

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT

Isaiah 9: 1-6 Psalm 96 Titus 2: 11-14 Luke 2: 1-14

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Another busy Christmas season seems about to end. We probably just got in under the wire—the last gifts purchased and wrapped; the school and office parties over; the groceries, meats, sweets, drinks and table decorations purchased and ready for the final touches tomorrow when family and friends arrive for the Christmas dinner. We won't get enough sleep tonight, after our Eucharist, but we will push on till tomorrow evening when it will all be over. We will have to dispose of the Christmas tree and wrappings and pack away the decorations for another year. In a couple days we might run out and buy Christmas cards on sale so we will have them for next year. Of course, there are still the credit card bills to arrive in the mail that will need to be paid. But, all in all, we pat ourselves on the back for a job well done. We are exhausted, but we got through another Christmas with all its frenetic preparations and we are ready, even eager, for things to get back to “normal.” That's the way it is, isn't it?

Maybe for the bankers, merchants, toy manufacturers and secular Christians; but not for us who take our feasts and liturgical seasons seriously. We just spent four full Advent weeks preparing for the return of the Lord and for the celebration of his birth. Christmas isn't over on the 26th, instead, today begins our Christmas season. It lasts more than one day. It is two weeks of celebration—not the frivolous, tinsel kind, but with spiritual awareness and response to what God has done and is doing again for us and our world. This Christmas season isn't ending at tonight's mass, it is just beginning and it will carry our spirits and help us see God's light in its many manifestations in the world.

The Christmas season will be a time of God's multiple and gracious manifestations, right up to the season's culmination two weeks from now on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. God's Word will accompany us these next two weeks and, through the lens of that Word, we will be enabled to enter more deeply into the sacred mysteries of Christ's birth and appearances in our time.

Isaiah reminds us tonight that God has shone in our darkness. We have tried to

navigate through the world guided by other lights--- and have been disappointed. We have gotten lost because of what we thought would give us light and satisfaction—military power, possessions, the latest gadgetry, the latest computers and gadgets, too large houses, too fast and large cars, our own security, isolation and independence. Now our nation and ourselves find we are in what Isaiah describes as a “land of gloom.”

What we thought would make us happy and free, the prophet describes as a “yoke that burdened...the pole on their shoulder.” Our world has not followed the gentle sound of peace, instead, what we continually hear is the sound of the “boot that tramped in battle.” Who says that the prophets are outdated and “quaint sounding?” It doesn’t take much imagination to spot, both in our modern world and our personal lives, what Isaiah saw and heard in his. But the prophet knew what we need to be reminded of: we can’t get ourselves out of this mess on our own, we need a “Wonder-Counselor, God-hero, Father Forever, Prince of Peace.” Someone whose “dominion is vast and forever peaceful.” God has seen our need and has come to rescue us. “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” But not in the way we look for or expect!

Without the light that God provides, we would miss God’s response to the world’s “darkness” and “gloom.” In fact, most of the world and at times, we too, do miss God’s coming and choose the darkness that we think is light. We don’t “get it”—because when God does come as “God-Hero,” it is not with trumpet and kettle drums; horse and chariot; laser and flashing light; missiles and internet pop-up banners. Paul tells us, “The grace of God has appeared, saving all....” And Luke is more explicit, telling us how the appearance among us took place. He opens our eyes so we can continue to see today how the Prince of Peace is among us—and still comes to us again and again.

Today’s gospel risks over familiarity. Who among doesn’t know the story almost by heart? Caesar’s decree; Joseph and the pregnant Mary’s journey to Bethlehem; “no room in the inn,” etc.? It is such a familiar tale we could miss the good news it has for those of us in “darkness...who dwelt in the land of gloom.” It’s an oft-told and too-familiar tale about which we may understand little. Worse still, we risk reducing the story to sentimentality.

Caesar, like many ruling powers, has no regard for the people under his thumb. His

plan to enroll “the whole world” is impersonal. He wants a head count so he can more effectively levy taxes on the members of the Roman empire. He will need the funds to keep his world-wide military funded and his homeland content in its power. The paradox is that God has another plan and will use Caesar’s scenario to help get it going. The gospel lends credence to the old saw, “God works in mysterious ways.” During the political disturbances of the times, God will have a say and will work out a plan for our benefit. No puny human power will be able to obscure or suppress it.

There is another census happening in Luke’s account. God has come to take flesh and be counted as one of us. The angels are not on Caesar’s side of domination and rule by force; they announce that the almighty God has come to be with us and walk among us. Where? In an insignificant town, a dot on one of the maps Caesar keeps in his chart room. Where is Isaiah’s promised Wonder-Counselor to be found? In the backwater called Bethlehem. Where will he live? In Galilee, the place Jerusalem’s religious elite considered semi-pagan, the land of the religious unwashed. What is God doing in such ignominious surroundings?

Well, for biblical people, the mention of Bethlehem, “the city of David,” stirs up memories of the best king Israel ever had; the shepherd king, who guided the people in God’s way of peace and justice. Under David the outcast counted; the abused got their rights and the widow and orphaned were protected. The lowly shepherds hear the good news that God has noticed those without status and has come to shepherd them by a new guiding light. There is no gloom in a world ruled by such a God. No one is beyond God’s loving gaze, everyone counts in God’s eyes for the news of the savior’s birth isn’t for just a few hand-picked castle elites in Caesar’s courts. No, the angel announced that the good news will bring great joy for “all the people.”

It isn’t just the birth of the savior we celebrate this night and throughout the Christmas season. It is our birth as well, for today we celebrate that we have been born in the Word of God. That Word has put flesh and blood on God’s good news for us. Tonight, through the angel, we have heard “good news of great joy”—all of us! A people who had opted to walk in darkness have seen a great light. We were in exile, in the “land of gloom,” but God has become one of us and, not only showed us another light to guide our steps, but has walked the very way we are to follow. Christ’s life has been an outpouring of God’s love on us.

What shall we do in return? Respond by living the life this night begins to show us. Turn away from worldly power, selfishness, ambition, and desires and put God first in our lives. Worship the “Wonder-Counselor” by living the wisdom given us in Christ. Imitate the “God-Hero” by choosing to love the poor and even our enemies. Commit ourselves to the “Prince of Peace” and eschew violence in all its forms, verbal and physical. Choose to be counted, not in Caesar’s worldly census, but among God’s children; citizens of the world guided by the light of another kingdom.

QUOTABLE

PRAYER OF BLESSING OF A CHRISTMAS MANGER OR NATIVITY SCENE

God of every nation and people,
from the very beginning of creation
you have made manifest your love:
when our need for a Savior was great
you sent your Son to be born of the Virgin Mary.
To our lives he brings joy and peace,
justice, mercy and love.

Lord,
Bless all who look upon this manger;
may it remind us of the humble birth of Jesus,
and raise up our thought to him,
who is God-with-us and Savior of all,
and who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Amen

(from, THE BOOK OF BLESSINGS, (Collegeville: the Liturgical Press, 1989)
page 587.

JUSTICE NOTES

Why does the church care about immigration policies?

The Catholic Church has historically held a strong interest in immigration and how public policy affects immigrants seeking a new life in the United States. Based on Scriptural and Catholic

social teachings, as well as her own experience as an immigrant Church in the United States, the Catholic Church is compelled to raise her voice on behalf of those who are marginalized and whose God-given rights are not respected.

The Church believes that current immigration laws and policies have often led to the undermining of immigrants' human dignity and have kept families apart. The existing immigration system has resulted in a growing number of persons in this country in an unauthorized capacity, living in the shadows as they toil in jobs that would otherwise go unfilled. Close family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents must wait years for a visa to be reunited. And, our nation's border enforcement strategies have been ineffective and have led to the death of thousands of migrants

The Church has a responsibility to shine the message of God on this issue and help to build bridges between all parties so that an immigration system can be created that is just for all and serves the common good, including the legitimate security concerns of our nation.

---from the "Justice for Immigrants Webpage,"

http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/faq_cath_position.html

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:.....

Larry D. Williams	#0442913	(On death row since 2/21/80)
Wayne Laws	#0234897	(8/21/85)
Henry Mc Collum	#0265106	(11/22/91)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available:

“First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year C.” Begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

“Liturgical Years A, B and C.” Reflections on the three-year cycle, with **Year C** updated.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the “First Impressions” CD link on the left.

2. **“Homilias Dominicales”** —These Spanish reflections on the Sunday and daily scriptures are written by Dominican sisters and friars. If you or a friend would like to receive these reflections drop a note to fr. John Boll, O.P. at Jboll@opsouth.org Or jboll@preacherexchange.org

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>
Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews, daily homilies and other material pertinent to preaching.

4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to fr. John Boll, OP at the above email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below.

Make checks payable to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thanks you and blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

P.O. 12927 Raleigh, N.C. 27605 (919-833-1893, ex 224)

judeop@Juno.com