

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 33<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)  
Proverbs 31: 10-13, 19-20, 30-31 I Thessalonians 5: 1-6 Matthew 25: 14-30  
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Talk of the Second Coming makes us main-line church folk uncomfortable. “The End is Near!”—reads the sign carried by the street preacher we rush by. Hope he doesn’t stop me and ask if I’ve “been saved.” What would I say? But it isn’t just those street preachers; talk of end times is in the New Testament as well. When we read those New Testament texts filled with apocalyptic images, do we feel we are reading texts of a long-gone religion? They seem part of someone else’s traditional belief. But these last weeks of the liturgical year, while not filled with exotic apocalyptic imagery, still cause us to consider Jesus’ return--- the Second Coming. What are we to think and say about it to people who seem so thoroughly modern and might find us quaint when we broach the subject?

The Second Coming is no minor event in our faith life. Though it hasn’t happened yet, the scriptural texts these last three weeks of the liturgical year nudge us to make it a factor in our faith lives---- and while we wait for it to happen, they urge us to consider the quality of our lives. The Parousia, these passages tell us, may be taking a while; but it will happen. When it does, how will it find us? While we may not live to see Jesus’ return, each of us is certain that our world will end. It will happen to all of us, no matter what our worldly stature. As the saying goes, “At the end of the game, the king and the pawn are put away in the same box.” So, these “ending parables” remind us that we had better be investing our lives in what will stand up to the questions that will be put to us one day. We will be asked how we used the time we were given? The Second Coming calls us Christians to take our lives very seriously, so seriously that we can meet the inevitable endings we must face with faith and courage.

A 70 year old man I had gotten to know during a recent parish retreat, told me about some medical tests he was to undergo to determine whether a large black spot they had discovered on his lung was cancer. He said, “Just pray I have the strength to take whatever comes.” I told him I would. But I know that this devout man had spent his entire life being prepared “to take whatever comes.” Like the first two servants in the gospel story, he had invested what was given him in “good investments”: his prayer life, his family responsibilities, active membership in his

parish community and service to neighbors in need.

Twenty years ago there was a popular police television series, “Hill Street Blues.” The opening scene of each week’s episode would show the precinct squad room at the beginning of a shift. There would be the assembled police officers and the shift sergeant. He would give them their day’s assignments and then send them out with the same admonition, week after week, “Hey, be careful out there.” The world can be a very challenging place, not only for police officers, but for Christians as well. We could just go to work, rush home, lock the doors and keep ourselves safe and untainted by the world. Instead, Jesus’ parable is encouraging us to go out and get involved, invest ourselves, get into the thick of things. The final judgement, in this parable at least, seems to be based on how much confidence the servants had that their master would support their endeavors, applaud their risk and appreciate whatever returns they could bring in.

Behind this parable are two sureties: Jesus will go away; Jesus will return. We know when the first happened, now we are anticipating the second. No date is hinted at. As for now, what we must do is attend to what we have before us; we must be faithful to the risk-taking spirit of Jesus who became fully engaged in our world. The third servant acted “out of fear”—and so held back, risking nothing. He thought he was playing it safe. Wrong! His master wanted his servants to go out, take chances and trust that he would appreciate their being just like him; for the master himself took a big chance when he went off and “entrusted his possessions” into the hands of his servants. Quite a risk-taker this master.

We live during times when people have lost their retirement funds because of dishonest business executives. Unemployment is on the rise (there was talk recently of United and American Airlines cutting back on employees) and the stock market’s future is very shaky. So, what’s wrong with a cautious financial manager anyway? When the master returned, he did not find that the third servant had been dishonest and stolen what was entrusted to him. In today’s economy he would be called prudent and trustworthy. But we learn that his cautious approach comes out of fear, he is out to protect his hide from a master he knows to be a “demanding person.”

The parable suggests that gospel living and loving require risk taking. We will have to think about how we can keep our religion from becoming a freeze-dried

package put on a high shelf for safe keeping. Let's take a chance and visit that grumpy relative; figure out a way to feed the hungry; take our concerns about neighborhood safety to the town meeting; tutor an at-risk teen; become a lector in church; visit and sit with a dying friend... well, you get the idea. How much talent do I think has been left with me and how can I invest it? We don't have to be successful as much as faithful and trusting in the One who is gone, but coming back.

The first reading from Proverbs has a very modern sound to it. It describes a woman who uses her gifts, not only within the comparative safety of her own home, but in the market place as well. Last week's first reading was about Lady Wisdom. Today we see Wisdom manifested in the life of this "worthy wife." For her time, she is a most unusual woman. She is not just a good wife, appreciated by her family at home; but she also has fame at the city gates. Her husband receives the benefit of her practical gifts. But so do the others, for "she reaches out her hands to the poor and extends her arms to the needy." Her practical gifts are the fruit of Wisdom.

There is an everyday quality to her holiness. She is a holy person who "fears the Lord," i.e. holds God in reverence. But the author of Proverbs does not depict her "holy acts" as taking place in isolation or in hours of prayer spent in the Temple. Instead, this good woman practices a worldly religion. She applies her talents to her home; but she also practices works of kindness beyond the walls of her home. Our culture shines a spotlight on pencil-thin models and young men with "six pack abs." But the author reminds us that exterior looks are deceptive, they will pass. We don't know what this worthy and worldly wife looks like; but we do see her interior appearance. She is reverent before God, industrious at home and kind to the needy. No wonder her works earn her "praise at the city gates."

The Thessalonians reading also expresses the early Church's concern--- when will the Lord return? Christ's return had been expected soon after his Ascension, and now years have gone by. Paul addresses the uselessness of this question. The return will be sudden, he warns. Notice the stark image used: he is not afraid to compare Christ's return with the intrusion of a thief. Using the image of pregnancy he says that though a woman knows she will have a child, the pains signaling the birth come suddenly. Pregnancy has a certitude about it; we too can be certain of Christ's return and there can be "no escape" from that reality. Like

pregnancy, forces are already set in motion and will come about, though the crisis can't be specifically pinpointed. However, false signals may arise, so be alert.

While the reading has a crisis sound to it, notice that the Christian has nothing to fear. We are children of the light, we are not in the dark about these things. In contrast to those who will be caught off guard, we know with certainty the Lord is coming. This coming need not be a frightening event for those who live as light and are anticipating the day.

The preacher can learn a lesson about preaching from this reading. Paul is dealing with an event that is part of the teaching of the Church; the Second Coming. He also addresses how Christians are to behave until that event. Notice, he does not speak in abstract or doctrinal language to make his point. Rather, these few lines are filled with allusions to the everyday lives of his listeners. He refers to: a thief, the pains and suddenness of childbirth, light and dark, sleep and sobriety. We preachers can learn from Paul to draw on the concrete realities of life to illustrate the divine in our midst. Abstract language only gives the impression that the things of God are beyond our daily experience.

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

James A. Wallace, *PREACHING TO THE HUNGERS OF THE HEART: THE HOMILY ON THE FEASTS AND WITHIN THE RITES*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8146-1224-5 (Paper, 196 pages, \$17.95)

I just finished this book and I really like it. Wallace first reviews the recent history of the homily since Vatican II. Then he shows how preaching today needs to address three spiritual hungers: the hungers for wholeness, meaning and belonging. He shows how to address these hungers through preaching we do for the great feasts of the Lord, the sacramental rites and the celebrations of the saints—with specific attention to the feasts of Mary. He includes examples from his own preaching. The homilies he uses to illustrate his points are very good too. This book gives good theoretical background and very practical suggestions to preach the kinds of homilies he recommends. Especially valuable for those who preach outside the eucharist.

#### QUOTABLE

Advent. This season prepares and anticipates the Christmas season in proclaiming that God continues to come. All three cycles of Sunday readings have gospels that

follow the same pattern: Christ will come again (first Sunday), Christ does come today (second and third Sundays), and Christ has come (fourth Sunday). As Christmas has its choir, Advent has its chorus: main soloists include Jesus (first Sunday), John the Baptist (second and third Sundays, and either Joseph or Mary, in the company of Gabriel, or Elizabeth, back-up singers include Isaiah, Paul, and an occasional appearance by Jeremiah, Baruch, Zephaniah, Micah, the authors of Hebrews and 2 Peter, and James. As Lent is a season of sensory deprivation, silence and sorrow for sins, Advent is a season of the senses and songs. We are called to “Wake up,” “Listen,” and “Behold.” We are told to “Watch for the day,” “Prepare the way for the Lord,” and “Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!” We hear the songs of Isaiah and the canticles of Mary and Zechariah. Advent is a season of exclamation and excitement. Something wonderful came but something wonderful still comes and, most wondrous, will come in glory. When Advent is preached in relationship to Christmas, this season evokes a readiness for the recognition of incarnation, filling people with a sensitivity and sensibility for the God who came and will come, but most of all, who draw us to our celebration of “Christ’s Mass” this year.

—James A. Wallace, pages 48-49.

#### 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:.....

William Bowie

Darnell Fowler Elrico

Jamie Lamont Smith

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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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](mailto:judeop@juno.com)