

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 31st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Malachi 1: 14b–2:2b, 8-10 Psalm 131 1 Thess. 2: 7b–9, 13 Matthew 23: 1-12
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

“The medium is the message.” We learned that a long time ago when we were being formed for service in the church. Paul VI put it this way (“On Evangelization in the Modern World”), “Modern people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” In other words, we who minister in myriad ways to Christ’s people do so by how we live, as well as by what we say by our preaching and teaching. If the way we act and speak outside the sanctuary and religion class doesn’t conform to what we say in “church places,” guess which will communicate more loudly, the witness of our lives or the words we speak in our public and official roles?

I don’t know this is true for other public people. Frank Sinatra had a lot of bad publicity throughout his career because he supposedly cavorted with gangsters, got into brawls in bars and took swings at photographers who tried to take his picture. But when I drive in a car and one of his special songs comes on, “The Lady is a Tramp,” New York, New York,” “Chicago,” “One for the Road,” etc, I find that I easily forget the personal details of his life and just go with the flow of the music. Another person comes to mind. I had a classical music teacher in college who was quite eccentric. She caused a lot of chuckles and comments among the students. One of my friends once said to me, “What a flake she is!” as she breezed through the cafeteria. But once we were in class with her—that was another matter. She was a terrific teacher and I owe most of my love of Bach, Chopin, Copland and so many other composers to her, regardless of her public oddities.

Not so for religious leaders, Jesus reminds us in today’s gospel. The way we live and how we treat others will either support or undermine the message we are trying to communicate. The scribes and Pharisees, Jesus tells us, speak from “the chair of Moses” (this expression could refer to when they were actually speaking from the teacher’s chair in the synagogue; or, because they spoke from the tradition of Moses that gave them authority). What they spoke in such capacities, was to be observed. But because they didn’t practice what they taught, their

example, wasn't to be followed. Actions really do speak louder than words. Jesus wants us to do what he told us last Sunday: we are to love God with all our heart, soul and mind and our neighbor as our self. In other words, he wants full and total dedication to his message in all aspects of our lives—words and actions; in church and in the market place.

I would be careful not to paint the Pharisees and scribes in villainous and hypocritical terms for we risk sounding anti-Semitic. The Pharisees were scrupulous interpreters of religious law. They were a very influential group for about three centuries (2nd century B.C.E. --1st century C.E.) The HARPER'S BIBLE DICTIONARY (ed. Paul Actenmeier, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985, page 783) says the Pharisees had a "simple standard of living," were faithful to their own way of life and "cultivated harmonious relations with others." They, like Jesus, believed in life after death. Most wanted to stay on Rome's good side (though some wanted revolution), so the Pharisees worked with the chief priests to maintain order. They were strict interpreters of the religious law, known for their ritual purity and their dietary and sabbath observances. They were admired by the people as a devoted group who strictly kept the religious laws, preserving them from being watered down or lost due to outside influences. Yet today, we hear in the gospel that Jesus calls them hypocrites. Why?

Part of it has to do with the fact that Matthew was writing around the year 90 for a Christian community that had many Jewish converts. They struggled with their former Jewish leaders and their own past, so Matthew strongly states the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, perhaps even over-emphasizing the conflict. He may have wanted to help the community make a final break from the old religious influences and more fully embrace Jesus' teachings and ways.

That was then; this is now. Why should this early church struggle interest us modern believers? Matthew may have preserved Jesus' teaching about hypocrisy because of the leaders in his own community. Seems hypocrisy didn't die out with the some of the Pharisees; it is always around. Jesus warns that religious leaders and teachers can be susceptible to it, perhaps because of the unique power we wield over others. When Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "As for you...." he is looking at us as well today. So none of us can get uppity or self-righteous and use the Pharisees as a whipping post—"those Pharisees were such hypocrites!" Who among us can say that all our actions fit our words? The Pharisee label, at

one time or another, hangs around our necks too!

We are the “good people,” the “loyal parishioners,” the “upright citizens,” “the contributors to the building fund and other worthy causes,” “the law-abiding and proper folk,” etc. But we can’t avoid Jesus’ pointed words. They require us to look at our lives to see if we really are loving God, “with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind...” and “your neighbor as yourself.” Of course we’re not! Why else would we come here each weekend to ask for mercy and nourishment? What we are reminded again today is that the life of Jesus shows us that God is on our side and wants to give us a willing and obedient spirit—just like Jesus’. We’ll ask for a renewal of that Spirit as we come forward today to receive the Lord in our sacred meal.

One more thing: my official title is “father.” But Jesus teaches that his disciples not call anyone “Rabbi,” “father” or “master.” Rabbi means “my great one.” Jesus is emphasizing that for Christians there is only one great rabbi and the rest of us are disciples of that “great one.” Around Jesus’ time the great Jewish sage Saul ben Batnith (cf. THE NEW JEROME BIBLICAL COMMENTARY, p666) was the first to bear the title “Abba,” —“father.” Despite Jesus’ teaching the title entered the church through the monastic movement. The “father” was the spiritual teacher in the monastic community (obviously in a male community). (In Matthew only God is called “Father.”) “Master” suggests a teacher and Christ alone is our teacher. All of us are the disciples of this teacher.

Jesus isn’t teaching that we are not to call priests “father” or women spiritual leaders “mother.” That would be too restrictive an application of the passage. And that interpretation would only be applicable to a few in the church. But we are all tempted to cherish and claim places of honor. We love titles that distinguish us from the rest of the crowd. All of us must practice what we preach: we must do what we can to lighten the loads that weigh on people (especially excessively restrictive or burdensome religious laws) and the “officials” among us must not let the respect and honor we receive because of our titles and roles, go to our heads. The name of the game is Service—like the service Jesus gave his followers when he washed their feet and died for them.

JUSTICE NOTES

THREE EXECUTIONS SCHEDULED IN NORTH CAROLINA

As you know, each week I post the names of three people on death row here in North Carolina and invite our readers to send one or all of them a post card. There are three men scheduled to be executed soon and in the past their names have been on our "Postcards for Death Row Inmates" list that is usually posted in this space. Now, because of their pending executions and with regrets, I post their names again. Please drop them a note with a word of encouragement and a reassurance of prayers for them. You might also write our governor and ask him to stop these killings in our name.

Contact Gov. Mike Easley at:

Governor's Office, 20301 Mail Services Center,
Raleigh, NC 27699-0301

Email: governor.office@ncmail.net or through www.governor.state.nc.us

Fax: (919) 733-2120 or 715-3175

Tel: 1-800-662-7952 (North Carolina only) or (919) 733-5811

North Carolina has set the dates of execution for the following:

Steven Van McHone, (# 270047) 35, has been scheduled to be killed by the state on Friday, Nov. 11. McHone was sentenced to death in 1991 for the murder of his mother and stepfather, Mildred Johnson Adams and Wesley Dalton Adams, Sr. A critical and contested issue in the trial was whether he was so impaired by the excess consumption of alcohol that he could not have premeditated the murders.

Elias Syriani, (398002) 67, has been scheduled to be killed by the state on Friday, Nov. 18. He was sentenced to death for the murder of his wife, Teresa Jousef Syriani, in 1991. His trial lawyers did little to investigate his background in Palestine and Jordan, where their client was born and spent most of his life. Nor did they consult with a mental health expert to assist them in preparing for Syriani's sentencing hearing.

The jury was not aware then that when Syriani was 12 years old his village was annexed by Israel. All the men in the village, including his father, were sent to concentration camps. His father returned more than a year later, a traumatized shell of his former self. Syriani lived in extreme poverty, and was abused physically and emotionally in his family.

After his trial, a psychiatrist examined Syriani and concluded he was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder at the time of the crime.

Kenneth Boyd, (0040519) 57, has been scheduled to be killed by the state on Friday, Dec. 2. He was sentenced to death in 1994 in Rockingham County for the murders of his estranged wife and father-in-law, Julie Curry Boyd and Thomas Dillard Curry. Boyd is a Vietnam veteran who was honorably discharged from the armed services. In the decade he has lived on death row, he has had no disciplinary infractions whatsoever.

-----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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