

***FIRST IMPRESSIONS* CHRIST THE KING (A)**

Ez. 34: 11-12, 15-17 Ps. 23 1Corinthians 15: 20-26, 28 Matthew 25: 31-46
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We scripturally-oriented people know where God stands in relation to the poor. Both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament make that abundantly clear – God’s heart is turned towards the poor. (There are over 2,000 verses in the bible that relate to the poor.)

Thus, Ezekiel voices God’s frustrations with the people’s appointed leaders and expresses God’s determination to take over the task of tending the scattered, injured and sick sheep. “I myself will pasture my sheep, I myself will give them rest.” Ezekiel depicts God as a loving and tender shepherd whose primary concern is the care of the flock; unlike the corrupt leaders who placed themselves and their own profit first. The sheep they were supposed to shepherd had been scattered and now God will tend them and heal their wounds.

A courtroom can be a place of high drama where guilt or innocence, imprisonment or freedom, hang in the balance. That explains, in part, the long line of television courtroom dramas going back to the first days of television, remember “Matlock?” – right up to the long-running “Law and Order.” This past liturgical year has had a special emphasis on Matthew’s gospel. Today, the last Sunday in the year, we have an imaginative courtroom scene, a parable that is unique to Matthew.

It is a good closing to our liturgical year and to Jesus’ ministry, because immediately after the parable Matthew begins to develop the Passion Narrative. Thus, Matthew is emphasizing the importance of this parable’s teaching in the light of Jesus’ public ministry. Next Sunday begins Advent and the parable suggests the kind of behavior that must engage Jesus’ disciples as we await his return in glory.

A month ago (30th Sunday – Matt. 22: 34-40), we heard Jesus sum up our responsibility to love God with all our heart, soul and mind and to love neighbor as self. This, he said, sums up the whole law and the prophets. If we want to love and serve the God we cannot see then, Jesus instructs us, we must serve and love the neighbor we can see. Today Jesus continues and reaffirms his message that he is to be found among the poor and suffering – and he continues to suffer in them. Since

this is Jesus' final teaching, it is as if he is delivering his last will and testament.

When judgment is passed, it will be based, Jesus tells us, on how we showed our love for those in need. This love isn't just expressed in words, but also in concrete actions. Jesus, the judge, highlights just a few examples of those who should be the recipients of his disciples' care and concern. Christians aren't just a group who share a common belief system, liturgical practices and religious vocabulary. We are also called to express our belief through concrete acts that address the needs of those within our physical sight and also those brought close to us through modern media – television, newspapers, the internet, etc.

If we clothe the naked, feed the hungry and visit the sick and imprisoned today – what will we do tomorrow and next week when they are again hungry, naked, still imprisoned? Our immediate response to their needs is important, but more is required of disciples whom the Master in last week's parable called, "good and faithful servants (25: 14-30).

Faithful servants don't give up after initial attempts to help the most needy and vulnerable: they "keep on keepin' on." And the really "clever" disciples, whom Jesus praises elsewhere in the gospel, will continue to address the poor's ongoing needs by organizing others in their charitable projects. Thus, in many parishes there are all kinds of helping hands for food pantries, clothing drives, prison and jail visitation, etc. But still more is needed. Many professional parishioners, such as lawyers, counselors, teachers, doctors, builders, nurses, etc. give their time pro bono to people with special needs beyond food, clothing and water.

But the needs of the poor, sick and prisoners are often greater than a few volunteers and ministerial staff can address. Still more is needed and that's why some who hear today's parable address the problem through community, state and national programs. (In many dioceses today there will be donations to the American bishops' Campaign for Human Development – a national program to address a very large need.)

There are also people who, in response to today's scriptures, keep an eye out when legislation to help the poor comes up for discussion and votes. Those of us linked to the internet have access to charitable organizations that can keep us current about legislative issues that affect the poor. Informed Christians make sure their voices on behalf of the poor and least influential are heard, for we know that we cannot

overlook the ones with whom Jesus identifies – “the least.”

We certainly must address the needs of those at our doorstep and in our local community. But we can't be nearsighted; we can't claim ignorance to the desperate needs of the poor in our globalized world. For example, when Pope Benedict visited America he drew our attention to the plight of global migration and the presence in our country of the large immigrant population. The bishops have also spoken out and said that our current immigration system is broken and needs reform.

While recognizing the need for a nation to protect its borders, the bishops called for a path to citizenship for the 11-12 million undocumented who live and work in the shadows of our nation. The church has taken a position on immigration because human welfare and rights are affected by this issue – we are talking about today's “hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, ill and imprisoned.” There is no adequate and workable immigration process today that will enable people to come to this country to work and meet our needs for labor. Certainly Jesus would add to today's parable, “I was an immigrant and you provided ‘guest worker’ status for me and a path to citizenship.”

ONE GOOD PUBLICATION

Most Reverend Thomas Wenski, **“What the Church Teaches: Immigration”**

Bishop Wenski is bishop of the Diocese of Orlando, is the son of immigrants and has worked with immigrants in South Florida. This is a very useful summary of the current teachings of our Church on immigration and will be helpful to laity seeking information and preachers needing succinct help to preach on the subject.

This pamphlet and others about Catholic teaching can be purchased in bulk for parish distribution.

Published in 2006 by: Our Sunday Visitor, Huntington, Indiana, 1-800-348-2440

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:

I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me drink,
a stranger and you welcomed me,
naked and you clothed me,
in prison and you visited me.

Reflection:

When judgment is passed, it will be based, Jesus tells us, on whether we showed our love for those in need. This love isn't expressed just in words, but also in concrete actions. We Christians aren't only a group who share a common belief system, liturgical practices and religious vocabulary. We are also called to express our beliefs through concrete acts that address the needs of those within our physical sight and also the needs of those brought close to us through modern media – television, newspapers, the internet, etc.

So we ask ourselves:

Do I sometimes find it hard to see Jesus in the distressful disguise of the poor?
Do I wait for someone to ask me for help or am I sensitive to their needs even before they ask?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

“Come you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom...” (Matthew 25:31-46)

On this feast of Christ the King, we are called to abandon our fidelity to "earthly kings" with their powerful armies and messages of fear. We are invited to pledge our loyalty to Jesus, the image of our all compassionate God. He is our King, this "image of the invisible God" who ended His life enthroned on a cross.

Jesus' description of His Kingdom was simple: "*I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, naked and you clothed me, sick or in prison and you visited me.* It is by our own compassion, by reaching out to others and treating them as brothers and sisters, that we reflect the compassion and the love of God that became incarnate in Jesus Christ. *We are called to build "The Kingdom of God" here on earth,* a Kingdom which is judged by how the least among us are treated.

The Gospel is not only about our own individual goodness or charity. It is about our responsibility to help change social structures and national policies to make them more compassionate. **We must ask the Gospel questions and struggle to change the answers.**

Does our nation feed the hungry? Or do we cut support programs in order to fund an ever increasing military budget?

Does our nation welcome strangers? Or are our immigration limits and laws making it more and more difficult for those seeking a better life to find one here in our country?

Does our nation clothe the naked? Or do we support the sweatshops, which make the lives of the poor a misery while making cheap clothing more available for those who already have an abundance?

Does our nation care for the sick? Or are health care plans and medical care available only to those who can afford it?

Does our nation visit Christ in prison? Or as the nation with the highest percentage of its population behind bars do we ask why these brothers and sisters of Jesus come mostly from minority groups and situations of extreme poverty?

What can I do?

1. Read the Gospel from the perspective of the poor.
2. Be Informed. Get involved in advocating for "The Kingdom of God".
3. Pray that "God's kingdom come" for all God's children.

Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten 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:

Reche Smith #0379083 (On death row since 3/14/02)
Terrance Campbell #0064125 (3/28/02)
Wesley Toby Smith #0765397 (5/29/02(
Cental Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 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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