

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 3RD. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-
Nehemiah 8: 2-4a, 5-6, 8-10 Psalm 19 1 Corinthians 12: 12-30 Luke 1: 1-4, 4: 14-21
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

In Advent we began a new liturgical year with a focus on Luke’s gospel. There have been enough exceptions since then to distract us. But today, you will have noticed, we are beginning our “year of Luke” in earnest. From now till the end of this liturgical year we will move through Luke in a more-or-less sequential fashion. So, today’s gospel reading starts with the prologue and an account of Jesus’ first preaching. We are at the beginning of his public ministry and, in a way, ours as well.

I have to confess my first thought on seeing today’s gospel----“here we go again.” I have been through this cycle before—many times before. As a preacher and worshiper, I wonder, “What new message and insights can I possibly gain from this gospel? What new ways can my heart, mind and spirit be moved by this all-too familiar account? From a preacher’s perspective I wonder if I can find a fresh approach and, yes, enthusiasm to do this cycle again? Anyone else feel the way I do?

Maybe Luke thinks his readers are in a similar frame of mind. There have been, he says to Theophilus, many who have attempted “to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us.” But, he says, he has decided to write this “orderly sequence” so that Theophilus “...may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.” Was Luke’s community also too familiar with the story of Jesus? Did the story lack freshness and was it just part of their religious wallpaper—there, but taken for granted in the daily rush of life?

At the beginning of Luke we are like people setting out on a journey that will take us to different places and introduce us to a variety of people. Many we meet will be needy and searching; others will be friendly and help us on our way; while still others will be hostile and try to toss doubts and objections along our path. We will change as we travel through Luke’s gospel. The narratives will nurture us and address issues that have arisen in the world and our personal lives since we last heard these passages in our assembly three years ago. Even if our lives seem to be pretty much the same, in truth, nothing is as it was early in 2001.

But the Word of God is not stagnant. It isn’t an old story for and about days long gone. The grammar of the gospel may sound “past tense,” but it is very much “present tense.” At least it can be present tense for faithful eyes and ears. So, if the liturgical year starts on a note of “deja vu, all over again” (to borrow Yogi Berra’s phrase), then we may need a blessing before we start out on our journey. Actually, our travels through Luke and this year’s liturgical celebrations are less tourist adventures and more pilgrimage. We are traveling to a holy place with rest and prayer stops along the way. And, just as the pilgrims of old, we travel together.

We pilgrims begin our travels invoking a blessing—for a breath of new life and a yearning for renewed enthusiasm, joy and celebration in our faith walk. We invoke the Spirit in a special way

as we read about the preacher Jesus' proclamation that, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me...." As we prepare for this cycle of preaching, we ask that the Spirit set a fire that reignites our preaching gifts and enthusiasm for the Word. O Holy Spirit, help us feel the fire of the Word in our belly and the passion to proclaim it in our hearts, "in season and out of season."

What we say about preachers applies to all the baptized. All are called by our baptism to proclaim "glad tidings" by our words and actions. This gospel, after all, is not only for preachers, but for all who have entered the waters and been united with Christ in his life, death and resurrection. A faithful hearing of Luke's gospel will reinforce our call as we again receive the mandate to proclaim the reign of God, the same mandate Jesus will give later in the gospel to the seventy two (10:9).

Today's passage shows what is true in all of Luke: Jesus's ministry is under the movement and activity of the Holy Spirit. We heard John the Baptist say that the one who was to come would baptize with the Spirit. The work of that Spirit, Jesus makes plain today, is that of freedom from sin and all forms of imprisonment. Jesus preaches using images drawn from familiar Jewish jubilee themes. What the poor, imprisoned and oppressed have yearned for, has become a reality in Jesus, "a year acceptable to the Lord," a jubilee, has been proclaimed. What was a hope in the hearts of the Jewish people has become a reality in Christ. Emptiness has been fulfilled. As we hear the text we take its present-tense timing to heart. It is meant for us—now. In his "inaugural speech" Jesus is not saying that someday in the future the forgotten of the world will be recognized and their needs addressed. Rather, he says, these needs are presently being addressed. Jesus is speaking of both physical and spiritual release as he announces a "year acceptable to the Lord." The jubilee imagery is drawn from Leviticus (25: 8-55) and no Jew would miss the implications.

At times we can over-spiritualize the scriptures. What the people anticipated when a jubilee year was proclaimed, was a release from whatever oppressed a person or community—be it spiritual or material enslavement. Jesus declares total release. He is speaking of actions that have begun to take place with his arrival and Luke is inviting his community to notice a similar release and freedom in progress in the church of his time. Luke is pointing to such liberating acts and, in telling this account, hoping to encourage his community's participation in actions that free people from whatever enslaves or weighs them down. What Jesus announced as arriving with his ministry, is supposed to be happening in our time as well. A new president of the U.S. gives an inaugural speech which outlines what are supposed to be the policies and actions during the president's administration. Jesus' inaugural speech announces not only what will happen during his "term of office," but what will characterize the lives of his followers as well.

As we go through this year with Luke we will see concrete signs of what Jesus announced in the Nazareth synagogue that day—the poor have glad tidings announced and enacted in their midst. We preachers and worshipers gather we pray for the Spirit to loosen our tongues and enliven our hearts so that we preach and live what we hear today and throughout the days of the "year of Luke."

QUOTABLE

Ellen Gilchrist (FALLING THROUGH SPACE: THE JOURNALS OF ELLEN GILCHRIST, 1987) describes the experience of “stuckness”. While she is speaking to writers, what she says also applies to preachers.

“In order to be a writer you must experience and learn to recognize and cope with periods of what Freeman Dyson calls stuckness. In order to do creative work in any of the arts or sciences you must go through long or short spells of not knowing what is going on, of being irritated, and not being able to find the cause, of being willing to work as hard as you can and what happens isn’t valuable enough, isn’t good enough, isn’t what you meant to do, what you meant to say. Then you just have to keep on working. Then, if you can bear it, if you don’t quit and move to Canada or call up Joe and go hiking for two weeks or quit your job or get a divorce or do anything else to relieve the pain, and it is pain, it’s really irritating, it puts you in a bad mood, you are irritable to children and can’t focus on anything and keep changing your mind, if you can put up with it and just go right on sitting down at that desk every day no matter how much it seems to be an absurd and useless and boring thing to do, the good stuff will suddenly happen. It may be twelve o’clock at night when you’re doing something else or are in the bathtub. It will be when you have given up and least expect it. There it will be, the radium, the formula, the good short story, the real poem.....”

And may we add.... “the good preaching ?”

JUSTICE NOTES

The fundamental sin is exploitation, whether it be expressed in the domination of male over female, white over black, rich over poor, strong over weak, armed military over unarmed civilians, human beings over nature. These analogously abusive patterns interlock because they reset on the same base: a structure where an elite insists on its superiority and claims the right to exercise dominative power over all others considered subordinate, for its own benefit.”

---Elizabeth Johnson, quoted by John Bucki, SJ, on the Center of Concern’s webpage:
(<http://www.coc.org/focus/ej/reflections.html>)

WRITING TO DEATH ROW INMATES

It is still not too late to make a new year’s resolution you can keep. Why not consider a monthly note to an inmate on death row? These inmates 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 “adopt” one of them as a pen pal. This Christian work can be a powerful experience. If you like, tell your new friend you got his name from North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.” Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Parrish Lorenzo Matthews	#0666808	(On death row since 5/26/01)
George Malcolm Kelly	#0223210	(5/29/01)
Jim E. Haselden	#0564913	(6/6/01)
James Hollis Watts	#0428143	(7/19/01)

-----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.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com