

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 28<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY (A)

Isaiah 25: 6-10    Philippians 4: 12-14, 19-20    Matthew 22: 1-14

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Frank Priol, the renowned wine critic for the NY Times, once said that whenever a person is asked about the best bottle of wine they ever had, they always describe the people with whom they drank the wine. Makes sense---great events, meals and wine are meant to be shared. At a recent ocean side retreat I was walking along the shore by myself and saw a school of dolphins in the surf and I looked around for someone to tell, “Look dolphins!” Sharing the sight would have enhanced the pleasure.

So, when Isaiah describes what it will be like at that future time of completion, for which Israel longed, he describes a meal of rich food and choice wines ----and “all peoples” will be there to participate in it. It’s going to be on “this mountain,” possibly the hilltop city of Jerusalem. But the image of a mountain also evokes much that we long for---it is above the fray, out of the tumult down below, and so offers wonderful vistas and security for this grand meal. Isaiah is talking about the end of the present anguish-filled age the Israelites and we have known and the beginning of a new one when all will experience God’s favor (vs. 6-9). Hear the grandeur of this promise. “The veil that covers all peoples,” is an image that suggests people in mourning. Death, the final enemy, will be destroyed. Isn’t this a day for which our whole world longs? A banquet, united with all people, with grief and sorrow banished from the table---forever!

The promise is of a future time, “On that day....” What about the present? Are we getting “pie in the sky” here? Isaiah’s vision seems to contradict the evidence around us; it promises a day of complete victory, lasting shalom. For those of us who look for God’s comfort in the midst of sorrow; for justice amid persecution and oppression; for peace, while seeing and hearing nothing but talk of war, we clutch this vision to our hearts and we let it fill our imagination with hope. Sooner or later, things are going to change---it’s a promise made by Someone who doesn’t break promises. In our large and small struggles against all that harms us and our neighbors, this vision keeps us engaged in trying to make a difference.

The Isaian vision animates and encourages us to collaborate with God in helping

bring it about. So, we roll up our sleeves and throw ourselves again into the work of peace making among enemies; caring for the poor; helping the voiceless find justice; nursing the sick and sitting with the dying. We are servants whose daily works are helping set the banquet table. We can't make it happen, we don't have the "rich food and choice wines" ourselves, but we are getting ready for the feast and we are sharing the banquet's good news in our words and daily works. How else will "all peoples" get there? We have at this eucharist, a foretaste of what God has prepared for us. For a moment at least, we are together on God's holy mountain, where we eat the feast, drink the "choice wine"---the total and satisfying life of Jesus. This meal, nurtured by Isaiah's prophetic vision, is more than enough to hold us until we enjoy that never-ending banquet on the mountain of our God. Someday...someday.

Matthew must have recorded today's parable with the Isaian passage in mind. It is the third in a series of parables against the religious leaders. It certainly sounds a lot like last week's vineyard parable. Both have delegates sent out who get mistreated, the guilty parties are punished and the newcomers are given what was rejected; they are also required to produce fruits. There are strong allegorical elements in today's parable, and they have implications for those who have been given something free of charge. In stark terms we are told, a judgment on our response to the gift is coming.

When a royal son or daughter is to be married it is a very public event. Everyone learns about it, even the lowliest subjects in the realm. For such marriages of importance, guest lists are carefully drawn up and scrutinized. (Just call to mind our family weddings and the agony sometimes spent on guest lists.) Think about that guest list with its names of neighboring royalty, military leaders, religious dignitaries, bankers and the CEO's of companies doing business with the royals. All the people, who would have been on such a guest list and should know enough to accept the invitation---reject it! Were they just too busy? Preoccupied with other matters? Trying to insult the royal family?

Now imagine being an ordinary person on the road when the king's servants were sent out with orders to invite in "whomever you find." Who would you be?---a laborer hoping to get a day's work? A beggar looking for a handout? A farmer bringing a few vegetables to the market? A widow going to a relative's house hoping for some food for your children? You would be doing what you normally

do. Except today is not a normal day. The unexpected is about to happen; the routine will be shattered. Nothing will be the same. On the road are the royal servants in splendid dress handing out free invitations to a meal, the likes of which you never dreamed of eating. You would be a fool to turn down such an invitation.

Now, instead of an unknown outsider, you are an invited insider; a place is set for you, free of charge. You are at a banquet on a day when you thought you would have the usual daily struggle to survive and make ends meet. Before we move on to the disturbing details of the “wedding garment,” the preacher needs to help us spend time imagining what it would feel like to have gotten so much as a gift. (It must be what Paul experienced on the road to Damascus when his whole life was changed.) And suppose this banquet never ended; that no force could ever take it away from us; no one would have the power or authority to do so---no one but ourselves.

Jesus’ life put flesh on this parable. When he sat at table with the poor, outcasts and sinners, he was showing what this parable looked like. All were welcomed into his company and would be welcomed at the banquet in God’s realm. Who gets to sit at the table with the Lord? The parable says, all who are outsiders and respond to the free invitation. But those who get in, must make a fitting response that indicates they realize what has been given them, “My friend, how is it that you came in here without a wedding garment?”

For sure, people are going to get a twitch when they hear about the wedding garment! There are all kinds of objections that can be raised in defense of the guest who got invited in from the road. How could the man be expected to come equipped with a wedding garment? Add to this the rough treatment he gets for not having one, “Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.” (Was a suitable garment provided for him as he entered and he turned it down, thereby insulting his host?) Well, this is a parable and perhaps Matthew is including some harsh details to get his hearers’ attention.

Religious leaders, who should have known better, rejected Jesus’ message. The Gentiles, those beyond the religious pale, subsequently accepted it. Maybe the parable is addressed to those now among “the insiders,” those of us today in pew

and pulpit. We may be following the Sunday routine, but ignoring the deeper reflection that requires us to examine whether our deeds (the “wedding garment”) match the words we profess in our assembly. Matthew frequently speaks of doing God’s will and bearing fruit (21:4). Remember the closing of last week’s gospel, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.”

Instead of inviting people to “dedicate more time to God”--implying more “church work”, we might help them see that church work is wherever members of the church work. It doesn’t mean preaching at the water cooler; but it does mean trying to act honestly, compassionately, justly and with love at the places we live and work. Suppose tomorrow morning, as we dressed for school, work or shopping, we imagined putting on one more piece of clothing over all the rest---an imaginary “wedding garment.” Imagine wearing it through the whole day. Will it make a difference how we think about ourselves and treat others? It should, for in each of those places, we can hear that question, “My friend, how is it that you came in here without a wedding garment?”

#### POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting here 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:.....

**EDDIE DAVIS**

**BILLY RAY ANDERSON**

**TIMOTHY WHITE**

**JERRY HAMILTON**

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

#### QUOTABLE

"The role of homilist is probably the most difficult of all liturgical ministries. In addition to basic training, there is a constant need to prepare every time one preaches. This preparation may take a great deal of time. It will always take

prayer and sensitivity to the mind of the assembly. A homilist may improve by attending preaching workshops, spending more time in prayer and study of scripture, but the assembly can be a great source of help to the homilist. We have to find ways for the congregation to express spiritual needs more clearly and to offer feedback in helpful ways. The homilist in turn must learn to seek advice and listen carefully."

-Gabe Huck in, LITURGY WITH STYLE AND GRACE, page 51.

## JUSTICE NOTES

"Bishops Raise Serious Moral Questions about Force While Welcoming President's Appeal to UN"

WASHINGTON (September 17, 2002) — In a letter to President Bush, Bishop Wilton D. Gregory expressed serious questions about the moral legitimacy of any preemptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq as he welcomed the President's efforts to focus the world's attention on the need to address Iraq's repression and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction in defiance of the United Nations.

Bishop Gregory, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), hand-delivered the letter to National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice at a meeting at the White House yesterday.

In the letter, Bishop Gregory recalled the situation one year ago when the then-President of the USCCB, Bishop Joseph Fiorenza, said the use of force against Afghanistan could be justified if it were carried out in accord with just war norms and as one part of a much broader, mostly non-military effort to deal with terrorism.

"We believe Iraq is a different case," Bishop Gregory said. "Given the precedents and risks involved, we find it difficult to justify extending the war on terrorism to Iraq, absent clear and adequate evidence of Iraqi involvement in the attacks of September 11th or of an imminent attack of a grave nature."

"The United States and the international community have two grave moral obligations: to protect the common good against any Iraqi threats to peace and to do so in a way that conforms with fundamental moral norms," Bishop Gregory

said. "We have no illusions about the behavior or intentions of the Iraqi government," he continued. "Mobilizing the nations of the world to recognize and address Iraq's threat to peace and stability through new UN action and common commitment to ensure that Iraq abides by its commitments is a legitimate and necessary alternative to the unilateral use of military force," he added.

While welcoming the decision to seek UN action, "other question of ends and means must also be answered," he noted. "Is it wise to dramatically expand traditional moral and legal limits on just cause to include preventive or preemptive uses of military force to overthrow threatening regimes or to deal with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction?" He emphasized that, "War against Iraq could have unpredictable consequences not only for Iraq but for peace and stability elsewhere in the Middle East," and "use of massive military force to remove the current government of Iraq could have incalculable consequences for a civilian population that has suffered so much from war, repression, and a debilitating embargo."

"We respectfully urge you to step back from the brink of war and help lead the world to act together to fashion an effective global response to Iraq's threats that conforms with traditional moral limits on the use of military force," Bishop Gregory wrote.

-----September 18, 2002 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

#### **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](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,  
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