

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 29th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Isaiah 45: 4-6 Psalm 96 1Thessalonians 1: 1-5b Matthew 22: 15-21
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today’s gospel may suggest to some that in our lives of faith we have some “wiggle room.” “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God”—sounds like our lives can be divided into two boxes. In one, the “Caesar box,” we have our “worldly concerns,” the practical stuff of every day life, especially our responsibilities as citizens—the paying of taxes, obeying local and national laws, serving in government and military service, supporting state policies, etc. This box seems to be the larger of the two because it takes up so much of our time and energies. It also has a strong influence over the decisions we make: what career we’ll choose; how we invest our money; where we live; how much taxes we must pay; where we’ll send our children to school; etc.

Some of us will have to decide whether we’ll work for municipal, state or the national government. When we make such decisions we’ll think about salary, retirement packages and health care benefits for ourselves and family members. If we take such jobs and they provide the security and chance for advancement we want, then if public policies change or decisions are made that we don’t agree with, we’ll feel great pressure to stay where we are. Will we? In the “Caesar box,” we who pay taxes may shrug our shoulders when some of our money goes to support national goals and policies we don’t support.

Somewhere in the background we have underlying principles to guide how we live and these influence the choices we make. We believe we must live honest lives informed by Christian values, but generally, unless we are doing something clearly wrong, we continue to live and work without much reference to our “God box.” We navigate the waters of daily life dealing with Caesar’s stuff quite comfortably. We do what we must as workers and citizens of the world; we live our lives “out there.”

First century Jews also had to negotiate between two worlds: secular and religious. They were an occupied people under Roman domination. One reminder of the Roman pressure and presence on their lives was the requirement to pay taxes.

They didn't have a choice. Jewish authorities even helped collect the taxes. Nevertheless, the population resented the tribute they had to dole out to support a pagan army in their land. Revolt was not uncommon; nor was brutal Roman suppression of any resistance. The question put to Jesus then, was not for the sake of religious debate on a theological issue. Rather, whether to pay the tax or not was a daily issue for a people who believed in one God and who didn't want to divert their allegiance to a foreign nation that worshiped other gods and caused untold suffering to the followers of the one, true God.

Matthew tells us that behind the Pharisees and Herodians' question was a trap for Jesus. He detects his interrogators' devious intentions and asks for the coin they used to pay the tax. It was the denarius and had the emperor Tiberius' image on it. For many devout Jews, carrying Caesar's image, especially into the temple area where this discussion took place, was offensive, even blasphemous. So, if Jesus had suggested paying the tax, he would have alienated the devout. If, on the other hand, he advocated that they not pay the tax, the Romans would have sprung on him for treason and for stirring up insurrection.

In his response Jesus turns the challenge back on his adversaries. He asked them for the "coin that pays the census tax" and, since they had one with them, it's clear they had already decided what they would do----pay the tax. But for them and us, Jesus' second response asks us to focus on the other "box." It's God's and when we reflect on this part of the equation, we see that the God area of our lives is not conveniently defined and set apart. Instead, "what belongs to God," for the devout Jewish listeners and for us disciples, is all-encompassing. There can be no part-time observance or a separate area of our lives that "belongs to God." While we may have to do what the laws of the state require; Jesus is not advocating mere submission to Caesar's realm. We are obedient to secular authority only when it is consistent with what God requires. Our obedience, our "repaying to Caesar," is relative and we must always see our response to political dictates and the world's influence in the light of "what belongs to God."

Jesus taught by his actions and words that dedication to God's ways and submission to God's will are primary. Soon after today's encounter his adversaries will again challenge him and ask which is the greatest commandment in the law. He will respond, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind....The second is like it: You shall

love your neighbor as yourself.” (We will hear this passage next Sunday—Mt. 22: 34-40.) God is primary and over all other powers and loyalties. When allegiance to God conflicts with allegiance to any other power, obedience must be to God. As it turns out then, our lives cannot be partitioned into two boxes. There is no “wiggle room,” no part-time observance of what God requires. All “belongs to God.”

It is clear from church teaching that we Christians are called to engage the world and bring our beliefs with us into Caesar’s domain. Vatican II reminded us to take our faith into the market place and interpret our times in the light of the gospel. If we have any doubts all we have to do is to read papal and episcopal documents that address: poverty, globalization, war, abortion, the death penalty, health care, environment, the economy, etc. At first glance these seem to be in Caesar’s box. But these teachings remind us that the church of Jesus’ followers doesn’t exist apart from the world and that we are called to be agents of change for peace and justice. Christ’s followers may have to live and work under various forms of governments, but we cannot merely conform when structures and laws run counter to Jesus’ vision for us. It is God’s will that all people be treated justly, the poor cared for and everyone must be given respect and treated with dignity as a child of God. When Caesar has acted contrary to these basic beliefs and if say and do nothing, then we are spending too much time in the Caesar box and have lost our identity as those who love God with our whole heart, soul and mind and our neighbor as our self. If Jesus had confined himself to his adversaries’ restricted notion of what belonged to God, he never would have infuriated religious leaders who conspired with Caesar; nor would the Romans have put him to death.

God wants us to work for the betterment of all in society and we are called to take with us into Caesar’s world what we have learned from Jesus about “what belongs to God.” We need to decide where our ultimate loyalties lie: if they are with God, not even Caesar should detract us from them. We can’t be people with divided hearts who spend our time separating our lives into two neat boxes. Instead we should combine their contents and realize it is the God-content that colors the whole mix.

QUOTABLE

Can an intense liturgical life transform parishes into communities of reconciliation and mission, and what might that mean in a North American context? How can the liturgy evangelize us as worshipers? Would we be more engaged as disciples

of Jesus if we really saw blessing ourselves with holy water on entering a church or taking part in the rite of sprinkling as a renewal of our baptismal vows? How many Catholics today could even explain those vows? What if the penitential rite became for each of us a real confession of sins? Would we be more attentive to social justice if we brought forward with our gifts food for the hungry in our communities? Would we be able to better articulate our faith if we recited the creed with more attention? Would we be more moved to seek reconciliation with those we've injured or with others from whom we've become estranged if we saw the sign of peace as something more than a time of greeting friends or really understood that the Eucharist is the basic sacrament or reconciliation? How can we fail to learn that the lesson of humble service when we participate in the washing of feet on Holy Thursday? And what if we really understood ourselves communally as the body of Christ for the world?

—Thomas P. Rausch, S. J., "Evangelization and Liturgy," in *EVANGELIZING AMERICA*, edited by Thomas P. Rausch, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 2004) ISBN 0-8091-4240-6, page 73, paper \$19.95.

JUSTICE NOTES

FAMILY PEACMAKER PLEDGE

Because we are a family of faith,
trying to be more gentle and less violent,
wanting our world to be more peaceful and more just,
believing we are called by Jesus to be peacemakers---

In our treatment of each other and everyone we meet,
to the best of our ability, with the help of God and one another,
we promise:
to be generous in giving help to others,
to give encouragement sincerely and often,
to show respect even when we disagree,
to reduce the violence in our lives,
to select entertainment that is less violent,
to void hurting others unnecessarily,
to ask forgiveness when we hurt someone,
to give forgiveness when anyone hurts us,

to forgive ourselves when we make mistakes,
to pray for those who need peace, and help them if we can,
to keep the peaceful example of Jesus as our model./

----Pax Christi USA, 348 East Tenth Street, Erie, Pa 16503 (814-453-4955)

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:.....

Kenneth L. Boyd #0040519 (On death row since 7/14/94)

Marcus Robinson #0348505 (8/9/94)

Alden Hardin #0166056 (8/12/94)

----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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