

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THE ASSUMPTION

Revelation 11: 19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab Psalm 45 I Corinthians 15: 20-27 Luke 1: 39-56

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

It isn't often that we get a reading from Revelation in our lectionary selections. If you are like me, you probably haven't preached from it very much--- if at all. Perhaps your biblical reading doesn't include Revelation as well. Here is a chance to do something about that, so I will focus on the first reading and add some notes I found helpful about this feast.

When I did prison ministry at San Quentin in California, I was struck by how many of the inmates who read the bible favored the Book of Revelation. What was it that they found so attractive in its exaggerated and stark symbolism--- in a biblical book that most Christians seem to avoid? I came to realize they were drawn to its description of the harsh struggle between good and evil that permeates the entire book. They found it comforting to hope that the larger punishing system in which they lived would someday be overthrown, with all the powers of the world. This was reassuring news both to the early Christians suffering under the Roman persecutions and the men in North Bloc at San Quentin. It is reassuring news for all of us who struggle against the powers of “the dragon” in our world.

Another attraction for the inmates, it seemed to me, was that they believed they knew the code; that they could figure out the symbols and metaphors so prevalent in Revelation. Somehow, they felt part of an inner circle with special knowledge--- everyone else was outside that circle. They even used this “knowledge” as a way of feeling superior to those in their same situation. But whatever misinterpretation they may have made of Revelation, you could understand their attraction to this book of visions and prophecies. The book speaks to people suffering under extreme external pressures.

The early Christians, for whom this book was written, were being forced to venerate the Emperor. Not to do so had, not only religious ramifications, but political as well. Christians were asked to choose one Lord to serve--- a choice had to be made. If they chose in favor of their Christian belief, they paid for it with their lives. Revelation is not an abstract book of fantastic imagery and other-worldly events. It was written to help Christians remain faithful and to offer reassurance that the Lamb (or as in today's reading, the child) would be triumphant.

Is it any easier for us to believe and for our faith to flourish? A casual perusal of just this day's newspaper tells us of still more car bombings in Iraq; militias still killing in Sudan; third world people suffering with AIDS who lack medicines that can save them; more conflict in Gaza between Palestinians and Israelis; etc. We have to ask the question, "Who is in charge here anyway?" We look around the world and are shocked by the scale of evil we see. Which force will win out? Are we believers on the side that will prevail or is our seeming small human effort going to pale into insignificance before the "red dragon with its 7 heads and horns"?

Revelation intends to assure us that goodness will win. Like the early Christians we may be tempted to drop out of our faith commitments in the light, allure and power of the opposing forces. Who is the Sovereign we Christians follow? God is and we want and can be faithful to the biblical God of justice—the One who will set things right. Revelation then, invites us to set our gaze, not on our hardships and calamities but on God. The power of the beast is awesome, its tail sweeps away a third of the stars in the sky. But the child being born is protected by God and will triumph.

While there is no secret code to this book to help us in its interpretation, the language does appeal to our imagination and makes it possible to interpret it in many ways. The struggle is clear and the threat of evil, devouring all that is good, is real and very ominous. A new people, the Christian community, are being born amid great pain and struggle. But despite the threats to its existence, the child is caught by God and is safe. No bible reader could miss the allusions to the Hebrew scriptures. Just as the God of the Jewish people protected them, so God continues to protect the new people of God. God's Word is not past tense, but actively protecting and recreating the community for which Jesus gave his life.

The community John has in mind is experiencing extreme hostility. They are being encouraged through this book to trust that God knows their plight and will come to their rescue. Evil shall not triumph. It is no wonder then, that on this feast of the Assumption, this reading is linked to Mary's "Magnificat." Mary's rejoices in the saving work of God, "scattering the proud...casting down the mighty from their thrones...." Here biblical faith, expressed in two different forms, voices the same hope in God. John is not writing a prediction of specific future events, as some today claim, but is trying to encourage and console Christians in his day for their very present suffering. He writes to help them and us keep faithful and to assure us that God's rule and justice will prevail.

The church celebrates the Assumption of Mary today. We see in her a model for our faith. We too give birth to Christ in our world. We are reminded that though Christ suffered, he has been kept safe by God, to whom he has returned and will come to bring us all to that place of protection and life. So, the dragon is not triumphant. The Christian is ready to say in the midst of the battle against evil's many manifestations, "Now have salvation and power come." The God of our assurance is offering that assistance to us now in our present struggle.

QUOTABLE:

This is a complex feast on which to preach. I found some help, some approach for the preacher, from Liturgy Training Publication's, SOURCEBOOK. I'll quote it in full and hope it offers some insights.

"History of the Solemnity: Soon after the council of Ephesus (431) proclaimed Mary to be Theotokos, the Bearer of God, a feast of her "dormition" or death began to spread. Within a few centuries, the church in Rome began observing this feast, which came to be known as the Assumption. At the first National Synod of the American church (1791), the nation was placed under the patronage of Mary with the title of the Assumption. The cathedral of the diocese of Baltimore, at that time the See for the whole country, was given the same name.

In 1950, Pope Pius XII defined the Assumption as dogma. At that time, he listed the benefits that should flow from this proclamation: a stronger piety towards Mary, a more universal conviction on the value of human life devoted to God's will, a repudiation of the materialism that diverts body and soul from their lofty goal, and "Finally, it is our hope that belief in Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven will make our belief in our own resurrection stronger and render it more effective."

The images of the feast reflect its history. In its earliest form, the day focused on the paschal mystery as expressed in the death of Mary. Making her entrance into heaven explicit was the second stage, with language about a triumphal procession, a bridal march and Mary's bodily assumption later added a third layer of texts for the feast.

Liturgy today: Recent history has focused strongly on the bodily assumption of Mary. The readings for the vigil and the day, however, suggest a stronger focus on Mary's share in the paschal mystery, and on our own share in the same mystery.

Planners might review the goals of Pius XII. Have our parish observances of this feast fostered a stronger belief in our own resurrection?"

----Lawrence Mick in, SOURCEBOOK FOR SUNDAY AND SEASONS: AN ALMANAC OF PARISH LITURGY, 1995 YEAR C. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publication, 1995) page 188.

JUSTICE NOTES

In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation. All believers are called to faithful citizenship, to become informed, active, and responsible participants in the political process. As we have said, "We encourage *all citizens*, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity meaningfully to participate [more fully] *in building the culture of life*. Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts. Every act of responsible citizenship is an exercise of significant individual power." Even those who are not citizens are called to participate in the debates which shape our common life.

-----"Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility"---US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003.

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.'"

----Jeanette 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:.....

Isaac J. Stroud #0478925 (On death row since 2/9/95)
James E. Thomas #0404386 (2/24/95)
Tony M. Sidden #0368820 (3/15/95)
-----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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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