

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 15th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Isaiah 55: 10-11 Psalm 65 Romans 8: 18-23 Matthew 13:1-23

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Preachers beware: today's gospel is much too long. Normally I wouldn't choose the shorter option (Mt. 13: 1-9), but I would today. Besides its length, I think there is also a textual reason for my choice. The passage really consists of three independent sections: the parable of the sower; a teaching about Jesus' use of parables and then an allegorical interpretation of the parable--- apparently by a later editor. The initial parable, without the allegorical additions of the “explanation,” is the one I plan to focus on. But, I'll also add a comment on the confusing teaching in the middle section about Jesus' use of parables

First note the context for the parable of the sower. In Matthew's gospel there are five discourses by Jesus. Matthew 13 is the third and is a discourse in parables. These parables are about the mysterious workings of God's realm and are told by Jesus in an atmosphere of mounting opposition. Look back over chapter 12 for a sense of the rejection Jesus is facing. That may give some sense of why he is telling these parables. Matthew is very deliberate here, he begins this section of his gospel with a clear reference to what has gone before. He opens this discourse, “On that day...” The very day Jesus met challenge and opposition he tells the parables that follow.

In the middle of his parable discourse (13:36) a key shift happens in Jesus' ministry; he will dismiss the crowds and turn his attention to his disciples. The mysteries of God's reign will be revealed to the disciples, but not to those who oppose Jesus. These later are those who “look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand.” The disciples may still lack a lot, but they do believe in Jesus, are able to “understand” him. He will ask them at the end of the discourse (13:51), “Have you understood all this?” And they will answer, “Yes.” Of course they don't really understand it all; but he accepts their faith at this stage of their formation. Same holds true for us. At the place we are at this moment in our faith journey, we make an act of faith in him and his teachings--- to the best of our ability. We trust that more will come, as it did for the disciples after their “Yes.”

I note another context for this parable. Matthew tells us that Jesus is in a fishing

boat. The last of the parables in this section will be the one about the net, “The reign of God is like a net let down into the sea, where fish of every kind were caught in it.” (13:47 ff.) The carpenter has become a fisherman, casting a net of parables. Whom will he catch up in his parabolic net? Can we trust the truth of the parables, and let ourselves be drawn up into their world?

The story of the sower is well crafted. There is a series of sowings that doesn’t show much promise. In such a short story a lot of time is spent on the prodigal waste from seeming careless sowing. Some interpreting this parable have said this all corresponds to a Palestinian way of planting: first you broadcast the seed, then you come back and plow it all into the earth. But, while that may be true to 1st. century Palestinian farming methods, it doesn’t blend with the thrust of Jesus’ story. We will let the Storyteller have his way with us. There is no mention of coming back to plow. We go with what the parable does provide us: a lot of seed is sown on bad soil and seems wasted. Human logic and appraisal cause us to draw a bleak conclusion. Things don’t look good for this farmer. The evidence around us in our own lives frequently prompts us to draw a logical and similarly bleak conclusion to what the future holds for us.

As I write this the bishops have just finished their Dallas meeting. There have been confessions of neglect and guilt. Much seems lost and wasted in our church, like the seeds in the parable. The bishops have a lot to do to regain the confidence of the faithful. I lament the loss of their authoritative voice in other areas of our religious and political life. In the past they have spoken out powerfully against nuclear armaments, for the rights of workers and programs for the poor. They have argued for peaceful solutions in areas around the world where our nation has become involved in conflict. Now I fear a loss of their recent prophetic voice about modern moral issues to our 65 million American Catholics and our national leaders. All the evidence we can logically draw leaves us wondering about lost opportunities and the need for our church to bear fruit in the service of God’s reign. I need to hear the parable and trust that God can produce much where so little seems possible. God can bring harvest where I anticipate failure.

Let’s invite Jesus to catch us up into this parable. Let’s trust the promise he is making in the story. When we look at our own lives we have lots of evidence that speaks of waste and carelessness. Why shouldn’t God give up on us, we who have so squandered opportunities in our lives? Whom will Jesus catch in this parable?

Those who have a record of living our lives on our own terms, rejecting the possibility of surprise by God; those who have had a lukewarm involvement in faith and are used to that pattern; those who have done things we wish we hadn't but now fear we are beyond God's being able to do something new for us; those who have called ourselves disciples, yet don't reflect sterling evidence to the imprint Christ has made on us; those who minister to God's people, but find ourselves running low on fervor and enthusiasm.

Listen to the parable's promise as it speaks to what we consider past failure, short-lived enthusiasm and failed harvests. Hear a possibility that even now God is sowing still more seeds in us and in our church that have the potential to spring into surprising new life and cause us to exclaim with wonder, "Wow, where did that come from?"

A word about the middle section of today's passage—Jesus' confusing instruction on the parables. Those who hear it proclaimed this Sunday may have a negative reaction or at least be confused. Jesus sounds exclusive, "...knowledge of the mysteries...has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted." Why not, wasn't Jesus speaking to and inviting all into God's reign? Is he locking some out?

The disciples' openness to the teachings of Jesus shows that a gift of understanding from their tradition had been given them. They were ready for Jesus who would add still more to what they already had. From him they would hear about the long promised kingdom. The others who heard Jesus' preaching were not getting it, their soil proved unproductive, not receptive. Jesus entered a hostile world and his teaching would remain a mystery to those hostile to him.

Those who reject Jesus feel satisfied with what they have; they feel they don't need more. But they do. The places where they have placed their trust will fail when life tests them, "...from those who have nothing, even what they have [or think they have] will be taken away." This passage really challenges the "answers" we bring to life. It forces us to reflect, what and who guide us in life's big decisions? What wisdom do I fall back on in the crunch? Is that wisdom going to sustain me on life's journey with all its twists and turns? Will I find myself empty when I try to draw on my resources to face a difficult moment? I am making little decisions every day, and yet, as insignificant as they may seem, they

reveal a pattern, they set a course. But is it the right course? Have I been making choices that will add up to nothing? “...even the little they think they have, will be taken away.”

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Donald Senior, *THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997. (Paper, 205 pages)

For the most part, we will continue to have our Sunday readings from Matthew’s gospel throughout this liturgical year. Why not read a book that focuses on this gospel? This text would be a very good choice. It focuses on the literary text of the gospel and the world it creates for the reader. Senior is an outstanding scholar. He intends this book for the careful gospel reader as an introductory guide to Matthew’s gospel.

QUOTABLE

The writing or the outlining of a homily is an exercise basically different from the act of writing something that is to be read. The preacher must be thinking speech and people’s faces and an assembly’s character as well as his/her own capacity for sharing the feelings elicited by the reflections. Literary rules are not for the writing or outlining of a homily. Hard as it is, for most of us, we should try to be thinking in this process of a congregation relaxed enough so that we can hear some of its members chanting, “Right on!” “Say it again!” “Amen,” or uttering squeals of painful recognition.

—Robert W. Hovda, *STRONG, LOVING AND WISE: PRESIDING IN LITURGY* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1976, page 42)

JUSTICE NOTES

People who are heavily burdened sometimes look for opportunities for a quick solution to their problems. The poor are especially vulnerable to get-rich schemes and the possibility of getting out from under debt. States that are facing financial shortfalls often think that having a lottery will solve their problems. The governor of our state of North Carolina is proposing a lottery as a way out of our current financial crisis. But the North Carolina Council of Churches and many other religious organizations oppose a lottery. Here are some of the reasons the Council gives; they may also apply to your state.

1. Gambling is wrong and the lottery is one form of gambling....Gambling, including numbers games that are really privately-operated lotteries, is

currently illegal. If the state goes into the lottery business, it will have to exempt itself from its own gambling laws.

2. Lotteries prey on the poor. People in poverty are most vulnerable to the appeal of a lucky payoff. They also can least afford the losses suffered by most players. Numerous studies show that poor people spend a greater percentage of their incomes on lottery tickets than those with higher incomes. Some studies show that poor people spend more per person in actual dollars.
3. Lotteries give compulsive gamblers easy access to the object of their compulsion. A 1999 study...concluded that there are 5 ½ million pathological or problem gamblers in our country with another 15 million at risk.. These are people whose addiction to gambling is as strong and as potentially destructive as is alcohol to the alcoholic. Lotteries make the object of this compulsion as readily available and unavoidable as the grocery check-out.
4. A lottery reduces consumer spending on other goods and services. It doesn't create new money. A dollar spent on a lottery ticket can't be spent on new shoes, groceries, movie tickets, dining out, charitable contributions, or any other discretionary spending.
5. The lottery creates a new tax, with a tax rate of at least 34%. It is ironic that legislators tout the lottery as an alternative to raising taxes and that many in the public buy that argument. The lottery tax is like the excise tax on cigarettes or beer. You can choose not to buy those products, but once you have chosen to purchase, you have no choice about paying the state's cut.

How sad that legislators and the public at large are not willing to pay for needed programs through a fair and equitable tax structure, but prefer to impose a regressive tax that falls most heavily on those who can least afford it!

----quoted from MANNA, May, 2002, published by the North Carolina Council of Churches.

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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