

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT -C-  
Isaiah 43: 16-21 Psalm 126 Philippians 3: 8-14 John 8: 1-11  
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Both Israel in the first reading, and the woman in the Gospel, are in a similar predicament. The cards are stacked against them. They are being punished, or about to be punished, for their wrongs. No way out for either. Except God won't let the story end in tragedy for them—or for us. Listen first to what Isaiah has to say to Israel.

The Isaiah section dates to the time when the people of Israel were in captivity in Babylon. Though there were political causes for the exile, the prophet's interpretation for why they were there was that it was due to their infidelity. They had not been faithful to their relationship with God. They were adulterous, and had broken their “marriage vows” with their Spouse. We can see why this reading was picked today, for like the Gospel, it tells of infidelity and God's response.

Jews hearing Isaiah's words would immediately have their religious memory stirred. They would hear references to their past; how God had brought them out of Egypt and led them through the sea (“opens a way in the sea”). They would remember God's guiding them through the desert (“in the desert I make a way and in the wasteland rivers”). They would hear and remember that God had led their ancestors for forty years in the desert and cared for them with daily bread and water. Isaiah couched his language in terms so familiar to the exiles that, despite their hopeless situation, they would remember God's past deliverance and be stirred to believe that God could do it again. In fact, they are told, “remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new!” To put it another way, God is telling them “You ain't seen nothing yet!” No army or chariots or horsemen would be able to overcome this God. The exiles would be set free, no matter how impossible things looked.

Lent is drawing to a close. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and then we enter Holy Week. We may feel discouraged that we have been less than successful these past weeks in the resolutions for reform and prayer we made the first days of Lent. We made resolutions because we wanted to grown spiritually, to express our

sorrow for sin, to be in solidarity with suffering people in other parts of the world, to simplify our lives so that we would be more open to neighbor and God, etc. Not much seems to have changed since Ash Wednesday. Are we stuck in our old selves, fated to repeat old patterns of living? Are we, like the Israelites in exile, a long way from our true selves, our true homes? Yes, to one degree or another, we are. How do we get “home”? Will we even want to leave where we are and go at all? After all, journeys can be scary and hazardous, they take us into unknown places we haven’t been before. Will we like it? What sacrifices will we have to make to get there? Is it too late to begin, are we stuck forever in our exile?

This prophetic passage says God sees us in our exile and God knows where we are now is not our true home. God is not indifferent to our plight. So, God does again what God has done in the past. God calls us out of exile; tells us that a way is opening for us, and as difficult as it looks to cross, God will provide nourishment along the way so we don’t give up or grow discouraged. Perhaps we ought to trust what we are hearing Isaiah say to us and take the first steps toward change. Will not God come swiftly to help us take these first tentative steps? Will not God send others to encourage us and lift us up when we falter? The prophet promises this, our desert journey will not be without refreshment. We are told that we are a people formed by God, “hand made” and therefore precious in God’s sight.

What slavery must we leave? What journey must we make? Here are some that come to mind, the preacher can add others to fit the congregation. We need to:

- leave our exile of comfortable religion and see to the needs of those outside our circle
- be healed of past hurts that set us apart and keep us fearful of new relationships
- give up sinful patterns that only drive us further into exile
- stop being apart, suspicious or fearful of others who are different from us
- simplify our lives and stop using resources as though we were the only inhabitants on the earth
- put aside our fears of God and respond to God’s invitation to come away to the desert, the place of intimacy and dependence on God

The Gospel story also has a tale of God’s reaching out to those in exile. This time the gesture is made through Jesus, and it is to the woman caught in adultery as

well as to her accusers. Jesus has gone to the Mount of Olives, his retreat and place of prayer. He returns to the temple to teach--- “early in the morning”. John suggests in this reference to the time of day that a new day is dawning. As we heard God say in the first reading, “...see I am doing something new.” Jesus’ teaching will reveal the new thing God is doing for us.

The woman’s accusers are trying to trap Jesus. (It’s similar to the question they put to him in Luke about paying taxes to Caesar.) If Jesus judges that the woman should be stoned, he would suffer the wrath of the Romans who forbade the Jews permission to execute. If Jesus tells them to free her, then he can be accused of breaking the law of Moses. Instead he puts it back on the accusers, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Now they must pass judgment on themselves too. None of us is so terribly far away from our own record of wrongs that our memory can’t be nudged by such a question. Our exile, big or small, is at the fingertips of our consciousness. The Jews in exile also didn’t need much to remind them that they lived in exile, the signs of it were all around them. Same with us.

But here again God sends a word to those in exile. If only those scribes and Pharisees hadn’t left but instead had stayed there with the woman. Then they too would have heard the words that brought the woman and us out of our exile to our true home with God. “Neither do I condemn you. Go and from now on do not sin any more.”

One can’t read this Gospel story without noticing the gross injustice in it. The woman is caught, “in the very act of committing adultery.” What happened to her partner? Was he one of their buddies and so they let him get away? Did they set up the situation in the first place so as to entrap the woman and have an “issue” to bring before Jesus? Or is the woman being blamed, as women have been in the past, for being the temptress, leading the man to sin? One thing is for sure, the Pharisees have debased her, treated her as an object for their discussion and as a means to trap Jesus.

Besides everything else going on in this story, Jesus may have identified with her, for like her, he too is an object of harassment and entrapment. His opposition is looking for a way to bring charges against him. He too is going to be brought to trial. There’s another irony here. He doesn’t condemn the sin of the woman nor

the sin of the accusers. The guilty go free. But soon Jesus, who is innocent, will not go free. He will be found guilty.

Just as God is willing to put aside the sins of Israel's past and lead them out of exile, so is Jesus willing to put aside the woman's past and open up a future for her. "Neither do I condemn you. Go and from now on do not sin any more." He is offering her a whole new life; the same thing God is offering the exiles. In Lent the same offer is made to us. We can look at the past with Jesus and we can hear him say to us, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and from now on do not sin anymore."

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Aquinas Institute of Theology. *IN THE COMPANY OF PREACHERS*.  
Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993.

Fourteen essays by the faculty of a theological school on a variety of topics related to preaching. Includes the areas of liturgy, scripture, hermeneutics, religious language, revelation, spirituality, pastoral care, social and moral issues, and the poetic. A good follow-up to a "how to preach" book, this one will deepen the preacher's awareness of what is involved in preaching.

#### QUOTABLE:

Obviously, as in most everything else, there are some major differences among the various denominations as to how these teachings of Jesus are understood and applied. However, despite these differences, there is essential consensus on the major points. With few exceptions, all Christian denominations hold and teach the following principles:

All people in this world have equal dignity and should enjoy equal rights in terms of respect, access to resources, and access to opportunity.

God intended the earth for all persons equally. Thus the riches of this world should flow equally and fairly to all people. All other rights, including the right to private property and the accumulation of riches that are fairly earned, must be subordinated to this more primary principle.

The right to private property and the accumulation of wealth is not an absolute one—but must be subordinated to the common good, the fact that the goods of the earth are intended equally for everyone.

No person, group of persons, or nation may have a surplus of goods if others lack the basic necessities. That is the present situation within our world, where some

individuals and nations have excess while others lack the basic necessities. This is immoral, goes directly against the teachings of Christ, and must be redressed.

We are obliged, morally, to come to the aid of those in need. In giving such aid, we are not doing charity, but serving justice. Helping the poor is not an issue of personal virtue and generosity, but something that is demanded of us by the very order of things.

The laws of supply and demand, free enterprise, unbridled competition, the profit motive, and private ownership of the means of production may not be seen as morally inviolate and must, when the common good, justice, demands it, be balanced by other principles.

—Ronald Rolheiser

### **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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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

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