

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 1st SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B)

Isaiah 63: 16b-17, 19b; 4: 2b-7; Psalm 80; 1Corinthians 1: 3-9; Mark 13: 33-37

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I stayed up late last night. I write this the day after the national elections. Whichever presidential candidate we backed, we heard some common messages during their campaigns. Their suggested goals and the ways to achieve them may have differed, but both candidates and their parties called for: help for those suffering from the economic downturn and the home mortgage crisis; an end to the war; healthcare for the uninsured; uniting our splintered nation; less rancor in the halls of government and between the political parties; educational opportunities for the poor; better relations with other nations; a commitment to fairness and equality for all citizens; religious and racial accord, etc.

These may have been the topics of political debates, television commercials, internet blogs and newspaper editorials, but for Christians beginning Advent, they aren't merely political topics for debates. We hear in them the sounds of Advent and we have been praying about them for a long time, not only in Advent, but throughout the liturgical year.

In Advent we raise our minds and hearts in hope to our God who alone can bring to fulfillment our deepest and best longings. In Advent we place our trust in our God who over and over has proved faithful to the promises God made us and our ancestors promises summed up in one translation of the name God revealed to Moses, "Yahweh" – "I am the one who will always be there for you." Longing for God and for a world where people live in harmony and community isn't just a prayer we Christians turn to during Advent. It is a year-round prayer we share with our brothers and sisters of all faiths.

Enter Isaiah. He is the prophet who will speak to us for the first three Sundays of Advent. He is our Advent prophet who implores God on our behalf – and who also speaks to us on behalf of God. Today Isaiah speaks to God for us. The prophet opens his discourse reiterating the basic tenet of Jewish faith, "You Lord, are our father, our redeemer you are named forever."

God took the first steps in the relationship with the Jewish people. God chose them; delivered them from slavery; nurtured and fed them during their desert wanderings and established a home for them in the Promise Land. God has been a

very good parent to the people – what more could God have done for them than God did? But the people didn't respond in fidelity to the God Isaiah names as "father" and "redeemer." Instead, they wandered and hardened their hearts to God. Isaiah's voice is plaintiff, "Why did you let us wander?" – as if to say, "How could you let this happen to us?"

Today's reading is from the third part of Isaiah ("Trito-Isaiah") and, unlike previous sections, which were addressed to the people in exile, Trito-Isaiah spoke to the survivors who had returned to their devastated land and ruined Temple. What an impossible task lay before them, everything had to be rebuilt from scratch: the economy, government, temple worship, etc. They were, the prophet laments, "...like polluted rags, we have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind."

We pray with Isaiah on behalf of our world, country and church. It is not that God owes us any favors, or that our prayers this Advent will force God's hand to come to our aid. Quite the contrary. Isaiah reminds us, from today's opening verse, that God is already disposed towards us, for God is both a loving parent and our redeemer who took the initiative towards humanity. From the beginning God has been and still is, inclined towards us with a listening ear, a caring parent ready to hear our plea for forgiveness and our prayers of hope for renewal of mind and spirit this Advent.

Lest we miss his reassuring reminder about who our God is, Isaiah repeats himself at the close of the passage, "Yet O Lord, you are our father," and adds another image, "we are the clay and you the potter; we are all the work of your hands." God created us out of the clay of the earth. Now, as we begin this Advent season, we need our Creator God to lay hands on us again and remold us into a faithful people who will be able to keep our eyes and attention fixed on the Lord's return – and, at the same time, apply ourselves to doing the good things we were created to do.

I am feeling impatient these days; anxious to see things in the world and our church set right. I know that is the task assigned to us believers – to be agents of God's reign in the world. But we are far from seeing our work completed. In fact, it is often hard to measure our success; things seem to go from bad to worse for so many victims of war, greed and exploitation in our world. So, as my mantra this Advent, I will pray Isaiah's lament, his prayer of pleading and impatience: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!" Let's go God, we could use a little extra help here!

How do we keep from becoming discouraged by the seeming lack of improvement in the world despite our best efforts? Perhaps that is what Paul was addressing in his first letter to the Corinthian community. He seems to be speaking of a continual Advent, as he offers hope to Christians in the midst of the fray.

We are at the beginning of Paul's letter and, as was his custom, in the earliest sections of the letters, after the greeting, he offers a prayer of thanks to God for the community. He speaks to them and also to us, for like the Corinthians, we too are waiting for "the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ." It is one of our job descriptions as Christians; we are those waiting the Lord's return. However, we are not on our own during this waiting time, left to resist the world's allure and powers. Rather, as we wait for Jesus we are strengthened by him.

We also have one another, the Christian community, for mutual support and encouragement. Where would we be this Advent without the signs of hope we see in this community celebrating Eucharist together? We look around the table and are spirited by seeing the long-lived faith of our elderly members who are witnesses to us that God does not abandon us in times of need. Indeed, they remind us that God can fill us with joy and a spirit of prayer all our days, right up to the end of our lives. Also at this Eucharist is the witness of so many ministers, ordained and lay, who gather strength at this table to go forth as children of light against the darkness.

We look again around the table and see our young preparing for First Communion and Confirmation – they are our future. Here too are couples preparing for marriage and young adults who continue to practice their faith and volunteer for church ministry; teaching the young, singing in the choir, helping with the sandwich program, etc.

We are not a perfect community – not poster children for the model Catholic parish. Often we seem so ordinary, every-day people, busy trying to hold our families together, making a living, getting an education, starting a career...and still lending a hand when there is a need. In reality, we are no better or worse than that first generation of Christians in Corinth for whom Paul offers thanks to God, "I give thanks to my God on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you." Paul reminds the Corinthians and us Advent people that God has been and will continue to be faithful. There may have been problems in the Corinthian church, as there are in our parish, diocese and world church. Nevertheless, Paul opens his letter with a prayer of thanks for them.

How could Paul explain the fact that his community, as fractious as it was, was still worshiping and holding together – except for the power of God? He will spill plenty of ink as he goes on in the letter to criticize the Corinthians for their false Christian teaching, factionalism (manifested even at their Eucharists), legal conflicts among members; participation in animal sacrifices in the pagan temples, etc. The community was a mess! Still, instead of complaining to God, Paul opens his letter with a prayer of Thanksgiving for them, for despite their conflicts and many failures, they still manifested the grace of God, alive and active in their midst.

That's how we can begin this Advent. We look around at those worshiping with us today and give thanks to God for the many gifts God has given individual members and the entire community so that we can reflect the Lord who is both present with us and still to come. It is Advent and, with Paul, we give thanks!

Additional Advent Homily Helps

We have posted suggestions by fr. Chuck Dahm, OP for preaching on immigration during the four Sundays of Advent. Go to our webpage (<https://www.PreacherExchange.com>) and click on the “Justice Preaching” tab on the left of the home page.

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 Isaiah reading:

You, Lord, are our father,
our redeemer you are named forever....
Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, ...

Would that you might meet us doing right,
that we were mindful of you in our ways!

Reflection:

As we begin Advent, Isaiah reminds us that God is already disposed towards us for, he tells us, God is both a loving parent and our redeemer. God has been and still is, inclined towards us with a listening ear. God is a caring parent ready to hear

our plea for forgiveness and our prayers of hope for renewal of mind and spirit this Advent.

Advent is a time for dreaming big dreams, and so we ask ourselves:

- This Advent, what do we hope for ourselves?
- What hopes do we hold for our family?
- What would we like to see happen in our world?

JUST HOLIDAY SHOPPING

"Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways!"

Isaiah 64:5 (Today's First Reading)

Consumer choices are moral and cultural expressions of what is important to us. Where we shop and what we buy are decisions which can express our awareness that even in these simple ways we must do what is *right and be mindful of God and all God's children*. We must take the time to learn under what conditions our purchases are produced. We can then choose to buy only products which are produced in ways which are just to our brothers and sisters who are making them, and which cause no harm to our world's environment.

We are never more challenged as "Christian Consumers" than during the Christmas season. We are motivated by love, generosity and billions of advertising dollars to celebrate the birth of the poor Christ by purchasing an endless array of glittering and enticing material objects at any one of our many glittering and enticing malls. But there is another way. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development promotes justice, human dignity and self-respect by supporting job creation and the establishment of businesses that provide decent wages and distribute profits more equitably.

If you want to support socially just causes while shopping for friends and loved ones, go to the Catholic Bishops' website

<http://www.nccbuscc.org/cchd/edshopping.shtml>. Here you will find various groups from whom you can purchase wonderful gifts with the knowledge that your purchase will be "doing right" and will bring greater justice to those most in need. And you don't have to leave home. Here are some examples from the website.

Each is describe there in full.

The Enterprising Kitchen

Family Farmer Cheese

Made on the Rez

Native Harvest

Pastureland

Rural Coalition SuperMarket Project

Southwest Creations

Catholic Relief Services also has a website called <http://www.crsfairtrade.org/> which provides a catalogue of fairly traded handcrafts and gourmet foods including wonderful chocolate produced by low-income workers in the Third World. There are gifts to please everyone on your list.

What can I do?

Buy at least one gift from one of the above organizations this Christmas. And next year, buy at least two!

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

READER'S RESPONSE

I would like to offer an alternative take on the Talents, since parables can be multivalent, and subversive of customary paradigms! (33rd SUNDAY (A) NOVEMBER 16, 2008

Matthew 25: 14-30)

Can the poor see more clearly than the rich and powerful? What if the least gifted servant is the one who read the situation correctly? What if he saw that the master is truly a hard man, whose priority is in maximizing profits, and who rewards those who faithfully play his game? (Echoes of civil and ecclesiastical politics in every generation?)

Then the third servant, who rejects cooperation with the dominant paradigm, is the one who has the courage, despite his fear, to take an independent stand.

Of course, as a good-for-nothing servant, he is thrown out into the dark where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is the experience of the storyteller, Jesus himself. The story of his casting out begins in the following chapter of Matthew, and his life story is context for the parable. The world-view described in our parable is worlds apart from that of Matthew 18.

The moral of the story of the Talents may indeed be taken as underlining the importance of using our God-given gifts, as may be inferred from the fact that the parable is paired in the Liturgy with Proverbs 31. But a more unsettling insight into the Kingdom may also be rumbling beneath. Jesus did not shrink from pointing out the hardness of some of the leaders of his people. Would I have the courage, despite my fears, to refuse to cooperate with the masters of the world, and accept that I may, like the storyteller himself, be in danger of being cast out? I may not

hear the masters of the world saying to me, “Well done, good and faithful servant ...”, but I am a child of the light and of the day, and I do not choose to go on sleeping.

The blessings of St Albert be upon you and on all preachers!

Pádraig McCarthy

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates’ names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten 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:

- Quintel Augustine #0612123 (On death row since 10/23/02)
- John Henry Thompson #0406487 (11/14/02)
- Terry Moore #0290634 (6/14/03)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available:

“**First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year B.**” Begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of 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, with **Year B** updated.

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” CD link on the left.

2. “**Homilias Dominicales**” —These Spanish reflections on the Sunday and daily

scriptures are written by Dominican sisters and friars. If you or a friend would like to receive these reflections drop a note to fr. John Boll, O.P. at Jboll@opsouth.org Or jboll@preacherexchange.org

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, daily homilies and other material pertinent to preaching.

4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to fr. John Boll, OP at the above email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thanks, to you and “Blessings on your preaching”
Jude Siciliano, O.P – FrJude@JudeOP.org.