

First Impressions HOLY THURSDAY

Exodus 12: 1-8, 11-14 Psalm 116 1Cor. 11: 23-26 John 13: 1-15

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

When I was a boy I used to watch professional wrestling matches on a black and white television with my grandfather. The other night I came across a wrestling match as I was flipping through the channels and I paused and recalled those boyhood memories. I was struck by how much professional wrestling has changed since I was a boy. Now it's in full color and with great spectacle. When the wrestlers for a match are announced they come down a long ramp, illuminated by spotlights, flashing strobe lights and fireworks. There's dramatic music too, lots of trumpets and drums. Quite a change from what I remembered.

But in other ways the past and present bouts are similar. You can still tell from the wrestlers' appearances and mannerisms who the heroes and villains are. The crowds know immediately who the "good guys" and "bad guys" are—and these days the wrestlers are just as likely to be women. They cheer and boo for their favorites. When the match starts, at first the hero is beaten up, or so it seems—it still looks phony. Then, as if by divine intervention, he or she gets up from the mat, gathers strength and proceeds to wallop the villain. From out of nowhere, it seems, the weakened hero has been given a gift of new life and power to overwhelm the villain. Of course, it is all drama and pretense. (I was told once there is a drama school in Manhattan for wrestlers to perfect their acting technique.) When the victim hero got up to stride forward to finish off the rival, my grandfather and I would say, "Oh, oh, here it comes!"

The wrestling match comes to mind because of today's gospel. Throughout John's gospel Jesus has been doing battle against evil and death. It has been a wrestling match; not the fake television kind, but a life and death struggle against very real and powerful opponents. He has confronted sin and death in the surrounding world and also in the resistance of the religious leaders to his message. Death's powers have come close to him. For example, two weeks ago many of us heard the Lazarus story. We watched Jesus weep at his friend's tomb as he confronted death's power to inflict pain and loss among those he loved—and to himself as well.

In today's gospel John says that Jesus, "was fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power..." Then we are told that Jesus "rose from supper." I remember those television matches and I wonder, is this going to be one of those, "Oh, oh, here it comes" moments? Will Jesus use the power he has been given to overcome his enemies? Will he name and condemn his betrayer? Will he smite the Roman army? Dash over to the Temple and cast out his religious opponents and banish the unfaithful? Will he break his previous pattern of patiently instructing his disciples, dismiss them and go get a better and brighter crop of followers? What will Jesus do when he rises from table with all that power available to him.

Well, he certainly surprised his disciples. And he continues to surprise us this day. Jesus rises and washes his disciples' feet. That's not how they or we would use all the power, were it available to us. How do we know? Because it isn't the way power is usually used in our world: nations dominate nations; one ethnic group purges its rival; one religion proclaims its dominance over others; some parents, by word and example, teach their children to succeed at any cost; some church officials cut off dialogue over disputed issues; news commentators shout down one another on talk shows; businesses take over weaker rivals, etc. It does seem that when some nations, organizations, religions and individuals come to power, other groups must shudder and say, "Oh, oh, here it comes!" —and suffer the consequences. Having power is not necessarily a bad thing and Jesus' life and today's gospel are examples of ways to use power to the benefit and for the good of others. His use of power is also an example to us.

I have friends who belong to a mediation group. They use the term "practice" to refer to their daily meditative exercise. So, they schedule into their day a half hour meditation each morning and evening. It's their "practice" and they have been doing it regularly for some years. They try to support this "practice" by other disciplines. They play meditative music in their home; occasionally join group meditative sittings; read books about meditation, etc. In other words, they feed their basic practice with an appropriate life style. But while they may change routines and what they do the rest of the day, they stay faithful to their meditation schedule. It is their basic "practice."

Notice the word they use---"practice." It takes the perfectionist pressure off what

they do, they don't have to do it perfectly. They can be patient and tolerant when they let things slip or they don't feel a meditation went as they had hoped. They can say, "I am no expert, I am just a beginner. I just practice, maybe I'll get it right some day. Someday it will be easier and better---right now I practice."

There are a lot of levels of application in today's foot washing story. We are at Jesus' last supper with his disciples and so we think of the Eucharist. The other three gospels already have the account of the institution of the Eucharist, so John doesn't have to repeat that. Instead, he narrates the washing of the feet and in doing that, links it to the Eucharist. From now on, disciples cannot think of the Eucharist without Jesus' example and instruction to us, his disciples, about the washing of feet. After he washes their feet Jesus tells his disciples, "...you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

Before we get too work-oriented and think about what we must do, let's reflect on what the washing means for us. First of all, it reminds us that we are recipients. In washing his disciples' feet, Jesus has acted as the lowly servant, given his life in service for others. As a church, we are who we are because of Jesus' offering of himself. The washing reminds us that our baptism unites us to Jesus and his death. He has gained life for us, something we couldn't do on our own. Our washing, our baptism, is what puts us in touch with that life, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me." Now, with that new life, we hear Jesus' instruction, "As I have done for you, you should also do." So, we too are called to lay down our lives in service to others —and we set about practicing the life we have received. We learn our "practice" from him. And of course, as with any other "practice," we probably won't get it perfect, but we will keep at it.

Eucharist is our most basic "practice" for Jesus' disciples; it is the center of our spirituality and is what we regularly return to. It is not only that we attend Eucharist, but, because of the foot washing, we try to put it into practice by serving the needs of others. We try to act towards the world as Jesus acted towards us, by being his faithful witness and serving others, even to the point of giving our lives. Have we gotten it perfect yet? No. That's why we return to Eucharist and that's why we keep practicing in our daily lives what we have learned at Eucharist.

PRAYERS FOR PREACHERS

(I recently asked readers to submit prayers for preachers. If you have one, send it to Judeop@Juno.com. I am sure other preachers will appreciate it.)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today to in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.

-----St. Thomas More

(submitted by Dave Mercer, St. Lucy Church Campbell, CA, who suggested this prayer could be applicable to preachers)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

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:.....

Lawrence E. Peterson #0320825 (On death row since 12/12/96)

Henry L. Wallace #0422350 (1/29/97)

Terrence Taylor #0539901 (2/18/97)

---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 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

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<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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