

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 33rd SUNDAY (B)

Daniel 12: 1-3 Psalm 16 Hebrews 10: 11-14,18 Mark 13: 24-32

By: *Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

PRENOTE:

On the first Sunday of Advent we will begin a new liturgical year, Year C – with Sunday gospel readings from Luke. We have just posted an overview of that gospel on our webpage. You may find it helpful for yourself or if you participate in a Lectionary-based scripture group.

Go to <http://www.PreacherExchange.com> and click on “Preaching Essay.”

In our part of the world, the days are getting shorter; darkness seems to be gaining the upper hand. In a couple weeks, when the days will be still shorter, we will celebrate Advent. It’s in our bones – when the days are the darkest we look for light. We express our hope that God’s light will shine in our darkness. God will not leave us to trip and get lost but will provide a light to show us the path to back to God.

But first there are things that need tending...that need ending! So, this weekend and next the readings remind us that the world is passing away; it must pass away. False securities and shallow guarantees will not sustain us in times of strife and testing. God alone must be our hope. God’s ways must be our ways, so that when our securities and misplaced confidences fail us we can turn our eyes to God’s saving light.

When biblical writers want to get our attention, shake us out of our lethargy and give us hope, they write in the apocalyptic literary genre. We see evidence of this literature in today’s readings from the book of Daniel and from Mark’s gospel. The word “Apocalypse” comes from the Greek and means “to lift the veil.”

Apocalyptic literature suggests what we think we see as true and as reality, in fact, may be obscured by veils. We think we see – we don’t. We think we know the truth and the way things are – but we don’t. We need vision; we need the veil over our own eyes lifted so we can clearly perceive God’s presence and God’s future coming into our world.

Apocalyptic writing is not meant to be taken literally or thought to contain secret codes reserved for those who can interpret them. Nor is this genre of literature meant to predict dates and places of future events. Though some have tried to make such predictions. Periodically one reads about a fundamentalist sect whose members have gathered on a mountain or in the desert somewhere, sure from their biblical reading that the world is going to end on a certain date at midnight. When the cataclysm doesn't come, the disheartened members have to return to their former places of employment to see if they can get their jobs back and to their children's school, to see if they can get them re-enrolled – since the world was ending who needed mathematics classes?

Apocalyptic writings don't have hidden codes which, if we knew the key, we could use to interpret and predict world events. Instead, they hold a more profound and important truth for us believers. For those Jews under persecution, who were tempted to believe that God had forgotten them, Daniel assures them that after the final struggles at the end of time, God will reward the persevering faithful. But even more than that; God would not abandon them as they underwent severe testing. God would see them through. Thus, God tells the people that Michael, “guardian of your people,” will protect Israel. (Michael's name means, “who is like God.”)

When the final tribulation, the “end times” come, the people will “escape” – for God is protecting them. Then, the very horrific trials will be the occasion for the coming of the Messiah. Our selection from Daniel does not promise that no pain or tribulation will befall God's faithful. No one has to remind us of that! We have seen too many good individuals and too many innocent peoples suffer under the world's tyrants. But Daniel assures his hearers that God is their Savior who will not let them suffer final destruction.

What reassurance do these people and we have? What gets us through the hard times when our faith feels pressed to cracking under internal and external pressures? Daniel isn't making a promise on his own. He is not telling the Jewish people in the midst of their extreme duress, “Cheer up! Things are going to be okay. Just be patient.” What he does tell them and us is, “In those days, I, Daniel, heard this word of the Lord....” The promise is from God. Daniel reassures us, “We have God's word.” So, the issue becomes: Is God trustworthy? Will God live up to God's promise? Can we live during a time when we see no visible signs of relief and continue to trust that God is with us; that hope is on the horizon? If we do have

this hope then, aided by God's nourishing Word, we can stand steadfast

In today's gospel Jesus draws on earlier apocalyptic literature, as he alludes to a time of tribulation followed by the coming of "the Son of Man in the clouds." (Dan 7:13). The distress will be profound, even nature will go into chaos. Such awful times raise the very questions the ancients asked— and we do too — "Who's in charge here anyway? God or chaos?"

Chaos may seem to have the upper hand, especially when all we are used to and rely on collapses. Jesus refers to the signs of the blossoming fig tree as a sign of hope. During the wintertime nothing looked more dead than my grandfather's bare fig trees in my grandparents' backyard. But each Spring their leaves would sprout and, later in the summer, we would again eat succulent fruit from those "reborn" trees. (Those figs could move an atheist to believe in God!)

If the suffering first Christians and we moderns were to ask Jesus, from the midst of our crazy world's whirlwind, "Who's in charge here anyway? And when is this all going to end?" He would say again what he once said: "You must trust my word. God is in charge and God knows the schedule. Meanwhile, you must be prepared for my return as you continue to live lives faithful to my word."

That's the faith of the Bible: even amidst complete upheaval, God has not abandoned us and will emerge victorious over death itself. How appropriate it is that Jesus spoke these reassuring words. He is about to enter Jerusalem and be put to death. "The tribulation" he predicts for his disciples is about to take place for him. When their world collapses with Jesus' death will they remember and cling to his words and look forward to an entirely new Spring? The same can be asked of us. Can we trust what Jesus tells us again today, "... my words will not pass away"?

With the resurrection of Jesus, the end times have begun. We do not know when Jesus will return; nor why there is such a long delay in his return. Perhaps the delay is to the world's benefit. Maybe we Christians are being given more time to get our act together; not just our personal rectitude, but maybe we are being given time to witness to the world who Jesus is and invite more people to experience God's boundless mercy through him.

Meanwhile, we live as if Jesus were about to return. But we keep our eyes open to signs of his presence already with us in his Spirit and we witness to those signs by

our lives. Perhaps that's why Jesus hasn't yet returned; God wants to invite still more people to fall in love with the God Jesus proclaimed. Today at this liturgy we celebrate Christ's presence to us in Word and Sacrament, and we are reassured that whatever endings we face, the Spirit will be present to plant and nurture new life in us.

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 Gospel reading:

Heaven and earth will pass away
but my words will not pass away.

Reflection:

Our faith invites us to trust that, even amid complete upheaval, God has not abandoned us. "The tribulation" Jesus predicts for his disciples is about to take place for him. When their world collapses with Jesus' death, will they remember and cling to his words and look forward to an entirely new Spring? The same can be asked of us.

So, we ask ourselves:

- As we face our own tribulations can we trust that Jesus' words will not to fail us and that he will be faithful to us?
- How can I be a symbol of Jesus' steadfastness to others in their trials?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever."

(Today's reading from Daniel 12:3)

"Trade conditions favorable to poor countries, including, above all, broad and unconditional access to markets, should be made available and guaranteed in lasting and reliable ways" *(Pope Benedict XVI, December 2006)*

"Leading others to justice" can be a thankless task. We do not want to know about painful situations of overwhelming injustice. At the same time, we ourselves, actually benefit from these unjust global policies as we purchase inexpensive products. The Catholic bishops of the United States have repeatedly stated that we must have a "preferential option for the poor", whose lives are described entirely by their *needs* rather than their *wants*. This description fits more than half the world's population whose dire condition results from economic policies that value

profits over the human right to adequate food, decent housing, affordable medical care and free education.

Among the groups “leading others to justice” is *Witness for Peace*, a “star” shining in the vast “night” of global injustice.

“Witness for Peace” (WFP) is a politically independent, nationwide grassroots organization of people committed to nonviolence and led by faith and conscience. WFP’s mission is to support peace, justice and sustainable economies in the Americas by changing U.S. policies and corporate practices which contribute to poverty and oppression in Latin America and the Caribbean.”

“WFP is one of the groups working to turn governments from “free” trade agreements (such as CAFTA) that benefit large industrial powers and to nurture fair trade policies which protect small farmers and factory workers in the struggling Third World countries.”

Witness for Peace continues to send delegations to poor countries. These delegations bear witness to the continuing struggle of the poor for justice. The delegates give a voice to these struggling people by returning home and speaking the truth of what they witnessed to legislators, asking them to work for fair economic policies. www.witnessforpeace.org/

What can I do?

- **Educate** yourself at: www.witnessforpeace.org/ and our local Witness for Peace group at: <http://www.wfpse.org/>
- **Contact** your legislators about fair trade legislation: <http://www.networklobby.org/issues/>
- **Get to know** someone from a struggling country and ask questions with an open heart.
- **Consider** joining a WFP delegation

(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:

- Clifford Ray Miller #0742512 (On death row since 10/25/01)
- Reche Smith #0379083 (10/25/01)
- Terrance Campbell #0064125 (3/28/02)

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
FrJude@JudeOP.org