

“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:

I am on the road preaching these days and like you must put together thoughts for homilies with resources that are available in the rectories where I stay. So, I borrow a commentary, read a magazine article for the season of Advent, and try to touch in with what is happening "on the scene," as I look for a homily focus. Here are some possibilities for this weekend's preaching.

I found a good quote I in a newspaper. 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, reduce the number of cards sent by calling or sending e-mail and save money on postage, paper and envelopes by sending holiday postcards. (Plus: You can save energy by shopping at home.)" The quote seems addressed to a middle-class audience, especially with its reference to email. I am not sure how many of the poor have access to email, even at this late date.

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

I was struck by the phrase that describes John as one sent to "testify to the light." John 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 at the parish where I am currently preaching. It was 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 "wants" 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 programming, but that requirement was dropped in 1985. Now children's programs are designed to create wants in children, many are nothing more than "informercials"--- one long commercial. Products for children are often just one in a line of products of "must haves," such as the Ninja Turtle craze, which had 1,000 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?" They 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 "de-programming," one parent observed. What would it be like to be a "voice" that "testifies to the light?" One parent talked about turning off the tv in her home, actually unplugging 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 thing to do for children younger than teens. Parents might call their local stations demanding violent programs be dropped, or more educational programs included.

Isaiah 61: 1-2,10-11

This is 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 the exiles' 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," who are being addressed in the passage. We have lives that are very incomplete, broken and beyond our own power to heal. We are vulnerable and unable to pull our lives together on our own. We share the human experience of need, no matter how together we seem to the casual observer. If we cannot locate the need for new birth in ourselves, this Advent reading will not speak to us, and we will miss God's offer for our lives. We are the captives Isaiah has come to free: locked up because of damage done us when we were in the vulnerable period of childhood, or we are held captive by our fears, 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.)

The choice of this reading for Advent puts a strong justice focus on our Advent

reflections. This is a time that we long and act for justice in the world. We grieve over what is not yet, what is incomplete. We must become active and intentional in our efforts to bring about the reality of justice in our community. 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 force of evil in the world. We will also need God to sustain us, for we will not see the completion of this task in our lifetimes. We yearn this Advent and look for the day when "justice and praise (will) spring up before all 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 even 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 1-814-453-4955.)

I Thessalonians 5: 16-24

You have to be careful when you come to the end of one of Paul's letters. 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 that does he dare suggest rules of behavior. Without the former, the hearing of the liberating Word, the behavior he lists is impossible and this section is 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 stirred up in us when we reflect on our lives and discover 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's 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.

Blessings on your preaching.

From the road,
Jude Siciliano, O.P.
Promoter of Preaching
Southern Dominican Province, USA