

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -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:

I watched a friend open a beautifully wrapped present. The gift wrapping was special, almost as thick as cloth, with rich dark colors and designs you could feel as you rubbed your hand over it. The ribbons were a work of art, they added elegance. We all admired the wrapping, and my friend was reluctant to open the package for fear of ruining the wrapping. He saw a chance to use this exquisite paper again. We decided to try to save as much of it as possible, carefully prying open one taped section at a time, but with each pull there was another rip. After the paper was finally off, someone tried to cut and save at least a section of the paper, but most of it was too wrinkled. What was finally saved would have been good to wrap a pen, but nothing much larger. We were so occupied in our recycling efforts that my friend almost forgot to open the box and see what he had gotten. Imagine being so preoccupied with the wrapping that you miss the gift!

Jesus' townsfolk had known him all their lives. They were very familiar with his family and had watched him grow up. They probably admired him too, a bright young lad, close to his family, showing signs of becoming a religious man who would raise a good family in the village. The wrapping was attractive, but all too familiar to them. Then he went off to be baptized in the Jordan by John and had begun to attract attention. Word travels fast in such rural settings and they were hearing news of his teachings and his mighty deeds. What they were hearing indicated that something about him had changed. There was more than what they had always known about him. When he returned home they went to hear him teach in their synagogue. Last week we heard his teaching, his "mission statement," about giving new life and freedom to the poor, captives, blind and oppressed. In today's story, still part of that synagogue teaching, we hear that they were "amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." But they are also incredulous as they ask, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?"

They remember the familiar wrapping, but there is something much greater happening to them in Jesus' presence and they cannot accept it. Something new is asked of those who now meet Jesus. He has changed, he is on mission, and we learned from his baptism that he is in special relationship to God and invites his

hearers into that relationship. They are going to have to make a commitment to him, forget what they thought they knew of him and enter into a new relationship. Life can't go on as usual, patterns are broken, old relationships have changed. Something is out of the box, and we can't rewrap it and just admire its outer appearances.

How far will Jesus's ministry extend? Who will be included? His townsfolk didn't want it to get out of hand. They may like the idea of a "famous son," but they would rather he practice his gifts closer to home and in an acceptable manner. They have in their midst a prophet and you can't keep prophets in a box; prophets don't follow prescribed patterns. They disappoint those who are comfortable with the accustomed routines and mannerisms. Jesus is rubbing against the grain and those who thought they knew him, didn't like it.

Jesus reminds them that when the message of God was spoken through Elijah, it went to outsiders, like the pagan widow of Zarephath. And in case his hearers didn't get the point, Jesus gives them the example of Elisha's curing of Naaman, the pagan leper. These were pagans, not members of the chosen people, they were supposed to be outsiders, beyond special favors from God.

No one has full possession of God. It's hard to penetrate the attitude of people who seem to have settled on answers that they like. If you know everything, there's not much chance of your being open to any new action or presence of God in your life. In addition, we'll have to be very careful when we claim to speak for God, or suggest we know how and where God works and what God thinks. We'll need to tread carefully when we claim any special historical relationship with God. Maybe we admire the wrapping and are quite comfortable with that. But once the gift is unwrapped, God just won't stay confined or play the game according to our rules. It's enough to make one humble when speaking about God. It's enough to cause any organized religion to be careful how it speaks of God's will or God's "favorites". (In the conflict in Israel right now both sides are claiming that God is on their side, that their cause is just in God's eyes. How can that be?) Judging from the examples Jesus uses in today's Gospel, we'll need to pay particular attention to those on the fringes and margins. They may very well be the place from which God is making a new entrance into our lives.

This Sunday and next, two Hebrew prophets will give an account to us of their

calls. These readings, from the Hebrew scriptures, will parallel the beginnings of Jesus' ministry recounted for us by Luke. To hear these prophets tell us about how it all started for them, should stir up reflection in us about the nature of our own call and how we have responded to God. Jeremiah is an intensely private person, yet throughout his ministry he will share his personal turmoil over his vocation.

Judah is a nation in chaos; its political and religious life is a shambles. A message is needed that will be more than a general wake up call. Jeremiah's call is unique; from the womb he has been formed. There's no room for debate here, he is born to do what he must do. ("Before," is repeated, to underline God's activity and Jeremiah's receptive role.) There is a very important thing that must be done and God is determined to do it. Indeed, Jeremiah is called to be a prophet to more than his own people; he is to be "a prophet to the nations." He will surely meet opposition to this, as Jesus does in today's Gospel.

The accounts of the calls of the prophets almost always contain a protestation by the one being called. Prophets feel unworthy of their call, especially during their encounter with God. It takes a lot of reassurance by God to get them to consent. (Jeremiah's objections are omitted in today's passage, cf. 1: 7-8) Judging from the responses of the prophets, they just don't feel up to the task set for them. In this, they are not very different from us, ordinary folk called to speak and act on God's behalf. I wonder where in their lives members of the congregation feel called to speak or act on behalf of what is right? Do they/we feel up to the task? How will we ever get the expertise we need to face organized opposition? Who are we to think that we can do anything to bring about change, especially when we are up against custom, structures, "the system", etc.? If we can identify somehow with the narrative of this prophet, as one with a sense of being called to a big task, and of feeling our own inadequacies before the task--- then we must also listen in faith to God who speaks to Jeremiah and us, "Be not crushed...for it is I this day who have made you a fortified city,...for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."

READER'S RESPONSE

This one is from Robert Morrin, he received it from a friend, Fr. Jerry Novotny, OMI.

A SEASONAL THOUGHT

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep.....You are richer than 75% of this world.

If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish some place.....You are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy.

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness.....You are more blessed than the million who will not survive this week.

If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation.....You are ahead of 500 million people in the world.

If you can attend a Church meeting without fear of harassment, arrest, torture, or death.....You are more blessed than three billion people in the world.

If you hold up your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful.....You are blessed because the majority can, but most do not.

If you can read this message, you just received a double blessing that someone was thinking of you, and furthermore.....You are more blessed than over two billion people in the world who cannot read at all.

QUOTABLE

Speaking of prophetic voices, here is something written by Dorothy Day in 1967 that still has prophetic application to our own day:

It is not just Vietnam, it is South Africa, it is Nigeria, the Congo, Indonesia, all of Latin America. It is not just the pictures of all the women and children who have been burnt alive in Vietnam, or the men who have been tortured, and died. It is not just the headless victims of the war in Colombia.....it is the fact that whether we like it or not, we are Americans. We are the nation the most powerful, the most armed, and we are supplying arms and money to the rest of the world where we are not ourselves fighting. We are eating while there is famine in the world.

Scripture tell us that the picture of judgment presented to us by Jesus is of Dives sitting and feasting with his friends while Lazarus sat hungry at the gate, the dogs,... licking his sores. We are Dives. Woe to the rich! *We* are the rich. The works of mercy are the opposite of the works of war, feeding the hungry,

sheltering the homeless, nursing the sick, visiting the prisoner. But we are destroying crops, setting fire to entire villages and to the people in them. We are not performing the works of mercy but the works of war. We cannot repeat this enough.

----Dorothy Day in, ON PILGRIMAGE: THE SIXTIES. New York: Curtis Books, 1972, page 188.

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> where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilías Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. "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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