

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 9th SUNDAY (A)

Deut. 11: 18, 26-28,32 Psalm 31 Romans 3: 21-25 Matthew 7:21-27

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The book of Deuteronomy has the sound of a preaching. It is written as Moses' farewell address, his last words before the Israelites enter the Promise Land. Deuteronomy means "second law" and the book contains many variations on its central message---an attempt to make the law applicable to daily life and to evoke obedience to the law from the people. Deuteronomy also includes the account of Moses' death. Now the people will have to enter the land without his leadership. What will sustain them, Moses tells them, is the memory of what God has done for them and the law he is urging them to believe and practice.

Since God has specially chosen them, the people's response is to observe the covenant God made with them. They can do this by keeping the law, making it part of their daily lives. How could a people, aware of the favors bestowed on them, not want to keep the observances God had proposed? We are not talking legalism or mere formalism here; rather, the people are free to do as they choose. But when they remember God's goodness to them, they will want to do what they can to sustain and be nourished by their relationship with God. One can accept the gift of love and live in its warmth; or one can reject love and live on one's own. The people have learned and Moses urges them: it is best to accept and live in the light of God's love and follow God's commandments. When the people lived according to the law, they experienced the blessings of a right-ordered life. When they betrayed the covenant, as they did many times in their past, the community fell apart and was "cursed."

The texts of the law were to be written on parchment, placed in small boxes and tied to the arms and heads of Jewish men at prayer. The prophets would criticize these customs when they became mere external performances; but when they were symbolic reminders of a person's interior disposition and determination to live in accord with God's ways, they reflected an awareness and a loving response to the God of Israel. These practices of "binding" the Word to the wrists and forehead were not seen as oppressive mandates, but as a devout people's reminder of the God who gave them life.

These days people have customs that remind them of their relationships or

allegiances: they wear a wedding band as a reminder of the bonds of love they have with their spouse. Boys paint their upper bodies the colors of their team's school as a sign of support and, stripped to the waist even in freezing weather, cheer their team from the grandstands.

When I lived in rural South Carolina I used to visit a poor African American woman named Rebecca. She loved her bible and told me once that when her eyes got too tired to read at night, she would put it under her pillow and sleep on it. She didn't want to be far from the Word of God, she said. I think of Rebecca as I hear Moses encouraging the people to bind his words, the law, to their wrists and before their eyes. Lovers of the Word know that we must pay daily attention to God's revelation and seek to keep it before us always. Physical reminders can speak about our emotional ties and loyalties. We can understand then Moses' dictate: "Take these words of mine into your heart and soul. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be a pendant on your forehead."

Last month was the feast of St. George (April 23), not a saint I know much about—except for his connection to England. So, I looked him up. The legend about him says there was a poisonous dragon that terrorized villages and towns. To ward the dragon off people would daily give it a sheep. When they ran out of sheep the people turned to human sacrifice. They held a lottery to choose the victim and the king's daughter was selected. So, she was taken to the dragon's cave in her bridal gown and was tied there. Just as the dragon approached St. George came on his white stallion and pierced the dragon with his lance. The dragon surrendered and George led the now docile dragon into town. George said he would slay the dragon if the people would be baptized; they agreed and George killed the dragon. He was offered a reward, but asked that the money be given to the poor.

It's a quaint story and we can delight in this charming account and cheer the help given to the poor. It may not be true in its details, but we see the Christian symbolism and get the point about protecting the vulnerable and caring for the poor. But later this simple religious tale took on another meaning and application. George was used as a patron for the bloody Crusades and Richard I called upon George's protection in the heat of battle. Now the saint was made a supporter of war and named the patron of England. George, who in his legend tamed the brute force of nature and was an advocate for the poor, now became a patron for an empire in times of war. Another religious symbol is used in conquest and empire building.

It makes one wonder. In the name of Jesus, how many wars were fought; how many lands conquered and how many natives forcibly baptized? In El Salvador during the years of civil strife and government oppression of the population, the torturers would go to church on Sunday and receive Communion. It reminds us of today's gospel, the people who seemingly profess religion, or call on religious symbols, don't always live out the meaning of those symbols. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." We can use the symbols, observe the titles and rubrics and still miss the very heart of our faith.

What is startling in today's gospel is that the people in the story have even done good deeds in Jesus' name. "Did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?" These were the things Jesus himself did—cured, taught and spoke prophetically. I would add: did we not preach in your name; teach others about you; train lay leaders to serve you; write about you? We can take pride in doing the good and right things. But it is sobering to hear Jesus say, "I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers"....just when we thought we were good disciples. What's the problem?

Jesus did heal people; in Matthew's gospel there are 24 miracles. In fact, he often takes the initiative. But who gets healed? —Gentiles, religious outcasts, the ritually unclean, lepers, the blind and the lame. These were people excluded from temple worship; yet Jesus often healed them in the temple area. So, when Jesus talks about doing "the will of my Father in heaven," maybe that is what he means. If we want to call him "Lord, Lord" then we ought to do what he did—our words and good works are to include the outsiders. Otherwise, despite our protests, he will say to us, "I never knew you." No wonder, he won't recognize us, we don't act like him.

Matthew's gospel places a big emphasis on the "kingdom of heaven" (he mentions it 51 times). It is a new kind of community where all are welcome; it is a new way of treating people, where people are not measured by their social status or influence. All, especially the least and the outsiders, can find a home in this community. Faith is a big issue in Matthew's gospel: not just oral acknowledgment of Jesus; not even working miracles in his name. Instead, for Matthew, faith is a way of living that shows our relationship to Jesus and his message. In fact, in the famous last judgement parable (ch 25), many will have this faith and not even know Jesus personally, but they lived Jesus' teaching and are rewarded for caring for the poor.

The true disciples who respond to Jesus, not only do the works of Jesus and not only call upon his name, but their hearts have been converted to the poor and the outcast who cannot return the favor. Jesus has told us in the Sermon on the Mount that love is the root of all the laws and observances. So, each good work we do in his name must be accompanied by the love he had for others. To do the “will of the Father” in this gospel is to do the works Jesus did and to do them with the love and compassion he did them.

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21)

The life and words of Jesus make it clear. We are not saved by ritual alone. We come each week to pray, to hear the word of God and to be in communion with each other, in order to be *changed* people. We come to know and live more fully the will of God that we care for each other, especially the least among us.

We are made in the image of a God who, in the person of Jesus, noticed and responded to the desperation of the sick, the poor, the stranger, and the broken. Just as a parent who focuses love and attention on one sick child but does not love the other children less, God invites us to focus our attention on those most in need.

Father Jon Sobrino writes that there are two classes of people in the world: rich and poor. The rich do not worry about whether they will eat tomorrow. The poor do. So we must accept that most of us are rich. Given our privileged status, how do we live out the command of Jesus to love especially those most in need?

- 1. It is important to be directly connected to the poor.** We don't usually care a thing about the world's poor until we care about one poor person. So we must place ourselves where we can encounter the poor.
- 2. Ask questions and search for answers.** After the first step, our face-to-face contact may stimulate an appetite for some kind of information or education.
- 3. Start to advocate.** It is very important that we become advocates for the healing of the political and economic relationships and policies that are broken and that keep the poor, poor.
- 4. Work with the poor as they help themselves.** This is what is called solidarity work. It's a mixture of the first three, and it involves working side by side with the poor as they negotiate the solutions to their own poverty.
- 5. Watch your money.** A prayerful dedication to the poor will probably result in a simpler life, with fewer things and less preoccupation with money and possessions.
- 6. Give money.** Remember to give a good bit of your money away. The early Christian definition of so-called disposable income is that it is the rightful possession of the poor. Like all things, the key is just to get started.

A preferential option for the poor simply reminds us who we are: a people who, when we are honest and awake, would do anything to end one another's suffering. (Taken from words of Jack Jezreel, the author of the JustFaith curriculum.

(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:.....

Robbie D. Locklear #0246186 (On death row since 5/14/96)

Archie Bilings #0471315 (6/5/96)

Angel Guevara #0506556 (6/20/96)

---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 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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