

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 16th SUNDAY (A)

Wisdom 12: 13, 16-19 Psalm 86 Rom 8: 26-27 Matthew 13: 24-30

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Seems the reign of God, the manner and places where God is working, cannot be reduced to one neat formula: “This is exactly how God works....” Or, “This is a sure way to know that God is truly present....” Or, “Here is how to determine the will of God....” If Jesus could have packaged God in such a clear, sure way, he would have. How satisfying that would be to us humans, to be able to box God up and have God within well-defined parameters. That would make things so much easier, remove ambiguities and give us a handle on God. We would be able to define precisely where God is working and for whom God works. We could then say, “God is here...but certainly not there!” We would have God in our corner, surely on our side. We would be certain in our edicts, “God certainly doesn’t act in THAT way!” How neat it would all be. But then, if we had all that certitude and precision about God, God would be under our control and wouldn’t be God---we would.

Jesus, our revelation into God, is very clear that God is not so easily summed up. So, when he wants to speak about God’s way, he does so in parables---not formulas. These stories and images open our imagination. Parables leap across the ages and can speak to us 21st. century hearers. They may have the accouterments of a simpler day and culture---nets, seeds, kneading bread by hand, good and devious sowers, etc. But they touch what we share with those who first heard them, they speak to our common humanity--our fears, hopes, dreams, ambitions and yearnings. They also speak to the other things we share with those who first heard them,--- blindness, dullness and our indifference to God’s ways. Just as in Jesus’ day, we still wonder how and where God works; why bad things happen to good people; why God’s people seem so weak and insignificant in our world; why good doesn’t triumph nearly enough, while evil is flush with winnings. Most of all, we wonder, “What’s it all about?”

In the midst of today’s string of parables, Matthew holds out a note of encouragement: somewhere in these parables, the believer can get a glimpse into God’s reign and can see the hand of God at work. Ordinary eyes could never get

this glimpse on their own. The believer, who turns an attentive ear to these parables, can catch a sense of how God is among us and will learn what “has lain hidden from the foundation of the world.” However, Jesus reminds us, we need to have ears to hear. He tells us we “ought to hear.” In Matthew “hearing,” “seeing,” and especially “understanding,” are figures for active faith.

So, we summon our hearing, we turn an attentive ear to the parables, hoping to gain a wisdom that will open us to perceive and grow in knowledge of our God who seems so hidden, even absent, to our modern world. This is no idle speculation for us, for at times it seems the world, as the saying goes, is “going to hell in a handbasket.”

It would serve the preacher well to work with just one of today’s parables for the peaching. I have chosen the first, Mt 13: 24-30. The parable opens by stating, “The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a man who....” (Matthew typically uses “kingdom of heaven” to refer to the “kingdom or reign of God.”) Keep in mind that when one reads a parable phrased in this manner, that Jesus isn’t saying, “The kingdom is like a man, or a judge or a woman who....” Rather, it really is saying, “the kingdom of heaven is like this whole situation,” i.e., the scene described in 13:24b-30. Jesus is telling these parables in an atmosphere of rejection by the religious authorities. He is sowing good seed but, by their opposition to Jesus’ message, his enemies are planting weeds in the hearts of the crowds. The church, for whom Matthew wrote his gospel, was also up against strong opposition. What were these Christians to do? The parable helps them and us to see, by putting aside the signs of success we usually use to measure the worth of our efforts. We want immediate and visible signs that assure us we are on the right side and, more importantly, that God is on that side with us. But Someone else is giving orders and is in charge of the field, the planting, the growing and the harvesting. This One will take care of the sorting at the end, we are encouraged to have confidence and patience that the owner will know how to tell what is truly fruitful and worth saving and what is worthless and to be cast out. It seems that sorting, weeding, rewarding and punishing are not our concern.

“All the evidence isn’t in yet.” The parable of the weeds and the wheat is a humbling one for us church folk. We like to think we have an inside track and are in the know; we have learned our religion well; have been taught to tell right from wrong and have done our best to pass that knowledge on to our children. We have

said our prayers about wanting to do God's will; have felt at home in our churches; know the rubrics for Sunday worship; call our clergy by their first names; volunteer for parish outreach programs; have our kids in the parochial school or for weekly catechetical programs and even, with current church scandals, support the many good clergy who minister to us. Basically, in terms of today's parable, we are "the slaves (servants?) of the householder," we are right up close, we are familiar faces. And yet, as it turns out, those of the very household, who are very concerned with how things are going, are not to worry themselves about what appears to be a disaster---weeds sown among wheat. It seems their efforts are going to be for nought because there are unwanted intruders messing up good plans. The best efforts of the hard workers are going to be ruined. It makes perfect sense to go out and clean things up.

But the household people are told that if they do what they think is good for the field's crop, they just might rip up what they are trying to preserve---the good, noble and fruitful. In our zeal to rid the church of the weeds in its midst, we might not recognize its true members. What standards will we use anyway? The owner seems to have a wholly different horticultural book to guide him. He has his own agricultural rules too. What looks like an efficient farming technique, as we would want it practiced, might very well be disaster for the overall plan of the owner.

The parable calls us to refrain from judgment, to trust that we don't have to be the ones in charge. Someone else also has an investment in the field in which we labor. It also is a parable of mercy; while things will be sorted out someday, there is still time for change. Look at our own track record. At one time some of us might not have seemed like the best servants of God, but something has changed in us. Or for others, we realize that we still have a chance to change; time has not run out on us. Mercy is the guiding principle for the One who is watching out for the field's future.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Donald Senior, JESUS: A GOSPEL PORTRAIT. New York: Paulist Press, 1992, paper, 161 pages.

This is a revised edition of a popular study of Jesus. Provides rich background material from Jesus' religious and cultural world. Senior makes contemporary biblical scholarship accessible for the average reader of the bible. Not meant to

be a technical study but attempts to show the aspects of Jesus' life that were so important to the evangelists and so necessary for Christian faith.

QUOTABLE

When we sift through Jesus' statements about the coming of the kingdom, there seems to be a certain ambivalence. Many parables insist that the kingdom of God comes slowly, almost imperceptibly. The kingdom of god is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds....Or the kingdom is like a bit of leaven folded into dough. It gradually transforms the loaf (Mt 13:33)....Thus some of the parables and sayings of Jesus refer to the kingdom as a future event whose full impact must be preceded by slow and patient growth. But these sayings must be balanced with an equally urgent insistence that the kingdom is somehow present now, in the very words and works of the kingdom's herald.

This confused timetable for the kingdom, seemingly both present and future, has baffled biblical scholars. Not neat solutions is likely to be found Jesus seems to say both. The fullness of the kingdom, the complete expression of God's rule over Israel and the nations, awaits the future. But that does not mean we are stranded in the kingdom's waiting room, victims of an uncertain future. Now is the time of decision. Now is the time when we either open our lives to a new age of grace or wall ourselves up in a life of egoism. The urgency pulsates throughout most of the preaching of Jesus. The kingdom may be future, but the choice is now.

----Donald Senior, pages 77-78.

JUSTICE NOTES

ECOLOGY AND RELIGION: A GREEN CHRISTOLOGY

.... Christians and others have much to learn from the attitude of respect which Jesus displayed towards the natural world. For example, there is no support in the New Testament for an exploitative, throw-away consumer society which in the last four decades has destroyed the natural world in so many parts of the globe and produced mountains of non-biodegradable and toxic waste which will plague the people and creatures of planet Earth for centuries. In the New Testament the disciples of Jesus are called upon to live lightly on the earth - 'take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics' (Luke 9:1-6). Jesus constantly warned about the dangers of attachment to wealth, possessions, or power. The forces which are impoverishing hundreds of millions

of people in the Third World, and at the same time destroying the planet, very often spring from greed and the allure of mammon. 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God' (Mark 10:23; Luke 16:19-31); cf. Matt 19:23-24; Luke 18:18-23). 'Fool! This very night the demand will be made for your soul; and this hoard of yours, whose will it be then?' (Luke 12:16-21).

Jesus grew up in a rural environment and had an intimacy and familiarity with a variety of God's creatures and the processes of nature. It is clear from his teaching that he was not driven by any urge to dominate or control either his fellow human beings or the world of nature. Rather he displayed an appreciative and contemplative attitude towards creation which was rooted in His Father's love for all creation. "Think of the ravens. They do not sow or reap; they have no storehouses and no barns; yet God feeds them' (Luke 12:24) (NJB). The gospels warn against the urge to continually accumulate more and more goods. God will provide for our legitimate needs: 'are you not worth more than the birds?' (Luke 12:24)....

Many of his parables are centered on nature: He speaks of sowing seed (Matt 13:4-9, 18-23; Mark 4:3-9, 13-20; Luke 8:5-8, 11-15), of vines (John 5:1-1-17; Mark 12:1-12; Matt 21:33-44; Luke 20:9-19), the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7; Matt 18:12-14), or the life and work of shepherds (John 10:1-18). His teaching is regularly interspersed with references to the lilies of the field (Luke 12:27), the birds of the air (Matt 6:26), and the lair of foxes (Luke 9:58). He was Lord of creation and could calm the waves (Mark 4:35-41; Matt. 8:22-25), or walk on the water (Mark 6:48-49), or, when food was needed, multiply the loaves. (Matt. 14:13-21) Mark 8:1-10; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13).

Like most famous religious personalities Jesus was a healer. He cured the sick and restored them to health. (Matt. 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11). He cured the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12), the man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-6), the woman who had been stooped for many years (Luke 13:10-17), and the man who had been paralyzed for 38 years (John 5:1-15), and restored sight to the man born blind (John 9:1-41). While individuals are restored to health in each act of healing, the healing ministry of Jesus was not confined to individuals. Each healing was a sign that challenged social or religious prejudices, and it also aimed at sowing a seed of healing within a community which was attempting to open itself up to the transforming power of God's compassion and graciousness.

In his preaching also Jesus identified himself with the natural elements of water

(John 4:13-14), bread (John 6:48) and light (John 8:12). He presented himself as the good shepherd (John 10:11; Mark 6:30-44) who came that 'they may have life and have it abundantly' (John 10:10b). He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (Matt 21:1b-5). In Mark's gospel (16:15) the disciples were called to take the gospel to all creation. Finally in and through his death, Jesus participated in the most radical way in one of the key processes of nature.

The ministry of Jesus was not confined to teaching, healing and reconciling humans and all creation with God. His life and ministry had a cosmic dimension. Paul tells us that he is the center of all creation.

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities - all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:15-8) (RSV).

Jesus is the word and wisdom of God who existed with God from the beginning. In the prologue of John's gospel the birth and life of Jesus is framed within the widest context of cosmic history. He is active in bringing forth creation; through him the universe, the earth and all life was created (John 1:3-5). All the rich unfolding of the universe from the first moment of the fireball, through the formation of the stars, the moulding of planet Earth, the birth and flowering of life on earth and the emergence of human beings, is centered on Christ. Hence all of these crucial moments in the emergence of the universe have a Christic dimension.....

Christ's life of service involved a radical stance on the side of life, which necessitated his own suffering and death. He atoned for sins against life (Heb 9:12). Paul presents Jesus' incarnation in this light in Phil.2:5-7 and Col.1:15-20.

Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus;

Who, being in the form of God,

did not count equality with God

something to be grasped.

But he emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

becoming as human beings are. (Phil 2:5-7) (NJB)

---Sean McDonagh SSC, From the Columban webpage, www.columban.com

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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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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