

***FIRST IMPRESSIONS*** 23<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY (A)

Ezekiel 33: 7-9 Psalm 95 Romans 13: 8-10 Matthew 18: 15-20

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Matthew wrote his gospel around the years 80-85 C.E. Today's passage is from chapter 18 – this chapter is oriented towards the community of disciples. Preceding today's passage Jesus has advised his followers that they are to protect the least in their community and, when necessary, they must go out to find any members who are lost or have drifted away. When Matthew wrote his gospel it had been a while since Jesus departed. At first Christians expected Jesus to return right away. When he hadn't, the early church showed the strains of trying to hold themselves together over the long haul.

In the light of the problems his community was having Matthew had good reason to save the life-giving words we hear from Jesus today. Jesus wanted his followers to be a sign to the world of his ongoing presence in the early church. They were to live in a way that would show to others that, while they were waiting for Christ's return, he was already with them. In Matthew the community was to be the kingdom of heaven already present on earth and the life of the community and its individual members, were to manifest and prove Christ's presence with them. Jesus didn't preach just to save individuals. Had he come just to do that, we could live our lives unencumbered by the stress and strain we experience trying to live as the "Christ-like" community we are called to be in the world.

While membership in the church offers us many blessings – a community of co-believers, support for members in stress, a place to celebrate the God Jesus reveals to us, etc. – nevertheless, even like-minded people go through times when they might prefer to drop out and make it on their own. It's tempting, isn't it, to ponder what it would be like not have to deal with community issues – to live our Christian lives by ourselves; pray our own prayers and do our best to help others – while we keep our eyes fixed on our "eternal reward?"

That sounds nice and neat, doesn't it? Especially these days of strain when: church attendance is declining; we have so much to put up in our local church communities, and on a larger, more public stage, we feel besieged by scandal and its coverage in the media. What's wrong with trying to make it by ourselves and to

teach our kids what we believe, so they grow up to be "good Christians?" Nothing, I suppose, but it "ain't Christian!"

Jesus wanted us to continue as his community after he left: as a light on the lamp stand; a city built on a hilltop. In his lifetime he called his disciples together, instructed them and prepared them to continue his work. He assured them that he was with them, not only during his lifetime, but he would always be with them as they went forth to spread his name.

In Matthew's gospel, from the very beginning, Jesus is named "Emanuel," "God is with us" (1:23). The gospel ends with the same assurance of his on-going presence. When Jesus commissions his disciples to "make disciples of all the nation's" (28:19), he lives up to his name, Emanuel, as he promises to "be with you always until the end of the world." He clearly wanted us to be a community faithful to his memory. He didn't want us to be stay-at-home individual believers, but Christians, worshiping together and then going out into the world living lives that proclaim his name to others.

And what better way for a community to be a beacon to Jesus than to practice forgiveness and concern for each other within the community? He wasn't suggesting such virtues just to hold the community together until he returned. But, since forgiveness is such a rare commodity among individuals, communities, religions, tribes, races and nations, a community that is characterized by forgiveness would certainly be a way of announcing Jesus Christ to the world. If forgiveness were the hallmark of our religious community we would be what Jesus hoped for us – "a city built on a hilltop," a "light to the nations."

Back in the Fall of 2006, five Pennsylvania Amish children were killed at their rural school and then the killer committed suicide. The tragedy made world news. But something else about the tragedy did too. While still in their mourning the Amish community urged forgiveness for the killer. Those who heard about what the Amish did were stunned by this extraordinary act. When asked, they explained the reason for their forgiveness. Their response also made world news, it was reported on television, the internet and in newspapers. Here is what USA Today wrote (October 5, 2006): "They believe their calling is to accept and absorb hostility without fighting back or falling apart." The paper also reported that one of the Amish went to the home of the killer's father, wrapped his arms around him for an hour and said, "We all forgive you." Another explained to the press, "We're really

strongly taught to forgive like Jesus did. We forgive the way Christ forgives us.”

In Matthew, Jesus is teaching that forgiveness, not retaliation, is to be the mark of his community. Jesus instructs that the process of forgiveness within the community is progressive and persistent. Forgiveness begins between just the two parties; then "two or three witnesses" are brought forth and finally the whole community is invited into the process. It sounds like the whole church is supposed to invest itself in the important moment of forgiveness -- the way the Amish community responded in one, united voice to both of the families of the victims, the perpetrator and his family.

It is only after the community has done everything it can to bring about reconciliation that the obstinate person is supposed to be expelled; treated as someone unacceptable to the community. The community has done what it can to “loose on earth,” but when its efforts are rejected the offended is to be disciplined. Perhaps then, facing the shock of expulsion, the offending member may come to his or her senses. If not, the member has, in effect, expelled him/herself by rejecting the forgiveness offered by the community.

The forgiveness Jesus describes unifies a community. He also says that praying together does too. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” Certainly that “gathering” takes place at liturgical celebrations when we look across the worshipping assembly and see someone we disagree with on some heated issue – personal, political, religious, cultural, etc. Yet, there they and we are, gathered in Jesus’ name and we are reminded that at our spiritual roots we are one. In prayer we are gathered in Jesus’ name.

We Catholics are shy about less formal “two or three gatherings.” We tend to mumble grace before meals, or when someone reveals a concern they have, we promise to pray for them. Here in the South, where I live, people are more spontaneous in their prayers. They feel an authority, even though they are not “official church ministers,” to offer a prayer on the spot for the person. Or, they open a bible, read a verse and pray about what concerns them. Guess Who has joins them in their “two or three” moments!

Ezekiel describes himself today as “the watchman for the house of Israel.” He speaks for God to the community about its sin. He is to call people who have turned from God to repent; he is to “dissuade the wicked from their way” – sounds

like the gospel, doesn't it? Ezekiel isn't going after strangers and foreigners: first he starts with those up close, those he loves. God wants a holy people and Ezekiel is the voice to call them to be God's faithful ones.

At this Eucharist we ought to keep in prayer the Ezekiels in our midst; the "watchmen and watchwomen" God has appointed over us. We pray for those in authority whose mission it is to speak and teach us God's Word. They are our preachers, teachers, catechists, theologians, religious authorities, etc. Their vocation is to be listeners first – to God and the people – and then speak what they hear. We also pray for "domestic Ezekiels" – parents, siblings, aunts, uncles and friends who sometimes have to speak a loving, but hard word to an errant member to "dissuade" them from their destructive ways.

### **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:**

Jesus said to his disciples, "If your sister or brother sins against you, go and tell them their fault between you and them alone. If they listen to you, you have won over your brother or sister.

#### **Reflection:**

As Jesus' disciples we are to be a people who reflect his presence in our midst. Since forgiveness is such a rare commodity among individuals, communities, religions, tribes, races and nations, a community that is characterized by forgiveness would certainly be a way of announcing Jesus Christ to the world. If forgiveness were the hallmark of our Christian community, we would be what Jesus hoped for us to be – "a city built on a hilltop," a "light to the nations."

#### **So we ask ourselves:**

What effect has forgiveness had on my own life?

What person or institution am I called to forgive?

Let me begin the forgiveness process by praying for the one(s) who have offended me.

### **READER'S RESPONSE**

My own reflection on Mt 16:13-20 (24 August): You say "Jesus was inviting Peter

to express his own faith”. But perhaps it is more.

Your reflection on the Canaanite woman (17 Aug) reminds us that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine. For me, Matthew is the evangelist who best brings out the character development of Jesus. As I said to our congregation today, the story of the Canaanite woman is the story of the day Jesus became a catholic (with a small c)! Despite his encounter with the centurion and the Gadarene demoniacs (Mt 8), he still tells the twelve (Mt 10) to confine themselves to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and says as much to the Canaanite woman. Perhaps as if Matthew is telling his target Hebrew congregation(s): “We need to learn to see the bigger picture. Even Jesus had to learn this: it took the spirit and desperation and quick repartee of a pagan woman, and the way a house-dog can be a significant member of a family, to help him recognise that the mission he had from his Father was wider than he initially envisaged.” Jesus is learning to “realise” (both “come to understand” and “bring to reality”) what is foreshadowed by the Magi, and leading to the Great Commission (Mt 28).

Similarly with Peter: yes, it is an opportunity for Peter to express his own faith. But it’s not like in John, where Jesus already knows and is in total command. It is an important step for Jesus himself in realising his mission. There is progress from “one of the prophets” etc to “the Christ!” Perhaps I may be bold enough to say that the response of Peter was an affirmation of that mission that helped Jesus in his own growth “in wisdom and grace” as he grew also in age. Close friends can help us know ourselves more deeply. The story-telling skill of Matthew in bringing Jesus alive to us tells us something of the journey our own faith must take.

Similarly, with Paul, we can experience the almost bi-polar transformation from the end of Romans 7 to the end of Romans 8; and the transformation from the beginning of Romans 9 to the end of Romans 11. Our lows and our highs are part of the way in which God works everything together for good for those who love him.

How rich are the depths of God! May you continue to be a channel through which those depths are more and more revealed.

Grace & Peace.

Pádraig McCarthy, Dublin, Ireland.

**JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD**

*“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”. (Romans 13:10)*

The task of caring for our brothers and sisters belongs to every believer and every parish. The pursuit of justice and peace is an essential part of what makes a parish Catholic. “Our parish communities are measured by how they serve “the least of these” in our parish and beyond its boundaries (the hungry, the homeless, the sick, those in prison, the stranger (cf. Mt 25:31). **A parish cannot really proclaim the gospel if its message is not reflected in its own community life.”** (US Catholic Bishops Communities of Salt and Light)

### **Did you know?**

1. Every Wednesday and Friday afternoon Raleigh’s poor receive help and encouragement through the parish **Open Door Ministry**. Many parishioners support this ministry through donations to “The Door Fund”. There are envelopes in the back of church for this purpose.

Sacred Heart parishioners feed the hungry every 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday at **Moore Square**.

Our parish provides the Tuesday and Friday evening meals to homeless families in the **WIHN program**. during 12 weeks each year and monthly dinners at the Helen Wright Shelter for homeless women.

Sacred Heart provides volunteers to **Catholic Parish Outreach** to help serve those who come in need.

Our parish **Prison Ministry** is active in providing emotional and spiritual to women at the Women’s Prisons and to those preparing for release.

Our **Aids Ministry** team is active in helping “care partners” suffering with HIV/AIDS.

Sacred Heart partners with **Passage Home** to support its work of mentoring families in need of housing.

Following the model of **Katrina Support Circles**, Sacred Heart offers support and a year long covenanted partnership to local families struggling with homelessness in our parish **Support Circle Ministry**.

Our parish’s **Global Outreach Ministry** offers assistance to those beyond our borders and to refugees in need of assistance.

### **What you can do:**

Be part of the many ways Sacred Heart “loves our neighbors”. Call the parish Social Ministries Office (865-8966) to volunteer for one of our many ministries.

Pray that our parish will continue to “love our neighbors as we love ourselves.”

(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.*

Johnny Hyde                      #0542024                      (On death row since 7/23/98)

Patrick Steen           #0388640     (8/28/98)  
Robert Brewington   #0584095     (9/3/98)

---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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