

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 31st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Malachi 1: 14b–2:2b, 8-10 Ps. 131 1 Thess. 2: 7b–9, 13 Matthew 23: 1-12
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Religious leaders do not come off too well in today’s first and Gospel readings. These past three weeks Jesus had been in contention with the “chief priests and elders of the people,” now he takes on the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes.

Jesus is not accusing the scribes and Pharisees of not knowing their religion. They knew it very well. They were even good at teaching it to others; it is just that they didn’t practice what they taught and preached. “For they preach but they do not practice.” In Jesus’ time, the teachers of Torah fell into two broad categories: those who took a very strict interpretation of the religious law and those who were broad interpreters. The strict teachers made religious observance very difficult for the ordinary person who lacked both the education and time to learn and practice all the minutiae these teachers emphasized. Thus, the strict interpreters could easily point an accusing finger at those around them, the common folk, who in their ignorance were constantly breaking the rules. John Pilch (THE CULTURAL WORLD OF JESUS) says that these strict interpreters did little to lighten the religious burdens they taught. Thus, they provided still more loads for an already oppressed people to carry. As a result of their burdensome teachings, they made it sound as if God were exacting and demanding. While those who gave a broad interpretation had a more pastoral approach. In today’s passage Jesus addresses the Pharisees and their strict interpretation. He accuses them of taking a position they themselves do not follow. Nor, he says, do they do anything to relieve the heavy burdens they have imposed on others.

Then, there is the matter of titles given to people of distinction. My father’s first name is Joseph. When I was a boy, if I had called him Joe, I would not have survived to adulthood. Yet Jesus says, “Call no one on earth your father....” What about those priests I served at the altar in our local parish when I was a boy? Should I have called Father Kelly, Pat? And, to allude to another strange passage, should I have cut off my right hand when it offended me or plucked out my eye, in the third grade, when it roamed to my desk mate’s test? I sense that Jesus is using exaggeration to make a point—and he makes some good ones in today’s Gospel.

In Jesus' day "father" was not only used to address a male parent, but also as an honorary title for distinguished elders living or dead. However, Jesus is saying, that a disciple is not to be distracted by a search for honor and titles. We are to go about our "business," the work of preaching and fulfilling our vocation. If our lives conform to what we teach, that will be enough. Let God take care of any subsequent honors for us. To be esteemed in God's sight is what counts. And only God may know who these "honorees" are.

The Malachi reading is an indictment against religious leaders who have been guilty of another violation of the teacher's responsibility---they have not observed God's ways and have taught falsely. "You have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction...." These priests failed in their roles as leaders and teachers. As I fly out of Kennedy airport today, I note the front page story in the paper I am reading. The headline reports that the Brooklyn diocese is being sued for three hundred million dollars by 40 people who allege clergy abuse over the last forty years. I am sure those in the pews cannot hear this Malachi passage without applying it to all the recent clergy scandals. And well they should. All religious teachers, and anyone holding positions of authority, have to take this reading to heart.

But the scriptures speak, not only to certain religious leaders, but to all believers. We must search our consciences, not because we have committed similar crimes, but because we all fall short of the ideals we profess and teach. In some ways, we do not "lay to heart" the commandments of God; nor, says Malachi, do our lives give sufficient example of "the glory of God's name." We are all expected to give witness by word and deed to our God. "You have turned aside from the way," Malachi complains. The prophet, formerly speaking for God, now speaks in his own voice, "Why then do we break faith with one another violating the covenant of our ancestors?" Sounds like Paul in Romans when he laments, "I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do and I find myself doing the very things I hate." (Romans 7: 15-16) Our human nature needs help; Paul, Malachi, all of us—our condition cries out to God for redemption.

Any of us who hold the position of teacher, in any way (parent, religious sister, priest, uncle, grandmother, etc.) listen to today's readings with humble hearts. We certainly are aware of our responsibilities to teach by word and example. Yet as we reflect at the end of a day on how well we lived up to what we profess and

teach, we know we fall short. Maybe our consolation and encouragement can be found in Paul's closing words today:

"...we give thanks to God unceasingly that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us, you received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe."

Paul was certainly aware of his shortcomings. But what he passed on came from God—who planted the Word in him. The gospel message is not a dead letter; but a living growing word. Our teachers in faith have passed that Word on to us. We have heard that Word today at this liturgy and will be fed that Word made flesh in our Eucharist. We are not discouraged by how we fall short, how we fail to fully live the teachings we profess and pass on to others. Instead, with faith in that Word "at work in you who believe," we are assured God is not finished with us yet. So, we ask the Holy Spirit here today to help us cooperate and live up to the living Word in us.

There is an opportunity in today's preaching to celebrate those who have taught us the faith we now celebrate and which has sustained us in difficult times. We could hold up for recognition the lectors who proclaim the Word at our liturgy; the teachers who take our young ones apart for their own liturgy of the Word; all the paid and volunteer religious educators in our parishes and schools, etc. These are people, who could say with Paul, are "determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us." They deserve our recognition and even mention in the petitions that follow this preaching.

QUOTABLE

I have been a lectionary preacher for so long that I fumble when I have to pick a text out of thin air for a special occasion. When I pick the text, it seems that I am shopping for a piece of scripture that I will back up what I already know I want to say. When the text picks me, I know I am in for a discovery. The lectionary provides me with breath and discipline I lack on my own, and my sermons are fresher with it than without it. The liturgical year provides a natural pattern for preaching.

—Barbara Brown Taylor in *BEST ADVICE FOR PREACHING*. Edited by John R. Claypool, page 41.

JUSTICE NOTES

(The noted Latin American theologian, Gustav Gutierrez, OP, recently gave a interview and it was quoted in the “International Dominican Information” newsletter (September, 2002). He was asked, “What does the future hold for a theology of the poor in a world that is being globalized?” This is his response:

On this subject the biblical message of chapter 25 of Matthew plays a major part. The fact is that globalization is widening the gap between rich nations and persons, in relation to the poor nations and persons. Liberation Theology has something to say, something theological. Many think that poverty is only a social problem, which should be attended to by the social action of the Church. Things are more complex. Poverty is a challenge that goes much beyond what we used to call the social question. I believe that this theology emphasizes and expresses itself in the formula: preferential option for the poor. It was born in Latin America between Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979), and presupposes that God’s love is universal, but that the big challenge is to maintain both universality and the preference of God’s love in our preaching. We have to take them both. John Paul II has insisted on the preferential options for the poor.

The perspective of the poor is that of the Kingdom, the final aim of the preference for the poor. It is the final one, because there are others. One doesn’t have to opt for the poor because they are good—if they are, the better—but because God is good, because God’s love is free and goes out to everybody, especially to those who are the most abandoned. I believe that this way of reading the Christian message from the point of view of the poor, when we face those who are excluded today by globalization has much, very much to say.

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 addresses. 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:.....

Wade Cole

John Daniels

Angel Guevera # 0506556

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

Please note: Fr. John Bateman said one of the inmates he wrote to has been pestering him with collect calls. I have never known this to happen, but writers to inmates might want to take privacy precautions, if they so choose. For example, some use their parish as a return address.

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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com