

First Impressions 1st SUNDAY OF ADVENT - A-
Isaiah 2: 1-5 Psalm 122 Romans 13: 11-14 Matthew 24: 37-44
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

"In days to come," that phrase begins the vision Isaiah recounts in our first reading today. It expresses a hope for the future. Hope is what keeps the light in our spirits from being extinguished in a present crisis. If we didn't have hope for the future, how could we continue to struggle against present difficulties? Isaiah feeds our hope today lest it be starved by the seeming-hopeless situations in the world around us.

Isaiah's times (eighth century B.C.E.) were not unlike our own, filled with conflict and danger. The Assyrians had ravaged the northern kingdom of Israel. Besides the physical distress, the people suffered a spiritual crisis as well. How could God let this happen? Wasn't God supposed to protect the children of the covenant? The disheartened people reasoned that they would have to seek protection from the Assyrians and so many in Judah wanted to make political and military alliances with other nations.

Isaiah had a different vision for Jerusalem and the nation. He called for a spiritual renewal and a re-commitment to the covenant and trust in God. He saw Jerusalem and the Temple, "the highest mountain," as potential beacons for all the nations. He called the people to be faithful to God, to put aside plans for a military solution to their problems and instead to seek peaceful ways. Isaiah promised that if the nation where God's ways would be taught by word and example.

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again." It is another Advent, a time to dream the impossible dream, "one nation shall not raise the sword against another." How long must we wait for that dream to come true? We wait in hope, yet continue to see much violence and terror in the world. We are tempted to respond in kind by word and action and, like Isaiah's contemporaries, form alliances with the world's powers by adopting their ways to achieve our goals. Isaiah's vision reminds us where God's heart lies. God wants peace for us and we believers cannot take a stand with one warring party or another, but instead need to plant ourselves firmly on God's side, where peace is born and resides.

Is Isaiah just day dreaming about what will never happen? He is if we think we are on our own. But we are not, we have God's grace active and working in us to enable us to live out God's vision of peace for the world. We can take Isaiah's vision as our guide this Advent and let it stir us to conversion, away from violence and towards peace.

In the early church, Advent included a period of fasting for those preparing for baptism on January 6, the feast of the Lord's baptism. While we no longer practice a penitential Advent, still it is a season that invites us to a change of heart to prepare for the coming Christ—who today warns us to stay awake and be prepared, “at an our you do not expect, the Son of Man [Humanity] will come.”

Guided by Isaiah's vision of peace and our desire for conversion to God's ways, we can prepare for Christ's coming by resolving to grow in peacemaking. We will “beat our swords into plowshares” this Advent by:

- removing violent words and expressions from our speech
- not watching violent movies and television shows, or playing war-like video games
- praying for peace in other parts of the world and in our own communities
- reaching out to be reconciled with those with whom we have been in conflict
- encouraging our children to be more peaceable in language, games and behavior with their peers
- praying for wisdom to see where in our personal and business lives we need to beat our swords into plowshares
- supporting individuals and groups working for reconciliation to conflicts

We may never see our world living in peace, conflict seems part of our human DNA. But it isn't and we who hear Isaiah's vision for a peaceable kingdom are renewed in our determination to put flesh on that vision in our daily lives. We prepare for the coming Prince of Peace by living as members of a kingdom not yet complete, but coming daily into our lives in unexpected and surprising ways--- for Christ comes at an hour and place we do not expect.

On this first day of Advent, when the prophet stirs up visions of peace in our hearts, we remember those suffering the ravages of war, especially in the middle East and Africa. All sides suffer the sadness, death and destruction that war leaves in its wake. We also remember today families displaced by war. Here is our own country, where we just celebrated Thanksgiving a week ago, we pray for military families separated by war during this holiday time. We also pray for those in Iraq and Afghanistan who have been victims of deadly sectarian violence and military actions in their own cities, villages and neighborhoods. And, of course, we pray

for or enemies. Our times are not unlike those when Isaiah wrote and called people to express their desire for peace by acting against violence, beating their swords into plowshares.

We will be focusing on Matthew's gospel this new liturgical year. He begins the gospel with his genealogy: "Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham (1:1). Jesus is a Jew, the son of Abraham and a descendent of David. David had been promised that one of his descendants would be God's appointed over the people. Jesus is that descendant of David and the Prince of Peace who fulfills Isaiah's vision. At this early stage of Advent we are not yet kneeling before the crib. Rather, we are expecting the adult Christ and we want to conform our lives to his ways. The evangelist uses Jewish apocalyptic writing to express the suddenness and unpredictability of Christ's coming. Matthew's church, like our own, was immersed in everyday concerns and preoccupations which, while not evil in themselves, could distract believers and cause them to miss Christ's coming.

It is not necessarily about sin. The people in Noah's time were not doing anything wrong; nor were the two men in the field and the two women grinding at the mill. They were just doing their daily jobs. Since Christ's coming will catch people off guard, there is an urgency required of us this Advent. We can't delay making necessary changes in our lives, changes we may be putting off. In the light of the gospel, leisurely repentance just won't work. Jesus returns to our daily lives. He shows up at unpredictable times when we are doing what we do each day. Since his return is unpredictable he calls us to be always on the alert. In addition, what we are doing now will someday come to an end, and how does that awareness affect the choices we are making this day?

PREACHING ON IMMIGRATION DURING ADVENT

We have posted on our webpage fr. Chuck Dahm's suggestions for preaching on immigration during the four Sundays of Advent. Go to <http://www.judeop.com/> and click on "Justice Preaching."

JUSTICE NOTES

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again."

(Isaiah 2:4)

Our Holy Father and our bishops reiterate Isaiah's call to "beat our swords into plowshares". They speak with strong words and anguished hearts on the issue of nuclear weapons and express dismay at their continued development.

"We call upon the United States and the other nuclear weapons states to enter into a process leading to the complete elimination of these morally offensive weapons.

- Ωε σπεακ νοω ουτ οφ λοψε νοτ ονλψ φορ τηοσε ωοο ουλδ συφφερ ανδ διε ασ πιχτιμς οφ νυχλεαρ ριολενχε, βυτ αλσο φορ τηοσε ωοο ουλδ βεαρ τηε τερριβλε ρεσπονσιβιλιτυ οφ υνλεασηινγ τηεσε ηορ ρενδουσ ωεαπονς.
- Ωε σπεακ ουτ οφ λοψε φορ τηοσε συφφερινγ βεχαυσε οφ τηε μεδιχαλ εφφεχτς ιν χομμυνιτιεσ ωηε ρε τηεσε ωεαπονς αρε προδυχεδ ανδ αρε βεινγ τεστεδ.
- Ωε σπεακ ουτ οφ λοψε φορ τηοσε δεπριβεδ οφ τηε βαρεστ νεχεσσιτιεσ βεχαυσε οφ τηε ηυγε αμου ντ οφ ρεσουρχεσ χομμιτεδ το τηε δεβελοπμεντ ανδ μαιντενανχε οφ νυχλεαρ ωεαπονς. Ωε ρεχαλλ τηε ωο ρδς οφ α ζατιχαν μεσσαγε το τηε Υνιτεδ Νατιονς, τηατ τηεσε ωεαπονς, Ύβψ τηειρ χοστ αλονε, κιλλ τηε ποορ βψ χαυσινγ τηεμ το σταρβε. Ύ (Τηε Μοραλιτυ οφ Νυχλεαρ Δετερρενχε: Αν Επαλυατιον βψ τηε Πα ξΧηριστι ΥΣΑ Χατηολιχ Βισιοποσ) http://www.ghnp.org/pax_christi.htm

"Nuclear weapons are incompatible with the peace we seek. They cannot be justified. They deserve condemnation." (Archbishop Renato Martino, UN Permanent Observer of the Holy See, Statement to the United Nations Oct. 15, 1997.)

Did you know?

- Τηε Υ.Σ. ηας 6,000 δεπλωμεδ στρατεγιχ νυχλεαρ ωεαπονς ανδ μορε τηαν 10,000 ρεσερβε νυχλεαρ ωεαπονς.
- □Ιν ΦΨ05 ανδ ΦΨ06, τηε Αδμινιστρατιον ρεθυεστεδ φυνδς φορ ον-γοινγ ρεσεαρχη ον τηε Ροβυστ Νυχλεαρ Εαρτη Πενετρατορ (ΡΝΩΠ). Ιν α μαφορ πιχτορψ φορ αδποχατεσ, Χονγρεσς δελετεδ τηεσε φυνδς ιν βοτη ΦΨ 05 ανδ ΦΨ06. Τηε Αδμινιστρατιον □σ ΦΨ07 βυδγετ δοεσ νοτ αππροπριατε φυνδς φορ ρεσεαρχη ον τηε Ροβυστ Νυχλεαρ Εαρτη Πενετρατορ, βυτ τηερε αρε χονχερνς τηατ φυνδινγ φορ τηε Ρελιαβλε Ρεπλαχεμεντ Ωαρηεαδ προγραμ μαψ βε υσεδ το δεπελοπ νεω νυχλεαρ ωεαπονς. □(ΥΣΧατηολιχ Βισιοποσ2 □ 07)

What can I do? (recommended by US Catholic Bishops)

- □Ασκ μεμβερς οφ Χονγρεσς το σχρυτινιζε τηε Ρελιαβλε Ρεπλαχεμεντ Ωαρηεαδ προγραμ το ενσυρε τηατ ιτ ις νοτ υσεδ το δεπελοπ νεω νυχλεαρ ωεαπονς.
- Χοντινυε το υργε Σενατορς το συμπορτ επεντυαλ Υ.Σ. ρατιφιχατιον οφ τηε Χομπρεθενσιβε Τεστ Βαν Τρεατυ ανδ τηε Οτταωα Μινε Βαν Τρεατυ. □
- Πραψ ανδ φαστ φορ πεαχε.

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

READER'S BOOK RECOMMENDATION

I have a wonderful book to recommend for all those who are trying to improve an understanding between the Jewish and Christian faiths and scripture. You may have read it. At the end of the book, the author, Amy-Jill Levine, gives concrete ways to improve the dialogue. She is a professor at the Vanderbilt Divinity School. The book is, **THE MISUNDERSTOOD JEW: THE CHURCH AND THE SCANDAL OF THE JEWISH JESUS**. I think this book is a must read for every homilist and educator.

Peace, Barbara Quinby

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Here's a note from someone who started writing to one of the inmates listed on this page:

I wanted to share a story with you about what happened when I sent off some post cards to death row inmates a year ago. One of the men dropped me a note thanking me for writing so I replied and it was the beginning of a correspondence that has been a gift to both of us. Just this week, he was returned to general death row population after 9+ years on look-down and he attributes some of his positive changes to the support and encouragement that our written conversation has offered. Certainly there are multiple pieces to the puzzle that is our life and every person and experience adds something to the finished picture. I feel very privileged to have been able to be a part of this man's journey towards healing. Whether or not there is acknowledgment of the message, it seems pretty obvious that sending postcards is something that needs to be continued. We become who we are in relationship to each other and it is very difficult to discover the many positive aspects of our selves in isolation. Continue to encourage people to reach out to these men, reminding them that they do have an inherently good self and reminding them that there is always the opportunity to become more of what God has intended for them.

---Mary Therese Lemanek Allen Park, Mi.

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Eddie Larmar Taylor #0762634 (On Death Row since 8/24/2005)

William H. Raines #0526698 (9/9/2005)

Jeremy D. Murrell #0940436 (2/17/2006)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"** **"Liturgical year A,"** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to

preaching.

“Liturgical years, A, B and C,” reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes "First Impressions" and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh.

Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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