

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 12th SUNDAY (A)

Jeremiah 20: 10-13 Psalm 69 Romans 5: 12-15 Matthew 10: 26-33

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

This week we passed the first day of summer. The water is warming up at ocean beaches, lakes and swimming pools. Many of us take vacations during the summer and we are looking forward to a break from long hours of work, homework, commuting, and taking the kids to music lessons and soccer games. Others in farming communities are not so lucky since summer means more daylight and longer hours of work. But we are at least happy to be out doors without winter harshness. It's pleasing to our eyes to see growing things, ripening fields and hear the sounds of birds. (This is from a Brooklyn boy who's trying to imagine a rural congregation---you preachers with farming ties will have to fill in the blanks here!)

With warm sunny days and some picnics in our future, the scriptures have turned rather bleak on us! Jeremiah, God's often complaining but nevertheless faithful prophet, laments what has befallen him for passing on God's warning to Israel. His fidelity has resulted in, "Terror on every side," denunciations, traps being set and vengeance planned against him. Jesus's advice to his disciples is very stark as he suggests that some will even face death for him, "And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul...."

There just doesn't seem to be a summer lull in the responsibility we have to follow and witness to God's ways in our world. We may be thinking summer breezes, vacations barbecues and cold beers---all well and good. But Jesus' disciples are always on the job--- 24/7. We must be prepared, he says, to reveal in the light what we have heard in the dark recesses of our hearts. Or as Paul would have it, "Preach the Word in season and out."

I found this story recently and thought it might go well with the first or third readings:

As a teacher and school counselor for more than 20 years, Sand Dore was used to taking a stand in front of a classroom. Standing up to the Aryan Nation was another matter. But when Aryan youth began recruiting at his secondary school in Kelowna, British Columbia, Dore spoke out. "As

teachers,” he says, “we should be up there saying what we believe.” School administrators and colleagues were skeptical. “When you start being vocal, people say ‘tone it down’ or ‘don’t make waves.’” Dore and his family started to get hate mail and anonymous phone calls in the middle of the night. Instead of toning it down, Dore got an unlisted phone number and went right on advocating respect and understanding. He gets students at his school to examine racism up close and personal, bringing Holocaust survivors in to talk to them. He convinced city hall to declare Kelowna a racism-free town. The mayor has proclaimed a Standing Together Against Racism Day and members of the Attorney General’s Provincial Hate Crime team now wear Dore’s anti-racism T-shirts. (“Spirituality and Health,” Winter, 2002 page 16.)

In the first reading Jeremiah, in his usual blunt fashion, pours out his feelings to God. He is undergoing persecution because of the message God gave him to deliver to Judah. He was a prophet during the reign of the pious King Josiah, who initiated a reform, which Jeremiah supported. But then the king died in battle and the people returned to idolatry. Jeremiah’s opposition to the nation’s relapse, and his warnings that such a breaking with the covenant would mean disaster, were met with harsh opposition. The people ignored his call to repentance and Jeremiah was imprisoned and disgraced. Jeremiah is feeling the stress of trying to do what God wanted, but finding himself rejected and suffering the consequences of his prophetic vocation. He feels on his own. Jeremiah never suspected that when he accepted his call from God that it would mean he would be predicting the destruction of the nation and suffering the bitter opposition of his own people.

Lament is one of the major forms of biblical prayer. In it the speaker complains of his/her situation, voices disappointment and need and asks God for deliverance. Many psalms are laments--about a third of them! Sometimes the speaker is one person; but the lament is also voiced for the entire community. Lament initially voices pain and complaint. To the one lamenting, it seems that even God has been oblivious to his/her desperate situation. Nevertheless, the prayer moves to confidence that God has not been blind to injustice nor will abandon the petitioner. All other resources may have failed; but God is on the side of the just. Laments end with a declaration of trust and often praise God. What an act of hope this kind of prayer is! Jeremiah is voicing a lament in today’s selection. He is confident that in the end God will rescue him, even though his friends are “on the watch for any

misstep of mine....” He trusts that God is his mighty defender, a “gibbor,” a fighter who is on his side. He has no doubt that God, who does not abandon the poor, will triumph over the wicked.

No season is automatically exempt from problems, summertime or not. Nor does a change of season automatically change a desperate situation. While people may talk about their difficulties with a friend and wonder “why is God letting this happen to me?” they often keep doubts, complaints and questions out of their prayer. They would never think of being so blunt and forthright with God. “Oh, I could never say that to God!” Some will just make a passive act of acceptance and say, “God never gives us more than we can bear.” (Indirectly blaming God, but never explicitly saying so.) Some fear they will offend God if they were to speak their true feelings. And so a silence is adopted that quarantines certain expressions considered “unacceptable” in prayer. In our preaching we may need to encourage people to let their feelings, past hurts, and complaints “all hang out” before God. If people feel they have a complaint against God, then encourage them to voice it. At least the conversation will be more honest and open and God can have some room to work with us. Jeremiah, no little authority on complaint, seems to give us encouragement to compose our own prayer of lament today. Who knows, though our prayer begin with an initial complaint, it may end, as Jeremiah’s does, with an exclamation point.... “Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord, for God has rescued the life of the poor from the power of the wicked!”

During a time of so many world conflicts, suicide bombers and vengeance killings, Jeremiah’s prayer for vengeance sounds brutal. But note he isn’t planning to get vengeance himself; he is leaving that up to God. What he really wants is that God practice justice---deliver the poor from oppression. As the lament ends it is clear that Jeremiah has no doubt that the just God will act on behalf of the poor--which in this case, includes the prophet himself. Quite a change from the initial desperation of his lament.

I went to the Cincinnati zoo a while back. They have an eagle exhibit with explanatory notes on the survival of the eagle. It was once almost extinct. It seems that pesticides and fertilizers on farms ran off into the streams and rivers and were absorbed by small fish who in turn were eaten by larger fish. This went all the way up the food chain until the eagles ate the larger fish and absorbed the poisons into their systems and began laying thinner shelled eggs due to the poison. The

eagle population was on the verge of extinction until a restriction was enforced on pesticides and fertilizers. The exhibit and the healthy eagles in the zoo were a powerful reminder that we live in an ecosystem where all life is affected by the well being or poor health of even the smallest plant or animal life.

The people St. Paul addressed in his letter to the Romans saw humans as living in solidarity with one another, a kind of ecosystem, where what happens to one affects the whole (the Semitic sense of "corporate personality"). In this line of thinking, Adam's sin affected us all, evil was introduced into "the system" and corrupted it. (The musical "South Pacific," has a song about passing on racial hatred, "You Have to Be Taught to Hate".) We "teach" the next generation by word and example; not just by individual word and example either, but by society's words and examples in the neighborhood, school, television, advertizing, etc.

Paul is showing how evil spread through Adam's introduction of it. Now, with Jesus, we have a new "man," a new head of humanity. Sin reigned, was our reality, and death held sway over us. Now Jesus Christ has freed us from the power of sin and death have over us. As with Adam, one person's action has affected the whole ("corporate personality"). Grace is more powerful than sin; goodness has overcome evil. We can now face the powers of evil, not on our own, but armed with the power of goodness that we have received as members of the new humanity through our baptism.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Brueggemann, Walter. Finally Comes The Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.

This is a must read for the preacher. Brueggemann claims that the work of preaching the Gospel has been trivialized. We need the prophetic voice that shatters our complacent reality. Such a voice can be found in poetic speech which can summon us to imagine our lives and that of the world in another way.

QUOTABLE:

The new conversation, on which our very lives depend, requires a poet and not a moralist. Because finally church people are like other people; we are not changed

by new rules. The deep places in our lives—places of resistance and embrace—are not ultimately reached by instruction. Those places of resistance and embrace are reached only by stories, by images, metaphors and phrases that line out the world differently, apart from our fear and hurt.

-----Walter Brueggemann (Page 109)

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.)

Why does the pope talk so much about the poor? Why do preachers talk so much about the poor? Come to think of it, why did Jesus talk so much about the poor (18 times in the Gospels)? There's a lot more to living a Christian life---like raising our kids right, doing an honest day's work, taking care of aging parents. Why single out helping the poor?

There's a reason. Perhaps an analogy will be helpful.

Most sports involve complicated moves, and athletes try to find the "key"---one thing that makes the rest happen. For example, the racquetball swing: In a split second you coordinate the movement of your arm, wrist, knees, feet. You can't think about all those at once, so you try to focus on the key. For me, it's the elbow. If the elbow is ahead of the rest of my arm as I'm coming at the ball, the rest happens.

In hockey, meanwhile, the key is to skate with the puck while looking up, not down. That forces you to skate well, handle the puck well and pass well. "It also helps prevent you from getting clobbered.)

I know what the key is in real life. I learned it from the Gospels. I learned it by watching good people lead good lives. The key is the poor. There's a lot more to leading a good life than simply being kind to the poor. But if we do that, the rest will happen.

That's why Jesus talked so much about the poor. Caring for them is not simply one item in a long list of good works. It's the key.

---Bishop Kenneth E. Untener, in "Millennium Monthly," September 1999.

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.

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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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