

“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:

The visit by the Greeks, who ask Philip, “we would like to see Jesus,” is the occasion for Jesus’ discourse about his death. It is also an opportunity for Jesus’ followers to be taught about being willing to be like Jesus –a grain of wheat dying so as to bear “much fruit.” At first the Greek’s request and Jesus’ response seem disconnected; but they are not. In response to the request of the Greeks, Jesus moves our attention to his suffering, death and resurrection, which we will soon be celebrating during our Triduum. He will face his death with a determination to see it through and not flee. Contrary to our experience of death as a final destruction, Jesus sees it as a moment of God’s glorification. Those who see his death and continue to look with eyes of faith upon him, will also see God’s hand rescuing Jesus from death.

Remember that the desire to see Jesus is expressed by Greeks. Jesus’ response about self-sacrifice and dying to oneself repeats what he frequently says in the Synoptic gospels. Here he has focused his words to the inquiry by the Greeks, for in Greek philosophy there is little or no reference to dying to self or the sacrifice of one’s own life for another. So, Jesus’ example of the grain of wheat bearing “much fruit” through dying, is a fitting image at this moment. His followers will leave behind the worldly and “logical” thinkers of the world and trust in his words—as contradictory as they may seem at this moment to the disciples.

Parents, educators and mentors in the congregation know what it means to die to self-interests; to give up one’s personal plans and goals for the sake of others. We are also aware of past and present generations of immigrants who toiled long and hard, giving their lives, so that their children could have a better one. They died to self; each like a grain of wheat that “falls to the ground and dies,...and produces much fruit.” Good parents, for example, will make such sacrifices for their own blood. It’s natural. What isn’t “natural” is that Jesus invites his followers to give their lives for those not of their own blood. We are to give of ourselves even for strangers, expecting no return payment-in-kind. It will seem to worldly thinking a waste of time; a pouring out of our life energies for little in return.

Through Jeremiah (our first reading), God promised to make a new covenant with

God's people, a covenant "written upon their hearts." Jesus is that new covenant and in him, God has united God's very self with us with bonds that can never be broken. Jesus looks death in the eye and sees victory; for through his death the new covenant is established, and we are raised from sin. We are assured of forgiveness of our sins this Lent because we look upon Jesus, the one "lifted up from the earth." He raises us up with him to a new, a forgiven life, "I will draw everyone to myself." He takes us to God. Jesus says that his way through death is the way to eternal life for his followers. Using Semitic hyperbole, he states we must "hate" our life in this world and "preserve it for eternal life." If we live the servant-life Jesus did, then it will mean death in one way or another for us: death to self-preoccupation; death to our independence and detachment; death to doing things our way, etc. Jesus' followers die every day in the decisions we make to choose him and service to God through neighbor, above our own self-interests and aggrandizement.

By Jesus' suffering on the cross, he showed us how to be faithful to God. To the very end of his life, he also showed us God's love for us. Jesus did not want suffering for its own sake; otherwise, he would not have cured and fed so many people. But there is a suffering we can't avoid if we are to follow him. In fact, he invites us to that suffering today, for following Jesus' path will cause suffering and pain. In a world of sin and violence, God wants people who will choose otherwise. Indeed, we are to counter evil, not by force and adopting evil's own battle tools, but by daily attempts to live lives of service in Jesus' name. Jesus ponders aloud, as he did in Gethsemani, whether or not to go through with this sacrifice of his life. "Yet what should I say, 'Father, save me from this hour'?" He quickly dismisses this thought and says, "Father, glorify your name." We will see the greatness of God in the self-sacrifice Jesus is about to make. And more. As a result of this sacrifice, we too will be able to follow Jesus in giving ourselves for others.

The voice from heaven is not directed at Jesus, but to those standing nearby and to us who hear it now. In the Hebrew scriptures, thunder represented the voice of God, or the voice of an angel. The voice affirms for us that Jesus' way has God's stamp of approval. We can put trust in what Jesus has just said: through dying comes life. Many will be attracted to Jesus' reigning from the cross; many will be repulsed by it. The commercial says, "Be all that you can be." That's what Jesus is inviting us to do—he just has a very different path for us to follow and become "all that we can be."

These Greeks were sincere searchers. While they were not fully part of the Jewish community, they were in Jerusalem to worship with the Jews at Passover. In John's packed vocabulary, "to see" implies more than physical sight; it suggests a sight that comes from believing. The presence of Andrew with Philip hearkens to the beginning of the gospel when Andrew and another disciple of John the Baptist, went to Jesus. He invited them to "come and see." We have been with these disciples on their journey with Jesus, listening with them to Jesus' words and observing his great works. We, like those disciples, have come to "see" who Jesus is (Cf. 1: 35ff).

Throughout John's gospel we have been told that the "hour had not come yet" (2:4; 7:6; 7:30; 8:20). We know Jesus wasn't referring to the time of day ("Chronos"); but to a special, grace-filled moment in his life ("Kairos") when he would be returning to God through his passion, death and resurrection. That "hour" has now come and Jesus is going to make himself available to the world. The Gentiles ask to "see" Jesus. Do they represent the "others," the people of the world who, along with Andrew and Philip, Mary and Martha, will also come to believe in Jesus? He must make it clear to them and us: to really get the full picture of faith, the whole experience of Jesus must be "seen." Soon we, with them, will see Jesus' passion, death and resurrection.

John has no agony in the garden in his gospel. Nevertheless, Jesus, as in the garden, is agitated or distressed. He knows what is up ahead and he is determined to go through with it. Had he not, we would have heard a different message from the one we hear today. Had he not accepted his dying, the message we would have heard would have been that the servant of God serves God up to a certain point and at little personal cost; that one could be a follower of Jesus without inconvenience to self or lifestyle; that God only asks a part of our lives in love and service, not all of it. The next two weeks we will see Jesus' giving everything to God for us. We are invited to follow.

How will the world be "judged" by Jesus' being "lifted up"? People will either accept what they perceive in the death of this "grain of wheat" and fashion their own lives accordingly, or they will look upon the crucified one as having lived a foolish and wasted life—and reject Jesus and his way. The world powers rule and govern from exalted thrones and military might. Jesus rules from the cross----by the cross and his resurrection, he draws "everyone to myself."

We might pay honor today to people in the Rite of Christian Initiation. Those who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil are like the searching Gentiles saying, “We would like to see Jesus.” Their sponsors and other mentors in the RCIA are the ones who, by the witness of their lives and their instruction, help the searchers “see” Jesus. And the rest of us? Don’t we “see” Jesus because of those who have shown him to us by their own lives? Haven’t others modeled the self-sacrifice Jesus speaks of in today’s gospel? Hasn’t their self-giving shown us Jesus? Do we “see” him in these scriptural stories we hear each week at these assemblies? Are we helped to see him through the preacher’s message? Do we look below the appearance of bread and wine and see Jesus’ life given for us and nourishing us?

Jesus is not frozen in time, the exclusive property of a community long ago. He has passed through his “hour” and we, along with John’s early community, have access to him; we “see” him through faith here and now. He promises later in the gospel, “Blest are they who have not seen and have believed (20:29). We have the expression, “seeing is believing.” But, in the light of today’s gospel, we can say today, “Believing is seeing.”

QUOTABLE:

Jesus’ enigmatic saying about being lifted up presupposes a knowledge of Israel’s Exodus journey and the incident of the poisonous snakes sent among the Israelites as a punishment for their grumbling. After many Israelites died, the people came to Moses and asked him to obtain relief from the Lord. When Moses interceded for the people, the Lord said to him: “‘Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ So, Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live” (Num 2: 8-9)

This image says *healing*: “Come here for healing!” Today we expect doctors to bring about physical healing by surgical and pharmaceutical means. Sometimes people approach medical dispensaries with the same attitude that they bring to the auto mechanic. “Find out what’s broken and fix it!” But Jesus’ healing is not the same as fixing. What needs to be healed?

We need to be healed of our mortality: our walking toward death is the ultimate wound that each one of us carries even in the vigor of life. That wound touches us frequently with its shadow of sadness and regret, especially when someone dear to

us dies. We also need to be healed of our spiritual vertigo—our loss of balance—when we lose track of the purpose of living. We need to be healed of the spirits of retaliation, envy, greed, manipulation, anger, and fear. We need to be healed of our unconsciousness of who we are.

----Frank Kacmarcik and Paul Philibert, SEEING AND BELIEVING: IMAGES OF CHRISTIAN FAITH, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), page 134.

JUSTICE NOTES

(A letter from our Dominican sisters in Iraq to one of our friars)

We have received your e-mail, which was very encouraging to us in this hard current time. We are so grateful for your tender feelings, concern and solidarity with our Iraqi people and us, the Dominican Family in Iraq. Thanks for your prayers and all your efforts.

The destructive war is overwhelming our country and everywhere. There is no place we can call a safe place. Everywhere there is fright and worry. Many people are killed, and even more are injured. We are all right at the moment. We do not know what will tomorrow have for us. Keep on praying. Our love and prayers to you and all the fathers.

Sr. Marie Therese Hanna OP

Sr. Sherine OP

I have been personally struck by *the feeling of fear which often dwells in the hearts of our contemporaries*. An insidious terrorism capable of striking at any time and anywhere; the unresolved problem of the Middle East, with the Holy Land and Iraq; the turmoil disrupting South America, particularly Argentina, Colombia and Venezuela; the conflicts preventing numerous African countries from focusing on their development; the diseases spreading contagion and death; the grave problem of famine, especially in Africa; the irresponsible behavior contributing to the depletion of the planet's resources: all these are so many plagues threatening the survival of humanity, the peace of individuals and the security of societies.

Yet everything can change. It depends on each of us. Everyone can develop within himself [sic] his potential for faith, for honesty, for respect of others and for

commitment to the service of others.

It also depends, quite obviously, on political leaders, who are called to serve the common good.

----Pope John Paul II, ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II, TO THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS (Monday, 13 January 2003)

Our nation's leaders have made the momentous decision to go to war to address the failure of the Iraqi government to comply completely with its obligations. We deeply regret that war was not averted. We stand by the statement of the full body of bishops last November. Our conference's moral concerns and questions, as well as the call of the Holy Father to find alternatives to war, are well known and reflect our prudential judgments about the application of traditional Catholic teaching on the use of force in this case. We have been particularly concerned about the precedents that could be set and the possible consequences of a major war of this type in perhaps the most volatile region of the world. Echoing the Holy Father's admonition that war "is always a defeat for humanity," we have prayed and urged that peaceful means be pursued to disarm Iraq under UN auspices.

The decisions being made about Iraq and the war on terrorism could have historic implications for the use of force, the legitimacy of international institutions, and the role of the United States in the world. The moral significance of these issues must continue to be assessed given their importance in shaping a more just and peaceful world.

The role of conscience. While we have warned of the potential moral dangers of embarking on this war, we have also been clear that there are no easy answers. War has serious consequences, so could the failure to act. People of good will may and do disagree on how to interpret just war teaching and how to apply just war norms to the controverted facts of this case. We understand and respect the difficult moral choices that must be made by our President and others who bear the responsibility of making these grave decisions involving our nation's and the world's security (*Catechism* #2309).....

The United States also must accept the long-term responsibility to help Iraqis build a just and enduring peace in their country, while also addressing the many serious unresolved issues in the Middle East, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. War and reconstruction in Iraq must not result in an abandonment of our nation's responsibilities to the poor at home and abroad, or a diversion of essential

resources from other humanitarian emergencies around the world.

At times like these, we turn to God and ask for wisdom and perseverance, courage and compassion, faith and hope. We Christians are called to be "sentinels of peace," the Holy Father reminds us. We join with him in urging Catholics to dedicate this Lenten season to reflection, prayer and fasting that the trials and tragedy of war will soon be replaced by a just and lasting peace.

---Office of Social Development & World Peace, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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