

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -A-**  
Isaiah 49: 3, 5-6    1 Corinthians 1: 1-3    John 1:29-34

Dear Preachers:

We think of this liturgical year as “the year of Matthew” because his gospel is the one we hear these Sundays. But here we are, still in this new liturgical season and we have shifted to John! What’s going on here; why break a barely established pattern of Matthew readings? You can tell that there is a reluctance to move too quickly from the epiphany themes of the past Sundays. Today, the first reading, another “Servant Song” from Isaiah, is like last Sunday’s: and again we have a gospel baptismal account, last week’s was from Matthew, this week’s from John. So, we are in John to help us continue the manifestation theme. I must admit however, that the Isaiah and John readings sound a lot like last week’s first and third readings. This presents a caution to me as a preacher; I don’t want to sound repetitious in my preaching this week. What to do?

One approach: I note in the opening lines of the gospel the reference to Jesus’ being the Lamb of God, who takes away the “sin” of the world. Was there a typographical error in the text? Shouldn’t “sin” be in the plural, for there is abundant evidence of more than one sin in the world these days? Even scripture has many listings of sins; think of Paul’s listings towards the ends of his epistles. Or, go no further than what we hear daily about: fraud, war, cheating, lies, infidelities, racial and ethnic attacks, endless civil wars in many countries, murder, sexual abuse, environmental degradation, etc. The list comes rolling off the tongue much too easily, revealing that we are all too familiar with them. They haunt our society daily, they confront our personal lives with punishing persistence. If we have not committed them, we are the victims of others who have, or we learn, much too frequently, of the devastation these sins cause in our world. So, why the reference to what sounds like only one sin?

Maybe the sin we need to be delivered from is the one the bible attributes to our first parents. In the story of the “fall,” our parents disobey a restriction put on them by God. Doesn’t their violation really reveal their disregard for God? Maybe they didn’t want any limits placed on them. Maybe they didn’t want to live lives dependent on God. There was also the promise made to them that if they disobeyed they would be like gods, they could be on their own, the sole arbiters of

good and evil. By choosing their own path, they broke the intimate relationship they had had with God. There it is, “the sin of the world,” the refusal to recognize God as having dominion over our lives and the failure to appreciate the dignity we have living in right relationship with God.

The sin is rooted in our own freedom, an abuse of the free will we received from the moment of creation. Isn't it amazing that God has never taken back our free will, despite the harmful ways we have chosen to express it? We have taken this precious gift from our Creator and abused it. The Hebrew scriptures use words to name sin that connote our going “off the mark”. It is a deliberate turning from God as our goal, rejecting the ways that will keep us moving in God's direction. One scriptural word for sin is “Awon,” which means guilt and so stresses the consequence of sin—an inner twisting and distortion. The understanding of the bible is that God wants to share loving intimacy with us, but sin puts us in a rebellious state. Our insides are twisted and we are messed up; we are going in the completely wrong direction. In Paul and John, we see the shift from emphasizing individual acts to sin itself. Sin lives in the sinner, has power over us (Jn. 8: 34) and turns us away from God. Paul describes this not in terms of a number of sins we commit, but as the very human condition. We have given into sin and voluntarily chosen to be under its power and so we live in a state of alienation from God. We live under the power of the sin of the world.

On a post-Christmas visit to New York I went to Ground Zero to pray for those lost at the Trade Center, for their families and for the workers who still labor day and night to retrieve some remains of the dead. It was a stark example of “the sin of the world” and its horrible influence over human thinking and acting. The preacher might give other examples of sin's power in our modern world--what manifestations of sin do you see? Indicate the signs of this power and how we are helpless on our own to get out from under it. The fruits of “the sin of the world” are many. Vatican II's “Gaudium et Spes,” drew from Romans 7 to show how humans are divided within themselves. We need help. We are “grace-resistant”. We are situated in the world and this world has a sinful history that infects us. We are the product of a sinful story. Every human is infected and experiences this limitation in many ways. One way the “sin of the world” shows itself is in a complacent acceptance of the world's view. Another way is that we often do not want to make waves in a situation at home or work and we accept the majority opinion of the group or culture in which we live. (Cf. quote below)

Who will rescue us from this “grace resistant” condition we find ourselves? Paul’s response —“All praise to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 7: 25) We can see today that John answers the question in a similar way. When the Baptist sees Jesus coming toward him he says, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” The word sin appears more often in John than in the other gospels and refers, not so much to personal acts, but to a condition that induces sinful deeds. Sin is stated in the singular, it is a force that infects humanity. It dwells in the sinner. It is clear in today’s passage that John sees Jesus as the victor over sin, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” To deny sin’s power over us is to deceive ourselves, John says in his epistles. (1 John 1: 8-11)

It’s not just the sins we need taken away, it’s deeper than that; our human nature is mortally wounded, resulting from our poor sin-influenced choices. This sin has warped our perspective, has us turned away from God’s face and towards ourselves. On our own we make so many choices from the fetid pool that is sin. Augustine summed it up when he described sin as turning away from God and turning toward the creature.

The biblical literature is clear that we cannot extract ourselves from the grip of sin. God is the One who is powerful enough to deal with it and when one accepts the invitation to enter into relationship with God, the bind sin has on us is broken. Jesus comes to proclaim this relationship and the forgiveness of sin. Reconciliation will be accomplished not by our own work, but through the work of Christ whose life, death and resurrection will break the enslaving power sin has on us.

The holiday season in the States has seen the opening and huge success of several escapist films. We seem so tired of the big human picture and the recent displays of the power of evil. Just when things were settling down, we thought, a man on an American Airlines plane from Europe tries to ignite explosives hidden in his shoes! So, we seek sanctuary from what seems insurmountable. “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone” has us rooting for good children who have powers to overcome the dark forces. When Americans were held captive in Iran, we had “the Force” in “Star Wars” to lead the fight against the evil Darth Vader. Perhaps Hobbit Frodo Baggins, in “The Lord of the Rings,” has a closer echo of today’s gospel. His task is to carry the evil ring back to the place where it, and the forces

of evil, can be destroyed. No wonder the movie is selling so well! We are weary of evil, on its grand and also its personal scale. We want to see evil overcome, taken to its source and destroyed! It may be a fantasy film for movie goers, but it does touch into our feelings of helplessness and our wanting to escape from the harsher realities. These escapist films also remind us that we need help, for sin has a powerful grip on our world. We can't do it on our own. Follow the pointing finger of the Baptist. See where he is pointing? There he is, "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

THE NEW DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY, edited by Joseph Komonchak, Mary Collins, & Dermot Lane. (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987)

A very fine one volume theological reference work that is a collaborative effort covering the principal themes of the faith in succinct articles. Accessible to the average reader.

#### QUOTABLE: ("Sin of the World")

Situationist theologians like P. Schoonenberg and K. Rahner treat men and women as historical beings who relate in personal freedom to their environment. This view of sin draws extensively on existentialism for its language. To be human is to be "situated in the world"; but this situatedness is sinful in that it is the product of a sinful history. Situationist theories thus focus attention upon historical and environmental evil (sometimes identifying it with the Johannine "Sin of the World") Their strength lies in the fact that they take with due seriousness the social and historical dimension of sin.

—Gabriel Daly, OSA in, THE NEW DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY, page 728.

#### JUSTICE NOTES:

A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil.

Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal I made recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is cruel and unnecessary".

--- Pope John Paul II

#### 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

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