

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 10<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Hosea 6: 3-6 Psalm 50 Romans 4: 18-25 Matthew 9: 9-13

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Allow me to step back from the usual commentary on the scriptures to reflect on our task and to pose a challenge to the preacher (and worshiper). From now until September 15<sup>th</sup>, our second readings will be from Romans. While most of us preachers usually gravitate to the gospel for our preaching, we shouldn't let these many weeks go by, and the opportunity they present, without some Pauline preaching. I have to admit I find it easier to “get into” the gospel readings. The narrative and vivid details they often present make them more accessible to me as a preacher and to the listening congregation. I tend to skip over the second readings. To get a preaching from them requires more work on our part. This work also frequently requires more exegetical work and some background work. To tell you the truth, with my busy schedule I tend to avoid the extra work preaching from Paul requires.

What doesn't help is that the Lectionary itself has some built in hazards for the preacher. It is designed to give emphasis to the Gospel reading. Notice how the first reading is selected to point to the Gospel selection of the day. The Gospel reading is mostly narrative and so each pericope can stand by itself; whereas the Pauline selection is brief, out of the larger context of its literary form, the letter, and usually so didactic. I dare say that even in parishes where the missalette is used and people follow the reading as it is proclaimed, the Pauline text still leaves people wondering, “What is this all about?”

While Paul seems to be fired up about some very specific problems in the early church, our listeners don't know what he is talking about: why he is writing what he writes and what it has to do with our lives anyway!? He also frequently alludes to the Hebrew texts, and touches into a general illiteracy of the Old Testament on the part of many Sunday worshipers. In addition, Paul's cultural outlook is so different from ours, and he has such a poor reputation regarding his outlook on women (further study on this later topic alone would prove rich material for preaching, or at least, for bible study class). So, why make preaching more difficult than it already is by introducing Paul into the mix?

Paul usually wrote for specific reasons, but there is something very universal about his letters. He addresses the early church communities about problems they are experiencing that still plague the modern community. The preacher will have to do a bit of background reading to discover what the issues were. We should have some good commentaries in our library to assist us. The commentaries will have brief a introduction to each letter that will provide the crucial background we need. This bit of extra work ought to be part of the preacher's on-going study. If you are a regular preacher, it might be more pastorally effective to preach a series of homilies on Romans and the time spent working with Paul now will yield fruit for more than one preaching. Thus, the extra study we do will have fruits for more than one preaching.

In addressing specific issues Paul shows how he "enfleshes" the Gospel message in the concrete reality of the evolving daily life of believers. He challenges us as preachers to do what he did, find how God's Word is speaking to our day with its unique problems. What were the issues then and what was he saying about them? How are the issues we face today similar and, guided by his approach, what should we preach?

So, let's look at the Romans reading for preaching possibilities. First I would take the time to read the whole letter to get a sense of the flow of his thoughts. Then I would get specific and look at the reading assigned for today. Today's selection from Romans is laden with a big Pauline notion--- "justification by faith" (righteousness). Just the very thing that intimidates preachers as we fear taking on a really big "theme" from the Pauline writings. Listeners also will hear in terms like justification and righteousness echoes of street preachers challenging, "Have you been saved?"

The word righteousness also stirs up prison memories for me. Over the years I volunteered at San Quentin prison I occasionally would hear an inmate around the chapel or yard described as "righteous" by the chaplain, a guard or another inmate. I knew that was a big compliment and that I could trust that inmate's word and rely on any promise he made. There were lots of inmates who would try to justify themselves in verbose ways, as if to talk someone into trusting them. (In some similar ways don't we do the same?) But that was not how someone got the label "righteous"---it had to be given because they had proven themselves worthy of the title. "Hey Father, that guy over there is a righteous inmate."

In the bible the issue of righteousness is central in describing our relationship with God. Job (9:2) asks the question, “How can a person be just before God?” Which one of us can stand completely right before God? What speech could a defense lawyer use on our behalf to make the case that we have been righteous in all our thoughts and deeds? We don’t stand a chance. Indeed, it is a biblical premise that, as Job reminds us, no one is just before God. What makes us righteous, Paul reminds us, is faith in “the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.”

Some believed that they could be made right by keeping the law--- observing the Jewish practices and restrictions. Or, as the 5<sup>th</sup>. Century heretic Pelagius taught, humans could be put right with God by a firm moral effort. (This is hardly a dead heresy among even the most devout among us. We preachers are guilty of this heresy when we suggest, “all you have to do is follow Jesus’ example.” Without freely-given and unearned grace, we can’t follow Jesus’ example.) Paul’s central teaching is that the works of the law could never justify us without the grace of Christ. In today’s selection he “proves” his case by using the example of Abraham, who lived before the law even existed. Abraham was made righteous, not by what he could do, but by what God could do in him and Sarah. Even when all human evidence contradicted his faith-- his and Sarah’s advanced age-- he “hoped against hope.” What was dead and impossible for the aged couple was fertile working ground for a God who could create a future when there was none.

Is it possible that even now God can take the sad and rotten mess we are experiencing in our church and, “the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,” could also bring new life where so much death appears on our church landscape? Impossible! Paul would say, “No one is righteous before God, nevertheless, God offers us righteousness through Christ. We need Abraham’s faith and Paul’s reminder of it. Abraham is a model for us who need to hope that life can come from death.

Paul suggests we not just look back to Abraham but to see him as a type. Like Abraham we are asked to rely on promises God has made to us and to believe that they will be fulfilled. Promises that offer forgiveness; reconciliation among enemies; a future of full life; that death is not the end and that God will always be there for us---no matter what we have done that might have driven off a lesser god. The specter of death is found in today’s reading: Abrahams body was “already dead” and Sarah’s was a “dead womb.” What could be a more impossible than to

trust God even in the face of death? Nothing is deader than a corpse; nothing more hopeless. Yet this, Paul tells us, is the One who “raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.” What God has done for the just one Jesus, God will do for the faithful who trust in the promise of life we have received through our faith in the risen One.

No matter what has gone before in our lives and as unworthy as we may feel for our life of half-hearted commitment to God and God’s ways---Paul stirs up hope in us. We shouldn’t measure past accomplishments or failures as we consider once again turning back to God. Rather, our faith calls us to turn again to God for the free grace that will enable a new life in us, one in which God will accomplish new things. Whether we feel worthy or not at this moment is not the issue. We admit that we desperately need God’s grace. We hope against hope and put our faith in the God who raised the dead Christ to new life. We are assured that we too are acceptable to God. What inmates declared over a trustworthy fellow inmate can be said of us in a much more profound way. “See that one over there, s/he is a righteous person.

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Raymond F. Collins, *PREACHING THE EPISTLES*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

Collins is an exegete and has written this mostly for the Sunday lectionary preacher. He gives a general introduction on the challenges of preaching Paul and suggests how to go about doing it. Includes brief explanations of Paul’s theology, “the Gospel according to Paul,” information on the epistle genre and briefly reviews each epistle as it appears in the Lectionary.

#### QUOTABLE

One of the reasons why Paul’s letters do not often serve as the basis for the Sunday homily is that many people, including some clergy, have a narrow perception of “the gospel.” All too often when people think about preaching the gospel, they think about preaching a homily that is based on one of the canonical gospel. They think as if “the gospel” was simply a story from one of the four canonical gospels. As a result, the appointed passage from one of the four gospels is usually the subject of the Sunday homily.

-----Raymond F. Collins, page 9.

## JUSTICE NOTES

St. Paul wrote Timothy: 'Everything God created is good; nothing is to be rejected when it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the invocation of God in prayer.' [I Tim. 4: 4-5] I believe that all of us who are created in the image of God are responsible for the prudent use and stewardship of the earth's resources; we must use our freedom to make wise choices, especially since we know our decisions potentially impact all of creation. I preach an incarnational theology affirming that God offers grace in the midst of the goodness of creation, as well as in our suffering. However, we ignore God's offer of grace when we reveal our self-centeredness and selfishness, each inherent in our shadow side. We distance ourselves from God and from people through sinful acts and by ignoring the needs of others. Mistaking ourselves for God, we capably destroy creation's beauty and abundance, as well as life-sustaining relationships. We destroy the unity that God intends for all of creation: 'The web of life is one. Our mistreatment of the material world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human.' ("Care for the Earth", Indiana Catholic Conference.)

---Audrey Borschel in, *Theology of Preaching: Essays on Vision and Mission in the Pulpit*. Edited by Gregory Heille, OP. (London: Melisende, 2001), p. 73.

## 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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA  
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: [judeop@juno.com](mailto:judeop@juno.com)