

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 8: 5-8, 14-17    1 Peter 3: 15-18    John 14: 15-21

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

As we track the activities of Philip, Peter and John today in our first reading, it looks as if the Acts of the Apostles is living up to its name. The three apostles are very busy proclaiming the risen Christ but something different is afoot as they reach out to the Samaritans. Raised in their religious tradition to consider Samaritans as outside the pale of God's grace, Philip, Peter and John are now sharing with them the most precious treasure they have—their fresh faith in the risen Christ. The apostles are witnessing by their words and actions that Christ is indeed alive, for they are doing in their ministry what Christ did in his own: reaching out to the rejected, driving out “unclean spirits,” curing the sick and invoking, on behalf of the Samaritans, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from death and was given to the Pentecost community. What Jesus began, the apostles are continuing.

But the apostles aren't the focus of the Acts—are they? Instead, their activities manifest the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in their ministry. Working through the apostles, the Spirit is uniquely broadening membership in the church. The Samaritan conversions show the universal scope of the church's mission; it is to all people. It isn't birthright, nationality, previous religious affiliation or geography that make for membership in the church. Rather, today's Acts reading shows that those who hear and accept God's Word, receive baptism and the Spirit----these are full fledged members of the believing community.

We are encouraged as we look around at others with us at worship. We embrace what usually separates us in the world----diversity of race, nationality, income, professional status, gender, etc. What's going on here? The Spirit draws us all together as the same Spirit did in apostolic times, through baptism, preaching, healing and eucharist nourishment. So, the Acts of the Apostles is really a book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Nourished today by the living Word and Eucharist we too are a “Book of the Holy Spirit;” people will read us and through the same Spirit feel welcomed into this community of those “baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” If others don't feel welcome or feel like second-class members in

our church, than that is a sign we are not working with the Spirit who urged the apostles to reach out to the Samaritans.

St. Peter was writing to Christians under persecution by the emperor Domitian in the 80's and 90's. But persecution didn't just come from the Roman empire. The reading suggests one form of the persecution Christians faced; they were maligned by "those who defame your good conduct in Christ." In other words, their words and actions so witnessed to their belief in Christ that their non-Christian neighbors took notice. (Remember the old adage: If it were a crime to be a Christian would they have any evidence to arrest you?)

I was in a scripture group recently and we were reflecting on the Peter reading. One person, noticing the word "suffer" and began speaking about "the crosses God gives us." What a dreadful picture of God---the One who inflicts pain! That's not what the cross Jesus invites us to carry is about----is it? Peter spells it out for us, we "suffer for doing good." There's the cross we are invited to carry: we suffer for doing good. Following Christ's example of love will cost us.

Though Christians may suffer for "doing good," Peter urges us to be prepared to give "a reason for your hope." Instead of confronting the evil our enemies inflict on us, he invites us to be focused on Christ ("Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.") and be ready to speak out of our faith with "gentleness and reverence." It is easy to get contentious over religion these days with attacks from without and within our membership. There are plenty of sects challenging what we believe; some of the strongest differences seem to be among those who sit in the same pews in church. The recent papal election has again brought those differences to the surface. Peter reminds us that Christ died for us, "the righteous for the sake of the unrighteousness." We are the beneficiaries of a gift that puts all of us in good favor with God. That forgiveness and the Spirit's breaking-down walls that would ordinarily separate us, is what we celebrate at this Eucharist.

Recently I was chatting with a man in the vestibule of the church where I was preaching. We were standing next to a filled pamphlet rack, and we both commented on the variety of the pamphlets' topics. They were very diverse but all, more or less, touched on faith issues: stem cell research, abortion, living will, Alzheimer's disease, euthanasia, environment, cloning, fundamentalism, death

penalty, etc. The man swept his arms across the rack and said, “Some of these topics were not even known to us when I was in college!” Yes, but they are part of our world now and Christians cannot avoid addressing them. So we do and we debate them with others who don’t share our faith—and with those who do. It can be so bewildering and on some issues we feel isolated in our beliefs.

You can tell we are getting ready for Pentecost. The scriptures these Sundays after Easter have been populated by references to the coming Spirit and the work the Spirit will do among believers. Today we hear Jesus’ concern about how his disciples will live out his teachings after he is gone and so he assures them he will not leave them on their own. Like good parents who want to make sure their children are well prepared to face whatever life throws their way, Jesus promises his followers that his Spirit will abide with them and help them hear his voice and obey it.

Notice that Jesus instructs his disciples to obey “my commandments.” He does not say “the Commandments,” for as Jews they would have already been living with the Ten Commandments as their guide. They are now his followers and so he places a big “If” before them: “If you love me....” We show our love for Jesus by a determined life of attentiveness to who he was and what he taught us about loving one another, washing feet and welcoming the outcasts in his name—like the Samaritans in our first reading.

The issues we face are complex indeed. We don’t only have to know what to do in Jesus’ name, but we need the will and the renewed will to persevere in his commandments in a world that can be very unloving. The Advocate (Paraclete) will help us know how to live Jesus’ teachings in a complex world whose issues were barely touched upon in those topics in the pamphlet rack. And more. The Spirit joins with our spirits to empower us when we find ourselves contrary to the world’s ways and thus feeling alone.

About ten years ago teenagers and a few adults, more wrist bracelets lettered “WWJD”----short for “What would Jesus do.? We don’t look back to apostolic times and wax nostalgic for a time when the disciples had Jesus walking with them and showing them the way. Nor are we on our own to make the difficult translation from first to twenty-first century Christianity. Rather, Jesus has kept

his promise and has not left us orphans. We look forward to Pentecost to celebrate his promise fulfilled, the coming of the Advocate to our present age. We are not left orphans.

## QUOTABLE

[While this is a quote about prayer, it applies to preaching as well; an advisory not to concentrate on just personal issues, but to “reach out” in preaching “toward our sisters and brothers in the wider world.”]

### Prayer for the Wider World

We all have an inherent inclination to be self-centered in our prayer. What is happening within me and to those who immediately surround or touch my life tends to occupy my interest. While those are all legitimate concerns for prayer, we as humans, Christians and members of the Church need also to reach out prayerfully toward our sisters and brothers in the wider world. Their joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, victories and defeats should be ours as well..... The daily paper, Catholic press, and radio or television news, together with our everyday contacts, provide us with an every fresh source of people and situations needing our prayer.

----Joseph M. Champlin, BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: A HANDBOOK ON HOW TO PRAY,(New York: Paulist Press, 1984), ISBN 0-8091-2637-0, pages 112-3.

## ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Anne Rowthorn, EARTH AND ALL THE STARS”RECONNECTING WITH NATURE THROUGH HYMNS, STORIES, POEMS AND PRAYERS FROM THE WORLD’S GREAT RELIGIONS AND CULTURES (Novato, California: New World Library, 2000) [www.nwlib.com](http://www.nwlib.com), Paper, \$15.95 ISBN 1-57731-106-X.

Drawn from the world’s spiritual traditions, this is a book of prayers and reflections on the earth. It would be good for a preacher’s prayer and is a rich source for inspiration when preaching about the environment.



## JUSTICE NOTES

### “THE RAINBOW COVENANT”

Brothers and sisters in creation, we covenant this day with you and with all creation yet to be:

- with every living creature and all that contains and sustains you;
- with all that is on earth and with the earth itself;
- with all that lives with the waters and with the waters themselves;
- with all that flies in the sky and with the sky itself.

We establish this covenant that all our powers will be used to prevent your destruction.

We confess that it is our kind who put you at the risk of death.

We ask for your trust and as a symbol of our intention we mark our covenant with you by the rainbow.

This is the sign of the covenant between our selves and every living thing that is found on the earth.

----- by Martin Palmer

[“The Rainbow Covenant” is inspired by the familiar Biblical story of God’s promise to Noah after the flood. In Genesis 9: 11-13, God assured Noah that “never again will all living beings be destroyed by a flood and never again will a flood destroy the earth. As a sign of this everlasting covenant, I am making with you and all living creature, I am putting my rainbow in the clouds. It will be a sign of my covenant with the world.”-----notes by the editor Anne Rowthorn, from EARTH AND ALL THE STARS”RECONNECTING WITH NATURE THROUGH HYMNS, STORIES, POEMS AND PRAYERS FROM THE WORLD’S GREAT RELIGIONS AND CULTURES

### 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:.....

Parish Lorenzo Matthews#0666808 (On death row since 5/26/01)

George Malcom Kelly #0223210 (5/29/01)

Jim E. Haselden #0561943 (6/6/01)

-----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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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](mailto:FrJude@JudeOP.org)