

**First Impressions 14<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

Isaiah 66: 10-14 Psalm 66 Galatians 6: 14-18 Luke 10: 1-12, 17-20

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

The use of the past, present and future tenses in our Isaiah reading today are clues to what was happening when the prophet spoke these words. There are both mourning and rejoicing in the text; but they are not happening at the same time: mourning is in the past and present; rejoicing in the future.

Jerusalem and Israel herself were decimated and the most valued and productive citizens taken off into Babylonian exile. From their exile people had mourned over Jerusalem and Isaiah had comforted them there. Now the exiles have returned to Jerusalem, a happy relief from years as slaves in a foreign and pagan land. But their return also had a sadness about it as they looked over the ruins of their beloved Holy City. What made things worse was that they believed they were responsible for what they saw; that their sin and infidelities towards God had resulted in their banishment and Jerusalem's devastation.

How painful it is to look upon the result of our misguided or sinful choices. We not only feel personal guilt; we can also see the pain and disintegration our acts have caused others. And more, for sin is not just a personal matter—sin is also a collective reality. A society's sin not only shows itself in its own divisiveness, violence and isolation, but it causes suffering in other, less powerful communities and nations. For example, environmental concerns are showing that affluent nations' abuse and overuse of natural resources have very visible and deleterious effects on poorer surrounding nations. It isn't hard to identify with the exiles who looked out on ruin and felt they had no one to blame for the ruination but themselves.

We are in the last chapter of Isaiah, in a section called "Trito-Isaiah." The final message addressed to the post-exilic citizens of Jerusalem isn't one of accusation, "look what your sins have done!" Instead, the oracle is one of hope and salvation and in very concrete images. Jerusalem will be restored; she will bring comfort to the defeated and deflated people who are gazing on her ruins. "For thus says the Lord...." That's how the impossible restoration will happen—God will be the one to restore Jerusalem to such a condition of splendor and wholeness that she, like a concerned mother, will be able to suckle her injured children. Jerusalem will console the inconsolable.

But there is a quick shift in the proclamation of good news. It isn't Mother Jerusalem who will

be a comfort to those who are presently mourning---it is God who, through Jerusalem, will be the Mother to her scattered and frayed children. When I peached at Sunday Eucharist in prison it was self-defeating for me to put too much emphasis on father images for God—despite the New Testament’s use of the title “Father” for the divine. From many conversations I had had with inmates, most of their experiences with their fathers were of life-shattering abandonment and brutality. But for the vast majority, their mothers remained constant, loving and forgiving, when everyone else had given up on them.

If I were peaching in prison this weekend, I would focus on this reading. But not just in a prison. Many people live in a variety of prisons in our modern world. They live with shattering memories of past abuse or violence in their homes; they suffer at the hands of demanding authority figures; their own fathers may have abandoned them or never shown affection for them, etc. They and we need to hear a fuller version of God’s Word—such as this Isaiah text which draws an image of God in maternal terms. We need to hear about a God who suckles us when we are battered; who doesn’t expect us to “shape up” to earn love; who wants to rush to pick us up when we trip on life’s broken sidewalks; hushes us when we try to explain ourselves and tells us she understands and then goes to the cupboard to get us a fresh piece of homemade bread.

All of which God is doing at this Eucharist. Listen to the maternal voice that speaks to us from the very opening of today’s liturgy in the penitential rite, saying to us, “Of course I forgive you. Hush and listen to my comforting Word and here, eat this special food and drink I have prepared for you.”

We know the first and gospel readings are chosen to pair with one another. We can read one to get some light thrown on the other. What I hear in today’s gospel is the tender and nurturing care Isaiah says God has, reflected in Jesus’ concern for the disciples he is sending out on mission. Is it stretching it to say that Jesus is the New Jerusalem who comforts and nurtures those in exile, who gathers the scattered, in whom you “shall find your comfort?” How shall he gather, restore and nurture so many and fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy, “The Lord’s power shall be known to God’s Servants.”? He will do it through his disciples. Luke tells us Jesus sends out seventy-two—and, as we also know, today he sends us out to follow those who were originally sent.

As he looks over the abundant harvest, instead of immediately sending the disciples out, Jesus directs them to pray to “the Master of the harvest to send out laborers.” Big moments in Luke’s gospel are placed in prayerful contexts. Those who come to serve will be the fruit of our prayer and discernment. A visit to any parish reveals that those who proclaim the gospel today do it in

so many diverse ways: serving at the altar in various ministerial roles; visiting the sick and imprisoned; planning liturgical celebrations; working on the budget committee; welcoming people at the church doors; answering phones in the parish office, etc. Today might be a good day to raise up these and many other ministers before the worshiping community, to celebrate their gifts and give thanks to God who richly answers our prayers for harvest laborers. God is in charge of the harvest and God sees to the supply of laborers. Those of us who are the “laborers” need to remember that ultimately we are not in charge, no matter how highly ranked or exalted we are in the community.

It is good to start with prayer because what lies ahead for the disciples has strong hints of danger and rejection: they will be like “lambs among wolves” and they will not always be well received. How could the disciples expect anything other than Jesus (the lamb of God) himself received? Because the road ahead will be rough going, the disciples will not be able to rely on their own resources or ingenuity. That’s why Jesus suggests the disciples, “carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals and greet no one along the way.” Having gone through airport security check points that require a driver’s license and cash for transportation to and from the airport, or bridge tolls if I am driving, I know I can’t interpret Jesus’ directive literally. Not in the twenty first century!

Nevertheless, I do sense that Jesus’ reminder about the difficulty of the task he has assigned his witnesses will require faith in him more than reliance on self. I also know that preoccupation with things can be a distraction for traveling disciples—whether we are itinerant preachers or heads of households with a marriage to tend to, children to raise and mortgages to pay. Each of us is sent; each has to respond in prayer as to where and in what manner we are sent.

The disciples are Jesus’ forerunners. Luke tells us that they are being sent “to every town and place he intended to visit.” They are his ambassadors. I note that the first words they are to speak are words of peace: “Peace to this household.” Their presence and their words immediately reflect the One who sent them, whom Luke reminds us from the beginning of his gospel, is the One who brings us peace with God and all men and women.

We just celebrated our freedom on July 4<sup>th</sup>. We want our nation to be like the city on the hill that Isaiah describes, where the lost and needy will find rest. That seems to be a partially fulfilled dream with just too many exceptions to the rule! God isn’t only concerned about fulfilling that dream in the next life. Rather, the prophets and Jesus want this time, place and this nation to reflect the reign of God. God’s rule is manifested whenever: we respect one another and try to live in loving relationships; work to bring about justice; reflect in words and deeds the image of our loving God. That’s a tall order, especially considering our bellicose

national situation. But a small place to begin would be to make the first words we speak be, "Peace to this household." We could say it in those words or, to be more "practical and realistic," we could say it in other words by not returning violence with violence; doing our best to diffuse anger and hatred; treating all people equally; respecting the rights of both the well-established and the newcomer; working to make neighborhoods and communities less violent; protecting the abused and the ridiculed. There are an infinite number of ways to say, "Peace to this household." We follow Jesus' guidance today and first pray that the Spirit accompany us to the places we are sent to announce the reign of God. We ask the Spirit to help us announce and be "Peace."

### QUOTABLE

In view of the risks which humanity is facing in our time, all Catholics in every part of the world have a duty to proclaim and embody ever more fully the "Gospel of Peace", and to show that acknowledgment of the full truth of God is the first, indispensable condition for consolidating the truth of peace. God is Love which saves, a loving Father who wants to see his children look upon one another as brothers and sisters, working responsibly to place their various talents at the service of the common good of the human family. God is the unfailing source of the hope which gives meaning to personal and community life. God, and God alone, brings to fulfilment every work of good and of peace. History has amply demonstrated that declaring war on God in order to eradicate him from human hearts only leads a fearful and impoverished humanity toward decisions which are ultimately futile. This realization must impel believers in Christ to become convincing witnesses of the God who is inseparably truth and love, placing themselves at the service of peace in broad cooperation with other Christians, the followers of other religions and with all men and women of good will.

---Message of Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2006

### JUSTICE NOTES

The most effective answer to this leadership vacuum would be a new era of political activism by ordinary citizens. The biggest, most far-reaching changes of the past century — the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement — were not primarily the result of elective politics, but rather the hard work of committed citizen-activists fed up with the status quo. It's time for thoughtful citizens to turn off their TVs and step into the public arena. Protest. Attend meetings. Circulate petitions. Run for office. I suspect the public right now is way ahead of the politicians when it comes to ideas about creating a more peaceful, more equitable, more intelligent society."

- **Bob Herbert**, *New York Times* columnist. (Source: *The New York Times*, January 25, 2007)

## 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:.....

- Michael Braxton #0043529 (On death row since 11/21/97)
- Jimmie Lawrence #0597164 (12/11/97)
- John Williams #0599379 (3/5/98)

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