

“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:

Our Acts reading today picks up immediately after Pentecost. Peter addresses his Jewish audience about the risen Jesus. Pentecost has enabled Peter to find his tongue. Remember, when Jesus was arrested?... Peter denied Jesus and left the scene during Jesus’ passion. Now that Christ is risen and has given the disciples his Spirit, Peter is a transformed man. And quite a change it is! He knows just how to begin speaking to them, “Let this be known to you and LISTEN to my words....You who are Israelites, HEAR these words.” Peter is touching into the primary religious duty of the people of Israel... to listen to God’s Word and to follow it. Before Moses gave them the ten commandments he said, “Hear, O Israel,...” (Dt. 5: 1). Later Moses gives the “Great Commandment”, “HEAR, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Therefore, you shall love the Lord, our God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Dt. 6:4-6). The first act of turning towards God is to be a listener. Since God has taken the initiative and addressed the people; we must turn in God’s direction and open our ears (and eyes) to hear what God has said.

God had seen the condition of the people in slavery and spoken to Moses, instructing him to lead the people out. Through Moses, God continued to speak the people and guide them through the desert. When Peter speaks of the patriarch David, he names him a “prophet,” again stressing the need to listen to one who spoke for God. Peter is inviting his listeners to remember that they are first of all, listeners, even before they are doers. We too must listen to the Good News about God’s mighty deeds on our behalf and then respond by transformed lives. So, Peter calls on the people to follow in the best tradition of their ancestors and become listeners to what God is saying to them.

Now that he has their attention, what does Peter say to them—and to us who are listening in? He proclaims the Good News they had longed to hear: Jesus, who was from God, performed mighty deeds for them, was delivered into “lawless” hands and put to death. That they knew; but it is not the end of the story, for throughout Israel’s history, many prophets were killed. In the middle of his speech

Peter comes to the all-important--- BUT--- and then we hear how God entered the tragedy and turned it around, “But God raised him up.”

Jesus’ enemies seemed to triumph, for his death marked his life as a failure; he went down in defeat. But God stepped in to raise him up and fulfill God’s purposes. Peter backs up this proclamation by quoting Psalm 16, the Davidic prayer which expresses that after death, God will not abandon the just one to the “netherworld.” Peter announces that Jesus is the truly faithful one rescued from death for us. As with the ancient Israelites in slavery, God has not been distant or callous to our need.

In myriad ways death seems to triumph over us. In its many guises, death takes the upper hand. We lose those we love and we also know, as hard as we try, we cannot shake the approach of our own deaths. Death has entered the cross section of our lives: we have seen some of our best efforts and projects fail; our bright hopes for ourselves, or others, dim; have felt the seeming unrelenting grip of death over our nobler efforts to bring about equality, promote peace, end poverty; we have watched the current war drag on, etc. At times it does feel that death is winning the wrestling match and our powers feel puny in death’s shadow.

That’s probably how those two disciples on the road to Emmaus felt as they trudged away for Jerusalem after Jesus’ awful death. They express their shattered dreams to the Stranger on the road in the poignant line, “But we were hoping....” Who among us hasn’t, at one time or another, started a sentence that way? “But we were hoping to build a retirement home and then my wife died.” “But we were hoping the treatment program would work, but our son is back on drugs.” “But we were hoping to bring peace and democracy to Iraq, but now it seems so impossible.” “But we were hoping our education program for kids-at-risk would create a different future for them, but now the state has cut back on funds.” We use “but” in these situations to begin a sentence of discouragement, failed efforts and shattered dreams. “But we were hoping.....”

But...we hear the echo of Peter’s voice from Acts reminding us that God also has something to say. We are in Peter’s audience listening in. “But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death.” And thankfully, releasing us too! There is that “BUT” again—God injects life where there was a downward spiral and where death seemed to have won another victory over life—and our hopes.

So, we join the down-hearted disciples who have opted to exit Jerusalem, the scene of so much suffering and dashed dreams. Jesus joins them and exhibits the best Israelite behavior: he becomes a listener. He lets the two travelers voice their bitter disappointment about how the dreams they had for themselves, and the nation have gone sour. “But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel.”

These resurrection experiences have a similar detail; Jesus’ followers don’t recognize him. It takes time for them to let go of their past experiences with him, especially of the last time they saw him, when he was in Roman hands and hung on a Roman cross. As with the disciples, so with us. We come out of the past slowly and need to let go of our expectations for how God will be in our lives. We need to grow more deeply aware of the love God is offering us and the free gift of forgiveness we have been given. We must be patient with the seeming-slow pace of our relationship with God. Patience is not an easily-developed virtue in our high-speed internet world. So, we too may have multiple reasons for discouragement as we trudge along.

The disciples to Emmaus have closed the door on their recent experiences. They are saying: we hoped Jesus was of God and would lead Israel out of its physical and spiritual bondage—but we were wrong. They are stuck in the past and do not see the life that is available to them. What will help them? They, like good Israelites, must now become listeners and hear God’s Word as Jesus correctly interprets it for them. This Word will be the corrective lens through which they re-look at all that has just happened. In one way, nothing has changed; The One they hoped would be the messiah was “sentenced to death and crucified.” But when Jesus opens the Word for them and helps them see what they had missed and how God was redeeming Israel beyond their hopes and preconceptions. The resurrected Jesus was present to the listening disciples as he is with us, each time we voice our disappointments and yet still gather to hear the Word proclaimed in our assembly.

The resurrected Christ will be with the disciples and continue to free them from the past in the breaking of the bread. Each time they gather around table with one another and break bread in his name, forgiveness will be theirs and hope will be reawakened, for once again they will hear, “BUT God raised him up....” Through this lovely story Luke is helping our community hear and see Jesus’ presence on the road we travel together. Individually and communally, we pass through many terrains in our lifetimes, but this story helps us hear and see that the risen One

continues to be with us.

Like the disciples we walk away from Jerusalem. We want out of the place of suffering and the costs of being disciples. Yet, a significant part of Luke's gospel has been Jesus' journey with his disciples to Jerusalem, (starting at 9:51 ff.) ----not away from it. Along the way he explains to them that in Jerusalem he will suffer and if they want to be his disciples, they too must take up the cross and follow him. The two on the road have forgotten his message and are leaving Jerusalem and the pain that may befall them as Jesus' followers. The pain they have witnessed has blinded them to God's sustaining presence in Jesus' suffering. Having listened to Jesus' reinterpretation of those events they are ready to have "their eyes...opened" and recognize him in the breaking of the bread. As David promised, God had not abandoned God's faithful servants.

There are numerous responses we might make to the Emmaus story, but one that strikes me is that we not brush aside the stranger we meet on our journey. While I prefer the reassurance of familiar faces with me as I travel through new territory in my life, I need to remember that the stranger I meet along the way might have a revelation for me about myself, the surrounding world and indeed, about God. The very person I feel most apart or different from may be the one with an eye-opening word for me. The ones I feel initially repulsed but may, through words or actions, gift me with unexpected yet timely wisdom.

In our world we often reject the outsider, newcomer and the different. We separate ourselves too facilely according to race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic status, class, religion, etc. But we learn from today's gospel to be attentive listeners. One never knows when riches will be given us in something as ordinary as a stranger's voice and broken bread. Luke begins the section where their eyes were opened with, "And it happened...." It sounds like the way we describe mere happenstance; as if an ordinary event surprised them. So, it is as if by chance, frequently in surprising and unexpected ones, Christ appears to speak to us and nourishes us on our arduous journey. In front of the produce stand at the supermarket we meet someone and start to chat, and they say something that has us pondering for weeks afterwards. It's just as Luke said in this story, "keep your eyes and ears open on the road, you just never know...."

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

John Shea, *GOSPEL LIGHT: JESUS STORIES FOR SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998.) ISBN0-8245-1709-1, Paper.

Shows how to get spiritual consciousness through the teachings of Jesus. First he presents a method for interpreting gospel stories (good material here for a preaching method) and then gives an example of his method by reflecting on six gospel stories. As usual, Shea is insightful and the stories he tells along the way are great!

QUOTABLE

(about the Emmaus story)

Jesus always walks further. He outdistances his followers. However, once you ask him to stay, he immediately replies. This is because the invitation to remain shows an openness to him. What he has already told you is fascinating enough to want more. Both Jesus and his Father never refuse an invitation. The reason the two have asked him to remain is that “evening is near, and the day is nearly over.” In other words, it is time to eat, and this has always been a special moment for Jesus. He characterized himself as bread. So, when people are hungry, he is eager to be with them. There is very little doubt about what he will do at supper.

-----John Shea, page 174.

JUSTICE NOTES

A...strand of biblical teaching is that God desires equitable distribution of material resources. The widening gap between rich and poor is a contradiction of kingdom values and an abomination to God. To reverse the natural process of the rich getting richer and the poor poorer,

God delights in exalting the poor and humble and casting down the rich and proud.

In the words of the Magnificat:

[God] has brought down the rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

[God] has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:52-53)

The biblical mandate for equity is not to be understood as demanding that everyone has exactly the same amount of money, land, possessions, or resources. Rather, equitable distribution means that no one has an abundance at the expense of those who have less than what they need. God desires equity, that the scripture might be fulfilled: “[The one] that gathered much did not have too much, and [the one] who gathered little did not have too little.” (2 Cor 8:15. Quoting Exodus 16:8)

—Michael J. Christensen, THE LIVING PULPIT, October-December 2004, page 12.

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:.....

Mark Squires #0682233 (On death row since 5/17/00)

Christina Walters #0626944 (7/6/00)

Paul A Brown #0051026 (8/11/00)

-----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

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

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email:

FrJude@JudeOP.org