

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 14th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Zechariah 9: 9-10 Psalm 145 Romans 8: 9, 11-13 Matthew 11: 25-30
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

There is a tone of mystery in the opening verse of today’s gospel as Jesus praises God for having “hidden these things from the wise and learned....” What does he mean and why would God do that? Jesus has just finished speaking to his disciples--- the “little ones.” They have received his message and are about to go out to spread it. The gospel begins with verse 25, but it always helps to check the context from which a passage is taken. Looking back at the sequence leading up to today’s passage we notice: that John the Baptist is in prison (11:2) and Jesus responds to criticism against himself with the complaint that his generation acts like finicky and self-willed children (16-19) who want things their way and no other. Both John and Jesus just haven’t conformed to the people’s expectations about what God’s salvation should look like. So, Jesus accuses them of being stubborn. He tells them that they are never satisfied; they didn’t accept a strict John the Baptist, nor a freer Jesus, who opened his arms to sinners and sat at table with those beyond the religious pale.

It’s obvious that finicky religious people didn’t just exist 2,000 years ago! People (us too?) never seem satisfied with the way the church and local parish are. There is always much to criticize and we have plenty of excuses to hold back fuller participation. It’s possible though, that our closer involvement might help the community and the leadership we criticize become a better reflection of Christian living and worship. Or, are we also guilty of Jesus’ charge against the stubborn generation? It’s true we don’t have a perfect church or world. So, what are we going to do about it? One response, in the light of today’s gospel, is to pray for a deeper commitment and response to Christ and to ask to be open to the revelation he has for us this day. How can we be less stubborn and more fully responsive to his invitation, “Come to me...”?

We learn still more about today’s gospel by looking back to what leads up to it. Jesus has met rejection in Galilee by a stubborn generation. Hostility is growing, particularly from the religious leaders, the very ones who, if they had accepted him, could have promoted his message to the ordinary people. Jesus hoped for a

better response to his ministry, how hard it must have been for him to see his project of spreading the good news thwarted. From this point in Matthew's gospel those who accept Jesus are fewer in number. It looks like the result of his work is on a downward curve. Nevertheless, what sounds mysterious to us is that he gives thanks to God for those few who are receiving him and his message. He isn't focused on the many who are rejecting, but on the few who are accepting him. They are the ones he calls, the "little ones"—little in religious and social importance, and little/few in numbers.

In his prayer, Jesus shows his acceptance of God's plan. The episode opens with, "at that time...." What time is that? It is the time when: Jesus' Galilean ministry is facing the population's rejection and his message ("these things") is "hidden...from the wise and learned." But the "little ones," who know nothing about the fine points of theology and few things of religion, who are considered unclean and sinners by the establishment----they get the message. They hear what it offers—God's grace for them through Jesus----and they accept it. The sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors, who don't even know religious law, much less keep it, they are the ones to receive forgiveness and welcome at Jesus' table.

There are "little ones" a preacher meets along the way. Some may be very educated, others may not have much education or sophistication in religious matters. But they do seem to have grasped the essence or heart of Jesus' teachings. They possess a wisdom, given them through their life experience, that enables them to, as if by second nature: know right from wrong; respond heroically to those in need; make large sacrifices of time, energy and money for their families and community and take the side of the outsider, poor and vulnerable. Jesus says, "No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal God." When we meet a "little one," we sense they "know" Jesus and his Father in a unique and intimate way. These are the kind of people over whom Jesus rejoices today, they are the gifts God gave to Jesus in his lifetime and continues to give now. For them, then and now, Jesus is most grateful and filled with joy even though he has plenty of reason to be disappointed in the response he is getting more and more from his contemporaries.

Today we sense the relationship Jesus has with his Father. When he talks about "knowing" the Father and "knowing" Jesus, he is talking about knowledge in the

biblical sense. While we know topics by studying and though we can even know a person by reading and getting information about him or her, to “know” someone in the bible is to have an experience of them. So God’s knowledge of Jesus is very personal and direct, as is Jesus’ knowledge of God. Jesus says to his disciples, the “little ones,” that by their coming to know him, they now know God. They know, through Jesus, that the Father has the same concern and love for us that Jesus showed. We too “know” God because of the life Jesus has lived for us and the relationship he offers us. There is an equality between Jesus and his Father, they know each other intimately and are working “hand in glove” together for our well being.

Religion could be a terrible burden for the unlettered and untutored of Jesus’ day. So much to know and, for desperately poor peasants, so little leisure time to learn. For those who were burdened by the guilt incurred by numerous violations of religious law (the “yoke”), Jesus offers his own “yoke.” It is rest and welcome for the religious outsider. The very ones religion considers unworthy of God are the ones Jesus is reaching out to welcome, “Come to me all who labor and are burdened....Take my yoke....” What book would someone who wants to follow Jesus’ way study? What tomes, laws and religious commentaries? How will they get his way right?

Jesus invites the “little ones” to come to him—to “read” and “study” him. Matthew’s gospel has a strong wisdom theme, reminiscent of the wisdom books of the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus is a wisdom teacher and today’s reading captures a moment in which he is teaching us wisdom. “Come to me,” he is saying, “and in me you will discover divine wisdom.” “What must I know?” we might ask. “Know me,” would be his response.

It is sobering to realize that Jesus’ wisdom was rejected by those in the know and yet accepted by the “don’t knows.” Today’s gospel passage calls me to another kind of wisdom than what mere information and learning give. The wisdom Jesus offers is not a series of teachings, things we must learn or achieve through our own pursuits. The wisdom he offers is not book knowledge, but a Person---- himself. We get that wisdom by following and staying close to him; observing his actions ; listening to his words; imitating him and seeing the world from his perspective. That’s what makes the “don’t knows” wise and those who claim they know, foolish. What a twist; but it is a gospel twist: the wise are foolish, and the

“little ones” wise; or put in another way, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

I reflect on my status as a preacher and ordained minister in the church. I received the necessary training and passed the exams that qualified me for public ministry. I do my best to continue my studies and periodically seek updating. There is a temptation to think like a “professional,” to reduce faith to knowing the proper rubrics and rules, the current theological and biblical opinions and to measure those around me by their level of training and knowledge of the religious system in which I live and work. I tend to expect to find wisdom only in the respectable and articulate. I tend to make friends among the well educated, of my own culture and among those well-traveled, like myself. It is necessary to be a well-trained and skilled minister, but the gospel calls me to be cautious about the standards I use to measure my own and other’s status in the religious community and before God. Like some religious leaders in Jesus’ time, I too can become an elitist, forgetting Jesus’ invitation to simple trust in the Spirit and to have dependance on Abba.

QUOTABLE

The Ministry of Lector

Never read publicly what you have not first read privately. Even the most seasoned reader can be caught off guard by a passage that (s)he had not seen recently, whether because of content, unexpected punctuation, the lack of it or unfamiliar proper nouns. ...

Verbs are more important than adverbs; nouns are more important than adjectives. Let your stress fall on them, not their helpers. Prepositions, while they should always be heard, should not be stressed. (If you come upon a sentence in the Bible like Lincoln’s familiar “government of the people, by the people and for the people.” you may then stress the prepositions.) The day the preposition dies in public reading is the day that Christian people may begin to learn what the Bible has to say.

Read the Bible privately on a regular basis.

----from “Parish Lectors,” a pamphlet prepared by, Touchstones for Liturgical Ministry, The Liturgical Conference, and The Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions.

JUSTICE NOTES

The Church makes a moral judgment about economic and social matters, "when the fundamental rights of the person or the salvation of souls requires it." [199] In the moral order she bears a mission distinct from that of political authorities: the Church is concerned with the temporal aspects of the common good because they are ordered to the sovereign Good, our ultimate end. She strives to inspire right attitudes with respect to earthly goods and in socio-economic relationships.

-----Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd Edition (2420)

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.'"

----Jeanetter 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:.....

Patricia W. Jennings #0207779 (On death row since 11/5/90)

Blance T. Moore #0288088 (11/16/90)

Steven V. Mc Hone #0270047 (3/7/91)

---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 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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