

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (A)

Ezekiel 37: 12-14 Romans 8: 8-11 John 11: 1-45

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

God is standing outside the tomb--- this is the strong image that touches me in today's readings. The tomb—our last stop on our journey to God. And what a terrible stopping-off-place it is! At American cemeteries the undertakers and grave diggers do their jobs well. The hole is dug, the excavated soil placed off to the side and the area surrounding the grave is covered with artificial green turf. (It looks like the astro-turf of indoor football stadiums.) Over the grave is a metal framed contraption and thick straps are hung from it to support the coffin. Family and friends remain in their cars until the workers ready the site with flowers. If the weather is foul, there is an awning to protect the mourners and the casket from rain or snow. When all is neatly arranged the mourners are invited to come to the grave site. The coffin is suspended over the grave, supported by that frame and straps. The grave diggers take their break off to the side, some grabbing a smoke during their idle moments. Soon they will be needed again but not till after everyone has left.

The final prayers are said, each mourner takes a flower from the nearby floral arrangements, bids farewell to the deceased and places it on the coffin before they leave. But no matter how antiseptic the grave site and how orderly the process, we know what we are looking at—it's a grave to which we are assigning one we have loved, perhaps all of our lives. Those nearby grave diggers will soon be placing our loved one into the earth and we will see them no more.

Of course, I know I describing American first-world funeral practices. In the poorest lands the body is wrapped in a simple cloth or placed in a wooden coffin made by a family member, a grave is scratched out of rocky soil by friends, and perhaps a flower or two is left on the earth that has been scrapped back into the grave. But in our culture, most of us leave before we get to see the casket lowered into the earth. We can't watch the final triumph of the grave as it claims our beloved dead. We also have our ways of camouflaging death with cosmetics and euphemisms. But no matter where and how we bury the dead, the grave finds us at our most vulnerable and seems to have its triumphant moments over us.

Hold this burial scene, the one you are most familiar with, in your imagination. Then look at the scriptures for today and see the graves in the first and third readings and hear the life-assuring words of the Romans passage. The scriptures assure us we are not alone at our most desolate moments. They don't avoid recognizing our pain and voicing our questions and even our disappointment in God. "If you had only been here...." But while they acknowledge our grief and feelings of impotency, as we stare at death's handiwork, the grave—they also tell us something unimaginable. The scriptures say that, in our most vulnerable moments, God stands with us at the grave and makes a promise of life that seems to mock the evidence before us. Death, by all logical conclusions, has defeated us. But God says, "NO!!!!"—in capital letters with a few exclamation points. As Ezekiel puts it, "Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people!" (Check out the text, it has an exclamation point and should have a few more to emphasize the impact of those words!) Only God can speak with such authority and certainty, for we are in no place to make such a promise on our own.

Ezekiel is not writing to console a family or a few friends over the death of a loved one. Ezekiel is writing for an entire people over the death of their nation and the destruction of their religious holy places. The prophet is speaking to the Jewish exiles in Babylon who have seen their beloved Jerusalem destroyed and their Temple desecrated. (587 B.C.E.) Using the vivid dead-bones vision (37: 1-10) Ezekiel evokes the hope that God can raise these people, these "dry bones," by means of God's Spirit and Word. The prophet is God's instrument for proclaiming this promise. Ezekiel's vision isn't addressing a final resurrection, but today's reading suggests God will raise up the people who feel cut off, not only from their homeland, but also from God, as they languish in foreign captivity. Can God do the impossible and restore Israel, take the people home to Jerusalem and help them rebuild the Temple? Yes—God is that powerful, promises Ezekiel. "I will put my spirit in you that you may live and I will settle you upon your land."

Hearing Ezekiel address the people we wonder: can people leaving a loved one behind for burial rebuild their lives? Can a family hold together as a family when its mother or father dies young? When a sibling is tragically killed in a random act of violence or an overdose? When a war causes civilian upheaval and displacement? Death has so many co-workers dealing out death in so many forms.

What will happen to the survivors? Hear what God has to say: “I will settle you upon you land; thus, you will know that I am God.” Let’s see how else the promise is made and to whom. We turn to the gospel.

The story gets more personal in the gospel for in it we get: a sick person who dies, a reprimand, an expression of faith in the impossible, weeping, disbelief, seeing the impossible and then coming to belief. In addition, Jesus will have to pay personally and dearly for this miracle, for it will intensify opposition to him and begin the scheming that leads to his own grave. While God doesn’t stand helplessly by Lazarus’ grave; this miracle of life will cost God dearly as well. Lazarus is Jesus’ friend and as we hear this story we are encouraged to believe that we are friends as well. As Jesus said earlier in John, “...an hour is coming in which all those in their tombs shall hear his [the Son of Man’s] voice and come forth.” (5: 28) We friends of Jesus trust these words as we stand by the open graves of so many loved ones and anticipate that a similar grave awaits us as well.

Jesus is very much in charge here. No one can rush him, not even the urgent pleas of the dying Lazarus’ sisters. He risks the appearance of not being their true friend, of seeming unconcerned. Why does he wait so long? (And why are we also left with questions and doubts when a word from him could raise us from our death beds?) One thing is for sure--- after the delay we know Lazarus is really dead! Practical Martha names the reality, “Lord, by now there will be a stench, he has been dead four days.”

What a scene; the dead man emerging from the dark, dank tomb with his burial cloths dangling from his resuscitated body! Soon Jesus will suffer a violent death. They will also wrap him, as was their custom, in burial cloths and place him in a tomb. Another group of family and friends will stand by yet one more grave and peer into its coldness. They too will feel helpless as they huddle to comfort one another. But all is not totally lost. God will visit this grave and speak a word of life over Jesus and God’s Spirit will raise him up to a completely new life. Who could have imagined? With his resurrection all of us who suffer death will be given the gift of hope and respond, “We too will rise.”

As we interpret this passage, note this about John’s gospel. For John, the life God promises in Jesus is already present to the baptized. Our new life does not begin

after we have breathed our last breath or when our bodies are surrendered to the grave—it begins now. To call upon another verse from John, “I solemnly assure you, an hour is coming, has indeed come, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who have heeded it shall live. (5:25) We have new life in us even as we stare at the many grave sites in the course of our lives.

There are the deaths of family and friends, of course. But we also face death if we; lose our jobs; flunk out of college; get a crippling disease; lose our physical or mental strengths in old age; give up plans of being married and having children; have our last child go off to school or get married; etc. Is new life possible beyond these and other graves? In this life? The believer, hearing today’s scriptures, is encouraged to believe that God has not abandoned us at our graves and will call out our names, utter a life-giving Word and breathe into us a resurrecting Spirit. “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he/she dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” And we respond with Martha, “Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.”

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

(A review submitted by Kris Bruun)

PREACHING TO EVERY PEW: CROSS-CULTURAL STRATEGIES, by James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers. Fortress Press, 2001.

This highly readable book analyzes and offers helpful strategies for dealing with cross-cultural preaching - when the preacher and the congregation are of a different race, class, ethnic background, or even different religious backgrounds. Nieman and Rogers use theology, the tools of the social sciences, and well-chosen anecdotes to develop their points. They offer the preacher methods of reflection on the differences which he or she is called to face. The book is extremely practical, yet does not lose sight of the work of the Holy Spirit.

JUSTICE NOTES

(During Lent we are posting six segments on the “Basic Themes of Catholic Social Teaching.” These may be helpful for your preaching, or you may want to put them

in your parish newsletter each week.)

NUMBER FIVE: THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS.

Theme: Work is more than a way to make a living; it is an expression of our dignity and a form of continuing participation in God's creation. People have the right to decent and productive work, to decent and fair wages, to private property and economic initiative. Workers have the strong support of the Church in forming and joining union and worker associations of their choosing in the exercise of their dignity and rights. These values are at the heart of RERUM NOVARUM and other encyclicals on economic justice. In Catholic teaching, the economy exists to serve people, not the other way around.

—U.S. Catholic Bishops, "A CENTURY OF SOCIAL TEACHING."

Principles: "The most important [organization] of all are Workmen's [sic] Associations....It is gratifying to know that there are not a few such societies, consisting either of workmen alone or of workmen and employers together.... It is greatly to be desired that they should multiply and become effective."

—RERUM NOVARUM

"Among the basic rights of the human person must be counted the right of freely founding labor unions."

—GAUDIUM ET SPES (68)

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.'"

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

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:.....

Henry L. Mc Collum #0265106 (On death row since 11/22/91)

Clinton R. Rose #0351933 (12/19/91)

Edward E. Davis #0100579 (3/12/92)

-----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,

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

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