

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 18th SUNDAY (A)
Isaiah 55: 1-3 Psalm 145 Rom. 8: 35,37-39; Matthew 14: 13-21
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

As I’ve traveled and preached in a variety of settings I have learned that appearances can be deceptive. For example, even in the most comfortable looking congregation there is a lot going on beneath the surface of people’s lives. Of course those ministering in parish settings and retreat centers know this all too well. But even an itinerant preacher gets to hear the stories behind the put-together surfaces people present to the world. After a few minutes of conversation one hears that: this man’s father is wasting away with Parkinson’s; this woman’s son is going through a painful divorce that is grieving everyone in the extended family; this young mother has a child with cerebral palsy; this bright high school senior has no financial help to get into college; this couple can’t conceive a child; this middle-aged man has just lost his wife and now he has sole responsibility for their two teenage daughters, etc.

Usually people share their stories with me in a religious setting, perhaps at the door of the church after a retreat service or in the rectory parlor. I think the setting prompts them to introduce God into their conversations. They may express: hope that God will see them through their present crisis; questions about why God lets such bad things happen to good people; fear that they are being punished for something they may have done to displease God; despair because they no longer feel God loves them.

There is nothing I can say in a moment that will give them answers or quell their deep-seated concerns. Like them I have my own issues I hope to raise with the Lord when at last we meet face-to-face. I have come to learn that in this life there are no guarantees that things will work out favorably for believers. Both believers and non-believers seem to struggle with similar difficulties in, what one prayer used to call, “this vale of tears.”

While there are no facile solutions to our real struggles, nevertheless, one hopes that these scriptures we hear at Sunday Eucharist not only address the real issues of our lives, but over time and through attentive listening, shape and strengthen

our faith for when we find ourselves well into “this vale of tears.” As I keep my own faith struggles and those countless conversations in mind, I hear in today’s scriptures a picture of God that consoles and strengthens, especially when God seems to have taken a leave of absence from the scene. Paul, for example, tells the Romans that no pain, problem or power on earth can separate us from the love God has shown us in Christ. This love is more power than even death itself!

The Isaiah reading is a biblical classic. The prophet is speaking to the Israelites in exile. Exile is also what many of us feel when life takes a cruel and agonizingly-long twist that causes faith questions to emerge. The prophet speaks to our concerns about the nature and involvement of God in our lives. He tells us God has promised to feed those who have no resources to feed themselves. And the food God gives is not a scrap or little morsel, but is a sumptuous banquet. We are so used to paying for everything we want; but the meal God gives is free of charge. What do we need to do to get this feast? Whom do we have to know to get to sit at the banquet table? According to Isaiah, we just have to hunger and thirst—and, of course, know where to turn. So, we ask ourselves at this eucharist: what hungers and thirsts have I tried unsuccessfully to fill? What need in my life have I learned only God can satisfy? When we have named those empty places in our lives, we are ready to come to receive the eucharist.

Let me come at the gospel a little differently. I heard a series on the radio before Labor Day a couple years ago that extolled workers, especially laborers. Each episode was about a different kind of heavy work. In one the announcer told us, “This must be the dirtiest job in New York City.” Well that got my attention. What do you think it was? It was an account of a woman working in a major hospital’s laundry. Huge machines, high temperatures and humidity and very soiled sheets, operating room linens, lab coats and surgeons’ dressing gowns---use your imagination---lots of possibilities for contamination from blood and needles accidentally scooped up into laundry bags. The wages for non-skilled labor at this level are very low, despite the health risks. The correspondent interviewed the woman, who was from the Dominican Republic. The roar of the huge machines almost drowned out their conversation. Since it was a very hot August I imagined that the heat and humidity must have left the woman wiped out at the end of the day. They asked her why she did this work. “It’s for my family, me and my husband and for our children. We want them to get educated.”

Soon afterwards I visited a family member in a hospital and saw the nurses and doctors' sparkling uniforms, the white and pressed sheets, the clean towels—I thought of that woman, or someone like her, down below in the laundry. She wasn't just feeding her children, she was taking care of us all. No one needs contaminated bed linens or dirty dressing gowns in a hospital. I wonder if she is going to church this weekend and if she will hear this gospel. Will she hear about Jesus' compassion for the sick and hungry? Will she see her work as a way to do what Jesus did, heal the sick and minister to the hungers of the crowd? Is she conscious how much "the dirtiest job in New York" also helps people get well or die with dignity?... How her clean laundry makes people like me feel comforted at the bedside of someone I love; a reassurance they are receiving good and respectful care?

We pray for vocations in the church. Of course we need more priests, sisters, brothers and deacons—that's usually what our prayers for "vocations" are about. But from another perspective, I have always felt we don't lack vocations in our church. I see lots of people working and volunteering to do church work. But there are other vocations, other ways to respond to Jesus' injunction, "...give them some food yourselves." Someone asked a woman, who frequently had to visit her elderly parents to check in on them, bring the groceries, take them for doctor's appointments, etc. if she wanted to do ministry at her parish. She said, "Right now my parents are my ministry." She's right. But even more. That's her vocation, that's her response to Jesus' directions to the disciples, "There is no need for them to go away, give them something to eat yourselves."

When asked about their primary religious roles and responsibilities, Christians don't usually talk about their jobs and they fail to recognize the sacredness of their everyday work. That woman in the laundry was doing a necessary dirty work not only to feed and educate her kids, but to help sick people get better. While Jesus visited and preached in the synagogues, he did almost all his miracles and teachings, like today's multiplication of bread, not in the official "holy places," but in our everyday world where there were homemakers, fishing people, farmers, etc. Those are the places he found the needy and the sick; that's where, as we hear today, he found thousands of hungry people. He saw their sickness and he cured them. He saw their hungers and fed them. Just as Isaiah said God would do—free of charge and with plenty.

So now the question is; whom are we called to feed and care for in our daily lives? And would we consider that we can do this even in our jobs? If we produce products, we make the best we can; if we repair things, we make sure they work properly; if we do a service, we make sure to bring it to completion; if we deal with the public, we do so with respect and kindness, etc. Whatever the work we do, is it possible that in some ways others are helped by our doing that work with diligence and concern? There is an optimism of grace here: that the God we hear of in Isaiah and meet in Jesus' feeding of the crowds, that this God is actively present wherever and whenever a disciple responds to Jesus' call to, "give them some food yourselves."

QUOTABLE

The word "altar" comes from a Latin word that originally meant "to burn up." Before Christ, altars were fearful places where blood was spilled, flesh seared, incense, grain and oil sacrifices in smoke and fire. Our ancestors sensed that in sacrificing life and that which sustains life, God would be near. Jesus' self-sacrificing love made the cross the ultimate altar. Because Christ offered his own body to be broken, his own blood to be poured out on the altar of the cross, we no longer have to spill blood or break bodies in violence or in war, in inner city alleys or on "death row," in the streets of Iraq, the mountains of Afghanistan or the fields of Darfur. Where not Christ's sacred body and precious blood enough?
—David Philippart in CELEBRATION, July 2005, page 9.

JUSTICE NOTES

God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should be in abundance for all in like manner. Whatever the forms of property may be, as adapted to the legitimate institutions of peoples, according to diverse and changeable circumstances, attention must always be paid to this universal destination of earthly goods. In using them, therefore, man should regard the external things that he legitimately possesses not only as his own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only him but also others.[9] On the other hand, the right of having a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone. The Fathers and Doctors of the Church held this opinion, teaching that men are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods.[10] If

one is in extreme necessity, he has the right to procure for himself what he needs out of the riches of others.[11] Since there are so many people prostrate with hunger in the world, this sacred council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the aphorism of the Fathers, "Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him, you have killed him,"[12] and really to share and employ their earthly goods, according to the ability of each, especially by supporting individuals or peoples with the aid by which they may be able to help and develop themselves.

"Gaudium et Spes – The Church in the Modern World" 1965 Vatican II #69
—from the "Social Justice Notes," of the diocese of Oakland, Ca.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'"

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

Eddie C. Robinson#0347839 (On death row since 5/19/92)

Ernes P. Mc Carber #0264009 (9/23/92)

Carl Moseley #294214 (10/1/92)

---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

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