

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:

PRENOTE:

People have asked about our Dominican preaching community here in Raleigh, N.C. We have a new webpage - come visit. <http://www.opraleigh.org/>

A few years back I preached in a city where there was a soup kitchen for street people run by three Catholic sisters. Well, it wasn't a soup kitchen exactly—it was more like a restaurant. The “guests” were greeted at the door by church volunteers and shown to tables with tablecloths and given a menu. The fare was limited, but they had a choice of “entrees” from which they could choose. There are quicker and more efficient ways to feed the hungry, especially these days with so many homeless and hungry on our streets. Food pantries and soup kitchens can barely keep up with those who come seeking food and clothing. The current numbers of the hungry are increasing and the charitable collections of food and clothing are just not enough to meet the urgent needs.

But still, that special soup kitchen, with its parish volunteers and special “guests” stays with me as a wonderful sign of what the scriptures reveal today about the food and drink we are promised at God's table—where we will be treated as honored guests and where no one will lack food and clothing. As the spiritual, in its own way, says, “All God's children gonna have shoes.” That's a promise we can bank on. We will all be special at the table and no one will lack for anything.

Are we believers all just dreamers? Considering the plight of so many poor, homeless and victimized in the world, who has the audacity to promise anything better in the future when things are so very bad now? A prophet does - and when a prophet speaks, we become dreamers of the better world we and God are struggling to create. Prophets are audacious and, in biblical times, as well as today, they can seem like fools.

The prophet we call “Deutero-Isaiah” (6th century B.C.E.), was with the people of

Judah in exile. His prophetic task wasn't to reprimand them for their infidelities, which got them into exile in the first place---but to comfort them, by telling them, despite all signs to the contrary, God had not forgotten them. The prophet told them they would be given a new beginning. As in the days of the Exodus, God would deliver them from slavery, lead them across the desert, provide them again with water and food for their journey and bring them safely home.

Here's where the "restaurant" run by the sisters comes to mind. The defeated and broken people in exile are getting an invitation to be God's guests and to come to eat and drink free of charge. "All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, receive grain and eat."

That's how it always is with God. When we are at our lowest point, in one exile of our own making, or another, a special delivery letter comes to invite us back home, where a meal is waiting us. The invitation reads, "I don't care what you have done, come on home! Let me supply the nourishment you have desired and searched for in all the wrong places. I have what you really need and I want to give it to you free of charge. For heaven's sake, forget the past, we have a future together!" Hear in the southern U. S. we might word the invitation differently: "Ya'll come! Set yourself down. Eat. Hear?"

That southern phrase ends with "Hear?" As if to say (as a native-born New Yorker living in the South, I am on shaky ground here) – "Do you hear what I am saying?" "Trust my words." Or, "I really mean what I'm saying!" Three times in today's Isaiah reading the prophet, speaking for God, does a similar thing: "Heed me...." "Come to me heedfully, listen...." Despite their current situation, through the prophet, God is reassuring the crushed people to trust God's words and act on what they hear. God has not abandoned them, will deliver them, settle them again in their land, feed them and give them drink – free of charge. They need to "heed" what they hear and respond. "Ya'll come!"

In Jesus, God has sent out another similar invitation to special guests to come, sit down, eat and drink. God offers a special meal, free of charge for those who are in a "deserted place." Appearances can be deceiving – where's the banquet table, linen napkins, candles, "fatted calf" and "choice wines" the prophets promised would be served God's people? Not yet. But at the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, God's promise to the needy is renewed and signs of fulfillment are evident for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Isaiah encourages us again today, "Heed

me and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare.” Or, as we might say these days, “Listen up!”

The multiplication of the loaves and fish is a spectacular miracle. But it starts very small and among seeming-insignificant people. Which is where God usually starts a good work, so that the people can’t claim any success was based just on their skills and merits. God is at work here. It is God’s idea to feed the least and it is God who makes it possible to do it.

Nevertheless, as we learn from Matthew’s account, people do have a part to play; though it does seem small by the world’s ways of measuring. The disciples understand their situation: the crowd is large and they have next to nothing to give to address the people’s hunger. “Five loaves and two fish are all we have here.” They may have practically nothing to offer, but at least they “heed” what Jesus says and offer up what little they do have. They could have looked to their own needs and saved the few loaves and fish for themselves. That would have been the prudent thing to do. But the crowd was hungry, they had to be fed and the disciples put what little they had to feed them completely into Jesus’ hands.

There are times when we just have to throw our whole lot in with the Lord; take a chance on him; join him in his sometimes reckless project. Didn’t we hear the parable last week about selling all we have to buy whole field, or the pearl of great price? And didn’t we hear Jesus say two weeks ago, “Whoever has ears ought to hear.”? Isaiah speaks the same message today as we ponder the miracle of the loaves and fishes, “Come to me heedfully, listen that you may have life.”

So it is a partnership God wants from us! We provide the best we can to do God’s work and, instead of standing far off to see how we do, God rolls up the sleeves and gets to work with us. We have got to trust that – otherwise, we would never set about to address the huge issues we face in our world, like hunger, racism, war, injustice, violence, disease, social inequalities, etc. We do what we can, even though it feels puny to us and appears insignificant by the world’s standards of measurement. We hand over what we have to Christ who invites, “Bring them here to me” and we see what he does with our offerings.

Here at Eucharist our offerings are small indeed, some bread and wine. We come in Jesus’ name to share these small gifts with one another. Here we are all equal, or at least we should be, despite the economic, social, racial, gender and language

differences we have in the outside world. We are equal because we need God to satisfy our hungers. We are also equal because the personal gifts we offer in God's service are insufficient in the light of the world's huge hungers. We need our "partner" God to fill in where we are lacking if we are ever going to be able to feed the hungry and clothe the naked – as Jesus tells his disciples to do in a later teaching (23: 31-46).

While we might receive comfort knowing that our inner hungers are fed today at this eucharistic meal, let's not just "spiritualize" today's gospel. Let's remember that Jesus' pity extended to the physical needs of the "vast crowd" he saw when he disembarked from the boat. Matthew tells us, "he was moved with pity for them and he cured their sick." Afterward, he fed their hunger – they had physical needs and he responded.

No one left hungry that day, "they all ate and were satisfied." We pray at this Eucharist that the Spirit come upon the small gifts of bread and wine we offer and that they become the body and blood of Christ for our nourishment. We also pray that the Spirit come upon us who gather to "heed" God's Word so they we will be guided and empowered in Christ's service. May the "loaves and fish" of our daily lives feed those hungry Christ sends us into the world to feed.

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

This coming Wednesday, August 6th we will celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus as well as the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, an event of catastrophic "transfiguration". Our Church, through the voices of Popes and Bishops has spoken out forcefully on the subject of Nuclear Weapons.

"In the face of the man-made calamity that every war is, one must affirm and reaffirm, again and again, that the waging of war is not inevitable or unchangeable. Humanity is not destined to self-destruction. Clashes of ideologies, aspirations and needs can and must be settled and resolved by means other than war and violence." Pope John Paul II, Appeal for Peace, Hiroshima, Japan.

"Nuclear deterrence as a national policy must be condemned as morally abhorrent because it is the excuse and justification for the continued possession and further

development of these horrendous weapons.”

US Catholic Bishops, The Morality of Nuclear Deterrence

“The time has come to rid planet Earth of nuclear weapons-all of them, everywhere...

Nuclear weapons, whether used or threatened, are grossly evil and morally wrong.

Cardinal Danneels, Statement to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Preparatory Committee

“...the arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree.” *Gaudium et Spes, Second Vatican Council*

“This Conference resolves to call upon our respective governments to urge all nations to agree by treaty to stop the production, testing, stock-piling and usage of nuclear weapons and to press for an international mandate for all member states to prohibit nuclear warfare.”

Archbishop Martino, Apostolic Nuncio, UN

“We must all pray that no human hand will ever again do what has been done here.”

Mother Teresa, Nagasaki, Japan.

“(Today) excessive nuclear arsenals, their continued spread, and proposals to further develop and use them underscore the need for much deeper cuts in nuclear weapons and ultimately a global nuclear ban.” *US Catholic Bishops 2003*

What can I do:

Pray fervently for peace, and that the renewed attempts of our government to invest in nuclear weapons cease.

Learn more about our government’s nuclear weapons policies and plans to develop new ones. Speak out in the words of our Popes and Bishops. Be a voice of peace.

Contact your Senators and Representatives. Ask them to vote against funding for nuclear weapons testing and production.

---(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

18th SUNDAY (A) AUGUST 3,2008

Isaiah 55: 1-3 Psalm 145 Rom. 8: 35,37-39 Matthew 14: 13-21

From today's Gospel reading:

Taking the five loaves and two fish, and looking up to heaven, Jesus said the blessing, broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds.

Reflection:

Jesus saw the hungry crowd and with the loaves and fish his disciples offered, he fed them. While we might receive comfort knowing that our inner hungers are fed at our eucharistic meal, let's not just "spiritualize" today's gospel.

Let's remember that Jesus' pity extended to the crowd's physical needs he saw when he disembarked from the boat. Matthew tells us, "he was moved with pity for them and he cured their sick," and, with the disciples' help, he fed their hunger.

So we ask ourselves:

What hunger do I bring to this Eucharist today that I turn to Jesus to feed?

In my world, what hunger am I hearing Jesus invite me to feed—with his help?

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Michael Braxton #0043529 (On death row since 11/21/97)

John Williams #0599379 (3/5/98)

Danny Frogg #0137368 (3/27/98)

---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 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. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://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. “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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