

“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:

I want to first spend some time on the Exodus reading because it is a good and practical response to the command Jesus gives in today’s gospel about loving neighbor. The love we have for God is put into practice and tested, Jesus says, by how we love our neighbor. The first reading spells out some specific “neighbors” for our love.

The Exodus selection reflects the background of the Israelites; they had experienced exile and oppression in a foreign land, Egypt. Noting their helplessness, God entered into covenant with them and delivered them to the Promised Land. In response to the gift of the covenant the people were to show their awareness and gratitude for what God had done for them by living an ethical and faithful religious life. They were to observe the Law, not out of any servile sense of obedience, but because a faithful life revealed their union with God. Religious observance is not enough, it must have social consequence. The God of compassion and justice must be visible in our lives; otherwise, our religious practices are just empty formalities.

Exodus then, reflects some of what is expected in the covenanted people’s social discourse. It calls attention to society’s most needy; those who are poor and legally vulnerable. “You shall not molest or oppress an alien....You shall not wrong any widow or orphan...You shall not act like an extortioner....” If it weren’t happening, there wouldn’t have been a need for a law. (Aliens were foreigners living among the Israelites. They didn’t have the legal status of Israelites and so were often victimized.)

Note the unusual way this law is stated: the command is given, but then the reason for it is cited. The Israelites are to remember, “you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.” God looks out for the disenfranchised; God did it once when they were slaves in Egypt and God continues to do it for the aliens and poor living among them. One can only conclude that God has not had any major personality change--- has not lost interest in aliens, widows, orphans or “the

poor neighbor.” God does not remain detached, but listens to the cry of those in need. The test of a “nation under God,” will be how it provides for its poor and those without legal clout. Abraham Heschel once said, “The exploitation of the poor is to us a misdemeanor; to God it is a disaster.”

In today’s gospel another religious expert, a Pharisee, continues the series of antagonistic challenges to Jesus’ authority. There may be one questioner, but there is a group of them “gathered together.” Jesus is in a hostile setting; this is not a religious inquiry, but a trap. Yet, Jesus responds to the question. Today’s passage has a very famous quote and risks being overly familiar, “You shall love the Lord, your God....” We are tempted to say, “I know this one, let’s move on.” There were 613 commandments in the Pentateuch. One can understand the desire to reduce them to a few core statements so that one might have guiding principles for daily living and worshiping. (The preacher needs to be careful here not to stereotype devout Jews as being overly legalistic, concerned with minutiae and external observances.) Religious leaders were often asked to summarize the commandments in a succinct teaching. Their response would reveal their priorities, what they considered the golden essence of Judaism.

There were a lot of possibilities for Jesus, but he chose to put together two of the ancient teachings. The first is the basic statement of faith recited by pious Jews each day, morning and evening, the “Sh’ma from Deut. 6:5. The second ties the first directly to the social obligations of the law, Lev. 9:18. Love of God is concretized in love of neighbor. Jesus was asked, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He posits a second and says it is equal to the first. He goes still further by saying that all God has revealed, “the whole law and the prophets,” depends on “these two commandments.” Since there were plenty of commandments he might have chosen, linking these two reveals Jesus’ fundamental teaching---our lives are to be guided by love. This gospel love is not a feeling one spontaneously has; it requires a willed determination to look after the interests of others as we look after our own.

Who might our “neighbor” be? Well in linking the first and the third readings on this Sunday, we have some insights. Our neighbors, the first readings suggests, include the “aliens,” “any widow or orphan” and “your poor neighbors” among us. In November, 2000, the U.S. Catholic bishops published, **WELCOMING THE STRANGER AMONG US: UNITY IN DIVERSITY**. In this letter they remind us

that our nation includes so many people of different cultures. They challenge us to a conversion (cf. “Justice Notes” below) so that as a church we might be a sign of unity amidst so much diversity. After the terrorist attacks last year, and with the national debate on “Homeland Security,” there has been a swelling of anti-immigrant sentiments in different parts of our country. These are not easy times, but just as Exodus challenged the Israelites to welcome the stranger in their midst and treat them justly and compassionately, so our bishops remind us to welcome the newcomers among us with justice and compassion.

Election time is drawing near---can’t wait for an end to all those political commercials! During these late Autumn days, many migrant workers are completing the harvest in our country. They tend to be the least paid and protected workers in our land. One response we can make to today’s readings is to support candidates and legislation which extend social services, guarantee decent wages, medical attention and educational opportunities for refugees and immigrants. Our nation’s slow economy has put terrible strains on those who labor on farms and in processing plants to supply our food. In my state of North Carolina, the Council of Churches has encouraged congregations to observe a time for hunger awareness and action. November is a good month to do this as we prepare for Thanksgiving. Parishes could contact local soup kitchens, food pantries and food banks engaged in fighting hunger. The national Second Harvest network has food banks and are always in need of money, food supplies and volunteers. It is also a good time to remember people throughout the rest of the world who do not have enough food and whose children are malnourished.

One place where we try to, “love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,” is at our weekly liturgical celebration. So, we look for ways at this worship to concretize this love in love of neighbor. Here, we welcome the stranger in our midst; here, we are a sign of the unity the eucharist calls us to be. We must integrate incoming groups into our liturgical, cultural celebrations and educational programs. The presence of brothers and sisters from other places is a true gift to our church. Pope John Paul II said, in his “Message for World Migration Day, 2000,” “The Church hears the suffering of all who are uprooted from their land, of families forcefully separated, of those who, in the rapid changes of our day, are unable to find a stable home atmosphere. She senses the anguish of those without rights, without security, at the mercy of every kind of exploitation and she supports them in their unhappiness.”

QUOTABLE

William Sloane Coffin's advice to preachers:

Remember that the neighbor these days needs a helping mind more than a helping hand.

Remember that charity is no substitute for justice, that charity alleviated the effects of poverty while justice seeks to eliminate its causes.

Remember that we are called to serve the Lord, not to be servile to our congregations.

Remember to ask always, "What would Jesus have me say?"

---quoted ed by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale in, *BEST ADVICE FOR PREACHING*, edited by John S. Mc Clure, page 11.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Undocumented Immigrants

One reality remains constant in the American experience of immigration: the demand of the U.S. economy for unskilled labor—and the corresponding entrance of immigrants seeking work—in labor-intensive industries such as agriculture, construction, food processing, and services. Undocumented immigrants face special hardships in such areas. The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that three to four million undocumented workers hold jobs in this country, many of which are poorly paid, insecure, and dangerous. They face discrimination in the workplace and on the streets, the constant threat of arrest and deportation, and the fear that they or their children will be denied medical care, education, or job opportunities. Many have lived in the United States for years, establishing roots in their communities, building their families, paying taxes, and contributing to the economy. If arrested and deported, they leave behind children and sometimes spouses who are American citizens. While the changes in the law over the last several years have enabled many in this situation to adjust their status to that of permanent resident, the 1996 immigration legislation made this option more difficult for the vast majority. Without condoning undocumented migration, the Church supports the human rights of all people and offers them pastoral care, education, and social services, no matter what the circumstances of entry into this country, and it works for the respect of the human dignity of all—especially those who find themselves in desperate circumstances. We recognize that nations have

the right to control their borders. We also recognize and strongly assert that all human persons, created as they are in the image of God, possess a fundamental dignity that gives rise to a more compelling claim to the conditions worthy of human life. Accordingly, the Church also advocates legalization opportunities for the maximum number of undocumented persons, particularly those who have built equities and otherwise contributed to their communities.

A Call to Conversion

Though we celebrate the diversity within our communities, we bishops must also confess that today, as in the past, the treatment of the immigrant too often reflects failures of understanding and sinful patterns of chauvinism, prejudice, and discrimination that deny the unity of the human family, of which the one baptism is our enduring sign. Such patterns, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "show the urgent need for a transformation of structures and a change of mentality, which is what the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 asks of Christians and every person of good will" (Message for World Migration Day 2000, no. 1). For Catholics especially, a recognition of failures in the face of the opportunities and challenges of the new immigration should serve as a call to a renewal of baptismal vows, through repentance and a sharing in the mercy of the one Lord who would gather all to himself in the unity of the children of God.

---WELCOMING THE STRANGER AMONG US: UNITY IN DIVERSITY,
Nov. 2000, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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."
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

[Archie Billings](#)

Jamie Cheeks

Eugene De Castro

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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