

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 20th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Isaiah 56: 6-7 Psalm 67 Romans 11: 13-15, 29-32 Matthew 15: 21-28
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

When the Israelites went into Babylonian slavery they lost almost everything—their liberty, lands, temple, etc. In that foreign land one more calamity threatened them, loss of faith. In exile they wondered if they were worshipping the right God. It was tempting for them to think that the gods of the Babylonians looked much more powerful than their own, since Babylon had conquered Israel. So, many dropped their adherence to the God of Israel and drifted over to their conquerors’ pagan religious practices. Exile broke the spirits of many. Not unlike today, when people who suffer great loss decide to turn away from the God they feel let them down.

But even in exile there was a faithful remnant who hoped against hope that God was still with them and would someday take them home. In the meanwhile these faithful ones did what they could to protect themselves and their children from the strong pagan influences that must have felt overwhelming. Can’t we identify with their struggle to keep themselves and their children true to the faith they had inherited from their forebears? For we too want to pass on to the next generation the faith that has sustained us. Like Peter, in last week’s gospel, our faith has helped us walk on stormy seas, probably more than once in our lives and we want our children to be strengthened by that faith too.

In their struggle to keep faithful in the harshest conditions the exiles came up with a solution. They decided to “circle the wagons”—to gather together for mutual support and to reject what, to them, was foreign, pagan and a threat to their very survival. For those who did make it back to Israel they found it was not what they had remembered. Foreigners now lived there; again pagans seemed to surround and threaten the faithful people’s core beliefs with foreign teachings and religious practices. Should they once again circle the wagons, as they tried to do in exile? Many, encouraged by their religious leaders, did. (We can hear clear hints of the exclusionary tactics in what Jesus says to the foreign Canaanite woman in today’s gospel.)

Isaiah speaks for God to those who had hardened their attitudes towards outsiders and looked upon the stranger as a threat to what they held sacred. Isaiah reminds the people that God's love is broad and all-encompassing. First of all, he calls the chosen people to, "Observe what is right, do what is just," lest they ignore their own need to reform and fail in their covenant with God. A prophet like Isaiah is not about to water down his faith in God. He is firm in his beliefs, he will not abandon his faith for some generic religious observance. But he does invite his co-religionists and us to keep our vision as broad as God's; especially we who live in a country of such diverse religious and cultural practices. (Here's an example of diversity. In my old neighborhood we had a Jewish bakery that sold "kosher pizzas!") Isaiah believed God had chosen the Israelites to bring salvation, not only to them, but through them, to the whole world. They were no better than any other people in the world, but nevertheless, they were to be God's instruments to proclaim the love of God for all.

The prophet wants to keep our vision of others broad and open. Isaiah helps us see how God works in so many ways and he invites us to welcome the many guises we find among people and the many ways they serve the God in whom we have placed our faith. The opening line of the first reading gives us a clue what to look for in others, whether they belong to our group or not: do they, "Observe what is right, do what is just?" Rather than being closed and parochial we must look to faithfully living what we have heard from the prophets about who God is and what God expects of us. When we see our God reflected in the actions of others, we welcome them and the God who obviously dwells in them. How big is the "house" Isaiah describes; the place where "foreigners" join themselves to God, "ministering" to God? That house sounds pretty big to me, probably a lot larger than my often limited vision provides. Well, that's the function of prophets, to open minds and hearts to a very inclusive God.

Matthew writes his gospel from strong Jewish roots. He sees Jesus as a new Moses and the founder of a new Israel. Yet there are significant moments in his gospel when outsiders manifest faith. Remember the foreign Magi (2:1-12) and the Roman centurion (8:5-13)? And now we have the Canaanite woman.

Jesus is out of his usual element in today's story. He has entered Tyre and Sidon, pagan territory. He is among the people who inhabited the holy land before the Israelites arrived. These are the people faithful Jews struggled against throughout

their national history to preserve their faith. Jesus and his disciples would expect to meet opposition there to the good news they preached. But they were surprised and so would Matthew's readers be, since the early church still had anti-gentile sentiments.

At first Jesus is reluctant to expand his ministry beyond his initial calling to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But this woman will hear nothing of protocol and religious priorities, after all her daughter is desperately ill, "tormented by a demon." She "came" to him, called him "Lord" and recognized him as "Son of David." Here is a pagan who express the faith Jesus had hoped to find among his own people. She also acknowledges that God's bread was meant for the chosen people and yet, in asking for "scraps that fall from the table," she is asking for a share in that food. She is insistent, despite Jesus' initial reluctance to go outside the pale to pagans. (It may help soften Jesus' response to the woman to know that some commentators have said, that "dogs" can also be translated "puppies"—implying some affection on Jesus' part.)

The woman's faith stirs a response from Jesus. She may not have had the "proper" religious heritage or upbringing in God's covenant and laws, but she captures the faith of believers like us who also recognize Jesus as "Lord," the One who will provide bread from God. (Isn't that what he is doing today at our eucharistic table?) How often do we meet people who may not be enrolled on our church's membership lists, but who manifest by their words and actions the self-giving influence of Jesus' spirit? Somehow God has found a way to renew and nourish them; how else could they be the people they are?

Matthew's community was expanding into gentile settings where it proclaimed the good news about Jesus. The gentiles were responding and entering the community of believers. Stories like today's, about the Canaanite woman, must have helped the original Jewish converts to Christianity accept people as brothers and sisters whom they once called "dogs." They heard the woman acknowledge the priority of the Jewish faith and God's openness to all believers through Jesus Christ.

The Canaanite woman is a voice for all who turn to a loving God from outside the usual religious contexts. She may not be an acknowledged member of Jesus' followers, but her trust in him and her faith that he is God's anointed, is a sign of

God's mercy working beyond the norms and conventions we humans set up to determine the "in" and the "out" crowd. If a pagan could surprise us with faith, then who are we to limit our expectations of where and how God is at work in the world?

QUOTABLE

(You may find this quote ties in with today's gospel about "outsiders.")

Migrants, in general, are at the bottom of the economic ladder.... they take the lowest paying jobs and occupy the worst housing. Most cannot open bank accounts so they are known to keep all of their cash on hand and are easy targets for robbers. They pay highest auto insurance rates, cannot continue their education because they do not speak and write adequately, much less in English than in their own native Spanish. Since early 2004, it has been practically impossible for immigrants to get driver's licenses in North Carolina, so many are arrested at checkpoints, and threatened with imprisonment the next time they are caught driving without a license they cannot get.....

As Catholics, we are taught that people whose families are starving have a right to migrate in order to obtain work to support their families.... That is to say, while states and nations have a right to control their borders, their immigration policies cannot exclude people who need to work in order to support their families.

----from an interview with Paul Brant, SJ in "Company: The World of Jesuits and Their Friends,": Summer 2005, page 14. (Paul is an advocate for Hispanics here in the Raleigh, NC diocese.)

JUSTICE NOTES

For those injured and killed in London and around the world from acts of terrorism, war, and poverty

PRAYER IN TIME OF TERRORISM

O God, I do not know where to turn in a time of terrorism. I have no easy answers or solutions to acts of terror against the innocent. When buildings explode without warning, when the defenseless are murdered without reason, I am tempted to retaliate with vengeance. I am tempted to place the flag above the cross and put my faith in the state rather than the Sermon on the Mount. I am afraid to face my deepest fears of suffering and death, both for myself and those I love.

O God, be merciful to me a sinner and understand my weakness, my lack of trust. I lift my heart to a God of forgiveness, of compassion, of peace. I believe that You are not present in any act of violence. I believe that every human being is a child of God and that all nations and religions are embraced by You. I believe that violence ignites greater violence and that in the long line of history our only lasting legacy is love.

I recommit myself to nonviolence as a witness of Your love. I will cast out fear and boldly live love for neighbor and enemy. I will cast out fear and renounce hatred, desire for revenge and works of war. I will cast out fear and publicly proclaim that You are a God of unlimited and unconditional love.

I recommit myself to nonviolence as a witness of Your love. I will embrace the suffering of others and wipe every tear from their eyes. I will devote my days to works of mercy and justice, not to deeds of death and destruction. I will give my passion to kindness and beauty and imagination. I commit to hope and the children of tomorrow. Amen

---Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB (from Social Justice News, Diocese of Oakland)

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:.....

William Bowie #0039569 (On death row since 2/5/93)
Elton Mc Laughlin#0272408 (3/17/93)
Rayford L. Burke #0057308 (4/1/93)
---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,

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