

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”      23<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

Wisdom 9: 13-18    Psalm 90    Philemon 9-10, 12-17    Luke 14: 25-33

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

This is the only time the letter to Philemon appears on a Sunday in our three-year cycle of readings. It is unique for it is the only personal letter of Paul's that we have. Since it is only one chapter long, you might do well to read the whole letter. Here's the background.

Onesimus was Philemon's slave. He had escaped, met the imprisoned Paul, received instruction from him and became a Christian. Slaves were very common in the ancient world. They became slaves because they were captured in battle, or because they owed a debt and accepted slavery as a way to pay it off. Apparently Onesimus has become useful for Paul in prison (Onesimus means “useful”). For whatever reason, Paul has decided to send him back to Philemon. However, Paul expects that the latter should treat the runaway slave “as more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially dear to me and how much more than a brother to you.”

We would have preferred Paul attack the whole institution of slavery. It is doubtful, however, that this obscure writer in an enslaved part of the Empire would even have been heard by those who could have made a difference. Plus, Paul was convinced the eschaton was about to happen and so he might have seen little reason to argue against the institution of slavery in the light of the impending end of all institutions. However, he is asking Philemon to see his slave in an entirely different light. He wants the one in the position of power to see his slave as a brother, for now both are brothers in Christ. Their former relationship no longer exists, a newer and deeper one now takes its place. A bond of love has replaced the bonds of slavery.

In a similar way, Jesus has identified himself with the least among us. His life and death have placed him with the outcast, and he has asked us to look again at those society considers as “no accounts” and see them as valued. He has become one of them and would say, as Paul does, “welcome them as you would me.” Paul has learned his message well from his Master.

This Gospel message affects all our relationships. We can no longer evaluate another in the way our world does— valuing or esteeming those who have “made it” over the rest of humans. No one is beneath us, no one is less because they lack a job, home, education or because of their gender, sexual orientation or age. Perhaps institutions will change if each of us is changed in our hearts towards one another.

Let's look at the Gospel. We seem hungry for heroes. In the middle of a hot August, with

stories of presidential sexual scandal abounding, the staid New York Times filled more than half its front-page headline space with pictures of a baseball game at Wrigley Field between the Chicago Cubs and the St. Louis Cardinals. Actually, it wasn't just another game, for it featured two heroes of modern-day baseball, Sammy Sousa and Mark Mc Gwire competing against one another in their race to break Roger Maris' home run record. Attendance records for these teams are soaring. In fact, all baseball teams are reaping the benefits from the summer slug fest. People come early to the games to watch batting practice and hope to catch a practice home run in the left field bleachers. Even people who could care less about baseball are aware of the summer competition. Television coverage of the games shows little kids with gloves and baseballs in hand hoping to get one of the stars to autograph them. When asked how he was holding up under the pressure Sammy Sousa, a native of the Dominican Republic, said, "Shining shoes in the Dominican Republic to earn money to buy food for my family was pressure. This is not pressure." These men may be the stuff of heroes. We certainly can use some. Politicians have been talking about a lack of heroes and the heroic in our society. The summer, with all its political scandal certainly has made heroes seem scarcer than ever!

What kind of hero do we want, do we need in our country, community and among our familiars? Maybe the Christian is being called to the heroic in the Gospel today. The hero has been defined as one who gives one's life to something bigger than oneself through either physical or interior deeds. Jesus is described in heroic terms, and in today's Gospel he is calling for heroic activity; not athletic achievements, or the accumulation of wealth for others to admire and envy, but the giving of one's life to something bigger than what is immediately obvious. The preacher might think of some local or unknown heroes and describe them to your listeners to illustrate the giving of a life to something big--even by anonymous people.

We have many volunteers in our society and church, and they are worthy of praise. We would not survive without them; but volunteerism is not what Jesus means, he is asking for a full-time commitment. A volunteer can always take a break, skip this round, exclude oneself when the going gets tough or unpopular. Unbelief is a big part of our daily world. Not because people don't go to church or profess a religion (we are one of the most churchd nations in the world), but because we leave our religion and commitment at the door of the church when we leave. Give some examples of difficult choices working people and families must make that require standing out in a crowd of friends or even at home--- that requires heroes. Jesus is saying, to follow him calls for a full-time commitment, with no backing out when the going gets tough. And he suggests we consider the costs.

It's self-appraisal time. (Some Catholics find the Sacrament of Reconciliation a good opportunity for this appraisal. There's a chance here to preach about this sacrament but keep it

tied to the reading.) We may need to "get hold of our lives." We may need to consider the depth or shallowness of our commitment and determine if we want to truly dedicate ourselves to something bigger than ourselves, to the heroic that Jesus calls us to; for commitment to him requires a heroic life. First century Christians really did make a decision for him that cost them family, jobs, social standing and even their lives.

But Commitment isn't a grim life of denial, as a first glance of the Gospel seems to suggest. While it does call into question the choices we make in life, it also holds for us a life that will take on deeper meaning for this life and into the next. The Christian community should be a sign of that new life, where all are accepted despite what the world says about their/our worth. "Get a life"--a popular expression we hear addressed to someone who obviously needs something more significant in his or her daily life. With Jesus, we "got a life" at baptism and we are renewed in it at the Eucharist.

We do not have to do all this on our own. Jesus is going to Jerusalem where he will voluntarily take up the cross first. We follow behind him and so are enabled through his sacrifice to also take up the cross--to live a heroic life for something/someone bigger than ourselves. This Eucharist we are at gives us the life that enables us to follow him.

### **ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:**

Hellwig, Monika K. Gladness Their Escort: Homiletic Reflections for Sundays and Feastdays - Years A, B and C. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987.

The reflections were originally the "last page" commentaries from America magazine on the following Sunday's readings. Each includes brief exegetical comments with modern applications of the readings. Good input for homily preparation.