

“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 want to take advantage of the readings from Acts we have had these weeks of Easter. They offer a rare opportunity to preach from this book. And so, that will be my focus for this weekend.

During the past weeks we have had some examples of powerful and varied New Testament preachers. First, there is Jesus; but also, John the Baptist at the Jordan; the woman at the well who brings the news about Jesus to her townsfolk (3rd Sunday of Lent); Mary of Magdala, who announces the news of the resurrected Christ, and Peter’s preaching on Pentecost (last Sunday and today’s readings from Acts). The effective preacher is blessed by the Spirit, as Peter was on this Pentecost. But the Spirit works beyond the preacher, stirring up a desire in the listeners to hear and respond to the preached word. And so, the crowds who heard Peter on this day didn’t just marvel at his eloquence or were impressed by his good ideas and intellectual depth. Those who heard Peter this day responded in quite a different way when Peter spoke of what God had done in Jesus. “What must we do, my brothers?” was their response. They heard and they were moved to make changes in their lives. Just in case we thought the Holy Spirit was just working in the apostles on that Pentecost, it is quite clear that the Spirit was moving freely in the hearts of the listeners. They very desire to change or respond to the Good News is a gift of the Spirit.

God’s Word doesn’t just give us information or “enlightenment.” It graces us with a word of forgiveness, and it also urges us to further and deepen our response to the Gospel. When we were baptized we entered into a lifelong process of conversion and growth. Each time we hear of the life God is offering us, the Spirit is at work within us urging us to respond again with one more step away from our former ways and one step towards God and God’s ways. The Acts of the Apostles was not just written to tell us about the first generation of Christians. It also tells us about how the Spirit is working in our present age. The Spirit is no less active today than it was on that first Pentecost when Peter preached this sermon. Trusting that the Spirit is working in our assembly today, as we hear the Word proclaimed, we might ask a similar question, “What must I do to respond to this Word?” Or, to

put it another way, “What must I STILL do?” When we have asked the question we might then listen to the promptings of the Spirit in us that will lead us towards a response.

The Acts is a book of wonder and praise as the first believers experience the Spirit at work through visible signs and interior promptings. Those who heard Peter realize they can no longer believe and act as they once did. They and we are living in a new age and this age is ruled over by Jesus, as Peter tells us, “made both Lord and Christ.” In accepting Peter’s message today, we too must make the changes in our lives that reflect the One whose rule we follow. Former ways must change as we proceed to enter more deeply into our baptized life with Jesus.

In this baptized community all the past norms by which society rates and ranks people are put aside. No one can claim special privilege because of race or nationality, for this God has made a new promise “to you and your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.” God has gifted us and acted freely on our behalf. I know a bright fourteen-year-old girl who is already wondering about what colleges she will apply to and what she will have to do in high school to get the attention of the college admission boards four years from now. High school students have to consider what they must do to qualify for the college of their choice. And college students have to consider what they must do in college to qualify for a good job after graduation. However, what got God’s attention towards us was God’s own predisposition to favor us---regardless of our merits. The Spirit is the gift we have received to change our lives. As we ask the question, “What must we do?” we are assured that the Spirit will also be there to help us make the necessary changes in our lives to more fully respond to God. With Peter’s hearers, we welcome this message.

“Repent,” Peter tells us today. We repent for fitting in so well with what he calls, “this corrupt generation.” We recommit ourselves, as we did at the Easter Vigil, to our baptismal promises. To help refresh our baptismal memory, let’s be more conscious as we leave the church today and sign ourselves with the water in the fonts. As we make the cross over our bodies, we say a silent prayer asking God to keep us faithful to the Gospel of Jesus and renew within us our baptismal calling to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

Sometimes a phrase appears in scripture that has been hallowed by use and time. It

is such an acceptable phrase that we don't even think to ask what its meaning for us might be. In the reading from Peter today such a phrase appears. "By his wounds you have been healed." We certainly have heard that before, but what do you think it means? Well, there are lots of applications, but it would challenge any preacher to focus on the reading from 1 Peter today and try to show what the phrase might mean. Perhaps a quote from an essay on the crucifixion will help: "By his wounds you have been healed."

"....we earthly pilgrims are burdened with a combination of physical vulnerability, moral frailty, sin, and the prospect of death. This describes our predicament as creatures who have inherited a world whose integrity is damaged by sin and sundered from its proper relation with its creator. We have no clear idea what to make of our situation.

Into this milieu comes Jesus of Nazareth, the charismatic preacher who revealed himself to be God's definitive prophet— God's own child. He shocked people by proclaiming God's mercy and forgiveness directly to all persons, regardless of race, class, tribe, or religion. He convinced many that he was from God by exercising divine power to change lost lives through healing and miracles. This is the Jesus who entered into the final drama of God's manifestation of redemptive love when he was nailed to the cross....

All our vague dread of our vulnerability, our fear of dying, our gnawing sense of our moral frailties, and our clear consciousness of our particular acts of injustice, cruelty and pettiness— all this becomes integrated in to the mystery described by Paul. We are saved.

The cross of Christ has taken up our mortality and our weakness. If we have faith in the one lifted up, we will find life, not death, beyond the pains and tragedy of the cross. Through this mystery of dying for us, Christ entered into life.

"Although he was [God's] son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him..." (Heb. 5: 8-9)

---- SEEING AND BELIEVING: IMAGES OF CHRISTIAN FAITH, by Frank Kacmarcik and Paul Philibert (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, page 69-70.)

Another example, I think it is from Henry Nouwen. (I got it from a commentary

on this passage, but I can't remember the source!) A psychiatrist had been struggling with a very difficult patient. "I've done everything I know how to do but you are still the same!" She sobbed and added, "I have failed to get through to you". From that moment, the patient began to show a dramatic improvement. She was moved by the depth of her therapist's love for her. The shared wounds of the healer and the afflicted person proved therapeutic to both. Healing for the soul can only come from the hand of those who have been wounded. We minister to the sickness of our society, not from a position of superiority, from above, but along side of and with.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

ALL SAINTS: DAILY REFLECTIONS ON SAINTS, PROPHETS, AND WITNESSES FOR OUR TIME, by Robert Ellsberg (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997.) Paper, 576 pages. \$19.95

Brief reflections for each day of the year on the lives of both Christian saints and holy ones of other faiths. Here are some fine examples of witnesses who have undergone life's trials and whose lives give us courage, inspiration and hope. Among others this book would be of help to the daily preacher's celebration of the saints.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

We can say with certainty that discrimination against women contradicts the will of Christ. We are painfully aware that sexism, defined as "unjust discrimination based on sex," is still present in some members of the Church. We reject sexism and pledge renewed efforts to guard against it in church teaching and practice. We further reject extreme positions on women's issues which impede dialogue and divide the Church. We commit ourselves to make sure that our words and actions express our belief in the equality of all women and men....

We are grateful, too, that many women possess leadership and organizational skills which, although often underutilized in the past, are now coming to the fore. We

urge pastors to recognize and to continue to call forth the distinct contributions that women can make to the Church and to the world. Diversity of gifts in the service of Christ is not to be feared or suppressed but recognized as a sign of the Church's vitality and ongoing renewal.....

Still, the face of the Church reveals the pain that many women experience. At times this pain results from the flawed behavior of human beings—clergy and lay—when we attempt to dominate each other. Women also experience pain because of persistent sexism. At times this sexism is unconscious, the result of inadequate reflection. A Church that is deepening its consciousness of itself. That is trying to project the image of Christ to the world, will understand the need for ongoing prayerful reflection in this area.

----from STRENGTHENING THE BONDS OF PEACE (A PASTORAL REFLECTION ON WOMEN IN THE CHURCH AND IN SOCIETY. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995

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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