

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 16TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
Jeremiah 23: 1-6 Psalm 23 Ephesians 2: 13-18 Mark 6: 30-34

Dear Preachers:

I find a resistance in me this week as I sit to write these reflections. I would rather avoid the painful thoughts that are my "first impressions" --- especially as I hear the first reading. Jeremiah, speaking on behalf of God, bemoans the "shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture." I was at Aquinas Institute's preaching workshop in St. Louis at the end of June when I first looked at today's scriptures. At that time the American bishops were having their semi-annual meeting across town. Besides the church's persistent sex scandal revelations, the news broke that week about the Phoenix bishop's alleged hit-and-run killing of a pedestrian. "How much worse can it get?" I lamented. I can't remember a worse time in my church life as a Catholic Christian. And there is no hunkering-down; no keeping a low profile till things blow over— I am a preacher.

Even if I wanted to avoid the issue, this first reading, in which God indicts the shepherds of the flock, won't let me. In this section of the book of Jeremiah, the "shepherds" he is referring to are Israel's rulers. (The prophets often include the rulers in their indictments and criticize their corrupt and ineffectual leadership.) The nation's rulers, along with the priests and prophets, were supposed to play a role in helping the nation fulfill its vocation as God's people. God had carefully and lovingly shepherded Israel and Judah. But those whose duty it was to be God's instruments, were, for the most part, a huge disappointment. Without good and righteous leadership, the very covenantal relationship between God and the people suffered. The rulers of the land had not, as God wished, protected the frail and powerless. Poor leadership had brought disaster to the nation, for when Jeremiah was writing these words, the Babylonian captivity had already begun. Eventually, the royal line would end and the nation would be taken into exile. Before it was over, Jerusalem and its temple would lie in ruins. When national or religious leadership is defective, the consequences for ordinary people are often disastrous.

While the church scandals have their origins among a relatively few priests and bishops, we know the vast majority of our shepherds continue to faithfully fulfill their leadership roles. Nevertheless, the scandals are constantly "in our face" and many are wounded by them. In addition, it does appear that many "sheep" have been "scattered...and driven away." One form of "scattering" was reported in today's NY Times (July 2, 2003, p. A-14). The Boston archdiocesan annual parish-by-parish count of those attending mass, shows a large decline since the sex scandals became public. "There was a 14 percent decrease from the previous year. The Boston archdiocese has 2.1 million Catholics and weekly attendance has fallen below 300,000." Along with the decline in church attendance has been a drop in the financial support that is crucial to maintain the archdiocesan schools and charity programs. The most vulnerable suffer for the sins of some of our leaders.

Despite the gloomy conditions Jeremiah is highlighting among God's people, the reading has a

breath of hope—and for this we can be grateful. While the rulers are blamed and threats are leveled against them, there is a promise for a brighter future. God is stepping in to "gather the remnant," to bring them back from exile, "to their meadow." To accomplish this renewal, God promises to appoint shepherds who will fulfill their appointed office faithfully.

And more. A special shepherd will be sent, "...I will raise up a righteous shoot to David." A new time is coming, despite the present distress. God promises not to abandon the people, but to renew them and form a new community with faithful leadership. Isn't that just the way grace operates? When there seems to be nothing but death and defeat, with no visible sign of hope on the horizon, God steps in to stop and reverse the downward spiral. Jeremiah's charge against the shepherds is valid and because of their corruption, the people are left scattered. This moves God's heart to compassion. Once again, God will rescue them. God has a plan.

God's promise to the people is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus personifies God's compassion for both the disciples—who will shepherd in Jesus' name—and for the people—who need to be gathered and raised up. Jesus is more than a plan; he is God's compassion made flesh. In the gospel, the "Good Shepherd," shows us what the new leadership and new people will look like.

Jesus had sent the disciples out (6:7ff) to preach, teach and heal. Now they return from a successful preaching and teaching mission and "...reported all they had done and taught." What the disciples learned by being close to the Good Shepherd, they pass on to God's scattered people. They have fulfilled their charge faithfully. But they need rest, a chance to catch their breath and spend time with Jesus. Even though the crowds are pressing in on them, Jesus sees the needs his disciples have for regeneration. How can they continue to give when so much continues to be asked from them? They need to "go apart." They and their mission demand it.

We have many blessed and responsible bishops, clergy, religious and lay ministers. How unfortunate that a few have besmirched the church's reputation, scandalized its members and diminished our public persona. A particular loss I feel at this time is the diminution of the bishops' moral voice in our society. In the past, they spoke about peace, economic justice, abortion, immigration, the death penalty, care for the vulnerable, young, elderly, and environment. And they had an effect, not just on the church, but on our national conscience. Now the scandal has distracted the church leadership and muted their impact on our political leaders and population. In my preaching, unlike in the past, I now find it harder to quote the bishops on important social issues. A few have damaged the prophetic voice of the many. Shouldn't be that way; but that's how it seems to this preacher.

Having looked at Jeremiah, I turn to the gospel for some additional good news. I notice Jesus' double-dose of compassion. The first is for the weary disciples. They have toiled as "apostles"—"ones sent." Now they need to be disciples again, taking time to sit at Jesus' feet for nourishment and direction. Jesus knows that for them to keep their perspective, enthusiasm for mission, energy to preach, teach and heal, they must, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest awhile." The Shepherd's compassion is as intense as always for the needs of the crowds. He has not forgotten them. But he knows that in order for his disciples to minister to those in need

and take his place as shepherds, they will need renewal and recharging. Thus, he calls them away to be with him.

He is also calling his modern shepherds to deepen their ties with him through prayerful renewal. He is speaking to us all. Each of us believers have shepherding responsibilities to family, the young, the needy and to society in general. All baptized are sent out to speak and act in Jesus' name. So, the invitation to "time apart" applies to us all. Our church needs healing and renewal. Each of us can play a part in this moment's potential for growth, by finding ways to spend time apart with Christ, for only he can heal and renew what has been so wounded in his church. Isn't that what we do when we leave our busy worlds to take time for eucharist? Here Jesus helps us face what divides and destroys our communal bonds. Here he instructs and heals us through his Word. Here he feeds us with himself, so that we can face what assails our church, be witnesses to hope and continue to preach, teach and heal as he did.

What's clear in our first and third readings is that a scattered and needy people are not on their own to figure things out and put their house in order by themselves. God, speaking through Jeremiah, makes it clear to a shepherdless people, "I myself will gather the remnant of the flock....I will appoint shepherds for them who will shepherd them." Jesus is the proof that God is doing just as God promised. Not only is Jesus assuming the shepherding task, but he is training others to carry on when he is gone. God will not leave us scattered. God will fulfill God's promises to us, be our Shepherd and gather us. The preacher needs to hear again the promise God, our faithful shepherd, holds out for us today---and then preach what we hear with conviction.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Aquinas Institute of Theology. *In the Company of Preachers*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993.

Fourteen essays by the faculty of a theological school on a variety of topics related to preaching. Includes the areas of liturgy, scripture, hermeneutics, religious language, revelation, spirituality, pastoral care, social and moral issues, and the poetic. A good follow-up to a "how to preach" book, this one will deepen the preacher's awareness of what is involved in preaching.

QUOTABLE

Whatever there is to say, no one will listen to us unless we can offer them evidence of our own relationship to silence. If we simply dip our cups into the noisy torrent of the world and serve it up with a little theological parsley on top, people will learn to look elsewhere for food. At the very least, we owe them words we have dug up with our own hands, words we have brought back from our own encounter with the silence. Our authority to speak is rooted in our ability to remain silent.

---Barbara Brown Taylor in, *When God is Silent*, Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1998, page 98.

JUSTICE NOTES

Things we can do: It is important to be directly connected to the poor. I didn't care for a thing about the world's poor until I cared about one poor person. And I only came to care about one poor person because I put myself in a place where that could happen. We need at least to give ourselves an opportunity to care about somebody who's poor, somebody we probably wouldn't spend time with in the normal course of our day. Spend time with an abandoned old person at a nursing home or serve and eat lunch with the guest of a soup kitchen. Become a big brother or big sister to a child growing up in inner-city poverty or in a rural shack with only one parent. That's step one.
—Jack Jezreel, *Catholic Wisdom On: Option for the Poor*. Claretian Publications, page 4.

POSTCARDS TO A DEATH ROW INMATE ---SPECIAL REQUEST

A few months ago I invited our readers to send postcards to William Quentin Jones, an inmate whose time was growing short. He requested postcards of sunrises and sunsets. Well, Quentin got a lot of them! Bernadette Page, who visits him, said he wanted to say thanks to all who wrote him. Recently, the Supreme Court declined to hear his case and an execution date is soon to be set for Quentin. It seems like a good time to post his name again and invite our readers to send him postcards or notes—he delights in nature scenes.

Please write to:

William Quentin Jones #0219316
Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606
Thanks,
Jude Siciliano, OP

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

Our webpage address:

(Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes these reflections and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
<http://www.op.org/exchange/>

“Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by four friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Carmen Mele, Brian Pierce, Angel Del Rio, Angel Mendez, and Dolorita Martinez, of the Grand Rapids Dominicans. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: jboll@opsouth.org

"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, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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

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