

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:

PRENOTE:

If you preach at daily Eucharist, or if you like to prepare before you go to Mass, we have just added a third help on our webpage, It is called, “The Word,” and is subtitled, “A Daily Dose of Dominican Preaching.” Dominican women and men, ordained and lay from around the world have recorded daily homilies which you can listen to on the webpage; or they can be podcasted with iTunes or with any automatic feed-reading software. (“The Word” is still new and soon will have preachings for the entire month.)

For all three aids to daily preaching go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com/> where you will find: “Daily Reflections,” “Daily Preachings” and “Daily Bread.”

When we are in dire straits, unable to help ourselves, we can be vulnerable to those who claim they can help us. The elderly, for example, are often preyed upon by charlatans who claim they can earn their “client” loads of money. So, the needy hand over their savings and the swindlers disappear, leaving their victims bankrupt. New immigrants, unfamiliar with the complex legal and economic systems of our country, also fall prey to the unscrupulous who, with a friendly demeanor and promise of help, cheat them of their meager funds. My grandparents’ generation told stories of some guards and officials at Ellis Island (the New York post of entry for overseas immigrants in the early 20th century) who offered to exchange the new arrivals’ money for American currency and gave them instead, fake paper money and wooden coins. Their victims were afraid to protest lest they get sent back. One result of the fraud some immigrants suffered was that they passed on to their children a suspicion of strangers who claimed that, for a price, they could help them. Or, as one financial expert said about a popular get-rich scheme, “If it sounds too good to be true—it probably is.”

All this comes to mind as I reflect on our Isaiah reading today. When you are desperate for help, you want to be sure the one offering to help really can and will. Who needs help? The Israelites in the 6th century BCE. The Babylonians had

seized their lands and taken the cream of Israelite society into exile. God seemed to have let the people down and broken a promise to protect them. Of course, God hadn't let them down; they had betrayed their covenant with God and made foreign alliances, for which, the Babylonians inflicted punishment—destruction and exile. Through Isaiah, God announces help for the decimated people; both for those in exile and for those left behind in Israel. But, for a people who felt let down and taken advantage of, a new word of promise is hard to hear. So, the One making the promise has to show credentials and trustworthiness.

Isaiah opens by laying God's credentials out on the table for all to see and examine. This is the God who performed great works for the people when they were in slavery once before. This is the mighty God who led them out of Egypt, parted the sea for them and destroyed their pursuing armies in the sea. This God's credentials are solid and God's word can be trusted. God is not just a past-tense God; a God of nostalgic recall. No, Isaiah says, speaking in the first person for God, "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see I am doing something new." The first Exodus out of slavery, as wondrous as it was, is being surpassed by a second. It is already in process, God has begun preparing the place of the former exodus, the desert, and is making it suitable for the journey. There God will spring up rivers for the returning exiles to drink; there, in the wilderness, the wild beasts shall not harm the battered people returning from their exile.

It is as if Isaiah is saying, "Check out God's credentials. When you were in Egypt wilting in slavery, God came to your rescue and guided you through the desert. Do not despair in your present condition for God is going to rescue you again. It was sin that got you into trouble in the first place; but God is putting all that behind and letting bygones be bygones. God is going to recreate you and make you, who are no-people, a new and faithful people. When this happens you will be a sign to others, an announcement of God's compassion, forgiveness and kindness." When those who were once broken and cast into exile are restored again and made a people, their new condition can't help but point to God, the obvious source of their liberation. Who else could have done this marvelous work? Who else should be praised?

We are drawing very close to our Passover, when Christ passed over from death to new life. Through our baptism we make the journey with him. We also believe that when we sin God, in the risen Christ, puts our sins behind and gives us new

life. What we exiles could not accomplish for ourselves, God does in Christ. God's promise in Isaiah, is fulfilled in Christ, "See I am doing something new!" God has the right "credentials." When we need to be set free from what holds us captive—sin, addiction, guilt, lethargy, discouragement, resentment and anger—we can turn to God. Christ is God's promise-made-flesh. Christ shows us that our God is not past tense or a character in a nostalgic, lovely, but fictional story. Instead, in Christ, God is doing something new for us—again and again.

What would Isaiah say to us modern exiles? He would direct our vision to Christ and say, "There, it's just as God said, 'See, I am doing something new!'" God has sent Jesus to us who has the right "credentials"—his life, death and resurrection prove that. We can trust him. Today's gospel gives us one more glimpse into how Jesus fulfills God's promises to us. Vulnerable people have a choice: we can turn to many places where there may be help for us; or, we can turn to Christ, the one whom we can trust because he has acted on our behalf. What he once did for us, offered forgiveness and welcomed us back, he will do again.

The woman caught in adultery is publically humiliated by the scribes and Pharisees and must have felt exiled, both by her actions and the disdain the religious leaders felt towards her. Jesus doesn't ignore or minimize what she has done for, after all, she has broken the community's code and violated its trust. For that matter, so has her unmentioned, un-caught and un-prosecuted partner. But Jesus finds even more reprehensible and objectionable the way the religious leaders are treating her, not as a person, but as an object of discussion and a test for him.

Jesus' invitation to the woman's accusers, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her," and their drifting off, "one by one," suggest they knew that they too were sinners. And so are we and because of our sin, we live in one form of exile or another. We can be like the elders. They were reminded of their sin and walk off. If we do, then we too will leave the presence of the one who had forgiveness to give and who chose to stay with the exile and offer her a way home.

Exile takes many forms and happens to those who:

- ignore the needs of the poor and exile themselves from the full community
- judge others and thus draw a dividing line between themselves and those they judge

- lie and are no longer trusted by others
- refuse to forgive, and are trapped in the past, not willing to respond to the present community
- cheat, steal and abuse the rights of others and thus offend the right order of the community
- act violently in words and actions and thus perpetuate forces that splinter and violate the human community
- withdraw from their religious congregation and diminish that community's ability to witness to God and serve others.

These are just some forms of exile. Once we choose to act against or ignore the well being of members of the community, how shall we return, who will heal the breach our actions have caused? How will the community be restored and we brought back from exile? Isaiah's words strengthen us. Through the prophet God encourages us, "See, I am doing something new!" We continue our lenten journey naming how and where we have exiled ourselves from God and one another. What deliberate choices, habitual actions and ways of thinking have driven us into exile? Once we admit the lands of exile in our lives we can join the woman standing before Jesus and hear him announce anew a word of forgiveness to us, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and from now on do not sin anymore."

This Lent, the God who constructed a safe road through the desert for the people to return from exile and Jesus, who offered forgiveness to the accused woman, offer us a word of direction, healing and forgiveness. Once we have reflected where and how we have exiled ourselves, we can admit our condition and need for a word from God; a word that calls us back from a far-off land.

Next, having experienced forgiveness, we must incarnate it by doing likewise for others. Isaiah would put it this way, we are to "announce [God's] praise." Now we are called to be forgiving and compassionate as God has been for us. God's forgiveness can empower forgiveness in us—if we let it.

Now we can be less judgmental; break the silence when other individuals or groups ("those people") are condemned by popular opinion; put aside offenses against us and give people another chance; include in our social and religious circles those who have been marginalized; stop blaming others for the problems in our society and do something that, even in a minuscule way, might help our community and

world; encourage and support those caught in addictions and destructive behavior to change and---drawing directly from today's gospel---- don't use religion as a support for our "righteous indignation" and condemnation of others.

QUOTABLE

Prayer to End Hunger

God, food of the poor, Christ, our bread,

give us all a place at the table.

Let us share the gifts of the earth that comfort us and nourish us.

The sacrament of your body: may breaking bread together

remind us that we are all equal in your eyes.

The sacrament of your blood: may sharing the cup together

remind us we that we must sustain each other.

Fill us with life, with hope and love.

Grace us with your bountiful goodness,

Let us taste and see that the Lord is good

and that we are one. Amen

(Education for Justice), from the newsletter, "Social Justice News," of the Oakland, Ca. diocese.

JUSTICE NOTES

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.

---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:.....

Shawn D. Bonnett #0037215 (On death row since 9/27/96)

James f. Davis #0510234 (10/2/96)

Melvin L. White #0434355 (10/15/96)

---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,
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