

**First Impressions**      Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Isaiah 8: 23-9:3    Psalm 27    I Corinthians 1: 10-13    Matthew 4: 12-23

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Light and darkness run through today's first reading, Psalm response and Gospel. The theme of epiphany continues for, as Isaiah tells us, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone."

We are told a lot in the gospel's opening verse. The pace of Matthew's gospel has accelerated, things are happening quickly. John the Baptist is arrested and Jesus withdraws to Galilee. Matthew quotes Isaiah because he is showing in his gospel how Jesus fulfills the prophecies and hopes of the Jewish people. Matthew doesn't mention what was going on in Jesus' mind at the very beginning of his public ministry. Perhaps this is idle speculation--- but, did Jesus feel threatened because he was closely aligned with John and was baptized by him? Would Herod, who arrested John, link the two and then go after Jesus? If John the Baptist, who was so popular and had attracted such crowds and disciples, could be so easily swept up, what would prevent the authorities from doing the same to Jesus as he grew in popularity?

Jesus goes to the very place that Isaiah promised would be the first to see the light and, instead of hiding, begins to preach. His public ministry has begun, his popularity will grow and eventually, he too will be arrested and killed. The cross looms over this gospel from the very beginning and Jesus knew that and accepted the consequences of preaching the gospel, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The places where the gospel narratives take place are often significant. Matthew tells us that Jesus, "withdrew to Galilee...to live in Capernaum by the sea in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali." Galilee, part of the promised land, was located on international trade routes and many merchants and invaders had easy access to it. Some settled there and so Galilee was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles ("Galilee land of the Gentiles"). Jesus begins his preaching in Galilee and is signaling that his message is not meant just for the Jews. Through Jesus, God is reaching out to the nations; Jesus' mission is universal.

Jesus begins his mission among a battered and mixed community. It is just as Isaiah promised, “in the land of gloom a light has shone.” The time of waiting and anticipation has ended. Jesus is not just another prophet, like Isaiah, reassuring people that, though they sit in gloom and darkness, someday God will come to help them. He is not telling people to hang on and have hope. Instead, he announces that the light has come, “for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

For those of us who preach, teach religious education to youth, conduct retreats, lead scripture groups, guide people through the RCIA process, instruct children at home in the faith, etc, today’s scriptures strike close to home. We can identify with Paul who, at the beginning of I Corinthians, calls himself a preacher; not because he was eloquent or the wisest of disciples, but because he identifies himself with and preaches the cross of Christ. In addition, those who preach in any manner, through words in public or private, certainly receive affirmation from today’s gospel for, from the beginning, Matthew identifies Jesus as a preacher. “From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

I was in a scripture group once and we paused on that verse when someone asked, “What does it mean, ‘the kingdom of heaven is at hand?’” Someone in the circle responded, “It means we don’t have to try to be good on our own. God has seen our need and has come to help us.” ----Not a bad summary of Jesus’ central message. That verse will follow Jesus throughout the gospel. Where Jesus goes he brings God’s presence to those who are trying to change and turn around their lives, but can’t on their own. Through Jesus, God’s sovereignty and rule is proclaimed and people are empowered to change. What is old and worn out, can be put aside for something new is at hand---Someone new has arrived.

What will happen now that Jesus has begun to proclaim the kingdom? The first thing he will do is enlist others to share in the work of proclamation. Those he chooses are ordinary fishing people who, like Paul in our second reading, will not be able to boast of their wisdom or eloquence; but will trust what happened to them, they were called by Christ to proclaim God’s nearness. When asked where their authority to speak and act on Jesus’ behalf came from, they will claim what Paul claimed, they were chosen and sent by Jesus to preach that the “kingdom of God is at hand.” We have received that same call and we have been given the same authority.

Jesus begins his preaching by calling for repentance. He is inviting those who “sit

in darkness” to turn to him, the light. The darkness may be caused by sin, but it also includes the gloom of hopelessness; self-centered preoccupation and indifference; lack of vision and purpose; grief with no consolation; confusion without a guiding hand; isolation without a community; sickness and old age with fear, etc. There are many ways we “sit in darkness” and dwell “in a land overshadowed by death.” But we have “seen a great light.” In Jesus a “light is arisen.”

Each of us, through our baptism, is called to announce Jesus’ presence in the world. At our baptism we were called “prophets.” What does that mean for me? It is a question worth asking at this Eucharist, “How and where am I called to announce ‘the kingdom of heaven is at hand?’” We may not do it from pulpits or at public gatherings, but in one way or another, each of us must bring light to people who “sit in gloom” and are “overshadowed by death.” We are to be signs of reassurance to people who may feel forgotten. As that person in the scripture group put it, through us, people will know that God has seen their need and come to help them.

The disciples heard the call and immediately left things behind. What must we leave as we respond to Jesus’ invitation to announce the presence of God’s kingdom? —old ways of thinking? possessions? plans? familiar surroundings? security? Even if we never pack up and take to the road, as the first disciples did, we still must make changes, if we have heard and accepted Jesus’ call. Once again, we need to ask Christ to show us what changes we must make so that, like the first disciples, we can follow him and be his instruments of proclamation. Yes, we already are his followers, nevertheless, we need to hear afresh and respond again to his call. Speak Lord, your servant is listening.

So, how shall we preach “the kingdom of heaven is near” this week? As co-workers and students we could be less competitive and more cooperative; as friends or family members we could be more willing to listen to what others are saying; we could respond to people’s request for help; we could treat all people, regardless of race, gender, economic status and education with acceptance and dignity. The bottom line, in light of today’s scriptures might be: In a world where there is gloom, how can I, with Jesus’ help, be “a light to the nations?”

## **JUSTICE NOTES**

***"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone!" (Isaiah 9:2b)***

### ***The Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.***

Last Monday we celebrated the gift of Martin Luther King to our world. The entire month of February is dedicated by our nation to remembering and celebrating the contributions of black Americans to U.S. history. Foremost among these many contributors is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who led this nation in a radical conversion of heart, to acknowledge the sin of racism, and to begin the long and arduous journey of correcting centuries of injustice for black Americans.

Like Jesus, Dr. King was killed because he made the powerful uncomfortable. Some believe that Dr. King would be dismayed at being honored as a national hero on a pedestal, because it focuses us on his past achievements instead of on the future and the great work he was still pursuing.

Dr. King did not rest with the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. He frightened some of his own followers and alienated some of his supporters when he also spoke out fearlessly for peace and against the U.S. war in Vietnam:

*"Never again will I be silent on an issue that is destroying the soul of our nation and destroying thousands and thousands of little children in Vietnam .... The time has come for a real prophecy, and I am willing to go that road."*

At the end of his life he was working tirelessly to improve the lot of all poor people in the "Poor People's Campaign". He was organizing a massive march to Washington and planned to camp out there with thousands until the nation changed its priorities from militarism to justice for its citizens:

*"I am tired of hearing the work of poor people described as menial labor. What makes a job menial is that we don't pay folk anything. Give somebody a job and pay them some money so they can live and educate their children and buy a home and have the basic necessities of life."*

As we celebrate the memory and achievements of Dr. King, let us do so by rededicating ourselves to the goals for which he lived and died: Peace, Justice for all, especially for the poor, and Love for everyone, even our enemies. They are also those for which Jesus lived, died and rose again.

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

## 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:.....

Warren Gregory    #0156518    (On death row since 5/18/93)

David Lynch                    #0251740    (5/27/93)

Jeffrey Barrett                #0021418    (6/1/93?)

---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](http://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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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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