

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 5th Sunday of Easter (A)
Acts 6: 1-7 Psalm 33 1 Peter 2: 4-9 John 14: 1-12
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I am aware of contrasts as I prepare these reflections. I feel like a split personality; I live in one liturgical period while I prepare these thoughts for a later. Usually, I ignore the contrast and project myself forward into the next season. So, for example, in Advent I found myself writing about the Epiphany readings. (I am told that the fashion industry does a similar split; showing winter clothes early in the summer.) Recently, rather than ignore the inconsistencies, I have deliberately tuned into them. What does it mean to reflect on the Passion narrative in “ordinary time,” or the Resurrection accounts in early Lent? So, permit me another blurring of the liturgical time line. Here it is... I am writing this 5th. Sunday of Easter reflection during a few hours of quiet at a Triduum retreat I am preaching in California. Today is Good Friday.

Of course it is Good Friday— world news continues to remind me that it is Good Friday and that the innocent continue to suffer and be exploited. A Dominican sister on the retreat just got back from El Salvador and describes the plight of the poor she visited there; *America* magazine reports that conditions in Guatemala are as bad as ever with military oppression and that at least 60,000 children under 5 are suffering from malnutrition; in Afghanistan parents are selling some of their children so they can afford food for the rest of their starving families. Of course it is Good Friday, even on the 5th. Sunday in the Easter season. Suicide bombings on Passover in Israel cause more slaughter and Israeli tanks are moving into Bethlehem. The children of Hagar and Ishmael and the children of Sarah and Isaac continue shedding innocent blood in an escalating atmosphere of atrocities. Good Friday is the name of each day of our world’s year. From this day’s perspective I listen to today’s gospel from John 14. Perhaps the people who designed the Lectionary and chose this reading had a similar feeling about Good Friday and Easter meshing. We have to keep our ears attuned to both suffering and new life if we are to experience the profound meaning of the Gospel.

Jesus is addressing his disciples; it is his Last Discourse. His tone and words convey a calm before the storm. Jesus is reflective, concerned and gentle as he instructs his disciples for the last time. He must give both them and the future

community (us) courage for what is immediately going to happen to them. He is like a parent who soothes the anxiety of his/her children by telling them, “There, there, everything is going to be alright.” What is going to happen to him will be painful, but in the long run, it will be for their benefit, for he goes to prepare a place for them. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”

I have often read this passage at the bed of a dying person or a funeral. It is very comforting to hear Jesus’ promise of a dwelling place for his disciples. A place with God is waiting us and the knowledge of that place of security with God is both comforting and encouraging. But in the theology of John’s gospel, what is promised and waiting for us--- has already begun. If Jesus has prepared a dwelling place for us, it is available to us now. His disciples do not live detached from the world, but are touched by it and face its challenges daily. We try to be a sign of Christ in a world that is tumultuous and often feels like a foreign land. Each of us has a special calling to live our unique lives in our family, job, school, and service to those in need. No two of us live in exactly the same way and so no two “dwelling places” are the same, for each of us has a special share in God’s life. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” Though we face confusion, ambiguity, struggle and challenge to our faith, we still dwell and share life with the divine. Jesus has not left us orphans on our own. By his death, resurrection and breathing of the Holy Spirit on us, Jesus has, in a manner of speaking, moved over and made room for us in God.

Thomas wants to know the traveling directions to where Jesus is going, “how can we know the way?” But Jesus is using “way” to mean his way of living. Jesus has, as he promised, returned to God, and has been “glorified.” He chose the way to God through suffering and death. The way others have rejected, Jesus chose as his and he invites his disciples to follow. His is the way of giving and sacrifice and because of what he did and who he is, we too can live his “way to the Father.” Believing in him and his way assures us that, in some real sense, we have already arrived into God’s presence. Though more is yet to come.

Jesus’ promise speaks to the itinerants among us---and we are all itinerants who have stopping-off places at various moments on life’s journey. We first live our lives with our parents, then we set out on our own. Many “stopping-off places” follow: we start a career or go to college, marry, have children, work out relationships, face the challenges of sickness and old age. Each stage of our lives

we carry much with us that life has given; both in blessing and injury. But each new moment also offers us another “dwelling place” where we experience the life of God for us and in which we receive help as we strive to live the “way” Jesus taught us. (“I am the way and the truth and the life.”) There are no guarantees in life---except that as we move through the changing landscape, we do so in Jesus’ assurance that we dwell with God. Jesus has gone ahead so that he can come back and take us to God---now.

So, it is Good Friday today. What “troubles” our hearts these days? One could easily wonder, as the disciples must have a couple days after their dinner with Jesus when the authorities were looking for them---- “So where is Jesus when we need him? Is he who he says he is? Why doesn’t he show himself and help us end the Good Friday sufferings in the world?” Like the disciples, we too can feel left behind trying to figure out the mess we are in and the seeming absence of God. These words of Jesus today assure us that God is not just up ahead waiting for us. We already dwell with God. That much is secure in our unstable world. In addition, anything we undertake to right the wrongs of our world, we do with the faith that God is up close to us---dwelling with us.

Have you noticed, as you read through the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, how frequently the number of new Christians is mentioned? Last week, "Three thousand were added to their number." Today another mention of growth is given, "The number of the disciples increased greatly...." I know we don't want to measure our success by numbers. The Gospel is not a popularity contest. The fact is, if we are faithful to the Gospel we may repel people; our history will bear this out by the death of our Founder and the innumerable martyrs who have died for the Gospel through the ages. Nevertheless, the early community had a great growth, and they saw it as a sign of Christ's working among them. The miracles he worked in his lifetime, Luke seems to be telling us, are continuing in the life of the early church. And that is attracting people, as they once were attracted to Jesus. The promised new order has begun, and the community is a sign of that new order.

One of the promises made in the Hebrew scriptures about the new order was that there would be no poor in the community established by God. All were to share in abundance. (Deut. 15: 4-5) When we celebrate Eucharist, we share in the abundance God has for us--- Christ, the great gift to the church. We eat the same food, without distinctions. There are to be no barriers in this community. Thus,

the dispute over the neglect of the widows of the Hellenists is settled so that no one is neglected. The "laying on of hands" when it appears in Acts, does not mean an ordination service as much as a call to special ministry, something of importance in the early church. The ones selected to care for the hungry are presented to the apostles to be prayed over and have hands imposed on them. That the poor be attended to then is important, not just a job assignment; God wills this ministry, and the early community is in agreement over its importance.

The preacher might address: the care of the needy in this parish community, it is a serious ministry and not just a peripheral job. Our community will increase if people see the signs of the living Christ in our midst; one such sign is the care of the hungry---the image of the "hungry widows"

The selection from 1 Peter today is an upbeat reading. There is enough to remind us of how far we still are from being the community Christ intends us to be: there is division in our ranks; scandal among our clergy; a comfortable life for many of us Christians of the first world; a neglect of the poor; an over-identification with our culture and its "isms", etc. But for today, Peter calls us to look at the dignity of our vocation. These post Easter readings help those newly baptized, and us "old timers," reflect on the dignity of our call and the community into which we have been baptized.

The author, possibly Peter himself, says we are a building that consists of "living stones." And more--these living stones, the baptized, are a "holy priesthood," offering "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." So, while not blind to who and what we still must become to truly be called the community of Christ's followers, here is a chance to celebrate the dignity and exalted calling of the congregation.

QUOTABLE

Attracted to temptations that encourage us to ignore Jesus Christ, our way, truth, and life, we engage in destructive behaviors resulting from our desire for power and acquisition. As preachers, we can help people prepare to hear the power of God's voice in those scriptures that urge us to resist immoral and unethical behaviors and to remain focused on the teachings of Jesus. Our preaching should

empower people to recognize their weaknesses, take ownership of their sins and addictions, and seek courage to find their own healing. Our preaching and pastoral care in combination should provide spiritual support to deal with struggles and help people continue on their journey of faith in community.

---Audrey Borschel in, *Theology of Preaching: Essays on Vision and Mission in the Pulpit*. Edited by Gregory Heille, OP. (London: Melisende, 2001), p. 71.

JUSTICE NOTES

Already, we are hearing the seductive script that avoids self-scrutiny. Already the rants of the politicians are equating strength with retaliation and vengeance, encouraging us to move from horror to anger to retaliation, and to the hollow reassurance that we are strong again. Yet in this moment, we share with millions around the world Scripture's unsettling truth: Our lives are as fragile as morning grass. We have no security apart from God--not in our weapons, our economic power, our possessions....

Too many North Americans have never fully opened their hearts to the suffering of the disenfranchised and oppressed in other parts of the world, believing those lives to be disconnected from our own. We deny the ways our history, national policies, and consumerism lend support to their suffering. We fail to consider how our arrogance might push people to levels of outrage, hatred, and despair that could one day ignite angrily in our unsuspecting lives as we go to work in the morning. If we have ever vowed nonviolence, thirsted for justice, or sought to live out Christ's gospel, this is a watershed moment. Can we learn from this pain? Can we find the strength to voice our grief, to practice reconciliation, to look at the hard lessons no one wants to hear--then dare to speak out?

May our broken hearts join us with weeping hearts around the world. May our slow healing emerge from our common cries to God, from the fragile, fibrous roots that interweave our lives in common soil, and from the wrenching pangs that will birth a new vision of compassion and peace.

---Dee Dee Risher, quoted in *The Living Pulpit*, January-March 2002, page 11.

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.