

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 27 SUNDAY (A)
Isaiah 5: 1 Psalm 80 Philippians 4: 6-9 Matthew 21: 33-43
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

There are obvious parallels in the first and third readings’ vineyard metaphors. I find myself focusing on the Isaian passage today, but the preacher, drawn to the gospel, may find some help here as well. Both readings feature special vineyards: ones that have been lovingly planted, protected (“watchtower,” “hedged”) and carefully worked. Growing grapes is a labor-intensive endeavor.

In Isaiah’s parable, the vineyard itself is a disappointment---it “yielded wild grapes.” Now where did these come from since it was planted with “the choicest vines” and lovingly tended? The owner certainly didn’t ignore this vineyard. It seems to be the vineyard’s doing. This is a parable and in such stories, even a vineyard can be cantankerous and rebellious. It’s the vineyard’s fault, the prophet tells us.

If you were an Israelite, you could not hear a story about a vineyard without knowing that the vineyard was an often-used metaphor for the house of Israel. The people knew that God had chosen, planted and tended them and promised to watch over them. Since they would know the parable applied to them, Isaiah invites “the inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah” to respond to God’s questioning lament, “What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done?” Failure to yield good fruits was not due to God’s holding back or stinting on the vineyard. The people are invited to pass judgement and the judgement applies to them.

The preacher may want to begin today’s preaching by drawing on the hearers’ farming or gardening experiences. If I were still living in California, or near vineyards, I would look for some further details about grape growing to draw out the care and work growers and farm laborers pour into vineyards. Those in farming areas would be surrounded by evidence in the fields, even in autumn, of hard work and diligent overseeing.

And then there are the rest of us who grew up in cities. I have strong memories of my immigrant grandfather’s backyard vegetable garden. Not a flower in sight---he didn’t grow anything that couldn’t be eaten! In very early Spring he planted tomato seeds in cups and put them on the cellar window sills to sprout. Later in Spring he transferred them to his tilled and manured garden along with other

plantings. He watered, weeded, pruned and kept the birds away from his plants and fig trees through the summer months. There wasn't a day he didn't walk among the plants---watching, guarding and waiting. Then came the harvest of beefsteak and plum tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, parsley and basil. (Doesn't that make you wish we were still in summer?) After all his labors and care, if his garden had rebelled, the way the vineyard did, he would have covered it over with cement and made a patio!

In the first part of the passage, the narrator describes the "friend" who plants the vineyard. But in the second part, God speaks to the people and threatens to tear down the protective hedge and let the animals graze and trample the vineyard. This threat would have been hard for the Israelites to hear. What would their lives be like without the care and nurturing God gave them? God didn't plant "wild grapes." God didn't form these people to be rebellious; but to reflect the gracious, just and merciful God who called, formed and made them into a people. "What more was there to do for my vineyard?"

God sounds like a parent who, after spending years giving an offspring the best family environment and education possible, learns that the child has gotten in trouble or committed a crime. "What more could I have done to prevent this?" the parent laments. The narrator's voice returns at the end of the passage to make sure there are no doubts about the application of this story. "The vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel... God looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed! For justice, but hark, the outcry!" After all God has done, God expects just living: that people live in right relationship to one another, their exchange be marked by honesty and that the poor and weak be treated properly. Such should be the characteristics of a people "under God."

After the debates around the "under God" phrase in our "Pledge of Allegiance" a few months earlier this year, the phrase is fixed and been planted firmly as an expressed characteristic of our land. But we need to examine our national structure; do we as a "people under God" do the justice God expressed through the prophets? Are we indeed a nation where all are treated equally before the law? Where no group is singled out and victimized because of their faith, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or economic status? For those who see a discrepancy between the vision we profess as a nation and the fruits we produce then we have to do what we can, in big and small ways, to produce the kinds of fruits the owner of the vineyard desires.

We church members call ourselves, “God’s people,” the “vineyard of the Lord of hosts.” The Isaian parable should certainly speak and challenge us. We trace our faith life to its origins in God, who planted the seed of the Christ-life in us; nourished it by the scriptures and sacraments; and gave us prophetic witnesses, parents and teachers. God has also protected that life within us when it was stressed and tested; renewed it when we wandered and caused it to grow at the most unexpected times. So, the first thing we do at this eucharist is remember with gratitude all God has done for us as individuals and as a community.

But we have to ask the Isaian question too. After all God has done for us, what fruits will God find at vintage time? “God looked for judgment, but see bloodshed! For justice, but hark the outcry.” We “people of God,” we “vineyard of the Lord”---do our poor receive preferential option; is there discrimination in our assemblies against the aged, disabled, gays, women? Are our laity involved in decision making? Is there open disclosure of financial matters? Are the home-bound made to feel part of our community? Do we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned? (See the Justice Quote below for more.)

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

THE INTERNATIONAL BIBLE COMMENTARY, edited by William R. Farmer. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998.

This was designed to be “an ecumenical commentary for the twenty-first century,” in the spirit of Vatican II. It’s aim is to be “truly Roman Catholic” and “truly ecumenical.” The commentaries and essays are written by men and women scholars from throughout the world. Thus, for example, there are articles written by African and Latin American biblical scholars. It includes over 300 pages of introductory essays, some with an exegetical emphasis, while others deal with “Selected Pastoral Concerns”—women’s biblical studies, justice, violence, antisemitism, ecology, nationalism, etc. This is an expensive book (\$90), but worth the price for a fine one volume biblical commentary that has a inclusive perspective.

QUOTABLE

“The church has always been tempted to withdraw from the city to the safety of the countryside or suburbia. And in addition to that spatial temptation there is a theological one as well. The Christian faith has always had to resist the temptation to focus on some world other than this one: to organize itself around the premise that getting people to heaven is our real purpose and that one way to do that is to persuade people that the world is tainted, sinful, tempting, and that faithful people

will simply not be too fond of it, or committed to it.

---John M. Buchanan, "Is There a Church Around Here?" LIVING PULPIT, April-June 2002, page 13.

JUSTICE NOTES

(Today's quote is applicable to the first and third readings.)

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing any urban minister and any urban church today is the same one that has faced them in every century since the movement began: the challenge to create community among people who regard one another as strangers. When wealthy churches open their doors to offer shelter to the homeless and facilitate interaction among their members and the homeless population, a, a bit of the experience of Christian life as being a community among strangers begins to re-emerge. When an African-American congregation and an Asian-American congregation visit each others' churches, join each other for special celebrations, and work together for community improvement, something fundamental to the very nature of the Gospel begins to be recovered. Urban outreach ministries to AIDS victims, at-risk youth, or the isolated elderly are more than acts of civic well-being (although they certainly are that.) They are a fundamental sign, a sacramental indicator one might say, of God's ultimate urban redevelopment plan as it is revealed in Revelation 21: 22-7.

----Dale T. Irvin, "The City: Community Among Strangers," in LIVING PULPIT, April-June 2002, page 17.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I will post in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or several 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:

[John Lee Conadway](#)

[James Jaynes](#)

[John Welsey Jones](#)

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.

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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