

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4th SUNDAY (A)

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

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I returned to St. Clare’s parish on Staten Island shortly after Christmas to visit friends. It is my sister’s parish and I have preached parish retreats there several times. I picked up the parish bulletin to catch up on events in the community and noticed the Mission/Vision Statement on the front page. A number of parishes I have been to have worked out such mission statements and posted them in their bulletins or at the main entrance to the church for all to see.

St. Clare’s mission statement begins by describing itself as a “family” and states, “At the heart of our family is Jesus Christ whose love we passionately strive to reflect in our worship, our educational, pastoral and social outreach ministries.” Based on this initial declaration, the statement goes on to “challenge ourselves...to enrich and enliven our family gatherings around the table of the Lord...to embrace a commitment to life-long learning for all members of our community...to be bold and passionate in our witness to the Gospel...to be unceasing and generous in our compassionate outreach...to be uncompromising in warmly welcoming our distant brothers and sisters....” (I have abbreviated these statements, for each statement gives specific groups of people who will be the recipients of the parish’s outreach.) How did the people of St. Clare’s get the insights for their mission statement? They looked at the life of Jesus and at their own community’s attempts to live that life in our modern world.

What strikes me about this mission statement is that it begins with the declarative statement of faith and grace—Christ is at the heart of this community and as a result, the parish can accomplish its list of imperatives.... “to enrich...to embrace...to be bold...etc.” This pattern, the declaration of what is given (Christ at the heart of this community) and then the imperative consequences, is the same pattern I see in today’s gospel, the Beatitudes. I also see the Beatitudes as a kind of early mission statement for the church to whom Matthew was writing.

The Beatitudes begin the Sermon on the Mount. There will be much in the Sermon that tell how the disciples of Jesus are to behave towards one another and in the world. The Sermon sounds like a rule book--- something like, “If you do

these things I am laying out for you, then I will reward you.” But the Gospel, even when it specifies behavior, is not a rule book. It is Gospel—the Good News of transforming grace. Where is Jesus in all our attempts to follow the teachings of the Sermon? He is, in the words of the St. Clare’s mission statement, “At the heart of our family....” He is the heart, source of the blood flow in us that enables us to live his life in our world. So, the Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, and the Beatitudes put the demands of the Sermon in focus...they start the Sermon with a proclamation of grace.

There is some ambiguity about the audience Jesus is addressing as he went up the mountain, sat down and began his sermon. Today’s opening verse states that there are crowds following Jesus and that, after he sat down, his “disciples came to him.” The biblical commentators tend to agree that Jesus is addressing his disciples, not the general crowd. But the crowd is there to listen in---- as they are today--- to note the manner of the Christian community’s life together and in the surrounding world. If the disciples reflect the Sermon they are about to hear, others who have been listening in may feel drawn to enter the community. Will our observers sense that Christians are energized by a good force at work in their midst? Will they experience Jesus “at the heart of our family” and want to come to a source for new life pumping in their veins?

The Sermon will tell the disciples that their lives are to be exemplary. They are to be “salt of the earth...light of the world” (next week’s gospel). But before they are told how they are to behave they are told they are blessed. Jesus’ words do what they say—they grant the blessing. Remember, early in Genesis (1:28) the Creator blessed human beings. They lived in a blessed relationship with God. But their sin ruptured this relationship. When God chose Abraham and Sarah (12: 1-3) God once again blessed humans and made this couple special. “All the communities of the earth shall find a blessing in you.” Zephaniah describes the faithful ones as, “the humble of the earth” who have observed God’s law. The faithful in the biblical story are those who have received God’s blessings and have lived faithful lives. They are blessed and they acknowledge God as the source of this blessing. How often Jewish prayers begin with, “Blessed are you God of the Universe....” Our own Liturgy of the Eucharist reflects the awareness that we have been blessed. As the gifts are prepared the presider prays, “Blessed are you Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread...this wine to offer....” And the congregation responds, “Blessed be God forever.”

The Beatitudes declare blessed those who form the new community Jesus has called. Their lives, quiet and often hidden from the world's bright lights, are nevertheless witnesses to God's presence in the world. What appears fixed now in the world's way of reckoning—the rule of power, wealth, ruthlessness, oppression and greed--- will be reversed, we are told, someday when God's rule (kingdom/dominion) becomes fully manifested in the world. But even now there are signs of God's presence and influence in the world. It is Christ's faithful followers who can read the signs and celebrate the hope they anticipate. Christians who have Jesus "at the heart" receive the blessings that enable them to persevere in the way Jesus has shown us.

The Beatitudes don't tell us how we ought to behave----let's make ourselves poor in spirit, meek, merciful, etc. Rather, the followers are blessed by Jesus. He confirms his ways in them and enables them to live as he did in a world that does not always accept him. The faithful little ones, the anawim, will declare by their words and actions the presence of God's reign in the world. With Jesus' blessing they will also wait in hope for its full manifestation when Christ returns.

It must be noted that included in Jesus' blessing are those who have been victimized by society. He is not telling his disciples to become victims. Some may interpret the Sermon in that way. As we shall see, those who are victimized—struck on the cheek, have a shirt taken, forced to go a mile (5: 39-41)—are not to be victims. Instead, they are to take the initiative and choose to turn the cheek; give not only the shirt but the cloak as well; go the extra mile. You may be victims to brute force, Jesus seems to be saying, but you don't have to think like victims. Those who hear the blessings at the beginning of the Sermon know with certainty of the ultimate victory of God's reign and so receive the blessings and assurance they convey. Beatitude people do not have to serve power, scheme or join the many ways the world has of taking care of itself.

The Beatitudes certainly give us an upside down way to look at our lives and the world in which we live. The things we have been told are important, are not why Jesus blesses us. When things go well for us: we have our health, earn money, have successful careers, have our kids in the best schools, etc., we say we are "blessed." Maybe yes; maybe no. Jesus is not blessing those who have made it and are admired by their peers. They already have their "blessings" from their equals. "Way to go!" "Lucky stiff!" "You've got it made." These are people who exchange the "high-fives" of victory and success.

Jesus saw what Zephaniah saw, those “humble of the earth” who seek the Lord. These are God’s remnant who have been faithful, those who have suffered the slings and arrows of the world, but have persevered in the vision of true happiness that can only come from God. Lest they forget where the gift of their fidelity and good works comes from, Jesus makes it clear, “You are blessed”...and that is why you can live without the items and accolades the world considers essential for happiness—so essential, that people are willing to do anything to achieve them. But not so you, for you are blessed and with that blessing you are able to live in true happiness, the kind of happiness only God can bestow. “Blessed are you.”

So the preacher needs to be careful in preaching the Beatitudes. They are not ways we ought to live, not Jesus’ own Ten Commandments. They are not commandments at all, not a code of ethics for the Christian community, not directives that will better help us follow the model behavior of Christ. (Cf. Brueggemann quote below.)

As has been suggested above, the Zephaniah reading ties to the Gospel, it is a promise that finds its fulfillment in Jesus’ proclamation. Zephaniah was a prophet who preached in a period of moral decay; religion in Israel was at a low point. Attempts at reform did little to change things and fidelity to the covenant was on a downward slide. So Zephaniah preaches an end time message; it’s a wake up call. He seems to live up to some of our notions that the prophets were gloomy. Zephaniah certainly was. He tells us that God is angry and is coming with a day of terrible punishment. Sometimes we need a rough or rude awakening to bring us to our senses. This warning is like the sound of a smoke detector going off; it offends the ears, but it could also save us. Zephaniah’s speech is rough but he reveals the passionate concern God has for us, especially when we sin and choose another path.

Notice the word of grace present, even in this difficult-to-hear message. There will remain a faithful remnant, “in your midst”. These people will truly be the faithful ones who find their security or riches, not in passing power and material riches, but in taking refuge in God. These faithful ones will guarantee the future survival of God’s people and will see the promises of God fulfilled. You can see that this reading is pointing to today’s gospel beatitudes.

The reading from Zephaniah is memorable because it contains the key word "anawim," which means the poor little band of people. The prophet gives new life, new hope to this group who are waiting for God's intervention. Have we ever lived on the promise of another, on the word of one whom we could trust? Have we ever trusted their words despite appearances to the contrary? Would we gamble our possessions, even our lives on what they have said to us? A child leaps off a mantle into her father's arms because he said he would be there to catch the child. Abandoning fear and doubts, the child flings herself into the air, confident in her father's assurance, "Don't worry, I will catch you." So do the anawim trust a parenting God who has made a similar promise, despite all appearances to the contrary. "I will be there to catch you."

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Walter Brueggemann, **FINALLY COMES THE POET: DARING SPEECH FOR PROCLAMATION**. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.

Brueggemann says that preaching has become trivialized. He insists we need to find another way to speak and proposes poetic speech is the appropriate language for preaching. Poetic speech shakes up our patterned ways of speaking and evokes in the listener new possibilities. Poetic speech helps construct a world beyond the one we live in and take for granted. This book has become a contemporary classic and is a must read for the preacher.

QUOTABLE:

I speak to you as one whose lot it is to listen to many sermons in the seminary, preached by yet-to-be-formed theologians and pastors. In their yet-to-be-formed condition seminarians largely preach sermons filled with "ought" and "must" and "should." I have found myself growing in resistance to such sermons that purport to speak God's command. I have found myself discovering that mostly I do not need more advice, but strength. I do not need new information, but the courage, freedom, and the authorization to act on what I already have been given in the gospel.

—Walter Brueggemann, page 84.

JUSTICE NOTES:

The superfluous wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations. The rule which up to now held good for the benefit of those nearest to us, must today be applied to all the needy of this world. Besides, the rich will be the

first to benefit as a result. Otherwise their continued greed will certainly call down upon them the judgement of God and the wrath of the poor, with consequences no one can foretell. (#49)

-----Pope Paul VI, 1967, "Populorum Progressio; On the Development of Peoples".

"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

----Martin Luther King, Jr.

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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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