

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”                      THE HOLY TRINITY (A)

Exodus 34: 4b-6, 8-9    Daniel 3: 52-55    2 Cor 13: 11-13    John 3: 16-18

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians helps keep us on focus. We aren’t celebrating a doctrine or theological formula today. We are celebrating the reality of God that prompted the doctrine. These Pauline verses today are the last three in the letter. They were obviously chosen for this feast because of their Trinitarian reference, but they are not proposed as a teaching as much as a final blessing Paul is giving the Corinthian community. Paul changes the usual order, we are used to saying, “Father, Son and Spirit.” He names this sequence; the “grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship (communion) of the Holy Spirit.” Christ is in the prominent first position, the gift of God’s love to us, unearned and gracious.

Fred Craddock points out that here God is not defined by Paul as Father, or Christ as Son. Instead, the emphasis, he says, seems to be on the active aspects, the dynamic role of God. “Brothers and sisters” are encouraged to certain behavior. “Rejoice...mend your ways, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace...” As is Paul’s custom, he is not calling the community to behave in these ways on their own. He turns our attention to the Trinity, to remind us we have a very active God working on our behalf. While he has just called the community to live in a certain way, he reminds us that our life together is enabled by the triune God who constantly works on our behalf, blessing us with “grace, love and fellowship.” The God of love, also highlighted today by John, is gracious towards us in Christ, giving us freely the grace to live our life in communion with one another. So, I would ask Paul, is that how we are holding together these days, despite the mess our church is in? Yes, he would say; this God, who blesses you with “grace, love and fellowship,” does not abandon you and encourages you to live in charity with one another as you sort things out. This is the God who will bless you in your efforts, making new life possible.

In Christ we have received a very concrete sign of God’s love for us. In this love we have been chosen as members of the “communion or fellowship” (koinonia). This union among us believers is not a merely a social club where members sign

up, have their names on a registry in an office somewhere and carry membership cards. “I belong to the Elks, the Republican party, the Reader’s Digest book club and the fellowship of Jesus’ believers.” Rather, the communion suggests active membership. Its members have entered into a deep sharing with other believers, whether they belong to the same social class or political party. In this communion we strive to “...encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace.” How can these good things happen among such a diverse group of people—except for this Trinity of graciousness from which blessings have been poured out upon us?. Our Christian communal life, if it is as vital as Paul asks of us, will reflect the very active presence of the Trinity living among us and binding us together. No we are not celebrating a doctrine today, but the active presence of a God who continues to pour out love on this communion of believers.

Barbara Brown Taylor (see below) quotes Robert Farrar Capon, who says that when we humans try to describe God it’s like a bunch of oysters trying to describe a ballerina. The mystics choose silence or exult in extravagant metaphors to describe their encounters with the Holy One. The God Moses meets on the mountains is revealed as “merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity.” This same God is also hidden in a cloud. Though what we say of God is woefully inadequate, the scriptures do try to name the mystery for those of us who grope in the dark---for us oysters.

Today’s gospel makes an attempt to picture God for us and so draw us into the divine mystery. Even if you are not a “chapter and verse” bible quoter, chances are you will recognize today’s Gospel citation for it starts with John 3: 16. If you have ever watched a foot ball game you have seen someone hold up a sign with that verse listed on it. Just as a kicker is about to kick the ball through the uprights, when the camera is focused on the goal posts and the fans behind it, someone stands up and flashes a sign saying John 3: 16 for the television viewers to see. I wonder how many people who see the sign know its reference? Perhaps even the church goes attribute the sign waving to a fringe group of fundamentalist Christians--- one of “those fanatics.” Most Christians intent on watching the game, beer in one hand, chips in the other, may even find it annoying or at least irrelevant to their lives this “John 3: 16 thing.”

But in this one verse is a summary of the gospel---- God is reaching out to us through Jesus, who is the full sign of God’s love for “the world.” We may not be

able to define God or click off all of God's holy attributes on this Trinity Sunday, but this much we know about God today---God is merciful, gracious and slow to anger. It is summed up for us in the Exodus reading and in our John 3:16 reference. Am I willing to let myself fall into the hands of this God, trusting the Sinai revelation? Or, no matter how I feel about myself, do I believe that John's testimony is reliable, something to lean on--- "God so loved the world ....?" Not just the generic, big picture world, but little ol' me, here on the small piece of real estate I occupy at this moment of time--- God loves me.

God's self description to Moses as "merciful" comes from a word that describes the feeling a pregnant woman has for the child in her womb or for the children born of her womb. That's the feeling the Trinity has for us today. That's the deep down love God had for us that urged God to send Christ to us and enabled us to hear, see and touch that love. John tells us that we are the recipients of this love, all of us---the entire world. So, God spares nothing, no effort is too much to make the point, even going so far as to give the Son into our hands. It's so incomprehensible, God reached into our world to be one with us and pull us out of the mess we were stuck in. This enfleshed love can come to any of us and transform us. In some strange way, no one is left out of this loving embrace of God revealed to us in Christ. To have been invited to accept love and to reject God's outreach is to reject a saving hand reaching out to pull us out of the mire in which we find ourselves---we ignore God at our own peril. Condemnation is our own decision, for to be cut off from God is to turn away from life. As we read today's gospel passage perhaps we are embarrassed by its seeming exclusivity, "God so loved the world that he(sic) gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." We moderns count an ethnic and religious diverse group of people among our friends and business associates. What about all these good people we know, some whose good works put us to shame, who aren't Christians? Are they going to perish if they don't claim John 3: 16 as their core belief? The passage is balanced by the clear proclamation that this love God has is for the whole world. About those people who have not accepted Christ or have not heard about him, and I am sure those who hold up the signs at football games will not agree with this, they are in the hands of the One who loves the whole world. God can figure out a loving way to include them.

But we gathered here for Eucharist today are those who are publically professing

the name of Christ. We believe the placard that says John 3: 16, whether we join those carrying the sign or not. This eucharistic celebration is God's holding up a sign to us. Do we see it? Here again, as Paul might say to the Corinthians, God's love is giving us the grace of Jesus Christ and through this meal, we are united in the communion of the Holy Spirit. This is what we know about the Trinity today--God has noted all and each of us and totally gives us the divine life to live in us. "Brothers and sisters, rejoice. Mend your ways, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you."

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Barbara Brown Taylor, *HOME BY ANOTHER WAY*, (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999). A collection of homilies for the church liturgical year preached and now published by a very gifted and creative preacher. Reading these homilies reminds one of the power of images and everyday examples to break open the imagination to the power of the Gospel message.

#### QUOTABLE

We have to make our preaching personal. That doesn't mean just telling stories about my last round of gold. It means being personal with Jesus, recognizing him as Peter did in Mark 8:29 as my Messiah, my personal savior, the center and most important person in my life. We preach not just a written word, but the living Word who spoke it.

Pray all week on how you can better preach him the following weekend. That means not just looking at the gospel and reading a few commentaries the day before. It means making that gospel and "he who is alive in it" alive in *you* all week. We preach the Word not from the book, but from our lives.

----Fr. Ron Luka, CMF (Quoted in *Celebration: An Ecumenical Worship Resource*, September 2000.

#### JUSTICE NOTES

In our times we are talking only to ourselves. We are not talking to the rivers; we are not listening to the wind and stars. We have broken the great conversation. By breaking that conversation we have shattered the universe.

----Thomas Berry, C.P.

#### 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.

#### **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](mailto:judeop@juno.com)