

**First Impressions**    Passion (Palm) Sunday (A)  
Procession Gospel    Matthew 21: 1-11  
Isaiah 50: 4-7 Psalm 22    Philippians 2: 6-11    Matthew 26: 14-- 27:66  
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We have had a very prolonged and contentious primary season in this country. We started with a full slate of presidential candidates for both parties and now that number has been vastly narrowed. At this writing, we have one Republican and two possible Democratic candidates left. Along the way contenders were accused of back-pedaling, of changing their positions on key issues to curry favor with the voters. There is nothing wrong with changing one's position on an issue once one has gotten more information or experience. I hope we are open-minded enough to rethink positions we have taken and, if necessary, change our minds if facts or further wisdom warrant it. But who wants a candidate that is like one of those wind socks at tiny rural airports that changes direction with every shift of the wind? Don't we admire a person who, once convinced of a position, sticks with it despite opinion polls or the desire to gain in popularity?

Our Palm Sunday liturgy opens today with a procession. We are instructed to gather "in a suitable place distinct from the church." Before we begin our procession with palms, the Presider addresses us and says, in part:

Today we come together to begin this solemn celebration in union with the whole church throughout the world. Christ entered in triumph into his own city, to complete his work as our Messiah; to suffer, to die and to rise again. Let us remember with devotion this entry which began his saving work and follow him with a lively faith. United with him in his suffering on the cross, may we share his resurrection and new life.

Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem. He didn't have to get to this moment; he could have changed his mind. As he traveled towards Jerusalem he met more and more opposition. At the beginning of his journey, he received an enthusiastic welcome from the crowds. But the religious authorities grew more adamant and vocal in their opposition to him. Even the crowds, who shout their "Hosannas" as he enters the city, will soon fade. His disciples will also cut and run.

Matthew tells us that when Judas and a large crowd, sent by the chief priests and elders of the people (“with swords and clubs”), arrested Jesus, “Then all the disciples left him and fled.”

Jesus had predicted this downturn in his popularity. He had spoken to his followers about his approaching passion and death. He could read the signs. He could have changed his teachings: about God’s kingdom being open to all people, even the pagan outsiders; about the last being first and the first last; about his presence in the least-favored of society; about God’s bountiful forgiveness; about a new heaven and a new earth—but he didn’t. Unlike those seeking popular approval—he stayed the course and continued to preach his message on the road to Jerusalem.

So, we find him today, the faithful child of God, freely entering Jerusalem to face suffering and death. In the gospel today we read that when the soldiers torture him, they mock him and shout, “Hail, King of the Jews!” The long-awaited King has entered Jerusalem to set the chosen people free—but not in the way they or we had hoped for or expected. “Behold your king comes to you, meek and riding on an ass and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.” Where is the white stallion, the armor and chariots? The road to freedom starts with total defeat. Who could have predicted that God would choose this way? Perhaps someone who had read and reflected on today’s Isaiah prophecy. It is about the servant who accepts the suffering that comes with being faithful to God’s call. Jesus is that Servant, determined to complete the mission God gave him and the suffering that mission entails.

When people experience tragedy, severe sickness or death, some people shrink back. “I just don’t know what to say.” So, they remain silent and absent. That’s not usually what those in pain need. Others make attempts to say something, though they feel inadequate. Words sound empty and very insufficient in the light of pain and mystery. Where do we get words at such times? We draw on our own experience, for none of us are foreigners to pain, failure, disappointment, fears, sickness and the death of loved ones. So, we reach down deep to say something, for we remember how we were comforted by another’s words when we needed to hear them. It usually only takes a few words in such circumstances.

Sometimes silence and being with people in their most vulnerable time is what

we must do---for silence and presence is another kind of word and can speak volumes. The Isaiah reading today is about a servant of God who is given “a well-trained tongue” and is sent “to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them.” This servant suffers for doing that task. But God wants words spoken to the weary and each day the Servant’s ears are open to hear again what God wants said and done.

As we enter into Holy Week we are first of all listeners to God’s Word, for God wants “to speak a word that will rouse” the weary. And God also wants to “train” our tongues as well, so that we can speak and act on behalf of the weary. This week Jesus, God’s Servant, speaks words of a different type as he stands with us, in the world’s suffering and darkness. He has set his face “like flint.” He trusts God and shows us God’s determination to be with us in pain. As someone has said, “God has entered our darkness; the darkness is inhabited.” [I remember the words, but I have forgotten the source.] Jesus’ life, death and resurrection speak a word of comfort to the weary and give strength to all who may be wavering in their faith and commitment to him.

This week we are primarily observers so that when we must speak a “word to the weary” we can draw on what our ears have heard, and our eyes have seen as Jesus enters into his Passion and death for us.

## QUOTABLE

### “The Trees”

The trees are coming into leaf  
Like something almost being said;  
The recent buds relax and spread,  
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again  
And we grow old? No, they die too.  
Their yearly trick of looking new  
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh

In fullgrown thickness every May.  
Last year is dead, they seem to say,  
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

----Philip Larkin

## JUSTICE NOTES

### **Jesus: a Victim of Capital Punishment**

We worship a God whose Son died as a common criminal despite His innocence. During this week when we recall the execution of Jesus Christ, we hear our Pope and Bishops call us as Catholic Christians to work for an end to the death penalty in our state and in our nation.

“A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew my appeal for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary” (*Pope John Paul II, Jan. 27, 1999, St. Louis, Missouri*).

‘Respect for all human life and opposition to the violence in our society are at the root of our long-standing position against the death penalty. We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing. We oppose capital punishment, not just for what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes, but for what it does to all of us as a society. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life.’ *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998*

### **Did you know?**

1. On Nov. 15, 2007, The United States Catholic Bishops released a document expressing consensus on opposition to the death penalty and seeking to provide a "consistent moral framework" for assessing political platforms. In a statement titled "*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility*," the bishops refer to the death penalty as “*intrinsic evil*.”
2. The United Nations General Assembly has voted to urge a global moratorium on the death penalty, over the objections of the U.S., China, Iran

and Sudan.

3. More than 210 men and women await execution on North Carolina's death row. Only four states have more death row inmates than North Carolina.

### **What can I do?**

1. **Form your conscience by studying the following links: Be aware. Be vocal. Contact your local and national legislators.**
2. United Catholic Bishops' statements:  
<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/national/deathpenalty/>
1. People of Faith Against the Death Penalty:  
<http://www.pfadp.org/deathpenaltylegislation.htm>
2. Catholics Against Capital Punishment

<http://www.cacp.org/home.html>

(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:.....

Jerry W. Connor	#0085045	(On death row since 4/30/91)
Isaac. J. Stroud	#0478925	(2/9/95)
James E. Thomas	#0404386	(2/24/95)
---Central Prison	1300 Western Blvd.	Raleigh, NC 27606

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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](http://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](mailto: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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