

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 20th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Isaiah 56: 6-7 Psalm 67 Romans 11: 13-15, 29-32 Matthew 15: 21-28
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Prenote: The city of New York has just erected a statue to Gandhi in Union Square. Beginning September 1st, a group of Dominicans will gather there to begin a fast for peace and nonviolence. I call your attention to their statement in this week’s JUSTICE NOTES below. During the September Sundays, four of the core members of this community, speaking out of their prayer and fasting, will submit reflections for “First Impressions.” Theirs will be the homiletical input for our September preaching notes. I, for one, am anxious to read what they have to tell us in the light of their experience and the Sunday scriptures. If you wish to add your thoughts to theirs, please send me your responses (Judeop@Juno.com) and I will add them in the next “First Impressions.” Meanwhile, we join them in a prayer for peace.

I wish some of these gospel passages could be rewritten to make it easier for us preachers! The Canaanite woman comes to Jesus asking for help for her “tormented” daughter. She voices her petition in a way similar to others who came asking for Jesus’ help, “Have pity on me, Son of David!” She may not be Jewish, but she is even calling him by the messianic title. When others used this title they received a favorable response. But to the woman’s desperate request, Jesus’ is initially silent. Even his disciples want him to do something. Their request, “Send her away” (or as some have it, “dismiss her”), may suggest they wanted Jesus to drive out the demon and heal the daughter. But Jesus gives two responses, one to the disciples and the other to the woman. Both are discouraging.

To the disciples he says, in effect, “She is not one of us [i.e., of the house of Israel]. She’s not one to whom I have been sent.” Sounds exclusive to me; hardly what we usually get from the universal Savior our faith professes. Would he exclude certain groups of people from our worship assemblies? Would the newcomer to our country find a warm welcome in his church? Would he favor the benefactors over the welfare mothers and their crying infants in the back row? Would he want teenagers to dress according to code? Does he hear the prayer of someone who hasn’t prayed in thirty years as much as he does the devout nun in a

monastery? Does he confirm the notions of those exclusive Christians who see all others as “infidels” of one kind or another? Not a very helpful notion during these days of religious strife, border incursions and terrorist threats against “others.” We don’t need more sounds of exclusivity in our faith. We don’t need to sound like we are professing faith in a God who is on “our side” against “them.”

To the petitioning woman Jesus speaks about taking the food of the children, the Jews, and “throwing” it to the dogs. Are we talking “pearls before swine” here? What kind of back-hand response was that? I would have preferred just the opening and closing part of the story: a desperate mother asks Jesus’ help, she acknowledges his messianic prerogative and he rewards her by curing her daughter. There— isn’t that what we have come to expect in these miracle stories? I’d rather not deal with the messy matter in the middle. Unfortunately, I didn’t write this gospel, Matthew did. We’ll have to work with what he gives us. But as preacher today, I wouldn’t sugar coat or ignore the rough edges of the story. Those who will hear the gospel proclaimed will not fail to miss the peevish or exclusive sounds of Jesus’ statements. For sure, they will be thinking, “Let’s see how you handle this one preacher!”

What is Jesus doing “in the region of Tyre and Sidon” in the first place? It’s pagan territory. Remember when he was among his own he met opposition. He may be getting away for rest or be taking a break from all the conflict he has been meeting. Ironically, among non-believers he hears a distressed Canaanite mother call him by the title he might have hoped to have heard from his own people, “Son of David.” How could he, in the end, ignore her?

Some would interpret in less strident ways his harsh sounding response to the woman. “Dogs” is what the Jews called the Gentiles. However, the word Jesus uses in this passage for dogs is better translated, “pups.” But, even as we reduce the sting of his address to her, Jesus is still saying that salvation is to come through the Jews first. You can tell from our first reading that the Israelites heard that they had a vocation to the world; their faith was to be the way God reached out to all peoples. “The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord ...them I will bring to my holy mountain...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for ALL peoples.” Isaiah’s words were not merely to be a prediction for some bright day in the future, but were a call to act on God’s design and bring “all peoples” to God. But Israel was frequently in a battered and defensive position, surrounded

by unbelievers of all kinds. Quite naturally she became protective and insular, seeing the outside world as a danger to her faith and the faith of her young ones. The vast and inclusive vision of Isaiah is still a challenge to all believers. We have to make sure that, as we deal with charges and accusation from the outside, our God doesn't get too small and become a God for a select few insiders who know the doctrines and rituals we profess.

Turns out God's plan is not confined and the woman's faith in Jesus is a clear revelatory event to him. God is breaking through narrow categories and channels, reaching beyond the usual frontiers. Somehow she recognizes that God is much bigger and more inclusive than any narrow box religious people might use to try to contain God. By the woman's turning to Jesus and his favorable response, the readers of Matthew's gospel learned to reflect on their shared religious customs and life together. Matthew's community was originally Jewish with a few Gentile converts among them. This story must have been an encouragement to them to work out previous differences, find ways to live in harmony and common faith in Jesus. God may very well have first addressed Israel, but now all are welcome; the gate has been swung wide open.

But the woman's blight is not primarily one of religious doctrine. Her daughter, she says is "tormented by a demon." At its heart, this is a story of a mother with a terribly distressed child. Who knows what strange behavior the child was manifesting. Perhaps she was even there with the mother. The times have changed a lot since Jesus' day when illness or mental afflictions were attributed to roaming demons who happened to pounce upon and possess a person. But we don't have to look far to be able to name a father, mother or grandparent suffering because of a child. Notice the mother's request, "Have pity on ME..." ----such is the suffering a parent takes on when a child is distressed. Indeed, the parent would rather suffer in place of the child and is indeed suffering at least as much as the child.

We pray for parents in the congregation today who are voicing a similar prayer for a child or grandchild, "Have pity on me, Lord.... My daughter/son/grandchild is tormented." Some children seemingly change over night and exhibit clear signs of torment---from drugs, alcohol, sexual addiction, abuse, rebellion, etc. They show "possessed behavior": turning on parents, family, friends and teachers; becoming violent, drifting, turbulent, troublesome at school; associating with a new and rough element; becoming indifferent in class and rejecting activities they once

loved. What a torment for those who love them! Most often, even before we pray for ourselves, we offer desperate prayers for these children we love so much and can't seem to help. How many parents, desperate to help their children, like the Canaanite woman, have accompanied them to talk to teachers, or sit hours with them in the company of counselors and therapists to calm their troubled and tormented spirits? All the while, voicing in these or other words, this Canaanite mother's prayer, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter/son is tormented."

The woman's story also reminds us that we too have come to Jesus through the Jews. We share the same faith; we see the hope this faith gave our ancestors in their wait for salvation. We are reminded we have no claim to priority with Jesus. With the woman and her daughter, we are recipients of grace---all has been freely bestowed on us. What we see with this gift of sight is the God Jesus reveals to the woman; a God who would draw us close, sees our distress and helps us. The woman also teaches us perseverance in prayer. We pray not to have God finally relent to our persistence. We persevere in prayer because we know through Christ, we have a hearing before God. Our prayer keeps us expectant and ready to recognize God's help when it does arrive.

QUOTABLE

Examples of a lack of pulpit honesty, then, include a familiar list of transgressions: claiming someone else's experience as your own; revealing confidential matters from your present or past arenas of ministry; demeaning or stereotyping others in any illustrations, including those in the first person. It is no accident that many of the issues related to honesty in preaching have to do with abuses of first-person references. Perhaps this should tell us something about their power, as well as caution us to use them only with homiletic care and moral integrity.

---Richard L. Eslinger in, *PITFALLS IN PREACHING*, page 100.

JUSTICE NOTES

"THERE MUST BE ANOTHER WAY": FAST FOR PEACE AND NON-VIOLENCE"

Our world is very vulnerable in this moment in history. Indiscriminate violence, the immoral marketing of arms, acts of terrorism unheard of in the past and a

pervasive ideology of war as a means of resolving conflict all seem to be tearing apart the fragile tapestry of our global community. Since September 11th, many of us living in the United States of America still wake up in the middle of the night to nightmares filled with billowing smoke, burning buildings and the cries of innocent children.

There must be another way.

Many great spiritual teachers and prophets have shown us that war and violence are not the only way for human beings to resolve conflict. There is another way: the way of mutual respect, loving kindness, forgiveness and compassion. These form the way to true and lasting peace.

Yes, there is another way.

On September 1st, 2002, a group of Dominicans, along with associates and people of other faith traditions will begin a FAST FOR PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE. We do so with the hope that others from across the country and across the world will join with us in saying through silence and prayer: THERE MUST BE ANOTHER WAY.

We do not claim to have the answers to the world's political tensions and problems. We do applaud all who work sincerely and honestly toward peaceful solutions. Our action at this moment is to wait on God, to return to our deepest center, our Ground Zero, where all beings dwell in the God who is Love. We wait in silence and in contemplative prayer as a gesture of healing and reconciliation for our world, and in memory of those who have died in the acts of terror and war of this past year.

We believe in the transforming power of nonviolence, prayer and fasting. We choose to be emptied of our own violent inclinations, and to feel the pain of hunger as an act of solidarity with the millions of people in the world who live the violence of hunger every day of their lives. War will never be a remedy for the hunger and suffering of our world. Peace is the only way. We believe in a God of peace. And we believe that there is another way, and that God will show us that way if we would only have the emptiness and purity of heart to listen.

Besides the core group of the FAST FOR PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE who

will gather on September 1st. in New York City, we invite others to join in, as well. We welcome people of any faith tradition or of no faith tradition, individuals and communities, families, churches, sagas, synagogues, mosques, ashrams and temples to join in this spiritually-motivated FAST FOR PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE. Together let us search for another way.

We invite you to be in solidarity with this endeavor in whichever way you are able:

- fasting and praying one day a week in your home, workplace or religious community
- organizing a prayer vigil for peace
- joining this FAST FOR PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE for a day or more here in New York during the month of September in Union Square
- gathering for interfaith prayer and meditation
- copying this statement and sending it to friends, as well as to religious and political leaders
- promoting reconciliation and nonviolence in your daily life
- lighting a “candle for peace” in your window each evening of September

For more information: Info@dominicanfastforpeace.org

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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com