

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”    The Ascension of the Lord  
Acts 1: 1-11   Psalm 47   Ephesians 1: 17-23   Matthew 28: 16-20  
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The Acts of the Apostles starts with an injunction by the risen Christ to wait. I wonder if the activists in that early community weren't frustrated by his directive. You can see that they were ready to get on with things---- and they would have gotten it all wrong. It's their question that reveals their mis-direction, "Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?" Of course, they mean a purely external, politically and militarily dominant kingdom of Israel. No, they have to wait for the baptism with the Holy Spirit, then they will know how and where to be Jesus' witnesses.

He wants them to break free of their limited view, their biases and tendency to misinterpret the meaning of his life. What he also wants is that they witness to him far beyond the boundaries of Israel. They will, he says, have to be, "my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." For all this they will need help, so they must acknowledge their dependence on God and wait for God's pleasure to pour that help out on them.

We are not good at waiting. We tire out if we do not get quick results. Waiting on lines, for lights, for our children to come home from the dance, with our aging parents at the doctor's office, for the war to end in Iraq. Waiting is not what we do well. Why is waiting so frustrating? Because it means someone else or some other power is in charge, not us. And being out of control and subject to other forces reminds us of our finiteness, and vulnerability.

Jesus tells the disciples to "wait for the promise of the Father." They cannot go off spreading the news of his resurrection on their own. They are a small, fearful community that has no power on its own and, as the Gospels showed, they have a tendency to get Jesus' message all wrong. What's more, they flee when things get tough. On their own they will be misguided, perhaps engage in ways that are not of Jesus. Haven't we made some pretty big mistakes in our history about his message and ways? In our history are the tales of promoting our religion by forced baptisms and by trampling over the dignity and cultures of whole

civilizations. We also, like the original disciples, have been cowardly when courage was required.

So the disciples and we must “hold our horses,” restrain ourselves and wait for God’s promise to be fulfilled. What’s more, the fulfillment will come at God’s timing, not our own. We are action oriented aren’t we? We have our projects and plans, we want to get on with things. Even when our plans and intentions are noble and serve a good purpose, how does God figure into them? Do we know? Have we asked? Do we wait for an answer, some direction? Maybe we have to “hurry up and wait.” “Don’t just do something, stand there!” Waiting on the Spirit is a reversal of our usual mode of operating.

Even as Christ talks to the disciples about their mission to the “ends of the earth,” Luke is making sure that we do not forget what had happened in Jerusalem. We recall the Emmaus story (3rd. Sunday of Easter) and the failed and frustrated hopes of the disciples on the road. “We had hoped,” they tell the Stranger. What they had hoped for was their version of triumph and success for Jesus —and themselves. But Jesus had to remind them, by interpreting the scriptures “beginning with Moses and all the prophets,” that suffering was to be part of his life and mission. Here in today’s section of Acts, Luke reminds us again of that link between Jesus’ mission and suffering, when he says that Christ “presented himself alive to them by many proofs AFTER he had suffered.” Jesus, and now the disciples, cannot escape the suffering that comes with fidelity to the message. Even in the presence of the risen Lord they are not far from the reality of suffering . So, for the disciples who will have to live out and proclaim the Good News, suffering will be the price they and we pay for our belief and for the mission.

We need to wait for the gift of the Spirit who sustains us when the going gets rough. We will be witnesses to Jesus by the integrity of our lives and the commitment to his ways. If we are faithful to what his Spirit teaches us at work, and with our families, in school and in the political arena, etc., there will be suffering. Or maybe worse, we will just be ignored, discounted as unrealistic and dismissed as impossible idealists. We will need the gift of the Spirit and the wait is worth it.

Thomas Troeger, the Presbyterian preacher and homiletician, in a sermon preached on Ascension Day, recalls the frustration of the disciples and the early church in

their waiting and longing for the fulfillment of the reign of God. He says we too know that frustration. After having given our lives over to Jesus Christ, we experience not triumph, but a mixture of triumph and defeat. Has anything really changed? What difference does our faith make? “When will things come together in some whole and enduring pattern?” he wonders. And then Troeger quotes Yeats’ lines to describe our world:

“Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
the blood dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
the ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
the best lack all conviction, while the worst  
are full of passionate intensity.” (from, “The Second Coming”)

We are wearied by our waiting. With Yeats we voice our longing, “Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand.” It’s a lament, a prayer of need and dependence. We need help that we cannot provide for ourselves. Troeger invites us to hear again what the early church heard in its anguish and yearning, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by [God’s] own authority.” How difficult it is for us to hear these words surrounded, as we are, by the kind of events we see and hear on the evening news—pictures and sounds of refugees from war and civil strife, and the scenes of poverty that persist in our prosperous nation. What we have, Troeger reminds us, is the belief that Christ reigns and will send the Holy Spirit to help us live as we must. We cannot force the hand of this Spirit, it is a gift constantly coming upon us. And one that still requires waiting.

(Thomas’ Troeger’s sermon was preached in 1982 and is reprinted in, SEASONS OF PREACHING, pages 158-9.)

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#### 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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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