

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD (A)
Isaiah 42: 1-4,6-7 Psalm 42 Acts 10: 34-38 Matthew 3: 13-17

By: Jude

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Dear Preachers:

Isaiah has had a strong influence on the Synoptic gospels and today is a good example of that influence. The passage from Isaiah is called “The First Servant Song,” (“Here is my servant...”) and we can see its influence on Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism. First, let’s pay some attention to that first reading.

It is clear this servant is approved by God (“with whom I am well pleased”—we can hear an echo of this line in Matthew’s account) and called for a special task. Here we meet the servant for the first time, there are four Servant Songs in Isaiah. Who was this servant? Some see the servant as a particular individual, others see the servant as the people of Israel. Whoever this servant is, he will fulfill the task God has in mind for Israel (“...my chosen one with whom I am well pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit....”).

What I find most interesting in today’s reading is the role the servant will have in bringing about justice. Three times, in this short reading, the servant’s task is described as, “bringing forth justice...establishes justice...called you for the victory of justice.” Justice is a big word in this reading; it is a big word in the bible. The prophets were the mouthpieces of God’s justice, agents for God, They were preoccupied with calling God’s people to justice—to equitable behavior. They preached God’s will for a society in which all people were treated fairly. God, according to the Hebrew prophets, is especially concerned for those overlooked in the normal routines of the world; the poor and weak, those not important enough to be heard or seen in the council rooms of the powerful; those who can not afford “a million dollar defense team” to represent them in the courts.

Justice is so central a characteristic to the kind of society God wants, that anything less would mean the people were not God’s people. Despite all their prayers and religious ritual, without justice, God would turn a deaf ear to the people’s prayer. (“I hate, I spurn your feasts, I take no pleasure in you solemnities; Your cereal offerings I will not accept, nor consider your stall-fed peace offerings. ... But if you

would offer me holocausts, then let justice surge like water, and goodness like an unfailing stream.” Amos 4: 21-24) All in society, particularly the needy, were to be given their most basic rights for food, clothing and due process. The prophets not only confronted the unjust in society, they also stirred up among the forgotten the longing for a day when all would be made new, when justice would light their dark world.

Isaiah says that the chosen servant will establish justice, especially for those in most need, “...to open the eyes of the blind, to bring our prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.” On the day Jesus appeared at the Jordan he found John baptizing those who confessed their sin and expressed a need for God’s deliverance from their various forms of captivity. Sin is a form of blindness, a kind of slavery and an absence of light. The servant Isaiah promised appears at the river to be part of this repenting and enslaved community. Of course he had no need for the washing, he could have kept his distance. Instead he chooses to be intimately united with them and so enters John’s cleansing waters. He may be without sin, but he too is part of a people enslaved by the Roman occupation, a people living in the dungeon and darkness of a foreign power.

In Matthew’s account of the baptism, the voice from heaven speaks words over Jesus very similar to the ones we hear in the Isaiah passage. While John recognizes that Jesus has no need for repentance, Jesus says it must be done, “to fulfill all righteousness.” What does that mean? First of all, Jesus’ presence to John’s baptism puts the stamp of approval on what John is doing. John truly is the precursor, truly the one calling people to readiness for the approaching anointed one of God. God wants this baptism for Jesus, for it will be the occasion for God to announce that the promised one has come who would set things right. Justice would be established, people would be invited to live in right relationships with each other and with God. Jesus receives his commission to do exactly that this day.

The baptism is a lesser point for Matthew, the epiphany that follows is the key point. The voice spells out quite clearly that this is the Son of God, the one on whom God’s Spirit rests. The voice is speaking not to Jesus, but to us—do we hear it? Are we ready to live the just life this One makes possible for us through our own baptism in which we have received this same Spirit that makes us, like Jesus, people beloved and pleasing to God?

On the 4th. Sunday of Advent we heard about the dream Joseph had. In it he was told the true identity of the child Mary was carrying. The child would be called, “Emmanuel, God with us.” Well how far would God be willing to go to be with us? Would God address sinners from a safe distance, calling us to repentance from the clouds, not soiling God’s hands with our sinful and tired world? Would God send still more prophets to call us to God’s self? But God had already done that many times over—to no avail. The human response to our obstinacy would have been to throw up hands in disgust, proclaim, “Enough already!” and strike us all dead. But this isn’t a human God, this is the genuine article! God is completely different from us and surprises us by entering our flesh, taking on our human condition, even to going down into the water to mix with people who are admitting they are sinners. There must have been better people praying in the Temple that day who would have been more “worthy” of a divine visitation. Instead, Jesus gets wet with the same water that has washed over sinners. Who can resist a God like this who would be willing to come so far over to our side to get our attention?

How did Jesus set things right? How was he the fulfillment of Isaiah’s dream, the one who would “establish justice?” The baptism shows he would not use brute force to get us to be a just people ---forgiven and right before God and just with one another. He chose to move among us, winning us over by his reaching out to the fringe—the outcasts, sick, sinners, poor and imprisoned. He would do this gently, since these are already languishing people who have had too much to suffer. Jesus would not break “a bruised reed...and a smoldering wick he shall not quench....” By joining people in the waters of their own predicaments, God had taken the first steps in acknowledging their importance in the plan God has to set things right; to bring justice and right relations to all people. Jesus has come for people who are broken or like a “smoldering wick,” feel depleted, about to go out. He enters the waters, not where the movers and sharers of society meet to make deals that affect so many others, but where those who know their needs and have turned to God have gone. They have gone out to John because they can not make it on their own, they need to hear and experience that God has heard their distress and has come to blow a new Spirit into them. This Spirit descends upon Jesus, but soon it will descend on all who follow into baptismal waters.

At the end of Matthew’s gospel, as he takes his leave of his disciples, Jesus promised to be with us till the end of time. He is still Emmanuel—God with us. He

gives us his Spirit through our baptism so that we are not left alone throughout our lives to stumble along and get tripped up by sin and the unjust ways of our world. Jesus' baptism shows us how close God wants to be with us, and our baptism establishes this closeness for all of our lives. We are the baptized here today for reminder and eucharistic refreshment. We look around this gathering and recognize some faces, many we don't. But there are no strangers among the baptized for whom all ethnic, racial, economic, gender and cultural differences are put aside, for we have gone down into the waters with Jesus and now we see differently.

The reading from Acts follows the emphasis on baptism. It is from Peter's last discourse in Acts and it marks the acceptance of the Gentiles into the community of Christians. God shows no partiality. The Jewish people, chosen by God, responded with works that showed them to be a covenanted, clean, observant people. Their outward sign of their special place before God was their strict observance of the Law, circumcision, the dietary practices and feasts. They had the outward assurances of their special place with God. Now Peter is suggesting the Gentiles are accepted by God with no prior observances, and no prior selection by God. There truly is no partiality with God, no one is outside the favor of God now, everyone is welcomed to be baptized. The preacher might allude to the barriers that still seem to exist in our congregations; that we judge each other on external norms of lifestyle, economics, race, country of origin, etc.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Joseph G. Donders, PRAYING AND PREACHING THE SUNDAY GOSPEL.
(New York: Orbis Books, 1988)

Brief reflections on the Sunday readings for the three year cycle. I like the sensitivity he shows to the justice message in the Gospels. His reflections are good meditations for both preacher and the person in the pew.

QUOTABLE:

In the year 1916, on a line of about seventeen miles, one million human beings killed one another over a period of eight months. That is an average rate of four thousand men killed each day. The mud of human evil is very deep. It stinks forcefully. It is full of dangerous gases. And there was Jesus in front of John, asking to be allowed to bend down in that mud. No wonder John hesitated. But

Jesus went down, and when he came up, the mud still streaming from his ears, over his eyes, out of his hair, over his nose and mouth, heaven opened. A voice was heard. A Spirit, a new Spirit in people and a new heart were announced, glory, glory, alleluia.

He was bathed in light. He was drowned in God's voice. He was full of Spirit. What about the mud? Was he going to forget it? Was he going to overlook it in the new light? Was that Spirit going to cover up evil? Was she going to work as a kind of consoling anesthetic, a kind of opium, cocaine, ether, or chloroform? She was not. Once he got that Spirit, he was driven by her into the desert, and again out of the desert, to do his work in this world, to struggle with evil in us and in this world, in order to overcome it.

—Joseph G. Donders, PRAYING AND PREACHING THE SUNDAY GOSPEL, p. 90

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.)

As followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a fundamental "option for the poor" -- to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess life styles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. This "option for the poor" does not mean pitting one group against another, but rather, strengthening the whole community by assisting those who are the most vulnerable. As Christians, we are called to respond to the needs of all our brothers and sisters, but those with the greatest needs require the greatest response.

-----U.S. Catholic Bishops, "Economic Justice for All" (Pastoral Message), #16

Although in general it is difficult to draw a line between what is needed for right use and what is demanded by prophetic witness, we must certainly keep firmly to this principle: our faith demands of us a certain sparingness in use, and the Church is obliged to live and administer its own goods in such a way that the Gospel is proclaimed to the poor. If instead the Church appears to be among the rich and the powerful of this world its credibility is diminished.

-----U.S. Catholic Bishops, "Justice in the World," #47

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,

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

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