

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 14th ORDINARY TIME (B)
Ezekiel 2: 2-5 Psalm 123 2 Corinthians 12: 7-10 Mark 6: 1-6
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Jesus and Ezekiel didn't come from the outside, as strangers, to preach to the people. Today's readings remind us that they were "local boys." It is good to remember that, since we women and men are often called to speak a word or set an example for those immediately around us; in our family, social circle or our local community.

Ezekiel, along with the leading citizens and artisans of Jerusalem were deported to Babylon. There, an exile among exiles, he received his call to be a prophet to his displaced country people. Why would exiles need a prophet? Well, besides being downcast and losing hope in God, many had gotten used to life in exile. They had adapted and settled in – made themselves at home there. When a chance to return to their native land was finally given them, these people chose not to go back. They had fitted in and even adopted the gods of the Babylonians – who looked stronger and more successful than Israel's God. Why not go with the winners; the more powerful and successful Babylonians and their victory-producing gods?

The exiles weren't so different from us, were they? After all, don't we live in a foreign land? Do we profess one set of values in church and live out of another in our daily lives? We get along; don't cause ripples and practice being good workers and upright citizens. And if offered a chance to change, make some sacrifices, uproot and turn to a more faith-filled way of living, praying and serving – would we? Or, like the exiles, have we settled in and accepted foreign gods and values?

The exiles in Babylon needed to reconnect with the God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt and who was once again offering them freedom. But they weren't disposed to such a rebirth in their relationship with God. God complains to Ezekiel that the people are just as rebellious as their ancestors. Still, God takes the initiative and calls Ezekiel to be the prophet to them. God doesn't give up on us and sends one prophet after another to rouse us.

The prophet's call wasn't a whisper, a little interior voice or feeling. It seems to have been a very personal and power experience for Ezekiel. He says, God "...spoke to me, the spirit entered into me and set me on my feet...." God is acting

with determination and power to get a message to the drifting and rebellious people.

I wonder what Ezekiel was doing that God had to “set” him on his feet? Some think he was prostrate in mourning for the nation. Perhaps he was weak-kneed and a hesitant prophet. He might have felt what we feel when we must face a hostile environment or speak a truth that others don’t want to hear. If that is the situation in which we find ourselves – needing to be upright and firm on our feet in the presence of negative or resistant forces – then why not pray for what Ezekiel received, “God, speak your empowering Word, send your Spirit to me and set me on my feet. Come O God of the prophets, of Ezekiel and Jesus, help me to be a prophetic voice amid the din and clamor of this world.” The Ezekiel reading stirs up another prayer in me, as I notice God’s warning that the people may not heed Elijah’s words, despite the authority God is giving him. If I were sent to such a people and, in one way or another many of us are, my prayer would go something like this, “Help!”

Like Ezekiel we are called to serve and speak for our God in this land of exile. And it is a land of exile isn’t it? What believing person could possibly feel “at home” in his or her land? Which people on the face of the earth fully reflects the God of Israel who: has come to the aid of the displaced; rescued the enslaved; liberated the imprisoned; fed the hungry on their rushed journey to freedom and made a home for the Israelites, a band of people who cast their lot with God?

As we celebrate our nation’s Day of Independence, we pray that God will not give up on us as a nation, for we have a history of obstinacy and have not always provided space and a hearing for the prophets in our midst. Of course, their voices have not always been pleasing to listen to; but politeness and proper etiquette have not always been the prophets’ style. Like Jesus’ home town folk, we too have shouted down, or worse, ignored the prophetic irritants in our communities. (Cf. below, “Justice Bulletin Board.”)

I wonder who, in our parish, are those prophets trying to get a word from God to us? Are they the ones who: challenge our poorly prepared liturgies; complain about the preaching; insist on reaching out to the newcomers who make the regulars uncomfortable; ask why we aren’t making better use of the internet to reach people; visit the sick and speak words of comfort to them; diligently prepare and proclaim the scripture readings at our services, etc.?

A woman described her teenage daughter to me and said, “She loves to cook, just like me!” I said, “Well, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” That’s a way we have to describe children who take after their parents – for better or worse! We take pride when our children follow our good example, and we even hope they achieve more than we did. We applaud their successes (“My child is an honor student at....” reads the bumper sticker) and even push them a bit.

Not so in Jesus’ Mediterranean world. Quite the opposite was true. A son was expected to follow in his father’s footsteps – but not go beyond them. If a boy’s father was a carpenter, then the son was to be one as well – but nothing more. When the people in the synagogue heard Jesus’ teaching that sabbath they recognized his wisdom and were on the verge of applauding him, but they didn’t. After all, he was the carpenter, how could he be anything more? Did you notice the off-handed insult? They call Jesus, Mary’s son, not Joseph’s. The son would be identified by his father, so they are suggesting some doubts about the identity of Jesus’ father.

The crowd is not very receptive to a local boy who seems to have gone beyond the expected limits. Jesus brings them up short by telling them that it takes outsiders to see what the locals refuse to see. It is hard to be rejected by the people who know us the best. The people’s rejection of Jesus limited his ability to perform powerful deeds among them. Their lack of faith means Jesus will leave that place.

Some people say it is harder to be a practicing Christian in their own homes among family members, than in their workplace or among their friends. “My kids won’t listen to me.” “My brothers and sisters think I am a religious nut.” “My wife refuses to come to church with me.” – and so it goes. “A prophet is not without honor except in his/her native place.”

We are reminded of Ezekiel. If prophets, whether in the civic or domestic arena, can expect hard times and even rejection, then we need to implore God for the gift of the Spirit, to “set” us on our feet, so we can live faithful lives in our land of exile – and more – so we can sustain other exiles in their search for God and their desire to do God’s will.

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

“With liberty and justice for all”

Praying Like a Faithful Citizen

On this Independence Day weekend, as we think with gratitude of all God’s blessings, ***prayer*** seems the only adequate response. Learning to pray is part of being good citizens of our country and of the larger world community.

“Our action as Faithful Citizens should flow from prayer. When we pray, we experience God and we remember that he is in us and in all people, who are created in his image and have inherent dignity. If we want to truly be faithful citizens, we must know how to come to God in prayer, experience God in ourselves and others, and listen to the ways God is calling us to respond.”

The US Catholic Bishops offer “Nine New Ways to Pray”. “*The Newspaper Prayer*” is described below. Check out the other “ways to pray” at www.faithfulcitizenship.org/youth/deeper

The Newspaper Prayer

“Look through a print or online newspaper to find a news article about an important issue. Cut out (or print out) the article and bring it with you to a quiet place where you can pray. Think about how human dignity is affected by the issue or situation. Pray for God’s healing and transformation for all people impacted, lawmakers, and citizens like yourself. Ask God how he is asking you to respond to this issue.”

We invite you to cut out the following prayer and make praying for our country a part of being a “faithful citizen”.

For Conversion of the Nations

O God, you are the foundation of every righteous nation. From the unity of your love, our world has seen the progress of many peoples and the birth of many nations. But too often the human spirit has been lured by selfish greed, the arrogance of warlike pride, and the lust of pride and power.

Into a nation shackled by oppressors, Jesus was born and lived in gentleness of spirit. In his life and death, he called forth a new nation, a people of justice and peace. In the upper room, a new law of love was spoken to a hungry world whose nations are starving still from oppression and violence.

Send forth the power of your Holy Spirit. Convert the nations to your love. Rid every government of the will to wage war and the desire to oppress. Raise up leaders for your people whose words will inspire us to new deeds of compassion. Make your justice the light for our paths. We ask this through Christ and the Holy Spirit, with you, One God, forever and ever. Amen (*Act Justly, Love Tenderly,*

Walk Humbly by Edward Gabriele.

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

QUOTABLE

To My Mother

I was your rebellious son,
do you remember? Sometimes
I wonder if you do remember,
so complete has your forgiveness been.

So complete has your forgiveness been
I wonder sometimes if it did not
precede my wrong, and I erred,
safe found, within your love,

prepared ahead of me, the way home,
or my bed at night, so that almost
I should forgive you, who perhaps
foresaw the worst that I might do,

and forgave before I could act,
causing me to smile now, looking back,
to see how paltry was my worst,
compared to your forgiveness of it

already given. And this, then,
is the vision of that Heaven of which
we have heard, where those who love
each other have forgiven each other,

where, for that, the leaves are green,
the light a music in the air,
and all is unentangled,
and all is undismayed.

by Wendell Berry

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 Gospel reading:

Jesus said to them,

"A prophet is not without honor except in his [her] native place and among his [her] own kin and in his [her] own house."

Reflection:

Faith is a risky business and may require us to take unpopular positions. There are times when we may alienate even family and friends because our faith requires we speak up or take a stand.

So, we ask ourselves:

- Have I ever not said or not done what was right because I was afraid how others would react?
- When have I had to do what I thought was right and found even those closest to me did not support me?

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:

- William Gregory #0156529 (On death row since 8/15/94)
- Gary A. Trull #0412440 (11/19/96)
- Lawrence E. Peterson #0320825 (12/12/96)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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, [Click Here](#).

If you would like to support this ministry, [Click Here](#) to make a secure tax-deductible online donation.

Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org