

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 6th SUNDAY -C-

Jeremiah 17: 5-8 Psalm 1 I Cor. 15: 12, 16-20 Luke 6: 17, 20-26

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Just a reminder: there are preaching resource materials on our “Preachers’ Exchange” webpage: <https://PreacherExchange.com>.

When a prophet begins a proclamation, as Jeremiah does today, with, “Thus says the Lord...”, hold on to your seats. What follows could be good news or bad for the hearers. They might be hearing about a blessing or a curse. We are used to prophets getting hot under the collar. They see what’s wrong with their community and they raise their voices; stamp their feet and do extreme things to get people to change and shape up. We tend to stereotype prophets and lump them with the modern street preachers we see who hold posters that shout in large print, “The end is near!” or “Eternal damnation for the sinner!” In fact, frequently the biblical prophets speak consoling words to a sinful or desperate people, promising them God’s consolation and coming help.

Today’s Jeremiah passage shows us that other side of the prophet. Instead of challenging and threatening to get the people to change, the prophet uses another tactic, one that is also reflected in Jesus’ sermon in today’s gospel. Jeremiah places options before his hearers: they can decide for themselves what they want. If they make a foolish choice, to trust in human power, they will have to suffer the consequences of their choice. He is asking them to decide whether they want to be barren or fruitful.

Prior to today’s gospel passage Jesus went up to the mountain to pray. When Jesus goes off to pray that’s Luke’s way of signaling that Jesus is about to do or say something very important. After he prays he comes down and speaks to his disciples about God’s reign; he lays out the basics for his community of disciples. In Matthew, the parallel passage is called “The Sermon on the Mount.” In Luke it’s “The Sermon on the Plain,” because Jesus stands on “level ground” to speak to his disciples. He is among them, one of them. He will live the beatitudes he spells out so that they will be able to live them too.

Luke’s beatitudes differ from Matthew’s. Matthew has eight (or nine), Luke has four beatitudes and four woes. The first impression is that, like the prophet Jeremiah, Jesus is also placing a choice before us. Will we choose to live according to his beatitudes or according to what the world usually considers “beatitudes”? What the world values, Jesus says, is worthless. If we

place our security on wealth, merriment, popularity and having our fill of food—we will be disappointed in the end. In Jeremiah's terms, we will be like a "barren bush in the desert."

If those usually neglected, the poor, hungry and weeping, are cared for by believers then something new is afoot in the world and those who observe it will "hear" a new message. But if the poor are neglected, as we know they frequently are, Jesus says they will be blessed by God—who does not overlook them. But more. Jesus warns those who are rich, filled and happy. Those who are satisfied now, while others are in need, these are in trouble: they woe to them for ignoring their brothers and sisters. There is a great reversal at work in God's realm. We who have eyes to see ought to make sure we observe the reversal and live our lives accordingly.

What the world usually calls the "good life," if it is so at the expense of others and their neglect, then there will be a great reversal in God's reign. The believer must live "in reverse"—see things with kingdom eyes. Thus, the poor, hungry and weeping are blessed by God and Jesus promises them fulfillment when God's reign comes to completion at the banquet table. Then the great reversal will finally be complete.

It would be wise then, for those of us who treasure God's blessings, to get close to the ones Jesus calls "blessed," living such a life by responding to the least will show our commitment to Christ and will, as he predicts, receive enmity from others who see and live in the opposite manner. We who live our lives "on account of the Son of Man" will suffer the consequences at the hands of the world. When we do, we can be assured that we too are counted among those Jesus calls "blessed." We, who have sided with the poor, will also find ourselves marginalized with them. That's what those who live the new life we have received from Christ can expect.

Our churches can be effective instruments in society as we use our influence to reach out to the poor and speak and take the side of the marginalized. If we receive praise for such advocacy we can be happy. But if our church communities blend well into the mainstream and "receive the first places" at society's overflowing table, then we need be aware, for we will have gone from the side Jesus has blessed to that of those who have earned his "woes." Like the prophet Jeremiah, in our first reading, Jesus places before us two contrasting ways to live and invites us to choose—both as individuals and as communities of the baptized. Jesus has reversed the usual measuring rods for "the good life" by his life, death and resurrection. Do we perceive it? Jesus has given us another way to live. He is our wise teacher who knows where true happiness is to be found and he doesn't want us to miss it.

Paul reminds us that Jesus isn't just an ethical teacher who lays out a new set of rules for us to

live by. Instead, by Christ's dying and rising, we have died to the old and entered into an entirely new way of living. The resurrection from the dead, that Paul speaks of, has begun for us in this life. Once again we are made aware that the reversal has begun and when we stand with the "blessed" poor, we show we are living the new life that has been gifted us.

Actually, it isn't so much that Jesus' pronouncement of the reign of God has turned things upside down. But the opposite is true. If there are poor, neglected abused and marginalized people in the world, then that's the proof that things are upside down. Jesus and his gospel make it quite clear that's not how things should be. His life and message have put things right side up and that's the way things ought to be.

Remember earlier in Luke's gospel Jesus, in the synagogue, announced the inauguration of the hoped-for year of Jubilee. This announcement is his "mission statement" as he begins his ministry. The poor and oppressed will hear the good news and be liberated; the sick will be healed. In Jesus, the great reversal has begun. Today's gospel is a further articulation of what will be the effects of Jesus' coming: the poor and powerless are blessed and the rich and powerful will be unseated in woe.

Those who live comfortable lives have been given much to think about and if they follow Jesus they will wisely use their wealth to help the poor, hungry and weeping ones Jesus calls blessed. Jesus doesn't spell out how they should do that; but the one who has announced the Jubilee wants us to find ways to release the poor of their burdens. The choice is ours and the new life that Christ gives to us makes such a choice possible.

ONE RESOURCE FOR THE PREACHER

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QUOTABLE

Preaching addresses first of all the imagination, building patiently and faithfully an alternative vision of this world in the light of Christ, and then calling those who can see it to use their minds, wills, and bodies to bring it about. The task of preaching "is an act of imagination, an offer of an image through which perceptions, experience and finally faith can be reorganized by alternative ways" [Brueggemann in "Preaching as Reimagination," *Theology Today*, Oct. 1995]. An image is capable of doing different things, depending on its function in the text, its capacity of relating to the life situation of this community, and the particular context of the liturgy in which the community is presently participating. On being asked whether art can

affect any dramatic change, South African playwright Athol Fugard responded, "Of course, yes. A play can get in to the dreams of a human being, can get into their soul and stir things." I believe that biblical imagery can also function in the consciousness of the community of believers, getting into their hearts and heads, into their dreams and hopes, stirring up things and resulting in an increasing realization in the world of the community's self-identity as being in Christ and commitment to his mission.

—James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R., in New Theology Review, February 1997.

JUSTICE NOTES

"Raising his eyes toward his disciples Jesus said: "Blessed are you who are poor"
"Raising his eyes toward his disciples Jesus said: "Blessed are you who are poor" (Luke 6:17, 20-26)

The reign of God belongs to the poor and to those 'persecuted for the sake of justice.' In a world of war and nuclear weapons, peacemakers get little thanks and few honors. But Jesus says, this is your opportunity to meet hatred with love -- just like the prophets and saints. The poor have much to teach us. They know that the systems which treat most of us well, have failed them and therefore they do not put their faith in these cultural "idols", but in God.

Blessed are you poor in spirit, you humble and powerless. Keep going. Don't be discouraged by your poverty. The reign of God is yours.

Blessed are you who mourn the victims of war and hunger. Keep going. You will be consoled.

Blessed are you meek and gentle and non-violent. Inherit the earth and enjoy the blessing of creation.

Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for justice. Don't give up. You will be satisfied. "Justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." (Amos 5:24)

Blessed are you merciful. Keep showing mercy in a merciless world. Forgive everyone. Be compassionate to everyone. Show mercy to everyone. Mercy will be yours.

Blessed are you pure in heart. Keep going. Be filled with the light of peace, and see Christ in the poor, in the enemy, in one another.

Blessed are you who make peace. Keep on going. Speak out for peace. Pray and fast for peace. Actively lobby for nuclear disarmament. Become who you are, the sons and daughters of the God of peace.

Blessed are you persecuted for justice. Keep going. Don't give up. You stand on the shoulders of Jesus, Dr. King, Gandhi and Dorothy Day and. your reward will be great.

Here are the Beatitudes of Peace, spoken contrary to the words of war that come so easily to our culture. If we follow these guideposts, hear this encouragement, and live them faithfully, the Gospel teaches us that the God of peace is alive and at work among us -- giving us God's reign, God's consolation, God's creation, God's mercy, God's face and the face of Jesus.”

(adapted from an article: *The Beatitudes of Peace*, by John Dear, SJ)

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

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:.....

- Darrell Strickland #0393145 (On death row since 10/27/95)
- Jerry Dale Hill #0511057 (10/31/95)
- Keith B. East #0511998 (11/8/95)

-Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

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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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., FrJude@JudeOP.org

Promoter of Preaching,

Southern Dominican Province, USA