

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 20th SUNDAY -C-
Jeremiah 38: 4-6, 8-10 Hebrews 12: 1-4 Luke 12: 49-53
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Just in case any of us preachers thought preaching was getting easy or a routine ministry for us, today's gospel passage should shake us out of our late summer hammocks. And just in case our congregations find the stories about Jesus "sweet" or "homey," they too have a shock in store for them today. It's the middle of August, a vacation time for many. We gather physical and emotional reserves for the rapid slide into returning to work and the September going-back-to-school rush. While most people say they like their jobs, there are some who are only able to keep at them by looking forward to weekends and summer vacation. Our vacations seem to go by too quickly, minced up by time spent on a sick child, a parent's surgery, bad weather and other surprise events. Coming off the treasured break that a vacation can give, causes some of us into at least a mild depression. Many feel blue as we watch the free time rush by and another summer come to an end.

Why couldn't today's gospel passage give us all, preachers and congregation, a break? The lilies of the field, birds of the air or sheep and shepherd images would seem much more consoling (they aren't really, but never mind, I'm making a point here!); much more consoling than Jesus the fire brand spewing fire and forecasts of family division.

In the Catholic liturgy today the gospel minister will end this reading by announcing, "The Gospel (Good News) of the Lord." And the congregation, without a moment's pause, will respond, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ." I am thinking of starting my homily by asking them if they really want to praise Jesus in the light of what he just said to us... "I have come to set the earth on fire.... Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." (Strange punctuation in the English text, don't you think? Shouldn't there be an exclamation point? It sounds like it's said with a loud voice and with plenty of heat!)

For these past three weeks we have been in chapter 12 of Luke. Jesus has been giving advice and warning to his disciples as they travel to Jerusalem. Tensions are mounting against him and his band of followers and so he is preparing them for the inevitable. You would think his words would sound more comforting. Surely his disciples are feeling the tensions, the kind we experience when we are taking a disciple's stance. Instead, he tells them that he has not come to establish peace, but division. Are we as confused as they must have been?

Well he surely isn't going to reinforce an artificial peace, the kind of comfort and rest those in the establishment have. For those who see no need for God in their lives, or no need to rethink the comfortable notion they have of God (the God they credit as "blessing" them with their possessions and securing their exalted position over the rest of humanity), for these, their illusionary peace will be shattered by Jesus' coming into their holy city and by his preaching. God, Jesus announces, is not a divine rubber stamp of approval on their self-centered lives. Those who hear Jesus' message about a God who loves even the least among us, even those outside the confines of their comfort-based religion—these will be distressed if they accept Jesus. They will have to trade in their self-styled peace and complacency for the peace Jesus offers the least in God's reign. They will feel an initial unsettling as they move out the tent pegs to embrace a more inclusive God and a more diverse and maybe uncomfortable community of holy ones.

There are those who gain much from injustice in the world. Those of us in the first world are often so far removed from the consequences of our life styles that we just keep pursuing what our money and desires want. Many Americans often see no further than the edges of their manicured lawns. They are quite at peace as they continue to strive for their life goals. Enter today's firebrand Jesus, who attacks such superficial security, who calls us to God's peaceable dominion. Here a new set of values governs the community of believers, where the citizens do not purchase their worth and esteem before God; but are given them as gift when they admit their poverty and need for God..

Jesus will continue to preach and live the peace given only to those who love and strive to live in a community of concern for their sisters and brothers; who work to tear down walls of division created by a near-sighted world. Those who hear his message are open to the real peace he is offering. They will have to make serious personal and social changes in their lives. In making these adjustments, some of which will be major and require enormous shifts in the way they have been living, these will alienate those closest to them--- even their own family members. In the close-knit Mediterranean families of Jesus' time, his message of family splintering, because of him, must have been very hard to hear. These divisions and conflicts existed in the early Christian community for whom Luke wrote his gospel. In the midst of the turbulence caused by their decision in favor of Jesus, these seeming harsh words of Jesus were really reassuring. "See," they would have said, "he warned us his fate would be ours as well." They would feel assurance in seeing their pain in the light of his words to them.

In today's first reading, Jeremiah will be opposed by royalty and even other prophets because he was predicting the fall of Jerusalem. As a consequence, the royal household turned on him

and threw him into a cistern. They and their false prophets did not want to hear the truth. They prefer a peace of their own making, and they want to make an alliance with the powerful Babylonian empire. Their peace failed them, they should have listened to the message of Jeremiah, which would make them initially uncomfortable, but which would bring them the peace God wanted for them. Such too was Jesus' mission: to speak unpopular but true words to a demoralized people. (We detect the parallels between Jeremiah and Jesus and why the first reading was chosen to go with today's gospel.) Jesus called them from their self-destructive independence to a God who would welcome all—powerful and weak; rich and poor; religious righteous and religious outcast; male and female; slave and free. The peace he offers does not come without cost. Accepting him and his way will even separate us from our old self---perhaps the most painful division we must suffer.

The opening verses of today's gospel (vv. 49-50) are unique to Luke. In them we find the symbol of fire. No symbol can be reduced to a simple explanation, and so the biblical image of fire is multivalent, it speaks in many ways and on many levels. Just to suggest a few of its connotations---- Fire represents the divine holiness and action. God's word is like fire (Jer 23:29). Theophanies feature fire, remember Moses and the burning bush? Fire leads the Israelites at night across the desert (Exodus 13: 21-22) and was present on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18). A fire burned constantly in the temple to signify God's special presence there and offerings to God were consumed in the fire at the temple's altar. Earlier in Luke, John the Baptist spoke of Jesus as one who would, "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (3:16) Luke unites the Spirit, baptism and fire again in Acts when the disciples are baptized with the Holy Spirit and fiery tongues. All of these meanings and more, are present when Jesus speaks about setting a fire on the earth.

Jesus is anxious to see his mission accomplished. In Jerusalem he will undergo a baptism of pain and death when darkness will reign. (At his crucifixion, Luke says, "darkness covered the land." v 23:24.) But his death will strike a fire that will burn in the midst of the community of believers, and no power will be able to overcome it. The fire of the Holy Spirit will guide the new pilgrim people to their divine destiny. Unlike the flame in the temple, which was extinguished when the temple was destroyed, this flame will never go out, will always burn away sin and show the way to holiness. Jesus yearns for that fire and his death will ignite it, set it burning in the world.

The preacher may want to pick up on Jesus' zeal in this passage. It is fiery and passionate, showing his desire to faithfully and zealously finish his mission. So, where is that flame in modern believers? Be careful as you pose this question. Are we looking for it only in the fiery figures of our day? Do we think there are not enough of them and so are inclined to belittle

modern believers?

What about the flame of constancy that burns in faithful Christians all around us? The aged and dying woman still fingering her beads, saying the name of Jesus over and over as she dies surrounded by her children; the theologian spending long and solitary hours in study and writing; the father holding down two jobs so his daughter can go to college; the teenager resisting the tidal wave of daily temptation; the minister raising her children and still spending long hours tending her flock; the young couple choosing low teachers' salaries because they want to "make a difference in the lives of the younger generation; the priest or deacon, spending a long day visiting the sick in the hospital and still finding time for some prayer and study for the next preaching.

You get the idea: look around your community and name the flame of God's presence. It's easy to excoriate a community for not having a burning faith or not carrying a bright torch of zeal. But with the eyes of faith, we will notice the fire is far from out. It burns steadily in our community, and we witness its effects in many marvelous, though frequently quiet and anonymous ways. It's the preacher's job to point out the fire Jesus started, to indicate where we can look to see evidence that it still burns. For in naming the flame, we are naming God's active, holy and cleansing presence in our midst. So, it turns out, we can say, "Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ!," when we hear today's gospel!

JUSTICE NOTES:

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

UNITED STATES' CATHOLIC CONFERENCE "PRIMER" ON FOREIGN AID

In a March 28, 2001, testimony, the United States Catholic Conference identified six areas of foreign aid requiring specific attention. Their conclusions may serve as a primer for all Catholics. What follows are excerpts from the testimony:

1. MORE AID TO SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA.

Sub-Saharan Africa is suffering intensely from the consequences of severe poverty, and current efforts are barely able to maintain the status quo. Poverty in Africa shows itself not only in starving children and families, but also in lack of primary education opportunities, particularly for girls, lack of economic infrastructure, lack of proper health care, environmental degradation and the spread of communicable diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS.

2. DEBT RELIEF

Last year Congress provided full funding of the Cologne commitment to multilateral debt relief.

This was an act of leadership and moral responsibility. We ask for continued funding of the U.S. Cologne commitment through an appropriation of \$240 million for fiscal year 2002.

3. DECREASED EMPHASIS ON POPULATION PLANNING.

Appropriation for the current year show that the United States gives excessive weight to population planning programs as a part of development assistance and global health programs. The United States dedicates nearly one-third of the funds identified for development assistance to population planning, or four percent of the total foreign aid budget. Most other donor countries, in contrast, give less than one percent of their foreign aid budgets to population planning. We also emphasize the longstanding international consensus rejecting the use of abortion as a method of family planning as well as the use of coercion in population programs.

4. PLAN COLOMBIA.

The U.S. relationship to Colombia should not be defined primarily by the drug problem. The Church in Colombia has insisted on the absolute necessity of finding a peaceful, political and negotiated settlement to internal conflict. It is essential to achieve effective balance between assistance to the armed forces and aid that more directly addresses the root causes of the conflict and assists the victims. This approach would mean that all aid would be strictly conditioned on human rights criteria, and that support would be given for programs that advance the peace process. These programs should include alternative crop development, judicial reform, and humanitarian aid to the displaced.

5. THE ROLE OF FAITH-BASED GROUPS AND IMPROVED DELIVERY OF AID.

We would propose that the following six characteristics are needed for successful aid programs:

- Long term funding commitments allowing multi-year and multi-country grants
- Programs designed and implemented with significant participation of the local community and the goal of building local capacity
- Programs focused through specific policy commitments but without undue reliance on earmarking, giving more decision-making authority to those closest to the poor
- Effective monitoring and evaluation
- Streamlined administration and reporting

6. CALL FOR DIALOGUE AND RESHAPING FOREIGN AID.

We conclude this section with a call for continued dialogue on reshaping foreign aid policy. A discussion on policy, purposes and priorities should preceded a debate on institutional structure and methods of aid delivery, so that delivery systems will be designed to meet a set of carefully crafted and coherent policy goals.

OUR GOALS ON FOREIGN AID:

- Pursue a dialogue on foreign aid policy, purposes, and priorities.
- Make poverty reduction a key goal of U.S. Foreign aid.
- Give priority assistance to sub-Saharan Africa.

- Increase U.S. development aid substantially so that our country bears its fair share of the international responsibility for our poorest neighbors.
- Make foreign aid more effective in delivering needed assistance to the poorest people in the poorest countries.

(This summary provided by Carmen Mele, OP, promoter of social justice for the Southern Dominican Province. It appeared in the province's newsletter, OP JUSTICE OUTLOOK, June 2001.)