

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT

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

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Jesus was born in a land that was part of and under the Roman empire. Rome was the dominant power of the day. Thus when the emperor Caesar Augustus issued his decree that there was to be a census, Jesus’ parents, along with all their neighbors, had little choice but to obey the ruling power and go to be enrolled in their native towns. So it is today. Powerful governments make one kind of decree or another—declare war, impose the death penalty, reduce aid to the elderly and poor, raise taxes, drop environmental safeguards, tighten immigration policy, etc—and people within these countries and elsewhere in the world, are affected. Sometimes these subjects are just inconvenienced, but other times, their lives are detrimentally affected. Some even lose their lives because the ruling powers have decided to eliminate the competition. If one were to ask someone alive at the time of Luke’s story, “Who’s in charge here?” the person would respond without hesitation, “Rome is.”

But there are hints in the manner and way in which Jesus was born, that the powers of the world may not have the last word. Like others living in Palestine and countries dominated by the Romans, Jesus’ parents had no options. Pregnant or not, they had to obey the “decree” that “went out from Caesar Augustus.” But Augustus would probably not be known today by most of us had it not been for Jesus’ birth at the time of the census. (Scholars debate the date of this census and they agree that one did not take place at this time. Luke seems to want to put secular and divine events together, to show how God works within human history.)

Luke also mentions another powerful person at that time, “when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” For sure, none of us would even know Quirinius existed had he not been governor at the time of Jesus’ birth. Luke is blending secular and sacred history and, as we read his account of the Nativity, we are reminded that those once considered powerful, have faded from our memory. The mighty Roman Empire, thought to be eternal, is no more. But the one who seemed most unimportant at that time, one of countless subjects dominated by Rome, is the one remembered, revered, and followed to this day. We reflect on where we are investing our trust and security. What seems powerful and influential today and presents an allure that takes our time and energy, in the future may only be remembered as the Roman Empire is today—as archeological sites. Whereas, if we choose to turn to the one whose birth we celebrate tonight, in an insignificant place and among a forlorn people, we will find in him permanence and significance for our lives.

The shepherds are another example of Luke’s skipping over the “stars” of his day to focus on the insignificant. First, we have Jesus and his parents; then the shepherds. At the time, shepherds were outsiders in society. Their mobile, rootless occupation made them suspect and their word was not trusted in a court of law. Yet, half the narrative is dedicated to them. We hear that God’s favor “rests” on the shepherds, the outsiders. They receive the good news that the savior

born for “all people” will be found in a manger. Luke’s gospel is already showing its characteristic marks: God is reaching out to the poor and forgotten by means of one like themselves, one “lying in a manger.” The shepherds hear in the angelic chorus the good news that, though they have not achieved status and standing in the world’s eyes, God has noticed them. The shepherds can do nothing to improve their lot, they will never be welcomed in Caesar Augustus or Quirinius’ courts. They will always be outsiders. But the God of Luke’s gospel is reaching out and showing favor to those outside the pale. The savior is meant “for all the people,” and through him God’s “favor” will rest on all those who accept him and his message.

Today’s gospel begins with a reminder of Joseph and Mary’s roots. They will go to Judea, “to the city of David that is called Bethlehem.” Micah (5:2) had prophesied that the messiah would be born there. The angel’s announcement is to shepherds and this and Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, remind us of David, the shepherd-king of the Jews, who was from Bethlehem. So, the story of the messiah’s birth is really a continuation of God’s revelation and reaching out to the Jewish people. There is no rejection of that past here in Luke, instead we hear a continuation of the promise God made to the chosen people.

Christmas stirs people’s hearts to generosity for those who are without. Recent natural and human-caused tragedies, like war and ethnic and religious strife, have made us aware of the displaced and needy of our world. The savior’s birth in humble settings deepens our awareness of modern day refugees, homeless families and hungry children. Even the secular press sponsor clothing and food drives for the needy and inform readers how and where they can volunteer to feed the homeless and drop off warm clothing for those in need. These are noble efforts and to be applauded. But the Christmas season will fade. Indeed, the day after Christmas will find our curbs lined with discarded Christmas trees, decorations and gift wrappings. Our society will move on and, in our hemisphere, bundle up for the cold and dreary days of January that lie ahead. The challenge for believers is to carry the message Luke gives us today into the winter, spring, summer and autumn days ahead that mark our year—our Christian year.

Besides taking on the responsibility of reaching out to the hungry, homeless and displaced we also need to find our roots in today’s gospel story. Initially there is no mandate in the passage to go out to the poor. Instead, we first hear the “good news of great joy” that tells us what God has done and is doing for us. First and foremost this gospel story is one of grace. God’s favor rests on us; not for anything we have done, but because God has chosen to be gracious to us. In Jesus we are the beneficiaries of God’s gift of reconciliation. The angels don’t bring a commandment of what we must do to win God’s favor. Rather they announce that God has manifested glory by favoring us with a savior. If we take this message of unearned grace to heart, then we will find ways to live out our new reality and be instruments of God’s favor to others who do not find favor in our world, a world that honors a Caesar or Quirinius of one sort or another.

JUSTICE NOTES

Jesus was born away from his parent’s village because of a governmental decree. Mary and

Joseph had to flee with their new born from the terror of Roman oppression and threats to their lives. It is appropriate then during this Advent-Christmas season that we reflect on the issues related to immigrants and what our church has said about immigration. The source for these notes is: the JUSTICE FOR IMMIGRANTS: A JOURNEY OF HOPE webpage.

(<http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/>)

Quotable

Excerpts taken from Strangers No Longer, Together on the Journey of Hope, A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration From the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States.

ABOUT the Catholic Church's Positions on Immigration

Does the Catholic Church support illegal immigration?

The Catholic Bishops do not condone unlawful entry or circumventions of our nation's immigration laws. The bishops believe that reforms are necessary in order for our nation's immigration system to respond to the realities of separated families and labor demands that compel people to immigrate to the United States, whether in an authorized or unauthorized fashion.

Our nation's economy demands foreign labor, yet there are insufficient visas to meet this demand. Close family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents face interminable separations, sometimes of twenty years or longer, due to backlogs of available visas. U.S. immigration laws and policies need to be updated to reflect these realities.

Does the Catholic Church support "amnesty"?

The Catholic bishops are proposing an earned legalization for those in this country in an unauthorized status and who have built up equities and are otherwise admissible. "Amnesty," as commonly understood, implies a pardon and a reward for those who did not obey immigration laws, creating inequities for those who wait for legal entry. The bishops' proposal is not an "amnesty."

The Bishops' earned legalization proposal provides a window of opportunity for undocumented immigrants who are already living in our communities and contributing to our nation to come forward, pay a fine and application fee, go through rigorous criminal background checks and security screenings, demonstrate that they have paid taxes and are learning English, and obtain a visa that could lead to permanent residency, over time.

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.-

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

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:.....

Thomas M. Adams #0001694 (On death row since 9/2/95)

Leslie Warren #0487180 (10/6/95)

Darrell Strickland #0393145 (10/27/95)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

(Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, Juan Torres, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If

you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll 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 to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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