

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST -C-

Genesis 14: 18-20 Psalm 110: 1-4 I Corinthians 11: 23-26 Luke 9: 11b-17

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

One important clue to the possible meanings to a biblical story is to note its context. It will serve us in hearing today's gospel story, not to take it out of context, but in its Lucan setting. The context will shed light on possible interpretations of the story for our lives. So, let us pause and first review the context for today's gospel.

The gospel passage appears within 9:7-50--- a brief section in compared to its importance in the narrative Luke is telling. And it is intense. The section is a transition from a high point in Jesus' ministry, a point of popularity and acclaim, to his turning towards Jerusalem (9:51) and his death. So, this section concludes his ministry in Galilee and prepares us for his journey to Jerusalem. A few verses before today's passage begins, the question of Jesus' identity is raised, and first by Herod when he asks, "So who is this I hear such reports about?" (9:9) immediately after today's episode ends, the question is raised again, this time by Jesus to his disciples, "Who do the crowds say I am?"..... "But who do you say I am?" (9:18, 20) Since the multiplication story is bracketed by these two sections, we would presume that this passage begins to address the question of Jesus' identity, as well as move us into the following major part of the gospel--- the Journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:28). So, the context and the very passage itself, raise some questions for this reader. Who is Jesus and what meaning does he have for our lives? Is he still with us, healing, nourishing and drawing us together around food?

Ever notice how little children like to hear their favorite stories over and over? They never seem to tire of them; they are comforted by both the familiar tales and all the details of each story as well. Don't dare try to be creative when you tell a story they love and have heard over and over. You will hear an adamant protest, "That's not the way it goes!" An oft told tale to children before sleep helps them face the dark and the scary dreams they may have. The feeding of the crowds is reported in all four gospels, a clue to its importance for the early Christian communities. It has also been a major story in our church's narrative. Who can count the many paintings, murals, stain glass windows, hymns, episodes in film, etc. that have been dedicated to it? It is our familiar story, and we want to hear it over and over again, it helps us face the dark and what frightens us about our lives.

It is hard to imagine that those of us in the first world live in a "deserted place" similar to the one in Luke's story. Recently I was stopped at a red light and couldn't see beyond the vehicles

around me. They weren't trucks; they were SUVs, large family cars, but more like trucks. Some of the occupants were on cell phones, others were eating fast-food lunches, and all were by themselves. What a plush, yet isolated world we inhabit, we seem to be traveling together, but we are not really together. It's a lonely and deserted world we are passing through.

The feeding takes place in a "lonely" ("deserted") place. It is reminiscent of the feeding of the Israelites on their desert sojourn, another deserted place. God notices a people in need and frees them from slavery through a mighty deliverance. But more, God does not leave them to finish their liberation on their own. Instead, God feeds them each day along the journey. These biblical memories are stirred up just by the way Luke sets the scene; it is in a lonely/deserted place. Considering the context, we can then ask, "Who is Jesus?" The multiplication story stirs us to respond; he is God's great act of deliverance for us. What we could not do on our own--- break the crushing weight of sin and the seeming persistent cloud of death over our lives--- God has done in the mighty deed of Jesus' death and resurrection.

We travel the journey together through the deserted places, carrying a message and vision not often shared by those around us. It is a lonely terrain. We would give in, if all we had to spur us on were a long distant religious memory of a one- time-only escape and the hope of a still distant homeland. But instead, we receive "daily bread" from God, as the Jews did in the desert. This bread is daily sustenance for us as we journey through the desert land. It is the body and blood of Christ celebrated here today and in many other ways whenever God strengthens us with daily bread and gives us what we need to continue the journey. Have you noticed the daily bread you were given today?

The disciples are not chilly towards the crowds as they first seem. They express genuine concern when they suggest to Jesus that he dismiss the people so that they can go to the nearby villages for lodging and food. They are overwhelmed as they realize the people's urgent needs. Even though Jesus has just been healing the sick that was not reason enough for the disciples to presume he would or could deal with such a large crowd. We can't be too negative towards the disciples, Luke isn't (Mark is!). When Jesus does feed the crowd, the disciples are helpful and get to share in the ministry.

We need to pay attention to the way Luke describes Jesus performing the miracle. There is a solemn, even liturgical sound to the narration: Jesus takes the loaves and fish, looks up to heaven says the blessing, breaks them and gives them to the disciples to give to the crowd. You have the feeling that you are witnessing an often-repeated ritual, with often spoken words. Luke's readers would certainly have recognized a Eucharistic narrative when they heard one. This feeding stirs up our awareness of the Eucharist, the meal that keeps us together on our

journey home. It is a meal that addresses our present hungers and awakens us to know Who is nourishing us day by day. Present hungers, like our hunger for.....a community to heal our loneliness, a food to keep us from wearing out on the way home, a spirit of trust as we begin new ventures in ministry and a consolation when the desert journey has gotten extra arduous.

Again, we are influenced by the context of the multiplication. This story, with its Eucharistic overtones, has a ministerial context. Just before the story begins, the disciples returned from the mission Jesus sent them on and they “gave an account of all that they had done” to Jesus. Then he takes them apart to a place near Bethsaida, “where they could be by themselves.” The disciples go from ministry, to rest, to an interruption by the searching crowds. So, this miracle, with its Eucharistic overtones, is also done in a setting of ministry. Indeed, it is done because of the imminent needs of those around the disciples. You just can’t isolate Eucharist from real life, the hungry need to be fed. But they are to be fed by disciples in the setting of Eucharist. We who go to Eucharist to be nourished in the lonely and desert places are also reminded to see to the needs of those others who travel similar lonely places. For that is what Jesus has the disciples do, “You yourselves give them something to eat”. (9:13. But we would protest that the problem is too big for us—poverty, world hunger, drugs, homelessness, Aids, civil strife, etc.

At a recent faith gathering a group of us got to share the enormity of the problems we encounter in our world. Like the disciples in today’s story, we felt overwhelmed by them, our efforts dwarfed by the enormity of people’s needs. A Baptist minister among us said, “Well the cloth of the injustices and needs of the world is very, very large. So, what I do is work on the corner of the cloth that is nearest to me.” That might be the response Jesus is asking from us when we, like the disciples, say to him, “Where will we get enough to feed them?” —“Just work on the corner of the cloth that is nearest to you.” He will take our efforts, raise his eyes to heaven, say the blessing, bless them, break them and give them back to us to “place before those present.”

QUOTABLE:

(From a homily on this feast)

We don’t know Jesus dead; we know him living. He has absorbed death. Death is written all over him when he appears to his disciples. He has to remove from their minds the classical conviction that once dead, never alive again. Except perhaps as a memory. But Jesus is so physical to his disciples in apparitions to them! That is why they were so physical when they remembered him. They took the same bread he did, the same wine he did, they meant what he meant. We can live off his innocence, we can live off his love, and we can live off his blessing

of the earth and all creatures in it. Such living may cost us our lives, as it cost him his. But due to him, death does not have the final say....

There is no doubt that people the world over want death to be a birth. We find shells in ancient graves, we find figurines of fertile women, and we find symbols of the moon. It is as if people were asking womanhood for one more, for one greater procreation, to take in death and give out life. And to come out of that experience rich with nourishment. It may be hard for us to think of Jesus as womanly, but that is what he is in Eucharist!

...the Eucharist moves, from Jesus to us, then back to Jesus. And the great purpose of his, to chase death down and make it yield life, becomes our purpose. There was an ancient way of praying to Jesus, my brother, my sister, my mother, my father, my all. There was so much love in him it called on every love.

—Francis P. Sullivan, S.J. in HOMILIES FOR THE CHRISTIAN PEOPLE, CYCLES, A, B, C

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

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To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year C–CD” button on the left and follow the instructions.

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 webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias

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