

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 23rd SUNDAY (B)

Isaiah 35:4-7a Psalm 146 James 2: 1-5 Mark 7: 31-37

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The Bible is one of the world's greatest pieces of literature. So many parts of it read like poetry; it evokes lovely images and has inspired great art. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." "Blessed are the poor in spirit...." The Isaiah reading today is an example of beautiful language and vivid images, "Then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing." "Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe. The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water." What lovely language! What beautiful images!

When the language is that picturesque we can admire it the way we might love and admire a good poem. The danger is we can become observers, a bit distant from the original meaning and intention. But as we gather for worship today we aren't merely lovers of literature, we are people of faith listening for a word from God for our lives and our world – our very concrete, complicated world and unpoetic world.

As we listen to Isaiah's words we get a sense of the condition of those to whom Isaiah first spoke these things. They were not in a good way. Why would Isaiah, speaking for God, have to encourage them to, "Be strong, fear not!" – Unless they were terribly frightened. Why talk about streams in the desert, unless the people were feeling drained and parched? Why a poetic image like "leap like a stag," unless the people were having trouble putting one foot in front of the other?

Isaiah is speaking to people who are trapped with no way to escape on their own. They had been defeated by the most powerful and terrifying force of their day, the Babylonian army; wrenched from their homes and dragged off to live as slaves in a foreign land. Their homes were destroyed, their cities torn down and their precious Temple dismantled and burned. Their past in Israel was no more; their present bleak and enslaved; their future promised only more of the same. No mere human power of theirs could get them out. And if they did manage to escape, how could they cross that burning desert back to their homeland? And if they finally did get back to their homeland – there was no "there" – there.

Have you been “there” – in exile? Have you been in a place where you feel like a stranger? A man told me recently that he was trying to live an honest life at work, but with so much cheating going on it was very hard. “I feel so different from everyone around me,” he said. A woman told me that her niece wanted to marry across racial lines, but her family had offered strong objection. “I have tried to support my niece,” she said, “and now the family has turned against me. My own family treats me like an outsider.” She felt like an outsider; in light of today’s reading, she could also be called an “exile.”

A middle-aged woman said that 20 years ago her loving and gentle mother got cancer and struggled with the pain for two years before she died. “I prayed hard for her and when she didn’t get better I felt God had ignored my prayers. So, since God gave up on me, I gave up on God. I walked out. Now I’ve got a long journey back to God and my faith. I hope God gives me strength not to give up. I have a lot of ground to make up.” Call that, “a return from exile.”

Aging can feel like an exile. We leave behind what was easy and familiar and face what is new, unknown and scary. It doesn’t feel like we have adequate resources of our own to continue our journey – which has now become difficult. Daily in our city I see recent immigrants who struggle with language and cultural differences. They are usually unskilled, and these days are having a very difficult time finding work. They rely on the help of church and community services – which are running very short on resources. They feel like strangers in a strange land – like exiles.

At one time or another in our lives we have felt that way too. There are lots of good, well-meaning people who try to encourage us when life gets difficult for us. They offer us advice, “Every cloud has a silver lining. Things will be okay.” But when life takes one of those curves; the world we are accustomed to shifts and becomes foreign to us and the unexpected breaks in and disrupts our usual life’s patterns. At these times we need more than cheery words and a pat on the back. Just as the Israelites needed more help than they could provide for themselves in exile. That’s why God sent Isaiah to them and that’s why God speaks to us and nourishes us at our eucharistic celebration today.

Isaiah’s images are picturesque, but they are more than sweet-sounding words. They are strengthening words that God speaks through Isaiah to us, in any place of exile we might find ourselves. God wants to do what the prophet says today, “Open the eyes of the blind,” clear “the ears of the deaf” and refresh us in the dry

and “burning sands” of our lives. God’s promises are trustworthy. Who among us can’t look back at some period of our lives which resembled Isaiah’s description – days of “burning sands,” and “thirsty ground?” After we journeyed through those hard times and they finally cleared for us, we said, “I never thought I’d get through that period of my life.” And we concluded, “If God weren’t with me, I never would have.”

We remember how God gave our parched spirits the water we needed. We not only got through those difficult days, but somehow, amazingly, our faith today is stronger! Isaiah’s words remind us that God did not stand aloof, an impartial observer, watching to see how we made out on our own; or, like a cheerleader shouting support... from a distance. No, our experience has taught us that God comes into our place of exile, searches us out and journeys with us. In the most unexpected and simplest ways God provides security, braces our flagging spirits, and provides soothing waters so that our life can bloom.

Our baptism unites us as a community and has stirred us to gather today for Eucharist. Through our baptism God promised that no matter what exile, distant or arduous place, we might find ourselves, God will be with us there to strengthen us so that we don’t give up.

We are about to approach the table to receive the body and blood of Christ; food for the journey – from exile to freedom. As we prepare to receive that food we name the exile we, or someone we know, is currently in. We’ll remember that God has not deserted us but has gone into exile with us. The sacrament we share not only sustains us, but promises that on our journey we will find, “The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water.” Just as God promised.

“Back to School Prayer for Educators”

As I step into a new academic year,
Restore my spirit.
Renew my passion for sharing your wisdom
And nurture my compassion
for those You put in my charge.
Transform me as I seek to transform:
Guide me as I seek to guide;
Open my mind and heart
As I seek to open minds and hearts

To the Good News of justice and peace.

Help me listen more deeply
To the world and to your Word,
So I can walk with my students,
Attentive to the Wisdom that
Calls us all to the Kingdom of God.

by Jane Deren (www.educationforjustice.org/)

(from the Oakland California Diocese's "Social Justice News")

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 Isaiah reading:

Streams will burst forth in the desert,
and rivers in the steppe.
The burning sands will become pools,
and the thirsty ground, springs of water.

Reflection:

Isaiah is speaking to the Israelites in slavery...and to anyone of us who may be feeling in exile.

At this Eucharist today we remember that God has not deserted us but, by taking flesh, has gone into exile with us. The sacrament we share not only sustains us, but promises that on our journey we will find, "The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water."

So, we ask ourselves:

- When my spirit feels dry and my faith like dust, where do I go for "springs of water?"
- Does my faith refresh those who know me? How?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

Labor Day 2009

"The Church fully supports the right of workers to form unions to secure their rights to fair wages and working conditions. No one may deny the right to organize without attacking human dignity itself. **Therefore, we firmly oppose organized efforts to break existing unions and prevent workers from organizing.** Migrant

agricultural workers today are particularly in need of the protection, including the right to organize and bargain collectively. U.S. labor law reform is needed to provide timely and effective remedies for unfair labor practices. (*US Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All*)

Did you know?

- North Carolina is the least unionized state in the country.
- FLOC (Farm Labor Organizing Committee), www.floc.com is both a social movement and a labor union. Their immediate constituency is migrant workers in the agricultural industry, but they are also involved with immigrant workers, Latinos, our local communities, and national and international coalitions concerned with justice. The FLOC vision emphasizes *human rights* as the standard and *self-determination* as the process for achieving these rights. FLOC struggles for full justice for those who have been marginalized and exploited for the benefit of others, and is seeking to change the structures of society to enable these people a direct voice in their own conditions.
- **FLOC represents some 6,000 migrant farmworkers in North Carolina. FLOC and the N.C. Growers Association have provided significant improvements in wages and working conditions for their workers. These workers now have a voice in their own conditions, and are now directly involved in their contractual terms of employment and problem solving in the fields and camps. But there are 150,000 other migrant workers in N.C. who suffer abuse, dangerous working conditions, and low wages.**

What can I do?

- Pray for those who labor. Pray for employers and for legislators, owners and managers that they will act with justice and provide living wages, affordable benefits and the freedom of association to their employees.
- Lend your voice as a concerned North Carolinian to FLOC's campaign on behalf of tobacco workers employed by RJ Reynolds Co. whose headquarters is in Winston Salem. Read about this struggle for justice for the least of our brothers and sisters at:

<http://www.floc.com/RJR%20Campaign.htm>

- Read about the conditions of migrant laborers and FLOC's work on their behalf.
<http://www.floc.com/>

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

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:

- Nathaniel Fair #0125241 (On death row since 5/18/99)
- Keith Wiley #0654009 (5/27/99)
- Eric Call #0542384 (5/22/99)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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