

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD  
Isaiah 60: 1-6 Psalm 72 Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2: 1-12

By:

Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Of course the kids will love this feast. Can't you just see them in the Nativity setting with three little ones dressed as the three kings, wearing fake beards and "royal" robes? Grandparents will be snapping their pictures. It is a lovely setting and story—for kids. We have done a good job to "pretty-fy" the story and make it warm and a tale suitable for children. That's fine. But for us it is a different story than the one the greeting cards portray. It is a story we need for our adult journeys. Is there any doubt that we, like the magi, are on a journey? We have a sense of our destination, but we have no idea what will happen to us before we get there; and we don't want to make this trip completely on our own

I am writing these reflections on a transcontinental flight after preaching in two parishes on the west coast. We are to land soon and a cabin attendant just announced the connecting flights for those of us who are going to change to another plane. After giving us the list of destination cities and connecting gate numbers she ended with a cautionary note. We should check the tv monitors when we get off the plane to see if the gates she just gave us still apply, because, she says---- "everything is subject to change." I think that line would make a good mantra for this feast that celebrates travelers from the east following a star. In fact we could use that mantra through this whole liturgical year as we hear and pray Matthew's gospel. Everything is subject to change and we need help along the way—just at the magi did.

How ironic to be traveling as I reflect on today's gospel reading. I am reminded that when you travel there is so much you have to leave behind. Along the way you must rely on the plans you have made, you hope they were well thought out and that they included contingencies. But there is always the surprise along the way. You hope, should something go awry, that some hospitable soul will be around to see you through the mess, lend a helping hand or redirect you in the right direction. Finally, you hope that you will eventually arrive at your destination, safe and sound.

Notice the opening prayer in today's liturgy. It isn't just about the magi and it doesn't presume an uneventful life for those who search out the Christ in their daily lives:

"Lord, fill our hearts with your love, and as you revealed to us by an angel the coming of your son as [human],  
so lead us through his suffering and death  
to the glory of his resurrection, for he lives.....

There, did you hear it in the prayer? Here we are celebrating the magi's finding Christ and the prayer talks about and even anticipates, that there will be suffering and death for him and us too. That is why this is very much a feast for us adults. It has the hard edge of reality about it. Last week we heard that hardships had already begun for Jesus and his parents for they had to flee the murderous intents of Herod. Today's feast connects us to the light the magi followed and to the many forms of darkness we humans experience in our lives and in our world. It is into the midst of our human mess that God has joined us on our journey.

As the magi traveled they faced evil in the form of Herod and his court who were seemed ready and even eager to join them on their quest. "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage." But we know that was not Herod's intention. The searchers didn't fall into the trap, they were saved by the advice they received in a dream. God is with them on their journey and also intent on protecting the child. So, they take another way home. We know the gospel stories are rich in symbolic meaning and we understand that once we have come to see the light of Christ and do him homage, we cannot follow the former paths, we have to find another path to our true home.

No matter who we are or the circumstances of our lives, the journey we are on guarantees we will encounter change—constant change. We know it is futile to try to cling to what has been or even what we now have. We find that as we face new circumstances and trials, the supports that once gave us strength are no longer helpful. In fact, they can be harmful, giving us a false sense of security. Things are going to change and we had better have some constant guide and security amid the changing terrain. The magi encourage us to keep our eyes and direction fixed on Christ, a light that will never disappoint us in any darkness we will encounter.

Matthew will show us in his gospel what it means to have “Emmanuel—God with us” on our journey. As the gospel progresses we observe Jesus heal the blind, raise the crippled, forgive sinners and welcome the outcasts. To have God-with-us our journey assures us we will have to face no difficulties alone, especially when the path takes a sudden change from our planned direction. God will be with us even in our disappointments and failures. The magi traveled with each other towards their goal and we have each other---- and more, for Matthew’s gospel is about “God with us” all the way---until we are safely home.

We are not a stationary people. As trustful travelers, we have left much behind—old securities and accustomed patterns of living. Perhaps, like the magi, we had hints of something better waiting for us at the end of the road and so we set off on a quest. What we left did not seem as valuable as what we were looking for—we set off as seekers. So much has shifted in our lives. Now, in the midst of change and movement we ask, where is our true home? Our true home is with God, even now on the road, in the midst of our travel. We celebrate this Christmas season that God saw us humans set in sin and ways of living that were dividing us from one another. So, God too set out on a journey. God came out looking for us and invited us to walk in the steps Jesus has trod and taught us to follow. We have accepted that invitation and we know Jesus’ path is a way home for us.

We are about to land. My fellow passengers and I have been given instructions how to prepare for the plane’s setting down in Atlanta. I am about to follow the directions about stowing things away, returning my seat to “a full and upright position,” turning off my computer, making sure my seat belt is fastened, etc. After doing all I can, I know the reality is that I am not in charge and I surrender my safety into the hands of those who know an infinite amount more than I about landing planes safely. I do that in life too. I do the best I can, try to follow good guidelines, take necessary precautions so that I don’t “crash”—but then I come to the point where I realize that at the heart of it all, I am not in control. I try to surrender daily to the one Matthew reassures me has my best welfare at heart and will see to my getting home safely-- just like the magi did.

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Robert P. Waznak, S.S., *LIKE FRESH BREAD: SUNDAY HOMILIES IN THE PARISH*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1993)

A fine collection of homilies from a gifted preacher and teacher of homilectics at

the Washington Theological Union. The homilies show contemporary sensitivity, humor, imagination and liturgical awareness. They scan the liturgical year and include some homilies for special feasts and occasions.

#### QUOTABLE

(This quote is about Christmas, but it is easily applicable to what has been said above.)

“The feast of Christmas touches our hearts and makes us dream, because it is a celebration of God’s homecoming. ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.’ This is the wild and wonderful meaning of Christmas: God abandons heaven and comes into our home: Our home, where life is never perfect, where people are often hurting and fearful of returning love, where even the most cherished religious rituals become empty at times. But those who believe in God know that God comes to us in the most unexpected ways, in the most unexpected people. Those who believe in God know that when they open the door to the unseen guest, they become ‘children of God.’”

—from a homily by Robert P. Waznak, S.S. (p. 44)

#### JUSTICE NOTES

It is no less mistaken to think that we may immerse ourselves in earthly activities as if these latter were utterly foreign to religion, and religion were nothing more than the fulfilment of acts of worship and the observance of a few moral obligations.

One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and their day-to-day conduct. As far back as the Old Testament the prophets vehemently denounced this scandal, and in the New Testament Christ himself even more forcibly threatened it with severe punishment.

Let there, then, be no such pernicious opposition between professional and social activity on the one hand and religious life on the other. Christians who shirk their temporal duties shirk their duties towards their neighbor, neglect God himself, and endanger their eternal salvation.

----The Church in the Modern World, (#43)

#### POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up

next—it's time for his execution.””

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

Michael Braxton #0043529 (On death row since 11/21/97)

Jimmie Lawrence #0597164 (12/11/97)

John Williams #0599379 (3/5/98)

----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

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