

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4<sup>th</sup> 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:

The first reading casts a light on today’s gospel beatitudes. Three times in the opening verses Zephaniah gives the admonition “seek” to the “humble of the earth,” those who have “observed the law”----“seek the Lord...seek justice, seek humility.” We don’t hear much from the prophet Zephaniah, he only shows up on one other Sunday in our three year cycle. He spoke to people who had turned away from God by immoral living and a betrayal of their faith. Zephaniah speaks out against these unfaithful ones. But he notes that not all have abandoned God; some, despite their current difficulties, have clung to the hope that God was still their refuge and will come to save them. Hence, this first reading points to those faithful ones—those Jesus also blesses in the beatitudes.

While others turn to worldly wealth, power and honor, these faithful ones, Zephaniah notes, are a “remnant of Israel” (also called the “anawim”), they are the few who have kept the covenant with God and can be called God’s people. While the powerful lord it over them, this remnant know that their power lies in God’s strength. While the important ones live for the moment, with little regard for the consequences of their actions, the “remnant of Israel” struggle to “seek justice,” that is, to set things right and place their hope in the God who will finally come and declare justice in the world. While the pride-filled boast of their accomplishments and stature, the remnant “anawim” acknowledge the greatness of God alone. They “seek humility.”

Zephaniah goes on to say that this remnant lives out what they believe, their lives reflect their faith. “They shall do no wrong, and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue.” Consequently they shall know true peace and safety--- described by Zephaniah’s pastoral metaphors---“they shall pasture and couch their flocks with none to disturb them.”

This is a reading for those of us who are ‘hanging in there.’ We live our daily lives doing our best not to be swayed by the allure of the surrounding world we meet at school, work and even at home. We are tempted to lessen our hold on our

faith, to coast along , little by little adopting and living by the standards of our world:

- to admire and strive after wealth and position
- to value the “haves” more than the “have nots”
- to seek the company of those who make us look good
- to cling to “eternal youth”
- to out spend our neighbors on clothes and potions
- to fit in with the majority opinion and be silent when a word of justice is required
- to fudge truth for personal gain and convenience, etc.

Zephaniah reminds us that this way of living and others like it, does not characterize the faithful “remnant” who find their refuge, affirmation and protection only in God.

Zephaniah is repeating the motif of the remnant that runs through the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. “Remnant” was a term used to describe a defeated nation, those left over after conquest. For the most part, the remnant addressed by the prophets were those who, despite defeat, continued to carry and trust the promises God made to Israel. They were the ones to whom restoration and messianic promises were addressed. In the prophetic literature the remnant are the scattered ones who though they dwell in distant lands, will be gathered together and once again possess the land of Israel. They turn to God as their strength during times when they are particularly frail.

So, while the term remnant originally applied to those who had suffered defeat, it was then applied to those who had messianic hope and trust that God would fulfill the promises of restoration. The very fact that this remnant survived all the travails the people went through became a sign of God’s power, fidelity and plan to save the people. They are like a sacramental presence, a concrete sign of God’s power working among believers who, in the world’s eyes, are the weakest and least. There is also reference to the remnant in the New Testament where they have become those who believed in Christ. The remnant are the subtext to many passages in the New Testament (e.g., Jn 1:11f, Rom 2: 28, Mt 3:9f.). Ultimately, the most faithful “remnant” is Jesus himself, the anawim of God.

The remnant become the model believers, they are members of the new covenant with God---the church. When we hear the beatitudes today, the biblical motif of

the remnant, the “little ones,” sounds loudly. Jesus praises those who have responded to him and are living his life in the world. These are the ones who look to him and who rely on the blessings and assurance he gives them to live as his disciples.

The Sermon on the Mount (ch. 5-7) begins today with the beatitudes. In the Sermon Jesus may be addressing the crowds or just his disciples. Some commentators think the Sermon was originally meant for his disciples, but with an openness to whomever heard and accepted it. The beatitudes are not a New Testament set of commandments, a kind of parallel to the former ten commandments. Nor is Jesus saying “this is how you are to live to please God and earn your reward.” Notice he begins with a word of grace, a freely given “blessed.” People who live the beatitudes are responding to God’s gracious gift; they are the “anawim,” who can live beatitude lives because they are responding to what they have come to believe: God stands with them and blesses those desirous of living righteous, good and faithful lives.

I was flipping through the tv channels the other night and there was Donald Trump and his show, “The Apprentice.” It’s very popular, in the top ten of the Nielsen ratings. People seem to be watching it around the country, not just in New York, where it is located. It is supposed to be a “reality show,” showing us how things are in the business world. I asked a young 30-something woman, “Why is the show so popular?” She said, “Well, it has Donald Trump, and people are curious about the rich and famous. There are also the crazy challenging tasks the contestants are supposed to do, like sell lemonade on the streets of Manhattan. But a lot of us in the business world don’t see anything very different on the show from what we have to deal with every day. We work where, like the show, there is a lot of in-fighting among ambitious rivals. When you see men bullying women on the show, that’s how it is where a lot of us work. And, again, like the show, some women use sex appeal to get ahead. They say, in effect, ‘Hey, whatever works.’”

The beatitudes Jesus speaks wouldn’t make much sense in the world in which this woman works and struggles. I could imagine Trump assigning the young entrepreneurs the task of coming up with a list of beatitudes for the “real world.” What would they be like, do you think? Blessed are the rich and famous, for they shall have what they want. Blessed are the powerful, for their wills will be done.

Blessed are the strong and young for they shall draw a lot of attention to themselves. Blessed are the white and well educated for they shall own the earth. Blessed are Americans for they shall have the earth's riches at their beck and call.

These beatitudes, or something like them, seem to reflect the way our world is run. They are what a lot of people in world value and would call "blessings." They may make us wince, but haven't we been encouraged to live by them, in one way or another, since we were young? Their values were passed on to us by our parents, in school, through advertizing—all the sights and sounds we see on tv ads present these worldly beatitudes by showing us the successful, young and powerful who seem to lack for nothing. But these beatitudes don't speak our faith vision, they aren't the ones Jesus spoke to those gathered around him.

We do try to live by the vision Jesus gives us. Our church communities are at their best when they reflect the beatitudes in how we live our faith, share with one another and turn to God in prayer. We gather at worship hoping for help to live out the blessings of the beatitudes: to be poor in spirit, not putting ourselves first but trying to serve God's plan for the well being of the world; to be consolation for the sorrowing; to yearn for the holiness of God; to be the face of mercy to those who seek pardon; to be single-hearted, not wavering in our service for others, not giving up despite the huge problems we address---like hunger, poverty and war; to be less instigators and more peacemakers; to bear criticism, even ridicule from those who see our way of living as naive or unrealistic; to be people quite happy to be among God's children and followers of Jesus Christ, united in a church that struggles to live and teach his ways.

The beatitudes celebrate the power of community, the kind whose members "show up" each day and put their lives on the line in many small and sometimes in very big ways, for their faith. Jesus isn't calling us to be wimps, to lie down and let the world run over us in its pursuit to pleasure and ease. He wants us to be an assertive, believing community, ever challenging by our values and ways of living what the world takes for granted and calls "blessings." We are, according to the beatitudes, people who practice unlimited forgiveness, peacemaking and patient loving, in the ways Jesus taught us by his living and dying.

We celebrate that life and death here at liturgy and we proclaim his resurrection, the source of both our blessing and the power to live out his life. We are a

remnant people, who celebrate together at Eucharist the God who has always been faithful to the little ones.

## FOR THE PREACHER

Lent will soon be here. Take a few moments to reserve your copy of the Dominican Alliance's 2005 Lenten Reflection Book. The reflections were written by sisters and associates selected from each of the Dominican Alliance congregations. Books are \$3.50 per copy for three or more copies and \$3.75 for one or two copies. The cost of the books includes postage and handling. Make checks payable to the Dominican Sisters of Great Bend. Orders must be in by Jan. 14, 2005. E-mail orders to

1. [rebecca@ksdom.org](mailto:rebecca@ksdom.org) and/or send any snail-mail correspondence on the Lenten books to Rebecca Peak, communications director, Dominican Sisters, 3600 Broadway, Great Bend KS 67530.

## QUOTABLE

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.... Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate....

Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

----Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

## JUSTICE NOTES

### **HELP END WORLD HUNGER**

Emergencies in the Darfur region of Sudan, flooding in Bangladesh, and the locust plague in West Africa have dramatically increased the need for food aid funding. Every year, the U.S. buys food to send overseas to alleviate hunger and poverty. One such program is the Title II Food for Peace Program. Another is the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust (BEHT), which is a food reserve administered by the Secretary of Agriculture and intended for use during unexpected food crises in poor countries.

As part of the recently passed omnibus appropriations bill, Congress provided \$1.183 billion to fund Title II food aid in FY (fiscal year) 2005. The U.S. also

recently released 20% of food resources stockpiled in the BEHT for Sudan. These actions have unfortunately fallen short of worldwide hunger needs in the face of the current emergencies. The \$1.183 billion is less than last year and will not be sufficient to meet the emergency needs in the world.

As faithful citizens, we are called to do everything we can to improve the lives of the poor worldwide, especially to meet basic needs such as food. As the U.S. Catholic Bishops recently stated in "For I Was Hungry And You Gave Me Food," the right to food is a basic right because it is required to sustain life and to live a truly human existence.

**ACTION:** Please contact President Bush, phone: (202) 456-1111, e-mail: [president@whitehouse.gov](mailto:president@whitehouse.gov), the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman, phone (202) 720-3631, e-mail: [Ann.Veneman@usda.gov](mailto:Ann.Veneman@usda.gov) ), Sen. Maria Cantwell, <http://cantwell.senate.gov/contact/index.html>, Sen. Patty Murray, <http://murray.senate.gov/email/index.cfm>, and your Representative, <http://www.house.gov/writerep>

-----The Catholic Advocate: A bulletin of the Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC)

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### POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

Patrick Steen #0388640 (On death row since 8/28/98)

Robert Brewington #0584095 (9/3/98)

Rodney Taylor #0472274 (10/23/98)

-----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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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,

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