

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

COMMEMORATION OF ALL THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED (A)

Wisdom 3:1-9 Psalm 23 Romans 5:5-11 John 6:37-40

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

When my parents died a few years ago I was comforted by scriptural verses like those selected for today's celebration.

The Book of Wisdom doesn't go out of its way to describe where the souls of the dead are right now. But it does offer consoling words we are invited to place our hope in: "The souls of the just are in the hand of God." Which is similar to what I held on to when my parents died. I've told people that I don't know where they are, or what they are doing right now; I just believe that they have fallen into the hands of a merciful God. Family and friends pictured mom in heaven cooking up her Sunday pasta with her sisters and dad playing pinochle with his brothers-in-law. What wonderful images they are and I am sure they offered comfort to my family at the gravesides. But all I hung on to were those merciful hands of God who created my parents, sustained them in a simple and trusting faith through hard times and final illnesses and now is showering mercy and love on them. As Wisdom puts it, "The souls of the just are in the hand of God."

Wisdom has some particular souls in mind; those whose "passing away was thought an affliction" and who were "tried" during their lifetime. People are tempted to give up on God when life offers struggles. Wisdom's view of our hardships is that they are like offerings placed on the altar to God. By reason of our baptismal priesthood, we are priests who offer our life's service and struggles to God. We have the hope that the Book of Wisdom gives us, "the faithful shall abide with God in love, because grace and mercy are with God's holy ones." There, we hear it again, a variation on what I was hearing at the time of my parents' deaths, "they have fallen into the hands of a merciful God." That is all we can know for sure now – and it is enough for people whose hope is in God.

That is also the focus of Paul's words to us today – Hope. This hope is based on God's love for us. Paul tells us that God's love has shown itself very concretely in Jesus' acceptance of death on our behalf. We didn't earn or deserve this love; it was given to us while we were sinners. "But God proves God's love for us in that

while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” We need not fear death, not as much as some of us do, if we believe that we are falling into the loving hands of God. Jesus is the sure sign of God’s love for us. Sin did not prevent God from showing us love in Jesus and, because of Jesus, sin need not keep us separated from God in this life or the next. God is offering us reconciliation: “we were reconciled to God through the death of [God’s] Son.”

In this life and in the next, we are reconciled to God by our faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection. When we waver in that faith, as we might do facing the death of a loved one after a long and painful illness, or when we consider our own death, it is the Holy Spirit who continually pours into our hearts the reassurance that God loves us. Nothing, not even sin and death, can separate us from the love of God. So, it isn’t only in death that we fall into the hands of a loving God – through Jesus we are already in God’s hands and those hands are molding us more and more into trusting children of God. Paul says it succinctly: “Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

The gospel continues the message: we are secure in the hands of a loving God, both in this life and the next. Some of my childhood images of God keep sneaking up on me when I think of how God deals with sin. Those images presented a very angry God who meted out a stern justice and was ready to strike down sinners – except for the intervention of Jesus, the beloved Son, who got between us and God’s raised fist. Funerals at that time weren’t much help in dispelling those images of God. The vestments were black and the hymns dour, especially the “Dies Irae,” (“Day of Wrath”), a medieval hymn which depicted God’s stern judgement on the dead. (Some classical composers have incorporated that melody in their pieces to convey an atmosphere of dread and foreboding.) It was hard to determine who would have the last word over our souls: the God of our last judgment or the compassionate judge Jesus.

We should have read more scripture in those days, for example, today’s gospel. John shows that God does not have a split personality: the angry and exacting Judge of all humankind and the forgiving and loving Christ. Rather, John tells us that in Jesus, God has drawn close to us. Wisdom’s reassurance that the dead are in the “hand of God” is echoed in today’s gospel. Jesus is the visible manifestation of God’s loving hand which holds the faithful securely in this life and will not let us go in the next.

John puts it this way: Jesus has come to give us eternal life – beginning now. Eternal life is now because in Christ we are already in an intimate relationship with God and God's life is in us. This relationship starts now and is not broken by death, for Christ says he will raise us up "on the last day." Shall we accept the life Christ is offering us now and receive the loving God into our lives?

We already have the gift of God's life in us, but we gather each Sunday to be reminded and strengthened in that life. How does it happen? The sign of the believing community gathered with us today encourages us. Hearing the Word of God makes God's active and creative power present to us. The Eucharist we receive is the food that sustains our hope. Now and into the next life, God's hands will never let us go.

Jesus assures us today, "I will not reject anyone who comes to me." He is very clear that it is his intention to enter into a permanent relationship with us, for it is also, "the will of the one who sent me," not to lose anyone God put into Jesus' care.

On this feast and the days which surround it, the Mexican community celebrates "the Day of the Dead." Family members visit the graves of their deceased and take the dead person's favorite foods. At the grave family and friends, adults and children, have a picnic: they tell stories of their dead and share the food they brought. It is an expression of the undying bonds of love that unite them to their family members who have passed to the other side. They also believe that the spirits of their loved ones are alive and, in some way, still with them.

We don't have to be of Mexican descent to celebrate the lives of our deceased family and friends. Aren't we doing something similar to what our Mexican brothers and sisters do when we gather at Eucharist on this day? We share stories from the scriptures, the family stories we have in common. We then eat the "favorite foods" that nourished our deceased brothers and sisters: the eucharistic bread and wine that sustained them in their living and dying and that gives us hope that someday we will again eat at a banquet table with one another and the risen Lord.

This is a time to go to visit the cemetery and share stories of the dead with our children. We could recall their lives, how they lived their faith and passed that faith on to us. We might open family albums for our little ones and, like a storybook reading in the evening, tell them the stories of their deceased grandparents, uncles,

aunts, and our friends. We could include prayers for them as we pray bedtime prayers with the little ones.

In our part of the globe it is Autumn and nature seems to be “passing away” around us. But we have firm hope that, after a season of rest and bareness, the earth will come alive again. We also have a secure hope, based on Jesus’ promise to us, that he has given us eternal life and that, with him and one another, we shall rise “on the last day.”

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

Jesus said to the crowds...

And this is the will of the One who sent me,
that I should not lose anything of what God gave me,
but that I shall raise it on the last day.

Reflection:

In today’s gospel John shows that God does not have a split personality consisting of: the angry and exacting Judge of all humankind...and the forgiving and loving Christ. Rather, John tells us, in Jesus, our loving God has drawn close to us. Jesus is the visible manifestation of God’s loving hand which holds the faithful securely in this life and will not let us go in the next.

So we ask ourselves:

As I recall my beloved dead, do I believe that God holds them securely in loving hands?

What can I do today to comfort someone who has recently suffered a death of a loved one?

Shall I pray for those who have died recently, alone and now forgotten?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

Prayers for Election Day

The debates are over. The ads, both positive and negative are ending. We will, within a few days, choose a president, a vice-president, and national, state and local legislators and officials to lead our country, which has been so richly blest. This is an awesome responsibility. It is time for prayer to take the place of arguments and yard signs. Below are prayers provided by our US Catholic Bishops for use this election season. We invite you to cut them out and use them frequently

and fervently during the next days. Consider taking these prayers with you to your polling place and praying while you wait to vote.

Gracious and loving God, let your Spirit be with us today. Hear our prayers, and increase in us the will to follow your Son Jesus. Help us to draw on the resources of our faith as we use the opportunities of our democracy to shape a society more respectful of the life, dignity, and rights of the human person, especially the poor and vulnerable. We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Immaculate Heart of Mary, help us to conquer the menace of evil, which so easily takes root in the hearts of the people of today, and whose immeasurable effects already weigh down upon our modern world and seem to block the paths toward the future.

From famine and war, deliver us. From nuclear war, from incalculable self-destruction, from every kind of war, deliver us. From sins against human life from its very beginning, deliver us. From hatred and from the demeaning of the dignity of the children of God, deliver us. From every kind of injustice in the life of society, both national and international, deliver us. From readiness to trample on the commandments of God, deliver us. From attempts to stifle in human hearts the very truth of God, deliver us. From the loss of awareness of good and evil, deliver us. From sins against the Holy Spirit, deliver us.

Amen.

Novena for Faithful Citizenship: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC.

(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:.....

Tilmon Golphin #0590940 (On death row since 5/13/98)

Mark L. Squires #0688223 (5/17/00)

Paul A. Brown #0051026 98/11/00)
---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

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