

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 30th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Exodus 22: 20-26 Psalm 18 I Thessalonians 1: 5C-10 Matthew 22: 34-40
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Mark Twain is supposed to have said, “It’s not what I don’t understand about the bible that bothers me, but what I do understand.” The basic teachings in the bible don’t require a bible scholar sitting across from us explaining them to us. Today’s gospel is an example of what Mark Twain had in mind when he said that it was what he did understand in the bible that bothered him. Jesus’ teaching today is straight forward and maybe what we need is less an explanation today than a reminder. Today’s liturgy gathers us at the “reminder-place.” But our assembly is also the place where we receive help to live what we hear and understand in the bible--- but don’t quite put into practice.

In the gospels these past weeks we have find Jesus in conflict with the religious authorities. Last week the Pharisees and Herodians banded together to challenge Jesus with the question about paying the Roman taxes. This week we hear that the Pharisees “gathered together”—doesn’t that sound predatory? They want to corner Jesus and get him to give an answer that will alienate one or another group’s religious sensibility.

There were over six hundred commandments in the religious law at that time and rabbis were often asked to prioritize them for their disciples so as to put appropriate stress on those that were more important (“heavy laws”) and those less important (“less weighty”). Jesus’ answer is not radical or set apart from what a devout Jew might have said. In fact, he draws from the Hebrew scriptures for his answer. To describe the love we should have for God he quotes Deut. 6:5; which still is the daily prayer prayed by Jewish believers—the Schema. Love of neighbor is commanded in Lev. 19:18, (It is quoted three times in the New Testament, more than any other text from the Hebrew text.) His response provides an over-riding principle that applies to all our religious, ethical and social behavior. All the laws and customs under which we live are to be guided and interpreted according to Jesus’ commandment. It is obvious that Jesus’ teaching about the greatest commandment was very important in the early church since all three synoptic gospels have it.

If we look at today's first reading we get a sense of what the first testament has in mind when it speaks of "neighbor." The book of Exodus calls for the Israelites to be careful for the most vulnerable in the society: "widows" were women without children whose husbands had died and who had no one to provide for and protect them; "orphans" had no male guardian and so were vulnerable and often destitute; "aliens" were those living among the Israelites, but from another place. They too were vulnerable since they didn't have the necessary support and protection a family could give in that Mediterranean culture. The Israelites were advised not to forget their own history of struggle since they were once aliens in Egypt. They were to remember their hard times and how God had taken care of them and rescued them. As God's people they were expected to reflect the God they believed in and to do for another group of aliens and vulnerable people what God had done for them.

The first part of Jesus' response calls for total dedication to God. Our response to God must be such because to love God, "...with all you heart, with all your soul and with all your mind" is not a part-time activity. Love of God requires daily commitment and frequent renewal. Which is why we gather for Eucharist. Having been less-than-full-time God lovers this past week, we come for the food that renews God's life in us so that our response to God can become more and more the full work of heart, soul and mind.

At this Eucharist we celebrate God's self-gift to us. Here we acknowledge and worship the God who has first loved us. In a manner of speaking, God loved us with "all God's heart, with all God's soul and with all God's mind." We remember at this Eucharist the tremendous and free gift of love we have received. We respond by asking for the gift of being willing and able to love God as we have been loved—totally and without reservation. Jesus' life reveals the form a total love of God should take. And he also showed us how loving neighbor "is like the first." When asked for one chief commandment, Jesus gives two and unites the second to the first. For him, love of neighbor is related to love of God; you can't have one without the other. We can't love God with all our heart, soul and mind, without also loving our neighbor. And Jesus isn't just talking about the up-close neighbor who shares our interests, life style and lives on the same street with us. Exodus spells out the neighbor Jesus has in mind: the widows, orphans and aliens are symbols of those who get forgotten, overlooked and ignored in our society. Jesus links our love for them with our love for God.

There is no aspect of our lives that is not embraced by Jesus's command to keep God in the first place in our lives and to include in that place of prominence the love of neighbor. Yet we know how difficult it is to live a life that doesn't fall short of this guiding principle. So, once again, as we gather for worship, we are reminded of God's mercy and ask help to live the life Jesus has laid out for us in the "great commandment."

Last week we heard Jesus' teaching: "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." We are tempted to compartmentalize our lives into two neat boxes: one containing the things of Caesar; the other the things of God. As with last week's teaching, the great commandment" should make it again clear that in our faith lives there is no "wiggle room." If Jesus gave us a clear set of lots of laws and rules to live by, we might be able to claim that there are some areas of life not covered by one command or another. Instead, we have his dual-natured great commandment. Nothing falls outside its guiding light because we are reminded that the heart of the gospel and our lives in God's reign, require us to love God with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves.

I was leafing through a children's liturgical planning book (cf. Pottebaum below) and found the following questions for children. There's some "adult matter" in them and they make good reflective material for us this week.

Concerning the First Reading

- What can you do to show friendship to foreigners and strangers where you live?
- How can you love the poor as God does?

Concerning the Gospel

- What do you need to do in order to love God with all your heart, soul and mind?
- What can you do to love yourself without being selfish?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Gerard A. Pottebaum (ed.), SUNDAY LITURGY OF THE WORD PLANNING GUIDE, YEAR A, 4TH. QUARTER. (Loveland, OH: Treehaus Communications Inc, 2005), paper. 800-638-4287. Web www.Treehaus1.com

This guide is designed to enrich children's experience of God's presence in the liturgical proclamation of the Word. The focus is on ritual and emphasizes

gestures, movement, singing and silence as responses to the Word. Helpful if you use the LECTIONARY FOR MASSES WITH CHILDREN (U.S. Bishops).

JUSTICE NOTES

Liturgy and the Work of Justice

...the ranks of the liturgical ministries fill up much more quickly than do the ranks of the peace and justice ministries. This imbalance is one that should cause us to be concerned. We have much work to do in reminding ourselves that the Sunday assembly for eucharist is validated or falsified by how the community's ritual translates itself into the work of the reign of God through the week. The community that roots itself in a baptismal ministry and spirituality can never dispense itself from the work of justice, or peace and of reconciliation.

Each Sunday we pray in the Preface, "It is right to give him thanks and praise...we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks...." This is how the International Committee on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) has chosen to translate: *Dignum et justum est...vere dignum et justum est, aequum at salutare, not tibi semper at unique gratias agere.... a fuller translation would read:* "It is right and just...it is truly right and just, proper and helpful toward salvation, that we always and everywhere give you thanks...." It is unfortunate that the Latin *justum* was "lost in translation." The members of the liturgy and justice and peace committees, and *the whole assembly of the baptized* would be well served in hearing and praying each week this intimate connection between the work of worship and the work of justice. The "connection" is in reality, a *unity* because the work of liturgy and the work of justice are the work of the Lord; this work is our too; we have been invited to "do this in memory" of the Lord.

----Austin Fleming in, *PREPARING FOR LITURGY: A THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY*. (Washington, D.C: The Pastoral Press, 1985), page 93, ISBN 0-912405-16-3.

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:.....

Michael L. Fullwood # 0138201 (On death row since 8/19/94)

Phillip Wilkinson #0438643 (9/15/94)

Malcolm Geddie #0143501 (9/29/94)

-----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,

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