

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 26th WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Ezekiel 18: 25-28 Philippians 2: 1-11 Matthew 21: 28-32

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

It's painful to have someone you trust tell you that they are going to do something for you--- and they don't. I remember being at the wake of a young husband and father of two children who died suddenly. His wife was now left to raise the children herself. During the two nights of the wake, she later told me, a lot of family and close friends came up to her and said, "Don't worry, we'll be there for you." Reflecting on the years after her husband's death she said, "Well, some were there when I needed them, including those who never made a promise of help at the wake. But others, who sounded so earnest those two nights in the funeral home, never called or visited. I never heard from them again."

Life has taught us to be wary of certain people; not just blatant liars, but those who are all talk with no follow-through. Yet, we do expect family and friends to keep their word and come through for us when we have pressing need. They don't always. When an acquaintance disappoints us we are not terribly crushed. But when someone close makes a promise and then fails to fulfill it, we are blind sided--- we never saw it coming.

There are some people from whom you just expect a loyal response. Those who should have responded with a "yes" to Jesus' message were the religious leaders. The chief priest and religious authorities have just asked Jesus why he acts the way he does (21:23-27). He had taken exception to their temple practices, his words and actions had stirred up their wrath. For example, they wanted him to silence the crowd who were proclaiming him by the messianic title "Son of David" as he entered Jerusalem; but he did not. What's the source of his authority, they wanted to know. Matthew goes out of his way to establish this authority in this gospel (e.g. 7:29, 9: 6-8). Right up to the final words of his gospel, Matthew reminds us of this authority when Jesus says, "All authority ...has been given me." (28:18) This gospel reveals the irony that the very ones who should have known better are blind to Jesus; while the ordinary and illiterate folk embrace him.

Today's passage is the first of three parables directed to the religious leaders. They confront Jesus, but he turns the confrontation around by proposing a short

parable about two exchanges between a father and his two sons. “Which of the two did his father’s will?” Their response indicts them. There are allegorical elements in this parable: the older son is like the leaders of the established religious tradition; the younger represents the outsiders and latecomers (Remember last week’s latecomers into the vineyard?), who have lived apart but now accept God’s invitation through Jesus. Their initial “no” has become a resounding “yes”.

Jesus’ style is unique. Rather than confront and accuse these opponents of faithlessness or lack of sincerity, he proposes a parable and asks them to answer a question about doing God’s will. Their response pronounces judgment on themselves. We, who also have this parable spoken to us, are invited to examine our own response to God. How faithful have we been to the invitation to follow Jesus and live his way of life? Of course we have been baptized; of course we have, in the past, done service to God in our family and at work. But now, how flexible is our spirit? How willing are we to say a “yes” and continue to follow through on our commitment to Jesus’ way? Each day presents new opportunities to serve God and new challenges to our initial “yes.” But respond we must. Remember Jesus’ reminder to his disciples that only those who do God’s will can enter the kingdom of heaven (7:21). Just saying “Lord, Lord” is not enough; nor is an initial “yes” without a follow-through.

It’s a daily “yes.” We still have to be honest and faithful to commitments we have made. Haven’t we, after all, said a “yes” to others in marriage, friendship, by having children, etc? Haven’t we said “yes” to the call to be a person of integrity in the work we do? As students, haven’t we said “yes” to pursuing, through our studies, not just professional skills, but also to a pursuit of what is true and worthy in life? A review of our lives will indicate the times we have said “yes” and have had others place trust in these commitments. Matthew began the Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes. His gospel fleshes out what it means to be a beatitude people, a people who have said “yes” to Jesus’ way---peacemakers, reconcilers, gentle spirited, prophetic witnesses, etc. To put flesh, our flesh, on the beatitudes, requires daily help in our resolve. That’s what we are praying for at this celebration.

Jesus stirs up a memory of John the Baptist (“When John came to you....”), who spoke of the nearness of God’s reign and called for a change of behavior. John’s

hearers were to give a “yes” to God by yielding “good fruit. “Give some evidence that you mean to reform” (3:8). John told the Pharisees and Sadducees, no one, no matter how fixed they are in their ways, no matter what their past sins have been, is outside the realm of God’s grace. Even the most wayward, here symbolized by “tax collectors and prostitutes,” can change their minds.

Do we hear the invitation and prodding to change? How many attempts to change have we made and how many times have we been less than successful? Nevertheless, with this parable that speaks God’s Word to us, comes the flame of Jesus’ Spirit to quicken our resolve to try again to change what needs changing. We have hope that this time, in some small or even large way, change is possible because we have heard God’s Word and experienced the living Christ through it. Paul has described Jesus as God’s “Yes.” Jesus was always responsive in both word and action to God. He was the one whose “yes” was never taken back, even when he faced his impending death. Before his “yes,” who doesn’t feel wishy-washy as a disciple; sometimes responsive to God, other times distracted, forgetful or even rejecting? What we do at this eucharist today is to receive the living Spirit of Jesus Christ, who can strengthen our resolve and help us to fully live our “yes” to God, just as Jesus did.

Are there any among us who feel like outsiders? Any who feel like “Johnny or Jane come lately”? God has a strange timepiece, one that doesn’t necessarily put in first place those who have been around the longest. Even now, at this tick-tock in God’s gracious clock, we are being offered an initiation to accept forgiveness. If we do, we will find God waiting for a “yes” from us. Let’s say that “yes” once again, and then ask Jesus, “What next?”

There is a special burden of responsibility on those of us who preach and teach. We, in the light of this parable, will have to reflect on whether or not our words match our actions. To use prison lingo, do we “walk the talk?” Parents, preachers, teachers, aunts, uncles, politicians, catechists, lectors---all who speak guiding words to others, will find this parable a prompting for an examination of conscience. Do we “walk the talk?” We are assured at this eucharist that there is room for improvement, along with a chance to change our mind and do the works that produce the fruits we have been called to do.

QUOTABLE

[Today's gospel] parable may also provide an opportunity for the preacher to reflect on the ambiguities of living with imperfections as disciples. Neither child had it all together. But the one who had the humility to change their mind and do what was asked was the exemplary one. Are there ways in which, both as individuals and as a community, we are being asked to admit we were wrong and then embark on a new course of action?

---Barbara E. Reid, PARABLES FOR PREACHERS: THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, YEAR A. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001, page 161.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

- Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 16, 1953

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I will post in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or several 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:

Allen Antione

Joe Bates #0023098

Kenneth Boyd #0040519

John L. Conaway

All are at: 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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