

FIRST IMPRESSIONS THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD
Isaiah 60: 1-6 Psalm 72 Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2: 1-12
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The glow of Christmas has mostly faded, but there are still signs of it in some places, especially here in church. So what happens if you didn't feel the "Christmas spirit and don't want to be continually reminded of it"? What if the school Christmas pageants, store decorations, television specials, carols on the radio and gifts under the tree didn't cheer you up, but in fact were "downers." In church the Christmas season doesn't end on the 26th, instead we are reminded today that it is still in full flower. There are people in the congregation who do feel like they are out of step with the cheery carols, nativity scene and candle lights. It's not that they are Grinch's; rather they find themselves in pain and it seems to feel worse at this time of year, multiplied by the season's sights, smells and sounds. They feel alienated and not able to unburden themselves because they don't want to be a spoiler of good cheer.

There are more of these people in the congregation than we realize, or than superficial appearances reveal. People smile a lot during this time, even when their heart isn't in it. What causes them to feel outside the circle? They may have harsh memories of childhood Christmases due to domestic violence or drug and alcohol addiction in their home. When they were young their parents may have been chronically ill, leaving them with adult responsibilities before they were old enough to deal with them. They miss the childhood they never had. Others had parents die, or their home split by a contentious divorce. Poverty, then or now, deprives parents of the ability to buy presents for their children. There are also childless couples, gay people or parents who have had a child die. For them, this children's feast is particularly hard. Sickness knows no "proper season," no "appropriate time." Some worshipers are struggling with cancer for themselves or someone they love. Whole congregations can feel alienated from this holiday season. There are also poor congregations who are like outsiders looking into a rich person's home where a banquet is in progress. Hurricane Katrina has destroyed homes and churches that are either still in repair or that can never be rebuilt. All those folks and their congregations, once a source of comfort and good cheer, are now gone forever. Christmas is particularly poignant for the displaced.

It helps to take the pain, our own or our parishioners', to the scriptures and to this feast to hear if there is any good news for those who feel out of it. And if we feel this is preaching to the minority that's ok. First of all, in some places those hurting may be in the majority. Or, if our hearers are going through good times now, we all can remember a time when each day hurt. So as we remember the difficult times, we celebrate our deliverance with a eucharist of thanksgiving. We also know from our life experience that a time will come when hurt will again predominate. If the preacher addresses the pain some feel this season, then even those who are not going through a dark period, will be reassured that there will be good news for them, if and when the hard times return.

Epiphany celebrates God's "showing forth," Jesus' manifestation to the world. We will celebrate this manifestation on three occasions: today's arrival of the magi, tomorrow's, Baptism of the Lord and then at the wedding feast of Cana (January 14th, the second Sunday in Ordinary Time). We will be celebrating that God "shows up" in the places where there is need, just when darkness seems to have an unbreakable grip on our heart and spirit.

Isaiah addresses the darkness. "See darkness covers the earth and thick clouds cover the peoples...." He starts with a rousing command, "Rise up...!" Why, for heaven's sake? Because God's light is coming, like a rising sun. The "darkness" that Isaiah says covers the earth has a poetic link to the primordial darkness at the beginning, in Genesis, when God created light. We are reminded of the power of God that can overcome any darkness—even the darkness that preceded creation. Isaiah is suggesting that what God could do once, God can do again. The line in that passage that conveys this hope begins with the word--- "But." It is a word of interruption, a contradiction to what has been. After we list the darkness and name the pain, we put faith in a God who can say, "BUT" —and bring light. In some situations only the Creator can effect a change, or give us the hope to get us through.

Isaiah prepares us for today's gospel. He says believers will experience God's "shining" through, the manifestation of God in themselves. But also because of the light in them, others will "walk by your light." He is speaking of the Gentiles. God is reaching out to non-believers through the light that shines from believers. The gospel shows God's star lighting the way to the Jewish couple and their child where God is manifested among humans.

People who feel like outsiders this season may hear a note of hope in Isaiah. There will be light for the “nations”—a reference to the Gentiles. And Israel’s children (“sons from afar....daughters in your arms”) will gather in the restored Jerusalem. We must remember that Gentiles and even children were marginal people in the Jewish community after the exile. They had no or, at the most, minimal rights. On this Epiphany we may identify with these marginalized and hear a note of promise addressed to them and us. Hear the promise, “You shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow.” When we can not see a way out of relief on the horizon, we need to lean on this promise, “you shall be radiant...” This is not an empty promise, a pat on the back and an encouragement to “look on the bright side of life.” This is a promise from God, who created light where there was no light. People who were “other,” now can see in a way they couldn’t on their own and so they come to believe what could easily be missed in darkness and struggle—God is doing something that will evoke praise and thanksgiving.

Enter the Magi, the outsiders. (On this feast I try to read T.S. Eliot’s, “The Journey of the Magi.” I highly recommend it as a way of reflecting on the trip the magi made.) These are people who have made a journey, leaving behind the familiar in search of the truth. They do not have the rich Jewish prophetic tradition that would guide them. Strange, isn’t it, that King Herod has those sources. He asks the religious leaders and they tell him Bethlehem is the place from which the new shepherd of Israel, the “Christ”—messiah, will come. Those who were supposed to be religiously attuned don’t go in search of the one the prophets had anticipated. Instead, the Gentile magi, who are open to change, continue their quest.

Whatever the diligence of our previous religious observance, today is another gospel-illuminated day. We can put aside the past, let ourselves be guided by the gospel narrative and make our journey to the place where our truth is found. This is a day for people willing to let go of whatever holds our spirits back, start all over and make the journey in the direction of the one who gives us new vision. This is a feast of universality, where all are welcome to God’s saving embrace. Outsiders have nothing to fear.

We notice the travelers brought gifts reminiscent of Psalm 72: 10-11. Gold was a gift for royalty; myrrh for anointing the dead and frankincense was for the altar of sacrifice. The gifts harken to Jesus’ present and future. Our life is a journey home to God. Like the magi’s trip there will be detours, questions and risk along the way.

We know where we are going--- to eventual union with God. How and when, are unknowns; but through faith our destination is assured. Unlike the magi, we won't need to bring anything with us—just ourselves, our faith in Christ and---- gifts left on the road behind us. Our gifts to the Christ child are the gifts we give in response to others. Which, when he got older, is what he told us to do. These gifts were when we brought food to the poor, shelter to the homeless, relief to debtors, medicine to the sick and, most of all, the gift of our own presence standing besides the vulnerable and the outsiders. Today we celebrate that God has first given us a gift; Jesus was God's own doing, not our own, for the benefit of all the world. We realize and celebrate this gift by our enthusiastic celebration of the eucharist today, AND....celebrating our “epiphany faith” by generous gift giving in places we encounter the many disguises of Christ in the world.

We will soon be tossing out our Christmas trees, if we haven't done so already, cleaning up the house and getting back to “normal.” We will want to be careful that we don't forget that at the heart of this Christmas season is God's gift to us. We live and believe in the security that God's gift will always be there for us, our guiding star on our journey home. Meanwhile, on the way, we will continue doing the work of getting Christ more and more into our lives and into the life of the world. Epiphany is the feast of travelers, a reminder that through us Christ will continue to be born in the most unlikely places and travel with us into our world.

QUOTABLE

...the truth is that silence plays as central a role in Christian scripture as in Hebrew. In each of the gospels, the Word comes forth from silence. For John, it is the silence at the beginning of creation. For Luke, it is the silence of poor old Zechariah, struck dumb by the angel Gabriel for doubting that Elizabeth would bear a child. For Matthew, it is the awkward silence between Joseph and Mary when she tells him her prenuptial news, and for Mark it is the voice of one crying in the wilderness--- the long-forgotten voice of prophecy puncturing the silence of the desert and of time.

—Barbara Brown Taylor in, *When God is Silent*. (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1998) page 74.

JUSTICE NOTES

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.

-----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:.....

Glenn E. Chapman #0072845 (On death row since 11/16/94)

Daniel Cummings #0095279 (12/16/94)

Marvin E. Williams #0443375 (1/25/95)

---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,
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