

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 21st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Isaiah 22: 19-23 Psalm 138 Romans 11: 33-36 Matthew 16: 13-20
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Let's start with the Romans reading because Paul sounds like he's on a high. The first two verses end in exclamation points. In the next two he quotes from another source and each ends in question marks; but they could just as easily have been exclamation points too, "For who has known the mind of the Lord...!" I imagine another exclamation would quite nicely end the closing verse as well. So, I wonder why is Paul so excited?

It helps, as always with Paul, to put the lines in context. In chapters 9-11 of Romans Paul struggles with the seeming failure of Israel to respond to the grace offered in Jesus Christ. While Paul's beloved people seemed, as a whole, to reject God's outreach to them in Christ; the gentiles did accept God's hand. Paul concludes that God used the initial rejection by the Jews as an opportunity to reach out to the gentiles, who were the recipients of Paul's preaching ("the apostle to the gentiles," 11:13). Paul is confident that the same grace freely bestowed on the gentiles will, in turn, be offered to Israel as well (11: 25-26). God's mercy is available to both gentile and Jew; indeed, Paul concludes, God can even use rebellious hearts to produce a gracious end.

That is what has Paul so excited; that God has used even the rejections of Jesus by the Jews as away to reach out to the gentiles. And more, for Paul says that God continues to embrace Israel in mercy (11: 25-26). Paul shouts out in praise of God because he has come to see that God can use disobedience as an opportunity for grace. In response to what Paul is saying, we shouldn't give up on our selves, or anyone else. As persistent as the habit of sin is in us and our institutions, God's grace is even more persistent.

Considering Paul's "grace optimism," do we have any authority or grounds to label a person or a situation hopeless? We and our world are a combination of sin and grace; frailty and power; despair and hope; indifference and passionate concern. Paul wrote Romans to a church that consisted of Jews and gentiles. Hearing his message should have awakened in them an awareness of how all of

them, despite their different backgrounds and human limitations, had been recipients of grace. Thus, no individual or group could claim priority or privilege over any one else. Nor could they, or we, consider the book closed on anyone. We might close the book, but God opens it to continue the work of salvation.

In Romans, Paul has been saying, in one way or another, what he said in 8: 39-39, “For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord.” That’s why Paul is so “turned on” in today’s passage from Romans.

During pre-Vatican II days there weren’t many scriptural verses we kids learned in catechism class—maybe two or three. Well, today’s gospel passage contains one of them, “...you are Peter...etc.” Those were pre-ecumenical days when we were still in a defensive/offensive stance. Quoting this statement about Peter and “my church,” was our way of affirming the legitimacy of the papacy and our Catholic church against “those Protestants who broke away from the one true church.” Sorry, that’s just the way it was. We also got an equal amount of prejudice from the other side. Let’s pray those days are behind us. Let’s pray the ecumenism since Vatican II doesn’t falter. Sometimes it feels as if it is. Who wants to go back to those days anyhow?

Let’s start with the affirmation Jesus gives Peter. Matthew makes Peter the spokesperson for the early church’s faith, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Matthew wrote about Peter’s faith declaration three decades after Peter’s martyrdom for the faith he is expressing in this passage. But as the gospel narrates the disciples’ journey with Jesus to Jerusalem, we hear about their all-too-human qualities. At the point we are at in today’s gospel, Peter and the disciples are not ready to die for Jesus. But they will be when they experience the resurrection. What Peter is professing today is the faith that he and the early Christians had after they met the risen Jesus.

Peter is still in an early stage of discipleship, yet he makes a terrific leap of faith in response to Jesus’ question, “But who do you say I am?” What was the source of Peter’s strong testimony? He certainly wasn’t speaking out of an insight derived from human reasoning; nor what he had learned from others. His faith, Jesus tells

him, is a gift of revelation from God. It is this faith that will be the solid foundation for Jesus' "church." Peter is the spokesperson for the community that came to believe in the resurrected Christ.

Today's episode, we are told, takes place in the region of Caesarea Philippi. It is pagan territory and it is there that Jesus asks Peter a question about his identity; not in a safe enclosure, a shrine or a religious site. Rather, the faith question is asked in a non-believing milieu. Much like the one in which we modern believers must answer the same question. Our response will not only be in words or in doctrinal formula; we will make the response by how we live and die. Peter's faith gave him strength to follow Christ all the way to dying like Christ. Legend has it Peter was also crucified. But more so, Peter imitated Christ in his daily dying to himself and living for Christ. It is on faith and example like Peter's that Christ has built the church.

The gospel story has us still in the midst of the disciples' training period; they are not yet fully formed. A number of times in the gospels we are told the disciples didn't understand; or that they were confused; or that their hearts were hardened. That was their reality at this stage of their formation with Christ. The resurrection, which empowered the disciples, had not yet happened. They were still in the thick of things, still not seeing clearly. Next Sunday will underline the all-too-frail nature of the disciples' faith.

Once again we will hear Peter speak for the community. Jesus will tell his disciples (16:21-27) that he must go to Jerusalem where he will be killed. Peter shows the other side of discipleship, the non-comprehending side. He responds to Jesus, "God forbid Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." And that's when Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me." They didn't have us memorize that line in catechism class! And that's something we will reflect on next Sunday.

At liturgy this Sunday we join with Peter and the early community in celebrating what "flesh and blood" has not revealed to us; but God has. We proclaim, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." To proclaim this faith and live the kind of life that reflects it, goes against the "flesh and blood" of the world. A world that opts for self-indulgence not self-sacrifice and individualism not community—like the community we are as a church. Jesus calls the forces lined

up against the community he is founding, “the gates of the netherworld.”

The revelation that opened Peter’s eyes to see and his tongue to proclaim Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” is our gift as well, as we run into “the gates of the netherworld.” We can see the inscription over these gates: cynicism in dealing with others; despair as we face large issues of violence and war; greed that puts ourselves first on the list; indifference to the pain of others; cowardice when our faith is challenged; conformity when prophetic witness is called for; and lukewarm religious practice that has stalled through neglect, etc. (Here we can pause and name the inscriptions over the netherworld’s gates we are most aware of as we worship this day.)

A rock solid faith has been given to us and trusting in the One Peter teaches us to call “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” the gates of the netherworld, in all its shapes and disguises shall not prevail against us.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

JUST PREACHING: PROPHETIC VOICES OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE,
edited by Andre Resner, Jr. N. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003. Paper, ISBN 0-8272-1715-3

Essays and sermons addressing issues of homelessness, poverty and hunger in America. Over twenty distinguished preachers, teachers, administrators and social activists address the topic from various perspectives, some emphasize immediate direct aid and service while others call for larger social change. The book is addressed to preachers as a guide for how to help us move our congregations from service to acts of justice.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Hunger stalks poor children, and even near-poor children, every day. One in three poor households experience “food insecurity,” as do one in four of the near-poor households. The children have too little to eat or are not certain that they will be able to eat, because the family lacks enough money. Just imagine not knowing if you will be able to eat at the next mealtime or if you will be able to eat enough to

ease your hunger. Hunger's nagging and relentless ache makes concentrating in school difficult. It stunts the growth of children's bodies and drains their energy. If your congregation runs or supports a food pantry or soup kitchen, you may know firsthand that requests for emergency food have risen. More than half the people requesting food are children or their parents. Despite an economic downturn, the number of children receiving help from food stamps has dropped over the past decade, in large part because families who have left welfare for work or eligible working families who have never been on welfare do not know what's available or cannot spend hours filling out application forms in food-stamp offices, and because thousands of *legal* immigrants lost eligibility in 1996. ---Marian Wright Edelman, "Times of Trouble: The Assault of Poverty on America's Children," in JUST PREACHING..., page 123.

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:.....

John Burr #0058316 (On death row since 4/21/93)

Eugene Decastro #0104984 (4/28/93)

Warren Gregory #01565189 (5/18/93)

-----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 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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