

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 22<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

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

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

There are still lots of questions about the state of our national and world economies. When the year comes to an end and the bottom line is drawn for 2002, what will the judgment of the economists be? Which CEO's will be judged successful? (Which will be in jail?) The successful business leaders will certainly be rewarded with fame and financial rewards. But CEO's are not the only ones who expect rewards for doing their jobs well. Secretaries, salespeople and mid-level managers also expect something extra in their pay check when Christmas bonus time rolls around. It's the way business is done; how the productive employees are rewarded.

Judging from the Jeremiah reading, the same rewards for a job well done don't always hold for the prophet who fulfills his/her job description. Jeremiah, not one to hold back his feelings, speaks right up to God. “You duped me, O Lord.” The word for “duped” can also be translated, “seduced.” Either Jeremiah feels he walked right into a trap by responding to God's invitation (1: 5-10); or, he feels that though he tried, he couldn't resist the allure of God. In either case, he is up to his neck in trouble. What was particularly hard for Jeremiah to swallow was that he wasn't undergoing trials because he shirked his responsibilities. He is suffering precisely because he has been faithful to his calling. He has had a tough job to perform. Judah, under strong Egyptian domination, had adopted pagan cults from Mesopotamia and Canaan. The prophet had denounced this false worship and had predicted the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. He spoke “violence and outrage” to his own people. Thus, he angered the political and religious leaders of his day and was beaten and jailed. His faithfulness to the message entrusted him by God, was the reason he was treated so harshly by his contemporaries.

It does not appear that Jesus' disciples understood what they were getting into when they first accepted Jesus' invitation to follow him. Today's gospel passage reveals that he is getting clearer about his impending suffering. Like Jeremiah, Jesus will suffer for doing exactly what God wanted done. His rejection will come, not only at the hands of political opponents, but also by those religious leaders whose interpretation of God and God's ways differs radically from Jesus'.

Did the disciples realize what they were getting into when they said “Yes” to his invitation to follow him? They are learning that serving Jesus, responding to God’s call, even though this is a good thing to do, does not guarantee smooth sailing.

At first things went quite well for the disciples. Jesus had been the favorite of the crowds. He had attracted people by his miracles and fed the hungry with both spiritual and physical food. With all that success, we can’t blame the disciples for not being able to comprehend Jesus’ words at this moment. Peter says, in effect, “God forbid Lord, that you should have to undergo any suffering. Why should things turn bad when everything has been going so very well? And don’t we too tend to measure whether we are doing the right thing by how well things turn out? We reason, if I am doing what God wants, then God will “bless” me. Or, if God is on my side, things will turn out well. Jeremiah and Jesus---what great prophetic voice they were! What dedication they had to their vocation, even in the midst of enormous religious and political opposition. Despite this opposition, they stayed the course, were faithful to their assigned tasks, right up to their martyrdoms.

We know contemporary people who have also spoken boldly, faced overwhelming opposition and even died for what they believed. God’s Spirit has not been blown out, but continues to work powerful signs in chosen humans. Oscar Romero, Ita Ford and her martyred companions in El Salvador, Martin Luther King, Jr., etc. But these greats seem so removed from our lives. We are, we would protest, just “ordinary Christians.” Well, if we are listening to today’s readings, as present tense and addressed to us, then we “ordinary Christians” are also called to be “ordinary prophets.” The call to follow Jesus and his way is addressed to us and with this call comes the enabling and still-active Spirit who helps us and keeps us faithful.

Do we have a choice, can we reject the invitation to be “ordinary prophets?” Of course we can. What is given to us today is an invitation, not a command.

“Whoever wishes to come after me....Whoever wishes to save his/her life....”

Jesus wants us to be fully aware of what we are taking on. But we won’t always feel the divine pat on the back for a job well done. Like Jeremiah and Jesus, we may just have to keep going, trusting the call we once heard. It is not that God isn’t the source of our call and our ongoing strength. It’s that we may not always feel it. God never abandoned Jeremiah and Jesus, but they didn’t always

experience that presence, they had to keep speaking and acting, meeting severe opposition, all the time trusting in their call and God's presence with them.

So, Jesus invites us into the same daily journey. If we aren't prophets with a capital "P", then we are with a small "p", when in following Christ we:

- find ourselves at odds with our family's fundamental choices and criteria for success
- refuse to practice unethical business behavior, even at the risk of our jobs
- choose forgiveness against voices telling us to be "realistic" and not naive
- do an honest day's work, even when the boss is not looking and others are cutting corners and telling us "everyone else does it"
- treat co-workers with respect, despite their job skills, level of education or social status
- welcome the newcomers into our social grouping, and treat them as "one of us"

A pastor I know has decided that he will promote the Catholic church's social teachings in the parish where he ministers. Even though he is a faithful pastor and is always there when parishioners need him, he is still meeting opposition and being accused of neglecting the parish. It seems many in his congregation are "not happy about the direction the parish is taking." It must be particularly difficult for him to meet opposition from people he loves as he tries to be faithful to his vocation. Kind of like being a modern Jeremiah. Or like Jesus. The pastor must make a daily decision to deny himself and follow Jesus.

#### **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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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