

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” CHRISTMAS DAY

Isaiah 52: 7-10 Hebrews 1: 1-6 John 1: 1-18 (Shorter Version John 1: 1-5, 9-14)
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The Gospel is very familiar to us “old time Catholics,” since it is the Prologue to John’s Gospel, the “last gospel” reading that used to come at the end of every Mass. It is a passage rich in poetic and narrative language. Patricia Sanchez recommends reading the shorter option since it will eliminate the added narrative about John the Baptist and have more flow to it. I tend to agree with her suggestion, it provides concentration on the proclamation of the Word made flesh.

Let’s face it, this is a difficult passage for the preacher. Each verse has enough for a preaching. And that is the choice you may want to take--- focus on one verse or section and draw out its implications. Whatever preaching strategy you take, I do think it necessary to get the sense of the entire passage before focusing on part of it. This approach will help keep the preaching in accord with the sense of the whole. While the preacher should not overwhelm the hearers with background material, it is necessary for us to do our exegetical homework in preparing this preaching. So, here is an overview—and it is much too brief considering John’s riches, but we don’t have a lot of space here, so please bear with me.

John wrote this gospel for the majority Greek Christian audience that characterized the late first century church. When he wrote the Gospel message had spread well beyond its first local Jewish community. You can imagine the difficulty John faced since he could not draw upon the Jewish traditional hope for the messiah. Thus, he had to reflect on the beliefs about Jesus the first Jewish converts had and figure out a way to address his Greek readers. He resolved his difficulty by drawing upon what he found in the Jewish tradition that might speak to Greek believers: the Jewish notion of word, and in particular, the Word of God. For the Jews, God’s Word is active and dynamic. As we see in Genesis, the Word is the source of creation. For people in the East, once a word is spoken, it has a life of their own. Remember the blind Isaac giving a blessing to Jacob, thinking he was really blessing Esau? Even though the fraud was discovered, once the word of blessing was spoken it had an independent existence and could not be taken back. In later Jewish writing the term “word of God” became synonymous for God. A devout Jew hearing the term “word of God” would think “God.” Similarly in Jewish Wisdom literature, Wisdom was also identified with God, and was used in the way God’s Word is—as active, creative and life giving.

When John looked at Greek thought for a parallel to the Jewish sense of Word and Wisdom, he found the notion of “Logos.” It is translated in today’s gospel as Word. For the Greeks, Logos meant Word or Reason, in the same way the Hebrew texts speak of Word and Wisdom. The Greeks had developed a philosophy of the Logos. For them it was the ordering principle of the world, the pattern for all created things. All had life and design through the Logos, which controlled all living things. Thus, John could address a Greek Christian in terms of the Logos, but still be faithful to the Jewish roots that spoke about the Word of God.

A few summers ago I had an opportunity to visit the underground War Rooms in London. In these bunkers deep below the central London streets, Winston Churchill and his councillors devised and conducted the war strategy for the embattled British people. It was also in this place that Churchill wrote and broadcast his stirring speeches to the English citizens suffering, along with Churchill and his colleagues, the awful Nazi blitz. During England’s darkest hour these speeches did much to keep British spirits from collapsing under the awful pounding of the bombs. No one hearing these words could doubt the power of words to revive and even create life in the human spirit. While we have tended to doubt the promises of many politicians make during their campaigns, labeling their speeches as empty words, and doubt the promises about dishwashing detergents advertized on television --- we still have enough encounters with the effects of words to know how powerful they can be. Just ask the British people who remember Churchill’s words or those here in our country who found Martin Luther King’s words so life giving during the struggle for civil rights. In these experiences and others like them, we get some sense of what John is saying when he says “the Word was God,” and “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

Recall how the other evangelists begin their gospels. Matthew first gives Jesus’ genealogy, locating him in a Jewish–Davidic lineage. Mark starts with John the Baptist’s preparation for “the One more powerful than I” (1:7). While Luke starts with the Infancy narrative. John’s beginning is very distinctive; in the Prologue he takes us back before creation. The two opening verses repeat four times “was”—the Word was in timeless existence, was in relationship to God and was God. John first uses the past tense, “was,” to indicate the pre-existence and pre-eminence of the Word. But notice how he shifts to the present tense, (verse 5), “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” All of creation came through the Word, it is the source of life and has come to bring light where sin has caused darkness.

This is where I am going to enter with the preaching. I would name the places in the world where we are experiencing the apparent victory of darkness. At this writing our military is involved in two areas of conflict Iraq and Afghanistan, with injuries and death happening daily for both military and civilians; the once tentative peace between the Israelis and Palestinians is shredded by violence and counter violence; Africa continues to be racked with civil wars, while AIDS is consuming a generation all over the continent; etc. There are personal experiences of darkness as well, as the unemployment rate stubbornly resists present improvements in the economy; in our country we live in fear of another terrorist attack; the poor number 30 million and many who can't afford it have to deal with high medical bills, either for themselves or family members.

John is not just speaking about the past. After he establishes the power and authority of the Word, he makes it clear that God has not stopped speaking the light-bearing Word, "light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." Don't we need this Word's creative power and light in our world? What feels old, tired, violently shaken, discouraging, and "under the shadow of death," is still being addressed by God through the Word. The Word's entering our world and taking flesh among us did not happen just two thousand years ago. Today we don't just celebrate a 2000 year old birthday. Rather, the Word continues to take flesh among us today and, despite the devastating effects of darkness in our world, God's light will not be overcome by it.

John's Greek hearers, receiving this message about the divine Logos, would know that God will never let us be overcome by chaos and the disorder caused by sin. The Jewish Christians hearing this message about God's Word would be assured that the very source of creation is still at work to bring light where darkness seems to hold sway. Whether of Greek or Jewish origin the faithful hearer knows that God dwells with us and joins our struggles to overcome forces that have their origin in our human deviation from God's message and plan for us.

Since we are soon to begin a new year and may be wondering what new year's resolution to make, John might be suggesting one to us today. In the light of the power of the Word, and the reminder that the Word's taking flesh is present tense, we might resolve to a more attentive and disciplined listening to the Word of God. There are many places God speaks to us, but our touchstone for the Word is the bible. What about a new year's resolution to be more faithful and prayerful in our reading of scripture? If the parish publishes next Sunday's readings in the bulletin then the preacher might suggest a daily ten or fifteen minutes' reflection on one of those readings each day. Make it practical, busy people are not going to be able to

do much more and at least this is a beginning for those who do not have bible reading in their daily routine. (This presumes the preacher does!)

QUOTABLE:

Here is some good advice on the telling of the Christmas story I found in CELEBRATING THE LITURGY (Resource Publications, Inc.1995, p.93)

“No Room in What Inn?”

Be careful how you tell the Christmas story. Popular tradition, which probably developed from a medieval morality play, holds that Joseph and his very pregnant wife travel wearily from door to door in Bethlehem looking for a place to stay. After several doors slammed in their faces, a kindly old man takes pity on them and shows them a cave or a stable out somewhere in the boondocks.

There are problems with this telling. The first is that it tends to leave the listener with an image of greedy Jewish innkeepers slamming the door on the Christ. It's not a good story for interfaith relations. Besides, it is not at all biblical. The whole creche scene and its attending story derives from a single line from Luke 2:7.

Some translations speak of an “inn.” In small villages of this time and place, there were no inns. Travelers in normal times would have gone to the village square, sat there, and waited. Villagers were honor-bound to offer the travelers food and shelter. Hospitality was a core value in the Middle East, then as now. Leaving a traveler stranded was unthinkable. The villager who passed by the travelers without offering food and lodging would have brought shame on the entire village. Bethlehem, about five miles south of Jerusalem, would have swelled with pilgrimage during the three great festivals of the year. Probably pilgrims would have stayed in an open air camping area called a “caravansary” located near the center of town and the markets. The caravansaries had no “innkeepers.” If Joseph and Mary happened upon the caravansary, they could have seen for themselves that it was full and was not, in any case, private enough for a woman about to give birth. If Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home, he would have been known to relatives who might have found a place for him and his wife. Where? In a less crowded time, they might have been shown to the guest room, most likely an “upper room,” which might have been a lean-to on the roof. If that was crowded, perhaps they made room for them downstairs, in the courtyard where the animals stayed. It wasn't the Taj Mahal, but it wasn't Siberia either. Keep in mind that this account of Jesus' birth differs radically from the account in Matthew and that Mark and John have no account of the birth of Jesus.

For further reading see THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH, (Image Books) by Father Raymond Brown. You can still work with the nativity scene. You might even add figures representing cousins, aunts, and uncles. The shepherds might

have been relatives. This helps give a more culturally realistic picture of the Holy Family as well.

JUSTICE NOTES:

"The New York Times Magazine" (December 7, 1997) had a special edition dedicated to "God Decentralized." Barbara Grizzuti Harrison (p. 73), who had formally been a Jehovah Witness, reflects on the Incarnation and makes an important link to Jesus' suffering and death. She writes:

At the core of my belief is the Incarnation, which breaks and exalts my heart. One could simply not wish to approach a God who had not shared the human condition and who did not suffer. ("Oh, Loving Madman! Was it not enough for Thee to become Incarnate, that Thou must also die?"--St. Anselm.) The greatest drama ever told is the greatest justification of faith.

To say that the incarnation is at the heart of belief is also to say that the orthodox Trinitarian model is at the heart of my belief. The Witnesses insisted that Jesus was merely a Son of God, not God Himself [sic]; but how very much less desirable and attractive He is if He

is only Daddy's brave best boy, prophet, social worker, revolutionary. It is because God suffered

in His flesh and soul the torments and anguish of human life that we, broken and askew, are able to cast ourselves upon Him. Hippolytus, martyr and saint, wrote of Christ: "His divine spirit gave life and strength to the tottering world, and the whole universe became stable once more, as if the stretching out, the agony of the Cross, had in some way gotten into everything." For me, He has gotten into everything. I see Him in the timely, unaffected gestures of friendship and in the unruly passions of human life; I see Him in the face of a doctor who serendipitously entered my life at time which I thought I had no more life left. I saw Him once and will see Him forever in a dead teacher of mine, who rescued my injured spirit. I see him in my daughter's merry eyes and in the merry play of her mind; I see him in my son's hands, the hands of a painter who loves the given world.

"Give the benefit of the doubt to the poor," a saint writes, "unless it is proven otherwise." I try to see him in the poor.

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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)

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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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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