

First Impressions 1st SUNDAY OF LENT -C-
Deuteronomy 26:4-10 Psalm 91 Romans 10: 8-13 Luke 4: 1-13
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Prenote: We have a new webpage address: www.preacherexchange.com If you ever miss an edition of these reflections, you will find it there. And much more-- for preachers, liturgists and those interested in preparing for daily and Sunday worship.

I'm sure none of us wants to get sick or suffer a serious disease. And I'm also sure we have our own list of the very worse diseases in the catalogue of serious illnesses, the ones we dread the most. In fact, some of us have a bit of superstition in us and we don't even want to discuss the subject lest the very thing we fear might happen to us. But let's consider one particularly poignant ailment for a moment----amnesia.

Imagine how awful it would be to forget our past; not to remember who we are and where we have come from. How painful and disorienting it would be to live in a cloud of forgetfulness; to have forgotten the experiences and relationships that have formed us; to forget who our parents and friends were, those who loved us and helped make us into the people we are. Such a serious amnesia would, of course, obliterate our past. But more. What good would the present be with no history and experience to draw upon? And what value would the future have without the past that equipped us to make wise choices about our future?

In some ways amnesia would be the very worse sickness to have because it would seriously damage our awareness of self and our knowledge of who we are. I don't know if such a serious or profound amnesia exists in the medical journals. But today's scriptures certainly address another kind of amnesia: the forgetting of who God is and what God has done for us. In the Deuteronomy reading Moses addresses the Israelites and tries to help them not have willful amnesia. He calls the faith community to remember God and keep alive the memory of the great deeds God did to deliver them.

Moses is addressing the community at a liturgical feast, probably a festival on which the people bring some of their harvest fruits and thankfully offer them to God, the source of these gifts. But Moses takes the opportunity to instruct them that

they should not only remember the gifts of God from the earth, but to especially remember the gifts God gave them in their past. Hence they are to recall and recite their history. It all started with their earliest ancestors, “My father was a wandering Aramean “ (perhaps this was Jacob). Their ancestors were wandering nobodies, nevertheless, God gave them the Promise Land and made them a great nation. Then, when they were enslaved by the Egyptians, God delivered them, “with signs and wonders.”

Moses doesn’t want the Israelites to become amnesiacs! They should celebrate their past because when they do, they will remember their God who was so gracious to nobodies and made them somebodies. By their remembering what God did in their past, they will have confidence that God will not abandon them in their present need or in their future trials.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. The Lenten season has begun and it is a time to follow Moses’ advice and remember what God has done for us. Isn’t that what Eucharist is, an “anamnesis”—a remembering, a memorial? Each time we celebrate Eucharist we recall the great deeds God has done for us in Christ—and more. We will hear Jesus’ words at this celebration, “Do this in remembrance of me.” It is not merely a looking backward so as not to forget what God did for us in the past. Rather, when we recall Christ’s self offering for us, when we “remember” him, he is made present to us. We are connected to his life, death and resurrection.

And that’s important because our lenten journey asks us to die to ourselves; our selfishness and sin; our egocentric goals and plans; our focus on our own immediate world to the neglect of the larger community. Such dying is impossible on our own. But we remember this first Sunday in Lent that we are not on our own for we have died with Christ in baptism and been given new life now and a promise of resurrection with Christ in the future. It’s good to remember the past: it gives us courage and vision for the present and hope for the future.

Our community remembers where we have come from and where we are going—with Christ and because of him. It is--- as we address God in the Preface today--- “truly right and just to give you thanks and praise through Jesus Christ your Son.” Want a different way to begin Lent? We can begin this holy season, not so much by beating our breasts, but by remembering what God has done for us and, in this Eucharist and in our daily lives, giving thanks. Let’s try that—all through

Lent.

Jesus was not an amnesiac; he did not have a problem remembering who God is and who he was. It is clear from the gospel narratives that throughout his life Jesus had the kinds of temptations Luke describes in today's gospel. Perhaps we moderns aren't comfortable with the notion that Jesus was tempted. Or, we have a sense that he, being who he was, could simply brush off these temptations the way we brush away a fly from our faces. But if the gospels say he was tempted, then he really was. The temptations were profound, not easily brushed away, for they were about his identity as Son of God. What did it mean to be in that kind of relationship with God, both in his personal experiences and in his ministry? How would he deal with temptation and be faithful to God and the mission God had given him?

The first temptation Jesus faced was about taking care of himself. He was hungry, so what's the big deal—why not make bread from stones? Why shouldn't the Son of God live a privileged life and avoid the pains and suffering the rest of us have to suffer, after all he is special, isn't he? But if he did take care of himself, using his power for his own convenience, what credibility would he have when he invited his disciples to deny themselves, pick up their cross and follow him? Well then, what about using the powers he had to feed the hungry by turning stones into bread or by multiplying bread? He did multiply bread and the crowds misunderstood who he was and what the miracle meant. They came looking for him to make him king. Those were not the kinds of followers he wanted.

The second temptation was also about how he could have lived as Son of God. He could have used his power over the nations of the world and accomplished his mission through force of armies and political influence. Israel always wanted to be a powerful nation in the world and Jesus could be just the one to lead them. But instead, he chose to be a true child of God and he placed himself under God's dominion and lived a life faithful to God's way—not the way of any worldly power.

The third temptation. Luke seems to place the temptations in order of importance and profundity. Once again he is confronted by a temptation about his identity as "Son of God"----"If you are the Son of God..." the temptation begins. If for no other reason, one would know that this is an important moment because Luke places it on the Temple parapet. (Jerusalem and the Temple are central in Luke's gospel.) If Jesus gave into the temptation and threw himself off the parapet, forcing

God to save him, then he could have resorted to calling on God to rescue him from all threatening and difficult situations throughout his ministry. He could claim his prerogative as God's Son and, in effect, test God to keep proving he was beloved and watched over by God. He would be asking God for special proofs of their relationship to reassure him every time the going got tough. We don't have such visible proofs at our beck and call and so Jesus, one of us, chose not to demand them for himself.

Can we trust God's love even when life knocks us off our feet? Can we continue to trust through long struggles when we wrestle with doubts about our own worth?... even when we want to say to God, "I thought I was your beloved child, how could you let this happen to me? Where are you now that I need you?" It's hard to trust God's power when we are in dire distress and our faith feels frail and God seems impotent or indifferent to our pleas. But Jesus stayed faithful and trusted God in similar circumstances. Because he could, now we can. The history of Israel and the words of the prophets show that Israel frequently gave into the very temptations Jesus encountered. Israel faulted many times in its vocation to be God's child. The people frequently turned away from God and sought its own bread; fell down and worshiped false gods and often put God to the test. We can't pile blame on Israel—we have done the same.

Let's not be amnesiacs. The gospel helps us keep our memory. It reminds us that we are the beloved children of God and God spared no expense on our behalf to assure us of our true identity. Because of Christ, we remember our past, experience him with us in our present and do not fear our future----where we will also discover him.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

QUOTABLE

You thumbed grit into my furrowed brow,
marking me with the sign of mortality,

the dust of last year's palms.

The cross you traced seared, smudged skin,
and I recalled other ashes etched into my heart
by those who loved too little or not at all.

----Elizabeth-Anne Vanek, "Extraordinary Times," quoted in THE LIVING
PULPIT, January/March, 2000, page 34.

JUSTICE NOTES

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:.....

Russell Tucker #0413011 (On death row since 2/21/96)

Kenneth Neal #0495163 (2/26/96)

Elmer R. Mc Neill #0528622 (4/9/96)

---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

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