

## **FIRST IMPRESSIONS 22<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY (A)**

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

Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

What would you do to prevent a family member or a loved one from getting hurt? If you thought they were about to make a foolish choice wouldn't you speak up and try to dissuade them; try to get them to rethink what they were about to do? Of course you would, so would I. That's why we can feel sympathy for Peter today. He is doing what we ourselves would do for a friend. He loves Jesus and is trying to get him to stop all this talk about going to Jerusalem where Jesus predicts he will "suffer greatly" and be killed.

What a sudden turnaround the relationship between Jesus and Peter has taken! In the verses immediately preceding today's (they were last Sunday's gospel) Jesus sings Peter's praises ("Blessed are you Simon son of John....") and is ready to give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Peter will have authority over Jesus' mission. However, today Jesus turns on Peter, calls him Satan and chases him away. Peter has just taken Jesus aside and rebuked him for talking about his suffering and death. In turn Jesus rebukes Peter publically. What's going on here? Why has Jesus taken such harsh exception to what Peter has said to him in private? And why does Jesus want the disciples to hear the lesson he is teaching Peter – and us too!

Some Christians think that being religious should improve their spirits, bodily health and even good fortune. I was listening to a very popular televangelist recently. He was preaching to 10,000 people in a stadium-like church. (As a preacher myself, I felt a moment's envy!) He has a reputation for being a great preacher. He certainly is popular. His message was: if we accept Jesus into our lives, we will receive the good things God is "waiting to give us." It was clear that the "good things" he referred to were financial and personal success. He kept referring to the "blessings" God has for us and the rewards believers will receive – in this life. No wonder he is such a popular preacher. I felt good after listening to him! Apparently a lot of people who listen to him or similar preachers do too. They seem to believe that faith in Jesus will make life easier. The promises also seem to apply to the believer's spiritual life, as if to say, once you have accepted Christ you will be happy and have fewer doubts and anxieties. Sounds great!

When people have had a recent conversion or gone through the R.C.I.A. process and have been baptized at the Easter Vigil, they frequently are happy and excited about their faith and their church community. As well they should be! But we know that life doesn't leave us feeling that way for long, soon those newly initiated into the church will have their faith tested by the world to which they must return. We know that's true because that is our experience. We treasure our faith and we do what we can to keep it strong. But even the most devout and active Christians know being a Christian is never easy for very long.

Which takes us back to today's gospel. Peter doesn't understand that, while Jesus is the messiah, still he must continue his mission and that will cause him suffering and death when they arrive in Jerusalem. Peter wants the glory and good times he thinks Jesus and his fame will give those closest to him. Peter doesn't want to hear that – if he really believes in Jesus and follows the way Jesus is indicating, he too will have to suffer and die for his faith. Jesus spells that out quite clearly for Peter and the disciples, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny self, take up [his/her] cross and follow me.” I don't think Jesus would fill an auditorium, attract 10,000 devotees and have his own television show with the message he just announced to Peter and the disciples. Who wants to hear a message like that?!

There was a story and a picture the other day in our newspaper about a truck driver who has a cross painted on the radiator grill of his truck. He believes the cross is the reason he hasn't had an accident in twenty two years of driving. Other people display St. Christopher medals and statues in their cars. Will those symbols prevent them from having an accident? Is that why we decorate our vehicles with them? That truck driver probably didn't have an accident because he was a careful driver – and lucky.

There's nothing wrong with medals and statues. Nothing wrong with wearing a cross around our neck, either. When I am shaving in the morning and see the cross around my neck, I hope it reminds me of Jesus' invitation to accept whatever suffering and pain come my way because of the choices I must make if I am his follower.

It is clear we can't take the visible cross out of our religion. We can't take it out of our daily consciousness either. We may not suffer on the same kind of cross Jesus did, or be martyred the way so many who have followed him have been. But still, Jesus tells us we must each take up our cross and follow him – and the cross costs.

The cross will cost if we follow what Paul tells us today:

“Do not conform yourselves to this age; but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”

Because we are Christians, Paul invites us not to accept the values and thinking of the crowd; nor to buy what the media attempts to convince us we simply must have; nor to leave the formation of our opinions and values to our peers; nor to always accept the latest fads. Being a Christian, Paul suggests, means we will live a different life, one guided by the life and wisdom of Jesus who consistently sought to do God’s ways in all things – all the way up to the cross.

From what Paul tells us we can examine our lives and ask ourselves: do we really think having more possessions will make us happy; that the more productive or educated person is a better person; that being with the majority must mean we are right; that we can rid ourselves of our problems through medication or finding the perfect guru; that being a good Christian will mean we will have no problems? If we believe any of these contemporary “truths” – then we need to memorize today’s gospel and see if it helps us change our thinking and acting.

### QUOTABLE

We know, don’t we, what the church in North America is like. Sadly, the church has become less like a community of disciples and more like a collection of small corporations. The church has too often lost sight of the world to come and become captive to the present age. Churches that preach the cross are losing members like mad, while the churches that preach the self-serving gospel of prosperity and “Your Best Life Now!” are packed.

----Thomas Long, from a sermon entitled, “Making Friends,” in “Journal for Preachers,” Pentecost, 2007, page 55

### FAITH BOOK

*Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.*

### From today’s “Romans” reading –

“Do not conform yourselves to this age; but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may discern what is the

will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”

### **Reflection:**

It is clear we can't take the cross out of our religion. We can't take it out of our daily consciousness either. We may not suffer on the same kind of cross Jesus did, or be martyred the way so many who have followed him have been. But still, Jesus tells us we must each take up our cross and follow him – and the cross costs. The cross is not simply something we wear as an accessory around our necks. The cross will cost us if we follow what Paul tells us today.

### **So we ask ourselves:**

Do I wear a cross around my neck or have one on the wall of a room at home?

Why? What does that visible symbol of Christ's suffering mean to me?

How does it affect my daily life – what I do and the decisions I make?

## **JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD**

### **Labor Day 2008**

“The Church fully supports the right of workers to form unions to secure their rights to fair wages and working conditions. No one may deny the right to organize without attacking human dignity itself. **Therefore, we firmly oppose organized efforts, such as those regrettably now seen in this country, to break existing unions and prevent workers from organizing.** Migrant agricultural workers today are particularly in need of the protection, including the right to organize and bargain collectively. U.S. labor law reform is needed to provide timely and effective remedies for unfair labor practices. (US Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All)

### **Did you know?**

North Carolina is the least unionized state in the country.

FLOC (Farm Labor Organizing Committee) is both a social movement and a labor union. Their immediate constituency is migrant workers in the agricultural industry, but they are also involved with immigrant workers, our local communities, and national and international coalitions concerned with justice. The FLOC vision emphasizes *human rights* as the standard and *self-determination* as the process for achieving these rights. FLOC struggles for full justice for those who have been marginalized and exploited for the benefit of others, and is seeking to change the structures of society to enable all workers to have a direct voice in determining their working conditions.

**ACORN**, the *Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now* is the nation's largest community organization of low- and moderate-income families, working together for social justice and

stronger communities. ACORN has taken a leadership role in more than a dozen jobs and living wage campaigns.

**ACORN has secured "First Source" agreements, which require developers to hire low-income unemployed residents in many cities.**

ACORN now has an active Raleigh office. You can read about their local work at:

<http://www.acorn.org/index.php?id=9424>

#### **What can I do?**

Pray for those who labor. Pray for employers and for legislators, owners and managers that they will act with justice and provide living wages, affordable benefits and the freedom of association to their employees.

Read about the conditions of migrant workers and **FLOC's** new campaign on their behalf especially in it its work to get justice from RJ Reynolds Tobacco. <http://www.floc.com/>

Read more about **ACORN's** work for justice at: <http://www.acorn.org/index.php?id=2703>

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

## **POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES**

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."

*If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Johnny Hyde	#0542024	(On death row since 7/23/98)
Patrick Steen	#0388640	(8/28/98)
Robert Brewington	#0584095	(9/3/98)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"** **"Liturgical year A,"** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

**"Liturgical years, A, B and C,"** reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: [www.preacherexchange.com](http://www.preacherexchange.com) and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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 webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

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.

#### **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

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