

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 3<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A)  
Isaiah 35: 1-6a, 10 Psalm 146 James 5: 7-10 Matthew 11: 2-11

Dear Preachers:

Boy, a lot has changed in the life of John the Baptist since last Sunday’s gospel! He has been center stage for us these two middle weeks of Advent. Last week he was out in the desert, the fiery preacher and precursor for Jesus. Remember his warning about “the one who is coming” after him, the one who would have a winnowing fan in his hand to clear out all the chaff from the threshing floor and burn it in unquenchable fire? Well, that was then, in chapter 3—this is now-- in chapter 11. A lot has happened since John’s earlier preaching. Jesus has taken up his ministry of preaching and healing and John has been arrested for speaking out against Herod’s marrying Herodias, the wife of Philip, Herod’s brother.

Now John is in prison and he sends his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” What happened to that sure-fired preacher we met earlier? He seemed pretty sure he knew what God had in mind and what the one to come would be like. Initially John was quite taken by Jesus and when Jesus came to him to be baptized in the Jordan, John demurred, “I should be baptized by you, yet you come to me!” ( Mt. 3: 14) We sense, in the question John sends through his disciples to Jesus, that John is disappointed or confused in how his successor Jesus is following the game plan John initiated. Why was it taking Jesus so long to purge the world? Where was the judgement on the world and the fire for the chaff John promised in last Sunday’s gospel? Why didn’t the religious leaders embrace Jesus? Others would have been disappointed as well. Jesus wasn’t pulling the country together along nationalistic lines, wasn’t organizing the people to fight for their freedom from the Romans.

Sometimes when people go through a life-changing religious experience and they come to a deeper and more personal experience of Jesus in their lives, the initial moments are quite rosy. (Many people, when they recall their childhood faith, also have similar memories of a time when they felt they had stronger faith because they questioned less.) After a major faith awakening there is a sense of illumination, daily life takes on new meaning and having a sense of Jesus ready and present to their prayers gives a great feeling of companionship. But as life goes on, that sense of immediacy often fades, especially in the harsh light of the

daily grind or at moments when we are jarred out of our routine by the harsh realities of life. Where, we ask, is Jesus now that we need him? Why isn't he helping us solve our current problem? Isn't our faith in him supposed to protect us from the difficulties we are now facing? Were we wrong to have put so much trust in him at the start? Faith doesn't take the shape we think it should—or rather, if today's gospel is any indication—Jesus doesn't always fit our preconceptions. Besides the personal issues Christians face there are larger ones we face as a community of believers. Where is Jesus' power in the world these days when we are experiencing so many manifestations of darker powers? What difference are we making to bring about a world of peace? Do our individual and communal efforts at reconciliation make any difference? So, we may find ourselves asking at worship today the question John raises, "Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?" Are we being asked to trust this Advent that God is really at work in our lives, though in often less obvious or "impressive" ways? "Lead us not into temptation..." we will pray today before we receive the eucharist. Is our temptation to be disappointed in God's pace, timing and manner of response to our urgent prayers?

What answer will Jesus send back to allay John's doubts and reinforce his faith in prison? Jesus doesn't impatiently dismiss the emissaries from John--- and that was good news for John and comforting to us as well. We are not ignored in our faith struggles to understand who Jesus is for us at this stage of our journey. Jesus does respond to the question John sends, though at first, it seems indirect. Wouldn't a simple "yes" or "no" have been appropriate to such an urgent question? Instead Jesus refers to Isaiah 35: 5-6 ("Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the dumb will sing.") and 61: 1 ("God has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the broken hearted.")

John would certainly be familiar with the prophet Isaiah's description of the one God would send. Guided by the Jesus' Isaiah reference, John would also have learned that Jesus was going to put aside the more militaristic messianic anticipations some of the people had and was going to be the kind of gentle messiah the prophet Isaiah had anticipated. However, Jesus did not give a thundering response to John's question, did not draw down lighting or cause the Jordan to stop flowing to reassure John's doubts. That would have coerced faith. Instead, John like us, was invited to draw his own conclusions and then decide

whether to put faith in Jesus. John was urged to see God at work in Jesus' reaching out to those in most need, bringing healing to the sick, forgiveness to sinners and preaching good news to all who had come to hear him. Jesus was God's sure sign that God had heard the cry of the people and had come to address them definitively!

Let's not overly spiritualize Jesus' statements to John's disciples about the blind, lame, lepers, deaf and poor. They are very real among us, their numbers grow daily in the economic downturn our world is experiencing and the loss of jobs due to the terrorists' attacks. ("Food for Survival," one of New York City's major food pantries just made a report that one million people, one out of eight New Yorkers rely on the city's food pantries to help them fight hunger. NY Times, December 2, 2001) Jesus really did help the forgotten and those in need. His actions on their behalf were a proof to John that God was working through him, for they were the ones God has always shown concern for and considered precious. Though forgotten by a world distracted by war, possessions, fashion, glamor and high tech, the poor are noticed by God. Jesus is the undeniable proof.

Each Sunday in Advent we are lighting another candle in our Advent wreath. Today we light the pink one. In our old liturgy this used to be called, "Gaudete Sunday," Rejoice Sunday. It was a break in the somber Advent tone to remind us that Christians have a joy rooted in the hope we express during this season. Even amidst our longing for God and when under severe trial, we are comforted and have a joy inspired by the Spirit. In seeming contradiction to reason and visible evidence (think of John in his prison cell) we know that our faith in God is not in vain. Our hope shall not go unfulfilled ---and for that we can shout, "Rejoice!"

Jesus also reminds us today that he is proclaiming a new age. Despite John's greatness, and Jesus does make much of him, the one who accepts Christ is truly greater before God than even John. Those who trust in Jesus walk the path God has opened up for humanity. Amid doubts, frustrations and failure it is the path that is always open and accessible to the believer. Like John, we may not have all the answers, things may not be going well for us, our efforts not producing spectacular results and we may even feel on the outs with God. But in Jesus, we are assured, God is at work, has not forgotten us and is bringing about the plan God has made long ago for us; a plan that is for our restoration and well being. Just like those Jesus enumerates in his response to John's disciples--- we will see,

we will hear, we will be raised from the dead — for we have had the good news proclaimed to us. The “one who is to come” has come and we have his life within us, working in us. As his instruments, his way will come to fruition in our world — through us, the “least” admitted to God’s reign.

#### ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER:

LIVING WITH CHRIST: COMPLETE EDITION,. (Novalis, 49 Front St. E., Toronto, ON. M5E 1B3, Canada. 1-800-387-7164 One year subscription, \$15.95) I have found these small monthly publications very handy for traveling. People I know carry them in purses and briefcases. They have the Sunday and daily scripture readings and excerpts from the Roman Missal for Mass. They make it possible to reflect on the daily scripture readings at any place and moment of the day. I use them to prepare daily preaching when I am in a parish. Note that there might be variations in the wording here in the U.S., since this Canadian publication uses the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, while our Lectionary uses the New American Bible.

#### QUOTABLE

Christmas is a great test for parents. We want to give our children too many things. One gift would never be enough, even a very expensive one. How did we get to this place where Christmas is measured by gifts? How did we get so far from celebrating the birth of Jesus? Can we resist the temptation to go overboard? In today’s gospel when people question whether Jesus is the messiah, he tells them to look around: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf can hear again. In a word, they will know him by what he does. This is true of us, too. We are Christians to the extent that we value Christ over all else—even Christmas presents for our children.

—Gwen Costello, ADVENT: A SACRED TIME FOR FAMILIES. Mystic, Ct.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1999, page 21.

Because the beginning shall remind us of the end  
And the first coming of the second coming.  
—T.S.Eliot

## JUSTICE NOTES:

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Do you now have or are they proposing a lottery in your state? Well here's something to think about from the Raleigh diocese's peace and justice newsletter

### **A Stand Against the Proposed State Lottery**

Bishop Joseph Gossman [our bishop here in Raleigh, N.C.] has joined the voice of those opposing the proposed North Carolina lottery, and has called all priests to actively involve parishes on this issue by sending parish representatives to regional meetings of the Citizens United Against the Lottery.

Our Bishop, along with the North Carolina Council of Churches, opposes the proposed lottery primarily for the following reasons:

- 1) A lottery plays upon the addictive nature of gambling that many suffer and it has the potential to temptation that leads to serious problems for participants and their families.
- 2) States should use taxation rather than gambling as a way to raise funds. A lottery is a form of regressive taxation and not the best way to raise funds for the common good. This reflects the need for distributive economic justice in which all citizens fairly contribute to State financial requirements.
- 3) It has been shown that States with active lotteries are not channeling the funds raised to areas of intended use. "In state after state, we're seeing the money that is raised in the lottery is not used as it was said it would be," said Msgr. Gerald L. Lewis, diocesan vicar general.
- 4) The lottery sets a bad example for youth and adults alike, detracting from any work ethic and playing on the misguided fantasy of "winning big". It is gambling and chance where only a few profit.
- 5) The lottery has proven to be a form of exploitation of the poor. Because the poor tend to buy lottery tickets more than other groups, the lottery can be viewed as an unfair and inequitable tax. Lottery systems prey upon the poor for profit.

----(Quoted in the Peace and Justice newsletter of the Catholic diocese of Raleigh, NC

### **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](mailto:jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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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