

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 21st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Isaiah 22: 19-23

Romans 11: 33-36

Matthew 16: 13-20

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

If you walked into a room of disorderly students you might ask, “Who’s in charge here?” It’s a question the Securities and Exchange Commission might ask the CEO’s of corporations recently in the news for their financial shenanigans. Whose the responsible one? At a concert, it is clear who’s in charge of the orchestra, it’s the one out front setting the rhythm and cuing the musicians. Today’s first reading and gospel show quite clearly who is in charge when it comes to responsibility and the leadership of God’s people.

In the first reading, Shebna has been in charge of King Hezekiah’s court, he has had the keys of authority that show his responsibility. But he opposed the prophet Isaiah’s advice and for safety and protection wanted the king to make an alliance with Egypt. But the prophet saw this as a betrayal of the covenant with God. God was Judah’s protector, Isaiah admonished, not any worldly power. So, as we hear today, the keys of authority were to be taken from Shebna and given to Eliakim, who will make a better “fit” for God. “I will fix him like a peg in a sure spot, to be a place of honor for his family.” Eliakim is more what God had in mind to lead God’s people. If you walked into Hezekiah’s court and asked, “Who’s in charge here?” Isaiah would remind you, “God is.”

Israel had waited a long time and gone through some very difficult periods hoping God would send a messiah, an anointed one. Peter’s confession expresses the fulfillment of this dream, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus is the Christ, the one who would break the chains that enslaved the people. Freedom is at hand. Jesus works his way up to the important question he plans to ask Peter. First, he asks Peter what other people were saying about him. People would have been speculating. Rumors, gossip and speculation about famous people always abound. About the well-known, everyone has a guess or an opinion. It doesn’t take much commitment to speculate, to sit around in late August with a cold beer in hand and with frankfurters on the grill. “So, what do you think, who will win the most valuable player award in the National League this year?” “Do you think Mike Tyson is through?” “Will ‘Spiderman’ get the Academy Award for the best picture of the year?” “What do you think of the president’s peace initiative?” To

render opinions around the office water cooler is one way to kill time. Doesn't take much personal investment.

But to answer the next question Jesus asks Peter, is quite another thing, "It's all well and good what the others are saying, but you, who do you say that I am?" That's a different question and involves much more from the responder. To say, as Peter did, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," is to confess that Jesus is the one in whom God dwells in a special way. To make such an answer requires a decision that directs our lives. If this is who Jesus is, what am I going to do about it? It's clear from what Jesus tells Peter, that his response was not merely the logical conjecture of a really smart or insightful person. The impetus for such a response came from an entirely different source—God. God is the one in charge here, God is choosing those who will lead people in discerning God's ways in the world. Jesus says he will build his church on this rock Peter and will preserve it from the destructive powers from within and without that are sure to try to bring it down.

It was only a couple Sundays ago that Peter, sure of his faith, attempted to walk on water---and almost drowned. Now Jesus is calling him the "rock" on which Jesus is going to build his church. In the light of Peter's recent performance, that's a scary thought. Doesn't it make you wonder whether Jesus knew what he was doing in choosing Peter that day? Was Peter the kind you would have chosen for such a task? Makes you wonder, "Who's in charge here?" We certainly have had enough evidence in our own history and in our present church crisis to know the fragility of church leadership. What's going to keep the church from going under the turbulent waters we are facing today or the next time a storm hits it?

Peter is a reminder that even when we want to do our best and when we are sure we can handle things, we are prone to human weakness. It's just not in human nature to walk on real or metaphorical waters. But Jesus also makes it clear that God is the source for Peter's faith, "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you...." Thus, if Peter is the rock on which Jesus will build his church, then God is the rock on which Peter, and all who are given church authority, must stand.

Are we just dealing with a historical moment here? Are church folk looking back for inspiration to a time in our beginning when we got our start? Peter uses a messianic title for Jesus, "You are the Christ...." In that one title he is expressing

the longings of his people who had been waiting a long time for God to send a messiah to free Israel both politically and spiritually. But what importance does all this have for us, the modern Christian congregation? We don't have such messianic hopes have we? We believe the hoped-for messiah has come in Jesus. Are we just trying to reminisce and imagine what it must have felt like for Peter to see in Jesus the one sent by God for freedom? Summer is quickly coming to an end, people have other things on their minds---it has been an all-too brief vacation time and there's lots of shopping to do before the kids' return to school. (In North Carolina kids are already in school!) Besides the end-of-summer blues we are feeling, there are the usual struggles and distractions that occupy our minds regardless of the season.

But the Word of God isn't history; it's present tense. As we hear Jesus' question to Peter, it is asked of us too at the moment we hear it read. Can we also say, "You are the Christ...?" If we can, are we willing to make the kind of life-altering investment in Jesus that is required of his disciple? To say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," is to say much. It is to profess: I believe you are here with us today, in this congregation, calling us to be a loving and just people; I believe the poor have a priority in your plans and I will do my best to serve them in your name; I believe you are offering me freedom and a truer-self, so that I can turn from false and fading securities and look to you for my true identity as a child of God, and an important part of God's people; I believe that as you were anointed by God to do God's will, through my baptism, so am I--- called to be a sign of God's kingdom on earth where all are brothers and sisters.

The amount of weakness, sin and foibles we are seeing in church leadership, those called and given authority in matters of God's law, is very discouraging. Nevertheless, we hold Jesus to the promise made to Peter and the other disciples that, "the gates of the nether world shall not prevail against" his church. This day, we who have authority over the institutional or domestic church recommit ourselves to responsible leadership. We who are asked to step out and walk on stormy waters entrust ourselves to Jesus's outstretched hand for strength and direction. We are weak, that is not news to us. But, with Peter as sure proof, God works through the weak to do marvelous things. That's just not any old news; that's Good News! Today, despite any personal and institutional evidence to the contrary, we do not shrink back from the ministry and responsibility Christ has entrusted to us in his church.

QUOTABLE

We stand before him. What did he say of himself?” Little in direct claim. But what of the indirect claim? What of his quiet assumption to speak the final word? “But I say unto you.” What of his reiterated demand on [people’s] complete loyalty? (10:37) What did those who walked with him think about him? The answer is in the N.T.: they hailed him as the risen Lord. Then what do WE think? His constraint is laid also on us. There is enough of the disclosure of the very God in him to warrant our venture, but not enough to spare us the venture. If we follow, as the disciples learned to follow, at risk, and cost, we also shall find the power in Christ. He will hold us too, living and dying, and give us now the pledge of eternal life.”

—George Buttrick in THE INTERPRETER’S BIBLE, VOLUME VII:
MATTHEW. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Jennie Weiss Block, COPIOUS HOSTING: A THEOLOGY OF ACCESS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES. New York: Continuum, 2002. Paper, 183 pages. \$19.95, ISBN 0-8264-1349-8.

A most valuable insight into the world of the disabled. Gives suggestions for pastoral care and a theological reflection on their place in our Christian community. Offers a challenging critique of the church’s historical response to the disabled and provides valuable perspectives to the preacher on interpreting the gospel passages about Jesus’ cures of the disabled. Will give the preacher without disabilities a perspective into to the often oppressed world of the disabled. Highly recommended.

(There will be a review of this book shortly on our webpage. www.opsouth.org
Go to “Preachers’ Exchange.”)

JUSTICE NOTES

The experiences of being disabled must be considered from a social justice perspective because people with disabilities have been and still are, oppressed and marginalized. A report issued by the United Nations contends that worldwide conditions for people with disabilities are worsening: “Handicapped people remain outcasts around the world, living in shame and squalor among populations lacking not only in resources to help them but also in understanding and with the numbers growing rapidly, their plight is getting worse...we have a catastrophic human rights situation...they [disabled persons] are a group without power.” *James I

Charlton says that “the vast majority of people with disabilities have always been poor, powerless and degraded.” He calls for an analysis, which considers how the overarching structures of society create this oppression.

----Jennie Weiss Block, page 93

* “Press Conference on the Release of the United Nations’ Report ‘Human Rights and Disabled Persons,’” *Chicago Tribune*, 5 December, 1993.

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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