

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” CHRIST THE KING (A)

Ezekiel 34: 11-12, 15-17 Psalm 23 1Corinthians 15: 20-26, 28 Matt. 25: 31-46
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Some people shy away from scriptures. They say they are afraid of misinterpreting them. They feel they are reading a text from another age and culture and that they lack the training to understand scripture's meaning for their lives. Today's gospel passage challenges the validity of these arguments. The parable of the last judgment is a familiar one. (In some circles people just need to say "Matthew 25" and this is the passage they mean---- the one about feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, etc.) It's familiarity doesn't dilute its impact however. To those who shy away from reading scriptures this parable challenges their arguments. As Mark Twain once said, "It's not what I don't understand about the bible that bothers me, it's what I do understand." In today's gospel Jesus is very clear about his priorities and how we will be judged.

In general, there are two ways to treat this passage. The first has a universal application: the judgment of all peoples will be based on how they treat the most needy. This interpretation holds out hope for both Christians and non-Christians. Note that both groups, the ones on the right and the ones on the left, are surprised that they had or had not cared for Jesus. They ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?" It seems all humans, whether they confessed faith in Jesus or not, will be judged by how they ministered to humanity's needs. People may not know Jesus, but in responding to those in need, they are responding to him.

The second interpretation of the passage says that the peoples of the world will be judged by how they treated Jesus' disciples. Remember he calls his disciples, "little ones" (10: 42; 18:6) and "the least in the kingdom of heaven (11:11). Jesus sent his disciples out to preach and he tells them to rely on others for hospitality, food and drink. These envoys of Christ were also warned they will be persecuted and imprisoned. In this interpretation, those who do not receive and care for Jesus' disciples on mission, will face the judgment today's gospel describes.

I think the first interpretation has a strong history and preaching appeal. It is consistent with Jesus' central message about the poor and the outcast. In addition,

it has gained favor among the general readers of the bible. I will go with this first view for my preaching.

Who comes to do the judging? It is Christ who, when he lived among us, experienced first hand the very needs he articulates. He knows what it meant to be without; he saw up close the ravages of illness and disease on people; he himself was arrested and imprisoned. He urges us to respond to these needs in others, just as he did. We are to have the mind and the heart of Christ. The judgment scene shows that judgment is not going to be based on some arcane theological point or some work that will take an enormous effort to achieve. Norms for the judgment are simple—did we take care of the most pressing problems of the needy, did we address their : hunger, thirst, being a foreigner, lacking clothes, illness and imprisonment? These are not some new directives addressed to an inner circle of elite disciples and hidden from the rest of us. They are taken from the Jewish faith in which Jesus was raised and are now addressed to all.

Matthew uses the same word, the “least” to refer to those who need help as he used earlier in his gospel to refer to Bethlehem, Jesus’ insignificant birthplace. Quoting the prophet Micah, Matthew says, “And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the princes of Judah, since from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” (2:6) It’s a wonderful literary touch which reinforces a profound truth of our faith. The insignificant, the poor and the forgotten, the “least” of the world, are the very places one finds the shepherd king. This is what we believe, when we serve the “least,” we are serving the Son of Humanity who will come to judge us.

Christianity is not just an individual’s religion, addressed to private spirituality. It also calls on the Christian community, indeed upon all nations, to respond to the poor. We look around the world and see enormous poverty and people desperately in need of clean drinking water; medicine for their aged and very young; food in famine and war stricken lands, fair wages and decent working conditions; help in combating the AIDS pandemic; international collaboration to clean up the air and preserve natural resources. What might Jesus say to the nations gathered before him this day?

“I was hungry and you did not give me seeds to plant crop; thirsty and your industries fouled my streams and rivers; a stranger and you sent me back to persecution in my native land, naked and you had me work in sweat shops

to produce your designer jeans, ill and you refused to lower the price of your nation's drugs, in prison and you did not challenge my government's human rights abuses." Jesus might also add, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least nations, you did or did not do it for me."

A few words on Paul and today's I Corinthians reading. The reading fits well with the other two, it is about the end of salvation history. He starts with the resurrection; Christ's rising from the dead began a whole new way to live. Our faith is grounded on Paul's opening lines, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." Contrary to what sometimes feels like overwhelming evidence around us to the contrary, the resurrection assures us that death and sin no longer have the upper hand. So, in our present situation, we don't have to be trapped by habit when we want to make changes in our lives; we are not caught in a never ending cycle of failed efforts to reform. Now we have a life working in us, making a new life possible. "Christ has been raised from the dead..." Who did this "raising"? The God who speaks to us today through the prophet Ezekiel; this God has taken charge and has done what we could not do for ourselves, conquered death through Christ. "I myself will look after and tend my sheep." Through this victory God has shepherded us, "I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered, when it was cloudy and dark."

How "cloudy and dark" it becomes when a loved one dies. In this darkness we could easily stumble and lose our way. But God has taken charge, conquered death and begun the process Paul describes, "...in Christ shall all be brought to life." We live in a new age, things as we have known them are coming to an end. It is hard to get substantial evidence of this. As I write, another suicide bomber in Israel has blown himself and three other people up. Our nation is pressuring our allies to support an attack on Iraq. But Paul says an orderly ending is unfolding, starting with Christ's resurrection and eventually destroying "every sovereignty and every authority and power." Finally, he says, even our most powerful and feared enemy death will be destroyed. I live with the hope that these things Paul speaks of will be accomplished and that I, in my large and small efforts, will be a resurrection-force affirming and nurturing life. Here an echo of today's gospel is heard, which directs me to the most vulnerable life around me; there I am to help the process Paul describes, "...in Christ shall all be brought to life."

QUOTABLE

We don't preach on doctrine; we explore an event. Even when it is a Sunday called Christ the King, or Holy Family, or Corpus Christi, the understanding (and the preaching) still rests on the key event of the paschal mystery. In the deepest sense, all our preaching is paschal, a passing over to fuller life that depends on the Spirit and the original event.

---Joseph T. Nolan in, *THE WORLD, THE CHURCH AND PREACHING: THE BEST OF GOOD NEWS COMMENTARY*, (Page 106).

JUSTICE NOTES

More than a few Christians might be surprised to learn that the call to be involved in creating justice for the poor is just as essential and nonnegotiable within the spiritual life as in Jesus' commandment to pray and keep our private lives in order. Jesus' teaching on this is very strong, consistent throughout all the Gospels, and leaves no room for equivocation. In the Christian scripture, one out of every ten lines deals directly with the physically poor and the call from God for us to respond to them. In the gospel of Luke that becomes every sixth line, and in the epistle of James, that commission is there, in one form or another, every fifth line. Moreover, the call to do justice as an integral part of relating to God is already strong within the Jewish scriptures. Beginning about 800 B.C., the Jewish prophets made one truth central to their teaching. They taught that the quality of faith in the people depends upon the character of justice in the land---and the character of justice in the land is to be judged by how we treat the most vulnerable groups in the society, namely, widows, orphans, and strangers. Thus, according to the Jewish prophets, where we stand with God depends not just upon prayer and sincerity of heart but also on where we stand with the poor.

Jesus never disputes that. He takes it further. He identifies his own presence with the poor and tells us that, ultimately, we will be judged on how we treat the poor. Bluntly put, we will go to heaven or hell on the basis of giving or not giving food, water, clothing, shelter and justice to the poor. How we treat the poor is how we treat God. For this reason, Jesus asks us to make a preferential option for the poor. ... This is not a new teaching, albeit our understanding of it is deepening.

-----Ronald Rolheiser in, *THE HOLY LONGING*, pages 64-65.

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."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Christopher Roseboro , 0352024

Johnnie Spruill

Rodney Taylor, Rodney #0472274

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

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 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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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