

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
Isaiah 8: 23-9:3 Psalm 27 I Corinthians 1: 10-13 Matthew 4: 12-23
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

There are a lot of geographical references in today’s gospel, as well as in the Isaiah reading, which the lectionary links to the gospel. Galilee, Nazareth, and Capernaum are familiar to us from gospel stories. But what about Zebulun and Naphtali which, we are told, is “the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan”? Why are we inundated with geographical references and, is it important to the gospel message? We suspect it is, since the gospels have no “throw away” lines or unimportant references. Like all readers of good literature, we pay attention to details the casual reader might otherwise gloss over as “tidbits.”

First note that Jesus “withdrew to Galilee.” We are so used to hearing him and his first followers referred to as Galileans that we miss the implications of his locating himself there. Galilee was not just a region of small villages of peasant Jews. It was along major trade routes and thus had access to the significant powers of biblical times, Egypt, Syria, Phoenicia, the Mediterranean, etc. Of course, those powers had access to Galilee as well. There were many gentile communities interspersed among the Jewish ones and so we read that the area was called “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Jesus “withdrew,” but not to a pocket of isolation, nor to anonymity in order to keep a low profile.

We are told after John had been arrested Jesus stepped forward to begin his preaching, “Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” What kind of message is this? Well, Matthew links both what Jesus is doing and his identity to Isaiah. For a people who are lost in darkness, Jesus is the “great light.” What form or shape will this light take in Jesus’ ministry? His teachings will bring light to those who need direction in their lives, they are “the people who sit in darkness. His words about God will attract people to the loving One he calls “Abba.” He will speak words of forgiveness and, as Isaiah foretold, dispel the darkness and relieve distress. The darkness of sin and ignorance are driven out by the light that is Jesus. His works will also dispel darkness; he will heal the sick, welcome the outcasts and open the eyes of the blind. In Jesus Isaiah’s promise has taken flesh and people respond with “abundant joy” and “great rejoicing”; the same feelings we, who have known our own darkness and then experienced the light of Christ,

offer at today's liturgy. Jesus begins his light-giving ministry in Galilee. As he travels through Galilee we will notice how his ministry expands to include the Gentiles, who were very much part of his Galilean world.

The gospel tells us, "From that time on, Jesus began to preach...." Matthew is summing up the subsequent ministry of Jesus by call it "preaching." Not only his words, but his healings, his manner of living and his dying and resurrection will be a "preaching," a proclamation of God's reign finally come to those in darkness who have yearned for light and the lifting of gloom. What good news this preaching was for those Israelites who waited centuries for this moment! All of Jesus' life was a preaching about God and God's good will, God's grace for us. Of course, all of this causes us to reflect and ask ourselves if our words and manner of life also are a "preaching" that makes present God's gracious reign.

Matthew uses "fulfillment" references to describe Jesus' life and ministry. These references will help his contemporaries see Jesus as the hoped-for deliverer. And what fulfillment does Jesus have for us? Certainly many of us feel we dwell in a "land of gloom"—darkened by sin in all its guises and persuasive powers. The recently passed Christmas season revealed again the excesses of our consumer-obsessed society.

There are many other manifestations of darkness: the slaughter of war; the miseries of poverty; the stressed environment; the divide between races; the conflicts across national borders; the sick left untended, the aged neglected and the killing of the unborn. In many ways we are "overshadowed by death" on a large scale; but also in our individual lives, insignificant from a world perspective, but so very important to us. From the beginning of his gospel Matthew is making it clear that in Jesus, God is offering our world deliverance from sin and a lifting of the gloom from our present reality and from our future prospects. A great light has shone, Matthew tells us, for anyone sitting in darkness.

Who will benefit from God's gift in Jesus? Matthew's geographical references make this quite clear, "Galilee of the Gentiles." Jesus' mission will be for all who are willing to accept his "preaching," and the call his words and life make to "repent." He invites us to reform, reshape our lives and to look at life from a completely different perspective—through the gospel lens. In that perspective, that light on our darkness, we "repent," to accept the forgiveness and welcome

God offers us, no matter how far we have wandered; to believe in the loving God Jesus reflects; to turn to neighbor, especially the most needy, with acceptance and compassion and whatever form of healing we can offer; to witness in our own “preaching,” through words and actions, to the reality of Jesus, the “great light” that has “arisen.”

As Jesus begins his public ministry it is clear he does not want to do it alone. Taking the initiative he goes out and invites others to follow him. These are the first to reform and reshape their lives in response to Jesus. They leave their former lives and goals and make Jesus their focus. He doesn’t offer them a detailed blueprint of what life with him will look like. He offers no written contract, no signing bonus and no “escape clause,”----but people will be free to stay or go. Jesus uses no scare or guilt tactics to get people to follow him--- “If you don’t accept this invitation God will be angry with you.”

Instead Matthew shows Jesus extending a simple invitation, “Come after me and I will make you fishers of people.” They couldn’t possibly know, at this stage, what he meant by that. But they turn their lives in his direction, go where he goes and learn, as they go along, what his call entailed. Sounds like our lives, doesn’t it? We accept his invitation to follow him and then try each day to make responses we know he taught us and is guiding us in—we hope! The only security the disciples and we have is Jesus himself; the future is entirely in his hands.

We have heard Jesus’ invitation to follow, otherwise we wouldn’t have gathered at church today. We all have tightly crammed schedules and we could always use extra time to get a few more things done. Instead, we have put aside this time to come to worship with others who have also accepted Jesus’ invitation to follow him. And more than just Sunday gatherings, we try to shape our lives by the light Jesus provides for us. What happened to the new year’s resolutions we made? If our forgotten good intentions are any clue, we need help to more fully accept Jesus’ invitation to reshape how we live and think. Since the invitation to be “fishers of people” applies to all baptized, not just to a few Jesus invited two thousand years ago, we also need encouragement and light in our mission to “fish” for others.

Aren’t the places we live and work also the modern equivalent of “Galilee of the

Gentiles?” Besides our own struggles in faith, aren’t we living and working among others who also try to live respectable and good lives? We form a community of support for one another “out there.” Some of the best church ministry happens among Christians who work together and form a “family” of encouragement in times of joy, stress and tragedy.

Other believers are in less hospitable settings. They many even feel isolated because their beliefs set them apart in aggressive business environments or in families who don’t share their values. Each day they contend with darkness in many large and subtle ways. Yet, they continue to hold to their faith and live in hope, illumined by the “great light” they have seen and that directs their feet.

Here in this worship we come to acknowledge and give thanks for the light Christ is for us. This light has not left us when darkness has threatened to overwhelm us. It also guides our lives so that we can be a preaching, in word and deed, to what we believe for those who “sit in darkness” of loneliness and guilt, indifference, aggression intolerance and all the other “overshadowings” of death. We church people have been called a counter cultural force , or as Jesus views our presence in the world, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Witnesses to the gospel need daily food and support and that is why we gather today with open hands, listening ears and eager hearts to again welcome and give thanks for the “great light” that has shown in our darkness.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

GALILEAN JOURNEY: THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN PROMISE, by Virgilio Elizondo (Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1983, in paperback.)

The author addresses the situation of the Mexican-American people, likening them to the Galileans of Jesus’ time. What the casual onlooker sees as “problems” for the Mexican-Americans, Elizondo sees as ripe with possibilities for new life as well as for contributions to the surrounding society. His rereading of cultural dynamics makes a new reading of the Gospel possible.

QUOTABLE

Concerning the Second reading from I Corinthians — here is a summary quote by Monika Helwig that rephrases the passage nicely.

“Because we have heard it all so often for so long, we may not be hearing this startling good news at all any more, relegating it to the status of background music dulled by our own interpretations of what Jesus was about. But the reading from Corinthians reminds us what it was about Jesus that made him such a dazzling light in a darkened history. What Paul asks for in the name of Jesus is dedicated community, concern for others, disregard for status and precedence, ministry not dominance, focus on the person of Jesus not on the factions that so easily arise among his followers, pursuit of the wisdom of the cross and not of worldly wisdom. Paul expresses a certain impatience with the unnecessary complications being introduced into the essential simplicity and integrity of the good news. As long as we are entangled in such unnecessary complications, it will be difficult to hear the gospel as good news, and it will be difficult really to see the startling figure of Jesus entering his ministry as Matthew paints it. To accept the teaching in its integrity is also to see Jesus as the great light in the darkening world.”

-----Monika K. Hellwig, GLADNESS THEIR ESCORT: HOMILETIC REFLECTIONS FOR SUNDAYS AND FEASTDAYS, YEARS A, B AND C. (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987), page 82.

JUSTICE NOTES

About 25% of U.S. working families can now be counted as low wage, says “Working Hard, Falling Short,” a report from the Annie Casey Foundation (701 St. Paul St., Baltimore, Md 21202; www.aecf.org). Of the 25%, half fall below the official poverty line: which is about \$18,800 for a family of four. The other half can be called minimum income: between \$18,800 and \$36,800 for a family of four. By comparison, the median income is about \$63,000. The report defines working families as household with at least one employed member. (NY Times, 10/8/04 and

Chicago Tribune 10/20/04)

—quoted in INITIATIVES, (National Center for the Laity, P.O. Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629, wdroel@cs.com)

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:.....

Gary Greene #0155512 (On death row since 6/1/98)

Donald Scanlon #0546715 (6/9/98)

Johnny Hyde #0542024 (7/23/98)

-----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

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