

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 17<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY (A)

1 Kings 3: 5, 7-12 Psalm 119 Romans 8: 28-30 Matthew 13: 44-52

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

“Such a deal!” You can almost hear the young king Solomon say that to God in our first reading. Imagine getting an invitation from the Almighty, “Ask something of me and I will give it to you.” What an opportunity! Who wouldn’t want to have such an offer from One who could give anything? Makes us wonder what we might ask for if God gave us a blank check. So much to ask for! Where to start? How to choose?

Solomon the young king and son of David, is about to take the throne. We now know him by his reputation for wisdom. When we refer to someone as having “the wisdom of Solomon,” it is high praise. But at this stage in his life and reign, Solomon isn’t feeling very wise. He knew what he needed to reign properly: he needed wisdom and he also knew he couldn’t get it on his own. Only God could give him this gift, so wisdom is what he asks for in response to God’s magnanimous offer. Solomon didn’t have to climb a distant mountain or succeed at Herculean tasks to get the wisdom he would need to rule well. He just had to ask for it.

Biblical wisdom is about everyday life; it concerns practical matters and guides us in living a godly life. Readers familiar with the bible will know the unique qualities of this wisdom. A person who wisdom may not be the most intellectually brilliant person in the room. When the bible speaks of a wise person, a wisdom figure like Solomon or a prophet, it presents a person who is closely attuned to God. The wise one and God have a strong and intimate relationship and the recipient of wisdom is characterized by very practical, everyday knowledge that enables him/her to live an ethically upright life.

Solomon isn’t asking for esoteric knowledge about other-worldly mysteries. He knows as a ruler he will have to make decisions between right and wrong, not only for himself, but for the people he has been chosen to lead. He wants to be a good king, one who rules in conformity with God’s ways. Unfortunately, later in his life, we learn that Solomon betrays God’s will and becomes self-seeking. Since he

was also the ruler, the nation of Israel suffers dire consequences for his betrayals of God. Still, at this early stage we can learn from Solomon about the importance of the divine gift of wisdom as we struggle to live out our Christian calling in some very ambiguous situations. We want to live good lives that reflect the divine life in us through baptism. We repent those thoughts and actions that were unwise and pulled us away from God. We, in short, are sorry for the things we have said and done that have hurt others...if only we had acted more wisely.

Remember a couple Sundays ago, Matthew began this parable discourse with Jesus' sitting down in a boat to teach. He presents Jesus as a wisdom teacher and thus suggests to us that the wisdom we seek is given us in Jesus. He is wisdom made flesh; his actions and words are our guidance for daily life and his life in us keeps us in intimate relationship with God. When we need to know how to live and act in conformity to God's will, Jesus is our guide. In today's gospel he is the wise teacher who invites us to ponder and learn God's ways; he does this by telling his disciples parables.

Today's gospel reading is comparatively short. The lectionary even gives a shorter option. I would use the whole passage for the proclamation, but focus on one of the parables for the preaching. There are plenty of preaching possibilities in each parable. Let's look at the first two and leave the decision up to each preacher which to choose for a focus.

Each of today's parables is introduced in the same way, "The kingdom of heaven is like...." (Matthew prefers "kingdom of heaven" so as to avoid using God's name; Mark and Luke use, "kingdom of God.") First a reminder. When a parable begins in this way it is not saying the kingdom is like a treasure, a pearl or a net. Rather, the kingdom is like what happens in each complete story. Jesus' basic message was that God's kingdom/reign/dominion had come near. The kingdom is present when God's sovereignty, actions and presence are felt. It is where and when God's will is being done and God's rule accepted and acted upon. Those who live in accordance with God's will might then hope to enter it when it finally comes in its fulness.

We are of an age and culture that looks for things neatly defined and clearly described. If only Jesus had satisfied our need for exactness and given a precise definition of what the kingdom is and exactly where and when it occurs. If he had,

we would have a precise measurement or standard to apply. We would then be able to say, “This is definitely of the kingdom of God; this definitely not.” Of course, that would put some of us in control. Then other people and events would depend on us for our stamp of approval where and in whom God were acting. Instead, with parables like today’s, we have the opposite. We hear that God’s reign is multi-colored and multi-layered. We see only part of it; just when it seems to be only here...it pops up over there too--- in the most unlikely places and occasions. You just can’t box in God’s movements and inspirations. In his gospel John would say it this way, “The Spirit of God blows where it will....”

Let’s look at the “issue” of the buried and found treasure. Listeners to this parable have countered by saying the one who found the treasure is dishonest. They claim he should have reported the find to the “rightful owner.” But Jesus is not teaching about honesty here and it is not uncommon for his parables to contain characters who act in a shady way. Jesus uses worldly stories to open our eyes to the acts of the divine in our midst. He is focusing on a person’s finding a treasure, realizing its value, rejoicing and selling everything to get what is so precious. We also have to remember the times and circumstances. It wasn’t usual for people to bury valuables during times of conflict, invasion or insecurity. Who knows? Maybe the one who buried the treasure had died; or the plot may have now been under foreign power, like the Romans. There are numerous possibilities to explain the treasure’s presence in the field. We do best to stay with the parable: a person finds a treasure and does what he must to get it.

What a risk he is willing to take, for he sells all he has! It’s parallel to what Jesus is asking his disciples to do; to leave everything else and invest their well-being and future in him. Isn’t Jesus a “hidden treasure” for us too? Grace to follow him has been freely given us and we are invited to celebrate this “find” with joy and total dedication. We preachers will want to avoid moralizing this parable, i.e. making its primary thrust just a moral teaching and then telling people what they ought to do. Remember, the finder does nothing to earn the treasure, nor does Jesus, in this case, stress the sacrifice required to acquire it. Recognition, joy, “pure luck” and excitement dominate the emotions of the fortunate finder. At today’s eucharist why not celebrate the sheer gift God has given us in Jesus and the constant renewal of that gift through another gift—the Holy Spirit?

The second parable varies slightly from the first; we have a merchant out

searching for fine pearls. Yet, the two parables have some common elements: the discovery, joy (which we presume for the merchant since he finds what he has been searching for) and a follow-up action. The first parable has a clear element of surprise to it. How often have we found in a person or a situation something so good that we realize, even though we weren't aware we were searching, we have found a treasure? Or, have we ever searched for something meaningful for our lives, found it and it was even better than we had ever hoped? While we put so much into our search, we realize we received so much more than our efforts warranted. When things like this happen, we can hear an echo of Jesus' introduction to the parables--- with a slight modification, "There, that's what the kingdom of God is like!" The bottom line....it's about grace. (Cf. Quotable)

In the parables we encounter God's gracious rule. Judging from the two parables we focused on, the treasure and pearl, this rule is not something to fear. Instead, we learn that God's reign promotes vitality, freedom and a sense of having found what we have always really wanted. We know life and service in the reign Jesus is proclaiming, will require sacrifice. But these parables encourage us to take the plunge, they tell us "it is worth whatever you must change or give up."

In both parables the investment is total. Each person has taken a huge gamble by selling "all that he has." What guarantee do they have? What have they done to hedge their investments in case they have made a mistake? They haven't, instead they have plunged ahead without reserve. Is God and Jesus' way worth the full gamble of our lives? In the parables, the wise Jesus tells us it is. He should know, he has first hand experience. It's like a friend of mine, who rushed head long into the ocean and when he came up for air, turned to me and shouted, "Come on in, the water's fine!" And so I did, because he was already in the water and I trusted him.

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Anne Lamott, *PLAN B: FURTHER THOUGHTS ON FAITH*. New York: Riverhead Books 2005.

This book makes great reading, especially for reflective summer moments. The author, a single parent, reflects on contemporary world and national events. She also turns her reflections to parenting (a teenager), her mother's Alzheimers, the death of friends, the change of seasons, and her political activism . She takes a preacher's look at her daily life's joys and questions through the eyes of

faith—aided by the support and prayers of her small church community in northern California. (The story of Lamott’s finding faith is told in her previous books, especially TRAVELING MERCIES.)

#### QUOTABLE

Grace means you’re in a different universe from where you had been stuck, when you had absolutely no way to get there on your own.

—Anne Lamott in, PLAN B: FURTHER THOUGHTS ON FAITH, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), ISBN1-57322-299-2, \$24.95 hardcover.

#### POSTCARDS TO A “LIFER”

Juan Velazquez is feeling pretty depressed. In the early ‘80's he was an inmate clerk at the Catholic chapel at San Quentin prison. He was a great help to this weekly visitor from the outside, often explaining some of the fine points of prison life to me. I just got a letter from him and he writes:

“You must know how I feel. I have been in here so long that my mind feels like I’ve been forgotten by God and everyone else. I get very few letters. You know it is very difficult in here and you do your best to do as God tells you to do, “show love and care for others.” But many times I feel just the opposite.”

If you want to drop Juan a line to tell him he is not forgotten, here is his address:

Juan Velasquez # D-16008  
Salinas Valley State Prison  
Facility B  
P.O. 1050  
Soledad, CA. 93960-1050

-----Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

#### 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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: [judeop@juno.com](mailto:judeop@juno.com)