

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4th SUNDAY OF EASTER (A)
Acts 2: 14a, 36-41 Psalm 23 1 Peter 2: 20b,-25 John 10: 1-10
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I am only a city boy by birth. I could tell you about street games like stick ball and kick the can; I know nothing about sheep. But for a week I was watching them in a pasture across the road from the small northern California church where I was preaching during Holy Week. I noticed that the sheep tended to clump together while they grazed. Though some, preoccupied in their munching and the attractions of lush Spring-green grass in other parts of the pasture, did wander off by themselves. Late in the week I saw the shepherd enter the enclosed field to take them to another pasture. He went behind them and used shouts and whistles to round them up. He started with the stragglers who were furthest from the rest and eventually got them all together and through the gate. They must have recognized the shepherd because they didn't get skittish when he entered the pasture. Whereas, earlier in the week, when I crossed the road to get a closer look at them, they shifted further away from where I was standing. They seemed to be watching me wearily out of the corner of their eye as they grazed.

In Jesus' time sheep were very precious. People's lives depended on their sheep for food and clothing for their families. The importance of sheep were instilled at a young age, for children were raised alongside sheep and while still young, went out with the sheep and quickly learned to care for them. No one would send an irresponsible person out to be a shepherd. If something happened to a sheep the shepherd had to bring back proof that the shepherd wasn't to blame. Because of the sheep's value to the family and community a shepherd was expected to fight off attacking animals and thieves, even at the risk of his/her life. This dependency on the sheep and the dedication to them form some of the background to Jesus' speech about being the shepherd. The sheep are valued, and the shepherd will not let them perish.

I can't help but compare what I observed the shepherd doing across the road and Jesus' description of how he shepherds us. Unlike the shepherd I observed, Jesus doesn't walk behind, but rather in front of the flock, talking to us as we move. From the beginning he walked out ahead and communicated with us: he walked

our life and as he did, spoke about a loving God--- all the way to his death. He has gone before us into death and has been resurrected. He hasn't stood in the rear to point out the way we should live; but has gone in front to show us how to live and even suffer in love for others. Now, along the path of our lives, he talks to us, revealing himself each stage of our journey. We listen to him today at this liturgy; we pay attention to him in prayer; we attend to what we hear from others—as we try to discern whether he is speaking to us through them. His words are meant to strengthen, guide and comfort us as we follow his life. All along our journey he pours out his Spirit to us, the Spirit that enables us to live his life, to “walk the walk and talk the talk.”

Notice that Jesus' audience is ambiguous, we are not certain whom Jesus is addressing. While the Pharisees are mentioned, they seem peripheral to what he is saying. By not being specific about the listeners, John is leaving us room to step into the stage and become listeners, hearing the message for ourselves— both as individuals and as a church. Thus, for example, the mention of the legitimacy and quality of the flock's leaders seems to address the most contemporary of modern church situations. Jesus wants reliable and good leaders for his flock, shepherds who, like him, will live exemplary lives and not be afraid to use their voices to guide those eager to listen to a good shepherd. We pray that, as the cardinals choose a new pope, they be attentive to the voice of the Shepherd who continues to lead his church on right paths.

Today's gospel has more “I Am” statement by Jesus. Remember others in John's gospel: “I am the way the truth and the life,” “I am the bread of life,” I am living water.” Today we hear him say twice, “I am the gate.” That's the second important image in today's passage, Jesus says he is both the shepherd and the gate. I guess we moderns would want more precision: is he the shepherd....is he the gate? Or is he the gatekeeper? How can he be all three? If we want a literal precision, we will be disappointed. Remember we are in John's gospel, and he is richly poetic, he defies our tendency to narrow his concepts. Let's just let the artist John present his images of Jesus and soak up the richness he presents us.

John's pastoral narrative was first addressed to a late first-century persecuted church. He is encouraging them and us to stay faithful to the shepherd who does not abandon us, but leads and speaks to us as we travel. We listen attentively to “recognize his voice.”

The sheepfold sounds like a snug place to be. It is protected from outside intruders. There is an enclosure, a gate and a gatekeeper who allows only the right shepherd in. When we are going through difficult and strained moments in our church these are comforting images. The bottom line is that we are not going to be abandoned, but the Shepherd, who gave his life for us, is with us even now—even in times of scandal when we realize some of our leadership did not use their voices to speak up about abuse. Things may seem bad, and many are downcast in our church community, but there is reassurance for us in today's pastoral images. The Shepherd is walking with us, has not given up on us, and will continue to speak guiding and strengthening words to the flock.

The sheep cannot hide out in their safe place. The shepherd leads the sheep to other pasture land, outside the sheepfold. Out there, they will find nourishment, but also risk. They might be snatched away or drawn aside by other voices. (And what family can't list offspring who have gone their own ways, not treasuring the Shepherd's voice that has lead us this far in our own lives of faith?) As attractive as it might be, we are not an enclosed, snug community in a bucolic pasture. Rather, we are out moving in less friendly and sometimes insecure surroundings. Voices call out to us from all directions and their message is appealing take care of yourself; don't inconvenience yourself for anyone else; seek your own comforts; protect your own interests etc. These messages are sometimes quite loud and explicit; at other times they sneak up on us and we find ourselves responding to them without much thought.

The "I Am" statements alert the listener that Jesus is saying something important. John tells us the Pharisees "did not realize what he was trying to say to them." It is as if John is cautioning us to pay attention and listen attentively lest we too miss the message or give into the other voices around us. There is a cacophony of sounds in the worlds in which we live, work, attend school, etc., and Jesus is urging us today to turn our ears to his words where we will find life. We offer a prayer to Jesus' Spirit hoping to be opened to the words Jesus has for us today. We also pray fervently that our cardinals be attentive to the voice of the One who wants to lead his faithful.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Craddock, Fred. PREACHING. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985.

An excellent basic preaching textbook by one of the major contemporary homiletician.

QUOTABLE

First Reading of the Text

This first reading is a spontaneous, even “naive” engagement with the text. All faculties of mind and heart are open, with no concern for what one ought to think, much less what one will say later in the sermon. This is the time to listen, think, feel, imagine and ask. All responses should be jotted down; do not trust the memory or take time to weigh the merits of your thought. This process is most enjoyable, but one should not be deceived by the pleasure; serious preparation has begun. And by all means, no other books or study aids are to be used at this point; they will have their chance later. Second, only to the fault of not doing adequate study is that of introducing into one’s preparation too soon the secondary resources. When used at the proper time they are indispensable, but if too early opened, they take over. They suppress and intimidate the preacher. After all, who is going to venture a thought or an interpretation when at the very same desk are six internationally known Bible scholars? They intrude themselves between the text and the preach and begin explaining everything. Some preachers who spend much time in study have confessed to having preached texts which they had not even read in the process of preparation.

-----Fred Craddock in PREACHING, pages 105-6.

JUSTICE NOTES

During his 26 years as leader of the Roman Catholic Church, the late Pope John Paul II frequently called for an end to the death penalty. Among his statements on this issue were the following:

"May the death penalty, an unworthy punishment still used in some countries, be abolished throughout the world." (Prayer at the Papal Mass at Regina Coeli Prison in Rome, July 9, 2000).

"A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must

never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary." (Homily at the Papal Mass in the Trans World Dome, St. Louis, Missouri, January 27, 1999).

----(from the Death Penalty Information Center, www.deathpenaltyinfo.org)

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:.....

Timothy L White #0434845 (On death row since 8/31/00)

Michael D. Holmes #0189289 (9/8/00)

Marcus D. Jones, Sr. #0217326 (11/9/00)

-----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.