

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 15<sup>TH</sup>. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME  
Amos 7: 12-15 Psalm 85: 9-14 Ephesians 1: 3-14 Mark 6: 7-13  
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I am focusing on the first and third readings this week. Upon first encounter, the Amos reading attracts my attention. Fred Craddock, the great homiletician, suggests in his book *PREACHING*, that preachers begin interpreting the text with a first, or “naive” reading (cf. Quotable below). He encourages that at first, we stay away from commentaries and hear the text the way the congregation will. We listen to the questions, ambiguities, confusions and other reactions stirred by the first listening to the text. We deal with the feelings the text arouses. Doing an initial hearing in this way will allow a fresh approach to the text and also help the preacher hear the text as the hearers will—raw and unfiltered. And so, the text strikes me in my first hearing as odd: what on earth is the fuss about in this reading? Why is Amaziah so upset with Amos? Whether we preach on this reading or not, I am sure people in the pews will hear it and not have a clue about its message. Am I being too pessimistic? Well, I admit, I didn't know much about it myself on my first reading.

We are in the 8th century before the Christian era and Amaziah is the priest in the courts of the king. It is a time of peace and prosperity for Israel and the rich feel quite secure. It is also a time of decadence; the people are ignoring the covenant. Amaziah is telling the court just what it wants to hear and, with so many others, has given up on God, relying on the powers of the government for security. Amos is a shepherd and dresser of sycamores. Apparently sycamores in the middle East bear a simple fruit that, in order to be edible, requires a dressing of the tree. Someone who knows how to nip buds was needed to get better fruit. (How's that for an image of a prophet!) The fruit was also the food of the poor. So, Amos does not come out of the court, nor is he a prophet from the organized religion. He is roughhewn and says he is the champion of the Lion of Judah (1:2). Amos has been having his prophetic visions and the text today, the encounter between him and Amaziah, is a break in these visions. Amaziah wants Amos out of town. Amos protests that he did not choose to be a prophet, but that God chose him. Nor does he have anything to do with other prophets. His message will be received for its own worth and not that of any official or public office. One can see why this reading was chosen to go with the gospel of the day---the message is what counts,

and God chooses the messengers God wants to convey this message.

I write these reflections on a day I am packing to go out on the road to preach a parish retreat. The gospel reading makes me squirm as I look at what I am packing! Am I being excessive as I hear in the text that I shouldn't worry about money and food? How will I get to the airport and who will pay for my ticket? I know the times have changed; I sit staring at this computer screen as a reminder of how fast things are changing! But I don't want to dismiss this reading too easily as belonging to another time, nor do I want to say it applies only to those few who still go out preaching. We all go out preaching in many ways and to each is given "authority over unclean spirits" of our day.

Jesus tells us to simplify our lives, focus on the importance of his message and go out and do something that speaks of his message. How many times do we put off serious prayer because we think we need to read one more book on prayer or go to one more workshop on meditation to learn how to do it? We certainly don't feel expertise enough to talk to anyone else about prayer. How about the conversations we avoid in areas of welfare, religion, military armaments, etc., because we claim that we don't know all the facts? We could all use less t.v. and more study time. But we need to realize right now that we have been sent out to preach, have power over evil and the power to heal.

Maybe we all should make attempts to simplify our lives, show that our real desire is for God alone and for God's rule over the earth and less for the rule of other powers over us. Maybe a simpler way of living will be one sign of "authority over unclean spirits," since we are well aware that our ways of living, spending, recreating and consuming are at the price of other nations' cheap, dehumanized labor and their natural resources. (A government report says we Americans waste 25% of the fresh foods we buy--what would a disciple of Jesus do in the face of so much waste and excess as we "strip down" to proclaim his other way of living?) Our preaching through words and living may need to be less ambivalent, more clearly a statement about who we are and who is the focus of our lives. If we are truly committed to Christ and the Good News we are sent to proclaim, perhaps a change in our patterns of living and a cutting out of "excess baggage" will speak more clearly the message we are sent to preach.

We remember the Good Samaritan story in Luke. It suggests something about the world into which Jesus was sending these disciples. It was a dangerous place for

travelers. Why leave the safe environs of family and village to venture out in the "big bad world"? Most people didn't; they had what they wanted at home. Yet Jesus sends his disciples out. Maybe that's why he orders them to travel in pairs, they would need each other for support and protection. (Someone suggested that two should go so that not just one perspective of Jesus, or his message, be preached. Two going together would guarantee a balance in the witnessing.) Jesus expected his disciples to be greeted with the typical hospitality of the Middle-East. Once they were welcomed into a place, he presumed that the message the disciples carried and not the contents of their traveling bags or their coins, would make them welcome.

Why is Jesus asking so much of his disciples? Robert Waznak, S.S. recalls a Jewish custom that, as a person entered the temple courts, they would have to stop first, remove staff, shoes and money belt, and only then enter. They were entering a sacred presence, and things of everyday concern were to be put aside. Now if Jesus' disciples were to remove the same "ordinary things," what could that mean? His message and the healings it would bring would be of prime concern to his disciples; everything else being secondary. Would a disciple, on the way to preach, carrying less, be in the presence of the Holy One, even while still on the road,---as if in the temple? Would the houses they entered and the families who received them be like the temple itself, a special place where God dwelt? Would he be reminding his disciples that when things got difficult ("any place that does not welcome you", suggests difficult moments) they should rely on God and not what they brought along?

The preacher might allude to the recent celebration of Independence Day here in the U.S. I was in New York at the time. Besides the classic three masted sailing ships and the hundreds of smaller sailing ships there was also the presence of huge naval ships. Where has the nation placed its trust? Our money says, "In God we trust." The military presence in the harbor didn't speak of trust in God. Where are our values? Whom do we value? I read something a while back that suggests where our national treasure lies. A newsletter written by Collins Kilburn, of the North Carolina Council of Churches, summed up revealing statistics and showed how the United States ranks among industrial countries on a number of significant social indicators.

"We are number one in the following : military technology, military exports, Gross Domestic Product, the number of millionaires and billionaires, and in health technology. In the gap between rich and poor children, however, we rank 18th; in

living standards among the poorest one-fifth of our children, 16th; in efforts to lift children out of poverty, 17th.; in infant mortality, and in low-birth weight rates, 17th. And we are last in protecting our children against gun violence. In other words, we are richer than anyone else and stronger in terms of military power and technological knowledge. But we are at or near the bottom when it comes to care and protection for our youngest and most vulnerable citizens.... This kind of snapshot of our society deepens [the] conviction that poverty, especially among children and their parents, must remain a central priority for...all of our churches....In 1969 the child poverty rate was down to 14% compared to over 20% today.” (From a newsletter of the NC Council of Churches)

Since the disciples “anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them ” ---- would this be a Sunday to preach about the Sacrament of the Sick? You would not want to put aside the scriptural context and overload the preaching with doctrinal content, but a move in the second half of the homily towards the sacrament as a sign of Jesus' continued healing presence in the community, might help show the relevance of this reading to our church life (Cf. book suggestion below).

#### JUSTICE PREACHING NOTES:

Thanks to Dr. Bernadette Page, from Durham, N.C., for suggesting these ideas for our justice preaching reflections. She writes to tell us about, “the Campaign of Conscience.”

The World Health Organization, the Red Cross and UNICEF all have verified that the US sanctions are causing the deaths of hundreds of Iraqis every day, over half of whom are children. It is estimated that over a million Iraqi civilians have died since 1990 as a direct result of the sanctions. American Friends Service Committee 1501 Cherry Street Philadelphia Pa 19102 [askaboutiraq@afsc.org](mailto:askaboutiraq@afsc.org) and Fellowship of Reconciliation PO Box 271 Nyack NY 10960 [iraq@forusa.org](mailto:iraq@forusa.org) are sponsoring a campaign of conscience for the Iraqi People. The Campaign has two parts:

1: They are planning to ship humanitarian aid to Iraq. This aid would violate the current US sanctions. The Campaign of Conscience requests people to:

- a) sign a statement that they are joining the C. of C. and,
- b) donate any amount of money. By doing this, C. of C. hopes to force Congress and the President to allow more humanitarian aid. If the sanctions are not changed, the shipment will be made anyway, and all who signed up would theoretically be

interpreted as violators of US law, and eligible to incur civil and criminal penalties. 2: They are having National Days of Conscience Aug 6, Oct 2, 2000, and April 4, 2001. The August days will actually be a three-day event in DC: Aug 5th a teach in and benefit concert, Aug 6 an interfaith rally and march and nonviolence trainings, and Aug 7 nonviolent direct actions. Specific contacts for those days are Kate Reuer [bsp@forusa.org](mailto:bsp@forusa.org) and Stephanie Schaudel [augustaction@hotmail.com](mailto:augustaction@hotmail.com) Anyone who is interested in more information or in participating could contact one of these organizations directly.

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

A wonderful book on the ministry to the sick is Charles W. Gusmer's, *AND YOU VISITED ME: SACRAMENTAL MINISTRY TO THE SICK AND THE DYING*. New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1989.

#### QUOTABLE:

##### First Reading of the Text

This first reading is a spontaneous, even “naive” engagement with the text. All faculties of mind and heart are open, with no concern for what one ought to think, much less what one will say later in the sermon. This is the time to listen, think, feel, imagine and ask. All responses should be jotted down; do not trust the memory or take time to weigh the merits of your thought. This process is most enjoyable, but one should not be deceived by the pleasure; serious preparation has begun. And by all means, no other books or study aids are to be used at this point; they will have their chance later. Second, only to the fault of not doing adequate study is that of introducing into one’s preparation too soon the secondary resources. When used at the proper time they are indispensable, but if too early opened, they take over. They suppress and intimidate the preacher. After all, who is going to venture a thought or an interpretation when at the very same desk are six internationally known Bible scholars? They intrude themselves between the text and the preach and begin explaining everything. Some preachers who spend much time in study have confessed to having preached texts which they had not even read in the process of preparation.

-----Fred Craddock in *PREACHING*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985, pages 105-6.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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