

First Impressions 4th SUNDAY (A)

Zephaniah: 2:3, 3:12-13 Psalm 146 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31 Matthew 5: 1-12a

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Ash Wednesday is just a few days away! It seems we just put away the Christmas decorations and already Lent is upon us. I am not advocating a return to a former Lenten mentality or observances, because we did have some unusual attitudes about Lent—with a good dose of fear mixed in. But in our modern world we seem to have lost a sense of Lent as a time of repentance, change and a preparation for Easter. We may have put aside some strange former notions about a God angry at our sinfulness, one who needed appeasing by our self-denying practices. But what has replaced our former thinking and motives? Is Lent going to be a season we are only conscious of when we come to church and notice the stripped-down sanctuary and purple vestments?

In our world of self-indulgence, excess and waste, don't we need to take another look at discipline and self control? The poor and our very planet might be the beneficiaries if we approach this Lent as a time to grow in sensitivity to those with much less than we have and towards our planet that is rapidly wearing down.

The prophet Zephaniah wrote at time like our own. Judah (the Southern kingdom) was experiencing prosperity. The people seemed unaffected by the Assyrian conquest of their northern neighbors in Israel. Yet the prophet saw the same conditions in Judah that brought about Israel's collapse: immorality, superficial religious practices, shallow faith and a sense of satisfaction and pride brought on by prosperity. The people had become complacent and presumed God was on their side since they seemed so "blessed." A common mistake many make when life is going their way.

Amos had preached of "the day of the Lord," when God would deal with all nations for their infidelities and injustices. Zephaniah takes up Amos' message and warns the people that they too are in danger, because God is angry with them. The "day of the Lord" is coming. The people who had reason to worry were those who were self-congratulatory in their well being and who put the pursuit of right relations with God and neighbor below their craving for material possessions. A prophet is a

pretty “official” voice, one who speaks for God. So, who is blessed by God if wealth and security are not sure signs of God’s favor and blessings? The prophets and Jesus have an answer to that question.

Zephaniah continues to challenge us. Our nation can be complacent in our prosperity. We worry about the threat of inflation and a down-turn in the economy and its effects on our accustomed life style, more than we do about how we use our power, our self indulgence and our waste of resources—which most of the people in the world lack. While we have great access to knowledge and information we must ask ourselves if we use what we have wisely. We may be smart, but are we wise in God’s ways?

Zephaniah places a stern warning before those who were indifferent to God and neighbor and he makes a promise to those he calls a “remnant” (“anawim”). These, we will read in the gospel today, are “blessed” because they have placed their security into God’s hands and their main concern is doing God’s will. These “little ones” are the holy remnant who look to God’s coming “day” with hope and longing. On that day they will take refuge in God and they will be safe from all harm. They will no longer lack and will see their fidelity rewarded by God. The Beatitudes carry forward the theme of the “remnant.” They describe what the new People of God will be: the faithful (poor in spirit, sorrowing, meek, merciful, etc.) who accept Jesus and follow his pattern of life.

Matthew sets Jesus on a mountain to depict him as a new Moses who renews the covenant with God and teaches the way to live as God’s people. In a world that teaches happiness consists in wealth, power, youth, sexual license and independence from authority, Jesus proposes another perspective. Happiness (or being “blessed”) is found in sharing what we have with the poor, being faithful in our relationships and in serving the reign of God on earth. Jesus invites us, when moments of decision come, to listen to his voice and to receive the life his way of living offers us.

When preaching or reflecting on the Beatitudes caution is necessary. We tend to treat them as Jesus’ version of the Ten Commandments. We look upon them as moral imperatives and we think that our responsibility is to act the way the Beatitudes direct us. And doesn’t that make us feel inadequate? We reason that in order to receive the reward Jesus offers his faithful servants we must be poor in spirit, meek, merciful, etc., so that God will show us mercy too. Jesus seems to

have set the bar high and our job is to do our best to leap over it. But where is the “blessing” in that? It sounds like the emphasis is on us and what we can do to gain the reward.

One way to look on the Beatitudes is to see them as words of encouragement to those who are in current difficult straits. If we are poor in spirit, mourning, hunger and thirsting for justice, then the Beatitudes are our assurance of God’s desire to bless us, renew our hope and strengthen us so we can persevere, despite the indifference or even hostility of the world. The Beatitudes reveal the heart of God. By describing “beatitude people,” Jesus is pointing to where God’s concern and blessing lie. God notices the poor in spirit, those who grieve and yearn for things to be set right in the world and God will not leave them on their own or expect them to accomplish the goals of the gospel by themselves.

While the Beatitudes are not primarily a moral instruction or manual for behavior, they do point to what matters to God and reveal God’s will. Thus they invite us to partner with God and one another in order to tend to God’s concerns for humanity. They don’t just point to a future fulfillment. While they don’t spell out specific ways to accomplish the conditions they describe, we are guided and inspired by them. We pray for wisdom today to know the direction we must take to be a beatitude people. Perhaps there is one beatitude in particular that speaks to us. We pray at this Eucharist for the Spirit to enable us to live that beatitude more fully and to practice it in our relations with others. The disciples are getting an early glimpse into what following Jesus will mean for them. They are learning about God’s concerns and what response they must make to follow in Jesus’ way.

Lent is upon us. It offers us a season to make the Beatitudes our own, to learn them by putting them into practice. Our lenten observance will help us examine our lives, free us from our dependence on what will pass away and fix our eyes on God and doing God’s will. We are called this season to acknowledge our deepest needs for God and for each other. No material good can satisfy that hunger and thirst. Guided by what the Beatitudes reveal about God’s concerns, we recommit ourselves this Lent to be with: the hungry, cold, poor and those who are treated unjustly. We stand with those who yearn for peace amid violence and rejection and are persecuted for the good they do.

The prophet Zephaniah and Jesus open our eyes so we can see the hand of blessing God extends to us. We are also reminded to accept that blessing and to turn to

extend it to others. The Beatitudes are our “Bill of Rights,” they lay out the foundations and give us a perspective on the life Christ is offering us.

QUOTABLE

How wonderful is it that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.

----Anne Frank

JUSTICE NOTES

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew's Gospel 5:1-2)

Jesus is turning our world upside down. His words are in total contradiction to the message of our culture that we never have enough - that we cannot rest until our self worth is defined by career, homeownership, bank account and possessions. Jesus says it is the poor who are "blessed". Perhaps this is because the world, which treats many so well, has failed them, and they know that it is not something to put faith in. The poor have the advantage of seeing clearly that the "idols" our culture offers to us are unworthy of our worship and sacrifice. **The poor have much to teach us.**

As we look toward the beginning of Lent, we offer the following examination of Conscience. This examination will make sense only if we really believe that what Jesus says in the Beatitudes is practical and relevant and is meant for us to make real in our lives and in our world. It is adapted from *The Fire of Peace* a publication by PaxChristiUSA

Examination of Conscience

Blessed are the poor in spirit... Do I fear being poor, in spirit or otherwise? Do I prefer to be rich in money, brains or influence?

Blessed are those who mourn... Do I grieve over the pain in the lives of others? Do I mourn over war, poverty, hunger, injustice?

Blessed are the meek... Do I understand nonviolence as a way to fight evil with good? Do I live that way?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice... Have I kept myself ignorant of current events that are clearly injustices? Am I trying to improve life for others? Have I kept silent when I should have spoken out against injustice?

Blessed are the merciful...Are there places in my life where others are suffering because of my lack of mercy? What is my attitude toward capital punishment, ex-convicts, the poor?

Blessed are the pure of heart... Am I open and honest about who I am? Do I take time for prayer, solitude, community?

Blessed are the peacemakers...Is my presence a source of peace? Do I support violence in films, sports? Have I read and supported official church statements against war, nuclear weapons and the arms race?

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake... Do I worship security and fear costly discipleship? Who are my heroes? Do I live a truly Christian life in witness to the teachings of Jesus?

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

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:.....

Norfolk Best #0030124 (On death row since 6/7/93)

James Campbell #0063592 (7/8/93)

Daniel Garner #0141374 (9/3/93)

---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.

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<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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