

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 28th SUNDAY (A)

Isaiah 25: 6-10 Psalm 23 Philippians 4: 12-14, 19-20 Matthew 22: 1-10

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I played with this parable about the king and the wedding feast he throws for his son. (Note, I chose the shorter version of the parable.) I tried to imagine how it SHOULD have taken place. So, according to my imaginings.....there would be lots of planning time spent on the food and wine to be served. The best chefs would have been hired from the most famous restaurants, with the menu published in the nation's newspapers. Produce, meat, fowl and fish would be brought in from the far corners of the land. A world famous wine steward would have been hired to choose the best champagnes, white, red and dessert wines. The finest china, silver and stem ware would be ever so carefully placed on the immaculately ironed white table cloths. Photographers would have been hired to take pictures of the dignitaries as they emerged from their limousines, and given orders, “not to miss one and to be sure to get plenty of pictures of the happy couple.” Engraved-in-gold invitations would have been sent out—each in three envelopes.

Imagine the guest list: the foreign rulers, political allies, military chiefs, bankers, industrial leaders and of course, famous stars from stage and screen, with at least two or three rock stars. The entertainment would be provided by bands and singers people usually paid a week's salary to get to hear. After month's of excruciating planning the big day finally arrives. Imagine the guests exiting their limousines, the cameras flashing and the royal parents there to greet each one personally. The gifts would be lavish, just perfect choices for the royal newlyweds. Each guest would have a carefully-chosen seat at the banquet table and the party would proceed with great dignity and formality until the wee hours, when the royal parents would see the guests off. After the last had climbed into their chauffeur-driven cars the king and queen would have looked at each other, sighed a sigh of contentment and returned to their palace in bliss knowing that all their plans has worked out just perfectly and that things had gone along without a hitch. Is that the way the parable went? Or, did my mind wander a bit? Did I miss a detail or two? Or, is this the way I would have told a royal-wedding story, if I were making it up?

But it's not the story Jesus told.

I think the first parts of Jesus' and my stories would have been similar—about the planning, food and drink, guest list, best china, etc... They would have been the same right up to the point where the servants are sent out to “summon the invited guests to the feast.” According to the custom of the time, the guests had already received the invitation and were waiting for when things were prepared and they received the announcement to come to the feast. But the story takes an unexpected twist. For some unexplained reason the cream of society behaves quite rudely. They claim they have more important things to do, important business to conduct and so, cannot come to the feast. What an insult to the royal house. Some even “laid hold of his servants, mistreated them and killed them.”

A judgment is passed on these malefactors who are the most prestigious people in the society, the kind that get invited to all the really important state affairs. They are judged “not worthy” and punished by the king. Now the call goes out to the byroads, the same invitation is given to the people who would never expect to get into a royal feast. They are “the bad and good alike.” The king makes it quite clear, “invite to the feast whomever you find.” Whomever? Anyone? What about all the labor that went into making a royal banquet so special? What about all that crystal? Choice wine? Silverware? (Watch out for that silverware with this bunch!) What about the carefully selected seating arrangement? Why, people who are “gathered” from the streets are just going to make a mess of decorum! The royal family will be brushed up against by commoners, jostled by crowds of people pushing and shoving their way to the sumptuous food and all that wine. Crystal glasses will get broken and there will be so much noise the sounds of the string quartet, that was supposed to play through the sedate meal, will be drowned out by this rowdy crowd.

I was with a parish scripture group and we reflected on this parable. We realized there would be no one sitting at that table who could boast of anything they had done to get there. They were, after all, from the roads. They could claim no privilege or rank. None of them had a special “in” to get them admitted; no friend in high places. The ones who did have status and could claim rank, had rejected the invitation and in turn, were themselves rejected. Our scripture group wondered who would accept the invitation to this feast? The hungry would, the

curious, the good and bad and people who would never dream of seeing the inside of the castle, much less attend a banquet there.

They must have entered the castle the way we did when we came into church today. They, like us, would have looked for a seat that suited them and would have sat down. Considering their pasts and some of the things they may have done, they would have been surprised to be there and may have needed encouragement to stay. What effects would their being invited have on them? Before, they were road people--- now they are called “guests.”

There is a food pantry that serves meals to the poor. Lots of good places and good people do that. But this one is different, because those who volunteer there know that people need more than food. So at this soup kitchen there are menus, subdued lighting, table cloths, candles and the volunteers wait on tables. The people congregate outside. Maybe two or three know each other, so they chat in small groups waiting to be invited in. The “waiters” come outside and announce, “table for three” and three “patrons” are led to their tables. “Table for six,....table for two....” Seems like a lot of fuss for people who are hungry and want food. Why not just get them some food? This place serves something else to their “guests,” they serve dignity, respect and appreciation. It’s like the parable, isn’t it? The “main road” people, who do not usually get invitations to eat or have a choice of what they eat, now are guests with menus to choose from. How extravagant! Almost like getting invited to a royal wedding.

Dorothy Day, the great servant to the poor, whose followers have founded hospitality houses around the country, said, “the poor have to forgive us for our charity.” You sense what she means; the way some people give charity and how they treat those in need require forgiveness. A woman once slipped me \$5 at a church door and said, “Here father, give this to some deserving poor person.” I wanted to chase after her and give the money back to her. How was I to judge? If they looked humble enough? “Truly grateful?” Would an older person be more deserving? What about a rough speaking person? Or, someone just out of prison? “The poor have to forgive us our charity.”

To appreciate the parable we have to see it as our story; to know that we have been the recipients of God’s gracious hospitality and generosity. We are here in church because of that generosity, not because of any good we may have done. We claim

no right and we feel privileged to find ourselves in the banquet hall. We are from the highways and byways no longer. We are honored guests. It should make a difference in our lives, don't you think? How can we do something to show we realize what has been done for us? We could behave like honored guests at the royal banquet who, despite whatever we thought of ourselves, have been dignified and called "guests."

There should be a warning label put on us when we come here, like the ones they put on cigarette packs. It would say, "WARNING: COMING HERE CAN CAUSE DISEQUILIBRIUM." After all, the usual world in which we live supplies us with so many of our values and criteria. But our accustomed world has been turned upside down by this and the parables we have been hearing these Sundays. We have seen each other here frequently and heard the same parables—just like the one we heard today. Where else will we see one another? At the malls, local restaurants, schools, office places and jogging? Maybe when we do see someone we recognize we will recall, "That person was also one of the guests at the table; they too were "gathered in."

We will have to put aside what separates us. How can we judge each other: Who are good, who are bad? How could we continue to judge by standards we were taught out there, based on beauty, physical ability, age, portfolios, grades in school, past lives, etc.? And there's still more. We need to look even beyond this place and the already-gathered guests. What about all the other people from the "main roads" we meet? The royal Host we have met at this wedding banquet wants everyone in; everyone to eat and be treated as guests, with dignity. So, we could find ways to travel to the main roads and the places we might not normally frequent, to reach out to people whose needs we can address, those we can treat as "guests." Because that's the way we have been treated. (Cf. Justice Notes below, Pope John Paul's quote. It sounds like he read today's parable!)

JUSTICE NOTES

The poor of the U.S. and of the world are your brothers and sisters in Christ. You must never be content to leave them just the crumbs of the feast. You must take of your substance and not just of your abundance, in order to help them. And you must treat them like guests at your family table.

----Pope John Paul, II, in his address at Yankee Stadium, 1979.

MUSLIM FEAST OF RAMADAN

[Statement of Voices in the Wilderness, Pax Christi, USA Teachers of Peace, Muslim Peace Fellowship and Fellowship of Reconciliation.]

We invite and welcome individuals and groups from our networks to observe all or part of the month of Ramadan in solidarity with our Muslim sisters and brothers.

LISTEN TO UMH HAIDER OF BASRA:

"Ramadan isn't about how much you eat or drink, it's an examination of the faith inside of your soul. God said that 'your reward depends upon your effort,' and that 'all the other months of the year are for the people, but this one month is for me.' Ramadan is the best month to clean your heart and soul. When you feel hungry you can remember the suffering of the poor, who are usually hungry, and by remembering you can help them always. Ramadan isn't just to forbid you from eating and drinking; it's to forbid you doing any bad thing. During Ramadan, Islamic activities increase, like praying, reading from the Quran, and helping others. These activities strengthen Islamic relationships because you must join with other Muslims."

There are a lot of traditional Ramadan habits. Families exchange food with one another for the sunset meal (If tar); this happened even during the sanctions in Iraq. God rewards those people who feed those who don't have any food. We feel Ramadan is like a religious festival; we buy many kinds of food to service during this month. We spend the time after If tar praying and reading the Quran until midnight. Then we pray and read from the Quran after the predawn meal (Sahara) until sunrise. We never feel tired because we are doing the right thing.

—submitted by Victor Laroche, OP

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:.....

Frank J. Chambers #0071799 (On death row since 3/10/94))

William L. Bames #0020590 (3/10/94)

Jeffrey Kandies #0221506 (4/20/94)

---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,

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