

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” PALM /PASSION SUNDAY (A)

Mt 21: 1-11 (Procession with Palms)

Isaiah 50: 4-7 Psalm 22 Philippians 2: 6-11 Matthew 26:
14-- 27:66

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

What does a “face like flint” look like? That’s the description of the servant Isaiah describes in our first reading. The prophet is speaking to people in Babylonian exile and promises a time when God will put an end to their suffering and humiliation. This is the third of four “Servant Songs” in which Isaiah describes the person who will be God’s instrument for deliverance. So, we hear the servant say today, “I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.”

I have seen that flinty face in athletes. It is the determined and set features of the marathon runner in the midst of a long race. It is Lance Armstrong’s expression as the cancer survivor pedals up one more long hill in a grueling race against the world’s best cyclists. A fourteen-year-old gymnast shows her flinty face as she stares up at the high bar before she launches into her medal-contending program. Isaiah tells us that this is the expression on the face of the prophet God has chosen for a very difficult mission. This is one who has... “a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them.”

The servant’s charge is to speak to his people in slavery who are weary of hearing promises of a deliverance that never seems to materialize. They are wearing out in exile, even hesitant to put trust in the good news the prophet has for them. The servant’s message is not received; he is not only suffering physical pain (“I gave my back to those who beat me....”), but ridicule and ostracization as well. Though the servant has been humiliated in God’s service, he trusts God will vindicate him. While there is nothing but rejection for him, he relies on God for the strength to keep going day after day; for he will not give up his mission.

Haven't we seen the flinty face of God's servants in our own time? We have sat by the bedsides of dying family members and friends who were determined in their suffering to set good example for their grieving children and loved ones--- some who might not share their faith. We have prayed with them and, by their courageous and faithful example, have been strengthened ourselves to trust in God, even in dire circumstances. We saw the "face set like flint" of Oscar Romero who continued to preach, even after he received death threats. The life he gave for his people strengthened the resolve both of his coworkers and a whole nation of suffering ones in exile in their own land. Remember Nelson Mandela's face as he walked out of prison after so many years doing hard time? His was the face of long-suffering and flint. He set his face not to revenge, but to seeing justice done for those who had been wronged. Did you ever see the photograph of Dorothy Day as she sat on a little chair at a protest for the poor somewhere?... A seeming-frail old woman, flanked by two beefy police officers. There she was, with that determined, set jaw and steadfast look. "I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame."

A "flinty face" doesn't just mean gritting your teeth to get through a difficult period; bearing the discomfort and pain until it's over. It isn't just bracing oneself and resisting an intolerable or unjust situation. We will see a flinty face in Jesus this week as he faces the obstinate forces of resistance and evil that will put him to death. We will see, through the passion narratives, the cost he will pay as he follows through on his words and acts. Like Isaiah's servant, Jesus too has set his face like flint. He has worn this expression for some time now. For example, we can look back to what Matthew said of him earlier in his gospel, "from that time on Jesus began to say plainly to his disciples, 'I must go to Jerusalem and suffer much...'" (16:21). That is where we find him in today's gospel, entering Jerusalem, determined to fulfill his Father's will. God's faithful servant has set his face "like flint."

Jesus is the servant who, like Isaiah, speaks to a people enslaved. Their exile is that of sin and Jesus, a "well-trained tongue," reaches out to them, but they would rather stay imprisoned in their own notions of God and holiness and of what's right and wrong. They

are trapped in their own self-righteousness. But despite the hostility he meets, Jesus stays the course, remains faithful to his calling to “speak to the weary a word that will rouse them.”

As we watch the events unfold this week, we bring our less-than flinty face, less-than committed selves. We have not always been willing to stand up for what we believe; but have preferred to be accepted by those around us. We confess that we have been pliable when we should have stood firm; tepid when the gospel called us to commitment and sacrifice. We would rather not hear all Jesus says about denying self and taking up the cross in his name. Because Jesus did turn his face like flint to do what needed to be done for us, we find relief this week. These special days offer us an chance to hear afresh our calling to join Jesus on his path to new life. As these days come to a close and we hear again the good news of his resurrection, we will be filled with hope and together renew our baptismal promises at the Vigil service.

What sustains and renews Isaiah’s Servant? It is his openness to God’s Word and his experience that, “Morning after morning God opens my ears.” The servant’s strong sense of commitment to the task God has given comes from the interior strength God renews in him each day. He discovers for himself and proclaims to others the God who is always willing to speak again and always willing to forgive. And that is the God we meet this week as we are present to Jesus’s living out of his role as God’s servant.

Because of Jesus’ fidelity we can live faithful lives of service: we can continue to minister even after the initial glow is gone; we are not dissuaded, even when the institutional church lets us down; we are willing to face challenges in a new setting, even though we faced the same ones so many times before. A well-trained tongue is given us again this week, to “speak to the weary”: those weary from constant family strife, poverty, homelessness, low-paying jobs, violence, war, fear and the ongoing illness or slow dying of a loved one. We can also speak on behalf of the weary in settings where they may not be listened to, or where their weariness is ignored.

Jesus enters the holy city this week. The people who welcomed him

wanted to see his glory. They would be disappointed, because it would come to them in a way they would not recognize—in obedience and service to God. While they didn't see his glory, we do. God has chosen to take on our pain as a human, chosen to walk our path. By our presence at these liturgies this week we enter into a special union with Christ. Because Jesus was willing to enter into his suffering, that means every place innocence suffers is holy ground. This week reminds us that we will discover holy ground whenever and wherever we are willing to become personally engaged in the pain and struggle of others. In addition, we learn from Christ that suffering on behalf of another or standing with those suffering, can bring healing.

SOME GOOD SOURCES FOR THE PREACHER

St. Mary's Press has recently published an excellent book for high school Catholic Social Teaching courses called, *Living Justice and Peace: Catholic Social Teaching in Practice* (1-800-533-8095). The text has an easy-to-read layout filled with great visual aids: including student art work, graphs, and illustrations of key themes. Students play a unique role in this textbook. They are featured in over 60 true stories about taking up the Gospel call to justice. This text puts "flesh on the bones" of social teaching and engages American youth culture in concrete ways. It's an excellent read for teachers and students alike. Most importantly, it inspires young people to see themselves as key players, *now*, in living out the church's social mission.

Broad theological topics like creation and original sin are introduced in chapter one. Then, the central documents and key themes, laid out in chapter two, are woven throughout the subsequent chapters. Icons symbolize the principles of social teaching and connect the principles with contemporary issues. The book also introduces a "circle of faith-in-action," which provides a very accessible lens for students to deepen their awareness of how to analyze and respond to contemporary questions. The activities and dialogues interspersed throughout the text challenge students to look beyond conventional left/right categories when thinking about how to respond to the pressing social issues of our time.

Currently, a website is being designed to supplement this text. It will include up-to-date information about justice issues. This text will take a while to become dated, so be sure it's on your shelf and let me know how it works out in the classroom.

Another highly recommended textbook is *Catholic Social Teaching: Learning and Living Justice* by Michael Pennock (Ave Maria Press: 1-800-282-1865). One of the strengths of this book is that it situates Catholic social teaching within larger theological themes. It provides a solid foundation for seeing Catholic social teaching within the broader framework of our faith.

This text emphasizes the history of the church's social tradition, its scriptural roots, and its connection to the sacramental life. Figures in the church's social ministry are highlighted, and there are charts and exercises that provide effective tools for social analysis and self-scrutiny.

At the end of each chapter, there are helpful vocabulary lists, internet links, and review questions. Also, the teacher's manual includes information for video resources as well as a computer disk with a testing program, review questions, and resource pages. This text is already being used by teachers throughout the country so recommendations and feedback may be just a phone call away!

----Deborah Ruddy, John Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought
(From the Social Justice webpage of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis)

QUOTABLE

In working with the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, it is easy to focus too exclusively on the formation sessions and the process of conversion leading to the rituals. While this dimension of initiation is obviously crucial, it is equally important to remember that the rituals we celebrate with the catechumens, and the elect are also crucial elements of the process. The quality of the rituals can make or break the catechumenate.

Taking ritual seriously ...means taking care with the ritual itself: allowing the symbols to speak as loudly as words, preparing well and doing the ritual prayerfully. It is a fatal error to assume that all

we have to do is how up on Sunday and follow the book....
Good ritual seldom "just happens." It takes good planning and prayerful execution to allow the power of ritual to have its full effect.
-----Fr. Lawrence Mick, in "Celebration," March 2005, page 142.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

If there ever were a time to consider our stance against the death penalty, this certainly would be the week, as we remember Jesus' trial and execution.

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:.....

Iziah Barden	#0491889	(On death row since 11/12/99)
Abner Nicholson	#0670167	(11/18/99)
Andre L. Fletcher	#0130628	(12/09/99)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A."** 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 Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right 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.

(Judeop@Juno.com)

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. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, 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

5. "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.

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://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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