

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 3rd SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B)

(Plus— the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe)

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11 Luke 1: 46-54 I Thess. 5: 16-24 John 1: 6-8, 19-28

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

How would you summarize Advent? – Hope? Waiting? Longing? Expectation? On the first Sunday of Advent we heard the prophet Isaiah pray, “Return for the sake of your servants....rend the heavens and come down.” We heard Jesus advised his disciples, “Be watchful! Be alert!” On the second Sunday Peter warned, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief....” And “...we await a new heavens and a new earth.” John the Baptist announced, “One mightier than I is coming....” The first two weeks certainly had us looking and waiting for God to act. This Sunday has a bit more action in it – human action – as various people hear the call of God and do something.

The pattern today seems to be a “call – response” dynamic. Isaiah tells us about his anointing by God’s Spirit. That is just part of Isaiah’s experience with God. God’s blessing on Isaiah isn’t just for his own inspiration and edification for God has sent him, he tells us to bring “glad tidings to the poor.” God has a purpose, has work to be done and Isaiah is the instrument who will accomplish God’s purposes.

At Eucharist today we might ask the same Spirit who anointed Isaiah for his task to give us the wisdom to discern what work God has in mind for us at this moment of our lives. Isaiah was sent to the nations, especially those eager to hear that God was coming to help them. Ours might not be such a broad or universal call. Nevertheless, like Isaiah, each baptized Christian has been called my name to proclaim, through words and deeds, “glad tidings” to those waiting in need of it. While we may admire the gifts and service other servants of God have, we have been uniquely gifted ourselves for service in God’s name. Each of us has our call; we have something to do – what is it?

In our psalm response, Mary proclaims God’s greatness – for though she is “lowly,” the Spirit of God has come upon her for a special mission. While she will give birth to the savior, even before this happens, she is already responding to her call as she opens her mouth and announces what God has done for her and will do for the poor who have turned to God for help. When the Spirit of God comes upon someone, like Isaiah and Mary, they cannot keep the news of God’s goodness to themselves, they must go and proclaim it to others.

Which is what people in our parishes do. They have heard a call from God; they have been “anointed to bring glad tidings to the poor,” and so they do. They minister to the grieving; proclaim the scriptures in the assembly; sit with the dying and comfort their families; take the Eucharist to the aged and infirmed; legislate on behalf of the homeless; serve on community boards for the homeless; teach good environmental practices to school children, etc. “Bringing glad tidings to the poor,” has as many faces as the members of our faith communities who have been baptized and anointed by the Spirit to fulfill God’s good work on earth.

“Hear ye, hear ye!” It’s the way trials begin here in the States. An officer of the court calls those assembled in the court room to attention and announces the arrival of the judge. The trial is beginning. John’s gospel has a similar beginning for very early we are introduced to John the Baptist. He was already well known by those early hearers of his gospel; his birth had been described by Luke and the three Synoptics describe his early preaching and baptizing mission. In fact, John was so renowned that some saw him as a greater prophet than Jesus. So, John the evangelist introduces us to the Baptist and clearly delineates his role: first by a series of “nots.” He is “not the Christ...not Elijah...not the Prophet.” John may have been immensely popular among those who heard and followed him, but he was only a precursor, anointed by God for his specific task: he was to announce Jesus’ coming.

At the end of this gospel Jesus will be put on trial, found guilty and executed. But this gospel shows us that we humans are really the ones on trial. The trial has begun and the first witness, John the Baptist, has been called forth to give witness to Jesus, who will describe himself in this gospel as “the way, the truth and the life.”

John is just the first to come forward to bear witness to Jesus – more will follow. In particular, Jesus’ signs will testify to his identity: he will provide food for the hungry, he is the living bread; he will give water to those who thirst, he is living water; he will raise Lazarus from the dead, he is life itself; he will open the eyes of the blind, he is the light of the world. Indeed, Jesus will tell those who confront him for one of the signs he performed, the curing of the cripple man on the sabbath, that his works show that “the Father has sent me...and gives testimony on my behalf” 5; 37). God also bears witness to us about Jesus.

Those who hear this gospel and give ear to these witnesses will have to decide: is Jesus the One on whom we will place our faith? Will we follow him and reject

what will not satisfy our hunger or quench our thirst for life – as Jesus does? If a trial has begun and witnesses are being called, then we being asked to make a decision: shall we accept what this gospel will say about Jesus? If so, how will it affect our lives.

Of course, if we profess our faith in Christ by accepting the witnesses in John's gospel, then we too will become another in the unbroken line of witnesses since John the Baptist. How we act... what we say... who we are...will either give witness to Jesus or deny him. People will draw their own conclusions about us: "Yes, that person is a true follower of Jesus, their life gives clear witness to him."

In the light of the witness theme which runs through John's gospel, it is obvious that those who accept the testimony of the witnesses, must also live a public life of faith. Christianity is not a private religion, kept to oneself, but each of us must live up to the identity our baptism has given us as "lights of the world." On this Sunday, when the third candle on the Advent wreath is lighted, we are reminded that we too have been set aflame by the one the Baptist was anointed to proclaim and like him we too must bear witness. "Hear ye, hear ye."

December 12th is the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The day honors Mary's apparition on December 9th, 1531, to Juan Diego, an Indian convert to Christianity, who was on his way to Mass. Mary, pregnant and in native dress, spoke lovingly and respectfully to him in his own tongue. She showed a respect the indigenous were not getting from their Spanish conquerors and some of the church hierarchy. She requested a church be built on the site, outside Mexico City, so that others, like Juan, could come to speak to her and experience her Son's loving care. She is the patron of the Americas and among other things, represents God's reaching out to those on the fringes who are unjustly treated by the dominant powers.

Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ, (THE TREASURE OF GUADALUPE, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006) cautions that Mary is not only a symbol of receiving God's love and the other half of the story prevents us from romanticizing and sentimentalizing the Guadalupe story. Deck says Mary calls us to enter into union with divine love and power and to respond in Christian discipleship by serving others and participating in the liberation of all human kind. The story of Guadalupe is about the divine initiative on our behalf and challenges us to respond by loving God and neighbor. How appropriate this feast falls in the midst of Advent, a season that reminds us that God has acted first and loved us, even though we dwelt in darkness and the shadow of death.

THE WINTER JOURNEY OF ADVENT

In this time of darkness,
We choose to look toward the Light.
In this time when so many suffer,
We choose faith, not despair:
We choose the work of compassionate justice.

As we move through Advent together,
Hungry for transformation, for hope,
Our steps themselves
Transform us, nourish us.
We are on constant pilgrimage,
Moving to the heart of things,
Reaching beyond what any one of us
Can reach alone.

The brightness of the Incarnation
Guides us as we continue,
With the promise of the Prince of Peace
As the bright star in these dark nights.

By Jane Deren, Education for Justice www.educationforjustice.org

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 Response to the first reading – Luke 1: 46-54

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
My spirit rejoices in God my Savior....

God has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich God has sent away empty.

Reflection:

Mary proclaims God's greatness – for though she is "lowly," the Spirit of God has come upon her for a special mission. She will give birth to the savior, but even before this happens, she is already responding to her call as she announces what God has done for her and will do for the poor who have turned to God for help. When the Spirit of God comes upon someone, like Isaiah and Mary, they cannot

keep the news of God's goodness to themselves, they must go and proclaim it to others.

Advent is a time for dreaming big dreams, and so we ask ourselves:

- How does my life proclaim the greatness of God?
- How can I share the goodness of God with others, especially the most needy?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor."
(Isaiah 61:1-2a)

The words in today's first reading could be rightly addressed to the parishioners of Sacred Heart Parish. In a multitude of ways, you "bring glad tidings to the poor" and your message of hope is known, and received, especially by those most in need.

One of Sacred Heart Cathedral's Gospel blessings is that being a downtown church, the poor are at our doorstep. The "brokenhearted" and "released captives" come to find "healing". One form of that "healing" is a welcoming, respectful invitation offered by the office staff to "come in" and be at home. For those in crisis, some small financial relief given from the "Door Fund" provides additional "glad tidings".

It is Christ who's Advent we celebrate. The Gospel teaches us that we are to receive Christ in all the ways He comes to us. Here in this small corner of Raleigh, our parish is recognizing the presence of Christ disguised as the poor and responding with "glad tidings".

Did you know?

· Many poor people who are not part of our parish come to our door asking for help. The parish staff welcomes them as Christ and that is "Glad Tidings" for the poor and for all of us.

· Sacred Heart Parishioners "heal the brokenhearted" in a multitude of ways. Here are some of them:

Forming "Support Circles" for local homeless families and individuals,
Bringing Eucharist and praying with those in prison

Volunteering at Catholic Parish Outreach,
Donating food and financial support on Share Sunday,
Serving meals at the ARC Shelter for women, and to homeless families.
Supporting refugees in their resettlement,
Donating winter coats for the poor.

What can I do?

- Contact your parish's Ministry Office to join other parishioners in your community's work of bringing "glad tidings to the poor".
- If you are able, you can make a contribution to our parish's outreach to the poor
- Pray that your parish may continue to recognize Christ in all His many disguises and that we will treat Him with great kindness when He comes.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

CHRISTMAS CARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten 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:

- Scott D. Allen #0005091 (On death row since 11/18/03)
- Terrance R. Elliott #0120236 (12/18/03)
- Kyle O. Berry #0562597 (3/10/04)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available:

"First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year B." Begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of 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, with **Year B** updated.

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” CD link on the left.

2. **“Homilias Dominicales”** —These Spanish reflections on the Sunday and daily scriptures are written by Dominican sisters and friars. If you or a friend would like to receive these reflections drop a note to fr. John Boll, O.P. at Jboll@opsouth.org Or jboll@preacherexchange.org

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, daily homilies and other material pertinent to preaching.

4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to fr. John Boll, OP 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 payable to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thank you and blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P.

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