

First Impressions 32nd SUNDAY -C-

2 Maccabees 7: 1-2, 9-14 Psalm 17 2 Thessalonians 2: 16- 3:5 Luke 20: 27-38

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Pre-note: We have posted suggestions from fr. Chuck Dahm, OP for preaching on immigration during the four Sundays of Advent. Go to <http://www.judeop.com/> and click on “Justice Preaching.”

If you come from a large extended family, or know someone who does, this may sound familiar. I’ll describe what my mother’s family did each Sunday and you make the adaptations to your experience of any large families you have experienced. In mom’s family there were lots of uncles and aunts and in my childhood we all lived within walking distance or a short car ride. Sunday nights the family gathered at my grandparents—uncles, aunts and lots of kids. We cousins played indoors and outdoors. My father and uncles went upstairs to a back room where they smoked cigars and cigarettes and played pinochle. Mom and her sisters talked in the kitchen, cooked up a storm and, when the food was ready, called us all together. After the food we would watch the Ed Sullivan show on my grandparents’ black and white television.

It all seems like ancient history now. Among mom’s 8 brothers and sisters only an aged uncle survives. At their funerals, the family expressed sadness, and we shared lots of memories. We cousins would console ourselves over the death of a parent, uncle or aunt, by telling ourselves things like, “Well, Aunt Helen is up there with her sisters now cooking up a storm in heaven.” Or “Finally, dad can play an endless game of pinochle with his brothers-in-law.” Those are comforting thoughts; things we say to give comfort in times of grief and loss. Each family probably has variations on those stories and what they said to comfort one another when death came to their loved ones. We imagine that they have gone to a beautiful place and there they can have endless good times without sickness, old age and pain. It’s a way we have to express our faith that they are alive and well, getting along with each other (no more arguments over which uncle played the wrong card) and living in good health, happiness and safety. We do our best; we paint pictures of the best place imaginable and call it “heaven.”

But there is the stark reality that keeps returning. We buried our family members in the same cemetery. Their gravestones stand in a line, mark their names and the dates of their births and deaths. I was there for all those burials and had the privilege of leading family and friends in prayer as we consigned our deceased to the earth. Mom and my aunts aren't cooking somewhere, my father and my uncles aren't slamming trump cards down on a bridge table upstairs in the back room. I visited their graves recently, remembered them with love and my imagination failed me. Where are they now? What are they doing? Facing such imponderables, I lack an answer. I have no experience from which to draw. So, I do what I do at such moments of mystery and questions—I turn to the scriptures for wisdom, comfort and insight. I also need courage as I face the inevitability of my own death someday.

The Sadducees in today's gospel pose a question about the resurrection to Jesus. And their question interests us. What will it be like in the next life? They are a Jewish religious party who don't believe in the resurrection and that sets them apart. To bolster their argument against the resurrection they pose an absurd situation to Jesus about seven brothers and their widow who is passed from one to the other. We moderns take offense at how this woman in their example was treated, as if she were property. Did she have any say in the matter? It's an ancient society, the families were poor, and the rule was that a widow was to marry her brother-in-law. It was a way of keeping what little property there was in the family.

The Sadducees concoct an extreme example, saying in effect, "Look how ridiculous your beliefs are! Imagine that woman trying to figure out who her husband is going to be forever in the next life. So, see how impossible the resurrection is?" Maybe Jesus chuckled at their example. Maybe he took exception to how they were using a woman seven-times widowed for their "theological" discussion. But he quickly brushes aside their logic. The Sadducees were presuming that life after death continues more or less the same as it is in this life. Death, in such an example, is just a blip on the screen, a brief and inconvenient interruption between two lives—the life before death and the life after.

We who believe in the resurrection do the same when we try to imagine the next life. We paint it to look a lot like this one—only a lot better! It will be a happy place where we won't have to work or go to school. No more homework, no more

credit card bills. Summer peaches will always be in season. Sounds nice! But Jesus interrupts our projections about the future life. He doesn't give us the precise description we would like to have. He doesn't tell us what lies up ahead for us. He does say that it is not just a continuation of what we know here. So, there won't need to be the human institutions we have known—no marriage, no property or worry about holding on to property. We will live "like angels," he says. We won't die.

Is that it? Is that all he is going to tell us? No more information than that? No more details our artists can use for their paintings of heaven for us? Well, he does say one more thing. We will continue to be who we are here, "children of God." There it is, the concrete fact we are looking for, something to put our faith in! The God who created our beautiful world; the God whose loving and forgiving face Jesus revealed to us...when we die we will fall into the loving arms of that God forever. And God will never let us go; we will live as "the children of God."

You know how parents want to give their children the very best they can? They want them make them as happy as humanly possible. They want to have them close and provide security and peace for them. Well, God has that intention for us—forever. That's the God whose children we are. That is also the God who feeds us at this Eucharist so that we can be nourished as we struggle to hold strong to our faith---especially when our faith is severely tested by death's brutal reality.

QUOTABLE

And so I must speak to the people's needs, this people's hungers. If they need to act justly or if they hunger for justice, a liturgy that expresses and molds their faith experience forbids me to keep silent. To say nothing is to say something.

---Walter Burghardt, S.J. "Preaching the Just Word," in LITURGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, edited by Mark Searle. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1980.

JUSTICE NOTES

"...pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified... and that we may be delivered from perverse and wicked people.."
(2 Thessalonians 3:1,2)

The words of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians are echoed in our hearts today. Every newspaper, every television and radio broadcast, and every media web source proclaims in bold print the horrors which we human beings are inflicting on each other today in every corner of the world. We cry out with St. Paul and with all the prophets, ancient and modern, "pray for us". We ourselves look for ways to pray and to believe in God's loving presence and power in the face of the growing global violence. We look for ways to live which proclaim God's love and compassion in our own lives in the face of a culture which makes consuming and competition its gospel.

But we know that despite our fears, "The last word belongs to the just and strong God. And God's silence is never a silence indicating an absence as if history were left in the hands of the perverse and the Lord remained indifferent and unmoved. To discover with the eyes of faith this divine presence in space and time, and within ourselves, is a source of hope and trust, even when our hearts are troubled and shaken' as the trees of the forest are shaken in the wind." (*Pope John Paul II*)

Did you know?

These contemplative religious go to the web sites of various news agencies. They then discuss and pray for the situations that they read about, from war-ravaged countries to families in crisis. They hold the pain of the world in their hearts, praying that the wounds of the world will become places of God's grace. They invite others to pray with them through their website.

What can I do?

Go to the homepage of *The Institute for Peace and Justice* www.ipj-ppj.org/index.html. Check out their many resources. If you have children, pay special attention to the links for *Parenting for Peace and Justice*.

Find out about the Catholic Peace Movement's organization, PaxChristi USA. This can be found at www.paxchristiusa.org/.

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

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

- Terrance Elliott #01200236 (On death row since 12/18/03)
- Kyle O. Berry #056259 (3/10/04)
- Jason Wayne Hurst #0509565 (3/17/04)

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