

First Impressions SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT -C-
Baruch 5: 1-9 Psalm 126 Philippians 1: 4-6, 8-11 Luke 3: 1-6
By: *Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

The gospels don't usually get specific about dates. We are used to passages that begin, "At that time..." or "After this..." We moderns would prefer a bit more precision, but usually our curiosity is not satisfied. We tend to ask, "At what time?" "Where?" "How long?", etc. But today's gospel seems to be an exemption to the usual ambiguities about time and place, since it begins rather date-specific, "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar..." We gospel readers are not accustomed to such specifics. What's going on here? This third chapter starts in a historical way: the public ministry of Jesus is beginning, and the story will not be other-worldly or in a "kingdom a long time ago." We are not talking "Star Wars," the gospel is not "out there" somewhere. Luke is making sure we know that at a precise time in our history and in a particular place the savior was born and began to preach. Since the beginning of his gospel Luke has been making references to the time and historical events that parallel his story. E.g. "In the days of Herod, king of Judea..." (1:5); "In those days Caesar Augustus..." (2:1). Today's passage begins in a similar way.

Luke sees Jesus' coming as part of an unfolding historical process in which God acts to save us. The first period in this history, according to Luke, began with creation and ended with John the Baptist. Thus, John is an important person in this gospel. The second period begins with John's announcement of Jesus' arrival. This central period includes Jesus' ministry and ends with his ascension. Luke's third historical period is that of the Church, which began with the ascension and will last till Jesus returns at the end of history and time.

Luke wrote for those who live in the third period. And it is a difficult time indeed! During Advent we are reminded that we are in a period of trial and stress, but the scriptures tell us this will end when Jesus returns to proclaim the fulness of God's kingdom to the world. Advent is our opportunity to remember Jesus' first coming, but also to be heartened by the hope we have in his return at the end of this third period. So, when Luke gets time-specific he is reminding us that God has acted in concrete ways in our human history. We are reassured that God has not remained aloof and distant from the daily struggles we believers experience. Luke tells us that God has, through Jesus, gotten involved in human history. In Jesus God has

walked shoulder-to-shoulder with us down the very paths and under similar conditions that test the human spirit.

Luke is helping us trust that God has not abandoned God's people. Baruch speaks the same reassurance and stirs up a sense of excitement and relief for a long-burdened people. God is coming to rescue people who have experienced the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. The city is destroyed, the people taken into slavery. They cannot help themselves; but God can and will. So, the prophet addresses Jerusalem as a mother whose children are enslaved and offers her hope. "Look to the east and see your children...." They will be delivered from slavery and are to come home to Jerusalem.

What did Jerusalem do to deserve such favor from God? Nothing. God is a great lover who chooses to act to save the people. Once again, another story of grace in human history! Jerusalem was rebuilt, but it never fulfilled its role as God's holy city. In Baruch's time the nation was in a precarious situation and had to make political alliances with stronger powers. But the prophet speaks words of hope---someday the restoration of Israel will be a reality. It will not only be about the rebuilding of an earthly nation, but there will be a time when God will invite all peoples into a new, lasting and holy kingdom. When will this revival and rebirth of the human spirit begin to take place? How long will the people have to wait? And who will be included?

Luke gives us the answer, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar...." Luke even spells out the sign that the new age is coming by telling us that John the Baptist is its herald; the prophet who calls people to prepare because the day of the Lord is at hand. John is doing what prophets have always done—preparing Israel for God's breaking into history. John focuses on God's activities in the present moment of our history. He doesn't speak about some future apocalyptic time when the world will collapse in on itself. Rather, he calls us to expect God's coming into our lives here and now.

Something big is about to happen and we need to respond very concretely to the imminent. John is specific, he calls us to open the way for the Lord's advent. We need to clear away the obstacles to the Lord's renewing entrance into our lives. One such obstacle could be that we don't expect much to change this year "it will be similar to last Advent and all the Advents prior. We may not have the where-with-all to bring about change or renewal in our lives on our own. But the Baptist

stirs us hope that God can remove any obstacles that stand in God's way: mountains of resistance; hills of indifference; valleys of despair and the rough roads of doubt and indifference. Baruch, Isaiah and the prophets promised such an advent by God into human history. Luke is telling us that it has begun to happen, "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar...."

Who will benefit from God's gracious activity in our history? "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." Luke announces one of his central themes: God's salvation is for everyone. This universalism permeates his gospel. The ancients waited in hope for God's coming. The prophets kept this hope alive through various images and proclamations as far back as 600 years before Christ. Baruch is just one example when he says, "...for God is leading Israel in joy by the light of [God's] glory...." All that is liberating and anticipated by the prophets, converges in Jesus. John the Baptist is the spark that ignites a fire; he passes his torch to Jesus who begins the final age in human history. Christ has come. Christ will come again to those who wait with lamps burning bright, ready to clear away any obstacles to his coming and ready to greet him when at last he does come.

Let's not skip over John's message too lightly: he is announcing God's judgment on sin. He invites us to do our part "repent" and tells us that God will do more than we anticipate or deserve. God will forgive us. That's the good news. God is dealing with our sin. How? By forgiving those who ask. What must we do as we begin our second week of Advent? Confess our sins and rejoice in forgiveness. Whew! Thank God, because we never could have broken the intransigent pattern of sin on our own!

A quick scan over our lives and the events in our world shows us the effects and power of sin. Luke starts the narrative today by naming some very "heavy hitters": Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias and the high priests Annas And Caiphas. Together they had a firm political and religious grip on Israel. But Luke is telling us today that they aren't the major players they seem, because at a very specific time and place, "...the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah in the desert." It's as if Luke is saying, "Hold on to your hats, everything is about to change and in the most surprising ways. The powerful will be brought down and the lowly raised up."

QUOTABLE

“The liturgical homily manifests the present significance of the liturgical act in such a way as to incorporate the worshipers more fully in the act of worship by arousing their faith and the dispositions of that faith appropriate to the liturgical act, so that the effects of the sacrament extend beyond the immediate sacramental celebration into all phases of their daily life and the life of the entire church.”

----John Burke, O.P. in, GOSPEL POWER, page 79.

JUSTICE NOTES

We were just sitting there talking when lines of people began to form, saying, “We need bread.” We could not say, “Go be thou filled.” If there were six small loaves and a few fishes, we had to divide them. There was always bread□

We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.

We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.

By Dorothy Day, Servant of God

CHRISTMAS CARDS 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 Christmas card 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:.....

- Martin A. Richardson #0343075 (On death row since 11/22/93)
- Randy L. Atkins #0012311 (12/8/93)
- William Gray #0153856 (12/16/93)

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

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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