

First Impressions 3rd SUNDAY -C-

Nehemiah 8: 2-4a, 5-6, 8-10 Ps. 19 1 Cor. 12: 12-30 Luke 1: 1-4, 4: 14-21

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

If we are at a morning Eucharist today chances are we were greeted with a “Good Morning,” not once but several times already. People at home, unless we live alone, greeted us that way as we arose and got ready for church. When we approached the church, we were greeted by familiar faces who called out “Good Morning,” and we responded in the same way. If the greeters at the door of the church were doing their job, or rather, their ministry, then they also wished us a “Good Morning” when we entered church. When we say, “Good morning,” we are wishing people a good start to the day; we are wishing that the whole day goes well for them---from start to finish.

It is as if we were starting life all over again and we want the day to start well for ourselves and others. Each day is a new beginning and most of us probably make early morning plans and resolutions about what we will do that day. As Christians our baptism gives us a particular view of ourselves, our neighbors and God. That start of a day offers us another opportunity to try again to live well our vocation as followers of Christ. We are already baptized disciples of the Lord, yet we have further to go on our Christian path. We have more to learn each day about what it means to have accepted Christ as our savior and how we are to serve him as we journey with one another on the ever-changing path of life. Each day brings its special challenges and none of us members of the body of Christ, as Paul describes us in our second reading, can claim to have perfectly served the Lord. So, with a Christian slant, we hope for a “good morning,” a chance to once again say “Yes” to being Christ’s disciples. Our baptism was not the end of the journey; it was just the beginning.

Luke says he has written his gospel for us “unfinished” Christians. Today’s passage is composed of two separate segments from Luke. The first is his introduction to his two-volume work, the gospel and Acts. He starts his gospel by telling us why and to whom he is writing. He addresses his work to Theophilus, who may have been an official in the government (“your excellency”) recently converted to Christianity. But Theophilus means “beloved of God” and so we easily put ourselves on the receiving end of Luke’s writing. We, like Theophilus, are already Christians, but we need to learn more about the consequences of our faith. As we face the beginning of each day, what does it mean for us to be “Theophilus” or “Theophila”—a beloved of God, called to serve Jesus Christ?

Luke intends to help us for, as he says, he has “investigated everything accurately anew” and has written “an orderly sequence.” His purpose is that we may “realize the certainty of the teachings” we have received. The English word “realize” has a few connotations and is worth a moment’s reflection. It can mean, to comprehend fully or correctly. That’s what Luke wants for us, a fuller comprehension of the truths we have already accepted about Christ. “Realize” also means to make real or actualize. That takes our faith beyond the comprehension stage to the doing stage. What we comprehend we must act on! Another sense of “realize” is to make realistic. Is our faith just an ideal, a nice idea, or is it something we can show by our lives to be a “real” way to live in the world? Each day we hope to make “real” again our living of the good news. And what does that mean, living the good news? Jesus helps us understand the consequences of the gospel by what he says at the synagogue in Nazareth. There he announces his mission and for those of us who follow him--- his mission is ours.

Before we go on, let’s glance back to our first reading. It may help us get deeper into today’s gospel. The Nehemiah selection narrates the renewal of the covenant between God and the people. The time is after the Babylonian exile, and the people have returned to their land from slavery. What they had known---is no more--- for their land, its cities, especially Jerusalem and the Temple, are destroyed. Nehemiah’s task was to rebuild what was ruined—restore the nation, and, in particular, rebuild Jerusalem and its Temple. But this rebuilding had to be accompanied by the spiritual renewal of the people. The priest Ezra proclaims to the assembled people the rediscovered Torah of Moses. The renewal begins when Ezra “opened the scroll”; blessed God and read the Word of God to the people. The community received the Word with reverence, and the people are instructed not be sad because of their past offenses, but to celebrate with a banquet of rich foods and sweet drinks. They hear the Word and respond “Amen, Amen” to it. The relationship between them and God is again affirmed in a new covenant—God will be their God, and they will be God’s people.

That is what is offered to us each time we hear God’s Word and celebrate the sacred banquet, our “rich food” and “sweet drink.” We hear the Word, are aware of our failure to live up to it. But forgiveness and renewal are offered to us again at the Lord’s banquet. Whatever the time of the day, it is a “good morning”, and we can start again, thanks to the God Nehemiah describes as, “your strength.”

Luke tells us that Jesus returns to Galilee “in the power of the Spirit.” His gospel will emphasize the role of the Spirit in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus visits a people who, as in the days of Nehemiah, need to be renewed in their covenant with God. The prophet told the returning exile, “The Lord is your strength.” Jesus comes to a people who again need to be renewed and strengthened in their covenant with God. Once the renewal happens, what will keep them and

us from breaking it again? Prior to his coming to Nazareth, Jesus was empowered by the Spirit at his baptism and by that same Spirit he was able to overcome temptation in the desert. Jesus comes empowered by God's Spirit, and as Luke will tell us in Acts, the same Spirit is given to us to be our strength in an unbreakable covenant with God.

In the synagogue Jesus was given the scroll and deliberately found the quote from Isaiah (61: 1ff., 58:7ff) that would identify himself and his mission. I write this before the president of the United States address the nation in his yearly "State of the Union Address." Jesus uses the images of the prophet Isaiah to tell us who he, our leader, is and what he is doing for us, his "nation." His words also describe who we are to be to the world, most especially to those who are forgotten in our society and held captive by cycles of poverty and oppression in our nation and the world. I would hope that in his speech to the nation and the world, the president would steer us away from our individualistic goals and unite us as a nation that pursues justice for all people. Isn't that our deepest hope for our land, whether we be Republicans, Democrats or Independents?

The Spirit empowers Jesus to put flesh on Isaiah's prophecy. What Isaiah promised is fulfilled in Jesus and so all people will be beneficiaries. Then, with that same Spirit empowering and guiding us, we will make real what Jesus began to announce that day in the synagogue: the naked will be clothed; the hungry fed; prisoners visited, captives set free and the blind given sight. In other words, the poor will have glad tidings announced to them, not only in words, but in deeds as well. We will not only wish them a "Good Morning," we will find ways to make it a reality in their lives.

Jesus wasn't speaking about some event that would be happening in some distant future or in the next life. In Luke, there are many references to "now" being a time of fulfillment. In the present moment God is visiting the people and setting them free. Jesus makes a brief comment after he proclaims the scriptures to the assembly, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." (If nothing else, it certainly must be the shortest sermon ever given by a Christian preacher!)

Today in our hearing the present moment is charged with God's presence in the Word. God says that today we are being set free, and we enjoy the special favor of our God; the light of God's Word is dispelling our darkness and continues to set us free. What we have experienced now, we must do for others, "proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

John F. Kavanaugh, THE WORD ENGAGED: MEDITATIONS ON THE SUNDAY

SCRIPTURES, CYCLE C. New York: Orbis Books, 1997. Paper, ISBN 1-57075-137-4.

This is part of a three-part series of commentaries on the Sunday scriptures. He draws from a wide background in literature, philosophy, theology and a reading of the contemporary world through the eyes of the gospel. He helps us see the gospel, not only as a personal message of salvation, but also as the church's call to do justice in the world.

QUOTABLE

There are surely humanistic reasons for opposing the death penalty and abortion, for more fair distribution of wealth and the world's gifts, for the use of talent and expertise in service rather than obscene self-indulgence.

But when a Christian opposes murder on death row or in hospital delivery rooms, when a Christian proposes an economy of service rather than greed, it is not just a matter of human calculation. For us, it is a matter of faith. It is a matter of whether we really believe the worlds we have heard and the actions we have seen in Jesus, who represents most fully to us God's will and our mission.

—from John F. Kavanaugh's reflections on the 3rd. Sunday in Ordinary time -C-, page 18

JUSTICE NOTES

Whatever your political bent, no one can be happy that nearly 20 percent of America's children are growing up poor; no one can remain complacent when nearly 25 percent of all African American citizens and 22 percent of Hispanic citizens remain mired in another generation of poverty.

And before anyone gets too carried away crowing over the glories of America's recent economic growth, let's remember many economists argue that a more realistic measure of lived poverty in America would essentially double the percentage of people living in a redefined state of poverty. While economic analyst Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institute doesn't discount the Census Bureau model—he calls it a “decent” tool for tracking broad trends in U.S. poverty—he does admit that by most measures \$20K for a family of four is probably too low.

An accurate poverty formula would take into consideration both regional distinctions and differences in urban and rural cost of living. It would add expenses, like out-of-pocket medical costs, currently left out, and redefine income to include federal anti-poverty interventions such as food stamps and the earned-income tax credit. That might achieve a more nuanced and accurate picture of U.S. poverty, but it would be one that would probably make few people happy, especially in Washington, where real policy would have to be produced out of those numbers.

-----from the Roman Catholic Claritian Order

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:.....

- Jerry W. Connor #0085045 (On death row since 4/30/91)
- Charles Walker #0420511 (2/7/95)
- Isaac J. Stroud #0478925 (2/9/95)

---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 all liturgical years. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://PreacherExchange.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. (FrJude@JudeOP.org)
3. Our webpage address: <https://PreacherExchange.com/donations.htm> where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilías Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P.,

Promoter of Preaching,

Southern Dominican Province, USA

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