

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 26th SUNDAY -C-

Amos 6: 1, 4-7 Psalm 146 I Timothy 6: 11-16 Luke 16: 19-31

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The Amos reading is a natural complement to the Gospel reading. The shepherd/prophet Amos is speaking to the rich and powerful of the land. They had the lion's share of the earth's riches. At the same time they believe they are receiving special benefits from their relationship with God. Amos acknowledges Israel's unique place; but also claims this will be the very cause of its downfall, since Israel did not fulfill its special mission to be the elect. Previously (5:20), Amos had spoken of "the day of the Lord." The rich and comfortable looked forward to it as a moment of joy and final triumph promised by God. But Amos says that "day" will be a day of gloom--- exactly because of the way the rich have behaved.

Notice the poetic images depicting the contrasting states of rich and poor: the rich have "beds of ivory" (vs. the usual straw pallets of the poor); the rich eat meat (while the poor rarely have it); the rich have time to compose songs---ironically compared to David's songs-- (while the poor have no free time.) What the people saw as signs of political stability, Amos says is intolerable to God. His words drip with disgust. These very rich will be the first to go into exile; and unfortunately, the poor will suffer too. The preacher might make use of contemporary images to contrast the appeals of our society to comfort, bodily extravagances, "the good life", etc. and show how we are seduced by the images that appear on tv and movies that promote this extravagance. Meanwhile, the poor keep growing in number—the number of uninsured in our country had grown by a million to 41 million. Careful, do not just get angry, or accusatory here. The reason for this prophet's strong oracle is to awaken people from their false illusions about God and what we call "blessings." This reading is a wake up call and in that, continues to show God reaching out to us through a prophet of "doom and gloom."

The rich man in today's parable didn't do anything wrong. He broke no commandments as he daily passed poor Lazarus at his door. But he does fall under Amos' condemnation of the "complacent in Zion." This man's life was spent enjoying the benefits of his wealth; he wore the latest fashions and sat down

to his gourmet meals—each day. All the while Lazarus was within reach, longing for the scraps from the table.

Last week's gospel ended with Jesus' instruction that we can't serve two masters, God and mammon (wealth). Indecision over our priorities and inaction about our choices are not an option. If we don't use what we have wisely and with these scriptures in mind, we fall under Amos' indictment against our complacency. After last week's passage, a few verses are skipped (14-18) as today we pick up the Lucan sequence. In the intermediate verses, omitted today, we learn that the Pharisees, "who were avaricious" (v. 14), mocked Jesus. So, he directs today's parable at them. It continues the theme of chapter 16: the dangers of wealth in its various forms. Earlier in this gospel, Jesus told us that the poor are blessed (6:20) and the rich will receive their woes (6:24). Believers must take to heart Luke's strong suspicions and reservations about wealth and the concern he shows in his gospel for the poor.

The poor are born, live and die in anonymity. Manufacturers of tombstones and monuments for cemeteries have a sales pitch that says, "remember your loved ones for the ages." If you can afford it. No one inscribes the names of the innumerable poor of the ages on any granite markers. They die and are forgotten. However, through a literary device in his story, Luke has done an unusual thing. He has named the insignificant poor man; he is Lazarus. It is as if Luke is saying, "There! The ages will not forget this poor one." He implies that all the wealth, recognition and esteem of others are merely temporary--- in effect, they have no lasting value. So, why hoard them and risk being forgotten with them? We are invited to reflect upon what and whom we have pinned our hopes. Lasting or fading?

Once again, through this parable, Jesus has taken the side of the poor and vulnerable. Luke has shown that Jesus was of lowly birth. For example, his parents offered the sacrifice of the poor when he was presented in the temple. Those following Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem, are learning that having material possessions should cause a disciple to be cautious. We learn that while possessions are not evil in themselves, they are dangerous and must be handled wisely. The rich man takes no such careful scrutiny of what he has and how he uses it. His wealth is only for himself.

The details of the parable are poignant indeed. Who can forget them? The dogs of the street, who lick Lazarus' sores, have more pity than the rich man. Jesus' listeners would have been taken up short hearing this parable since his contemporaries thought that riches were a sign of blessings from God. (It should make us cautious the next time we go about giving thanks for our "blessings." What blessings and where did they come from?) In a similar vein they would have thought the poor man had sinned and his condition was God's punishment for his misdeeds. The parable throws those tidy and convenient thoughts out the window! It turns out that God has noticed the poor, while the rich, as Mary says in her Magnificat (1:53), God has sent away empty. How ironic this parable is. Those for whom monuments are constructed while they live and after they die—are forgotten. While the poor, who live and die anonymously, are remembered by name. They are valued in God's realm and get an up-close seat, "in the bosom of Abraham."

The utter density of the rich man is shown by his requests in the next life. He wants Abraham to send Lazarus to him with a drop of water. Lazarus is supposed to be his servant! Then he wants Lazarus to be a messenger to his five brothers back home to warn them what awaits them. (Did he have any sisters? Did they count in his eyes?) This man is so insensitive that even in the torments that are a result of his previous callousness, he still does not see how he missed Lazarus. The poor man continues to be insignificant and the rich man doesn't even address him directly. But Lazarus is not some anonymous butler to run the rich man's errands in the next world.

What also startles the listener is that the usual norms for reward and punishment are missing. The rich man isn't being punished for anything wrong he did; nor is Lazarus rewarded for a virtuous life. The details of their moral behavior are not mentioned. All we know from the parable is that one lived an isolated life of luxury; the other one of dire need. And God has set things right.

Let's not make the New Testament more sensitive to the plight of the needy than the Hebrew text. Both texts called for justice and care for the poor. But if the rich man shows any concern at all, it is just for his brothers. He wants them to know the fate that awaits them too, if they live as he did. He is told by Abraham that he and they already have been given all they need to know. The teachings about the poor are not something new; they are in the religious tradition of the Jews. "They

have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.” We too have sufficient information about where our priorities should lie. We cannot be like the rich man and profess surprise and ignorance of what we should have known and done. Last week we were urged to make a choice between God and mammon; this week we can see a choice for God means actions on behalf of God’s beloved poor. Amos warns us today about complacency. We can not go merrily along our own way; otherwise, the parable says, there is going to be a moment of anguish and regret.

It’s not the wealth that is condemned, it’s the complacency. We may not be wealthy, but still we can be indifferent to others. When our own life runs along smoothly, we can lose awareness and sensitivity to those in need, especially to those in our immediate surroundings. Lazarus, after all, was at the man’s door. But through television and the internet, the whole world is at our door. While we can’t address all the needs we become aware of, we cannot use that as an excuse for inactivity.

We Americans don’t have a strong communitarian sense. I may be guilty of generalizing here, but, for example, Africans I have known seem to have a stronger sense of sharing personal goods than we do in our culture. I also found this to be true among the poor in Appalachia. People with barely anything for themselves were extraordinarily generous with what little they had when another family was in need. We, on the other hand, are educated in many ways from childhood to be strong individuals. We learn that by hard work we get our rewards in goods and social standing. Thus, we might conclude that “I have earned what I have, let others do the same.”

This parable reminds us of the deep links we have to others. The bible consistently tells us that while God may have addressed some individuals, they were not called primarily for the benefit of themselves, but for a people. God made a covenant, not with individuals, but with a people. The rich man and Lazarus were part of God’s people; something the rich man ignored or forgot. In effect, he broke the covenant with God and we learn of the consequences of such a choice. The man, not God, created the unbridgeable gap between himself and Abraham and Lazarus.

The God who speaks this parable to us at this liturgy is like a mother concerned about her children. You can hear her wondering: “How come the few with so

much are so indifferent toward so many of their sisters and brothers who are without? Don't they know they are a family--- my children? Don't those who spend so much on themselves to find happiness realize that they would be truly happy if they provided more for others? There would be fewer divisions and more harmony if my children would just live as the brothers and sisters I created them to be!" The parable opens our ears so we can listen to our concerned Mother. She knows best.

QUOTABLE

In spite of brevity, the [gospel] account is rich in detail. The sharp contrast between the rich man and the poor is vivid and evocative. This is true even in death: the rich man died and was buried; the poor man died. The contrast continues into the next world. The preacher will want to avoid taking the description of the fates of the two men as providing revealed truths about the hereafter and divine answers to questions about the state of the dead. The story simply conveys popular beliefs of the time and is not give by Jesus or by Luke in response to interest in what happen to people immediately after death.

-----Craddock, Fred B., Hayes, J. Holladay,C., Tucker, G., PREACHING THROUGH THE CHRISTIAN YEAR. YEARS A, B AND C. Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1992, p. 422.

JUSTICE NOTES

This quote can be applied to the Lazarus story about sumptuous food and neglect of the poor.

"Since 1960 the world population has doubled and patterns of food consumption have changed markedly. In most parts of the world, people get their basic nutrition from corn, wheat and rice. In the United States, however, the grains are fed to livestock and the animals are eaten for protein. In order for grains to be fed to animals and food to be processed vast amounts of oil for energy are consumed for planting, processing, shipping and preserving food. Following the farm-factory model of the US, Mexico now feeds 45% of its grain to livestock, an increase of 5% since 1960. In the same time, Egypt sent for 3 to 31% and China went from 8 to 26%. Experts estimate that if the rest of the world begins to eat the way the US eats, all known fossil fuel reserves will be exhausted in 7-10 years —Richard Manning, "The Oil We Eat: Following the Food Chain back to Iraq"

(Harper Magazine, February 2004. Quoted in the Intercommunity Center for Justice and Peace newsletter, "From the Center," Spring, 2004

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:.....

Stacey A. Tyler #0414853 (On death row since 11/14/95)

Davy G. Stephens #0388922 (12/20/95)

Russell Tucker #0413011 (2/21/96)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

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. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>
(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. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "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, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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