

First Impressions 2nd SUNDAY -C-

Isaiah 62: 1-5 Psalm 96 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11 John 2: 1-11

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

What happened? The Christmas season ended last Sunday, and we are well into the new liturgical cycle. During the special Christmas celebrations, we expected gospel selections chosen to match the season and feasts. But now we are in “Ordinary Time” when we would expect a flow of Lucan passages--- after all, this is the “year of Luke.” Instead today we hear from John’s gospel. If we give credit to the people who put together the Lectionary, that they knew what they were doing, then there must be some reason for giving us John’s story of the wedding feast of Cana today. We suspect that it has more significance than just providing us with a miracle story—of which there are more than enough in Luke to cover these Sundays. And one’s suspicions would be justified, for John’s Cana story is well chosen for today. It gives a perspective that will help us be even more attentive listeners to Luke’s narratives, which we will hear from next week till Advent.

Our first reading from Isaiah begins to develop a tone for us. It is so exuberant, you can almost hear its being shouted by a prophet who is carried away with delight; too overjoyed to hold his tongue. “For Zion’s sake, I will not be silent.” And he says it again, “For Jerusalem’s sake, I will not be silent.” Isaiah is like a person happily celebrating at a wedding. This is not an occasion for decorum and reserve, especially at a Middle Eastern wedding. Rather, it is a time for singing, dancing, hugging and kissing—and yes, a time for the best wine one can afford to toast the family, old friends, new friends and even strangers. Most of all, Isaiah is toasting the couple.

Who are they? Who are the lucky newlyweds? One of them is in dire straits; serious enough to be called, “Forsaken” and “Desolate.” That’s because Isaiah writes at the end of the exile in Babylon. The nation was no more. Forsaken and desolate are apt descriptions for the people’s condition. But a marriage involves a couple, and the other spouse is God, who makes a promise that must have seemed impossible to the downhearted people. God is going to change everything and give them a new name, “My Delight.” In the bible a name change indicates a new identity, a whole new present and future. It is like the change that happens when two people are married; it’s the beginning of a new life together. God is going to put aside Israel’s past infidelities and the “Builder” of the nation, the One who created Israel from nothing, is making new promises of love and offering the people a new identity. Isaiah is expressing the unbelievable thrill of this promise.

What more powerful image of God could the prophet present? For anyone or any nation that has sinned, Isaiah describes God as a faithful and passionate lover. There is no reason to shrink away from this God in fear, guilt or dread. Instead, he invites us to draw near to the God who loves us so intensely. The prophet uses wedding imagery to get his point across. It is no wonder then that John picks up on this theme in the beginning of his gospel in the Cana story. The choice of the wedding feast is such an appropriate gospel for us today. As we look ahead to all the stories we will hear or read this year, from any of the evangelists, the accounts of Jesus words and actions can be seen through this primary metaphor. From his baptism at the start of his ministry, right up through his death and resurrection, Jesus manifests God's intense love for us. Even when Jesus is stern towards the stubborn Pharisees and scribes, his is still the voice of one reaching out in love. "For Zion's sake, I will not be silent." Jesus speaks a very clear message: our God will go to any lengths to make and keep a covenant of love with us. And if we should break that covenant through our sin, God will not let go of us, but will come looking for us to take us back, and will, if we can once again say "Yes" to God.

Isaiah is the guest at a wedding, and he does get carried away in his exuberance. John does the same, though in a more reflective tone as he tells us about the "best wine" in Cana. Indeed, as we hear any gospel passages this liturgical year, we can imagine ourselves toasting God in gratitude, for in Jesus, God has served us a very good wine. Salute!

Cana is more than a miracle story. John clues us to that fact when he calls it "the beginning" of Jesus' "signs" and that it "revealed his glory and his disciples began to believe in him." It is as if we are celebrating the Epiphany, for once again a manifestation of God is before us. God is revealed to us in this sign. First Jesus' mother makes the situation known to him, "They have no wine." Then, after instructing the servers, "Do whatever he tells you," she discretely steps back. Whatever will happen will be according to Jesus' determination? He chooses to begin his ministry with this sign of water changed to wine. Not a little wine, mind you, but 180 gallons of the best wine! It is wine human beings in their need couldn't provide for themselves. It's the wine of reconciliation with God. It's the wine of a community celebrating its God. It's the wine of Jesus. It's the cup we raise at our Eucharist today as we say, "thank you" to our gracious God.

We couldn't do it on our own, so God did it for us—healed, forgave and welcomed us back. The six stone jars, meant for purification, were not enough. We can't think of our faith as just keeping rules and regulations; they can't purify us. Nothing we can do will save us. That's what God does, and the wine is the sign of that to Jesus' disciples and us. The jars were filled up with water, but it took Jesus to change everything for us and make us new. He is our best

wine and in him today we celebrate and make merry, as guests do at a wedding.

We “read the sign” today and we begin to see what is ahead for us. Last week we celebrated Jesus’ baptism in the waters of the Jordan. In our baptism we entered the waters that Jesus had made cleansing for us. So, this “first sign” tells us that God is giving us God’s very self in Jesus and will never take that love back. At Cana, John tells us, Jesus reveals his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him because they saw what others missed. While others might have attributed a great miracle to Jesus, his disciples began to see the “sign”—and it pointed to Jesus. God, our faithful spouse, offers us this love through many signs every day and we, who drink the wine of Christ’s presence at the Eucharist, resolve to look more closely to see the daily ways our Lover God is reaching out to us. Baptism enables us to see God’s glory in our world.

The head waiter remarks to Jesus that, “...you have kept the good wine until now.” [some translations have “the best wine’] That’s what our Eucharist is, isn’t it? In John’s gospel there is no narrative of the institution of the Eucharist. Perhaps because his was the last gospel written and so the account was already told three times. Yet, John’s is the most Eucharistic of the gospels and the “sign” at Cana certainly draws us to the Eucharist. Jesus’ first sign is about wine at a wedding banquet. We are here celebrating in our Eucharistic wine the blood that sealed the new covenant. We aren’t looking back to Cana—we are at Cana today.

God has saved for last the best wine—for Israel and for us—Jesus Christ. And this wine has produced great joy in us. God has surprised us. We don’t have to look to the past and wax nostalgic about “the good old days,” or “the old-time religion,” when we and our church were better. Rather, right up to the present moment God keeps offering us the best God has to give. That is our hope for the banquet we will one day share at the heavenly feast. It will be the best served last. But Cana was an ordinary place and the wedding happened on an ordinary day, for ordinary people. That should give us a clue about our lives. As young people say, “Check it out.” Check out the daily stuff of life and see Christ giving himself to us—in the love, care and presence of others. And check out this Eucharist. Christ is doing it again, giving us the “best wine last.”

Luke will be giving us other perspectives on Jesus’ words and acts this year. He too will help us see the meaning of Christ for our daily life. Like John, Luke will show us Jesus’ glory, God’s magnificent love shining through the ordinary—in the joyful and the painful, the celebratory and the disappointing moments we experience. Luke too will reaffirm God’s abiding love for us.

QUOTABLE

It is easy for sermons to become like the media's cameras, always focusing on the same characters, and not giving adequate play to those voices that have been buried by our constant attention to the chief players. One of the most significant gifts to preaching from liberation and feminist theologies has been the way they have helped us recover the muffled voices that are in the Bible and in our world. This act of recovery often breaks open texts so that the light of God streams from the familiar story with dazzling brightness.

—Thomas H. Troeger, *TEN STRATEGIES FOR PREACHING IN A MULTI MEDIA CULTURE*, (Nashville: Abington Press, 1996, page 97.

JUSTICE NOTES

The horror and perversity of war is immensely magnified by the addition of scientific weapons. For acts of war involving these weapons can inflict massive and indiscriminate destruction, thus going far beyond the bounds of legitimate defense. Indeed, if the kind of instruments which can now be found in the armories of the great nations were to be employed to their fullest, an almost total and altogether reciprocal slaughter of each side by the other would follow, not to mention the widespread deviation that would take place in the world and the deadly after effects that would be spawned by the use of weapons of this kind.

All these considerations compel us to undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude. The men of our time must realize that they will have to give a somber reckoning of their deeds of war for the course of the future will depend greatly on the decisions they make today.

With these truths in mind, this most Holy Synod makes its own the condemnations of total war already pronounced by recent popes and issues the following declaration.

Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.

The unique hazard of modern warfare consists in this: it provides those who possess modern scientific weapons with a kind of occasion for perpetrating just such abominations; moreover, through a certain inexorable chain of events, it can catapult men into the most atrocious decisions. That such may never truly happen in the future, the bishops of the whole world gathered together, beg all men, especially government officials and military leaders, to give unremitting thought to their gigantic responsibility before God and the entire human race.

—Vatican II's, "The Church in the Modern World," #80

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...

- Phillip Wilkinson #0438643 (On death row since 9/15/94)
- Malcolm Geddie #0143501 (9/29/94)
- Marcus Robinsin #0348505 (8/5/94)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C." The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and PDF) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer.

To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year C–CD” button on the left and follow the instructions.

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. (FrJude@JudeOP.org)

3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (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. "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, [Click Here](#).