

## **FIRST IMPRESSIONS 14<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY (A)**

**Zechariah 9: 9-10 Psalm 145 Romans 8: 9, 11-13 Matthew 11: 25-30**

**By: Jude Siciliano, OP**

Dear Preachers:

We have just celebrated Independence Day (July 4<sup>th</sup>) here in the States. The scriptures we have today challenge our national perceptions of our country and offer biblical wisdom by which to measure our land and our personal values.

The Zechariah passage provides quite a switch from our ordinary ways of thinking! In our world of power, those at the head of states and kingdoms summon subjects before them. But Zechariah, speaking of the coming Messiah-ruler, proposes the reverse, “Your king COMES TO YOU.” This one who will save the people will arrive, not with war horses and armed chariots, but riding on a donkey, the beast of the lowly people of the land. To be lead by one who is not after lands and vassals, who does not want to be ruler of a war machine— now that would be a completely different leadership! For a year and a half we have been hearing speeches by potential presidential candidates as the primary campaign warmed up. Zechariah’s vision certainly challenges the present and potential leadership of our nation as well as our individual perception of leadership as we celebrate this 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

Doesn’t Zechariah set up a longing in our war and violence-satiated minds, hearts and land? Don’t we yearn for an end to our current war? Don’t we want a place to live where there is peace for ourselves and our children? Don’t people in certain violence-prone areas wish for assurance and tranquility as they worry about sending their children off to school? Our world and our leaders are far from the vision Zechariah offers us today.

We who have accepted the reign of the one Zechariah anticipated, have said in effect, “This is how I choose to live. I want to ‘banish’ the chariot, war horse and warrior from my life. I want to seek a peaceful way of living in the world. I hope to be guided by the Spirit of the One who comes riding a donkey and who establishes peace by his presence and his response to violence.” The one Zechariah promises shall be triumphant over the nations, but unlike other conquerors, he shall achieve dominion through proclaiming peace and winning hearts to his way. He sets himself apart from all other conquerors and in doing so, is the one who fulfills the long-ago hopes expressed by Zechariah.

One parish where I've preached, requires the preacher to compose the intercessory prayers. That might be something we preachers could do, and in those petitions draw on today's first scripture as we pray for our land and our world. Thus, we might pray: for those who have died struggling to be free; for gentle peacemakers; for those who speak for justice and stand with the downtrodden and, in this election season, we pray for wise and strong leaders who will help us achieve peace here at home and in war-torn parts of the world.

There is more than a bit of irony in Jesus' prayer today. He praises God for "hiding" from the "wise and learned" what God has revealed "to the little ones." Jesus has just reproached the towns, including Capernaum where he lived, for not accepting him, even though he worked most of his miracles in those places (11:20-24). He was also rejected by the teachers of the law, those who should have recognized him as one sent by God.

Despite rejection by so many, Jesus does the unexpected and praises God for those who have accepted him—the least, the "little ones." These religious leaders would have despised the crowds following Jesus because they were the religious outsiders and marginalized—the poor. They were considered incapable of following the righteous path on their own. Thus, these "little ones" were those who had deep spiritual as well as physical hungers. Their leaders had not taken seriously the role of teaching and shepherding them. But God had noticed them, seen their need for a shepherd and sent them Jesus.

Things were upside down. Those who should have known better rejected the one God sent to them. Was it because Jesus didn't fit their preconceived notion of what their deliverer would look like? Hadn't they absorbed Zechariah's vision of the gentle savior, meek and riding in on a donkey? Didn't they recognize their king who had come to save them? But those who didn't know which way to go and were considered lost by the religious establishment, were found by God. It was they who heard what Jesus had been saying about the reign of God and it was Jesus who welcomed them in. What had these "little ones" done to deserve God's special attention? Nothing, except that God has a "gracious" will, and judges contrary to all the usual standards of excellence and merit. The "little ones" needed God and they knew it—so God responded.

Jesus praises God for choosing those who haven't earned God's pleasure and can only have it as a gift. The gift is given, based solely on God's love and it comes

through Jesus, the meek and humble one. It takes strength to be meek and humble. Jesus doesn't invite the poor, already crushed down, to be a doormat for the aggressive and powerful. Instead, he is inviting those of us who have personal, financial, physical and intellectual power to choose not to use that power over others.

Meekness seems like a useless and impossible virtue in our modern world with all its dangerous weapons and aggressions. But the gospel today invites us to try practicing meekness (we "practice" because we will never get it perfect) by: disarming our own hearts; not returning anger against anger; using our personal authority to stand with the powerless and those deprived of a chance for a full life.

Jesus was "meek and humble of heart" because he chose to be that way. He could have used power to gain a following, to conquer his opponents and overwhelm the towns that rejected him. Instead he used his power to stay committed to God and God's ways and to share the life of the "little ones" who accepted him. They had suffered at the hands of the powers of the world, and Jesus will too. They only had God as their support and future and Jesus' own faith was the assurance to them that their trust in God was not misplaced.

### 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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA  
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: [judeop@juno.com](mailto:judeop@juno.com)