

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 26th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Ezekiel 18: 25-28 Psalm 125 Philippians 2: 1-11 Matthew 21: 28-32
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We preachers need to be careful with today’s gospel text lest we slip into anti-Semitism. The gospel selection today and for several weeks to come, have a combative tone. Jesus is confronted by strong opposition from the Jewish authorities. Thus, for example, today’s story opens, “Jesus said to the chief priest and elders of the people...” Next week’s begins in the same way. In Matthew’s gospel, the context of these passages is conflict and religious debate. Jesus encountered such opposition in his ministry and so did Matthew’s community.

Our circumstances are different. I would avoid making the religious leaders “straw men,” using them as examples of people of bad faith in their rejection to Jesus’ person and message. Instead, we preachers should search for the message within the passage and thus find the relevancy of the story for our times. After all, at its core humanity hasn’t changed very much, if at all. We contemporary religious people are just as prone to making a show of religious observance and obedience that is not supported by actions.

A moment to look at the setting for this gospel: Jesus’ authority is challenged by the religious leaders. He has just challenged them, asking them if the origin of John’s baptism was divine or merely (21:25). The leaders are stubborn and refuse to respond to Jesus’ question, “We do not know...” (21:27). If they had acknowledged the divine origins of John’s ministry, they also would had to accept what John said about Jesus, “He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:11).

Instead of shutting them out, Jesus tries to keep them in the conversation by inviting them, “What is your opinion?” He tells them the parable about the two sons and again attempts to engage them, “Which of the two did his father’s will?” Jesus is offering these religious leaders a chance to re-enact the parable. He wants these “sons” who are saying “No” God’s invitation in Christ to finally say “Yes.” But their subsequent actions show they will not change their minds or hearts. Next week’s gospel reveals their continued opposition and in a few weeks we will

hear, “The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech” (Mt. 22: 15-21, for the 29th Sunday, October 16th). Their “No” never became a “Yes.” They rejected and opportunity to change; they turned away from the gift Jesus offered them.

That was then—this is now. The same issue faces us today. We make visible and verbal professions of faith. The lectionary’s English translation is a bit misleading for it says the second son’s response to the father’s order was, “Yes sir....” A better translation would be “Lord” [kyrie]. Remember that Jesus once said, “None of those who cry out ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of God, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven” (7:21).

Jesus expects follow-through by those who profess faith in him. If we call him “Lord” we must do the things he taught us to do. We can see then that doing God’s will wasn’t just a problem for the Jewish leaders in Jesus’ time; the gospel is a book for our times as well. Do our lives reflect the prayers we say and liturgies we celebrate in which we profess Jesus as Lord? Of course they don’t, not always, that’s why we began our prayers today with, “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.”

I guess you can never really tell who the “guilty” and “not guilty” are. The parable suggests, to those of us listening in to the incident, that appearances and sounds can be deceptive. If I heard the quick, “I will not,” response of the first son I would have judged him guilty. If I heard the docile-sounding “Yes, sir” of the second, I would have patted him on the back as a “good and obedient son.” And probably I would have added, “You make your daddy proud.” But, as events developed, I would have been wrong. Makes me wonder how many times I drew similar conclusions about people based on appearances or first impressions.

I feel in the parable and amplitude of space and time. Both sons had time after their responses to do the right thing—the second could have followed through on his “yes;” the first could have changed his mind. That space and time interval was a graced opportunity for both to “do the father’s will” but only one took advantage of it.

The religious leaders had time to change; the two sons had time to obey their father—and this Eucharist is also a time that is charged with grace and opportunity

for us. We pray together to know: what response is the “Lord” we profess asking of us individuals in our daily lives in the “vineyard?” Likewise, what response is the Lord we acknowledge in our Nicene Creed (“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ....”) asking of his church in these troubled times? We ask, “Have we been faithful to proclaiming you as Lord in our lives?” If we have, then the judgment parable Matthew tells later in his gospel should not frighten us (25:31 ff) because, in the Lord’s name we will have been: feeding the hungry; giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger; clothing the naked; comforting the ill and visiting the imprisoned. If we haven’t, the parable encourages us that there is still time to change our minds and start doing what children of the reign of God should be doing.

The line in the parable I find most comforting and challenging is the one about the first son. After he rejected his father’s request, “He changed his mind.” That’s a small verse, but it has amplitude and breathing space. I can take a deep breath in the presence of that verse; it assures me that until I die, nothing is fixed and locked in. I don’t have to continue in some of the ways I have followed; I can change, a new start is possible. I hear offered to me what the first son received, a chance to “change my mind” and here at Eucharist is the food that makes that change for the better possible.

Next week is Rosh Hashanah, ten days later it is Yom Kippur. These are great holy days in the Jewish liturgical year. If you live near a temple or synagogue you might want to inquire when services are and join our Jewish brothers and sisters as they celebrate the new year.

GOOD WEBPAGES FOR THE PREACHER

AT HOME WITH THE WORD, 2005 (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004) suggests checking some webpages for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur events non-Jewish people might attend.

The National Conference for Communication and Justice ([www:nccj.org](http://www.nccj.org))

The Jewish Outreach Institute ([www:joi.org](http://www.joi.org)).

“Judaism, 101,” (www.jewfaq.org)

Also, www:jcfrelations.com and JEWFAQ.org.

QUOTABLE

Yom Kippur is probably the most important holiday of the Jewish year. Many Jews who do not observe any other Jewish custom will refrain from work, fast and/or attend synagogue services on this day. Yom Kippur occurs on the 10th day of Tishri. The holiday is instituted at Leviticus 23:26 et seq.

Rosh Hashanah--- In Hebrew, Rosh Hashanah means, literally, "head of the year" or "first of the year." Rosh Hashanah is commonly known as the Jewish New Year. This name is somewhat deceptive, because there is little similarity between Rosh Hashanah, one of the holiest days of the year, and the American midnight drinking bash and daytime football game.

There is, however, one important similarity between the Jewish New Year and the American one: Many Americans use the New Year as a time to plan a better life, making "resolutions." Likewise, the Jewish New Year is a time to begin introspection, looking back at the mistakes of the past year and planning the changes to make in the new year. The name "Rosh Hashanah" is not used in the Bible to discuss this holiday. The Bible refers to the holiday as Yom Ha-Zikkaron (the day of remembrance) or Yom Teruah (the day of the sounding of the shofar). The holiday is instituted in Leviticus 23:24-25.

The shofar is a ram's horn which is blown somewhat like a trumpet. One of the most important observances of this holiday is hearing the sounding of the shofar in the synagogue. A total of 100 notes are sounded each day. ... The Bible gives no specific reason for this practice. One that has been suggested is that the shofar's sound is a call to repentance.

—from "Judaism, 101," <http://www.jewfaq.org/toc.htm>

JUSTICE NOTES

The earth is the Lord's and all it holds, the world and those who live there. For God founded it on the seas, established it over the rivers.” (Psalm 24: 1-2)

There is a unity to our Earth. There is a unity of people despite the diversity of culture, race, and creed. We are all brothers and sisters, children of a loving God. This binds us together into the human community. We are also part of a larger community, the community of life. Indeed, everything belongs to this one sacred community. More and more, we are coming to realize the profound interconnectedness of our Earth community.

Earth is more than a collection of objects or resources for human consumption.

Every species of plant and animal, every physical system such as the air and water, works together to maintain the integrity of this community. All are necessary. We are all in this together. Together we will have an impoverished future due to scarcity, pollution and species extinction or together we can choose life, not only for ourselves now but for our children and the children of all species.

—Joan Blais, DHS and Janet Lewis, DHS in, **TENDING THE HOLY: DAILY REFLECTIONS ON CARING FOR THE EARTH.** A publication of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Edited by Annmarie Sanders, IHM, (asanders@lcwr.org), Silver Spring, Md, 2004.

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:.....

William Gray #0153856 (On death row since 12/16/93)

Terry L. Ball #0017060 (2/3/94)

Rex D. Penland #0318113 (2/3/94)

---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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com