

**“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:

I knew an inmate on death row whose mother stopped visiting him. Over the years, from the time he was a young teenager, he had given his family nothing but grief. He was in and out of trouble; in and out of jail. He just wore his family down, one by one they gave up on him. When he was convicted of murder and sentenced to death only his mother came to visit him on death row; his father had been abusive and abandoned the family when the son was 10. So, all he had left was his mother. Once a month she made the long bus trip from Los Angeles to San Francisco to visit her son at the prison. She didn't have much money and the monthly visits drained her resources, but for several years she loyally came to the prison and kept her son connected to the family by telling him the latest news about ---graduations, baptisms, engagements, marriages, sicknesses and deaths of the folks back home. When his beloved grandmother died, his mother waited to tell her son in person when next she visited. She didn't want him to find out the bad news in a letter or from a prison official.

So, when I heard from the inmate that his mother stopped visiting him I knew this was disastrous news for him. Mothers generally were the last to give up on their inmate sons. I also realized that the connections with the rest of his family he had through his mother were now severed. In effect, he had no one from whom he could expect a letter or receive a visit to remind him of his other life outside the prison walls. All he had left was who he was in prison, for all intents and purposes, the outside world ceased to exist for him and him for it. What he would learn about life beyond his prison world would come through week-old news magazines or from news programs on his tiny black and white television. I knew a lot of inmates whose mothers stood by them during very difficult times, during stresses that would cause others to say, “Forget about it!” and just drop away. But the mothers were always the last to do that and they almost never did. I hope I am not being stereotypical here, but a mother's love for her child is unique and intense—at least for most mothers and their children.

Israel was a puny nation; many times defeated, captured and enslaved. Under such dire circumstances, within a male-oriented world, where men were the symbols of

authority and power, it must have been consoling for the Jews to image God in masculine terms. In their vulnerability what they needed and wanted was a very powerful and protective God. Though they were weak they could at least lean on a God who would support them and deliver them from their enemies. The predominant images of God in the scriptures therefore are masculine. This was true in the Hebrew texts and it was picked up in the New Testament as well. Of course, a prime example of this masculine projection is Jesus' name "Father" for God. Jesus uses the metaphor of Father to describe the special bond he had and that now we, because of our faith in Jesus, also have with God.

But for my inmate friend and many like him in prison, describing God as a "loving Father" wasn't always helpful, for his father, after all, had beaten him, his brothers and his mother and then abandoned them. Just the word "father" would raise some pretty hard memories and associations for him. Male images of God may predominate in the scriptures, but they are not the only ones. Emphasis on the "maleness" of God has caused a narrowing of our imagination, severely limiting the ways we try to depict and address our limitless God in prayer. God is mystery and no one metaphor ever captures this mystery. It is possible by using other metaphors for the divine, we can have our imaginations expanded and even our hearts turned more fully to God.

Which brings us to today's Isaiah reading. Previously, in Isaiah 42, Isaiah describes God as a woman in labor, struggling to give birth to a new and free Israel. The people needed to hear about a "new birth" since their present lives were in exile and slavery. They would have to start all over and God was in labor pains to cause that to happen. Such an image of the divine brings God up close and involved in our struggles for a new life and a fresh start. God wants to deliver us from whatever is binding, limiting and restricting us. How approachable this God of Isaiah is, as we hear about labor pains on our behalf! How could such a God ever abandon us or be indifferent to us after having gone through so much for us?

Today's passage from Isaiah is another section about our mothering God. First the future liberation of Jerusalem is described. People mourned over the devastated city, but they will have reason to rejoice. The city will be like a mother to her inhabitants, offering them comfort and nourishment from her own body. What was once a destroyed place will become a place where the weak and vulnerable will find life.

The people were in exile and they saw that their miserable condition was a result of their own sin and their turning away from God. To give them strength in their despair, Isaiah applies the maternal image of God for them (“As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you....”), to raise the people hopes and draw them back to God’s loving embrace. Isaiah is just one example among the biblical authors of how the biblical writers are not as reserved, as we moderns, in their use of feminine images for God. Just as the male images present God as a powerful protector, so we have no less a powerful image in the One who scoops us “nurslings” into her arms to protect and comfort us.

These maternal images of God must have been a great consolation to the enslaved Israelites. The God who gave birth to them had not given up on them, despite their misdeeds and misplaced loyalties. Their exile would come to an end and they would find themselves nurtured in their frailty by a tender God, until they were once again a people dwelling in security and prosperity in their beloved Jerusalem. Nothing would separate them from God, not even their long years of exile in Babylon.

While the people are encouraged to look forward to a restored Jerusalem, a place that shall be a secure and permanent dwelling for them, the reading also evokes faith in the God they already have with them and on their side. God is offering peace and reconciliation to them—and to us. And what more tender and approachable image of God can we have than this mother-God who will put aside our wrongs and nurse us back to health and strength? I don’t know if my inmate friend’s relationship with his mother ever got reconciled; if he again knew the all-embracing love he once had from her. I’d like to think she didn’t give up trying to keep her son within the family fold. At one time he was important enough for her to make many sacrifices for him. I hope, for his sake, she tried just one more time and that he responded.

But Isaiah’s God does not give up on us. Earlier we read, “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even though she forget, I will never forget you” (49: 15). This is one of those, “How-much-more” scriptural passages. It recalls Jesus’ words, “If you with all your sins, know how to give your children good things, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask” (Luke 11:13). So too with Isaiah. God is a “how-much-more”

God, who loves us with the most maternal love and will never forget us.

Post script: If you decide to preach from the above material, this would be a very good time to contact the musicians for the liturgy to make sure the wording of the hymns doesn't contradict your message. So, make sure the hymns' words aren't masculine metaphors for God.

### **QUOTABLE**

"...public preaching and the Preacher should not be isolated from the simple, everyday and matter-of-course language of the congregation's faith, the language used by Christians in the world."

-----Jurgen Moltmann

### **JUSTICE NOTES**

A Catholic moral framework does not easily fit the ideologies of "right" or "left," nor the platforms of any party. Our values are often not "politically correct." Believers are called to be a community of conscience within the larger society and to test public life by the values of Scripture and the principles of Catholic social teaching. Our responsibility is to measure all candidates, policies, parties, and platforms by how they protect or undermine the life, dignity, and rights of the human person, whether they protect the poor and vulnerable and advance the common good.

Jesus called us to "love one another". Our Lord's example and words demand care for the "least of these" from each of us. Yet they also require action on a broader scale. Faithful citizenship is about more than elections. It requires ongoing participation in the continuing political and legislative process.

-----"Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility"---US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003, page 7.

### **POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES**

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine

what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

- Rex D. Penland                      #0318113    (On death row since 2/3/94)
- Frank J. Chambers                #0071799    (3/10/94)
- William L. Bames                #0020590    (3/10/94)

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