

**First Impressions**    20<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY -C-  
Jeremiah 38: 4-6, 8-10    Psalm 40    Hebrews 12: 1-4    Luke 12: 49-53  
*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

It's amazing what a lasting influence our parents, grandparents and elders can have on us. If we were fortunate to have good role models, their lives continue to bless us even after they are gone and we are no longer children. (The reverse is true too; poor example and abuse from our elders can have a lasting deleterious effect on our lives.) It's not uncommon for even elderly people to refer to something a parent said or did that continues to guide them in the present. "My mother always treated guests hospitably." "Our father made sure he did his best at whatever job he had." Our prayers of thanks often include expressions of gratitude for those excellent role models who taught us how to live honest and good lives. Chances are these same people were the ones responsible for the faith that calls us together in worship today. During today's eucharistic celebration we would do well to express our thanks for "the cloud of witnesses" we have had in our past and present lives.

That's what our reading from Hebrews calls the faithful ancestors of the Israelite people—"so great a cloud of witnesses." The section from the letter we hear today begins chapter 12; but is really recalling the previous chapter. Chapter 11 describes faith as the "confident assurance concerning what we hope for and conviction about things we do not see." Then, starting with Abel, the author highlights key figures in Israel's history who modeled "confident assurance" in God—even when they could see no concrete signs to prove their faith had borne fruit. "All of them died in faith. They did not obtain what had been promised but saw and saluted it from afar" (11:13).

These heroic women and men had enormous influence on Israel's faith. But not just Israel's faith--- on our own as well. Hebrews reminds us that Christian faith has also benefitted because of the "great cloud of witnesses" who have "surrounded" us. In difficult times our own faith has been bolstered when we fixed our gaze on the witnesses in both the Hebrew and Christian testaments. Today, in gratitude, we also call to mind our own personal "cloud of witnesses." When we cast our gaze on them they help us keep, as Hebrews says, "our eyes fixed on Jesus."

That's the advice a mentor-priest friend of mine gave me more than once. "Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, Jude." He was one of the cloud of witnesses for me. He suffered from depression, and I knew he sometimes felt he was in a dark and deep pit. He was sharing with me what got him through his trials. "Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus." It wasn't until after he died that I realized it wasn't a platitude he read in a book or magazine. Instead, he had gotten it from the Letter to the Hebrews. It was God's Word that he repeated throughout his trials, and he passed what he had learned on to me. It's what gave him and continues to give me, the strength to run "the race that lies before us."

Is Jesus falling into a stereotype today? Has he turned into a fiery prophet on us? Today's gospel must be one of the hardest for us to read. It certainly feels like a sudden shift on Jesus' part from the gentle shepherd who told us just last Sunday, "Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom." Considering the stress we Christians already experience trying to practice what we profess surrounded by skepticism, rejection or benign neglect by others, do we really need to have Jesus suddenly shift gears on us and tell us about a hard baptism, fire on the earth and division even in our families? Maybe we should drop the gospel reading today and find one that is more consoling in these hard times!

Let's take a closer look: first, at the context for what we hear today. Jesus has just counseled his disciples to live in readiness for the return of the Son of Man (12: 35-48). Now he is spelling out, in dramatic images, the consequences of accepting or rejecting him. Jesus is indicating that his presence is a moment of crisis for those who hear him. Will they accept him and his way of life? His very mission, he says, is to "set the earth on fire."

Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem where the crisis for himself and his disciples will become most intense. If he had been a popular messiah whose life was more resplendent with worldly power, people would have had little trouble choosing to follow him. In fact, that's what first attracted crowds to him—until he started to teach them about his being rejected and that he would suffer. He has come to "set the earth on fire." Responding to his call each day is like having a fire burning in us; it's a refiner's fire that burns away the dross and consumes what is false in us. It is also a fire that ignites zeal for the Lord and his ways and makes us followers

who accept the difficult demands of discipleship. Jesus doesn't want followers in name only. He wants us "fired up" about him and the reign of God he proclaims.

Luke is writing for a church suffering persecution. Troubles for Jesus' flock started soon after his death and resurrection. They were expelled from their synagogues and even by their families, for their decision to be Jesus' disciples. It must have been comforting to them to know that what they were suffering was anticipated by Christ. They experienced that what he told them was true: Jesus didn't establish peace, but division and households were, just as he said they would be, divided because of him.

Throughout Luke Jesus has been promising peace. Earlier this summer we heard him appoint seventy-two to go ahead of him and proclaim to the homes they entered, "Peace to this house" (14<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Luke 10: 1-12). Those who accept Jesus into their lives do experience peace; but not without conflict and rejection, sometimes even from those closest to them. Jesus was a "fiery prophet" because he was consumed by his call to announce God's loving embrace for all. He knew there would be a cost to pay for his life's mission, but he continued on the road to Jerusalem where he would be seized, tortured and killed.

Can we name times when we suffered because of our faith? When we spoke up for what we believed in a family situation and alienated some who were closest to us? Have we "felt the heat" when, because of our faith, we spoke an unpopular position among co-workers and friends? Aren't there times when trying to live out our Christian faith has made us feel like foreigners in our own country, maybe even in our own parish community? Did we speak up on behalf of the poor, the alien, the prisoner, a pro-life position? Did we picket outside a prison on an execution day and receive hostile glares and words from some we even see in church on Sunday?

Being a Christian can make us feel like foreigners in our own land. It's as if we are carrying a passport from another place. And we are, for those who are first of all citizens of God's reign, Jesus' vision and values come first in our lives. All because Jesus has come to set a blazing fire on the earth and that fire burns already in us.

We look back again to our second reading and conclude that the heroic women and men who preceded us in faith, the “great cloud of witnesses,” had very difficult times themselves because of their faith. They have passed on to us the blazing fire that Jesus ignited in them by his life, death and resurrection. Through all their trials, they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus—and because of their example, we do too at this Eucharist and in our daily lives.

### QUOTABLE

In employing the Bible in preaching, the biblical text is a central ingredient and for this reason exegesis is a fundamental prerequisite. Yet it is just as important to remember that exegesis and proclamation are distinct activities. The transition from text to sermon is a natural transition., but it is a transition, nevertheless. It is as much of a mistake to assume that proclamation consists of doing exegesis as it is to assume that exegesis is essentially a form of preaching. Both exegesis and preaching may inform each other but they should not be merged into a single, undifferentiated activity.

---John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *BIBLICAL EXEGESIS: A BEGINNER’S HANDBOOK*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, ISBN 0-8042-0030-0, page 122.

### JUSTICE NOTES

***“In those days, the princes said to the king: “Jeremiah ought to be put to death; he is demoralizing the soldiers...” (Jeremiah 38:4)***

Today, as in the days of Jeremiah, those who speak out against the Iraq War are often accused of “demoralizing the soldiers”. Both our Pope and our US Catholic Bishops continue to speak out on the War’s futility and its devastating consequences.

### **US Catholic Bishops’ Letter July 17, 2007**

“...Our Conference is under no illusions regarding Iraq... There is no path ahead that leads to an unambiguously good outcome for Iraq, our nation and the world. Nevertheless, our nation must have the moral courage to change course in Iraq and to break the policy and political stalemate in Washington so that we can walk a difficult path that does the most good and the least damage in human and moral terms. Too many Iraqi and American lives have been lost. Too many Iraqi communities have been shattered. Too many civilians have been driven from their homes. The human and financial costs of the war are staggering.”

“Prior to the war ... our Conference of bishops, in solidarity with Pope John Paul II, repeatedly raised grave moral questions about military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of an invasion and occupation. Sadly, many of the tragic consequences we, and others had feared have come to pass.”

“ In November 2006... we noted with satisfaction that the Iraq Study Group shared our goal of a “responsible transition.” ...Its broad outlines mirror the benchmarks and new approaches that our Conference has advocated in promoting a “responsible transition” with U.S. troops leaving “sooner rather than later.”

“U.S. military action in Iraq has brought with it new moral responsibilities toward the Iraqi people. Our nation must make provisions for refugees who have fled their native land in search of safety and security for their families.”

### **Did you know?**

- Fourteen Catholic Members of Congress sent a letter on June 28 to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) calling on the Bishops to increase their involvement in efforts to end the war in Iraq. The Bishops have agreed to meet with the legislators.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

### **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:.....

- Nathaniel Fair      #0125241      (On death row since 5/18/99)
- Eric Call            #0542384      (5/22/99)
- Keith Wiley        #0654009      (5/27/99)

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