

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 6th SUNDAY -C- FEBRUARY 15, 2004
Jeremiah 17: 5-8 I Cor. 15: 12, 16-20 Luke 6: 17, 20-26
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Well, the opening of the Jeremiah reading certainly will jolt awake anyone who might be dozing, “Thus says the Lord: Cursed is the one who trusts in human beings....” Is God cursing someone--- or isn’t this a statement of fact: one is cursed if they think they can trust in themselves or anyone else for what really is important to life? If we turn to any place other than God for our identity, values and the measure of the success or failure of our lives—we will live as if under a curse. Nothing will be right; nothing will survive the test of time and trial. We will have put our confidence in what is straw; be standing on ground that is vulnerable to life’s earthquakes.

For example, have you read the biographies of some athletes or famous personalities who once enjoyed the spotlight? In their prime they were the darlings of the press and their fans. How sad to see them, when their prowess or skill have gone into eclipse, struggling to hold on to the adulation and approval of their once adoring multitudes. They find that the spotlight has turned elsewhere and if they invested their sense of personal worth on fickle humans, then they find themselves forgotten and alone. Where are the cheers now? Where are the groupies and the pursuing press? I imagine, compared to their former lives in the spotlight, their current situation must feel like a curse. “Cursed is the one who trusts in human beings, who seek their strength in flesh.”

This isn’t just the dilemma, the “curse,” of some faded athletes or Hollywood stars who placed their sense of self worth on human acclaim. All of us can fall into the trap of “trusting in human beings,” whether this trust be in the norms established by others, or a reliance on only ourselves for direction and approval. The prophet Jeremiah is not a Pollyanna. He isn’t promising that a person who trusts in God gets a trouble-free life. At the end of the reading Jeremiah likens the believer who trusts in God to a “tree planted beside the waters.” This one “fears not the heat WHEN it comes,” and he says, in a “year of drought it shows no distress but still bears fruit.” He isn’t saying IF the heat and drought come, but WHEN they come. The hard and testing times come to the believer just as they come to the non-believer. But if we are planted in God our faith will not be in vain. If God is the place we go for the wisdom for right-living, when the drought and heat come

with their faith-testing trials, there will be a greenness in us, a life that no threats will be able to squelch.

Those who trust in the Lord also show blessings in other, less dire circumstances. These faithful ones are content, even joyful, with less in life. They make conscious choices not to pursue careers, money, property and things at the expense of family, friends, the environment, community or church involvement. Their lives show the signs Jeremiah describes that belong to the “one who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord.” They are not “barren bushes in the desert,” rather they are like a “tree planted beside the waters.” They “stay green” when the heat and drought come. Lives that exhibit such trust require continual insight and reflection on God’s Word and constant recommitment to God. Our liturgical celebration today helps us stay planted in the right place—in and with God. Let’s soak up the life-giving waters available to us in our celebration as we prepare to return to a world that, to a believer trying to live a faithful life, can feel like a “lava waste, a salt and empty earth.”

People can prosper whether they believe in God or not. Evil people and atheists have as much chance to win the lottery as the devout do. But it is in the “heat and drought” that the faithful stay “green” and fruitful. We have sat at the bedsides of dying friends and loved ones, some of whom have suffered painful illnesses. Their and our prayers for healing seem unheard or rejected—their suffering prevailed. Nevertheless, we have marveled at their faith and their rock-solid conviction that God was with them. They believed that even if they died, God would take them home into a loving, mysterious and eternal embrace.

In the gospel Jesus is speaking first to his disciples, who have made sacrifices and taken risks to follow him. They have, as Jeremiah encouraged, trusted in the Lord. Jesus is setting guidelines for what makes disciples genuine. His disciples have turned away from pursuing what others would consider a successful life—riches, transitory delights and the praise of others. Indeed, their choice to continue following Jesus would bring them deprivation, sorrow, hatred and rejection.

Discipleship requires daily decisions that often set us apart from the prevailing or latest opinion polls. Are we in favor of lower taxes—if the poor suffer the consequences? Will we vote for candidates who voice our vested national interests—if other countries are deprived or ignored? Will we choose to be with the “in crowd” at school—if they shun the less popular kids? Like Jeremiah, Jesus isn’t predicting a life of success for believers—as some preachers proclaim. Jesus

knows the “heat” and “desert” will come: WHEN is uncertain, but they will come. But for Jesus, these adversities come precisely because we have chosen to trust him, not any mere human contraption, for our security.

These beatitudes are paradoxical. They lay out dire consequences for the followers of Jesus. But they praise people for making choices that have brought on suffering. They are like pats on the back given to a person who has just won a prize or a competitive event. “Well done!” However, instead of seeing the reward now, the believer is assured there will be a time when the esteemed prize will be given. The beatitudes say, in effect, “you can bet the house on that!” Or, in less secular terms, “trust in the Lord,”—“your reward will be great in heaven.” Indeed, we are told, God has not forgotten us, but is duly noting the price we pay for our faith. Even NOW we experience God’s blessings: “Blessed are you who are poor for the kingdom of God IS yours.” (It helps to pay attention to the tenses in these beatitudes and to discover, while rewards will be given to those who are now suffering for their faith, nevertheless, we are reassured that in the present, “the kingdom of God IS yours.” We live in the confidence that the prize we long for is already ours.

Luke has in his beatitudes something that Matthew doesn’t—the list of woes. These additions can make us uncomfortable. What is so wrong about being rich...filled now...laughing now...being spoken well of? Some have described the current malady of our first-world society as “affluenza.” Personally and corporately we live quite privileged lives and have enormous expectations that blind us to the needs of the vast majority of the world. Indeed. “Affluenza” makes us indifferent even to the poverty that is at our own doorsteps in our own land. Affluenza is a disease of privileged excess and environmental waste. We seek pleasure and materials at an intense pace, regardless of the costs to our country (consider the current national deficit) and the devastation to other peoples of the world and their natural resources. Our own capitalist society, for example, favors those who can afford to buy, while striving to pay the least for production and labor costs. For those who are indifferent to the costs their wealth and life of plenty have on the less fortunate, Luke presents us with the Woes. They are a wake up call that invite us to look beyond our immediate pleasures and excesses and to consider those who are left out and even drained by our self indulge.

QUOTABLE

“From my work with local pastors and seminarians, I am convinced that one of the practices that gets most shortchanged in the sermon preparation process—and one

of the junctures that holds most promise for strengthening contextuality in preaching—is the initial encounter between the preacher and the biblical text
Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, PREACHING AS LOCAL THEOLOGY⁶ AND FOLK ART. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, page 104

JUSTICE NOTES

When considering economic, social and environmental policies on behalf of agriculture and rural communities, The National Catholic Rural Life Conference considers the following as one of its principles:

HUMAN DIGNITY

Human beings are created in the image of God. In this image, we human beings have worth and value by virtue of our existence, and that our dignity shall not be taken away from us or diminished in any way. It is never permissible to use a human being to attain some proscribed end or purpose. The rightful purpose of an economic system, therefore, is to serve the human person; no one is meant to be a slave to the economy. Any reduction of the human person to increase economic production violates that dignity.

In a system of factory farms or debt-laden contract production, farmers and farmworkers are turned into modern-day serfs. This goes against the principle of human dignity. We as a society sometimes refuse to see the dignity of a farmer when he clings dearly to his land even as market forces work against him. We may be led to believe that such farmers are poor operators. They may also begin to see themselves no longer as farmers, but as failures. As fellow human beings, we should not tolerate this lowering of others. Human dignity is not to be defined by market forces or by manipulators of the market.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

In memoriam:

John Dennis Daniels was executed at Central Prison, Raleigh, NC. on November 14, 2003. We pray for him, his family and all victims of violent crime and their families.

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:.....

Wesley Toby Smith #0765397 (On death row since 5/29/02)

Augustine Quintel #0612123 (10/23/02)

John Henry Thompson #0406487 (11/14/02)

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

LENTEN REFLECTIONS

"The Stations According to Luke: A Spirituality for Practitioners of Peace and Justice," has just arrived from the press. It was written with Lent during the liturgical Cycle C in mind. We would be pleased to send a copy to anyone interested in reading it.

Please send \$2 to Peace and Justice Ministry, Diocese of El Paso, 499 St. Matthews St., El Paso, TX 79907. Multiple copies are available at reduced rates.