

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 3rd SUNDAY OF EASTER (A)
Acts 2: 14,22-33 Psalm 16 1 Peter 1: 17-21 Luke 24: 13-35
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The church has always struggled with dark forces that threaten to destroy it from within and crush it from without. Perhaps one of the darkest of these forces in our times are those which dismiss the church as hopelessly outdated or naive and not worth serious attention by “modern” people. And of course there is the contemporary pain caused by clergy abuse, the long-term damage done to innocents and their families and the pain all this has caused in our church.) There were powerful forces that threatened the early church in Luke’s time. His community struggled with its own Jewish Christian members who insisted that all should practice the strict observances of their former religion. The argument went as follows: if the church is the new Israel then the observances of the former religion should apply to all Christians. This controversy threatened to fragment the still nascent church.

There were external forces as well. Luke wrote from Antioch, where the church faced harassment from a hostile pluralistic Syrian population. There were also Jewish religious leaders who resisted the interpretation of Jesus as the messianic fulfillment of the prophetic promises. How fragile this young church must have felt as it tried to deal with both internal and external tensions that could destroy it. Luke wrote this gospel with these pressures in mind. In today’s account, the disciples voice an urgent plea that not only applied to Luke’s early readers but could also be our own prayer: “Stay with us, it is almost evening and the day is almost over.” Another translation says, “it is almost dark”---doesn’t that suggest they were talking about more than the time of day? Luke is telling today’s story in a way that will show both the community and individual believers under stress how Jesus does stay with us as we journey. When our talk along the way is disheartening and the news of the resurrection feels like just a rumor, Luke encourages us to meet the resurrected Christ in Word and Sacrament.

Notice how Luke tells the story. What prevented the disciples from recognizing Jesus? The passage makes it sound as if some external forces were at work, “their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.” Perhaps the outside forces do make it

hard to see Christ. But this is also a biblical way of saying that they were blind to what was really going on. They didn't get it; they were spiritually obtuse. They lacked faith. When death wrenches a beloved from us; projects fail and dreams must be put aside; when we must make changes in our lives because family needs demand it; when we get clues of our approaching end because of failing health or old age ---we too can feel as if we are on a long, lonely road away from what was familiar, going towards what feels very dark and unknown. At these times Jesus can sound like a distant rumor, more a phantasm created by our need than a real person walking the same road we are walking.

Today's gospel account has a very familiar beginning---disciples are caught by surprise by the risen Lord. Well, who could blame them! There is something very different about Jesus in these resurrection stories. Mary didn't immediately recognize him either in the garden. Add to that the confusing details in the stories--was there a man or angels at the empty tomb? Where did Jesus appear to his disciples, in Galilee or Jerusalem? Some people point to these discrepancies as proofs that these stories were fabricated. But the early witnesses weren't dumb; they could detect the variations in the stories just as easily as we. Biblical commentators argue that the accounts were passed down by word of mouth and discrepancies developed. What really mattered to the Christian community was their experience of the resurrected Christ. The accounts of the witnesses may vary in detail; but what the early church remembered and what nourished their faith was the conviction of those who saw, spoke and shared a meal with the risen Lord. These personal accounts were saved for us, as we heard in last week's account from John, so that we might believe, "these [signs] are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name."

The two on the Emmaus road have left Jerusalem after Jesus' bloody Passover death. They heard about the women's report and Peter's account of the empty tomb (24: 1-10); but there wasn't enough evidence to convince them and so they depart for home. On their morose journey they meet a stranger; perhaps they assume he is a pilgrim returning from Jerusalem. We know from other resurrection accounts that Jesus' appearance has changed. Those who knew him in another way as a healer, preacher, teacher or even as a friend, now do not recognize him. He has changed significantly. It seems mere human logic and reckoning cannot come to "see" him. These alone can prevent people from

“recognizing him.” Jesus is definitely transformed; we will have to see in another way. The story also tells us in our day that having been there, back then, was no guarantee of “seeing” the resurrected Jesus. Those closest to him did not or were slow to believe. Something more was needed for sight and so Jesus, as usual, comes to help us and leads us to seeing. He does this by first opening the scriptures.

From my experience of preaching parish retreats, there has been a growth in knowledge of the scriptures among us Catholics. One recent parish had 30 small faith communities meeting regularly to share the scriptures and their faith journey. It seemed to me that people in these communities had experienced a real growth in their faith. Hard working staff had organized the groups, trained leaders and designed programs for them believing that Christ would be discovered in the Word. In these gatherings all present had some past or present issue of darkness and doubt. By providing opportunities to reflect in small groups on the scripture they could meet the risen Lord in what they heard. Some in present distress, like the disciples, had seen hopes dashed (“we were hoping”). These could be aided by others at a less stressful place on their journey. Those who had passed through trials and had come to a deeper or new “sighting” of Jesus in their lives could help others who were still stumbling or in a searching stage. It is no exaggeration to say that there were witnesses to the resurrected Christ in this parish who had met him illumined by the Word that was shared in these groups. They could say, “were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?”

In effect, the parish staffs provided the beginnings of an Emmaus experience; people on a journey were given an opportunity to hear the Word and then be prepared to recognize Christ in their daily lives and at Sunday worship when the bread was broken. The preacher might want to encourage people to participate in such groups or attend bible study classes which can begin the process of opening the Word---a process that can remove the obstacles that prevent our eyes from seeing the resurrected Christ in our daily lives.

The eye-opening moment happen while the Emmaus disciples are at table. Luke describes this meal in the way he has already described the multiplication of the loaves (9:16) and the Last Supper (22:19). Jesus blesses, breaks and gives the bread to the disciples. The “breaking of the bread” was the early Christian name

for the Eucharist and no believing reader would miss the broad hint. The scriptures burned in their hearts when the “stranger” interpreted them. He showed how the scriptures spoke to the suffering that had happened to Jesus and them in Jerusalem. What they had experienced as disaster and dashed hopes, God had used to bring about their salvation. Jesus used the scriptures to address their lives and show how God, who may have seemed absent to them, was in fact very close. Not a bad description of what the preacher’s task is: show God active and present in our lives by opening to us the scriptures.

QUOTABLE

“Attentive listening to the Scriptures and to the people is, in essence, a form of prayer, perhaps the form of prayer most appropriate to the spirituality of the priest and preacher. There is nothing more essential than prayerful listening for effective preaching, a praying over the texts which seeks the light and fire of the Holy Spirit to kindle the *now* meaning in our hearts. A week of daily meditation on the readings of the following Sunday is not too much to spend in preparation for the preaching we are called to do on the Lord’s Day. Such regular preparation will allow us not only to savor the word in Prayer but also to incorporate the experiences of a full week into our preparation.”

---FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING: THE HOMILY IN THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

JUSTICE NOTES

Here is the way the parish of the Sacred Heart in Salinas, California summarized “Catholic Justice Principles.” These were listed in the parish’s specially designed Lenten prayer booklet. Every person, at each stage of life, is an image of God and deserves respect.

1. Every person has rights: life, security, food, shelter, worship, education, decent work and wage, rest.
2. Creating a just society--where all receive their rights--is the obligation of every person.
3. Victims of gross injustice deserve our first attention.
4. We promote justice best when we act in solidarity: with others instead of for.
5. Society, government and the economy are for the good of people--not the other way around.

6. We are stewards of God's creation, not owners.

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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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