

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2ND SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 2: 42-47 -47 Psalm 118 1 Peter 1: 3-9 John 20: 19-31
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

As I look ahead at the readings for the upcoming Sundays, I notice that right up to Pentecost Sunday in mid-May the first readings are from the Acts of the Apostles. So many appearances of Acts, yet I wonder when we last reflected or preached from this book? Why not dedicate at least one of these Sunday preachings to this important second book of Luke? I hope the following helps us do that.

We notice as we read the selections from Acts over these Sundays, that the early community was unique and their life challenges us to this day. It was an inclusive community that fulfilled Isaiah’s vision (chapter 56) of a renewed Israel in which all were welcome---foreigners, outcasts, women, poor, etc. As the prophets foretold, justice would characterize their community; all, rich and poor, would share their goods and they would eat together in a new age as members of a whole new life. Here in the community are the first signs of a new rule of life, the beginning of a new reign. How could a community that believed in the resurrection live in any other way? Today’s passage shows that at their table and prayers, as well as in the rest of daily life, community life was practiced (v. 42).

The word “koinonia” (communion/community) appears a lot in Acts. The early believers strove to get others to join them through their initiation rite of baptism. The frequent use of “koinonia” throughout Acts shows how much they valued their unity. Despite their many differences, the Spirit they received bound them together as a community. They valued staying together as a community and doing what they had to for their members. “All who believed were together and had all things in common....” Raymond Brown, for one, believes this communal sharing to be an exaggeration, but that some sharing of goods was indeed likely for a group of Jewish converts who believed the end was near and in the light of that, all wealth had lost its meaning.

In the Acts community the powerless are empowered. Remember, on the day of Pentecost, the first members were easily spotted as Galileans, “These people who are talking like this are Galileans!” (2:7) The Galileans were religious and social lower-class people in the eyes of the institutional religion of Jerusalem. Yet, it is

these very Galileans who manifested the gifts of the Holy Spirit and boldly preached to the more sophisticated and learned religious leaders. The whole world has been turned upside down and this resurrection community manifests how extensive the change is---the outsiders are in and the usual insiders are out.

Reading on further in Acts will reveal that the community's faithful witness to what God has done in Jesus will arouse persecution. Nevertheless, despite the strong opposition they meet, the community will experience rapid growth. Their community life, even as it faced hostility from the establishment, attracted others to join them. Periodically Luke will pause in his account, as he does today, to give an update on the growth of the early church (E.g. 2: 41, 47; 6:7). Members of this community came to experience that Christ had not left them, for the apostles were performing the same wonderful works and preaching Jesus had in his lifetime ("...many wonders and signs were done through the apostles."). We are told that the community broke bread in their homes. They weren't just being nostalgic, looking back on a remembered Jesus. Instead, these were celebrations of the Risen Christ at their table and the renewal of his vision filling them with hope that someday they (we) would eat together at the heavenly banquet.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles is a bit idyllic, but it does show what daily life might look like in a community whose faith has been engendered by the Resurrection. The community is closely knit, shares its goods and talents and worships together. The apostles continue the work of Jesus as they perform "many wonders and signs." I think we preachers make a common mistake of comparing the early Christian community, based on readings like this one, with our contemporary experience of community. Perhaps Luke is writing this idyllic description to stir his community and us to work harder at our Christian community life. It's as if he is saying, "here is an ideal, let's see if we live up to it." I just wouldn't place a guilt trip on the contemporary hearers by suggesting, "See how good they were then and how far short of the early Church we fall." If these early Christians were humans, then they had the same problems we do. Perhaps our second reading from I Peter is more realistic as it praises God for the faith we have and the hope that draws its life from the resurrection of Jesus. But the writer also names the paradox that, with such peace and joy, is also persecution.

The readings these Sundays from Acts announce, through the words and deeds of the disciples, that the Reign of God has dawned. Either we are its members or we are not. Either we take the side of the outcasts, the eunuchs, Galileans, Gentiles and other social rejects or we take the side of the old order and deny the Resurrection, which we may have affirmed verbally, but not in fact. Do we stand with "the blasphemer Stephen" or are we with the civil religion of our country? Barriers fall in the light of the Risen One and Acts shows this by showing a mixed group of people united by their baptism and the gift of the Spirit.

The ideal that Acts poses to us does require we make an inventory of our own situation in our church, both on a local and international scene. How are we like or unlike the community in Acts? Are the poor, uneducated, ill, disabled, unemployed, at home among us? Do some people come to church for years and never feel like they really belong? Some people say the hour in church on Sunday is the most segregated time of the week. Do minorities, refugees, and others feel a part of us? Are people in nearby prisons, hospitals and jails visited by our faithful?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Hessel, Dieter T., ed. Social Themes of the Christian Year: A Commentary on the Lectionary. Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1983.

This book looks at the Lectionary, the seasons and assigned readings from the perspective of social analysis. Its essays, by a variety of writers, offer the perspective of the poor and marginalized in interpreting the readings and seasons

QUOTABLE

“Resurrection does not simply spell the survival of the soul but requires the transformation of the world as we know it.”

—Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, in “Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet”.
Quoted in “The Living Pulpit”, Jan-March, 1998.

JUSTICE NOTES

Dominican Sisters of Hope Speak Out Against the Death Penalty

On Ash Wednesday, February 13, 2002, the Dominican Sisters of Hope release the following Corporate Stance Against the Death Penalty. This corporate stance is the result of more than a year of prayerful reflection and study by their membership on the issue of capital punishment. The sisters will continue to study and work in a variety of ways for the repeal of the death penalty.

Corporate Stance Against the Death Penalty

We, the Dominican Sisters of Hope, declare our opposition to the death penalty. We do not believe it is a means for dispensing justice or a deterrent to future criminal acts.

We attest that individual action is good and indispensable, but it is not adequate to the challenge of world issues which involve human rights.

We corporately take this stance, choosing life over death, because of our belief in the dignity of the human person and our belief in the possibility of individual transformation.

We are conscious that this stance is made in the 25th anniversary year of the reinstatement of the death penalty in the United States.

As women of faith, we give our lives to imitating the compassion of Jesus whose forgiveness instilled hope into the lives of the people he encountered. Although we grieve with those who have lost loved ones through violence, we refuse to give momentum to the rhythm of revenge.

The Dominican Sisters of Hope were founded in 1995 and serve in 33 dioceses in 19 states and Puerto Rico. Their ministries include education at all levels, health care, spiritual renewal, parish and pastoral work.

Donna Brunell, OP Email: dbrunell@ophope.org Dominican Sisters of Hope

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

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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