

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 12<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY (A)

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

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

There is an ominous feel in the first and third readings today. Upon my first reading the Jeremiah account, shadowy words jump out at me: “whispering,” “terror,” “denounce,” “trapped,” “vengeance,” etc. The gospel picks up the somber tone with: “fear,” “secret,” “fear/afraid,” “kill,” “destroy,” “denies,” etc. It’s no coincidence these two readings blend as they do, the designers of the Lectionary for Sundays intentionally picked the first reading to refer to the gospel of the day. Overall, the tone of the readings is, what we used to call, “a real downer.”

Let’s look at what’s causing the fear and turmoil. It has to do with faithful disciples living up to their calling to witness to what they have experienced. Last week we heard about Israel’s being chosen as God’s “special possession,” the people were to be “a holy nation” (Ex. 12: 2-6a). Similarly, in last week’s gospel, Jesus called the apostles, gave them authority and sent them out preaching. Jeremiah and the apostles were called to be spokespersons for God, called to announce God’s love and to invite people to live out that love by loving and acting justly towards others. Or, as Jesus succinctly announces the reality of God’s immediacy and the new community God is forming through Jesus, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Which brings us to today’s readings; they are a sequel to last week’s call. Those who accept the invitation to be witnesses to God will be opposed. In both Jeremiah and the apostles’ cases the opposition will be bold and even murderous—we are talking here of martyrs. Jeremiah has done God’s bidding and warned the king, priests and people of Judah that God would deliver the people to Babylonian captivity (Jer. 20: 1-6) if they didn’t turn back to God. For this boldness the prophet was scourged and placed in stocks. Just before today’s passage (Jer. 20: 7-9) he complains bitterly that he was “duped” by God into this ministry. He never anticipated the pain involved in serving God, in being God’s messenger to an unresponsive world. Now, he says, God won’t let go of him, won’t let him remain silent and allow him to escape.

Jeremiah's faith in God and his response to what God told him to do, have made him the object of abuse and caused him great anguish--- even from those closest to him. "All those, even my friends, are on the watch for any missteps of mine." Trying to do God's will, as best as we can discern it, will put us contra to the prevailing values of the world around us. Jeremiah and the gospel witnesses find rejection, even hostility, from the very places they might have otherwise looked for support and encouragement---from their friends and family. In his pain Jeremiah may feel rejected, even punished by God, but in fact God is sustaining him through his trials.

Success in the world is most often measured by visible material goods and fame. How do we believers measure success? When things we usually call "blessings" have been taken away, do we think we must be on the wrong side of God and God is somehow punishing us? Jeremiah's story suggests the contrary: being faithful to God may leave us on the wrong side of the world's opinion, but we will be strengthened and blessed by God.

Behind Jeremiah's narrative of his painful predicament can't you hear his implied complaint to God? When I was in high school I learned the word "jeremiad." The dictionary said, "An elaborate and prolonged lamentation or tale of woe." Of course, the word has its roots in Jeremiah, who complained to God so frequently. But think about Jeremiah's faith; he gives himself whole-heartedly (one might say, naively) to God and when circumstances turn bitter for him he doesn't turn away from his task. But he does complain! Which might give us permission to do the same when our own discipleship has us pinned to the mats.

Matthew's community must have been going through a Jeremiah experience—living and speaking about their faith were causing pain and fear among them. Like Jeremiah, they may have even been quite vocal in their bewilderment and disappointment because things weren't turning out the way they had hoped. Otherwise, Matthew would never have recorded these frank and consoling words of Jesus. Jesus is reminding his followers that because of him, they will suffer persecution. The saying about the sparrows has ominous tones: God knows when even a minuscule sparrow "falls to the ground." There is a hint here of the disciples themselves having to face even death ("fall to the ground") as Jesus' followers. I don't know if I have to fear being killed or imprisoned for my faith; but living that faith does have its costs and may even cause pain, or at least

daily sacrifice and inconvenience

Usually a salesperson pitches a product in optimistic tones: the most comfortable car; the best- cleaning vacuum; the most powerful stain remover, etc. Hasn't Jesus studied the course and read the books on how to put a product forward? Today he is talking to newly-chosen apostles, but instead of promising them a glory ride and pie-in-the-sky, he is talking about sufferings and fear-raising situations in their ministry. Throughout today's gospel there are sprinkled words to the twelve about not being afraid. What might they fear?

They are not to be afraid because of the small, seeming insignificance of their project in the light of the world powers around them. Now---the good news is "concealed" and "secret," known by only a few. Now--- Jesus speaks in "darkness" and his message is "whispered" to them. But someday all will be "revealed" and "known." In our modern world of high speed internet access, million dollar television commercials and "glitterati," living out our faith in Christ can make us feel out-shouted, overridden and insignificant. Judging from the more dominant voices and forces around us, our Christian approach to life can seem diminutive and without influence as the world makes decisions that affect the destinies of present and future populations and of the planet itself.

Jesus promises his message will be "proclaimed on the housetops." How? Some people in our history have been very forthright proclaimers, they have been like people standing on roof tops for all to see and hear. But most of us are afraid of such heights and our call might be less spectacular, but still requiring courage. I read this Brazilian proverb recently, "Your head thinks from the spot you plant your feet." We have planted our feet with Christ and he invites our heads to think and our hearts to feel from that spot. We must, if we are standing with Christ, acknowledge him by lives and words that are recognizable as having him as their source.

Jesus predicts a sign by which we will know we are being faithful to him---when we are standing on his side of honesty, concern, forgiveness, trust, community, etc---we will stir upon opposition. His message will stir up strife. He is aware that, just as he found resistance to his teaching, so will his followers. So he tells them, "And do not be afraid of those who kill the body..." for they have power, but only over the body. God's power is more sweeping and total, in fact, Jesus

says, God "...can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna." But the disciples is not to fear, because God cares about each of us and every part of us, right down to the hairs on our heads. If birds fall unde4r god's care, how much more do we?

This reminder about God's care for us isn't a guarantee we will have an easy ride as God's servants. Jeremiah has already voiced the feelings of abandonment, disappointment and dismay one might feel in the face of the rejection God's witnesses often experience. Jesus uses the example of sparrows falling and dying and God's concern for them, to reassure us that in the face of trials and even death, God will care for us. Jesus is not going to leave us alone however, he will not exempt himself from our struggles. He says he will "acknowledge" us before God. This image suggests he stands with us and claims us as one of his own. When the going gets tough, he is right in the thick of things with us.

Last week Jesus once again called us and sent us out. If we have reflected on our lives this past week, we know being sent into the world to live our beliefs in Christ is "easier said than done." It's a rough world out there for those who want to practice their faith. We come back here this Sunday for a breather from some harsh realities; but also to be refueled so we can do what we know Jesus would have us do.

#### FATHER'S DAY

Father's Day, contrary to popular misconception, was not established as a holiday in order to help greeting card manufacturers sell more cards. In fact when a "father's day" was first proposed there were no Father's Day cards!

Mrs. John B. Dodd, of Washington, first proposed the idea of a "father's day" in 1909. Mrs. Dodd wanted a special day to honor her father, William Smart. William Smart, a Civil War veteran, was widowed when his wife (Mrs. Dodd's mother) died in childbirth with their sixth child. Mr. Smart was left to raise the newborn and his other five children by himself on a rural farm in eastern Washington state. It was after Mrs. Dodd became an adult that she realized the strength and selflessness her father had shown in raising his children as a single parent.

The first Father's Day was observed on June 19, 1910 in Spokane Washington. At about the same time in various towns and cities across American other people were beginning to celebrate a "father's day." In 1924 President Calvin Coolidge supported the idea of a national Father's Day. Finally in 1966 President Lyndon Johnson signed a presidential proclamation declaring the 3rd Sunday of June as

Father's Day.

Father's Day has become a day to not only honor your father, but all men who act as a father figure. Stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers, and adult male friends are all honored on Father's Day. -----from: "Father's Day on the Net,"  
<http://www.holidays.net/father/>

### BLESSING PRAYER FOR FATHER'S DAY

Blessed are You, [Source of all life]  
who has given to us the gift of the father of our family.

Today, we honor him, and we thank You for the numerous good things that are ours because of him.  
His love for us has been a sign of Your divine affection and a sharing in Your holy love.

His continuous concern for our needs and welfare is a mirror of Your holy providence.  
And so, as we honor him, we praise You, Father of All Peoples.

Bless him this day with Your strength and holy power that he may continue to be a sign of You, our God, and a priestly parent to our family.....

May we, the members of his family, assist him in his holy duties as a parent with our respect, our obedience and our deep affection.

Bless him, with happiness and good health, with peace and with good fortune, so that he who has shared of his very life may live forever with You, his [loving] God.

This blessing and all graces, we pray, descend upon the father of our family: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen

-----PRAYERS FOR THE DOMESTIC CHURCH: A HANDBOOK FOR  
WORSHIP IN THE HOME, by Edward Hays (Easton, Kansas: Forest of peace Books, Inc. 1979)

## QUOTABLE

Spending time in silent waiting for the word of God to speak in a new way at this moment in our own lives and in the history of our communities is a non-negotiable for preachers. Because preaching is not a matter of explaining a Bible passage or teaching a class about salvation history—much less giving wise human advice or entertaining a crowd—preachers remain beggars ourselves before we can nourish others. One of the best descriptions of preaching I ever heard was “one beggar telling others where to find bread.” Like the disciples in the Gospel, preachers remain keenly aware that our own resources are inadequate to meet the needs of the hungry crowd. At the same time, we are called to trust that God’s Spirit continues to transform the fragments we can offer and to nourish hungry crowds in abundance. But we can’t offer others a word that hasn’t nourished us. As preachers, we need to “eat the scroll” ourselves if we are to speak words that carry conviction.

—Mary Catherine Hilbert, OP, “Making the Word a Home: Contemplative Spirituality for the Preacher,” in *PREACH*, September/October 2004, page 31.)

## JUSTICE NOTES

The Bible, from the first page on, teaches us that the whole of creation is for humanity, that it is men and women's responsibility to develop it by intelligent effort and by means of their labor to perfect it, so to speak, for their use. If the world is made to furnish each individual with the means of livelihood and the instruments for growth and progress, all people have therefore the right to find in the world what is necessary for them.

-----Vatican II’s, “On the Development of People,” #22

## 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.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

Norris Taylor #0401049 (On death row since 7/30/79)

Larry D. Williams #0442913 (2/21/80)

Michael E. Pinch #0324142 (9/11/80)

-----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](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.

### 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

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: [judeop@juno.com](mailto:judeop@juno.com)