

**First Impressions** 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A)

Isaiah 7: 10-14 Psalm 24 Romans 1: 1-7 Matthew 1: 18-24

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about." What would you expect should follow an opening line like that? If God, who created the stars and placed the planet's in orderly orbits; designed the marvelous workings of the human body; created the vast array of animals on land, in the sea and the air--had a plan for us and our salvation---what do you suppose it would look like? What would you expect to unfold after this opening line in today's gospel?

I would expect that God's plan would be neat and orderly and those involved in it would experience marvelous order and splendor; be able to marvel at what was revealed to them and go comfortably along with it. Well, God did have a plan, it was delivered by the prophets and spoken to people like David, "I will raise up your heir after you. I will make his kingdom firm. It is he who shall build a house for my name. I will make his royal throne firm forever."

Now that's a plan! God sounds like an architect planning a house, guaranteeing that it will be firmly and properly built and last forever. Matthew explains how the promises made toward our Jewish ancestors would be fulfilled. And what he describes may be God's plan---but it is a mess for the humans involved. It upsets human plans and is not how we think our God should work. Certainly if we were God, we know how we would do things!

Mary and Joseph are engaged and an engaged man and woman would already be considered husband and wife. Notice that mention is first made of Mary and Joseph's betrothal (v.18), and then Joseph is called Mary's "husband" (v. 19). Engagements were a binding contract and so an engaged couple were as good as married; the engagement could not be broken except by a certificate of divorce. In ancient Judaism the families of the bride and groom contracted the marriage and an economic transaction would have been negotiated. A marriage not only joined families together, it was also a community affair and a reason for neighbors to celebrate. We can presume that the two families must have been delighted over Joseph and Mary's engagement. There was no formal ceremony and so all that remained for the marriage to be completed was that the husband take the wife into his home.

But then there is the pregnancy with its hint of adultery. In a small town like Nazareth, rumors would spread quickly. Imagine the feelings of the various people involved: the hurt, frustration, anger, recriminations and fear. What was Joseph to do? Mary's seeming adultery would have been a breach of the marriage contract. As a "just person" he would have to divorce Mary, But as a compassionate man he did not want to expose her to public shame.

So Matthew tells us Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly—which means that instead of bringing her before a court, he was going to choose the option of granting her a certificate of divorce before two witnesses. Still, what a difficult decision that would be, he loved Mary and a divorce would have subjected Mary to isolation and possible poverty. Imagine Joseph's troubled sleep before the dream clarified things for him.

Up to this point in the story we can identify with Joseph. We love to have our plans and routines securely in place. They add order and a sense of control to our lives. But our experience shows that life frequently interrupts the best laid plans: a computer locks up on us in the middle of an important project; the car won't start just when we must keep an important appointment; an appliance breaks down when we're expecting guests. Who among us has not had to change plans? Redirect our lives?

We can navigate easily enough around most of those and other ordinary interruptions. But there are larger events we can't control so easily: a child gets in trouble; a marriage ends in divorce; a heart ailment limits activity; we lose a job; we can't pay our mortgage and must sell the house, etc. It is not that God throws a glitch into the mother board of our computer causing our work to come to a stop. It is not that God gives me a sickness or makes a marriage fail. It's just life with all its uncertainties, limitations and its accidental nature. What is most painful and distressing at moments like these is the realization that, after all is said and done, we don't have the control we thought we did.

When the "exception" occurs, the event that throws our world into chaos or uncertainty, we are painfully reminded, once again, that we are not in total control. If we thought we were, we were living in a dream. These harsh times are dreadful and there is not much good we can say about them except that they do bring God to the forefront of our awareness. We realize we are fragile and can only rely on the One whose hands are strong, upholding and always present.

"Such was his intention when behold ...." It is rare indeed to have an opportunity to reflect on Joseph in the scriptures. But we certainly can identify with him at this period of his life. His plans are interrupted, not to test them or punish him for some wrong he did. Quite the contrary! We are told he is a just man. Joseph may have had his plans--- but God had much bigger plans for him and for all of us. In this case, the author of the interruption in Joseph's life is God.

The angel tells Joseph that Mary will bear a son conceived through the Holy Spirit. The purpose of God's interruption into Joseph's plans is for our benefit. God is coming into our lives through Jesus who, we are told, "will save his people from their sins"---he will save his people from themselves and he will save his people from their alienation from God.

Not all interruptions that affect our life's plans or daily schedules are from God. Whatever their source, they give us a reminder of our creatureliness. We are not in control of the really significant and important events of our lives. For "control freaks" like us modern Americans, this is scary, even painful. But here is an opportunity to surrender into God's hands; to let God work out something new for us. Maybe we are the dreamers who need to be awakened us from our illusions and useless plans so as to let God's life be born in a new way in our lives. Look at the good that came from Joseph's making room for God after his plans were unsettled.

We are getting close to Christmas and, with Joseph as our example, we ask God to deepen our faith so that we can accept our life when the life's absurdities occur—the collapse of our plans and the sense that we have been cast adrift in a stormy sea. As the Word takes flesh and is born into our dizzying world, we ask that we too can be born again and be Jesus' presence in the world. We will know that rebirth is happening when we find ourselves extending a generous hand to one in need; growing in understanding of those different from us and welcoming those who are outsiders and interrupt our plan for the day. This Christmas we welcome Jesus as the one who willingly welcomed and responded to God's plan in his daily life.

### **JUSTICE NOTES**

*These are notes submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC This week's are particular to the cathedral parish, but we share them with you to give you a sense of one parish's social concern and outreach. Thanks to Anne and Bill for their weekly reflections for "First Impressions."*

**"Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." (Matthew 1:23)**

Countless parishioners this year have participated in Sacred Heart's Social Concerns Ministries. You have recognized Christ in one of His most distressing disguises, that of the poor. It is not possible to thank each of you in person. Please see in the following words, our prayer of blessing and our deep thanks for being part of our Parish's outreach ministries to "the least of these who are members of Christ's family", and of ours.

Thank you for **welcoming** Christ in those who come to the door for help, and in supporting the homeless through our Support Circle Ministry and refugees through Global Exchange Ministry.

Thank you for **wrapping Christ in "swaddling clothes" by participating in the Mother's Day collection for Catholic Parish Outreach, and bringing Him gifts through the Share Tree ministry.**

Thank you for **clothing Christ in the blankets and coats, socks and gloves you have provided for the homeless poor of Raleigh.**

Thank you for **feeding Christ as He gathers weekly at Moore Square, or is served by Wake Interfaith Hospitality Network, Passage Home, the Helen Wright Shelter and by the thousands of pounds of groceries you donated to Catholic Parish Outreach.**

Thank you for **furnishing a home for Christ with items offered to support circles and to refugee families.**

Thank you for **providing Christ with a roof over His head, heat, light, and running water through the financial support you have given to Sacred Heart's Door Fund.**

Thank you for buying fair trade coffee to make Christ's life easier in the coffee farms of Latin America.

Thank you for **visiting Christ in prison through Sacred Heart's Prison Ministry and for ministering to Christ in the aged through Caregivers.**

Thank you for all you have done to make Christ, in all His many disguises welcome here at Sacred Heart.

As a community of faith in this "Child born to us" let us wish one another the joy of Christ, Emmanuel, Who comes to us in so many disguises. During this holy season may we all experience the continued joy and peace of His coming, and may we learn to recognize Him when He comes.

## 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.*

Wayne A. Laws                    #0234897    (On death row since 8/21/85)

Henry L. Mc Collum            #0265106    (11/22/91)

Clinton R. Rose                #0351933    (12/19/91)

---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](http://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](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,

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