

***FIRST IMPRESSIONS* 33rd SUNDAY (A)**

Proverbs 31: 10-13, 19-20, 30-31 Psalm 128 I Thess. 5: 1-6 Matthew 25: 14-30
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Recently I preached at a parish in Brooklyn. Alongside the ambo in the sanctuary there was a large framed painting of St. Paul. In front of the painting a candle burned. That parish was acknowledging this “Year of St. Paul,” which Pope Benedict declared on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul (June 29th).

The pope followed his announcement with further urgings that we not only prayerfully read St. Paul, but that we become a more scripture-based church. When the pope opened the World Synod of Bishops in early October, which had the Word of God as its focus, he said that knowledge of the Scripture is essential to our evangelizing mission. He also said, “it is indispensable that the Church know and live that which she proclaims, so that her preaching is credible, despite the weakness of her members.” (Quoted in the Brooklyn/Queens diocesan newspaper, “The Tablet,” 10/11/08, page 1.) So, let’s pay some attention in these reflections to our Pauline readings, usually the second selection on Sunday and let’s resolve to renew (or begin) a habit of daily scripture reading and prayer.

Selectons from 1Thessalonians have been chosen for these closing weeks of the liturgical year, probably because of Paul’s escathological message in the letter. In an earlier section (4:13-18) he addresses the grief community members have suffered at the loss of loved ones. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. The Thessalonians believed that Christ’s return would be quick; but it wasn’t and community members were dying. What would happen to their deceased and when was Christ coming back? – these were crucial issues of faith for the first generation Christians.

Thus, today we arrive at the beginning of chapter 5 where Paul addresses the questions, “concerning times and seasons.” He challenges the Thessalonians to be less concerned about dates and times of the Lord’s return. He will come, but no one knows when: his return will be sudden and unexpected. “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” While the image of a thief breaking into our homes or stealing our possessions is stark, still there is hope in it. Despite our long wait and our questions, Jesus will certainly return. What we must do now, Paul advises, is to be vigilant and ready in our daily lives. We must behave like “children of the

light,” and live as the people we are in Christ: we possess the Spirit who guides and helps us see and act in an often dark and misdirected world.

It is hard to get worked up about Jesus’ return, so many years have passed and we are still waiting. Which is why Paul calls us to be vigilant. Why does it often take a crisis to wake us up to our vulnerability and our need for God’s help? Why do we put off making necessary changes in our lives? Is it because we expect tomorrow and the day after tomorrow to be much like today?

Yet, so many of us can tell stories about ourselves, or people we know, whose lives have had a sudden turn for the worse with the report from a CAT scan, accident, family crisis, world event, financial downturn, etc.? The end time is not so far off for us, it could happen at any moment, when we will be tested on how well we have lived and where we have put our trust and security.

Paul’s emphasis is on the end time, still he realizes tests and challenges face us each day; that times of “peace and security” can end abruptly. I write this while the world’s once strongest economies are suffering their worse collapse since the Depression. No one has to tell people who have faced foreclosure on their homes or the slashing of the values of their 401k’s how quickly we can go from security to insecurity.

While Jesus has not caused the collapse of our financial markets, nor the grief that will be visited upon the most vulnerable, still, it does feel like the “Day of the Lord,” a time when our values and foundations are tested; when our “investments” are questioned. How well am I living my Christian faith? In what or whom have I placed my confidence? Where do I find a “peace and security” that will not fade, even in tumultuous times? How can I renew and maintain the light of Christ within me and where can I find opportunities to share that light with others, especially with the most distressed? Those are just some of the questions Paul surfaces when he reminds us that in Christ we are children of the light who need to be vigilant in our daily lives and persevering in our Christian faith, as we await “the Day of the Lord.”

Matthew’s gospel today has a similar emphasis on a disciple’s responsibility and faithful service during the master’s absence and then his return, “after a long time,” to settle accounts with the servants to whom “he entrusted his possessions.” The parable has allegorical characteristics. The master “calls” his servants, as Jesus

called his disciples at the beginning of the gospel; like Jesus, the master is about to go away and “entrusts” his possessions (“talents”) to his servants. The English word “talent” tempts us to speak of using our “talents” in God’s service; but in the original Greek, “talent” is either a monetary measurement or a measure of weight. Thus, the parable is speaking of material things that have measurable value and suggests our industrious engagement in the daily affairs of life – as trustworthy servants waiting our Master’s return.

The distribution of the talents is based on each servant’s abilities. The servants are not given any explicit instructions about what to do with the talents they have been given. At this point in the parable we hear the trust the master has in his servants and the freedom he is giving them. They receive plenty of latitude to use their own ingenuity with the master’s valuables. While he doesn’t spell out exactly what the servants are to do while he is gone, the master does expect them to do something. Which shines a dramatic light on the third servant’s inactivity, fear and worrisome caution. He buries the talent entrusted to him.

The master returns and calls each of the first two servants “my good and faithful servant,” for they have been “faithful in small matters.” Indeed, their faithfulness has taken the form of risk with their master’s goods, since they have entered into venturesome enterprises to make a profit for him while he was gone. The first two servants seem to know the master better than the third, who gives as an excuse that he perceived the master to be “a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter....” That’s hardly the nature of the master, judging from how he rewarded the first two servants. Is that also the way we perceive God, as demanding and fearsome, requiring cautious behavior and timidity in our dealings with the world? Do we expect the Lord will return to make sure we kept the treasures of our faith close at hand and heavily guarded, safe from “the world”?

In a couple of weeks we will begin Advent. During that season we will hear much about the anticipated return of Christ. Towards the end of his gospel Matthew touches into themes we associate with Advent. We hear today that while we wait for Christ’s return we are encouraged to risk taking and expansiveness in our faith. But doesn’t it seem that our churches encourage the tried and true, even when the signs around us suggest these methods are not speaking to some of our people; both those present in our worship and those no longer with us?

I see the parable taking flesh in parishes that have been venturesome in their approaches to the often unreached and under-served groups of their parishioners. Some parishes have taken risks and used scant funds: to hire youth ministers; to reach out to young adults by designing interactive webpages, podcasting, and e-newsletters, etc. (These days, even in parishes with modest resources, there are technically skilled people willing to help design such internet parish resources.) There is a young adult discussion group called “Theology on Tap” which meets in the backs of restaurants and pubs to hear lectures and discuss contemporary issues of the faith. Meeting in pubs, sharing the faith on-line – who would have thought! There are many other new ventures today that show the creativity and energy of a new generation of servants waiting for the Master’s return and using the resources we have been given while he is away.

Discipleship isn’t a holding back for fear of making a mistake or looking like a fool. Judging from today’s parable, it requires a spirit of risk and boldness, sometimes in big matters, but mostly in small daily occurrences. Whatever the “risky business” we use in our service of the Lord, we are encouraged in today’s parable by a Master who trusts his servants to “give it a try” – so that when he returns we will hear him call us “good and faithful servants.”

But he isn’t really “away” is he? He is with us today, and his Spirit is opening our ears to hear his encouragement to venture out and “deal” with the world. It is the same Spirit he promised would be with us and give us the words to speak when the occasion arises.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

Jesus told this parable to his disciples:

“A man was going on a journey. He called in his servants and handed his funds over to them according to each person’s abilities.....

After a long absence, the master of those servants came home and settled accounts with them.”

Reflection:

Discipleship isn't a holding back for fear of making a mistake or looking like a fool. Judging from today's parable, it requires a spirit of risk and boldness, sometimes in big matters, but mostly in small daily occurrences. Whatever the "risky business" we use in our service of the Lord, we are encouraged in today's parable by a Master who trusts his servants to "give it a try" – so that when he returns we will hear him call us "good and faithful servants."

So we ask ourselves:

Do I treat my faith as something fragile, keeping it close and protected as if it will break if brought out into the open?

In my daily life, how venturesome before others am I with my faith?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"She reaches out her hands to the poor, and extends her arms to the needy"

(Today's reading from Proverbs 31:20)

In many graceful ways Sacred Heart Cathedral Parish is the "she" of today's reading from Proverbs, "reaching out her hands to the needy" whom we are called to recognize as Christ among us. Being in downtown, the poor are at our doorstep. They come because we are here, near the bus station, near the shelters and near the soup kitchen. They come because we are "Church", often without knowing who we are and they find "hands reaching out" in friendship. It is not always easy, but at Sacred Heart the poor receive a welcoming, respectful invitation to "come in" and be at home. For those in crisis, some small financial relief given from the "*Door Fund*" is an additional sign of Sacred Heart's "extended arms".

Our parish is *responding with open hands and hearts to the needy* in many ways through many parish ministries.

Did you know?

Each Wednesday and Friday afternoon many poor people who are not part of our parish come to our door asking for help. The parish staff welcomes them as Christ. Sometimes the funds in the "Door Fund" have been exhausted, and we are saddened to turn the needy poor away, without being able to help.

Sacred Heart Parishioners open their arms to the poor by:

Providing prayer services and RCIS to those in prison and accompanying women from the prisons to our Sunday celebrations of Eucharist.

Helping families in crisis through support circles

Volunteering at Catholic Parish Outreach

Donating food and financial support on Share Sunday

Serving meals at the Helen Wright Shelter for women, to homeless families in the WIHN program and to the neediest poor on Saturdays at Moore Square

Serving the elderly through Caregivers, those who are HIV positive through the AIDS

Ministry, those who are pregnant and need help through the Gabriel Project and refugees through Global Outreach.

Pray that our parish's hands, arms and heart stay open to Christ as he comes to us in "the

distressing disguise of the poor". (*Mother Teresa*)

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Mike Hayes, *GOOGLING GOD: THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF PEOPLE IN THEIR 20's AND 30'S*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), paper, 208 pages. ISBN-13: 978-8091-4487-7.

Young adult Catholics are loosely connected to the institutional church – if at all. Young adults Catholics are not a homogenous group, though they tend to be loosely placed in two groups, “Gen X” and “Millennial.” But Hayes avoids the “one size fits all” ministerial approach to young adults and discusses strategies for engaging them from his own experience and that of other ministers.

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.” *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Shan E. Carter #0486636 (On death row since 3/19/01)

Fernando. L. Garcia #0702066 (4/19/01)

Jim E. Haselden #0561943 (6/6/01)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS”** **“Liturgical year A,”** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

“Liturgical years, A, B and C,” reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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 webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

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