

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”; CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT; DECEMBER 25, 2003

Isaiah 9: 1-6 Psalm 96 Titus 2: 11-14 Luke 2: 1-14

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

It is dark. Last week we had the longest night of the year. We are not getting much light these days. But no one had to tell us that. Anyhow, we moderns can take care of ourselves after the sun sets—we flip on a light at home, school, office or in our cars. The street lights come on, the parking lot in the mall is as bright as day and we go about our business. No, it's not the shorter daylight that causes us anxiety. It's the other darkness we have to worry about.

There isn't a lot of good news coming from around the world these days. It seems to be getting darker and darker. Just pass a quick glance over the world, name a few places and there's the dark. The African nations appear to be slipping into a bottomless pit of AIDS, starvation, murderous civil wars, oppressive regimes, growing poverty and disease. Daily news from Afghanistan and Iraq tells of military and civilian casualties and, at this writing, two bombings that left children dead! Each continent has its list of woes. The slow lines I encounter at airports are one more reminder of recent terrorist attacks on civilians in our own country. Meanwhile, over 30 million Americans live in poverty; our schools are in trouble, and our environment is becoming more polluted. A recent international meeting of scientists concluded that yes indeed, global warming is really happening. But our own government is turning a blind eye the scientists' conclusion. Of course, those who will feel the effects of the globe's rise in temperature the most are going to be the poor nations of the world. No, there isn't a light switch we can flip to address the growing darkness. There is no anti-depressant we can pop to help us “put on a happy face.” If we acknowledge the darkness with honesty we can turn to God for light to show us the right way to go so we don't trip in the darkness. We can also, at this Christmas Midnight celebration, pray that we can be candles in the world we inhabit each day.

With all his talk about: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” and descriptions of people with “abundant joy and great rejoicing,” Isaiah sounds like he is putting on a happy face. He writes about the past and the present. Things used to be bad, but now all that's over and we can celebrate. Sounds good. I wonder when will that happen to us, in our time? When will the boots that

“trampled in battle and every cloak rolled in blood” finally, once and for all, be burned ----as the prophet promises?

The passage from Isaiah today is a poem; more like a hymn of thanksgiving. The reasons for the thanksgiving are listed after each of the three “FOR’s” in the text. He was writing about God’s deliverance of the people from under the Assyrian boot. They are finally out from under “the yoke that burdened them... the rod of their taskmaster....” They have been delivered from their most recent oppressors. Hence, the hymn of thanksgiving and joy. The third “FOR” is the poem’s central image; it is about a birth. This child’s arrival is a reassurance that God is with the people. The closing images (“Wonder-Counselor” etc.) evoke memories of David for the people. This new born will follow in David’s way, will be God’s instrument to bring about justice and peace.

While Isaiah names God’s past deliverance, he is inviting a present response, calling us this evening to give thanks for the specific ways God has helped us through the darkness. How have we have been a “people who walked in darkness” and now see “a great light?” The prophet is encouraging us that God will continue to strike a light for us in our present darkness. If God could do it before, God can do it now. What’s more, we believe and profess this evening that the light God has ignited for us in Jesus Christ will never be extinguished. We have reason to celebrate with the joy and rejoicing Isaiah evokes in this reading.

The gospel writers have their own slant or emphasis as they tell the Jesus story. So, individual episodes will reflect one or more of the major themes of an evangelist. This is true in today’s story. Luke’s gospel has special emphasis on Jesus’ reaching out to the poor and outcasts. In the infancy narratives therefore, the angelic messengers announce the good news to shepherds. At that time, shepherds were poor and on the fringe of society, for they lived outside the towns. In addition, their demanding jobs made it hard for them to keep the requirements of religious law and customs. As a result, they were considered irreligious and unfaithful people. Their quick response to the announcement of Jesus’ birth however, is anything but irreligious and unfaithful. Would that we were so quick to respond to God’s Word! In the darkness of night, the shepherds receive the good news of the Savior’s birth. Just as Isaiah promised, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

We can hear echoes of Isaiah’s promise in tonight’s gospel. A time of fulfillment

has come. God has not forgotten us in our darkness but instead has lighted a bright flame for us to see by so that we can make our way home—together. Luke tells the account quite simply. But it is clear he sees the importance of Jesus' birth for the chosen people. The story has references to many Hebrew scriptures. In particular, we can hear references to the Isaiah reading in the description of Jesus as, "a descendent of David," and like David, Jesus is born in Bethlehem. But Luke also situates Jesus and the importance of his birth in the whole world. He tells us that Caesar Augustus is emperor and the emperor's word affects all the known world. He decreed, "that the whole world would be enrolled" ---and people obeyed. But another word is spoken this evening, it takes flesh in a seeming inconspicuous infant among an oppressed people, but his word will affect the whole world in a greater and longer-lasting way than Caesar's.

This Christmas story is touching, and the kids just love it—the nativity scene, angels, magi, shepherds, candle light, "Silent Night," and the decorated tree. Tomorrow, however, we adults clean up the wrapping paper, heat up leftovers and think about what's waiting for us at the office, school and in certain family situations. Christmas is, after all, an adult feast, tomorrow and the days after that will test us. Do we believe what we have celebrated here—God's taking flesh among us; becoming part of who we are; joining us in our hopes, fears and our efforts to be good parents, spouses, teachers and role models? Tomorrow will be the proof of the Christmas pudding.

“When the song of the angels is stilled.
When the star in the sky is gone.
When the shepherds are back with their flocks.
The work of Christmas begins.

To find the lost.
To heal the broken.
To feed the hungry.
To release the prisoner.
To rebuild the nations.
To bring peace among peoples.
To make music in the heart.”
----poet unknown

QUOTABLE

Exile and homecoming. Our lives are marked by exile, another central image of Advent and another primary biblical image for our condition. Exile expresses that sense of being separated from that to which we belong and that yearning for “home” which runs so deeply within us. Like Israel, we mourn “in lonely exile here,” yearning for the coming of Immanuel, who is God with us. Christmas is about the end of exile and coming home—not to the home of our childhood, which is forever gone, but coming to be at home with God. At home with God, we can also be at home in the world. “There’s no place like home for the holidays” is true in more ways than one.”

----Marcus J. Borg, “Christmas Then and Now,” in *Celebration*, October-December 1995, page 6.

JUSTICE NOTES

US Catholic Conference of Bishops ' President Asks Reflection on Key Questions
In a statement marking the anniversaries of the atomic bombings on Japan and of September 11 and commemorating the 40th. Anniversary of John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* and the 20th. anniversary of USCCB's own *The Challenge of Peace*, Bishop Wilton Gregory, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, invited Catholics to reflect on a number of key questions, such as:

- How can we reject the profane use of religion to justify violence and terrorism and instead, working with other churches and religious, reinforce the role of faith as a force for liberation and peace around the world?
- Will not new doctrines of preventive use of military force undermine serious efforts to limit the occasion when force will be necessary and justified
- How can we pursue genuine nuclear disarmament, not merely as an ideal but as a moral imperative and a policy goal?

The full text of the statement can be found at:

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/cpanniv.htm>.

-----from "Voz en el Desierto: Peace and Justice Ministry Newsletter," for the diocese of El Paso, Texas. Submitted by Carmen Mele, OP,

NEW YEAR’S POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Imagine celebrating new year’s eve on death row? Imagine what new year’s day will feel like for inmates with little hope for a “happy new year.” I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of the inmates listed below to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families as the new year begins; 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:.....

- Terry A. Hyatt #0199877 (On death row since 2/07/00)
- Cerron T. Hooks #0561692 (2/22/00)
- Jonathan E. Leeper#0493734 (2/22/00)

Terry Robinson #0349019 (4/10/00)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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