

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 6th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-

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

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

In a Sunday Times Magazine article (January 14, 2001, page 34 ff.), Natalie Angier makes her case as an atheist. She quotes surveys about the United States and other nations' religious beliefs and practices. For example, in the U.S. 92-97% of Americans profess belief in God. Survey results vary, but another says 80% believe in life after death. However, we in the U.S. stand in stark contrast to other nations. In France, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Japan and the Czech Republic 40-70% say there is “probably no life after death.”

Summarizing her own atheism Angier says:

“I believe that the universe abides by the laws of physics, some of which are known, others of which will surely be discovered, but even if they aren't, that will simply be a result...of our brains having evolved for a life on this one little planet and thus being inevitably limited. I'm convinced that the world as we see it was shaped by the again genuinely miraculous, let's even say transcendent, hand of evolution through natural selection.”

Angier's article challenges Christians. She quotes Michael Cromartie (The Ethics and Public Policy Center, Wash. D.C.): “Survey data point to an overwhelming belief in God, but when you go down a couple of layers, it can be pretty vacuous...it's striking how many people say they're Christian but don't know who gave the Sermon on the Mount.” She also cites a study that college students who believe in God are just as likely to cheat on exams as atheists, and no more likely to volunteer at a hospital for the mentally disabled than atheists. Angier draws a conclusion about ethical behavior, “What remains open to question is whether religion makes anybody good or great who would otherwise be malicious or mediocre.”

Belief in our God, the resurrection of Christ from the dead, our own future resurrection and our consequent behavior should be interconnected. Let's look at Paul. He is writing to people in the Corinthian community who have had loved ones die before the anticipated return of Christ. What would happen to their deceased when Christ returns—which they expected at any moment? Would they be left behind? Paul sees the past resurrection of Christ as the starting point, the basis for belief in our future resurrection. “If Christ had not been raised, your faith is in vain; you are still in your sins.” The resurrection has freed us from our sins--- and more. To deny the resurrection of Christ, Paul says, is also to deny our own resurrection, a new life that

holds future promise for us. But the resurrection should also be effecting change in our lives now. We must reflect this transformation by the new life we live. If our lives are not changed then, in effect, we really do not believe in the resurrection Christ's or our own. We have not incorporated into our lives the faith we profess. It isn't just knowing who gave the Sermon on the Mount, or memorizing catechism answers, that measure a true believer. We Christians cannot just melt into the general population with all its virtues and vices. If we do, we have no effective faith in the resurrected life Jesus will share with us and does share with us now.

In Jesus' world almost everyone was poor. If a person were rich, it meant they had enough power to take from the powerless, and that was usually the case. So, it goes with power in the world. When a poor person was cheated there were no resources available to him or her to right the wrong. And in this Mediterranean world, John Pilch tells us (THE CULTURAL WORLD OF JESUS: SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, CYCLE C), the primary value for a person was his/her honor. The poor, without status or power, lacked honor and so were shamed in the eyes of those who had it.

A detail from the Gospel today speaks volumes, in fact, it seems to encapsulate the Gospel. Luke says, Jesus came down from the mountain and spoke to the large crowd "on a level place." Unlike the Pharisees, who despised the common person, Jesus is not aloof from them. He stands among them, can be heard and touched by them and he can hear and touch them. The message he preaches is not from "on high" or above their heads. To those who are not educated in the intricacies of religious law, he speaks a message they have longed to hear: God has noticed them, God honors them, they are "blest".

God is the true source of honor and if God bestows honor, no one can deny it or take it away. So, Jesus is speaking Good News to people who need to hear it. Hearing the Good News comes first; the response follows. First we hear the message, that before God we are honored. We do not have to work to earn this honor, it is bestowed on those who have no other claim to it. Next we respond to what we have heard. The clue to our response is the descriptive phrase, "hunger and weep." The hungry and weeping are those suffering at the hands of malefactors. But hunger and weeping are also biblical descriptions for those who protest social injustice. Thus, the "blessed" are also people who voice the pain of those treated unjustly in the world, these voices God honors and declares "blest".

"Blest are the poor...." Practically no one really believes this message. Each evening there were commercials for the Publishers' Clearing House's \$10 million sweepstakes to be awarded during the Super Bowl game. Gambling casinos are flourishing; where gambling is not yet legal, there are gambling boats that take you out into international waters for a day of gambling.

No one thinks being poor is a blessing. Yet riches may not be such a blessing either. Follow-up stories about people who won big lottery jackpots show their newfound wealth was hardly a blessing. Many experienced dramatic breakdowns in their lives and the lives of their families. Jesus isn't saying it's a blessing to be poor. He says, "Blest are you poor...." And he is speaking to his disciples ("raising his eyes to his disciples, he said...."). He is teaching them about a new relationship to God and a new way of being with one another---living in the reign of God. To these disciples who are poor and accept his message that focuses their lives in a new way, he is saying, "You are blest...." We don't need to strike it rich at some casino, for we have struck it rich with God, "Blest are you..."

The blessings and the woes voiced by Jesus, underline whether a person is disposed towards God or not. The passage calls for primary commitment to God; not a loyalty that compromises by keeping an eye out for enjoying all that the world has to offer while at the same time, professing faith and trust in God.

Luke's Gospel is a gospel of paradox. Of the four Gospels, his is strongest about how the New Testament life is paradoxical. In Luke we find an upside-down world. In the light of this Gospel, everything has to be looked at from a different perspective. This Gospel, and particularly this passage, confronts us with challenge; how do we view ourselves and others? What is the standard by which we measure who and what truly count? What seems like "common sense" and "practical" to us, is seen as disastrous logic when viewed through the eyes of the Gospel. What we consider objects of the good life to be striven for, are challenged in a Gospel that calls those who are poor, hungry and weeping-- blest; while telling the rich, the full and those laughing that they are cursed. What a paradox! Yet at a deep level, we know the paradox makes sense. To put our trust in anyone or anything other than God and the hope held out for us in Jesus, is to court disaster.

This wisdom that Jesus offers is ancient. Jeremiah voices it clearly, "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord." Amid the rejection and insult promised by the Gospel, we are strengthened, Paul reminds us, by our belief in the Resurrection. "If our hope in Christ are limited to this life only, we are the most pitiable of people."

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Alter, Robert and Dermode, Frank, (eds). The Literary Guide to the Bible. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987.

A broad selection of international biblical and literary scholars approach the biblical books from the perspective of literary criticism to study: genre, style, structure, thematic organization, narrative points of view, poetry, imagery, etc.

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Blessings on your preaching,

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

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