

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 30TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

Jeremiah 31: 7-9 Psalm 126 Hebrews 5: 1-6 Mark 10: 46-52

By *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

Jeremiah has a reputation for strong preaching and outlandish prophetic actions. Well, at least the early part of Jeremiah is like that. When the people of Judah were unfaithful, he lashed out at them. Since they were impenitent, he promised that the Babylonians would humble them. King Zedekiah, contrary to Jeremiah's counsel, conspired with the pro-Egyptian party in Jerusalem against the Babylonians. The Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar took punishing action by destroying Jerusalem and taking the leaders of the people into Exile. (“But this people's heart is stubborn and rebellious, and they turn and go away. And say not in their hearts, ‘Let us fear the Lord, our God...’” (Jer. 5: 23-24).

Today's section from Jeremiah comes at a time when the people are in exile. This section is meant to be consoling to those who cannot help themselves. God is promising to bring those who are faithful back from exile. PEOPLE magazine recently had an edition dedicated to “the world's 50 most beautiful people”. Of course, the “most beautiful” were movie stars, political leaders and young successful business people. (The ones who weren't young were certainly well preserved.) What is striking in this Jeremiah passage is that the community returning from exile consists, not just the able bodied and “stars” of the community. Rather, the prophet says, “in their midst” are “the blind and the lame..., the mothers and those with child.” This is already a different kind of community that embraces all its members and does not cast out to its fringes those with needs, those whom other societies might consider a burden or less than full citizens. The ones who return are those who had no one but God to hear them in their exile. They could not get themselves free; they recognized their need for God. The “beautiful people” in this society, are those who are faithful to God. No one will publish a magazine featuring these people; but they are featured in the bible, where they are called, “the remnant” of Israel.

The notion of “the remnant” has survived right up to the present. These are the faithful people, of no-account in the eyes of the world, who have placed their trust in God. They are the ones who are assured of a final victory when they will be gathered in the presence of God, their Savior. What they cannot see with their eyes now, they see with the eyes of faith. All who continue to trust in God, despite dire

circumstances, are numbered among this remnant. Those in hospitable beds dying of wasting cancer, but who continue to finger their beads in prayer; those whose children are in prison, but who continue to pray for them and give them hope by their constant visits; those who, at risk to their own lives, struggle to bring justice and peace to the world (cf. the quote by Cesar Chavez below); those who struggle to raise children to be honest and God-fearing in the most dire poverty or violent surroundings----these and so many like them, are the faithful remnant in our midst today.

I used to live in West Virginia. The state is rugged and beautiful; there is also desperate poverty among the people who live in the hills. Often the only jobs to be found are in the coal mines, dangerous work that provides income as long as the coal lasts. Or, as long as one can avoid being injured by accident or crippled by black lung disease. When the coal runs out, the companies move on; the people stay behind. They are the “leftovers,” the “remnants.” Among these poor, nothing was wasted or thrown out. The women saved scrapes of clothing in a “remnant bag.” When I would look into these bags all I could see, on first glance, were worthless bits of cloth, good for nothing but dusting the furniture or mopping up spills. But in the hands of the gifted women, they would be worked into beautiful quilts. What appeared useless to this casual observer, was made into a treasure in the hands of the quilter. Is that what God does? Does God take the “leftover” pieces of society and “save” them, making them into something beautiful, into works of art? The ones who remained faithful to God in exile were the poor who looked to God for their salvation. On first glance they didn’t look like much. They would not make the list of anybody’s “50 most beautiful people.” They would pass unnoticed and do---- right up to our present world. However, no matter how bad things looked, they trusted God when others in their community gave into their slavery, adapted themselves to their new surroundings and worshiped the gods of the conquerors. After all, didn’t the rulers’ gods look more powerful to those who were conquered than their own God? Where was their God when they were in need ? Jeremiah is encouraging them not to give into despair, not to sell out to appearances ----God had not forgotten them.

The promise Jeremiah makes to the people is that the return to their homeland will not just be something they will have to achieve or struggle with on their own. What they cannot pull off; God will accomplish. These faithful, but most vulnerable of people, will have a powerful God acting decisively on their behalf. They are like the first Israelites fleeing their Egyptian rulers, making a journey to

freedom across a hostile desert. What God did once before, God will do again: once again God will see to their needs and deliver them. God will not be a mere spectator cheering them on but will “console them and guide them.” God will be making the way easier for them, leading them to brooks of water, placing them on a level road so that the fragile and exhausted will not stumble. In the final verse of the reading, God is depicted as a parent who had once given life to this family and now wants to restore them to their home where they will find peace and again be able to worship God together in Jerusalem.

We are not strangers to exile. By our actions and attitudes, we have put ourselves apart, outside the midst of God’s faithful people. Some of our attitudes were pressed on to us by the families and environments in which we were raised. They were further forged into our being by our consent, whenever we acted out of prejudice, fear, indifference, short-sightedness, exclusivity, violent instincts, unbridled anger and a host of other acts of blindness. As a result, step by step, we have fashioned our own exile, setting ourselves apart from other believers and from the image God had in mind for us when God created us. We may even have lots of companionship in our exile, accompanied by people who think and act the way we do and who, blind like us, confirm our ways with approval and participation. Exile is a place where we can survive--- but it is not full life. We are away from our true home, worshiping many false gods. (It does not take much imagination for the preacher to name these gods we worship—gods of security, comfort, abundance, career, acceptance, isolation, nationalism, glamor, speed, thrills, control, etc.)

In today’s gospel, Bartimaeus in like the remnant Jeremiah promised God would rescue. He is sitting along the road, a blind beggar. He seems forgotten by all, rebuked and told to be silent even by those following Jesus. He has nothing to earn him favor except his voice, which he uses to cry out to the passing Jesus. He also has a sight the disciples do not yet have--- he recognizes Jesus. He has been in exile and like the remnant in exile, he can only turn to God for help. He is physically blind, but spiritually sighted. He does not have physical sight, but he has his voice and he uses it to appeal to Jesus. When he does receive his physical sight, his spiritual sight encourages him to become part of the new remnant, the followers of Jesus on “the way”.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

PARABLES FOR PREACHERS: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE, YEAR C, by Barbara E. Reid, O.P. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000. 351 pages, paper \$11.95. This is the second in a series on the parables found in the lectionary. This one comes in time for the upcoming liturgical year and like its predecessor is a gem for preachers. There is an excellent introduction on preaching the parables followed by an overview of Luke's Gospel. Each parable is then treated in a separate chapter which includes a section for each entitled, "preaching possibilities." A very good and useful book for preaches as we prepare for Year C.

QUOTABLE

During this election season we continue quoting from: FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP: CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM (United States Catholic Conference/ National Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Society has a right and duty to defend itself against violent crime and a duty to reach out to victims of crime. Yet our nation's increasing reliance on the **death penalty** is extremely troubling. Respect for human life must even include respect for the lives of those who have taken the lives of others. It has become clear, as Pope John Paul II has taught, that inflicting the penalty of death is cruel and unnecessary. The antidote to violence is not more violence. As a part of our pro-life commitment, we encourage solutions to violent crime that reflect the dignity of the human person, urging our nation to abandon the use of capital punishment. Respect for human life and dignity is the necessary first step in building a civilization of life and love.

Promoting Family Life

God established the family as the basic cell of human society. Therefore, we must strive to make the needs and concerns of families a central national priority.

Marriage as God intended it provides the basic foundation for family life and needs to be protected in the face of the many pressures working to undermine it. Tax, workplace, divorce, and welfare policies must be designed to help families stay together and to reward responsibility and sacrifice for children. Because financial and economic factors have such an impact on the well-being and stability of families, it is important that **just wages** be paid to those who work to support their families and that special efforts be taken to aid poor families.

The **education** of children is a fundamental parental responsibility. Educational

systems can support or undermine parental efforts to educate and nurture children. No one model or means of education is appropriate to the needs of all persons. All parents—the first, most important educators—should have the opportunity to exercise their fundamental right to choose the education best suited to the needs of their children, including private and religious schools. Families of modest means especially should not be denied this choice because of their economic status. The government should, where necessary, help provide the resources required for parents to exercise this basic right without discrimination. To support parents' efforts to share basic values, we believe a national consensus can be reached so that students in all educational settings have opportunities for moral and spiritual formation to complement their intellectual and physical development.

Communications play a growing role in society and family life. The values of our culture are shaped and shared in the print media and on radio, on television, and on the internet. We must balance respect for freedom of speech with concern for the common good, promoting responsible regulations that protect children and families. In recent years, reduced government regulation has lowered standards, opened the door to increasingly offensive material, and squeezed out non-commercial, religious programming.

However, television and radio broadcasters, cable casters, and satellite operators are still subject to some government regulation. We support regulation that limits the concentration of control over these media; disallows quick sales of media outlets that attract irresponsible owners seeking a quick profit; and opens these outlets to a greater variety of program sources, including religious programming. We support the development of the TV rating system and of the technology that assists parents in supervising what their children view.

The internet has created both benefits and problems. Since it offers vastly expanded capabilities for learning and communicating, this technology should be available to all students regardless of income. Because it poses a serious danger by giving easy access to pornographic and violent material, we support vigorous enforcement of existing obscenity and child pornography laws with regard to material on the internet, as well as efforts by the industry to develop technology that assists parents, schools, and libraries in blocking out unwanted material.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”

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