

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 7th SUNDAY OF EASTER (A)

Acts 1: 12-14 Psalm 27 I Peter 4: 13-16 John 17: 1-11a

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The disciples of Jesus have a whole new life ahead of them. Acts tells us today that they returned to the upper room where the men and women followers of Jesus gathered in prayer. They would need that prayer as they pondered the next steps they would take. Their old life was over; their new life just beginning.

The disciples, having experienced the resurrection and Jesus' return to God, must have had feelings of awe, excitement, uncertainty and some anxiety. But we don't learn what they were feeling, just that they were together in prayer. That's important, especially when a community is going through big change----praying together and waiting. Perhaps that explains the feeling of calm that pervades the reading. The disciples aren't sure what's coming, but we know. The Spirit will come upon them and they will launch out into the world to proclaim Jesus Christ.

There is something else we know that the gathered disciples don't. The road ahead of them is going to be rough. At this point Peter doesn't know the suffering he and the others will endure as followers of Jesus. But when he, or a disciple writing in his name, wrote the epistle we hear today, he certainly had a different perspective. He writes that following Christ entails suffering. He is encouraging and reminding us that if we suffer because of Christ, we will rejoice "when his glory is revealed." There will be a time of fulfillment, Peter promises, for those who have shared in Christ's suffering.

There is not doubt what will be the cause of Christians suffering. It will be "for the name of Christ." That happened quickly for the early church and still happens for Christians in many places in the world. While we don't consider it an act of bravery when we declare ourselves as Christians, for the first generation of followers of Christ, to be called a Christian was to be open to ridicule, scorn and maybe worse. We might reflect on that the next time we check off "Christian" or "Catholic" on a questionnaire that asks for our religious affiliation. Being a Christian, 1Peter reminds us, will entail suffering for the name of Christ.

While most of us don't have to fear the midnight knock on the door for being

Christian, our suffering comes in more subtle and daily ways. Our Christian choices may set us apart from our peers in: the entertainment we seek; the political decisions we make; the simplification of our life style; the lesser salaries we earn because we choose jobs in the helping and teaching professions; the amount of volunteer time we spend; our refusal to gossip; our defense of immigrants; our opposition to the death penalty; our concern for the environment, etc. These are choices we make, sometimes everyday. At other, more momentous times, decisions we make can be life altering. Large or small our choices must be based on our faith in Jesus and his gospel. If we rarely refer to our faith in Jesus and its consequences on our daily lives, then our Christianity is only surface deep. It's just a check mark on a questionnaire that asks for "religious affiliation." If that's the case, we won't have to worry about the sufferings for Christ described in 1 Peter.

The disciples had good instincts. They returned together to the upper room to pray. Maybe they suspected what lay ahead of them, after all they did witness Jesus' suffering. It may have become clear that carrying the new label "Christian" would cost them. They gathered in the "upper room." We traditionally associate the upper room with the place where Jesus celebrated the first Eucharist with his disciples. So, we who gather today to pray and celebrate the Eucharist are poised to receive what those disciples received in the upper room—the outpouring of the Spirit. We are too human and prone to choose the nearest exit when faced with suffering for our faith. We already have the Holy Spirit through our baptism. But, at this stage of our personal and church life, we certainly need a deep drink of the living waters that Jesus promised us through his Spirit. Then we can leave this "upper room" with confidence, infused with renewed life from the Spirit and prepared, when it is necessary, to suffer "for the name of Christ."

The gospel today takes us back to the moments before Jesus entered into his suffering. He prays, yet his focus isn't on his impending death. He is like a parent leaving the children he has been nurturing. Now that he is leaving, he is concerned for them and how they will fare "in the world." The words "glory" and "glorified" appear six times in today's gospel reading. The section is part of Jesus' farewell prayer for his disciples.

The baseball season is still young and fans have high hopes. We dream of our team appearing in the World Series—and even winning! Tens of millions of dollars will be paid this year to individual stars on whom we have placed our hopes. If our team wins, we fans will bask in its glory. That is how we imagine glory----

something bright, which shines on the gifted and successful and maybe even rubs off on those around them.

Jesus' "hour" has come. It's the hour of his death and resurrection, when his disciples will see in him God's glory. He is about to receive his glory from God. But it will not be the kind of glory people will enthusiastically rush to share. Jesus is going to accomplish the work God sent him to do—a work that will culminate in his crucifixion. People will behold Jesus' glory when they see him on the cross. They will also see his glory when it shines through those who follow him----especially when serving him and doing his work on earth cause them to suffer as he did. The trouble the disciples will have is the same as we: how do we recognize Jesus' glory when it is the exact opposite of what they expect and hope for? How would they see glory in what was complete collapse and failure?

The Jewish people learned about God's glory. It wasn't in magnificent edifices or golden statues. Instead, God's glory resided hidden in the cloud that led them across the wasteland to freedom. When they spoke of God's glory it was in their retelling of the narratives of how God delivered them from slavery. Though they had done nothing to make themselves worthy of it, God had looked favorably on their misery and saved them. What a spectacular event that was! How glorious their God!

God's glory wasn't going to be spectacular in Jesus' delivering us from slavery. Instead, it was going to be seen in Jesus' death and resurrection. What was glorious about that? In his death and resurrection Christ revealed how much God loved us. In Christ, God was willing to enter into our suffering and transfigure it for us. Out of failure and suffering God would draw meaning and life. Only God could do that. How glorious is our God!

There is no pain, no loss, no disappointment, no ending, that can escape God's touch and ability to transform. There is no part of our lives, or the world's, that we need be afraid to look at, no matter how dark and scary. For in Christ, we can find hope and new life. Only a God of glory could accomplish that! God's glory isn't in the pain, as much as in what God can do to bring life out of pain and death—the way God did in Christ.

Jesus' prayer today can give us the courage to face the darkness and search for the signs of God's glory. As Jesus prays at table with his disciples and faces his suffering and death we get the impression that God isn't withdrawing from him to

leave him to battle against the darkness on his own. As Jesus' hour nears, you feel that God is drawing even closer to him. Which is what God does with us each and every time we face our hour of need. How glorious is God!

A NEW PSALM

*On this day and every day
Let us give praise to our God –
Why else did Love create us?
Why else are we waiting in Jerusalem?*

*Israelites of the New Covenant
Awake!
Love approaches, asking,
“Are you my Beloved?”*

*See! The heavens are glimpsed,
In the thin spaces
Intersecting heaven and earth
By the humble of heart.*

*Given a new voice,
Turning to one another,
Let us joyfully proclaim
The Good News!*

*For this brother of ours,
Is the velvet hammer of
Compassion and mercy,
Vanquishing death's black hole.*

*We are given a new voice,
By the one
Who has proved faithful to us
Through death.*

*To the holy one of Israel,
Who brings to us
The fire of dimensionless Pentecost -
In thanksgiving, Amen.*

© 2007

Garth Stanton

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD
Migrant Farm Workers

During the past weeks, we've heard Jesus refer to himself as the “Good Shepherd” and the “Gate” for the sheep. We also have heard many other references in the Gospels to farming images, like “vines”, “fig trees”, “sowing seeds” and “harvesting”. We who in most cases live far removed from a rural life style, have

little experience with shepherds or farmers. This is the case because in most cases it is not our own labor, but rather the labor of tens of thousands of migrant farm workers who provide us with fresh fruits and vegetables all season long. As the growing season begins in North Carolina we are called to be aware of the hidden and difficult lives of these men and women who are Christ's presence among us. Christ journeys with them as they search for a more hopeful future and a welcoming community. In committing ourselves to the service of all uprooted people, we build up the Kingdom of God.

Did you know?

- 1. North Carolina migrant workers are sometimes exposed to heat indices of 105-110 degrees without the opportunity to adequately hydrate or cool down?*
- 2. North Carolina migrant workers regularly suffer skin and respiratory infections from exposure to pesticides.*
- 3. Sometimes babies born to farm worker families suffer severe birth defects and death as a result of the pesticide exposure of their parents.*

What can I do?

- *Be informed and speak out in support of the following farmworker justice issues:*
 - *Labor law, and wage and hour reforms, and better enforcement of current laws for agricultural workers;*
 - *Immigration reforms to help undocumented workers adjust to legal status*
 - *Restoration of federal benefits to legal immigrants;*
 - *Support for adequate federal and state funding for rural housing, and for existing programs such as migrant health, English as a second language instruction and education and enforcement of the laws which govern the use of pesticides.*
- *Watch the Justice Bulletin Board for specific local and federal legislative lobbying opportunities on behalf of farmworker justice.*
- *Sign up to help this summer when Sacred Heart prepares meals and serves the migrant farm workers. It is a joyful experience.*
- *When you buy fresh fruits and vegetables, think of those who harvested them and say a prayer for them and their families. Advocate on their behalf when possible.*

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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." If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:.....

Jerry Dale Hill #0511057 (On death row since 10/31/95)

Keith B. East #0511998 (11/8/95)

John D. Mc Neil #0275678 (11/10/95)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"** **"Liturgical year A,"** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

"Liturgical years, A, B and C," reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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 webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

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: judeop@juno.com