

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Isaiah 8: 23-9:3 I Corinthians 1: 10-13 Matthew 4: 12-23

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I want to take issue with the Isaian reading—play the “devil’s advocate,” if you will. I find myself resisting this and similar passages that describe God’s intervention to bring about right in the world as a “fait accompli.” I am skeptical when a scripture passage, similar to today’s first reading, sounds something like this: while things used to be bad, God has come and fixed things up and now we are (according to Isaiah today) “rejoicing” and “making merry.” That’s just not my experience; is it yours? How do we deal with the inconsistency between what God has supposedly done and the reality of our world—both global and personal? Should we just acquiesce and “have faith”? Should we “put on a happy face;” whistle while we walk through the cemeteries of our lives; “look at the bright side of life?”

As I am preparing a passage for preaching, before I turn to biblical commentaries for help, I first walk and talk with the passage as I go about my life. I use it for prayer, trying to sit with it and listen to what it has to say to me/us in the light of current realities. That’s what I have been doing the last few days with Isaiah. I’ve listened to the prophet; walked and talked with him. He speaks, I listen and, in the case of this passage, I protest. Here’s what is at stake for me.

I started reading the passage, about anguish “taking wing” and darkness being “dispelled,” the day after Christmas as I waited almost two hours at the Raleigh, NC airport. I was on my way to New York for an after-Christmas visit home. The security check was endless, some people just behind me had already missed their plane. There were National Guard troops with mean-looking weapons; security personnel roaming the waiting area with squawking walkie talkies; and passengers taking off their shoes for inspection. It didn’t used to be like this; the days have gotten darker. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Not yet Isaiah, in fact, the signs indicate it is getting still darker!

Two days later I met a Dominican sister friend and we walked several miles from mid-town Manhattan, along the Hudson River, towards “Ground Zero.” We were not going as tourists to see the sights, but to pay our respects. It felt like a

pilgrimage to a holy place, the way pilgrims of all faiths through the ages have traveled to significant holy places. Like those pilgrims, as walked, we told stories of our experience of the tragedy. The streets grew more deserted as we got closer, stores and restaurants were closed, huge office buildings near the sight were sealed shut. We were joined by some others coming from the side streets, forming a rivulet— all making our way to “the Site.” I thought of some criticism I heard voiced about tourists coming to “gawk”. I didn’t feel that; there was a somber and reverential air about the people. They too seemed to be paying their respects. Periodically we stepped aside to wait while trucks from the site went by. One carried a huge burnt steel beam, others were filled to the top with what looked like snow from the excavation area—but it wasn’t snow, it was the ash.

Some fundamentalists of various faiths have said this was God’s punishment on a faithless and corrupt nation. Where do they get these notions, I wondered, as I looked at the several memorials around the area with candles and pictures of smiling victims taken at happier times? I look at Isaiah’s opening lines, they seem to echo a thought similar to the fundamentalists’, “the Lord degraded the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.” Does that mean that God “degraded” over 3000 people on a sunny morning at work, their families, friends and the rest of us who feel their loss and the loss of “the way we were?” When bad things happen to other people are they also being punished by God? And if so, what kind of God do we have anyway? Who would want to follow this God; unless out of fear and an attempt to keep on the good side of God’s wrath?

I turn back to the Isaian passage. I ask myself; what’s going on here? What do I know about the background of this passage? When Isaiah wrote, the Promise Land was split into a northern kingdom, Israel and a southern one, Judah. In the 8th. century B.C.E., Zebulun and Naphtali, two of the twelve tribes in Israel, had been overrun by their northern neighbor Assyria. Isaiah observed the fall of the northern kingdom and interpreted it as a result of their sin. They were being punished by God. Whenever I read such early biblical literature, I remind myself that this writing, and others like it, occurred early in the people’s faith. They are just beginning to understand God. In this early faith, all good and painful deeds were seen as coming directly from the hand of God, either as reward or punishment. Later, as their faith develops, the writers become more careful in distinguishing the acts of God from the results of our own foolish behavior. Jesus dispels the belief of afflictions coming in this life as a result of our sin. For

example, in the story of the blind man in John 9. The disciples ask, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” And Jesus tells them the man’s blindness had nothing to do with sinful deeds. I have come to interpret biblical passages, like this one from Isaiah, in the light of the overarching message Jesus reveals about God’s love for us. What I do hear at this moment of my reading of the passage is the promise that God will dispel the darkness in which the people walked. See, a loving God is already coming through the Hebrew text and later that will be the dominant message to Israel. Later it would be the same message taught to the Jewish Jesus by his parents.

The fact that the statements of deliverance are made in the present tense, as if already accomplished, does two things for me. It fills me with hope by providing a sure vision of what God is planning: be assured, things will not stay the way they are. God has noticed our travail and will dispel the darkness. This vision should affect the way we live, not as people destined to be overwhelmed by darkness, but as people who know the “yoke that burdened them ...has been smashed.” We do not walk in darkness. For those who believe in Jesus we know that the ultimate power of darkness has been overcome. The light to all nations to lead us out of darkness has already arrived.

The second result of my belief in Isaiah’s words has me looking again at the darkness and noticing the rays of light. Maybe I just have been looking in the wrong places or expecting spectacular displays of God’s vindication, while the less obvious signs of this prophet’s assurance are all around me. At the Trade Center site that day, a bitter cold winter’s wind blew in from the nearby river, I notice the dogged persistence of those digging, staying at their sad and strenuous task, wanting to bring some remains of the deceased to their families for burial; I hear about the charitable outpourings from around the country and the world for the survivors and the victims’ families; I see the spontaneously erected places of prayer and memorials on the streets and at the firehouses to remember the dead and those who saved so many. As New Year’s day approaches there are still prayer services around the city. There are national personalities donating their time to make tv commercials that carry the message about tolerance amidst such diversity. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”

Darkness and light are powerful symbols for us, as they were for those for whom Isaiah wrote. We describe not only our national tragedies, but our personal ones

as well, as “dark days.” When we are probing and searching for direction in our lives we say we are in the dark, hoping for the light at the end of the tunnel. I am not completely happy with the “results” of my struggle with this passage and the harsh realities around me these days. It doesn’t feel as if it has balanced out; there are still many questions. But I do feel that, while I do not have all the answers, I do walk in a God-directed light that takes me through the darkness pointing me to the light at the end of the tunnel.

QUOTABLE:

Concerning the Second reading from I Corinthians — Here’ a summary quote 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.
Page 82,

READER’S RESPONSE”

Caught! Father Andy Blake, of St. Andrew’s parish, Sag Harbor, N.Y., wrote a note of thanks for these reflections and then said,

“Concerning your Epiphany reflections, Howe Caverns are in upstate, NY; Mammoth Caves are in Kentucky.” (My apologies to Sister Angelica, who taught me fourth grade geography!)

JUSTICE NOTES:

(From Carmen Mele, O.P., Promoter of Justice for the Southern Dominican Province. It was originally addressed to Dominicans, but here is a chance to look over our shoulders and listen in.)

Brothers and Sisters,

Please pray and preach for an end to the death penalty during this month in which we recognize a somber anniversary: 25 years since the reestablishment of the death penalty in the U.S. On January 17, 1977, Gary Gilmore was executed by the State of Utah, the first use of capital punishment in ten years. Since then there have been approximately 750 executions nationally.

The Dominican Leadership Conference has recommended that we Dominicans use this occasion to advocate for an end to the death penalty. You might consider reflecting on the following words of Martin Luther King on violence in general:

"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." (MLK, 1964)

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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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