

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 22nd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Jeremiah 20: 7-9 Psalm 63 Romans 12: 1-2 Matthew 16: 21-27

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Does God break promises? Is God like a used-car salesperson who sells us a “bargain car” and then, when it breaks down, God is no where to be found? Does God have a change of mind and then not tell us about it? I can’t help thinking these thoughts as I hear Jeremiah’s complaint to God, “You duped me, O Lord and I let myself be duped...you were too strong for me and you triumphed.” Sounds like a wrestling match, the puny prophet against a giant God. Can’t you see him pounding his forehead with the palm of his hand, telling himself, “How could I have been such a fool to accept God’s invitation to be a prophet?”

I hearken to the very beginning of Jeremiah’s career; to the moment when he was called by God (1:4-10). At first, he protested to God that he was too young and inexperienced, “Ah, Lord God...I know not how to speak; I am too young.” This passage had meant a lot to me over the years, I have turned to it when I have felt inadequate to some ministerial task facing me. There have been times when I felt I didn’t have what it would take to do what needed to be done. This reading and trying to trust in the call, as Jeremiah did, gave me confidence as I took to my heart God’s words, “Say not, ‘I am too young....’ Have no fear because I am with you to deliver you,” says the Lord.... “I place my words in your mouth!” (1:5-9).

But that was then---in chapter one. This is now---in chapter 20. A lot has happened to the prophet since he was first called by God and a lot has happened to us too since we responded to the call we heard to service in God’s name. In today’s reading we find the prophet in over his head. This sensitive man has found his divinely-appointed role to be a burden. He has had to be a prophet of doom and destruction. His task was to publically confront the ruling monarchs and priestly guardians of temple worship. These were not things he felt naturally inclined to do. For his audacity he was whipped and put in stocks. Now he seems to be wondering, “Where was that in the job description I accepted?” He stayed faithful to his calling, but suffered the consequences for his discipleship. Now, facing the harsh consequences of the mission he accepted he feels bullied by God, “...you were too strong for me and you triumphed.”

Jeremiah is no longer a youth who may have thought that, if God called him into ministry, God would see him safely through, unscathed, to the end. Now he knows better. Do we, like Jeremiah, feel called by God into the ministry of the Word? “Yes,” I would answer. Has it been a blessing? Once again I answer, “Yes, many times over and in most surprising ways?” But I tell you! There are days and situations in church work that make me take sides with the Jeremiah we hear today. There are church politics, parish divisions, public scandal, liturgical disputes, certain decisions from authorities, vocal opponents to any change, committee conflicts and much more. In addition, the feelings of impotency in the face of people’s pain, sadness and problems, also cause me to wonder, “How did I get into this in the first place? Do I have the stamina to stay with it? Did I hear a call at all?”

I am encouraged that Jeremiah can let loose with such bitter words of disappointment to God. There is nothing wimpy in all this. Jeremiah isn’t just whining, he’s lodging a full-throated and justifiable complaint. He is like a frustrated employee in the boss’ office threatening to quit, “I say to myself, I will not mention [God], I will speak in [God’s] name no more.” But then the prophet’s sense of vocation kicks in, “But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bone, I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.” What’s the “it”? It is God’s Word, a power within him that he can’t suppress and that urges a faithful response from him.

Jeremiah has discovered that fidelity to his call may very well cost him his life. But just as God’s Word in him is alive and burning to be uttered, it will also sustain him to the end. This Word will not wear out or desert him. It will be the life force that sustains him through still more pain and even death. Hard reality but, as Jesus reminds us in the gospel, we can’t “exchange” or make our lives rich on our own. Like Jesus’s faithful disciples, life is given us in the very call we have received. Jeremiah is the ancient evidence that, despite difficulties and during the most dire times, God does not abandon us but, in each circumstance, continues to speak a new and sustaining Word.

Initially Peter and the disciples got more information about what lay ahead than Jeremiah did. Like the prophet they too had been called to preach the Word. Last week we heard Peter confess profound faith in Jesus. From that moment of insight and blessings, things have changed rapidly for Peter because Jesus lays out what is

about to happen to himself and those who follow him. Jesus tells them that he will “suffer greatly.” And indeed, that this is soon to take place. Peter protests. Who could blame him, after all wasn’t he just congratulated for his recognition of Jesus as messiah and Son of God? He attempts to change Jesus’ mind and instantly finds himself in conflict with Jesus. Peter has gone from prophetic speech to a babble based on human standards and expectations. In last week’s passage we heard Jesus speak a beatitude over Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah....” The one who was just blessed is now called “Satan.” It’s enough to make one’s head spin! He who was just called the rock on which Christ would build his church, has now become an obstacle, a stumbling block, on the path Jesus is walking.

In the beginning of Matthew’s gospel when Jesus went to the desert, he was tempted by “the devil.” One temptation was that Jesus throw himself down from the parapet of the temple (4:6), because God would send the angels to “take care of you... that you may never stumble on a stone.” The temptation began as the others did, “If you are the Son of God....” It is tempting to believe that being on the right side with God will enable us to avoid pain. Peter had just called Jesus “Son of God” and like the devil, Peter tempts Jesus to avoid pain in doing God’s will. After all isn’t Jesus the messiah and Son of God? Peter too is “Satan,” for he is trying to subvert Jesus’ plan. Peter wants to eliminate what appears to him to be weakness, vulnerability; he wants to eliminate what, in his way of measuring, is unattractive.

How neat and antiseptic religion can become, or at least seem, to both participants and on-lookers. When most of our church communities gather in worship things are spic and span, laundered and pressed, each object in its place and each person knowing the proper behavior and timing. I love a reverent and orderly liturgy as much as the next person. It helps me pray. But I shouldn’t use my standards and preferences as a way to measure my faithful response to the call to be a prophetic witness to Jesus’ reign. Earlier this summer, through parables, we heard in the Sunday gospels how surprising, unpredictable and even messy God’s reign is. Today, with Peter, we are reminded that service in that reign is not only unpredictable, it also involves suffering.

Poor Peter! He didn’t do anything wrong; didn’t commit an act of betrayal. We tend to blame him for being dense, impulsive and foolish. Maybe we do that

because, if we do, it lets us off the hook. We can just chuckle in a patronizing way at Peter and come off feeling wiser and more dedicated than that “poor klutz Peter.” This approach may make us feel better, but it discounts what Jesus just said to Peter, “Blessed are you....” Jesus acknowledged Peter’s faith and the unique revelation he has been given by God. If we acknowledge how admirable Peter’s profession of faith was and don’t dismiss his failure to grasp Jesus’ fuller message, we won’t miss learning about a key part of Jesus’ true identity and role—and our own.

We believe in Jesus, worship him here at eucharist and can answer doctrinal questions about who we believe he is. But the tense encounter between Peter and Jesus today raises issues for us. We are starkly reminded that disciples follow the path of the teacher who boldly instructs us that life comes through losing our lives for his sake.

But, as always--- first the gift; then the responsibility. Like Peter we are blessed with the sight our faith gives us. We see in Christ the source of new life for us and we confess him in the words Peter did, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Today we are reminded that our confession of faith has consequences and manifests itself not only in public worship, but through our words and actions in daily life. So, we offer our lives in surrender to Christ’s purposes. This self-offering does, as Jesus reminds us, ask our lives: in time-consuming service; in frustration when we don’t see quick results for our efforts; in disappointment when we have to let go of our plans and projects for a greater good; in restlessness when ministry upsets our schedule and saps our energies, etc.

Today’s gospel reminds us of our choice to constantly take up the cross, as Jesus did. There are many reminders of that cross with us at liturgy, lest we forget what discipleship asks of us. We signed ourselves with the cross and holy water when we entered and will again when we leave the church; the procession of the scriptures and ministers was preceded by a processional cross; there is a large cross in front of us in the sanctuary; etc. But we signed ourselves with the waters that remind us of our baptismal waters. Those waters, still bubbling up inside us, enable us to confess with Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. They also constantly renew in us the willing spirit that says “Yes,” to our own taking up the cross to follow Christ.

ONE GOOD RESOURCE FOR THE PREACHER

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference

NCRLC is a membership organization grounded in a spiritual tradition that brings together the

Church, care of community and care of creation.

NCRLC sends out a free electronic bulletin about once a week with news about rural life, fair

trade, food, and environmental justice issues. Mostly these are brief news items with links to more information on other websites, but also includes action alerts about federal legislation on agricultural, environmental and energy issues. You can view recent editions of the NCRLC Bulletin at

<http://www.ncrlc.com/signup-ebulletin.html>.

To subscribe, email your request to Tim Kautza at ncrlctk@mchsi.com.

JOIN US IN OUR GREAT WORK!

QUOTABLE

A Benediction for Those Engaged in Ministries of Proclamation

May God give you grace never to sell yourself short, grace to risk something big for something good, grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love. Amen.

William Sloan Coffin

(Sent to us by Bob Morin, OMI)

JUSTICE NOTES

The Church's emphasis on the social dimension of morality has led to the development of the concept of social sin, that is, personal sin expressed in the structures of society with social implications. Sinful structures contribute to social relationships that cause systematic denial or abuse of the rights of certain groups or individuals. Organized social injustice, institutionalized racism, systematic economic exploitation, and the widespread destruction of the environment are examples of the social consequences of sin. Despite the difficulties in eradicating these evils, individuals are moral agents and need to work with others to change those structures and systems that cause evil.

----SUMMARY OF THE NATIONAL DIRECTORY FOR CATECHESIS.

Washington,
D.C., United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, May 2005 page 26.

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:.....

David Lynch #0251740 (On death row since 5/27/93)

Jeffrey Lynch #0021418 (6/1/93)

Norfolk Best #0030124 (6/7/93)

---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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