

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 23rd SUNDAY -C-

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

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

If Jesus were looking for popularity and a large mass of followers, what he says today wouldn't help him achieve his goals. He is on his way to Jerusalem, and it is clear he is out in front leading the way because, in order to speak to those with him, Luke tells us Jesus "turned and addressed them."

Pity those who thought they were going to enter Jerusalem and share a glorious future with Jesus. He "turns" and speaks bluntly about what it means to follow him. (I wonder if the high-spirited followers, when they heard what he had to say, felt that Jesus had "turned" on them?) If there were any people who were planning on going a short distance with Jesus, some kind of part-time followers, this would have been a good point to drop out and turn back. After hearing Jesus spell out the costs of discipleship, the indecisive or feint-of-heart might seize the moment and return to their loved ones and former lives.

It's clear that one can't be a part-time or casual disciple of Jesus. Coming to church and supporting the building fund still falls short of what Jesus requires of his followers. He is asking us to choose him even over family; to accept suffering because we serve him; to have a full-time and all-the-way-to-the-end commitment to him. There is no escaping the urgency and total response Jesus requires of us. Sit down, he suggests, weigh the costs and make a decision. He uses military terms about entering into battle; but we get what he means. Following him is no superficial venture; it requires full engagement and will, at times, be a struggle.

Jesus is not inviting a select group of elite scholars or world leaders to be his followers. His invitation is open to all. Most of us don't think of ourselves as extraordinarily gifted people. How will people of ordinary talents be able to accomplish the total dedication he asks? History shows that everyday people like us have done the most extraordinary things in service to humanity: built hospitals, brokered peace, lived among and helped the most destitute; fed and clothed the poor, confronted injustices, accepted martyrdom, etc., all in Jesus' name.

And there's the clue—huge sacrifice and the expenditure of vast amounts of energy and resources for others have been possible because ordinary people have, since his lifetime, acted in Jesus' name. Jesus' followers have been inspired with his extraordinary Spirit. That's the only way we stand a chance of following the one who has "turned" toward us. He has given us

his Spirit and thus we have been able to respond to his radical invitation.

The gospel will sound particularly harsh today to all the family members in the congregation—and that means everyone! How can Jesus ask us to hate “father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even your own life”? We know Jesus came to proclaim a gospel of love for all. He certainly loved his mother, relatives and friends. But Jesus made a choice to leave home and the comfort of the familiar to preach the reign of God. There are no other absolutes in our life than our devotion to God and our desire to follow Jesus’ way. In the light of the gospel everything else is secondary—family, possessions and even life itself. Jesus has first turned to us and then asks us to make a full turn towards him, to prefer him to everyone and everything else.

We are invited all through our lives to “turn” daily and choose again to be Jesus’ disciples. We know we have been less than fully responsive to our Christian vocation. But day by day, inspired by the Spirit, we can renew our “yes” and continue following him on the road. Certainly, today’s gospel should leave none of us feeling complacent or saying in response, “I am doing all that Jesus has asked me to do.”

We can’t accuse Jesus of making false promises to us or offering special favors and rewards if we enlist as his disciples. Quite the contrary, he makes it quite clear that following him will cost us. Anyone who is in church ministry these days knows the cost on our personal energy, morale and perseverance that are the result of our choosing to continue on the road with Jesus. So do devoted Christians in homes, the market place and the academic world. The Book of Wisdom reminds us that only with the gift of God’s wisdom, the Spirit of God, can we know how to respond to the daily challenges we face as Christians.

I don’t know if Jesus is asking all of us to liquidate our finances, sell our possessions and lead an itinerant life for him. Some great souls have done that in the past. But most of us have far too many responsibilities to do that. But we might at least take a couple baby steps in the direction Jesus points out to us. He is reminding us that we can’t have everything. We can’t have been washed in Baptism’s waters, have put on Christ and still have everything else we want—not in the face of the needs and poverty that surround us at home and in the world.

How about thinning out our wardrobes; giving away the extras in our attics and basements; donating more money and time to feed the hungry and clothe the needy? Today might be a day to make a list in our hearts of who and what we consider essentials. We can ask the Holy Spirit at this Eucharist to help us keep a sense of perspective and balance in our lives. One thing has been clear in Luke’s gospel: riches are under suspicion, for they can turn disciples’ heads in the

wrong direction. Just when Jesus turns to us he might find us turned and looking elsewhere.

What will happen to anyone who finds that, in choosing Jesus, he or she must leave family behind? Jesus has been saying that anyone who hears the Word of God and acts on it has entered his new family (8:21). This family includes people of different races, levels of education, political perspectives, genders, economic status, etc. Our new family consists of people like us who are trying to make the turn towards Jesus and one another. We gather at Eucharist around our family table of the Word and Sacrament, nourished by our parent God. Without this food how will we be able to live as family members in a world that seeks to divide, not unite people?

How will we be able to reach out to others in need? Unless we are strengthened by this feast, how will we ever be able to let go of whatever possessions hindering our response to the gospel? For those in our congregation who are poor or lonely, Jesus' sayings today invite them to be heartened by their membership in our baptismal family—which of course places the obligation on the rest of us to share and care for one another the way members of Jesus' family should.

QUOTABLE

The parables of the tower builder and the warring king are simple enough, but the sayings on discipleship that surround them are some of the most radical in the gospel. They are not difficult to understand but are immensely demanding to practice. The preacher will want to be wary of compromising the gospel message by spiritualizing it or interpreting the hard sayings in a metaphorical way. The gospel says that to be a disciple of Jesus, one must be willing to let go of what one values most: familiar relationships, possessions, and even one's own life. Jesus names three of the strongest attachments that would be difficult for anyone to leave aside when called into the community of believers and to participate in the mission of Jesus. The cost is particularly high for any who have riches, power, privilege and status.

Barbara E. Reid, *PARABLES FOR PREACHERS: YEAR C.* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press), ISBN 0-8146-2552-5, page 174.

JUSTICE NOTES

"In Every Age, O Lord, you have been our refuge!" (*Psalms 90:1*)

"Today, we remember the victims of violence throughout the world. May God inspire men and women of good will everywhere to renounce hatred and to build a world of justice, solidarity

and peace". (*Pope Benedict XV*)

Blessed are the Peacemakers
A Reflection by Archbishop Wilton Gregory

"How we define the meaning and legacy of September 11th will determine in significant ways the role that our nation plays in shaping a more just and peaceful world. The following questions are among those on which we could reflect as we mark this anniversary.

How can we pursue "peace on earth," in a world marked by deep divisions, systemic injustice, violence, and underdeveloped international institutions

How can we reject the profane use of religion to justify violence and instead, working with other churches and religions, reinforce the role of faith as a force for liberation and peace around the world?

What more can be done to develop the tools of nonviolent conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peace building so that we can fulfill our obligation to work for the avoidance of war?

How can nations act together to protect the lives of the innocent, stop genocide and curb fundamental human rights abuses?

How can we respond both to *threats* of terror and the *roots* of terror – denial of human rights and dignity, desperate poverty, hopelessness and hatred

How can we pursue genuine nuclear disarmament, not merely as an ideal but as a moral imperative?

This anniversary provides an occasion to recommit to the challenge of peace, for much work remains to be done. (Excerpts from *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Archbishop Wilton Gregory* 8/4/2003)

What can I do?

- Prayerfully reflect on the questions posed by Archbishop Gregory.
- Read: *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace A Reflection of the US Catholic Bishops* at: <http://www.zero-nukes.org/Harvest%20of%20Justice.pdf>
- Pray daily for peace. Be a peacemaker.

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

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

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:.....

- Abner Nicholson #0670167 (On death row since 11/18/99)
- Andre L. Fletcher #0130628 (12/09/99)
- Terry A. Hyatt #0199877 (2/07/00)

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