

First Impressions 2nd SUNDAY OF ADVENT A
Isaiah 11: 1-10 Psalm 72 Romans 15: 4-9 Matthew 3: 1-12
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

If they had it MTV in Jesus' day, John the Baptist would have been a star! He was the closest thing the first century had to a rock star. He dressed the part: camel's-hair clothing and a leather belt. He ate exotic foods-locusts and wild honey. He was up front and in your face. He could not help getting people's attention: kicking up the waters of the Jordan, putting his fingers in the face of the insincere, shaking up the comfortable by calling them names---" You brood of vipers!" He was an attention-getter because he had something to say. " Repent ... straighten things up!"

Recently I had long car trip to make. I left the house at 5 in the in the morning, and drove two hours in the dark. After four hours on the road I realized I hadn't been fully alert: I had traveled a couple of miles on "cruise control." I wasn't sleeping exactly, but I was almost in a hypnotic state. I was lucky that traffic was light. I was lucky that no fast responses were required during those couple miles. I pulled over and took a nap. You can't travel at 65 m.p.h. and not be fully awake! It's scary! And it is dangerous!

Life gets like that. We move along at 65 m.p.h. on cruise control. Maybe we haven't crashed, but is that any way to go through life? What are we missing along the way? Where is our attention? Where is our focus? Have we been missing those people and parts of our life that count? Have we lost a sense of priorities? This time of the year, with all its hustle and bustle, we are especially prone to "cruise control." We're on automatic pilot, we put our heads down and plunge through the season. What we need is a wake-up call. And we sometimes get it. It can be as strident and in-your-face as John the Baptist was.

For example. A spouse stops us in our tracks in a gentle, or not-so gentle, way and gives us a wake-up call. In one way or another he or she reminds us that we have been traveling through life on cruise control; we have been absent from life, marriage or from our children. A friend confronts us; we have broken a promise or taken the friend for granted. The voice of John the Baptist comes like that in various modern disguises. That's how our God speaks to us. In one way or another we hear the call, " Repent." " Straighten things up!" Sometimes the voice is harsh. Sometimes it is gentle. But if we listen to the voice, we realize that it is

speaking the truth to us.

Most likely our first response is sorrow. But what is there to be sorry about? As blessed as this season is, it does touch into certain compulsions we have. When we hear the summons to “repent,” we may realize that we have lived only on the surface of life. We have been searching for happiness in the wrong places, thinking that what will make us happy lies in the newest, fastest, cleverest device or the latest fashion. What new gadget or toy are they pushing on tv or on the internet this season that we just can't wait to get our hands on? One recent survey said that the less time parents spend with their children, the more gifts they buy them. Our society desires more and more; but we seem to have less and less of what really counts. At this period of Advent we ask ourselves if we are investing a lot of our energies in the wrong places. We have to admit with sorrow that our quest for happiness has disappointed us. We have let others identify for us what will make us happy and we find it wanting.

Why else do we come here to celebrate Eucharist together week after week? It is not merely because we're keeping a religious rule. It's not just because we are concerned about the next life and we want to guarantee a place there for ourselves. No, it's about this life: we are hoping to find meaning, sanity and balance in our lives. We want to see, in the dark that surrounds us, a way illumined by a lasting light. We want to focus on what is real for ourselves and for our families.

As harsh as John the Baptist sounded he did draw a crowd. He was popular because they needed help and he was a voice of clarity and sanity. They and we hear his promise: someone is coming bearing a fire for spirits that are chilled by boredom, aimlessness and routine. John promises that our spirits, which are bloated with excess, can be revived by a new spirit. What has been chilled and feels tepid in our spirits can be heated again by the fire of the coming Christ. He is coming, John tells us, with a baptism of the Spirit and fire. That must have been an exciting message to hear! We cannot revive our spirits on our own. We need what John promises us--- the gift of a renewed spirit. Unlike other gifts at this buying season, this spirit of renewal cannot be bought or charged to Visa. It cannot be owned and possessed only by the rich and powerful. It can't be cornered and monopolized by any special religious elite. It is a gift that only God can give, a baptism, as John says, "with the Holy Spirit and fire." Behind John's voice is God speaking with love and concern for us. God has sent someone out looking for us to bring us home, the one mightier than John, who will baptize with water and the Spirit. With that Spirit guiding us we will not lose our way. With that fire burning within us we will share what we believe with others who might still be on “cruise control.”

QUOTABLE

I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day "every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, and the rough places will be made plains, and the crooked places will

be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together to struggle together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

And when this happen and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"

—Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

JUSTICE NOTES

“There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain.” (Isaiah 11:9)

JUST HOLIDAY SHOPPING

Consumer choices are moral and cultural expressions of what is important to us. Where we shop and what we buy are decisions which can express our awareness that even in these simple ways we must do what is *right and just*. We must take the time to learn under what conditions our purchases are produced. We can then choose to buy only products which are produced in ways which are *justice* to our brothers and sisters who are making them and which cause *no harm* to our world and environment.

We are never more challenged as "Christian Consumers" than during the Christmas season. We are motivated by love, generosity and billions of advertising dollars to celebrate the birth of the poor Christ by purchasing an endless array of glittering and enticing material objects at any one of our many glittering and enticing malls. But there is another way.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development promotes justice, human dignity and self-respect by supporting job creation and the establishment of businesses that provide decent wages, and distribute profits more equitably.

If you want to support socially just causes while shopping for friends and loved ones, go to the Catholic Bishop's website <http://www.nccbuscc.org/cchd/edshopping.shtml>. Here you will find various groups from whom you can purchase wonderful gifts with the knowledge that your purchase will "do no harm", but will bring greater justice to those most in need. And you don't have to leave home. Some groups are:

The Enterprising Kitchen

Family Farmer Cheese

Made on the Rez

Native Harvest

Rural Coalition SuperMarket Project
Southwest Creations
Trillium Artisans
Woman Craft

Catholic Relief Services also has a website called <http://www.crsfairtrade.org/> which provides a catalogue of fairly traded handcrafts and gourmet foods including wonderful chocolate produced by low-income workers in the Third World. There are gifts to please everyone on your list.

What can I do?

Buy at least one gift from one of the above organizations this Christmas. And next year, buy at least two!

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

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Darrell W. Maness #0831753 (On death row since 4/4/2006)

Ryan G. Garcell #0775602 (4/4/2006)

William J. Moore #0290914 (4/26/2006)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"**

"Liturgical year A," which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for 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.

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" CDs link on the left.

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 webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>
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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