

First Impressions 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Isaiah 49: 3, 5-6 Psalm 40 1 Corinthians 1: 1-3 John 1:29-34

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Prophets are audacious, but not just when they are lambasting a community for their idolatry, indifference to the poor, or military alliances with foreign nations. Isaiah is showing another audacious side of prophets. Today's selection is from the second in the series of four "Servant Songs" found in Deutero-Isaiah (). The prophet is addressing the people who are in exile in Babylonia and Assyria. Their situation is dire, yet Isaiah boldly speaks a promise of deliverance to them. God will bring them home to the land from which they were snatched and enslaved. Using human logic to assess the exiles' situation--- things seem hopeless.

But Isaiah not only promises freedom for the exiles, he goes further, telling them that, after restoring them, God will make them a "light to the nations." "It is too little, the Lord says, to be my servant...and restore the survivors of Israel, I will make you a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." The enslaved people are not only going to be given their freedom and restored to their land, they will be a sign to the pagans of their God's power and concern. How audacious is that!

A contemporary hearer of Isaiah's prophetic utterance has several possible avenues of response. For example, I would ask myself: where am I currently feeling exiled? Am I suffering alienation from a loved one or have I recently experienced a broken relationship? Am I an exile in my family because my faith sets me apart from those I love? Does the practice of my faith alienate me from my co-workers or friends? Am I an exile in my native land because my sense of justice places me at odds with regional or national policies? Isaiah's words are a comfort and offer hope to any of us who are currently living in a form of exile.

Exile can be a lonely place. In exile we seek support and encouragement from like-minded people. Which is one reason to worship together. We are not alone in our exile, others are also struggling to believe in an environment that does little to support our faith. Isaiah tells us God has seen our exile and speaks words of promise and encouragement. God has joined us in exile; has come close to strengthen and sustain us. God makes a promise of deliverance to us and

more—calls us to be steadfast in faith. If we are faithful to our calling to be witnesses of God's light then, we are told, we will also fulfill our mission to be "a light to the nations." Through us people will learn that our God is faithful to exiles and promises one day to unite us in a joyful and celebratory home coming.

The Isaiah reading has been linked in the Lectionary today to the time of Jesus' baptism in John's gospel. The Baptist sees Jesus coming towards him and testifies that Jesus is the "Son of God." John's gospel omits the actual moment of Jesus' baptism because, throughout this gospel, Jesus speaks and acts as the Risen Christ—strong and actively present to believers. John wants to eliminate anything that would suggest limitation or subordination in Jesus. Though the actual baptism is not mentioned in this gospel, the Baptist speaks in terms similar to the Synoptics. He testifies that he has come to be a witness to Jesus: that he heard the divine voice and saw the Spirit descend on him.

In all four gospels Jesus' baptism begins his public ministry. The Isaiah passage reflects the choice Jesus made as he began his public ministry: to model himself on Isaiah's Suffering Servant; to be God's faithful servant and thus be a "light to the nations." The Baptist points to Jesus and says, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." In the fourth of Isaiah's Suffering Servant Songs (52:13-53:12), the servant is described as the "lamb that is led to the slaughter."

There are a couple of repetitions in today's gospel and each contain a message for us. The first is what the Baptist says twice: "I did not know him." We cannot achieve on our own knowledge of Christ--- not the kind of knowledge that leads to recognition, faith and discipleship. We come to know "the Son of God" by revelation from God, as John did. He saw the Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove and he heard the voice of the One who sent him to testify to Jesus. John saw, heard and responded to the gift he was given by bearing witness to Christ.

Which is what each of us, gifted through our baptism, is called to do: the Spirit gives us sight and hearing to discern where Christ is to be found in our world and then we are led by the Spirit to witness to Christ by lives that are in accord with the gospel. At our baptism God began to share the life of Christ with us and we were incorporated into a community of believers gathered at this liturgy. Gifted with sight and hearing from our baptism, we are called to be servants and beloved children of God.

The second repetition is John's testimony that he saw the Spirit come down and "remain" upon Jesus. John's gospel uses the expression "to remain" ("abide") to describe the relationship between God and Christ and between Christ and his followers. John is emphasizing the permanent relationship Jesus has with the Spirit. Jesus doesn't have a momentary revelation that starts him on his mission. Rather, the Spirit will be with him through his entire ministry and will be with him in his trial, suffering and death. Jesus will also give that abiding Spirit to us so that we can live as his followers through all the phases, the ups and downs, of our lives and to enable us to be witnesses to his life, death and resurrection.

Today we have still one more epiphany of Jesus. John's voice provides another manifestation to us of Jesus. This epiphany doesn't happen because a voice addressed the crowd from the clouds or a beam of light shone on Jesus. The scene isn't like the paintings or religious cards we have frequently seen that makes the moment hard to miss. Rather, today's epiphany comes because John the Baptist received a revelation and spoke out of his experience. We have the ordinary human voice of the Baptist revealing what he believes about Jesus so that others can also come to know and believe in him.

We don't get voices from heaven to point out to us Jesus' presence in the world. What we have are graced human beings who bear witness of their faith and who lead us to Christ. Like John the Baptist, our faith starts with a gift from God, but that gift comes through very ordinary witnesses. When we have received this revelation we are then called to give witness to what we have seen and heard.

JUSTICE NOTES

"The Lord said to me; you are my servant..." (Isaiah 49:3)

"The Church has a special call to be a servant of the poor, the sick, and the marginalized, thereby becoming a true sign of the Church's mission -a mission shared by every member of the Christian community. The Church now serves many such people through one of the largest private human services delivery systems in the country. Still we must be reminded that in our day our Christian concerns must increase and extend beyond our borders, because everyone in need is our neighbor. We must also be reminded that charity requires more than alleviating misery. It demands genuine love for the person in need. It should probe the meaning of suffering and provoke a response that seeks to remedy

causes. True charity leads to advocacy". (US Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter: *Economic Justice for All* # 356)

In this Kingdom of God, we are all servants to each other. We are especially called to be servants to those whose lives are filled with sadness, sorrow, hunger and need. We are especially called to be servants to those whom the world and its structures have served so poorly.

Did you know?

Our Catholic Bishops have provided guidelines for living this "servant" role. They are called **Catholic Social Teaching**. Catholic Social Teaching can be summed up by the following 7 themes:

1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person
2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation
3. Rights and Responsibilities
4. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable
5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
6. Solidarity
7. Care for God's Creation

What can I do?

Find a way to live out your "servant" role here at Sacred Heart by joining one of the many Social Concerns ministries. Each ministry serves the Body of Christ in unique and graceful ways. Call the parish office and ask for Social Concerns Ministry. There is a place for you.

To learn more about Catholic Social Teaching visit:
www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching

Bring a fuller understanding of the content of Catholic Social Teaching and earnest prayer as you reach decisions about candidates in this 2008 election year.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Rayford L. Burkes #0057308 (On death row since 4/1/93)
John Burr #0058316 (4/21/93)
Eugene Decastro #0104984 (4/28/93)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS”**

“Liturgical year A,” which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

“Liturgical years, A, B and C,” reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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 webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

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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