

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” TRINITY SUNDAY -C-
Proverbs 8: 22-31 Psalm 8: 5-9 Romans 5: 1-5 John 16: 12-15
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I have a preaching strategy on these big feast days. I want to resist any attempt to “explain” or teach the mystery being celebrated. This didactic approach usually yields a very esoteric and doctrinal preaching unrelated to the readings and the possible meanings of the feast for our lives. (St. Patrick had a good example when he used the shamrock as a symbol for the Trinity, but most people have heard it already and will it help them see their lives in the light of the grace offered today?) Big themes make for big obscurity in preaching. Keep the listeners in mind. What will they do this week? Till the soil? Sit in traffic jams? Take the kids to soccer? Struggle to find a job to support their family? Stare at a computer? Take final exams? My choice this week, as always, is to meet the mystery through the lens of the scriptures. And for me this week, it is through the first reading. I hope it speaks about some aspect of our triune God and that it stirs up a reason to celebrate Eucharist on this Trinity Sunday.

To borrow a phrase from Charles Dickens, let’s presume the “best of times” this Sunday. All have arrived on time for the liturgy; no latecomers will distract the listeners. After an opening hymn and an initial greeting, a well-prepared lector takes his or her time with the first reading. The reader knows the passage well enough to interpret it intelligently, to have good eye contact and to read it slowly enough to communicate the message. With all these pluses, and I admit they are rare, still the Proverbs reading is dense and will sound obscure to the typical worshipping community--- almost all of whom drive to work, rush to school, are overwhelmed with piles of unwashed laundry and have a yard long shopping list that needs filling on the way home from church. They have precious little time for reflection, much less time to join a bible study to become familiar with the book of Proverbs.

With all that is on their mind (and I admit there is another list of even more urgent things on the minds of the poor and third world congregations to whom some of you preach), how would the average congregation get a sense of what this reading is all about? If they didn’t quite catch the brief opening phrase, “Thus says the wisdom of God...,”--- they certainly wouldn’t know the identity of the “I” who is speaking—“I was poured forth,” “I was brought forth,” “I was there...I was beside him (sic) as his artisan.” This reading could be easily missed. It’s a shame because it opened up the possibility for a very contemporary message.

In the Hebrew scriptures wisdom is not merely theoretical but is about practical knowledge. Its

concerns are about daily life issues, particularly about living virtuously—doing good, avoiding evil. Most striking in chapters 1 and 2 of Proverbs is wisdom's personification as a woman, "Lady Wisdom." In the beginning of chapter 8 she uses familiar prophetic language appealing to humans to tend to her teachings. "Mine are counsel and advice; mine is strength; I am understanding (8:14). "My fruit is better than gold...." (8: 19). In today's passage, the most famous in Proverbs, wisdom repeatedly suggests that she was there at the creation of the world as God's artisan.

As you reflect on the passage, notice the teaching is expressed in the form of Hebrew poetry, i.e. in aphorisms or sayings of two lines that parallel each other. The second line seems to repeat, expand or intensify the first, sometimes in positive, other times in a negative way. These lines are not meant to perfectly explain God and God's ways, but to open the mystery of God to us--- to evoke thought and elicit wonder. When you read wisdom literature, such as Proverbs, you feel more in touch with the Near East and another way of seeing the world and negotiating the mystery that is God. These ancient sages were aware that life is ambiguous. They were searching for new insights and ways of dealing with life. They were insistent on applying wisdom to everyday matters; encouraging justice, hard work, self control honesty, etc. They wanted to help us see meaning below the surface of the often-mundane things of life.

Isn't it a shame we don't have more readings from the book of Proverbs in the lectionary? One suspects such sayings are in touch with a wisdom not appreciated in our day of computer technology, space walks and DNA testing. But those of us who live in a second or third world country, or who have a memory of grandparents from the "old country", certainly can appreciate the sayings of these wise sages.

We learn from Proverbs that the sages were not shy of facing the larger mysteries that addressed the source of our existence, life's meaning, the nature of God, etc. We get the sense from today's passage of a God who carefully designed the world, an architect/engineer who measured and planned, who "marked out the vault," "made firm the skies above," "fixed fast the foundations of the earth," " set the sea its limits." Wisdom is begotten of God from the very beginning, a first born. She is beside God as an artisan. She is a delightful and playful participant in the work of creation. What emerges from the reading is that God did not create the world haphazardly, willy nilly. From the beginning, God has planned creation and taken delight in it.

While this wisdom reading does not teach with the moral force of the Decalogue, nevertheless one can deduce some modern applications. What strikes me, with pending national legislation threatening rollbacks on environmental safeguards, is how Proverbs presents creation and God's

relation to it. Wisdom, God's artisan, plays before God as God is creating. So, while God approaches creation with deliberation, a spirit of playfulness and delight is also present. As a younger generation might say, "Awesome." And as Roland Murphy, in THE COLLEGEVILLE PASTORAL DICTIONARY OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY says, "Wisdom theology is Creation theology".

The created world around us did not just happen, it is the result of a deliberate and unfolding plan. Creation is so special to God, so much the result of God's wise creativity, that each day's experience of the world is a contact with God. Each day is charged with God's grandeur, each day has religious potential. To contemplate, work and even play in creation, is to be in touch with God. It isn't that we don't need special liturgical events, special reminders of the holy, sacraments that celebrate God's gracious approach to us in water, bread, wine, oil, etc. But Proverbs reminds us that the entire created world is from the hands of a purposeful Creator who shares with us the delight God found in creating and continues to have, in sustaining creation. The entire world is potentially sacramental if we behold it through the eyes of the sage of Proverbs. How could the devout believer read this passage and not be reminded of the glory of God in which we constantly live? Here and now, we dwell amid the presence of the God who, according to the final verse, finds "delight in the human race." We are not living under a curse then, even as we experience life's arduous moments. We are the delight of God. No wonder God was so willing to reach out to us through the Son and continues to grace us through the ongoing presence of the Spirit.

Since this reading gives the preacher an opportunity to invite the congregation to see God's gracious presence and delight in nature, the following may give a concrete example for the preaching and provide helpful information.

ONE GOOD RESOURCE FOR THE PREACHER:

(I went to the webpage of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops for information on the environment that might apply to today's reflection. I found the following.)

Children and the Environment
*A Joint Reflection by the National Council of Synagogues
and the Bishops' Committee for
Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations
November 20, 2000*

As Catholic and Jewish religious leaders, we wish to express our concern over environmental

health hazards adversely affecting the health of children. Children are especially vulnerable to their environment and deserve special concern from their society. They are, we believe, "a gift from the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward" (Psalm 127:3). The rabbis of the Talmud centuries ago interpreted the biblical words, "blessed is the one who does righteousness at all times" (Psalm 106:3), as referring to one who gives proper attention to the welfare of their children when they are young (Ketuboth 50a), making the raising and protection of children of paramount importance for the religious community.

Jews and Christians infused with the spirit of the Psalms view nature as a living testimony to a living God, as the Talmud states: "One who goes out in the spring and views the trees in bloom must recite 'blessed is God who left nothing lacking in God's world, and created beautiful trees for humanity to glory in'" (Berakhot 43a) See Jonathan Helfand, "Consider the Work of God: Jewish Sources for Conservation Ethics," in Daniel Polish and Eugene Fisher, editors, *"Liturgical Foundations of Social Policy in the Catholic and Jewish Traditions"* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) 134-148.

With the praise of God comes moral responsibility, as an ancient rabbinic tale teaches: "When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created Adam, He took him to survey all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: 'See how beautiful and superior are my works and all that I created for you. Take heed not to corrupt and destroy my world, for if you corrupt it, there is none who can repair it after you'" (Koheleth Rabbah).

Decisions about how we use the environment, and about the environmental health risks to which we expose our children, have a distinct moral dimension for the Church as well. Pope John Paul II has strongly stated that the "state has the responsibility of ensuring that its citizens are not exposed to dangerous pollutants or toxic wastes. The right to a safe environment (*italics in original*) is ever more insistently presented today as a right." John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 1990, no. 9.

While our country has made significant progress in reducing air pollution and providing clear water over the last several decades, further efforts are needed to ensure safe. This is particularly true in the areas of lead and pesticide poisoning which can lead to damage to the nervous system and to immunity, and for air pollution which can lead to asthma and other breathing problems. While all children are at some risk from exposure, we express a special concern for children from low-income families, who share a disproportionate risk and burden from environmental hazards.

We recognize that children are not "little adults". Children have different patterns of exposure to

environmental contaminants and also respond differently to them than adults. Additionally, children's normal behavior puts them at increased risk for exposure to toxic substances that may cause debilitating or life-threatening health problems. Children, for example, tend to be outdoors more than adults and consequently have greater exposure to pesticides or air pollutants. Infants and toddlers have more exposure to substances in floors, carpeting, and soil.

The ability of children's bodies to cope with harmful substances is also significantly less than that of adults. Young children breathe more rapidly and inhale more air in proportion to their body weight than do adults. They have higher metabolic rates, drink more fluid, and consume more calories for their body weight. If the air children breathe or the food they consume contains toxic substances, they will receive a larger dose than would adults. Further, because their metabolic systems are not yet mature, they have less ability to detoxify and excrete harmful substances than do adults.

As leaders in the Jewish and Catholic communities, we strongly support efforts to protect the most vulnerable among us, who certainly include the children of our nation. Because of our common concern for and desire to protect our children, we encourage our Jewish and Catholic people at the local and national level to work together to help make our environment safe for children. We urge that this interfaith endeavor will lend special assistance to poorer communities who may not have the resources to address these concerns adequately. We pray together that God Who created this bountiful and beautiful world and Who gives and sustains our lives will enable us and others of good will to provide a safe physical environment for all children.

Joint Social Action Recommendations:

- Create a coalition of key individuals and groups in your community to assist in assessing its "environmental health." Potential members include pediatricians, nurses, health department officials, child advocacy groups, PTAs, and environmental, youth, civil, business, academic and religious groups.
- Educate community and school leaders about children's special vulnerability to toxins, and families about using fewer toxins in their homes, yards and neighborhoods.
- Support "right to know" laws to enable families, schools and communities to learn about their children's exposure to toxic chemicals and products.
- Work with existing community groups who are environmentally concerned. Map your

community's known or potential hazards (e.g. dump sites, incinerators, superfund sites, major industry). Check the Toxic Release Inventory (TRA) data available to the public. Work with local industry and government to reduce emissions, clean up sites, etc.

- Religious educators can communicate the ethical and moral dimensions of this issue from the perspective of Catholic and Jewish social teaching.
- Advocate the development of a national warning system for environmental health risks. While the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has monitored lead levels in human blood over the years, to good effect, it does not monitor for other dangerous pollutants.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. CD Available: “FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C.” The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and PDF) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer.

To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year C–CD” button on the left and follow the instructions.

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 webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (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 a secure online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thank you and “Blessings on your preaching”,
Jude Siciliano, O.P.,
Promoter of Preaching,
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Selected Resources for Information on Children's Environmental Health

Federal Agency Websites:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention – www.cdc.gov/nceh/ncehome.htm

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry – www.atsdr.cdc.gov/child

Environmental Protection Agency, Children's Health Protection –

www.epa.gov/children/index.html

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences – www.niehs.nih.gov

Nongovernmental Organizations

Alliance to End Childhood Lead Poisoning – www.aeclp.org

American Academy of Pediatrics – www.aap.org

American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine – www.acoem.org

Children's Environmental Health Network – www.cehn.org

Physicians for Social Responsibility – www.psr.org

U.S. Catholic Conference Office of Domestic Social Development –

www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/ejp

Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism – www.rac.org

National Religious Partnership for the Environment – www.nrpe.org

Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life – www.coejl.org

Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs

National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference

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READER'S RESPONSE:

Here's a response and a good idea from a sister who does prison ministry:

Dear Jude, This brief note comes to thank you for the many inspirations, ideas, and sources of energy you have offered me weekly. At the moment I am chaplain at a men's state prison in CT. On Friday each week I sponsor an "Hour of Power" in the chapel for the inmates. We start with some intro remarks which I offer to situate the gospel of the coming Sunday. I try to include helpful hints on meditation as well as encouragement along with the data on the gospel. After an opening prayer the men are free to take the chair anywhere in the Chapel and have quiet meditation time. This is a rare commodity in our environment, and the atmosphere is a gem of praise to our God who gathers us there, giving us new hope.

After quiet time we re-gather in the circle for some sharing and closing prayer. I include time for the blessing of any person, place or issue of concern for anyone. On those Saturdays when the priest is unable to come, I am able to incorporate some of your ideas into the homily at the Communion Service on the following day. Otherwise we have Eucharistic liturgy on Saturday.

Some of my greatest challenges are their fundamentalism and lack of real evangelization, along with under-development in many areas of life. SO I especially appreciate this weeks quote from Mary Catherine Hilkert on the "experience and promise of a welcoming community, a shared table and the unconditional forgiveness of God" sustaining our commitment.

----Love and peace of Jesus, Patty Cook, RSM

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3. Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.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. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, Juan Torres, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org.

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DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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