

First Impressions 4th SUNDAY -C-

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19 Psalm 71 1 Corinthians 12: 31- 3:13 Luke 4: 21-30

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

“A prophet to the nations”...that’s a big task for anyone, especially since the “nations” includes those outside your own people, your own kind—especially since it includes your enemies! Jeremiah received his prophetic call during the time the Assyrian oppression of Judah was being replaced by the rising power of the Babylonians: one period of slavery and desolation followed by another. Jeremiah is being called to respond to and serve the Word of God. His mission will not only be to his own people, but beyond them to the “nations.” Will that include the Babylonians?

God is larger than we can imagine. Poor Jeremiah, he certainly will address his own long-suffering people; but he will also have to preach about a God who reaches out beyond them to “all nations?” The enemy will also have an opportunity to come to know God’s mercy. And there is more! He is also being called to preach “...against the whole land; against Judah; kings and princes, against its priests and people.” Now you know that is going to cause him much grief! It would be one thing if Jeremiah were being sent to speak words of consolation to his suffering people. But he also is being sent to confront a resisting people, especially their political and religious leaders.

Today’s passage from the lectionary leaves out a middle section in Jeremiah’s dialogue with God. It is a shame because Jeremiah’s initial response to God’s call is, “Ah Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (1:6-8). And who, no matter what our age, would not feel inadequate when faced with God’s call to speak and act on the Word we hear---especially in the face of the inevitable opposition we would surely receive? But if God is going to take the initiative and call forth someone to a prophetic role, then God will have to equip the person with what they will need to complete their assigned task.

The Jeremiah text uses creation language in God’s response to the fledgling prophet (cf. Gen 2: 7-8). “I *formed* you.” Once again God has taken shapeless clay and, like a skilled sculptor or potter, handmade a suitable instrument to serve God’s good intentions. There is nothing Jeremiah can say about his deficiencies that God does not already know. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you...” Nevertheless, God “dedicated” Jeremiah, consecrated him for his mission.

God, knowing the prophet's limitations, will not leave him on his own, but will make him a "fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of brass." No prophet more than Jeremiah, has shared so openly the personal price of assenting to God's call. His fidelity to God's Word will result in suffering throughout his ministry; a prophet rejected by his own—for who wants to hear that God is bigger than one's preconceptions and will include more than just one's own people? What political or religious leaders will want to listen to a voice calling them back to God's way, away from corruption, the neglect of the poor and the misuse of the power of their office?

Prophets are irritants, disrupting the artificially smooth flow of the daily life of the privileged and powerful. The self-confident and comfortable don't want to hear the prophets' harping voices. Those who challenge war and aggressive international policies don't want to be heard by the comfortable, powerful and those who profit from the status quo. In our church these days there is a tendency to label the voices calling for fiscal transparency and accountability in the abuse cases as trouble making outside agitators and greedy profit seekers. God sent Jeremiah to speak "against the whole land; against Judah's kings and princes, against priests and people."

The Word of God does not get old or outdated. God did not just speak once, a long time ago, in a land far away. What God once did, God does again now. When we were baptized each of us was called, "priest, prophet and [royalty]." At our Eucharist today we ask God to open our ears to hear the particular prophetic word meant for us—how and where is God calling us to "stand up and tell them all that I command you?"

That's what Jesus just did in the section prior to today's. He stood up and spoke a word from God.* Like Jeremiah and the other prophets God has called Jesus for his task. Jesus announced his prophetic mission in the synagogue in his home town. He has come, he said, to fulfill the mission of the prophets; the people's longing for salvation has arrived. His townsfolk are inspired and impressed by his words, and they anticipate he will act favorably for them for, after all, he is Joseph's son, one of their very own. He owes it to them, they reason. But, like Jeremiah, Jesus is a "prophet to the nations." His mission is to more than people like himself; more than to his own religious community. To underline this point he refers to Elijah, who helped the gentile widow during the famine (I Kings 17: 7-16) and to Elisha, who helped the Syrian army commander (2 Kings 5: 1-14). Imagine what his townspeople heard. This prophet would fulfill God's will by reaching out beyond the chosen people, even to the enemy...as Elijah and Elisha did. The people want a small, private God for themselves; while Jesus' God is for all people. Luke's gospel will reveal Jesus' proclamation of God's Word as available to any who would welcome and receive it as good news.

But Jesus, like Jeremiah, will know rejections. So will the early church members who proclaimed his message. We are still early in Luke's gospel yet, in the angry crowd's expectations, demands and frustrations, we already hear hints of the final rejection Jesus will meet. The crowds reject his message and would do him harm, but his time has not yet come and so he passes through their midst.

We are not just interested observers to today's scriptures, are we? We are not just looking back to past events about the calls and actions of God's special chosen ones----are we? Don't we hear in Jeremiah and Jesus a call for ourselves, for our lives? Don't we hear a word meant for us, something we must respond to... Someone we must respond to? There is no time and no place we are not expected by our baptism to act and speak according to our beliefs. Each of us has heard the Word of God and each is sent "to the nations."

Prophets suffer, in big and small ways, for their fidelity to God's Word. And so do we. Living honestly, peaceably, justly and lovingly (cf. Paul's description of Christian love in our second reading) will have its price. That is why we take courage in the God Jeremiah describes who stands us up, makes us a "fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of brass," in the face of any opposition. Our Eucharist today is food for a prophetic people. It sustains us in our call; gives us the desire and strength to "stand up" for the Lord. It is not only a meal for our personal nourishment and consolation; it also unites us to the One who has called us to be a "light to the Gentiles." The world is a dark place at times, but each of us bears the light and are sent forth as a light to a dark world and to a church whose light seems to be somewhat diminished these days.

*It's a shame the Lectionary split up the gospel readings. I am sure most people in the congregation will not connect today's passage with last week's. They won't know what Jesus is referring to when he says, "Today. This passage is fulfilled in your hearing." What passage? The preacher may have to help those assembled remember what we heard last week.

QUOTABLE

Within each of us there is a silence, a silence as vast as the universe. We are afraid of it...and we belong to it. When we experience that silence, we remember who we are; creatures of the stars, created from the birth of galaxies, created from the cooling of this planet, created from dust and gas, created from the elements, created from time and space...created from silence. Silence is the source of all that exists, the unfathomable stillness where vibration began, the first oscillation, the first word, from which life emerged. Silence is our deepest nature, our home, our common ground, our peace. Silence reveals. Silence heals. ----Gunilla Norris in SHARING SILENCE.

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:.....

- Larry M. Thomas #0233526 (On death row since 4/28/95)
- Darrell C. Woods #0497100 (5/22/95)
- Timothy Richardson #0492102 (6/1/95)

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

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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> 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.,

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