

First Impressions FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT -C-

Jeremiah 33: 14-16 Psalm 25 I Thessalonians 3: 12-4:2 Luke 21: 25-28, 34-36

By: *Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

The liturgical year begins with the crashing of cymbals and the roar of kettle drums. With the new year we turn to a sequential reading of Luke's gospel. But not the way one would read a book or a story—starting at the beginning and proceeding in an orderly manner to the end. As we get closer to Christmas we will go to the early chapters of Luke for the stories of the Visitation (4th Sunday in Advent) and then to the Nativity for the Christmas masses. On the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary time, the sequential readings begin in earnest as we proceed week by week through the gospel. Those who prefer order and a "proper" sequence in life will feel more satisfied later on.

But not now; not at the beginning of Advent when the chaos described in today's gospel (from chapter 21 in Luke) parallels the disruptions we feel today as we reflect on the world immediately within and around us---as well as the turmoil beyond our personal horizons in the wider world. No, Advent doesn't begin with a lullaby story from Luke; it begins raucous and conflicted, the way life is for much of our world. Indeed, a closer reading of the Nativity stories will also reveal conflict and hints of the Christ child's future passion and death right beneath the seeming-serene accounts of the birth, with its supporting cast of angels, shepherds and wise men. Don't forget that evil Herod is also a part of the stories of the birth of the savior.

As ominous as today's gospel sounds in reality, it is quite consoling. A quick glance to Jeremiah tells us why. He and the other prophets had announced to the people that God would come to save them. Jeremiah was writing while under arrest (33:1) and while the Babylonians were attacking Jerusalem. The chaos and destruction Jesus describes in the gospel had happened in various ways and times in Israel's history. It was happening to Jeremiah and the residents of Jerusalem. The city and nation were about to be destroyed. So, Jeremiah does what prophets often did when the people were under duress he presents God's promise of restoration. In those days Judah shall be safe, and Jerusalem shall dwell secure.

He even quotes his previous promise (23:5-6) about the continuity of the line of

David. Under the dire conditions Jeremiah was speaking, his words must have seemed absolutely absurd. How was God going to rebuild the destroyed nation and holy city? And how could David's line rule when the Babylonians were about to destroy the nation and take its leaders into exile?

What humans can't imagine, God can. What humans can't do, God can. God, Jeremiah says, will raise up one from David's line and, unlike the corrupt rulers Israel had so often endured, this just shoot shall,...do what is right and just in the land. The nation and city will be saved by one chosen by God, who will be a just leader and who help the people become a community where justice and equity are the dominant characteristics.

If you were to ask Jeremiah, or any of the prophets, What does salvation look like?

They would put less emphasis on the personal experience some describe as being saved. Instead, they would describe, besides being in right relationship with God, being in a community that is safe under God's protection and living in a way that grants all the inhabitants of the land peaceful and just relationships with one another. They would call all that, Shalom. That's the salvation the prophets promised it was a community event. At the beginning of Advent Jeremiah reminds us again what other prophets have said about God's will for us. He reassures a people under siege that one is coming to fulfill their long-awaited salvation. The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah.

But Luke's gospel tells us today that the arrival of the days will not be easy. Much will happen before Christ can come again. Just prior to today's passage Jesus told his disciples that they would have to give witness to his name (21: 13). As a result, they will suffer persecution because of him (21: 12-19) and then Jerusalem will be destroyed (21: 20-24). After all this,...then they will see the Son of Man coming.... And one can presume that after all he just told them, they will be very happy indeed to see him! We can draw some obvious conclusions from what Jesus is telling his disciples.

Having faith does not protect his followers from persecution; in fact, it is because of their faith that they will suffer. Disciples can take heart that we will be strengthened to bear witness in Christ's name and that, after a period of trial and rejection, Jesus will return. Calamity marks the opening lines of today's passage;

but God's salvation with Jesus return, is the dominant theme and conclusion. Even the faithful are not spared the trials, For that day will assault everyone.

So, it is very important that the disciples stay alert, for the temptation is great to go with the flow to blend into the dominant culture and adopt its values and habits of living. Jesus warns us not to fall asleep on the job. And what's the job description for Christians? Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life and that day catch you by surprise like a trap. What will keep us awake and not overcome by anxiety? Prayer.

Luke's gospel has strong emphasis on the importance of prayer. There are temple scenes and times when Jesus bursts into spontaneous prayer. He also prays at important moments throughout the narrative (5: 16; 3: 21; 6: 12, etc.) and he instructs his disciples on prayer (6:28; 10: 2; 20: 45-47, etc.). Today's passage, so filled with distressing signs and warnings of future frightening events, for everyone—including disciples---- ends with a strong, typically Lucan reminder: "Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength.

Will the parts of the world that are corrupt, indulgent, lustful, aggressive and oppressive really pass away? Sounds like a wistful dream of someone who has lost contact with reality. Look around, can't you see how entrenched the old ways are! Yes, they are, but even the implacable sun, moon and stars were going to show signs of the end of such dominance and of coming change. Powerful and firmly established powers will require an even more decisive power to uproot and cast them into the sea. And that's exactly Jesus offers us. The encouragement he gives us to pray is not a pious tidbit attached to the end of his teaching. Prayer is essential if the disciples are to fulfill their call to vigilance against the surrounding seductive powers we encounter daily in overt and subtle ways: aggression, racism, political corruption, indifference to the blight of others, isolations from the community, greed and a host of other such forces.

The gospel's apocalyptic language is very graphic. The upsetting events that are described are less predictions of how things will be, as much as metaphorical images to describe endings and beginnings. What is evil and persistently destructive to human beings will not last. God will see to that. There is going to be a great turnaround. God has promised and will also see to that!

But on a personal basis, anyone who has suffered great loss through: the death of a

loved one, a breakup in a close relationship: the loss of a job in middle age; a disabling accident or illness; the decline of advanced age; civic strife; violence in the neighborhood or town in which they live; a child's life ruined by drugs, etc. any of these people would, in the midst of their crisis, say that today's exaggerated biblical imagery describing endings and upheavals, is right on target. That's the way it feels the powers of the once-secure heavens are shaken. Everything has changed, life's foundations have been removed.

What's left? Nothing we usually count on. Except Jesus assurance that on "that day" he comes to help us. Stand erect and raise your heads, because, as impossible as it seems, he offers us new life. During the duress, he advises prayer to keep our faith from collapsing. People say that at such crisis moments they are unable to pray. There are people in the congregation going through such terrors right now. We can invite them just to be with us and let us do the praying for them until a time when they find their footing more secure and have a breath of new life. Then they may have to return the favor and carry us for a while in their prayer, for at one time or another, each of us experiences the end of a world.

We are not dreamers with our heads in the clouds. We are realists who must persevere in our mission of service to the world, while not getting overwhelmed by the size of our task. It is hard to believe at times, but something new is coming. It is awful dark out there, but we can see a light up ahead and it is drawing closer. With that vision sustained by prayer today we can renew our commitment to stand in vigilant service to the Lord and to wait with eyes wide open for his return. The gospel today may have its scary aspects, but the focus isn't on the cataclysmic. God is the center of this narrative. We have looked at the reassuring face of Christ and know that God is in control and will not let go of us until Jesus returns.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

James A. Wallace, CSSR., Robert P. Waznak, SS and Guerric De Bona, OSB. **LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS: HOMILIES AND REFLECTIONS FOR THE CYCLE.** (New York: Paulist Press, 2006. ISBN 0-9-8091-4410-7, paper, \$19.95. This is the third in a series of homilies based on the liturgical cycle, as well as six feast days. The authors are or were homiletics teachers at distinguished theological faculties. These homilies are biblically and liturgically rooted and right up to date with contemporary events. I have referred to their past homilies to help me in my own preaching preparations. I have stolen some of their insights too! The cover of the book announces, Not Just for Preachers, and that is true because anyone

seeking deeper insights into scriptures and our liturgical celebrations will find a many treasures in this collection.

QUOTABLE

At the heart of the C Cycle is the Gospel of Luke, probably written between 80 and 85 by a gifted storyteller. For Luke, Jesus is the Lord, the prophet like Moses, God's embodied message/messenger of mercy and costly love, and especially the savior sent to redeem all humankind. Luke's unique perspective on Jesus, the prophet who is impelled by the Spirit of God from the Jordan to the desert to the land of Galilee and finally to death and resurrection to Jerusalem, provides the final perspective on Jesus from the Synoptic tradition.

From the Introduction to: LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS: HOMILIES AND REFLECTIONS FO THE C CYCLE, pviii.

JUSTICE NOTES

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep ... you are richer than 75% of this world.

If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish someplace ... you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy.

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness ... you are more blessed than the million who will not survive this week.

If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation ... you are ahead of 500 million people in the world.

If you can attend a church meeting without fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death ... you are more blessed than three billion people in the world.

If you hold up your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful . .,you are blessed because the majority can, but most do not.

If you can hold someone's hand, hug them or even touch them on the shoulder ... you are blessed because you can offer the healing touch. .

If you can read this message, you just received a double blessing in that someone was thinking of you, and furthermore, you are more blessed than over two billion

people in the world who cannot read at all.

----source unknown

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

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:.....

- Wake L. Cole #0082151 (On death row since 6/14/94)
- Alden Hardin #0166056 (8/12/94)
- Lyle May #0580028 (3/18/99)

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