

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 5th SUNDAY OF LENT (B)

Jeremiah 31: 31-34 Psalm 51 Hebrews 5: 7-9 John 12: 20-33

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I just finished preaching a parish retreat and, in conversations with the parishioners for a week, I heard and saw what I usually do, stories of great sacrifice. A woman cared for her infirmed mother until she died and now is the caregiver for her dying brother. In the midst of it all she has a terrific sense of humor. A man, dying of cancer, cheers up people who come to visit him. Someone said of him, "He would never blame God for what is happening to him." His wife is there caring for his every need. A senior woman gets someone to drive her to the nursing home so she can visit and push the wheelchairs of the residents, many of whom are younger than she. Another woman in the parish is an advocate for mental patients whom, she says, are admitted to hospitals, over-medicated and then sent home. "I speak out for their rights," she says, "no one else does."

Like you, I marvel at their sacrifices of time, energy and resources. Even those with sickness have decided to live out their lives in a chosen way; they have determined how they will be sick and in doing that, they inspire others. All these people I meet don't make a big deal out of what they have chosen to do. One said, "I don't see it as a big sacrifice, this is the way I choose to live my life." But this doesn't mean at times they don't feel frustrated, exhausted, bewildered and despairing.

When you meet people like this and I know each of us has, there is a golden thread that runs through their lives: they feel privileged to do what they do and it gives them joy: not "ha, ha, ha," happiness, but joy, their lives feel deep and filled with meaning. Jesus' words in the gospel come to mind, the "...grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, and it produces much fruit." – for others and for themselves as well.

There are other, perhaps more domestic, examples that come to mind: a parent gives up a career advancement so the family won't have to be uprooted and move; a couple, who are social workers, decide to move in from the suburbs to live closer to the poor they serve; a worker takes a stand at the workplace against an injustice to another worker, which could undermine his chances for promotion; a teacher takes a lower salary to work in an inner-city parochial school that serves an

immigrant community, etc.

From the outside looking in, all this seems like unnecessary risk, even foolish sacrifice. Yet, these acts of sacrifice produce, as Jesus says, “much fruit” and preserves their lives for “eternal life.” When “eternal life” is used in John’s gospel it isn’t speaking about the future life, as much as the present one: it means we draw from a deep well of life and meaning and we come to know a joy that cannot be obtained by human effort alone. The grain of wheat dies and bears much fruit. The casual observer looking in from the outside will never be able to understand fully what Jesus means, but those who put his saying into practice do.

Haven’t we enjoyed the fruits of sacrifice made for us by others – parents, grandparents, friends and neighbors? Those who worked long hours to house and feed us, who gave up their time for us when we were in need?

When the Greeks came asking to see Jesus he replies, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” The “hour” in John’s gospel is the time for both his suffering and glorification. We can understand something of what the “hour” means in this gospel if we reflect on our own experiences. A man told me that his “hour” came when he discovered that the insurance company for which he worked was cheating its customers. He took a stand, and he lost his job. A teenager says his friends are constantly getting drunk and he does not want to join them. As a result, he has lost those friends. Hours are not always sixty minutes. Our hour comes when our identity is on the line, when we are called on to make sacrifice, when we must make a decision that will cost us. The “hour” often puts our choices at odds with others, and we must decide if we will live out and, in a way, die for what we believe.

The Greeks, wishing to see Jesus, would get what they asked. The gospel doesn’t tell us who these Greeks were; were they Greek-speaking Jews? Were they visitors, sympathetic to the Jewish faith who had come to the city for the festival? They could be a symbol for all of us in the Gentile world who wish to see Jesus. They (and we) will “see” Jesus in his “hour” of suffering and glory. They will see that he doesn’t back down or compromise but enters his hour freely.

Nor will fear conquer him. In John’s gospel Jesus is very much in control, there is no agony in the garden of Gethsemani. Still, Jesus admits he is “troubled.” His approaching death was no easy matter for him. Jesus is facing the “hour” of his

glorification, and it is not without some dread. But he will continue the path he is on and the voice from heaven affirms his choice. We are the beneficiaries of Jesus' willingness to face his "hour." Jesus will enter and come through his "hour" completely faithful to God and a servant to us. No wonder he says, "When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself."

Jesus and his disciples hadn't preached to these Greeks who asked to see Jesus. They didn't proselytize them; they came of their own free will. What was the attraction? They and we are attracted by the one who, in his hour, is a completely faithful servant to God; who shows total generosity, willing to give up everything for us, without holding back anything in reserve; who shows us that defeat and even death may open up new possibilities, when we would see only endings and lose trust; who offers us hope, even when the doors are shut and when we would throw our hands up in despair and prepare to accompany one more body to the tomb.

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Sir, we would like to see Jesus." (John 12:20)

We focus earnestly during Lent on "seeing Jesus". The Crucifix is prominently displayed, and Stations of the Cross are offered regularly. For most of us, our daily lives proceed with perhaps a few extra minutes of quiet prayer at home or at church. We offer the words of the following "*Apology*" for all the times we have *not* seen Jesus as He lives in and suffers in our neediest brothers and sisters around the world. The words are not intended to create guilt, but rather to open our eyes so that we may "see Jesus" with clearer sight and serve Him in our needy brothers and sisters in new and unexpected ways.

"To my brothers and sisters..."

While I was deciding which oat bran cereal to eat this morning, you were searching the ground for leftover grains from the passing wheat truck.

While I was jogging at the health center, you were working in the wealthy landowner's field under a scorching sun.

While I was choosing between diet and regular soda, your parched lips were yearning for a sip of clean water.

While I complained about the poor service in the gourmet restaurant, you were

gratefully eating a bowl of rice.

While I poured my “fresh and better” detergent into the washing machine, you stood in the river with your bundle of clothes.

While I read the newspaper and drank my cup of steaming coffee, you walked the long, dusty miles to a crowded schoolroom to learn how to read.

While I scanned the ads for a bargain on an extra piece of clothing, you woke up and put on the same shirt and pants that you have worn for many months.

While I built a fourteen-room house for the three of us, your family of ten found shelter in a one-room hut.

My brothers and sisters, forgive me for my arrogance and my indifference.

Forgive me for not doing my part to change the unjust systems that keep you suffering and impoverished. I offer you my promise to become more aware of your situation and to change my lifestyle as I work for the transformation of our world.”

*(Taken from **Out of the Ordinary** 2000 by Joyce Rupp. Used by permission of Ave Maria Press. All rights reserved)*

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

Some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover Feast came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.”

Reflection:

Jesus and his disciples hadn't preached to these Greeks. They didn't proselytize them; they came of their own free will. What was the attraction? They and we are attracted by the One who, in his hour, is a completely faithful servant to God; who shows total generosity, willing to give up everything for us, without holding back anything in reserve;

So, we ask ourselves:

- How have we benefitted from the sacrifices others have made on our behalf?
- What sacrifices are we being asked to make for the wellbeing of others?
- How have we experienced the fruits of these sacrifices in our own lives?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Barbara Brown Taylor, *WHEN GOD IS SILENT*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1998. 129 Pages.

This is a collection of three talks Taylor gave at the 1997 Lyman Beecher Lectures in preaching at the Yale Divinity School. It is about the world's hunger for the Word of God and yet the seeming strange silence of God. In this silence, how can we listen to and then proclaim the Word? She is a nationally known preacher and writer on preaching. I have to admit to a bias here; she is one of my favorites. Her gift with language and the ability of expressing the quandary of faith in God while surrounded with so many seeming contradictions, remind me of Annie Dillard, another favorite. You don't have to be a preacher to appreciate this book, treat yourself to some fine Lenten reading.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."* If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- George E. Goode #0149506 (On death row since 11/20/93)
- Martin Richardson #0149506 (11/22/93)
- Randy L. Atkins #0012311 (12/8/93)

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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