

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B)

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11 I Thessalonians 5: 16-24 John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Dear Preachers:

Today's first reading is from the third part of Isaiah. The exiles have just returned to the Promised Land, and they are decimated. How unreal the promise of restoration made by the prophet must have seemed. We need to hear this passage from their perspective, from their weakness and vulnerability, so that the Word of God can enter our own lives. So, how are we the "lowly," the "poor," being addressed in the passage? We have lives that are very incomplete, some of us feel broken, beyond our own power to heal. As a community we too are vulnerable and unable to pull our lives together on our own. We share the human experience of need, no matter how well put together we seem to the casual observer. If we are not in touch with our personal and communal need for renewal and wholeness, for a new birth, this Advent reading will not speak to us.

Like the people Isaiah addressed: we may be blind. We don't see and so we miss God in our lives. We don't see the goodness or the struggles of others; we miss their gifts or are blind to their brokenness. We too are captives: locked up because of damage done us when we were in the vulnerable period of childhood, or captive by our fears and withdrawn from the difficult and ambiguous world around us.

Notice that the promise of restoration is in quite bodily terms, it is a total salvation of body and spirit. Hence, there is a strong message of biblical justice in this reading. (Jesus takes this passage to describe his ministry when he announces his identity and vocation in the synagogue in Luke's Gospel.) The choice of this reading for Advent puts a strong justice focus on our Advent reflections. This is a time when we long and act for justice in the world. We grieve over what is not yet, what is incomplete. We must be active to bring about the reality of justice in our community. Thus, the preacher might point to the inequalities that exist in our church, in our community and world. Yet, this reading says that we cannot accomplish justice on our own, that it is a gift from God, and so we will need God's help to overcome the powerful forces of evil in the world. And we will need God to sustain us, for we will not see the completion of this task in our lifetimes. We look for the day when "justice and praise [will] spring up before all the nations".

A "Pax Christi" booklet I came across says of this reading, that if we persist in trying to help the homeless and speak up for the rights of the poor against the

militarism of our country, we will be ridiculed, called do-gooders or bleeding-heart liberals, or unpatriotic. "We may be denounced, but the Word is stronger than the world and it will, in God's mysterious ways, overcome all adversity. We have confidence in this hope. We do not get discouraged....In the fullness of this Reign people will be liberated from their physical and mental anguish. The Light will overcome the darkness. God's healing and justice will finally and fully come." (Page 20, THE WORD BECOMES HUMAN SO THAT WE MIGHT BECOME FULLY ALIVE, reflections by Janice and Gerry Vanderhaar. Pax Christi 1814-453-4955.)

I was struck by the phrase in today's Gospel that describes John as one sent to "testify to the light." John the Baptist was not the light, but he gave testimony to it. He was a "voice in the desert crying out, "Make straight the way of the Lord." With that in mind, I went to a lecture in a parish where I was preaching, based on John Kavanaugh's book, FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A CONSUMER'S SOCIETY. Kavanaugh said that by the time a person is 18 years old they have already seen 65,000 commercials on tv. Our "needs" and our "want's" are formed by these commercials. "I want therefore I am." Our identity is grounded on what we have and want. Kavanaugh said that he asked a 7th. grade class to name as many jeans as they could, and they named 47 different designer jeans. They were only able to name 7 world leaders. There is the constant impulse to indulge and consume. The WALL STREET JOURNAL called our condition, "time famine", we have so many things, we have no time to enjoy them.

The FCC used to regulate and require some children's educational programing, but that requirement was dropped in '85. Now children's programs are designed to create wants in children, many are nothing more than "infomercials", one long commercial. Products for children are often just one in a line of products, of "must haves", such as the Pokemon craze, that has a movie, video, collector's cards, action toys, t-shirts, sneakers, hats, and many other products associated with it. Once a child gets one they lose interest and want the next in the line. Parents at the lecture I attended asked, "What's going into my kid's minds?" Children are shaped by the media before they have had a chance to form their souls. That's the formation system of our culture, and a child's ethics are already formed by these influences by the time a child is 5 years old. Christian education is really "deprogramming," one parent observed. What would it be like to be a "voice" that "testifies to the light?" One parent turned off the tv in her home, she unplugged it. Now the children have to do other things with their time, and they come home

and play games and draw. Someone observed that it might only be a possible to do for children younger than teens. A mother told me she declared her home “A Pokemon Free Zone.” She won’t let anything related to the current craze in their home. Her reason, “It’s not a game kids can play, it encourages owning the cards. It’s about having.”

You have to be careful when you come to the end of one of Paul's letters, as we do in our second reading. This is the spot where he starts to give a "scatter-gun" approach to morality. He will run down a long list of behavioral injunctions. Keep in mind that the first part of the letter is where he normally announces the Good News and only after he does will he dare suggest rules of behavior. Without the former, i.e. the hearing of the liberating Word, the behavior he lists is impossible and can be moralistic. The preacher might distinguish the difference between happiness ---that is affected by circumstances that may change and rob us of the feeling of happiness---- and joy, which stays despite circumstances. Joy is a gift that comes from hearing the Good News and knowing that God is alive in our lives. Joy is the response to reflecting on our lives and discovering the presence of God who is faithful, despite life's circumstances. Joy comes when we realize that God's promises are being fulfilled, that our waiting is over and that God is coming to free the captives and give sight to the blind (the first reading.). Jesus' coming at this time fills us with joy because we know that God has not forgotten us. Joy is to know that God is on the side of the poor; that God hears our prayers; that life comes from death and that God is present to us through Jesus in the Word and the Sacraments.

Here is a quote I found in a newspaper (sorry I don’t have the source). I thought it would make a good bulletin insert or could be included in the part of the preaching where we try to draw some practical responses to the Gospel:

"Reduce for the Holidays.

It's estimated that last Christmas, gifts worth as much as \$1 billion dollars were unwanted and doomed to the attic, basement, garage or oblivion, according to the ULS (Use Less Stuff) Report, a newsletter dedicated to waste reduction. To reduce waste---and still keep the holiday spirit--the report suggests that people donate unwanted gifts to charity, donate cosmetic "free gifts with purchase" to a woman's shelter, (Plus: You can save energy by shopping at home.)"

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

A GUIDE TO THE EUCHARIST AND HOURS: ADVENT-CHRISTMAS, by

Kevin W. Irwin. New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1986.

This is a detailed commentary on both the Eucharistic celebrations (Scriptures and Sacramentary texts) and the prayer of the Hours through the Advent/Christmas season. It includes the daily liturgical celebrations. It's a solid liturgical commentary from a renowned scholar (he is a Catholic University liturgy professor) who also drew inspiration from a worshipping community in the Maryland parish where he lives and worships.

QUOTABLE:
Advent Prayer

May the waiting God of Advent
touch you in your listening heart.
May the companionship of Christ Jesus
nurture you with gentleness each day
May the tender mercy of God
draw you to receive that special
compassion meant just for you.
May the witness of Mary, the Mother of Jesus
inspire you to magnify, to the world,
your own greatness and beauty of soul
May the spirit of Jesus be born in you,
for others to see, a light shining
with the radiance of a love that is
humble and real, gracious and
overflowing.
Gregory Norbet

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

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)

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

"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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“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, O.P.

Email: FrJude@JudeOP.org.