

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 21st SUNDAY (A)

Isaiah 22: 19-23 Romans 11: 33-36 Matthew 16: 13-20

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

When Jesus asked Peter, “But who do you say that I am?” he wasn’t asking Peter to recite a series of doctrines about his identity. He wasn’t inviting him to recite the Nicene Creed we recite at Sunday Mass. That would come later when the Christian community had to address questions that had developed among its communities and when church teaching was challenged in the new lands where it had spread. The creeds and formulas would be necessary—but later.

No, Jesus was not asking Peter to work out a christological formula. That’s clear from the beginning of the question, “But you...?” Jesus was inviting Peter to express his own faith. Does he believe in Jesus and what does he believe about Jesus? From his experience of Jesus and through the gift of God’s grace, Peter has come to know that Jesus is the revelation of God to the world. He articulates what the church has come to believe about Christ. The articles of that faith will be developed and taught to inquirers: but first comes Peter, expressing his faith and the faith of the first generation Christians.

Other followers of Christ will have to answer the same question and pass on that faith to their children and those to whom they preach. They will announce to anyone who will listen – who Jesus is and what difference he made in their lives. The creeds will emerge, but the teachings will have little meaning if people have not, in one way or another, answered the question Jesus asks us today, “But who do YOU say that I am?” Jesus isn’t just asking us if we go to church on Sunday; if we send out children to religious education classes or say grace before meals. First of all he invites us to acknowledge our belief in him and to bear witness to his love and manner of living in the world.

Those who know us usually can detect our preferences. If we say we are big Atlanta Braves fans but never watch a game, wear a team insignia or know who plays first base – people will begin to wonder. If we say we love to read, but all we talk about at social gatherings are the evening tv shows and soaps – people will begin to wonder. If we say we are very concerned about the environment, but never recycle, drive a gas guzzler and keep all the lights on in our homes – people will

begin to wonder.

If we say we are Christians, yet there is little that signifies Jesus has made any difference in our lives – people will begin to wonder. If we insist our children must go to church with us, but at home they hear us use racial slurs, utter stereotypical comments about the poor and immigrants and gossip about people in our church – our children will begin to wonder: “Are my parents (grandparents, uncles or aunts) really Christians, or do they just go to church?” “But who do you say I am?” Jesus asks us today. What response to the question does our life reveal to those observers around us?

Jesus’ question isn’t just asked of us as individuals. It is posed to our church as well. If our Christian community fits comfortably into the society around it; never raises an objection to public discriminatory policies; never speaks up to represent those who have little power or no voice; welcomes only those who look and act like the established members; is more fussy about ritual and decorum and less concerned about newcomers and how to welcome them and incorporate them into our community and its rituals, then when Jesus asks us, “Church, who do you say that I am?” in reality our answer is, “You are an admirable leader and teacher and a good role model – and that’s it.”

Peter voiced the faith the early church had in Jesus. It was to be the message they proclaimed, “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Those who accepted that message professed their faith in God’s unique presence and revelation manifested in Christ. In accepting Jesus as “the Son of the living God,” and receiving the grace God offered them in Christ, they agreed to change their ways. Jesus was more than a role model for believers. In him God offered humanity the grace to live Christ’s life of love and service – especially to serve those Jesus served, the least in the eyes of society.

In response to Jesus’ initial question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Peter responds, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” People may have had differing opinions, but they seem to have agreed that they saw Jesus in the line of the great prophets. His words and life had revealed to them that he must be speaking with the authority of God. High praise indeed! But Jesus disregards those opinions and asks the question more directly to his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” Jesus says Peter’s response, that Jesus is the Son of God, is not a conclusion mortals can attain on

their own. We can not come to the faith we profess at the Eucharist without being called and gifted by God. That gift of sight is something to give thanks for at this celebration.

The faith Peter and the disciples come to profess in Christ should not be kept to themselves. They must not form a secretive and isolated sect that will strive to avoid contamination from the world. Quite the opposite. Peter speaks the faith of the post-resurrection church. This is the faith Jesus will send them out to proclaim. Peter will bear the keys, like Eliakim in our first reading, who carried “the key of the House of David.” Peter will have the mission of stewardship to lead the early church by his preaching, teaching, example and his ultimate martyrdom.

Peter’s faith will be accepted by many and those who profess it will be strengthened as they face persecution; the long wait for Jesus’ return; internal conflicts that would shake the church to its foundation and pastoral disputes. Peter and the disciples will be instructed to do as Jesus did for them; to be a servant church and wash the feet of others. Their task will be to lead others to accept Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” and to sustain and serve the community as its members attempt to live out the faith in the One they profess.

Jesus said he would build his church on rock. Sometimes it feels that the church is less on rock and more on sand. We have all sorts of divisions that distract our energies and create an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust. It doesn’t feel like a rock-solid church, does it? A quick survey of our history reminds us that we aren’t going through anything those before us didn’t also go through in one way or another. From the very beginning we have had both saints and sinners among our popes, bishops, priests, religious and laity. At times it is very discouraging. At those low moments, when we feel our dreams and ideals are under siege, we might want to repeat as a mantra what Jesus promised, “...the gates of the nether world shall not prevail against it.”

We give praise today that, despite our less-than stellar performance as the people of God, Christ has not abandoned us. We can praise God today for the prophetic leaders we have had in our past and have today who: speak out against war and the death penalty; defend innocent and unborn life; protect the rights of those displaced by famine and civil war; provide shelter for the homeless and abused, etc. In our church, while there are signs of our shaky faith, there are also ample reminders that Christ is very much with his church. Just as he promised he would be.

Note: *For another take on today's gospel go to our webpage and the "First Impressions" archive for the Feast of Peter and Paul June 29, 2008*

(Here is the direct link to that archive:

http://www.preacherexchange.com/fi_06-29-08a.htm)

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.

From today's Gospel reading:

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Reflection:

Jesus is not just a wise teacher or another prophet like John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah. In our accepting Christ as "the Son of the living God" and receiving the grace God offers us in him, we can change our lives and affect the world around us. We can more and more show the person of Jesus to the world so that others will also come to acknowledge him as "the Son of the living God."

So we ask ourselves:

What response would we give if Jesus were to ask us what he asked Peter? "But who do you say that I am?"

What changes must I make so that others will experience me a person who believes that Jesus is "the Son of the living God?"

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Thus says the Lord..."I will thrust you from your office and pull you down from your station." (Isaiah 56:1)

Today's first reading from Isaiah brings the action of God into the very heart of

politics. The Prophet Isaiah strongly says that our God cares how rulers exercise their power.

This past June the Catholic Bishops from the G8 countries echoed Isaiah's words in a letter calling on political leaders to meet their moral obligations. The Bishops urged leaders to *"deepen your commitments and actions to reduce global poverty and address global climate change."* The bishops wrote: "Our religious and moral commitment to protect human life and promote human dignity moves us to be particularly concerned for the poorest and most vulnerable members of the human family, especially those in developing countries."

The bishops note that the poor have contributed least to the factors that aggravate global climate change, but they will be disproportionately affected by *"its harmful effects, including potential conflicts, escalating energy costs, and health problems."* They urged Summit leaders to recognize that the *"costs of initiatives to prevent and adapt to the harmful consequences of climate change should be borne more by richer persons and nations who have benefited most from the emissions that have fueled development and should not unduly burden the poor."* <http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/2008/08-091.shtml>

While it is not always easy to be well informed amid the current election sound bites there is an enormous array of resources available to help us. Below is a list of just a few.

1. Office of International Justice and Peace, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/
2. NETWORK, a Catholic Lobbying group: www.networklobby.org
3. Jubilee USA Network: www.jubileeusa.org
4. Catholic Relief Services: <http://crs.org>
5. Equal Exchange: <http://www.equalexchange.com/crs>
6. The Catholic Organization: Center of Concern: www.coc.org
7. Institute for Policy Studies: www.ips-dc.org
8. Alliance for Responsible Trade: www.art-us.org
9. International Forum on Globalization: www.ifg.org

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

QUOTABLE

“Within each of us there is a silence,
a silence as vast as the universe...
When we experience that silence, we remember
who we are, creatures of the stars,
created from time and space, created from silence...
Silence is our deepest nature, our home,
our common ground, our peace...
Silence is where God dwells. We yearn to be there.
The experience of silence is now so rare,
that we must guard and treasure it.
This is especially true for shared silence.”
—Gunilla Norris in, SHARED SILENCE

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.*

An inmate I know is interested in a pen pal. If you would like to communicate with him on a monthly basis, his name is,
Lyle May #0580028
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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