

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” ALL SOULS

Isaiah 25: 6-9 Psalm 23 I Corinthians 15: 20-28 John 6:37-40

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We will hear and probably sing the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Psalm after today's first reading. Of the 150 psalms in the bible, the 23<sup>rd</sup> is probably the most recognizable. Maybe because we have heard it at so many funerals. It has also been presented in children's books, discussion guides and innumerable musical renditions. We hear its soothing reassurance as we face worldly fears and the ultimate fear of death. Amid these fears the psalm encourages us to also recognize God's presence. Rabbi Harold Kushner, the best-selling author, has a new book, *The Lord Is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm* (Alfred A. Knopf, \$19.95). It is a phrase-by-phrase analysis of the psalm and Kristin E. Holmes, writing for Knight Ridder Newspapers, has a recent review of the book. She writes that whether people are believers or not, the psalm is well established as part of our literature as well as our prayer.

Kushner describes the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as a three-act play that tells one person's story. The first act is filled with peace and serenity; then darkness and grief enter to finally be replaced by a new relationship with God, who has been the source of strength in a period of great distress. Kushner has had personal reasons to find comfort in the psalm. His son Aaron died at fourteen from progeria, an incurable disease that causes rapid aging in its victims. His son's dying and eventual death was a "valley of the shadow of death" for the rabbi. He says he had to face and discard his former notions of God as an all-powerful being who causes everything that happens in our lives. He described his son's sickness and death and his own grief in his best-selling book, *"When Bad Things Happen to Good People."* Kushner concluded that God doesn't cause bad things to happen to us, rather, the gift of free will is misused and we do bad things to one another. He also said the laws of nature and bad luck could also be the culprits.

In the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Psalm, Kushner found support for his faith perspective. He notes that the psalm doesn't say we need fear no evil because evil only happens to bad people. Rather, he finds the psalm reassuringly reminding us that we can handle evil when it does happen (and eventually it will to all of us!) because God is on our side. Kushner also found gratitude, direction and inner peace in the psalm's images of an overflowing cup, the reassurance of God's guidance and rest in green pastures. Psalms are poetry and so their imagery invites people to identify with the situations being described and to apply the images to their own circumstances. After September 11, 2001, Kushner received a lot of phone calls asking him how some people could do such terrible things in the name of God. In answering these inquire he turned to scriptures and was

reminded that God did not promise that life would always be fair, but that God would be with us when we have to confront unfairness. Kushner found that the best summary of the message he was receiving from the whole bible was to be found in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

If you have experienced a death in your family or among your closest friends recently, today's feast stirs up memory, sadness, absence and loss for what was and could have been. When my father died earlier this year at 96, we had great sadness; we also had a sense of completion, a life well and fully lived. But we know and have loved others who were taken much too soon and sometimes painfully. Cancer ate away at them, diminishing them a notch at a time. An accident wiped them out, taking a child with whom a surviving parent would gladly have traded places--- "take me instead." And who hasn't heard through the media, the daily losses, not just the deaths of the renowned, but the passing victims of war, terrorism, poverty and disease? So many have "passed over" — leaving us waiting, sad, confused and, yes, doubting and fearful.

In Isaiah's images for death, a "veil" has veiled us all, a "web" is woven over all nations. But the prophet and our other scriptural writers today invite us to hope. Our hope isn't about vagaries; we hope in something specific, "...God will destroy death forever." We who mourn our personal losses, as well the loss of those countless souls, who have joined them this year, know how powerful the death grip on them has been. We could not wrestle Death to the ground and take back the lives it had stolen from us. Listen to the biblical invitation today, to put our faith in One who has already won the wrestling match with seeming all-powerful Death and is on our side to share the victory with us.

Paul describes Christ as the "firstborn of those who have fallen asleep." And he promises us that, "...in Christ shall all be brought to life." Believing these promises is life-giving; not just for some future time in the "hereafter." In John's gospel, the promise of eternal life is a promise for the here and now. Rather than be beaten down by death's powerful blows, through Christ we have "eternal life," which strengthens us in the face of death. Death does not have the last word over us and our loved ones. We hear today that another Word has been spoken to us and it is life giving—starting right now. To believe the Word we hear today, despite the seeming evidence to the contrary, is to "have eternal life."

The Eucharistic feast is the meal we eat in "the meantime," as we wait; as we see death take another member of our community; as we hear of the broad swaths death takes across whole populations. This Eucharist keeps us from buckling, it strengthens our knees, speaks reassuring words to our grieving hearts. This Eucharist units us in a special way with those who once shared this meal with us and now see its completion in Christ. Their lives inspire us and set an example for us to follow. Their faith kept them strong over troubled waters and so we are

assured that the faith we share with them will do the same for us.

Our liturgical prayers today remind us of the inevitability of death—no one escapes. As the saying goes, "At the end of the game, the king and the pawn are put away in the same box." As we pray for our departed today, we remember that we are all in need of God's forgiveness and we express our hope that we too will live with our departed under God's loving and unending care. Our liturgy reminds us that at death, life is changed, not ended. And so, today, as at each liturgical celebration, we proclaim our faith in the resurrection.

We remember that through Christ, an innumerable host has been taken up into God's loving and merciful arms. Almost all were considered nobodies by the world's standards--- though some were very special to us. They counted in God's eyes and, though mostly forgotten, they are imprinted indelibly in God's heart. God has not allowed them to perish. Perhaps we may have let them down while they were with us, but today we deepen our relationships with them through our memory and prayer. Our worship today expresses our living union with them and our confidence in their union with God.

### **QUOTABLE**

A word is dead  
When it is said,  
Some say.  
I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day.

----Emily Dickinson

### **JUSTICE NOTES**

The following principles highlight major themes from Catholic social teaching documents of the last century. (Continued from last week)

#### **Promotion of Peace and Disarmament**

Catholic teaching promotes peace as a positive, action-oriented concept. In the words of Pope John Paul II, "Peace is not just the absence of war. It involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples and nations. It involves collaboration and binding agreements." There is a close relationship in Catholic teaching between peace and justice. Peace is the fruit of justice

and is dependent upon right order among human beings.  
See selected quotations.

### Participation

All people have a right to participate in the economic, political, and cultural life of society. It is a fundamental demand of justice and a requirement for human dignity that all people be assured a minimum level of participation in the community. It is wrong for a person or a group to be excluded unfairly or to be unable to participate in society. See selected quotations.

### Global Solidarity and Development

We are one human family. Our responsibilities to each other cross national, racial, economic and ideological differences. We are called to work globally for justice. Authentic development must be full human development. It must respect and promote personal, social, economic, and political rights, including the rights of nations and of peoples. It must avoid the extremists of underdevelopment on the one hand, and “super-development” on the other. Accumulating material goods and technical resources will be unsatisfactory and debasing if there is no respect for the moral, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of the person. See selected quotations.

-----from the Office for Social Justice, Archdiocese of Minneapolis

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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...

- Johnny Hyde                      #0540424    (On death row since 7/23/98)
- Patrick Steen                    #0388640    (8/28/98)
- Robert Brewington            #0584095    (9/3/98)
- Rodney Taylor                  #0472274    (10/23/98)

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

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS”**
  - **“Liturgical year A,”** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.
  - **“Liturgical years, A, B and C,”** reflections on the three-year cycle.
  - If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.
  - You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: [www.preacherexchange.com](http://www.preacherexchange.com) and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.
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](mailto:FrJude@JudeOP.org))
3. Our webpage: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com> - Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes "First Impressions" and “Homilias 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, [Click Here](#).

## DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please  
go to our webpage to make an online donation:  
<https://www.preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thank you,  
“Blessings on your preaching”,  
*Jude Siciliano, O.P.*,  
Promoter of Preaching,  
Southern Dominican Province, USA

