

“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:

It's really loud out there, isn't it? I don't mean the car alarms that go off at 2 am; or the boom-boxes and the passing cars with radios that pound out bone-rattling rap music; or the inconsiderate people who talk on cell phones in elevators and restaurants; or the sounds of jets taking off and landing, low-flying helicopters, fire engines, emergency vehicles, garbage collectors and early Saturday morning leaf blowers. As bad as they are, at least those sounds don't compete and try to out shout our inner voices, the ones we struggle to hear and keep tuned into for direction, sanity and wisdom.

The noise that competes with those inner voices has picked up recently. I saw my first Christmas display a couple weeks before Halloween in a chain drug store. Next came the cloying insipid piped-in holiday music in the stores, then the tv, radio and newspaper advertizing—yes, print ads also shout at us during Advent. It's really loud out there isn't it?

Amid all that noise, we struggle to hear another voice, the voice of Advent. It's very difficult to hear it amid all the jingle bells around us. Is it too much to expect that we might search out a little quiet during these four weeks to pay attention to the Advent voice? It is not as if that voice is going to come down hard on us, make us feel guilty or require us to make unrealistic and drastic changes in our lives. Though let's face it, we know we need to change and for some of us, a lot of change may be necessary, if we are ever to get a better grip on our lives. All in all, the Advent voice has our best interests at heart. If that is true, let's "listen up" to what that voice is saying. Today, in our scriptures, there are there speakers for the voice of Advent—Isaiah, Paul and Jesus.

The Isaiah voice is well known, even by people who rarely read or hear a scriptural passage: particularly the familiar, "they shall beat their swords into plowshares...." In chapter one, the prophet has denounced Israel for its sin and empty worship and called her to return to just ways. ("Justice used to lodge within her, but now,

murderers” (1:21). Now, here in chapter two, Isaiah focuses on and condemns Jerusalem, but nevertheless, holds out a hope, a promise that Jerusalem/Zion shall be the instrument for bringing God’s plan to fulfillment. And what is that plan? — that Jerusalem will draw all peoples to herself and that in God’s house, the Temple, the nations will find instruction in “God’s ways.” What a vision for the morally bankrupt city! A vision that only God can bring about. It will be a place for God to instruct the world in the ways of peace. Enemies will be reconciled and troubled nations will come to Zion where they will find a just Judge. War will not be the resource of desperate or totalitarian leaders and so the weapons of war will be dismantled.

Of course we could say, all this is only a vision. What good can a vision do? A vision like the one Isaiah puts before us isn’t for dreamers to use as a sleeping pill to lull them into hazy sleep of inactivity. Rather, a vision can offer hope and guidance for a people in a desperate time. It can spur people to make the vision true in their own lives and to work to see it come true in the surrounding community. Isaiah’s vision should stir us to put aside violent and aggressive ways, with which we try to force our will on others; to urge us to turn the weapons of violence into instruments of peace. Where there are battlegrounds in our lives, we must turn them into gardens of peace? Only God can accomplish peace in the world and so Isaiah’s Advent voice invites us to turn to God. “Come,” the reading ends, “let us walk in the light of the Lord.” All other ways lead down a dark alley to war, injustice and division among peoples.

St. Paul’s Advent voice would rouse us from sleep. It is a call to be vigilant. Paul tells us, “you know the time....” It is wake-up time, Christ wants us to see reality in a new way; for darkness is passing and day dawning. We are presented with a choice: shall we choose the ways of light or the ways of darkness? When we awake to a new day we get dressed. So Paul invites us to wake to the day of Christ and put on new clothing—“put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” If Christ is our light and we are “dressed” with his “armor of light,” then we will turn away from ways not befitting this new life.

Paul also wants Christians to live according to a new time, one not governed by clocks and calendars. Instead, we must have a sense of timing—knowing the potential value of each moment and so fill our time doing the works of Christ. This Pauline Advent voice calls us to alertness and expectation. In the time we are

given we have enough light from Christ to direct our paths and keep us alert so we can choose and act in his ways.

Jesus is the third Advent voice we hear today. The gospel gives us a reminder that Advent isn't just about Christmas' approach. There is no mention of Christ's birth today. The voice we hear is not a baby's wail but the adult Jesus' call to look to the day of his coming. We await Christ's coming with joy, but are reminded that our days must be marked by alertness. Since we do not know the exact day or hour of his return, we must not be lulled into a routine that makes us unprepared. Notice the people in Noah's time were not behaving sinfully, rather they were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage"—when the flood came and carried them off. Events changed suddenly on them, as they can do on us.

We go about our daily lives, one day melts into the next. Nothing much changes for a while, but that is no guarantee, for life is fickle and we can find ourselves short on reserves when we need to face "the flood" of unfavorable events. Christmas and Christ's Second Coming, while emphasized in different parts of Advent, nevertheless have a lot in common. Both are about salvation; both events point us to Christ's saving power. He came into the world to save us and show us a new way of being human. He gave us his Spirit as his lasting gift to us so we could live out our lives the way he showed us in his own life. Now we await his coming, living with a consciousness of his return. Meanwhile, we live in the light of his teaching and strive to love others as he has loved us.

The two men in the field and the two women grinding at the mill, were both awake; but as with the people of Noah's day, eating, drinking, marrying, and working in the fields are not enough. One of the two men and one of the two women are "taken." The other two didn't appreciate how important each day was, they were living without a concern for the return of Christ.

Remember, at the beginning of today's gospel, we are told that Jesus wasn't addressing a crowd of the merely curious. If that's who they were, we would expect some, even many of them, not to take his message to heart. Of course they would not be prepared for his return, but we would presume that at least Jesus' followers were prepared for that big event. However, we are told immediately that Jesus was speaking to his disciples, people who were following him. But even among them, Jesus raises the concern: would his own followers be prepared for his

return?

So we, his disciples, tend to the three Advent voices we hear today—they form one consistent voice. Despite the holiday rush and noise we hear them speak in unison—be prepared, for the time will come when God will send someone to bring about the fulfillment of time. For us Christians, that one is Christ. We realize that in Christ, God has accomplished the most important work that needed doing on our behalf. But the readings today also remind us that there is work for us to do until Christ's return. While he is "gone," we do what we can to prepare for that return. Of course, we will not complete that work, but we do have a part to play in his bringing it to completion.

Thus, we look at our troubled world to see what swords need to be beaten into plowshares. We must not fall asleep at our tasks, nor be dazed by the daily distractions that try to sway us away from vision. Instead, we must make the best of the time that is given us. A new "day" is about to come, the old ways will be no more. Doesn't that good news give us hope and energy this Advent to set about doing the works of God? And aren't we happy to have heard the Advent voices we did at this liturgy?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Dick Folger, *THE GOSPEL STORIES OF JESUS: SUNDAY BULLETIN REFLECTIONS FOR YEAR A, B, C.* (Hayward, CA.: Folger Graphics, 2001--2--3) Paper, \$9.95 for each year.

Deacon Folger has written 156 stories based on the Sunday gospels of the liturgical year. The stories were first published in *CELEBRATION*, the liturgical resource publication. Originally they were printed on the covers of the parish bulletin where Folger ministers and were meant as a "take home" meditation. (Website: www.thegospelstories.com, or dickfolger@aol.com)

JUSTICE NOTES

(based on today's Pauline reading)

Paul lists the behaviors the Roman Christians have to quite doing—individual sins of wild living and bad interpersonal relations. The preacher today must listen to what God is revealing as the besetting sins of our own nights, behaviors that today's people, and particularly we in the United States, must put away. Here are some: materialism, greed and avarice; consumerism gone haywire; the failure of

those who have enough to share with those who have not; the insistence of people in our nation of their right to have cheap Middle East oil, to ruin the environment by driving SUVs all over the place, to refuse to use mass transportation or engage in conservation; our nation's unwillingness to develop and use renewable energy; and the U.S.'s giving a smaller percentage of its gross national product to foreign aid than any other major industrial nation. Those are the world of night, the works of the "flesh" and "its desires." None of these behaviors has any place in the daytime. We are to take them off, like old clothes, and put on the new clothes of Jesus Christ (is there a baptismal reference here?)

—Al Krass, in *HUNGER FOR THE WORD: LECTIONARY REFLECTIONS ON FOOD AND JUSTICE, YEAR A*. Edited by Larry Hollar, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), "First Sunday of Advent," page 2.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'"

---Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

Terrence Taylor #0539901 (On death row since 2/18/97)

Todd C Boggess #0510801 (3/24/97)

Johnny S. Parker #0311966 (3/24/97)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON**

LITURGICAL YEAR A.” The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.

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 webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (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,

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