

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 15TH. 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 have stayed away from preaching the psalm response to the first reading. As an itinerant preacher, I can never be sure if the parish or retreat house I am going to preach at is going to use the psalm response or substitute it, perhaps at the “family mass,” with a song by a children’s choir. So, to be on the safe side, I stick with one of the other readings. What a shame, because the psalms can be such rich sources for preaching. They are close to human emotion and our struggle with self, the world and God. If you are sure the psalm is being used this Sunday, why not try preaching from it? Since it is a response to the first reading, one approach I would take is to reflect on the psalm by itself, then spend time with the Amos passage and see if there is a relation between the two. For example, sometimes the first reading will present a dire situation, and the psalm will respond with a prayer of trust. Another time the first will show a wonderful work by God and the psalm will be a hymn of praise. So, besides its own integrity and message, what additional or special meaning does the psalm take on when seen in the light of the first reading? Let’s see then, what the psalm and first reading open up as a preaching possibility.

First, a word about the lectionary and the psalm. When psalms are used as responses to a reading, usually the whole psalm is not cited, just a pertinent section that seems appropriate to what the first reading is saying. Thus, the internal flow of the whole psalm gets lost when just a “useful” section is excerpted for the liturgy. The first half of the 85th psalm is omitted today, the second half is the section chosen, verses 9-14. Although the emphasis is on the second half, I have found that the first part of psalm 85 does help the interpretation for today’s celebration.

In the first part of Psalm 85 petitions have been voiced; a plea placed before God. The petitioner(s) are waiting in hope for a response. (This psalm is also used in Advent; its message fits that season.) The petitioner is listening for a response from God. With usual chutzpah the psalmist says, that if God responds to the request for rescue, God’s name will be enhanced on earth, God’s “glory will fill the land.” There’s a not-too-subtle appeal to God’s reputation here. Since God made a covenant with the people and since they are suffering right now, if God rescues them, God’s glory will be made evident; others will see what God has done

for them. God's good name will be secure; people will know that the God who entered into covenant with these suffering people has not abandoned them after all. God is reliable.

There is a strong sense of anticipation in the psalm. In the first verse it says, "You have favored, O Lord, your land...." What God once did, God will do again. The people cannot handle the situation by themselves, so they will rely on God. This psalm is not a pep talk to the people to work harder and pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They cannot help themselves; God will have to do it. So, they are waiting, keeping their ears and eyes open for where and when help comes. And the help will not just be "spiritual" aid and comfort. It will be tangible, God's attributes will be made visible, "Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss. Truth shall spring up on the earth, justice shall look down from heaven." The people are waiting till peace and justice are finally proclaimed and for a time when they will reap the benefits of this new moment. The land will bear the needed harvest, and God will visit them---with justice leading the royal procession.

The people have suffered serious setback; they don't have a way out themselves. They have turned to God and confidently wait to see God's response. I note that this is not a prayer to God as much as it is a statement about God. It sounds like a preacher's encouragement to a discouraged people; a proclamation of assurance that these events will take place, God will come to the aid of the people, and the divine attributes will walk among them--kindness, truth, justice and peace.

This psalm may have been part of an autumn festival. Autumn is a time that ends one growing season and anticipates the planting, growth and harvest of another. It was a time of atonement as well, a way of putting the past behind and seeking forgiveness and a new start. The first verses of the psalm suggest that the community has made atonement for their past sins and asked God to put away punishment. The old, former season is past; a new one is beginning. Deliver us O God from our sins and failures to live up to your covenant. Or, as the psalm puts it, "Show us, O Lord, your kindness and grant us your salvation" (verse 8).

But remember that the second part of Psalm 85 has a special context, it is placed as a response to the Amos reading. Examining the first reading then, may help the preacher find a way of preaching from the psalm. The folks who designed the lectionary saw a possible application for the psalm and the preacher may be helped

by discerning what connections exist between the two readings. We turn to the Amos reading.

Amos is having a confrontation with Amaziah, the priest for the temple at Bethel. Official prophets and priests were assigned to the courts and shrines and Amaziah worked for the royal house at Bethel, a national shrine. He was part of the establishment. It was expected that prophets and priests in such positions, close to the royal family, would promise prosperity for the rulers and nation. But previously Amos had criticized society and the royal house for their behavior. He preached the coming destruction of both the sanctuary and the king. You can see why Amaziah wants this former shepherd and dresser of sycamores out of Israel and back to Amos' own southern Judah. Amaziah, on the other hand, is telling the court just what it wants to hear, despite the fact, as Amos has said, so many in the court and nation have given up on God, preferring instead to rely on their own powers for security. Amaziah calls Amos a "visionary---he doesn't mean this as a compliment. Amaziah represents religion closely linked to the state, civil religion. It is the religion that supports political leaders' decisions, waves flags and blesses troops on their way to war. Civil religion preaches, "God is on our side."

Amos represents the faith that hears God's word and responds to it. He is the model for the true Israelite and speaks to us Christians as well. Amos has no personal gain from his role as prophet, in fact, it brings him plenty of grief. But God spoke to him, he listened and responded. While Amaziah speaks for those with a vested interest in the status quo, Amos calls for complete change and warns that if Israel does not turn from its self-centered ways, the nation will perish.

In the light of the Amos reading, our psalm now takes on a special meaning. The psalmist spells out a primary trust in God, rather than in any state or nation. What saves, we are told, is "the Lord." Prosperity for both people and the land, the psalm says, will come to the nation that truly listens to God. Amaziah, the royal house and all Israel, did not realize that in the critical voice of Amos, they had a messenger from God bringing a warning ----but also a promise of true health and prosperity--for those who responded to God's word.

We hear the psalmist's vision of what God wills for a nation, and we look for ways to respond. A nation that hoists the motto, "One nation under God," has a lot to live up to; just claiming to be a religious nation is not enough. We want the psalmist's hope for "kindness and truth, justice and peace" to be a reality in our

land--- starting with us. Thus, we ask God to make us more peaceable and just, with kindness and truth towards all--- even our enemies. At this Eucharist, we look to our lives and ask, how can I make God's "glory" more a reality in my life? How can I better reflect the divine attributes in my relationships and even in the casual encounters with others? With the light of God's word and help from this eucharist, how will I reflect God's peace, justice, truth and kindness?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Walter Brueggemann, *The Spirituality of the Psalms*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8006-3450-0. Paper, 76 pages.

This is a short book, but very packed with Brueggemann's rich thoughts. He divides the psalms into categories of "orientation, disorientation and new orientation" and spends a chapter on each. Very helpful for those who pray the psalms and for preachers who need a good and challenging overview of the spirituality of the psalms. Highly recommended.

QUOTABLE

When we pray these Psalms, in community or in private, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who count on our prayers. Those witnesses include first of all the Israelites who cried out against Pharaoh and other oppressors. But the cloud of witnesses includes all those who hope for justice and liberation. This does not detract from the conviction that God is powerful Spirit. It does not reduce the Psalms to political documents. It rather insists that our spirituality must answer to the God who is present where the questions of justice and order, transformation and equilibrium are paramount. We dare not be positivist about our spirituality, as though we live in a world in which all issues are settled. The spirituality of the Psalms assumes that the world is called to question in this conversation with God. That permits and requires that our conversation with God be vigorous, candid and daring.

-----Walter Brueggemann, page 74.

JUSTICE NOTES

[continued from ----"Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope: A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration," from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States]

Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.
---- The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their territories

but rejects such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.

Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.

---- Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority.

The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

---- Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.

The Church recognizes the right of a sovereign state to control its borders in furtherance of the common good. It also recognizes the right of human persons to migrate so that they can realize their God-given rights. These teachings complement each other. While the sovereign state may impose reasonable limits on immigration, the common good is not served when the basic human rights of the individual are violated. In the current condition of the world, in which global poverty and persecution are rampant, the presumption is that persons must migrate in order to support and protect themselves and that nations who are able to receive them should do so whenever possible. It is through this lens that we assess the current migration reality between the United States and Mexico.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; 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:.....

- Melvin L. White #0434355 (on death row since 10/15/96)
- William Gregory #015629 (8/15/94)
- Jonathon Hoffman #018653 (11/14/96)
- Leroy Mc Neil #0275780 (11/15/96)

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

READER'S RESPONSE

Both Peter and Paul are quite alive to me! Their messages sound loud and clear today even though 2000 years have passed by. The real problem, especially for Roman Catholics is that most of them are biblically challenged.....Admittedly, as Peter states in 2 Peter 3:15-16 that some of Paul's letters are hard to understand..... I believe that encouraging Catholics to be more biblically literate especially in the Gospels, Acts and the epistles of Paul, John and Peter is a worthy endeavor. How can we evangelize others, if we, ourselves, are not evangelized!

Yours in Christ, Vincent Ciminera

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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