

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2<sup>nd</sup> 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:

Today’s scriptural story opens with a light on Isaiah’s “servant,” then the light moves to John the Baptist and his testimony about Jesus, and finally the light comes to rest on us, both as church and as individual witnesses to the light of Christ.

The New Testament shows that John was a very important figure. Devout people followed him into the desert to be his disciples; some commentators claim that initially Jesus himself was one of them. John also attracted crowds of others to the Jordan to be baptized by him. Even after his death and during the church’s first days, John still had loyal followers who saw him in messianic terms. Thus, the gospels are very deliberate in their attempt to shift the light away from John the Baptist to Jesus; especially in John’s gospel. John, the evangelist, downplays Jesus’ baptism, in fact, in this gospel the actual event is missing. Jesus is not shown submitting to John at a baptismal ritual. Apparently the gospel writer is going out of his way to establish the superiority of Jesus over John.

Today’s narrative opens by saying that John the Baptist “saw” Jesus, suggesting more than just a physical recognition—John had a light that enabled him to “see” who Jesus was. This is an epiphany story and through John’s testimony we will come to “see” Jesus. Our Protestant brothers and sisters list this and subsequent Sundays by numbering them as “Sundays after the Epiphany.” Their titles show that these Sundays are related to the Epiphany, they narrate the various revelations about Jesus and his meaning for our lives. (In the Roman Catholic tradition these are Sundays in Ordinary Time.)

Though Luke and Matthew have a voice from heaven affirming Jesus as “the beloved Son,” today’s epiphany is different, it comes through the human voice of the Baptist. John was a forthright, outspoken prophet, but also quite vulnerable. Soon, we know, he will be arrested and killed by Herod. The Baptist’s human voice gives rich testimony to Jesus’ identity. The Baptist tells us that Jesus is the Lamb of God who “takes away the sin of the world; the one who ranks ahead of

John; the one upon whom the Spirit came and remained and Jesus. John also tells us Jesus is the one who will “baptize with the Holy Spirit” and is “the Son of God.” The voice of God identifies Jesus in Matthew and Luke; but John the Baptist is the clear witness to him for us today. Thus the fourth gospel has turned our attention to human witnesses, those who are lights in the world, who speak and act out of their own faith experience and thus give witness to Jesus’ identity.

Epiphanies still happen and John’s gospel helps us reflect on how they occur through us. If our lives, like the Baptist’s, have been touched by the Spirit of Jesus, then through us people will learn about Christ. No voice from heaven, no visible parting of the heavens, no dove’s descent—just faith-filled believers whose lives of forgiveness, compassion, fidelity under trials, fervent lives of worship and sacrifice—these show the fingerprint of God’s transforming Spirit in our lives and are the ways Jesus is revealed to the world. Our witness to Christ suggests that, not just Sundays, but our days should be numbered as “days of the Epiphany” or a “day after the Epiphany.” Each time our witness to Christ speaks a word about him to those who know or meet us, then that is a “day of the epiphany.”

John’s witness to Jesus was very effective. There is evidence to this in the response made by those who heard him. In the passage that follows today’s (1:35 ff.), two of John’s disciples respond to the Baptist’s lead, go to Jesus and become his first disciples. Then one of them, Andrew, seeks out his brother Simon Peter and testifies to Jesus’ identity. Andrew’s testimony is the prompting that causes Simon to also become a disciple. Each day has epiphany possibilities through the witness Jesus’ followers give and each day should be counted as a “day of the Epiphany.”

In the Prayer After Communion at today’s celebration we will pray, “Fill us with your Spirit and make us one in peace and love.” Well that would be a sure sign of Christ’s life among us, wouldn’t it, that we become a less fractious church? That certainly would be an epiphany of the Lord, made by a community of believers called to be “Christ bearers.”

On Sundays, the first and third scripture readings are related; the first chosen in the light of the gospel. The Isaiah passage is another “Servant Song” —we had one last week as well. In today’s excerpt the servant speaks (“The Lord said to me...”) and the passage narrates the dialogue between the servant and God. The

servant is to raise up the enslaved people of Israel and more, be a light to the nations. Who is this mysterious servant figure? It may be Israel herself (“You are my servant, Israel....”). It is also possible it is Isaiah or some other prophetic figure.

We are told that the servant’s task was to “raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel”—but still more—to be a light to all nations. The new testament and early church saw the Isaiah’s servant texts as helpful for interpreting Jesus’ identity, meaning and relevance to our daily Christian lives and for the world. Now we are called to the servant role spelled out by Isaiah and enfleshed in Jesus. We are not to be a closed community but, like the servant, are called to be “light” to the nations. Which is why our church not only addresses “in-house” doctrinal, moral and liturgical matters, but also speaks out to the world on important issues of life, war and peace, hunger, poverty, racism, sexism, children, elderly, etc. Those who think church leaders shouldn’t speak out about “worldly” affairs from the pulpit, need to listen to Isaiah today. The “nations” to whom we are called to be “light” don’t sit in our pews or read our parish newsletters. We have to reach out to them.

Besides statements made on local, national and international matters by our church leaders, we church members are also called “to the nations.” Hence the need for individual human witness—the light that shines on us must shine through us to others. Of course the most important witness or epiphany we can give Christ is to reflect him in our daily actions. But light is also a biblical image for teaching and knowledge. Therefore, we must be prepared to bring the light of our faith to the market place. This requires knowledge of what our church believes, especially our teachings about contemporary issues. As adults we try to keep up with politics, local and world events, literature, the arts, sports, etc. We feel it is important to be informed citizens and knowledgeable about the culture in which we live, as well as other cultures of the world.

Yet, once we have finished learning the basics of faith in the religion classes we attended as children and teenagers, many stopped studying our faith. It is as if we learned what we had to know, the basics, and then proceeded through the rest of our lives praying and going to church. That is not what we do in other areas of knowledge, why do we do that in religious matters?

It is not too late to make one more new year's resolution. Let's decide to grow in the light of our faith, in our knowledge of our beliefs and practices. We could subscribe to a religious magazine, attend a series of classes at our church or a regional workshop sponsored by our diocese, read a good book, learn about other faiths, focus on a social justice issue, etc. The witness of our lives and the ability to share what and why we believe what we do, will make those of us gifted by God's Spirit a "light to the nations."

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

If we suggest to our congregations that they consider studying more about their faith this new year, then we too might reflect on our own study habits. At the beginning of this liturgical year we could focus our study on Matthew's gospel or a commentary on the Sunday readings. It will serve us well in our preaching this year. (Check past or future editions of "First Impressions" for some reading suggestions this preacher has found helpful.)

#### QUOTABLE

[On "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.

**Solidarity with Victims of South Asian Tsunamis:** *A Statement of the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane.

December 29, 2004

"No words can comprehend the horror and tragedy unleashed by the tsunamis that struck huge parts of South Asia on Sunday, December 26th. The scale of the calamity that took tens of thousands of lives is matched only by the human

suffering and loss experienced by many thousands more who just barely survived. They now face the unimaginable task of identifying and burying the dead, rebuilding their lives and struggling to rebuild their communities.

"Together with the Church everywhere, we pray for the victims of this disaster and assure the survivors of our solidarity. As the international community moves to provide emergency aid to the people of the countries most affected, we know that the worldwide Caritas network of Catholic agencies, including our Conference's own Catholic Relief Services, are doing all that is humanly possible to lessen the suffering of those affected. Yesterday I asked all of our Diocesan Bishops to consider taking up a collection in their dioceses to aid our brothers and sisters in the hardest hit areas.

"We commend the souls of the departed to the merciful care of our Savior, whose birth we have just celebrated. We express our ecclesial solidarity with the Bishops and faithful of the Church in each of the lands so devastated this week. And we offer our prayers and support to all whose lives and livelihoods were overwhelmed by the tsunamis."

#### 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:.....

Timmy Grooms #0158506 (On death row since 4/24/98)  
Kevin Golphin #0591301 (5/13/98)  
Tilmon Golphin #0590940 (5/13/98)  
----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](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,

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