

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 27th SUNDAY (A)
Isaiah 5: 1-7 Psalm 80 Philippians 4: 6-9 Matthew 21: 33-43
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders continues today as Jesus proposes “another parable” to them. You have to admire his persistence. It isn’t as if he were a college debater trying to win a religious competition. He’s not looking for crowds to applaud his clever words and “one-upmanship.” Nor does Jesus want to gain more points for his side as we do in athletic or intellectual contests. We know he is out looking for “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6)—and these religious folk, who are supposed to know better, are the most lost sheep of all. Jesus isn’t out to score more points; he is inviting these leaders to change their attitudes towards him and his message and to do the works they were called to do.

As we note in today’s Isaiah reading, the vineyard imagery has strong roots in Jewish religious symbolism. The religious leaders were the ones who were supposed to care for the vineyard God had planted. In the past we have cautioned not to allegorize these parables, but instead: to enter them, experience the story and see life from their perspective. But quite frankly, today’s parable may be the exception to the rule, for it has strong allegorical elements and Matthew seems to want us to reflect on the parallels between the characters in the parable and Jesus’ contemporaries’ obstinate resistance to his message. So, we note the allegorical elements: Jesus, like the son in the parable, comes after a long line of persecuted servants (prophets) and is killed outside the city. Like the servants sent to the tenants, Jesus and the prophets were “seized...beaten...killed and ...stoned.”

To use a different metaphor, Jesus casts another line into the water, hoping this time for a bite—he tells “another parable.” By telling this parable to the obdurate leaders, Jesus continues to hold out an opportunity for them to change their minds about him. The parable mirrors God, who like the landowner, shows exaggerated (we might say “foolish”) patience and persistence, even after the first servants are treated harshly. God too continues to send “other servants, more numerous than the first ones...,” hoping for some compliance from those who were given the care of the vineyard. The owner is foolhardy by anyone’s standards; just too patient and too willing to give another chance to violent and rebellious tenants. Parables

may sound like slice-of-life stories, but they befuddle us when they do this to us: reflect behavior we ourselves would never do or tolerate in “real life.” The tenants reflect the consistent rejection God’s prophets and Jesus have met. Nevertheless, God seems to have been as forgiving as Jesus said we should be in his answer to Peter’s question, “How often must I forgive...?” (We heard this gospel just two weeks ago.) Jesus said to Peter, “seventy seven times”—persistent, unflagging forgiveness. Our God does the same; keeps reaching out, hoping we’ll turn to God and reflect God’s priorities in our lives by the good fruits we produce.

Isn’t it ironic that when Jesus asks the question about what should be done to the wicked tenants, the religious leaders cast a sentence applicable to themselves, “...put those wretched men to a wretched death?” The early church found comfort in this parable because the Gentile members felt they were the late arrivals, the “new kids on the block.” They had inherited what the original tenants rejected; life in the vineyard. But they were also supposed to do what was expected of the first tenants---produce a harvest. The parable revealed the privilege they had received in Jesus, but also reminded them and us that grace is not cheap; while it is a gift, there must be subsequent works that reveal the new life in us.

Somewhere our names are written in a baptismal registry, kept in a safe place in a parish office. Somewhere there may be a file of our academic performance from when we attended parochial school, bible classes or a Catholic/Christian university. In our parish office the secretary probably has a computer with a special program that lists our donations each week from our properly filled-out collection envelopes. But the parable speaks of a vineyard, not a reserved table at a parish picnic. Vineyards mean work and fruits of labor. The parable suggests more than membership and privilege; it calls us to reflect on our labors—labors that are specific to being workers in a vineyard God has planted and given to us to tend.

It is clear from the parable that no one is entitled to or has ownership of the vineyard. We are here at this eucharistic celebration in response to an unearned invitation to be members of a new community. We have accepted and responded to the invitation, but we also know it is a gift given, not something we have earned and so we cannot boast of being better or more deserving than our predecessors.

This is isn't just a parable that relates, in quaint and outdated images, how Jesus was rejected by his co-religionists and accepted by the Gentiles. That would make this parable a museum piece, we would admire it, reflect on the past and then move on. Instead it calls each of us to think about where we do this vineyard work? The parable isn't just focusing on doing more "church work," though I am sure our parish could use more volunteers to teach the young and serve the needy. Rather, the parable Jesus tells isn't set in the temple precincts, but in a place of daily life and labor. His workers are people "out there," working to support themselves and, at the same time, do the work they are called and supposed to do. All must produce fruits for the owner of the vineyard. Wherever we spend vast amounts of our time and energy working at a job, caring for family, helping people who need a hand, making sure people with less get a square deal, etc., these are places for us to be conscious that what we are doing is also "vineyard work" and we will be held responsible for it at "the proper times."

We can hear the likeness to the Isaiah vineyard in our first reading and Jesus' listeners would have recognized the allusion. Like the Isaian text, Jesus' story also begins with the landowner showing tender care for a vineyard. (The details between the two stories are very similar.) In the parable the owner plants the vineyard, builds a protective hedge around it and erects a watch tower to detect thieves and roaming animals. There is also an echo in the parable to the question in the first reading: after all the care and protection put into the vineyard, the owner asks, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done?" There is no doubt who is in charge in this parable, the parable establishes that the vineyard belongs exclusively to the owner and this owner is very concerned about conditions in the vineyard.

But as the parable proceeds, the tenants reveal that they could care less about whose vineyard it is; they want it for themselves and will do anything to get it. The dramatic effects of the parable, the extreme actions of the tenants, exaggerate and heighten the importance of the message; even the reluctant listener should have understood what Jesus was trying to communicate.

There is a lot of work to do in our world to make it reflect God's will and desire for us. This parable invites us to stay with the task and reminds us that the project isn't ours alone to complete. We remember at this eucharist that the owner has invested care and concern for the work we do in the vineyard and, in the end,

God's ways are what we are trying to accomplish. We recall that we are only tenants and the full responsibility for the success of our work is not only ours. We have, after all, a loving Owner who has invested a lot in this vineyard; who finally sent the Son to be with us. This can reassure us when we feel less than successful, with little visible signs of achievement. Remembering God's investment in who we are and what we are about can sustain us as we wait for the final harvest when all our labor will finally be done.

Meanwhile, a couple of questions come to mind: Where is our place in the vineyard? How is the labor going? Does God enter into our decision making? Do we see the places we serve as "owned" by God?

JUSTICE NOTES

We must commit—there is no other choice for believers! We must commit ourselves to the Gospel fully and completely. We must commit to an awareness that leads to action. We believe that in God's creation everything and everyone is connected, embedded, bonded, soul-mated in an extraordinary web of created being. Through this unity of all beings, of all creation, we glimpse the unity and community of God: unity and diversity, one though many. The World Wide /Web is only one example of how close we are to our brothers and sisters half a world away and the recent landing on Mars makes us present to other planets, to the universe of all creation.

We must commit—to awareness that leads to action, to awareness that this planet is dying, out of its natural time, and that humans are the cause of such destruction. How must I/we act?

We must commit—to awareness that leads to action; to awareness that I/we consume much more than I/we need. How must I/we act? What are our choices? We can either despair and become complacent or hope as we have never hoped before. We can become complacent or we can love as we have never loved before. Believers must respond in hope. "Those who hope seek openings, assume responsibility, endure failure after failure, and still seek new openings for fresh efforts." (John Cobb)

----Paula Damiano, SP in, TENDING THE HOLY (Silver Spring, Md: Leadership Conference of Women Religious), a reflection dated "May 9".

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:.....

Vincent M. Wooten #0453231 (On death row since 4/29/94)

John R. Elliott #0120038 (5/4/94)

Wade L. Cole #0082151 (6/14/94)

---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 “Homilies

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

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