

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FEAST OF PETER AND PAUL
Acts 12: 1-11 2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 17-18 Matthew 16: 13-19
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We modern preachers have work to do if we are going to make the lives of the saints speak to modern hearers. Saints have been trivialized or romanticized. A lot of what we have heard in our tradition has made saints seem unreal and remote from our hectic, plugged-in lives. Saints have seemed too perfect and detached from what concerns and consumes us. It is hard for everyday modern Christian to believe we have anything in common them. We also live in a time when people love to debunk heroes; we are afraid of investing too much emotionally in those whose lives we admire for fear someday we will find out unsavory truths about them. Recent church scandals have not helped our faith in ordinary people living truly holy lives.

But devotion to the saints can serve as an expression of devotion to the gospel and a protest to the ungodly values that frequently dominate our America culture. The feast of Peter and Paul celebrates two pillars of the first church. Paul is called the “Apostle to the Gentiles” but, as we have heard in recent Sunday and daily readings from Acts, Peter too ate with Gentiles and baptized them into the faith (Acts 10: 23ff.). Later he had to explain what he had done to the leaders of the Jerusalem church. The first Jewish Christians wanted Gentile converts to first become Jews and observe Jewish religious customs and laws. This would have severely limited the early church’s growth. Peter and Paul accepted Gentiles into the church and eventually so did the rest of the disciples. These saints struggled with their own brother and sister believers as well as with a world that was hostile to what they professed and taught as Christians.

The first and second readings today find both saints in prison for their beliefs. The fact of the apostles’ imprisonment sets a sober atmosphere for today’s liturgy. We find these two models of faith suffering for practicing what they believe and for spreading the name of Jesus. What suffering does our own faith cause us? While Peter is rescued, eventually both he and Paul will be martyred as disciples of Christ. So the palm of martyrdom hangs over our scriptures today. Both saints were driven by their love for Jesus Christ and this love seems to have overcome fear and emboldened them. They had, what Walter Burghardt, S.J. says we

preachers (and all believers) need, a “fire in the belly.”

We are a community that remembers our ancestors in faith. These two saints, whose lives we celebrate today, speak to us of God’s power to transform and redirect our lives. Peter and Paul’s lives were completely changed by their following Jesus. Their lives surprise us, and surprised them too! What Paul says in the second reading, Peter might have also said, “I have kept the faith.” Paul isn’t just speaking of doctrinal observances here; rather, he fulfilled what the faith required of him----witnessing and preaching his faith in Jesus to non-believers.

Though we celebrate two saints today, as a way of focusing I am looking at Paul as he comes to us in the second reading. (It is rare that we preach from the second reading and today is a opportunity to do that.) Also, Paul’s words are so personal today as he gives us insight into the cost and joy of being a disciple. We know that Paul was imprisoned in Rome during Nero’s very harsh suppression of the Christians. At first Paul was placed under house arrest for two years, but then he was put in a more difficult prison environment. Paul doesn’t ordinarily reveal so much personal information about himself in the epistles and so it is thought this letter to Timothy may have been written by one of Paul’s disciples, perhaps after his death. Since it is so personal, today’s selection has strong homiletical possibilities. Living the Christian life is not easy, Paul describes it in terms of an athletic contest. The Second letter to Timothy places Paul’s life as a Christian witness before us. In verses omitted from today’s section (verses 9-15), he tells of being deserted by his companions. Yet he is confident he will not be deserted by God. We can be grateful to Paul for these personal words from prison. He has suffered much for his faith and now the end is near.

We modern Christians may be tempted to give up on our own journey of faith. Being a Christian requires personal sacrifice, or as Paul puts it, we are to have the dedication of an athlete who must stay in top condition for the contest. Living the gospel calls for consistent dedication to our calling. Such sacrifice is made extra difficult because we are not surrounded by a lot of examples. Corporate greed, unethical business practices, cheating on tax returns, sexual promiscuity, “reality” television shows that pit people against each other for money prizes---- all speak of other options and contrary ways of living. At times, those other paths seem over populated and they have the power to draw our attention. They invite us to imitate their ways. If others can have it all, why can’t we?

Paul has made a long, constant and arduous sacrifice to live out the calling he received on the road to Damascus. Though he is in prison and sees his end near, he has no regrets for following Christ. He tells us that God will take him and reward him for the race he has run. This reading gives us an opportunity to hear the reflections of a great saint toward the end of his life. He speaks to those in our congregation who have lived a long and faithful life. Despite our doubts and fears as we face endings and many forms of closure, like Paul, we want to confidently entrust ourselves into the hands of a merciful God. But Paul's example also speaks to younger members who are assured that the sacrifices they make to live their faith with integrity and their attempts to pass their faith to their children, will be rewarded some day by God. Even now, in the heat and strain of our race, God will not abandon us, just as God did not abandon Peter or Paul. We pray at this eucharist for the endurance and confidence our faith offer us. We come hungry to this celebration today; we hear stories of our ancestors in faith that assure and give us courage and we hunger for what nourished them. We know that the same Word and food that sustained them is ours as well.

As he faces death, Paul's words give us wisdom. Using the perspective he gives us, we ask "When the day comes that I look back on my life, what will I see? Will I feel satisfied, a life well spent, energies invested in the right place? Or, will I feel disappointed by the choices I made?---- Energies misdirected and invested in shallow places? A lifetime distracted by less important and passing things? Being a Christian for "the long haul" means resisting passing attractions to compromise. We must settle for an easy Christian life consisting of mere church attendance, while ignoring the more difficult options of discipleship. Paul shows us that the life of a faithful Christian does take perseverance and sacrifice. He says it is a life "poured out like a libation". A libation to the gods would precede a sea journey. The image of the libation then is like the sacrifice made before a departure. Paul is about to leave on the final journey and his life is an offering poured out to God. A dedicated life of discipleship does set us apart, has us going against the stream of the majority, and consequently requires long and consistent sacrifice. Our lives in service to God are a libation that prepares us for our final journey. Such a life is only possible, Paul reminds us, because God has been there with us, enabling and helping us day by day to live out our faith despite constantly changing circumstances.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to come to the end of our lives feeling Paul's confidence--- that we had fought "the good fight", finished the race and could trust God's reward waiting us? We look to the future when Christ, who won "the merited crown" for us and made it possible to live faithful lives, will give us that crown. Meanwhile, our reading ends with a note about the present moment. There may be more to endure and more faithful service asked of us. However, we are not alone in the present struggle, and Paul says we not only look forward to some future vindication, but we are assured that even now, "The Lord will continue to rescue me from all attempts to do me harm and will bring me safe to his heavenly kingdom."

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*. New York: Continuum, 1999. Pages 299 (ISBN 0-8264-1198-3).

This profound and readable study will help preachers broaden their notion of the communion of saints to include various cultures, women and men, the living and the dead united around the table of the Lord. It will help us in our preaching about the saints to our contemporary hearers and enable us to see the holiness of our own lives.

QUOTABLE

Saints are those who have drawn so close to the center of the circle that Uncreated Light streams through them into the world. And the closer people draw to them, the closer they get to the divine.

---Elizabeth A. Johnson, page 15.

JUSTICE NOTES

["A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration", by the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States]

As pastors to more than ninety million Mexican Catholics and sixty-five million U.S. Catholics, we witness the human consequences of migration in the life of society every day. We witness the vulnerability of our people involved in all sides of the migration phenomenon, including families devastated by the loss of loved ones who have undertaken the migration journey and children left alone when parents are removed from them. We observe the struggles of landowners and enforcement personnel who seek to preserve the common good without violating

the dignity of the migrant. And we share in the concern of religious and social service providers who, without violating civil law, attempt to respond to the migrant knocking at the door.

--- Migrants and immigrants are in our parishes and in our communities. In both our countries, we see much injustice and violence against them and much suffering and despair among them because civil and church structures are still inadequate to accommodate their basic needs.

---We judge ourselves as a community of faith by the way we treat the most vulnerable among us. The treatment of migrants challenges the consciences of elected officials, policymakers, enforcement officers, residents of border communities, and providers of legal aid and social services, many of whom share our Catholic faith.

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."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Elmer Mc Neill #0528622 (On death row since 4/9/96)

Eric F. Murillo #0499258 (4/18/96)

George F. Page #0310202 (4/26/96)

Guy T. Le Grande #0238344 (4/26/96)

-----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 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,

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