

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 5th. Sunday in Ordinary Time -C-
Isaiah 6: 1-2a, 3-8 Psalm 138 I Corinthians 15: 1-11 Luke 5: 1-11
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

What was the great “sin” that made Peter so ashamed before Jesus after the miraculous catch of fish? We don’t get a sense that he had a disreputable past. The gospel doesn’t list his many sins or say that he was a reputed sinner. In fact, this is our first face-to-face meeting with Peter in Luke’s gospel. Jesus has cured his mother-in-law, but we don’t meet or hear Peter speak until this fishing scene. So, how bad of a sinner could he have been that he has to fall down in front of Jesus and say, with presumed sincerity, “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.”?

More than likely Peter was just like us—a decent person working to put food on the family table; trying to set good example for his children and hoping for good health to continue fulfilling his responsibilities. How bad could he have been? How bad are we? On the list of the world’s biggest sinners, we wouldn’t even be a blimp on the screen. But Peter’s words echo on.... “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” It is not that Peter was so terribly bad—it is just that he had an insight into the person of Jesus that made him pale in comparison. He had just witnessed an epiphany, Jesus’ greatness came shining through, and Peter felt very humbled, inadequate, and yes, a sinner. Maybe he saw how half-hearted his response had been to God in his life. Maybe, faced with the super-abundance of God’s generosity, symbolized by the huge catch of fish, Peter got a glimpse of his own pettiness. Maybe he just felt shadowy in the presence of so much light.

“God is so big,” a Baptist woman said to me recently, “and in so many ways, we are so puny.” There it is again! I heard Peter’s response in another person. This woman had spent years ministering to the sick in Africa. She and her husband had built a hospital and trained native nurses to care for the poor. Now in her 80’s she still reads the bible every day. What has she learned through her great works and her faith?—“God is so big, and we are so puny.” No false modesty here; when faced with the immensity of God, her insight is the same as Peter’s. Catching only a glimpse of God’s wonder, whether in a fishing boat with your partners, who are struggling to bring in an immense catch; or in prayer and private reflection on these biblical stories, the response is the similar, “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful woman/man.”

The realization of human limits and God’s immensity is a common thread in today’s readings. However, I would avoid preaching on all three readings; it is just too much for listeners to digest and for preachers to manage. I would also avoid preaching on the “theme” that links the

readings. I just mention this common thread and invite the preacher to settle on one reading to see how it is fleshed out.

The Isaiah reading is about a vision the prophet has in the Temple. Like the gospel, we hear a call being issued. God's majesty shines forth, filling the Temple. Seraphim are stationed around chanting the holiness of the God of Israel. Isaiah's response to this manifestation of God's holiness is similar to Peter's and my Baptist friend's, "God is so big, and we are so puny." Isaiah is confronted by his human limitations when he is faced with God's enormity and holiness. "For I am a man of unclean lips." God's response isn't, "Well then, in the light of your confession Isaiah, I will go looking for someone worthy of me." No, God does what God always does, takes an ordinary person in the midst of his ordinary life and begins the process of creation all over again. God will create a great prophet from this human with all his limitations. Remember, this is the same God who made the world out of nothing. God will purify Isaiah so that he will become God's mouthpiece to the world. God has things to say to Israel that the people need to hear, and God is going to use the "man of unclean lips" to speak to them.

Isaiah, the future great prophet, responds as Peter does. Isaiah senses that God is purifying him and will be working through him and so, despite his awareness of his limitations, he responds, "Here I am ...send me." Peter and his partners respond similarly, "When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him."

Note, in passing, that Paul in the I Corinthian's reading is also aware that God chose him, "the least of the apostles." Paul refers to himself as one born "abnormally," as one cast out of the womb before the normal birthing time. But he, like Isaiah and Simon Peter, recognizes that his call to serve did not depend on his own merits, but on God's election.

Have you noticed the name change in the gospel? Before the catch the reference is to "Simon." He has had the frustration of working "hard all night" and coming up empty. Humans, on our own, cannot achieve the great things God has in mind for us. When Simon sees the power of God working through Jesus he is called by his former name, Simon, as well as by the name Jesus will give him. Now he is Simon Peter. It is as if he is in transition, from the old person to the new; from a life that comes up empty, to a life that holds the promise of a whole new identity and purpose. When Peter was on his own, his fishing was fruitless. Now, a word has been spoken over him and a promise made. From now on, Jesus tells him, your life will be very fruitful, it will have a new direction and purpose.

What is striking in the gospel story is that the manifestation of divine power and abundance happens at the work place. These fishing people encounter the divine while struggling at their

jobs. God “catches” us where we live our daily lives. There God calls us and invites us to be actively involved in God’s plan for humanity—the reign of God. We are invited by the passage to examine the daily places —our work, family, school, neighborhood and world—with an emphasis on our workplaces. Many people practice their religion, but don’t see the connection between their faith and their community and work place. There is a split between faith and work.

One of the gifts of Vatican II was to call our attention to the church in the world and to highlight the importance of the laity. Everyday Christians were called to be salt and light in the marketplace. To be better Christians does not necessarily mean spending more time on internal church ministry. For most, it means living and proclaiming the gospel throughout the week in the most ordinary situation—by words and a life that witnesses to the immense God of goodness and abundance that the people in today’s scriptures experienced. It is not insignificant that the call in today’s gospel happened at the water. We Christians got our call when we were at the waters of our baptism. Just as Jesus saw in Peter and his partners those who could “catch people,” so he sees in everyday Christians the same potential witnesses to his gospel.

We pray today for the gift to recognize the sacredness of everyday life and to hear the call Jesus has for each of us. This eucharist is a listening place to begin to hear God respond to our prayer: How, O Lord, can we witness to your life at our jobs, in school, at home and in the world?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

William Droel, *FULL TIME CHRISTIANS: THE REAL CHALLENGE OF VATICAN II*. Mystic Ct.: Twenty-Third Publications, 2002. ISBN 1-58595-177-3.

This book examines Christian spirituality in the workplace, home, family and neighborhood. In particular Droel invites us view our work lives through the lens of our Christian vocation. The book presents a needed examination of the spirituality of work and can help preachers address the spirituality of the everyday lives of our congregations.

QUOTABLE

There are still sermons, parish meetings, pieces of literature, designs and plans in church agencies and foggy notions in the minds of people that limit the definition of church. An assumption still lingers that a committed Christian is one who knows the technical details of diocesan and parish structure, one who speaks a church language and optimally, one who volunteers for or is employed by a church organization. There are too few forums in which

workaday Christians are encouraged to see their cities and towns as places in need of healing, too few sermons that encourage them to be partisans of justice and not enough support groups that challenge them as spouses, citizens, and workers.

—William Droel, page 17.

READER'S RESPONSE

Dear Fr. Jude,

Just a little pleasantry to share with you apropos of the Cana gospel.

Two years ago, Cardinal Murphy O'Connor of London was invited by Queen Elizabeth to spend a week-end during the Christmas holidays with her and her family in their residence at Sandringham, England. It was the first time that a Cardinal had been invited as a house guest to the royal residence.

On the particular Sunday the Cardinal was asked to speak at Morning service. The gospel of the day according to the Anglican calendar, happened to be that of Cana. Gifted with a nice sense of humour the Cardinal began by saying that when he reads this particular passage from St. John, he somehow gets the impression that the apostles were gatecrashers at the wedding feast, - and that that was the reason why the *'the wine ran out.'*....

It was a pleasant, gentle piece of humour to introduce a reflection on the 'sign' of Cana - and the place of Mary in the Marriage feast of God with humanity....which the Cardinal developed nicely, underlining what all Christians are agreed about Mary.

Renewed thanks for your own - always original - reflections.

Oremus pro invicem

Richard McCullen CM St. Paul's. Raheny, Dublin 5, Ireland.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Ronald Poindexter #0325786 (On death row since 1/29/02)
- Reche Smith #0379083 (3/14/02)
- Terrance Campbell #0554125 (3/28/02)

Michael Eric Maske #0763486 (5/10/02)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for all liturgical years. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://PreacherExchange.com>

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (FrJude@JudeOP.org)

3. Our webpage address: <https://preacherexchange.com> where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilías Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please go to our webpage to make a Secure online donation: <https://PreacherExchange.com/donations.htm>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., FrJude@JudeOP.org

Promoter of Preaching,

Southern Dominican Province, USA