

First Impressions 1st SUNDAY OF LENT (A)

Genesis 2: 7-9; 3: 1-7 Psalm 51 Romans 5: 12-19 Matthew 4: 1-11

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Lent has begun, another Lent! It comes early this year. Perhaps it feels like “one more Lent.” We are very familiar with it, we have done this before. In the past we have resolved to pray more; go to church a little more often, or break a bad habit. We may have resolved to eat and drink less, so that we can sacrifice some and have the bonus of losing a few extra pounds. It’s Lent and we feel we should do something extra.

At first, Christians thought Christ would return soon and so this expectation kept them alert and vigilant in their practice of faith. But he didn’t come right away and so they settled in for the long haul. They were no longer persecuted for their faith and soon even became part of the establishment. Their worship became more public--- there was no longer need to hide out in small, huddled communities afraid of the knock at the door. They built admirable edifices, filled them with beautiful art and became regular churchgoers. Nothing wrong with that; except that the edge Christians had at the beginning seemed to dull. From all appearances God had blessed them with safety and comfort. But something of the earlier zeal was missing. And so, an extended period of renewal, prayer and sacrifice was introduced into the church year.

While the first Christians didn’t feel the need for a special season to provide an atmosphere and encouragement to reflect, repent and renew—we certainly need it now—we who live so many years after Christ first called ordinary people to live as lights in a dark world. We need these forty days to open our eyes so we can see how we have given into comfort and have adopted one form of addiction or another to dull the pain and fill the empty places inside us where we have excluded God. Welcome to Lent.

There are two creation stories in Genesis. They differ and thus remind us that a reporter was not there when the world began taking notes so we could know exactly how the Creator worked it all out. Nor was someone looking over Jesus’ shoulder as he was tempted in the desert. What we have, in both our Genesis and Matthew readings, are faith-based accounts that speak to us of fundamental mysteries. The stories may not be factual, but they are true and in reflecting on

them we are given a glimpse, not only into the mysteries of our faith, but into our inner selves as well.

In the Genesis account we see how things deteriorated---from when God breathed life into the first humans, to when they chose to go their own way making wrongheaded decisions to satisfy their own greed and selfishness. While no one was there in the beginning to take notes and record a video of what happened in Eden, nevertheless, the story Genesis provides us is true, because it opens our eyes to our foolish and sinful decisions and their consequences. When did we decide to take God out of the picture and what were the results in our lives?

From Eden to the desert. Now, instead of our weak and susceptible ancestors succumbing to temptation, we have Jesus, representing humanity and undergoing temptation. He too faces the temptation offered Adam and Eve, to seek one's own glory, to have power and not be subject to another authority. While Adam and Eve chose to feed their ambitions, Jesus chose God and God's service. "The Lord your God shall you worship, and God alone shall you serve." He will serve God faithfully, always putting God first---which will eventually cost him his life.

At first Jesus' attracts large numbers of people through his powerful deeds of healing, driving out demons and feeding the hungry. Many of those who first came did so because of his powers. They had hopes that he could lead Israel to overthrow the Romans and return her former glory. To help Jesus do that the people wanted to give worldly power to him and make him king. (Remember the temptation? "All this I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.") Isn't it ironic that when Jesus is proclaimed king, it is written on the inscription over his head on the cross (27:37)? Jesus will stay consistent to his calling as God's faithful, suffering servant. He will continue to reject the tempter's offer of power, right up to the end of his life.

All that Jesus suffered--the rejection and persecution by the religious authorities; the betrayal by one of his followers; the abandonment by his disciples and his passion and death, happen to Jesus because he chose the way of the prophets: fidelity to God's Word, despite the rejection of his own people. If alienation, sin and death were to be overcome, it would have to come, not by power and worldly display, but through humble obedience to God and ministry to God's people---even when that leads to failure, suffering and death.

After Jesus was put to death, God raised him to new life. But at this early stage of the story and through the suffering that lies ahead for Jesus, the resurrection is not

yet visible. Jesus will experience pain and death and that is how new life will come to him and to us. Our baptism unites us to his life, death and, yes, his resurrection. But when we suffer because we are serving him, the resurrection is not always in our scope of vision. All we know at those moments is that we are called to follow Christ in darkness, a darkness he too knew. Matthew will tell us that from the cross Jesus, “cried out in a loud tone.... ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

At this Eucharist shall we choose, once again, to accept Christ and his way into our lives? Shall we serve him, even though that service will ask much of us? Maybe even death? Certainly, death to our own preconceived plans, timetables and self-image. On our own we are reluctant disciples. But we are not on our own, for through our baptism we are gifted with Jesus’ Spirit.

At the Easter Vigil service we will be invited to renew our baptismal promises and we will be asked three questions: “Do you reject sin, so as to live in the freedom of God’s children? Do you reject the glamor of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin? Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?” To each of these we will say, “I do.” And we know we can only say that because the same Spirit that was with Jesus in the desert stays with us and strengthens our resolution.

JUSTICE NOTES

“Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden”(Genesis2:7)

”In the Book of Genesis, where we find God's first self-revelation to humanity there is a recurring refrain: "AND GOD SAW IT WAS GOOD". After creating the heavens, the sea, the earth and all it contains, God created man and woman. God entrusted the whole of creation to the man and woman, and only then—as we read—could he rest "from all his work"

“Adam and Eve's call to share in the unfolding of God's plan of creation brought into play those abilities and gifts which distinguish the human being from all other creatures. Made in the image and likeness of God, Adam and Eve were to have exercised their dominion over the earth with **wisdom and love**” (Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation: Pope John Paul II for the celebration of the World Peace Day, 1/1/90) read Pope John Paul’s entire statement at:

<http://conservation.catholic.org/ecologicalcrisis.htm>

Did you know?

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops sponsors **“The Environmental Justice**

Program (EJP). EJP seeks to educate and motivate Catholics to a deeper reverence and respect for God's creation, and to engage Catholics in activities aimed at dealing with environmental problems, particularly as they affect the poor. To read more go to: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/>

1. **There is such a thing as "Ecological Spirituality."** "No one is holy who is not first good. Disciples who are spiritually alive, actively seek to discern God's will and act as collaborators with God. Today, this must include a reassessment of what Genesis means when it tells humankind to subdue the earth and have dominion over all living things on it. Can we be collaborators with our Creator if we want only pollute air, pile up atomic waste, denude our forests, and foul our rivers and lakes? No. A serious spirituality begins with a deep conversion from callous tearing of whatever we want from the earth to a caring stewardship." Read more at: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/background/articles/ecological.shtml>

2. Our Bishops' approach to climate change reflects three central and traditional ideas: the **virtue of prudence**, the **pursuit of the common good**, and the **duty to stand with and for the poor and vulnerable**. Read more at: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate/June07FinalTestimony.pdf>

What I can do:

· Στυδψ της ΥΣ Χατηολιχ Βισηοπισ □ Ενπιρονμενταλ θυστιχε Προγραμ, *Χαριν γ φορ Γ οδ □ σ Χρεατιον*: Μακε ενπιρονμενταλ πολιχιεσ αν ιμπορταντ ισσυε ασ ψου χηοοσε candidates in the upcoming election year. <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/>

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

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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:.....

William Gray #0153856 (On death row since 12/16/93)

Terry L. Ball #0017060 (2/3/94)
Frank J. Chambers #0071799 (3/10/94)
---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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