

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 14th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Zechariah 9: 9 Psalm 145 Romans 8: 9, 11-13 Matthew 11: 25-30
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Life and the scriptures frequently stand in stark contrast to one another. Which shall we believe and where does wisdom for living lie? It is Memorial Day and I write this at the Raleigh, N.C. airport having arrived two hours before my flight. Armed federal marshals have now replace the military presence of the National Guard, with their assault weapons and olive green camouflage fatigues. It's a pleasant sunny day but the tv monitor in the waiting area is broadcasting the news. The nation, we are told by a solemn newscaster, is on high security alert, with the focus on our nuclear power plants. Tensions are very high between the two nuclear powers of Pakistan and India who have a million troops at their common border. Yesterday Pakistan, our ally in the war on terrorism, rattled its nuclear saber by test firing a land to land missile. India got the message and notched up its state of military alertness. President Bush's Memorial Day speech from the beach at Normandy has quoted statistics from the D-Day battle, "the sky was filled with 12,000 airplanes...38 pairs of brothers died in this battle." Today we are remembering our war dead and fearing the possibilities of men and women dying in more battles around the world, not just from our own country but from the ranks of other armed camps.

Summer is beginning, it's a warm day. There will be lots of barbecues and picnics today (as there will have been on July 4th three days before this Sunday, the 14th. in Ordinary time.), so contrasting with the news being broadcast on the tv monitor. Bob Herbert writes in today's New York Times, "the desire for peace is eternal. But it's fair to wonder, given the madness of our species, if it isn't also eternally futile." Looking around at the evidence here at the airport and in the world, one might join Herbert in his query; is peace a futile dream? And, in the face of such harsh realities, what's the power of a dream anyway?

The first reading is a familiar one, quoted in the Matthew selection (21:1-6) chosen for the opening procession of the Palm Sunday liturgy, Christ's entrance into Jerusalem. Zechariah is envisioning a king for Israel who will establish a peaceful kingdom. Weapons of war will be banished (chariots, horses and bows) "from the River [Euphrates?] to the ends of the earth." This ruler will come and

declare a peace that will go well beyond the borders of Jerusalem, it will extend to the ends of the earth. The original Hebrew text, commentators tell us, is written in a way that suggests that God is the prime agent causing the peace. The ruler is gentle. He has not had to overcome an enemy in battle because God has eliminated the chariot, horse and bow. God has sent a ruler for the people to declare peace---a peace that God has established. God will make it happen. In the light of Israel's weakness and vulnerability, who else but God could have established the conditions for peace? What good were weapons of war for fragile Israel? And, as it turned out, what good were weapons of war for Ephraim with all its chariots, as well as other powerful nations, since they are now gone--their weaponry did nothing to give them permanent peace.

What does this Zechariah's vision do for us? It reminds us that violence of any type is not the way to solve personal, communal or international problems. The prophet gives hope to the ones who work for peace in situations that seem hopeless. No effort for peaceful resolution is hopeless, for God is the agent who can make our efforts for peace come to fruition. The one entering the city will not have caused the peace, but will proclaim the work God will accomplish, "he shall proclaim to the nations." Who will bypass the fortifications we have set up to protect us from real or imagined enemies? Who will disarm our warring hearts, reconcile warring parties and declare peace? God will do this and if we believe this then we need to work in consort with the divine desire and plan. We need to invite God through our prayers and earnest desire to declare peace in our hearts. Then we can turn our best efforts to making peace in the places it is absent. We know where God's heart lies. We are not working on our own, but have the heart of God in our efforts--- God who can "banish the chariot...the horse...and the warrior's bow."

Today's gospel passage includes three elements: a prayer of thanksgiving for what God has revealed, a statement proclaiming Jesus' identity and finally an invitation to turn to Jesus.

While today's passage has strong comfort appeal to anyone who is burdened or suffering under life's heavy demands, the original sense of the passage is quite specific. People familiar with biblical literature will recognize these texts as coming from the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew bible. God is offering a new wisdom to those who hear Jesus; but many are not accepting the gift. Today's passage comes after stories of rejection. Jesus has just taken to task the religious

leaders and those in the Galilean cities who have rejected his word. They were the clever who thought they already knew what they needed to know. In their pride and lack of humility they ignored the wisdom God was making known in Christ. These were also the religious leaders the people attributed with having knowledge of God and God's ways. The ones rejecting Jesus were the very ones the people turned to for instruction on how to behave, how to live in accord with God's will. The "wise and the learned" did not recognize God staring them in the face; how wise were they after all?

Matthew adopts the wisdom motif to point to Jesus as God's wisdom made flesh. Jesus is speaking to those wearied by the heavy burden of the religious law with all its observances. Wisdom doesn't come from our own efforts or learning, it comes to those gifted with it by God. Jesus' way and his teachings are God's gift of wisdom to those who would receive it. We are asked to determine what is the wise and what is the foolish way of living, and to make a choice. To accept Jesus is to accept the wise way to live.

We don't have to accept a long list of rules that will cover all of life's circumstances. That would be an impossible tome to read, much less follow! So, for example, we are invited to look at the world through Jesus' eyes, to accept his wisdom. To him we are all sons and daughters of God. We may look different and speak differently, but beneath the surface we have the same parent, God who loves us. We are not strangers to each other, we are members of the same family. The wisdom of Jesus invites us to treat each other like brothers and sisters. We don't have to have advanced degrees in ethics or psychology to do that. All can live as truly wise people if we act in this way. We may not always like one another, but with God's grace we strive to love as Jesus loved. So, by actively loving our neighbor we are acting in accord with Jesus and so have learned how to be like him, with a "meek and humble" heart. His life and his teachings have taught us where true wisdom lies. Jesus praises God today for making such wisdom accessible to everyone who accepts him.

QUOTABLE

Jesus says that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, but this may not be entirely true. The burden Jesus alludes to are the demands of the law, and instead of preaching permissiveness, Jesus usually intensifies the demands. So it may not be that his burden actually is lighter; rather, it feels lighter once we have put on his

yoke. Remember, oxen are usually yoked together to pull a load. The yoke Jesus offers us is one he also wears. Side by side we are to walk, watching and doing as Jesus does. Side by side we are to learn by his grace the way of gentle humility until one day we too may soar the celestial heights.

— AT HOME WITH THE WORD, 1999....., page 107

Greg Heille, O.P. Central Dominican Province Promoter of Preaching) writes:
I offer the following for your reflection--prepared by our Aquinas Institute Doctor of Ministry in Preaching students.

A MANIFESTO FOR PREACHING IN A TIME OF CRISIS

Remember who you are. You bear the authority of the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, and you are the servant of all who hear you. Look around you, look at them and the world you live in together. Pay attention to the bad news—the terror, the grief, the pain—but always remember that the bad news does not define the good news. Have faith, have courage, have love. If the preachers will do that, we may all come safely home.

--Alan Bowslaugh, Kathy Calore, Linus Edogwo, Ed Griswold

We, as preachers, proclaim the reign of God by being the living Gospel in the face of terror, and of a sometimes silent God. We witness, pray, and act for justice. We build community, speak passionately, and call ourselves to reverence. As exiles, stripped of all but speech, we will preach faithfully hope, faith, and love in our mother tongue to our brothers and sisters. As a community of exiles, we become the example of God's *shalom* for the world. Amen.

Nosotros, como predicadores, proclamamos el reino de Dios impregnados con el Evangelio en medio del terror y en la presencia de un Dios a veces en silencio. Nosotros damos testimonio, oramos y actuamos con justicia. Nosotros construimos comunidad, hablamos con pasión y nos acercamos a Dios con reverencia. Desde el exilio, quitados de todo menos nuestra lengua, predicaremos esperanza, fe y amor con fidelidad a nuestros hermanos y hermanas en nuestra lengua madre. Como comunidad de exilio, nos hacemos el ejemplo de la paz de Dios para el mundo. Amen.

----Audrey Borschel, Ken Hoyt, David Morman, José Quintana, Mike Woroniewicz

Whereas we live in a world and a church ravaged by terror and sin, whereas in this personal and communal terror we sense a deep despair and an absence of God,

whereas all that we have held as good and holy has been profaned, whereas we are tempted to self-preoccupation, whereas we grieve the loss of innocence, whereas our old words fail us—therefore, we will find new words to speak and name and face the terror as our own; we will speak the name of God with voices of hope; we will find the courage to name our false gods and proclaim the Risen One; we will speak hope from a place of abandonment; we will speak humbly of the forgiveness of God; we will proclaim Jesus as God’s Compassionate Word and be prophets of a future not our own.

---Mike Becker, Ray Goetz, Jim Hayes, Bill Promesso, John Kha Tran

In the beginning was the Word

And our home is the Word

A home to those who experience exile

Exile because we are in crisis

A crisis that calls us to the Word

A Word to be preached in truth

A Word that situates us in God’s story

A Word that calls us to community

A Word that grounds the preacher in that community

A Word that is a stumbling block that confronts and questions contemporary values

A Word that ultimately needs God’s miracle to be heard

But a Word that brings hope

Hope for the future

And a hope in the Word that will endure.

---Daniel Francis, Barry Harmon, Kofi Ntsiful-Amissah, Duncan Macpherson, Dennis Sewar

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,

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