

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2ND. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
JANUARY 19, 2003

I Samuel 3: 3b-10, 19; Ps. 40: 2-4, 7-10; I Cor. 6: 13c-15a, 17-20; John 1: 35-42

Dear Preachers:

Of course, you have noticed by now that I have consistently neglected one of the scriptures available for the preacher----the Psalm response to the first reading. Mea culpa! But I have an excuse, I am an itinerant preacher and some parishes I preach at drop the psalm in favor of another hymn response or they sing an adaptation of the psalm that may differ in wording from the Lectionary text. In addition, since I usually preach at all the masses on a weekend, there is always the chance that at least one mass will have a different response to the first reading. That's my excuse for not preaching from the psalm response--- what's yours? To make amends, I thought I would spend some time: first discussing in general the psalms' potential for preaching, then addressing today's psalm and even recommending an excellent short book on the spirituality of the psalms that I have just finished reading (cf. below, "One Good Book for the Preacher").

The Psalter is both a hymn book and a prayer book. Psalms were used in Temple worship, where the community's prayer could be sung. But when the Temple was destroyed and the people taken into exile, they had to leave everything behind--- Temple, altar and their liturgical settings. But the psalms went with them. More than ever, people needed to gather and voice their condition and need to God. The psalms were formed over a long period of time (from about the 10th. Century to the 2nd. B.C.E.), they reflect the long and diverse experience of the Jewish people. So, they make excellent preaching material, since they cover so much in Jewish spirituality. As the Jews, so with us; we can take the psalms with us on our own journeys and exiles. They suit every occasion and life situation of the praying person and community.

The psalms are not listed in any order, or category--- hymns, laments, thanksgiving, etc. Instead, they shift from one human expedience to another. One psalm may praise God but be followed by another that voices anguish and complaint. Isn't that the way it is with us humans, one mood or situation following on another, with no logical explanation? Or we experience life's taking one of its twists and we find ourselves desperately turning to God, looking for words? Most people may not be avid bible readers, but chances are they know some lines from

the psalms. Who hasn't heard, for example, "The Lord is my shepherd?" Psalms may be the most accessible biblical literature, for they voice our shared human predicament in plain talk. The psalms express a broad range of feeling, metaphors, rhythms, and literary forms. They show many possible responses to God and speak from the many situations in which we humans might find ourselves in the course of our lives.

The 150 psalms have one thing in common—they are poetry. But they are Hebrew poetry and that makes them different from what we normally consider poetry. As poetry they are pitched higher and have more intensity than prose. They address our imagination and lend themselves to memorization and frequent repetition. Psalms contain the compressed language of poetry and the rich imagery associated with bodily feelings and deep inner struggles and ponderings. Like other forms of poetry, the psalms are best experienced when prayed aloud. We do this at our liturgies, often with musical accompaniment. As Hebrew poetry and the psalms are different from our usual experience with poetry. Hebrew poetry relies on parallelism: a sentiment is expressed in one verse and restated in the next. Sometimes the second verse amplifies the first; other times an antithesis is proposed. So, in today's psalm we have:

"Sacrifice or oblation you wished not,
but ears open to obedience you gave me."
Followed by the parallel and amplified:
"Holocausts or sin offerings you sought not;
then said I, 'Behold I come.'"

The psalms make excellent material for preaching. They are eloquent and powerful expressions of both personal and communal struggling to believe and trust in God while living in a world of non-belief, hostility and temptation. Now, let's get specific and look to today's selections from Psalm 40 and their possibilities for preaching.

The psalm begins with a situation of need. One of the omitted verses in today's passage says, "God brought me out of a horrible pit, out of the murky clay" (40: 2). The speaker sounds like he/she has been through a very difficult time. And help from God was not quick in the coming. The poetic device of repetition suggests what must have been frustrating and difficult. This person didn't just "wait for the Lord," rather, they "waited, waited for the Lord." You can almost hear another

prayer in the background, a prayer many say at one time or another, “How long O Lord?” This is the plea of those waiting for an answer to prayer ---for their children, for example, who are in trouble or alienated from their families. This is the prayer of one suffering from a long debilitating disease. An aunt just died from Lou Gehrig’s disease. She was paralyzed for the last few years and needed full-time care. I am sure this devout woman “waited, waited for the Lord”---hoping for an end to her travail; I know her family did. The applications to suffering this psalm suggests are innumerable. The preacher might appeal to personal suffering or to anguish on a larger scale. These opening lines to the psalm express the prayer of those suffering poverty; those in war zones and places of civil strife. I think of Jewish and Palestinian families; the starving and sick children of Iraq; those dying of AIDS in the poor countries of Asia and Africa. “I have waited, waited for the Lord....” The believer is sorely tempted to give up on God. “How long, O God?”

But though the psalmist’s faith may have been tempted during the waiting time, God did eventually respond. It doesn’t say the person got exactly what he/she wanted; but that God “stooped toward me and heard my cry.” The response must have been more than adequate for it stirs a “new song,” a hymn to God. Can we, assembled in prayer at the Eucharist, recall the times in our lives when the long wait was over and we felt God had “stooped” in our direction? The hymns we sing at our liturgy give us an opportunity to sing a “new song” to God; a prayer of thanksgiving that our faith sustained us and that our waiting bore fruit. We also renew our faith in God, for with the psalmist, we know that God will always give us what we need when we find ourselves strained under worries and pain, waiting on God.

The psalm indicates God does not want a response of “sacrifice or oblation” as a thanksgiving offering. Of course there is room for such sacrifice; but a more proper and primary response to what God has done for us is our willingness to commit ourselves to God, “ears open to obedience....” (The psalmist says this in a parallel way, “Behold I come.”) Ritual prayer is certainly an important part of our faith life, as it was for the psalmist; but God wants much more than periodic prayers and rituals, for these can become mere formalities and routine. God wants our total selves, not part time; but full time. “...to do your will, O my God, is my delight. And your law is within my heart.”

We realize God has responded to our waiting, “has heard my/our cry.” This realization stirs praise in us at this Eucharist, which is our prayer and hymn of

thanks. If God has the primary place in our hearts, prayer and ritual will follow, not out of obligation and formality, but out of a willing response, “Behold I come.”

One last thought: the psalmist’s response to God’s deliverance is to speak about it “in the vast assembly.” In the church “assembly” to which we belong, there are ample opportunities to make a grateful response to what God has done for us: we can do this as diligent minsters in the various ministries of our parish community. For example, ministers of the Word ---lectors and catechists--- have ample opportunities to “announce God’s justice in the assembly.” But there is also a larger “assembly— the world. Knowing how God has responded to our cry for help, moves us to keep attentive ears to the cries for help around us. As children of a God who has “stooped toward” us, we look at others as children of the same God, and we lean in their direction when they need help. This is a way God’s “law is within my heart.”

READER’S RESPONSE

1. In the material for the feast of the Epiphany, which was excellent, there is a link related to National Migration Week. Unfortunately, a typing error takes readers to a screen telling them it is a bad link. In the link, "usccb" should be "uscgb". Once I changed that, it still would not open. But, since I resettled refugees for 12 years for the Archdiocese and now lobby immigration issues, I use the USCCB site often. So here is a link that will take your subscribers to the website and further info on migrants and how we can fulfill our obligation to welcome them. I really appreciate all you do to help me prepare for homilies.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Walter Brueggemann, *SPIRITUALITY OF THE PSALMS*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002, 76 pages, paper.

What a terrific overview of the psalms this book is! It is a short book, but I found myself underlining much of it as I read. The psalms are studied under three general themes: psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of new orientation. Brueggemann takes full account of recent critical studies of the psalms but maintains a constant perspective of biblical faith. He is a believer who is a biblical scholar and we are the beneficiaries of his being faithful to both callings.

QUOTABLE

The Psalms are profoundly subversive of the dominant culture, which wants to deny and cover over the darkness we are called to enter. Personally, we shun negativity. Publicly we deny the failure of our attempts to exercise control. The last desperate effort at control through nuclear weapons is a stark admission of our failure to control. But through its propaganda and the ideology of consumerism, our society goes its way in pretense. Against all of this the Psalms issue a mighty protest and invite us into a more honest facing of the darkness. The reason the darkness may be faced and lived in is that even in the darkness, there is One to address.... Because this one has promised to be in the darkness with us, we find the darkness strangely transformed, not by the power of easy light, but by the power of relentless solidarity.

—Walter Brueggemann, page xiii.

JUSTICE NOTES

Garth Stanton sends the following reflection from the bulletin of St. Anselm's parish in San Anselm, CA. It was written by Maureen Bennett.

Are war and violence inevitable? Where has peace gone? Even as we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, peace is less and less a reality in our world. Hatred and violence continue to ruin the lives of untold numbers of people in regions around the globe and the threat of terrorism is worldwide. Our own country moves daily closer to war against Iraq.

As Christians, we can't believe in that inevitability nor succumb to despair. Rather, we are called to action! Our pastor, Fr. Neil in his New Year's Day homily, urged us to pray for peace, peace in our hearts, peace in the world. Taking up that challenge, a group of parishioners is **suggesting** that every day at noon each of us take a moment to say a prayer for peace. If we're near a church, stop in, but wherever we are, at home, work, in the car, just a quick conversation with God, the Creator and Redeemer of this beautiful world. Church bells at St. Anselm and throughout the county ring at noon, and will be a reminder. **We also suggest that you invite your** friends to join with us wherever they are.

Violence and destruction are not inevitable - we cannot let them become so.

Prayer is very powerful. Let us pray for peace!

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:.....

- Norris C. Taylor #0401049 (On death row since 1979)
- Larry D. Williams #0442913 (1980)
- Michael Pinch # 0324142 (1980)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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