

***FIRST IMPRESSIONS* 29th SUNDAY (A)**

Isaiah 45: 4-6 Psalm 96 1Thessalonians 1: 1-5b Matthew 22: 15-21

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

On the feast of Saints Peter and Paul (June 29th) Pope Benedict announced a special Jubilee Year dedicated to the apostle Paul. (Cf. Quotable below). Special classes are being offered in parishes and dioceses and religious newspapers are featuring articles in response to the focus on Paul proposed by the pope. It is appropriate that we preachers, liturgy planners and Lectionary-based scripture groups also turn our attention to Paul, especially during this Jubilee Year. Quite frankly, it is rare to hear a preaching based on Paul at our liturgies. This next year may offer us an opportunity, indeed challenge (!), to remedy that deficiency. We could begin this Sunday when we have the first of three sequential readings from I Thessalonians, the first letter attributed to Paul. The selections from I Thessalonians also close out this liturgical year for us. So, let's focus on our second reading today and resolve to do more of that over this coming year – and beyond!

I Thessalonians is the first of Paul's letters, written around the years 51-52. Thessalonica was a capital city of the Roman empire and had about 200,000 people. It rivaled Constantinople in importance and culture and like that city was a bridge between the eastern and western parts of the empire. Thessalonica had abundant commerce and its population and visitors made it a rich in diverse cultures. Many religions and cults were found there and Paul preached in Thessalonica during his second missionary travels, ca. 50 C.E. His message was, at first, well received by the Jewish community in the city. But he also began to attract many gentiles and conflicts broke out between the two groups. Paul had to leave the city in haste. But he did not forget the Thessalonian Christians and soon after his departure he wrote a letter of concern to them.

Today's second reading from Paul is the opening of the First letter to the Thessalonians. We may be centuries removed from the original recipients of the letter, but it is also addressed to us, for we too are like the Thessalonians, "brothers and sisters loved by God" and we, like them, are "chosen" to hear the gospel and to experience its power through the Holy Spirit. With such a positive greeting we are encouraged to read more, we who have heard this grace-filled and grace-promised introduction.

Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians who manifested the three traditional Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. They are not separate, but form a dynamic trio: faith is grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Christ and this force is the source of the love we express, not only to those in our church community, but to those outside as well. All the while, we are oriented toward the future, our hope, in Christ's return.

Paul's personal encounter with the risen Christ was the experience that gave him the conviction that he had been chosen; it is the root and source of his preaching and how he sees other Christians. Just as Paul received grace through God's free gift of love, so are we "loved by God" and "chosen." In Paul's experience we hear one more manifestation of a biblical theme: God first chooses, then calls and finally sends on mission. Paul certainly knew God did that for him and now he is reminding the Thessalonians and us that they were chosen by God too. Paul also knows that having been chosen is not something for our benefit alone, but that God's love for us, shown in Christ, must be announced to all the world. All of humanity benefits from God's work in Christ. Paul would certainly never claim rank, privilege or spiritual superiority because he was chosen. Rather, those God chooses are to be servants to the world, to announce salvation to all nations.

While we form one chosen community of faith, each of us is distinct and has been given gifts to use to announce the Gospel. That's a big and intimidating responsibility for us ordinary folk – isn't it? Paul reminds us that the gospel "did not come to you in word alone." Now, Paul would be the last one to diminish or dismiss the importance of the word he preached. But he assures the Thessalonians that the word they heard also came with "power from the Holy Spirit."

That's a bit redundant, since in the New Testament, power and the Holy Spirit are usually linked. But he is making a point: Paul's preaching was supported by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. So too for all of us, in whatever walk of life, whether we are young or old; educated or not; articulate or shy; a trained catechist or an ordinary person in the pew – we have been recipients of God's love and through our words and everyday actions, we are empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit. If we trust and act out of that faith we will have what Paul describes as "much conviction," and the message we bear will be hard to resist.

Later in the letter Paul will acknowledge that the Thessalonians did indeed receive his word as more than the words of one person, "but as what it really is, the word for

God, which is at work in you believers (I Thess. 2: 13).

We didn't just hear a religious speech; we didn't just receive moral lessons. Rather, we heard a living word, the Word of God, which at this very moment is doing its work in us: strengthening us when our faith is challenged by personal trial or external pressures and confrontations. As Stanley B. Morrow says:

It is the faith of the believers that accepts the word proclaimed as the word of God, which it really is; and, to complete the circle, believers can accept it as the word of God because it is already at work in them....[Paul] was proclaiming a gospel whose true efficacy, he knew, came not from the proclaimer but from God, whose word it was."

(Paul: His Letters and His Theology: An Introduction to Paul's Epistles (New York: Paulist Press, 1982, page 69, paperback. ISBN 0-8091-2744-X)

Thessalonica was a city under the rule of Rome. Paul is preaching a revolutionary message, for he claims that while people in the Roman empire were under that political, economic, military and social order, Christians have accepted the rule of another power, that given by the Holy Spirit through their faith in Christ.

Consequently they cannot accept any human power over that of Christ, nor can we. When challenged to choose between accepting the power and allure of the world and living under God's rule, we must choose the latter. For God has claimed us and given us the power that unites us to the Holy Spirit and enables us to live lives marked by "holy and righteous and blameless behavior" (2:10).

As our elections approach we are asked by the gospel to choose what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar. I refer you to our Justice Bulletin Board below. As we make our choices for national and local leadership we ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which Paul reminds today, we have.

QUOTABLE

Dear brothers and sisters, as in early times, today too Christ needs apostles ready to sacrifice themselves. He needs witnesses and martyrs like St Paul. Paul, a former violent persecutor of Christians, when he fell to the ground dazzled by the divine light on the road to Damascus, did not hesitate to change sides to the Crucified One and followed him without second thoughts. He lived and worked for Christ, for him he suffered and died. How timely his example is today!

And for this very reason I am pleased to announce officially that we shall be

dedicating a special Jubilee Year to the Apostle Paul from 28 June 2008 to 29 June 2009, on the occasion of the bi-millennium of his birth, which historians have placed between the years 7 and 10 A.D.

~ Pope Benedict XVI, June 28, 2007
First Vespers of the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul

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 I Thessalonians reading:

**We give thanks to God always for all of you,
remembering you in our prayers, unceasingly calling to mind your work of
faith and labor of love and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ,
before our God and Father, knowing, brothers and sisters loved by God,
how you were chosen.**

Reflection:

Paul's personal encounter with the risen Christ was the experience that gave him the conviction that he had been chosen; his call is the root and source of his preaching and how he sees other Christians – also specially chosen by God.

Paul knows that having been chosen is not something for our benefit alone, but that God's love, shown in Christ, must be announced to all the world. Therefore, each of us is distinct and has been given gifts to use to announce the Gospel.

So we ask ourselves:

What gifts has God given me to serve the Gospel of Jesus?

Where and how can I use those gifts?

Shall I invite the Holy Spirit to make me open to ways God is calling me to serve?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."(Matthew 22:21)

As our national election approaches, the question of what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar takes on great importance. As Christians we are called to put into practice our conviction that each human person from the child in the womb, to the

person on death row, to the elderly person in a lonely ward in a nursing home **belongs to God**. We must think of the “common good” not just “self-interest”. We are required by our faith to think globally and to consider not just the welfare of “middle class Americans”, but the welfare and plight of the poorest and neediest in our own country and on our planet. All of these “belong to God”.

Our US Catholic Bishops, in their Election year statement, *Faithful Citizenship* call us to be part of the election process.

“ In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a *moral obligation*. This obligation is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, “It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. . . . As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life”.

“Unfortunately, politics in our country often can be a contest of powerful interests, partisan attacks, sound bites, and media hype. The Church calls for a different kind of political engagement: one shaped by the moral convictions of well-formed consciences and focused on the dignity of every human being, the pursuit of the common good, and the protection of the weak and the vulnerable. The Catholic call to faithful citizenship affirms the importance of political participation and insists that public service is a worthy vocation. We are called to bring together our principles and our political choices, our values and our votes, to help build a better world.”(*US Catholic Bishops’ Faithful Citizenship # 13,14*)

Did you know?

Only 54 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots during the last four decades of presidential elections.

What I can do:

Read and pray over the US Catholic Bishops’ statement, <http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/FCStatement.pdf>

Pray for wisdom for voters and candidates.

Become informed.

Vote.

(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.*

Please write to:.....

James Morgan #0291861 (On death row since 7/8/99)
David Gainesy #0139378 (7/13/99)
Billy Anderson #0007328 (10/26/99)
---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 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 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