

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT -C-

Baruch 5: 1-9 Philippians 1: 4-6, 8-11 Luke 3: 1-6

By *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

I was at a drugstore a week before Halloween and saw my first “Christmas sale,” wrapping paper with scenes of Bethlehem. Advertizing starts alerting us to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem --- for profit’s sake not devotion. But Advent has us first look at another city. The prophet Baruch today helps us focus on Jerusalem, the actual city and the symbol it is for our stored-up hopes. Advent faces the future, not to avoid the realities and struggles of the moment, but to give us encouragement as we struggle in the bleakness of what is not yet. Advent give us a chance to do an honest inventory of our lives and to resolve to return to a Jerusalem God is renewing for us. God has not forsaken us in our exile; Baruch reminds us but is calling us back now during Advent. I find the Advent readings from the Hebrew prophets particularly rich. Their powerful language helps cut through the fog the commercial fog machine is cranking out these days. And so, let us focus these reflections on the reading from the prophet Baruch.

Baruch was a scribe of Jeremiah in the 7th. Century B.C.E. But this text comes from another author and may have been written 5 centuries later for Jews dispersed by the Greeks. They too are living in an exile and so references to a former captivity, and the destruction of Jerusalem will resonate in them. The promise is that once again God will deliver the people, leveling the road so that the journey will not overtax the already exhausted former slaves.

Baruch is using images drawn from the Babylonian exile. Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Jerusalem and taken her leading citizens into exile. Baruch depicts Jerusalem as a grieving mother, robed in mourning for her exiled children. They were led off into exile for their sin. God is promising to bring them home to the mother who has cast off her robes of mourning and is waiting for them royally bedecked. Baruch is speaking to a people whose exile was a daily reminder to them of the sins that caused their collapse.

So it is with our own sinful choices, they bring pleasure at first, but sooner or later we find ourselves in exile. Perhaps we have damaged or even destroyed relationships; pursued selfish ends, regardless of the consequences to others;

overworked ourselves into spiritual numbness in an attempt to “have it all” and in the process, neglected our families; used excessive amounts of resources for still larger houses and cars which drain and damage the earth. We have made choices that have taken us away from our true home, like the ancient people to whom Baruch is speaking, and like them, we too find ourselves in exile. We have detached ourselves from our faith community and lived like islands of isolation, holding ourselves accountable to no one but ourselves. We look at our faith this Advent and may find it in ruins, like the city of Jerusalem after the Babylonians got finished with it. Or maybe our interior Jerusalem has structural damage --- our prayer, generosity and community life are in need of repair. Advent calls us to tend to these repairs and promises that God is not only interested but involved in the reconstruction process.

Advent gives us a time to do an honest inventory of our lives and to resolve to return to a Jerusalem God has restored for us. Baruch promises that God’s light will lead us and will level the path back to make it easier for us to return. This passage has the sound of an announcement, like the clarion call of John the Baptist in today’s Gospel. According to Baruch, the events spoken of will happen, no “ifs, ands or buts.” There is no doubt, no ambiguity in today’s passage, no stipulations, no telling the exiles to get their own act together and get home to Jerusalem. They do not have the capacity to restore themselves; God will have to accomplish it for them. But once brought back, they will be a different kind of community.

If Jerusalem is wrapped in a “cloak of justice from God,” then it is clear that the repentance called for is not just an individual one. The entire community will live wrapped in this new cloak of justice. We need to reflect on what the bible means when it speaks of justice. Biblical justice (“righteousness”) is rooted in God; it is a prime characteristic of God. God concretely shows what justice is by caring for all people, regardless of race, ethnicity or economic status. Since God is the creator of all people, God’s justice is to extend beyond Israel. In particular, it is manifested towards the poor and vulnerable. Therefore, the community of God’s people, returned from their exile, will give evidence of God’s justice by how well they treat the poor and vulnerable, both within and outside their borders. This holy city wears the “cloak of justice;” it is an exterior garment, evident to anyone who sees it.

The city of God, that reflects God’s holiness and justice, is not just in the future. We already see glimpses of it in Christ’s faithful community. I saw clear signs of

it recently in a community of single, widowed and divorced. At the close of a recent Eucharist for about 90 people, I listened to the announcements made by the community's leaders. The faithful were told about: a retreat for recently divorced people; an evening "starting again" session for the widowed; a Saturday night dance, "In case you're lonely on the weekends and want some good company." But this community, while dealing with their own serious issues of loneliness, single parenting and financial stress, also took up a collection for clergy ministering to the needy in their area; had a fund raiser for a diocesan program for flood victims; and gathered volunteer workers for Habitat for Humanity's home construction project for a poor family. You can see signs of the new Jerusalem in this community, not yet finished, but definitely, "gathered from the east and the west at the word of the Holy One."

A last word---about translations of important biblical words. One bible translation I saw of the Baruch passage used "justice" while another translated the same word as "righteousness." Each has a different connotation in English. This is addressed in a book recommended in a previous edition of "First Impressions,"

LIBERATION PREACHING: THE PULPIT AND THE OPPRESSED, by Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez (Nashville: Abindgon Preacher's Library, 1980). The authors discuss the difference between "justice" and "righteousness" and say....

"In the original Greek of the New Testament, these two are the same word. And yet, by consistently translating that word as "righteousness," many translators have left aside the demands of justice, and texts that may well refer to justice are seen as speaking only of a moral rectitude. Take for instance II Corinthians 6:7, [with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left' and 6:14, [what partnership have righteousness and iniquity?' (RSV), and substitute the word [justice' for [righteousness.' Does this not give the text a biting edge that our more modern translations seem to miss?

"Still on the question of [justice' and "righteousness,' it is significant to note that most western European languages have these two options for translating the one Greek word, and that in general those translation done from a position of power or at least of prestige seem to prefer [righteousness,' and its equivalents, while those done in the midst of persecution, or in other positions of disadvantage, opt for [justice'. Again, biblical translation, like biblical interpretation, is not done in a socio-political void." (Page 36)

QUOTABLE:

“The season of Advent always suggests preparation for letting Jesus be born into our midst. Everything about this season stands in counterpoint to the culture that surrounds us. The darker colors, the more quiet music, our emphasis on waiting, preparing, hoping suggest not starting the Christmas parties yet, not singing the Christmas songs until we are finished with *this* season. To preach Advent is to invite parishioners to participate in a most counter cultural experience. We prepare with the Baptist. We wait with Mary. It is not Christmas yet, not until Christmas Eve.

Then as the world around us dismantles its trees, abandons its seasonal music, and gets on with the important business of football bowls, we Christians continue Christmas for three more weeks and beyond, as this child is manifest, an epiphany to the world.

----from CHURCH, Winter, 1998, page 11.

RESPONSE: To a question posed two weeks ago by Fr. Robert Konopa about Christmas liturgies for children. This one is from Deacon Bill Ladroga, Diocese of Venice in Florida..

Bill writes:

(Buy three white ping-pong balls, spray paint one red and the other blue)

There is a make-believe story that when Jesus was born, there was a Fourth Wise Man. His name was supposed to be Artaban. He went out to follow the star that appeared when Jesus was born and he took with him a sapphire, a ruby and a pearl to give as gifts to Jesus the King. (Show the three colored ping-pong balls to everyone.)

He was riding his camel very hard to meet his three friends, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar at a certain place so that they could all go together in a caravan to meet Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. He was running late and the other three wise men would leave without him if he wasn't in a certain place at a certain time.

As he was riding his camel across the desert, he saw someone on the side of the road. It was a poor man all alone and sick with a high fever. Artaban knew that if he stayed to help the poor man, he would miss the other wise men and they would

leave without him. But he did stay; he helped the man. But now he was alone. He needed help to get him across the desert because he had missed his friends and their caravan. He had to sell his beautiful sapphire to get help to get to the other three wise men. (Give the blue painted ping-pong ball to one of the children.) He was sad because now he wouldn't be able to give Jesus the King his expensive sapphire.

He traveled on through the desert and finally got to Bethlehem, but he was too late. Joseph, Mary and the baby had already gone. Bad King Herod sent soldiers to kill all the little babies because the king was jealous and didn't want Jesus to live. He didn't know which baby was Jesus, so he had them all killed. The fourth wise man, Artaban, was in a house where there was a little child with his mother. The soldiers came to the door; you could hear the crying of all of the mothers in the neighborhood because their little babies were being killed. Artaban stood in the doorway, tall and dark, with the ruby in his hand and he gave it to the captain of the soldiers so they wouldn't come in. (Give the red painted ping-pong ball to another child.) The little child was saved; the mother was so happy; but the ruby was gone; and Artaban was sad because the Jesus would never have his ruby.

For many years after, Artaban wandered all over looking for Jesus the King without finding him. After more than thirty years he finally came to Jerusalem. There were crowds all over the city and he was told that someone was being nailed to a cross that day. When Artaban heard that it was Jesus being crucified, he hurried as fast as he could to the place where the crucifixion was being done. Maybe his pearl, the best in the whole world, could buy Jesus' life. As Artaban ran towards the place, down the street came a girl running from some soldiers. "My father owes a lot of money," she cried, "and the soldiers are taking me to sell me as a slave to pay the debt. Please save me!" Artaban stopped; then sadly he took out his beautiful and precious pearl, gave it to the soldiers to pay the father's debt and the soldiers let the girl go. (Give the white ball to another child.)

As he stood there with the girl, suddenly the sky got very dark; there was an earthquake and lightning. The buildings started to shake and fall down, and a flying roof tile hit Artaban on the head. He sank to the ground, very badly hurt. The little girl knelt down and put his head on her lap. His lips began to move, and she could hear him saying, "Jesus, when did I see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty, and gave you a drink? When did I see you as a stranger, and take you in? Or naked and give you clothes? When did I see you sick, or in prison, and come to

see you? I have been looking for you for thirty-three years, but I have never seen your face or done anything for you, my King." And then a whisper came from very far away, and a voice said, "I say to you Artaban, because you did it for so much for so many of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me. And as he died, Artaban smiled because now he knew that the King had received his precious gifts, and he would now see him face to face.

Yes, boys and girls, the best way to use our most precious and sacred things is to use them for other people. We should be careful that we aren't more concerned with things than helping someone. Pokemon, toys, computer games and dolls are not more valuable than people.

Always remember that all of us have been given so many precious gifts of all kinds: money, talent and skills. And it is not until we use our gifts to help other people that we too will find the King of our lives, Jesus.

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

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