

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” EASTER VIGIL

Dear Preachers:

We have a rich diet of scriptures this evening! Let's pause for a momentary overview and notice their flow. Start with the creation account and the pair of humans who are given stewardship for what God has created. This is a perfect reading to address how well or poorly we have done in our care of what God has placed in our hands—the created world around us. With the daily extinction of plant and animal species throughout the world and the pollution of rivers, fields and air in our immediate environment, we must seriously ask if the original blessing God said over the humans in the garden has really taken! If it has, then why don't we share the Creator's love for everything God saw as “good.?” It is because sin entered the world and defaced the image and likeness of God that was created in each of us. We are in need of help.

God comes to help us and it begins with a call. Abraham and Sarah are God's called and chosen ones and from them shall come descendants who will “find blessing.” The third reading shows God's deliverance of the enslaved chosen people and reflects how God will deliver us from sin—through the parting-waters. Tonight's readings carry a strong baptismal theme. Hear the prophets Isaiah, Baruch and Ezekiel proclaim God's forgiveness and invitation to a wayward people to return to “the One who has become your husband....” If nothing else, the prophets make quite clear that God is crazy in love with us! Where shall we go for rebirth and renewal? Isaiah directs us, “All who are thirsty, come to the water!”

God's graciousness is the strongest message from these readings. This graciousness does not come because the people have been faithful. Based on their own merits, Ezekiel says, they would deserve nothing, for they have “profaned among the nations” God's holy name. “Not for your sakes do I act, house of Israel, but for the sake of my holy name....” God just continues to be loving and forgiving despite how we act, because God just can't help it. It's God's nature! And God is always doing what comes naturally!

This night the biblical waters will flow again as new Christians are initiated into our community. While we humans have taken some meandering paths since our creation that have turned us away from God's original blessing and plan for us,

tonight's readings remind us of God's faithfulness to us. We may not have deserved such a "crazy-lover", but God tells us through Ezekiel that, "for the sake of my holy name," God will not let us go. We hear in the readings God's ultimate act of love for us, the sending of the Son. Jesus shows by his life and message that God loves us despite ourselves. Even under threat of death, Jesus will not renege or back away from this message. Isaiah described it well, God would not give up on us, "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I send it." (fourth reading.)

The congregation will be somewhat fatigued by the evening hour and the length of the readings. But that is no excuse to omit the homily; just keep it focused and short. We will have ample opportunity to preach from several resurrection and post-resurrection accounts over the next weeks. I thought my preaching this evening would focus on the Romans text. It grabs my attention as it speaks about being "baptized into his death." What does it mean and what are its consequences for our life? No one talks about that at baptisms—"baptized into his death." Why not? Is it because it would turn off potential candidates? Is it because we want to stress the bright side, the resurrection and new life? Of course we do. But these Triduum days remind us that to get to the resurrection, Jesus had to pass first through his death. We need to have a dying of who we are and what we have been—we too need to pass through death to get to a new life, a new way of living.

In a manner of speaking, we were baptized first into the human experience—the waters of the womb was our first baptism. We were immersed into the human condition. It is our life and the only life we would have known. Besides its joys, there are the limitations, and the contagion we caught just by walking along with others in our condition. We catch the illness of the tubercular ward just by walking through it and breathing the air. Sin is in the air and we breathe it in from the first breaths we take—it is racism, sexism, aggressions, selfishness—you know the list. We have been breathing this stale and contaminating air all our lives. We have to stop breathing in this way and begin breathing in a new way.

We have, according to Paul, to die and have a whole new life. How can this happen? Paul has a special moment in mind when he speaks to Christians about having died. He is speaking about being "baptized into Christ." Paul sees Christ as a representative figure; he is the new human being (Adam). In 2 Cor. 5:15-15)

Paul's teaching reflects this representation model when he says that Christ's death was on behalf of us all—he died and so “all have died.” He died and we die by being linked to him in our baptism.

At a particular moment, our baptism, we died to sin. (Read back a few verses for this, 6:1-3) Baptism in the early church looked like a dying and a rising. Remember that immersion was the more typical form of baptism. To be immersed in water was to be “buried”—when you came up from the water you were “raised.” (Acts 8: 36-39) You stopped breathing when you went under the water. When you came up you took your first breath as an entirely new person, the way an infant takes a first breath at birth. This baptismal dying involved the ending of our past way of living. So, whereas we once lived in sin, now we live in a whole new life.

Notice the continual use of the expression used to describe who the baptized are: we are “with him”—with him through baptism, “with him through a death like his,” “crucified with him,” “died with him,” and “shall also live with him.” The words Paul uses to describe being “grown into union with him” literally translated means, “grown together with him.” It is like a grafting. We are now, through our baptism, grafted to Christ; growing together with him. We were buried in death with him and so we will be raised with him. The final resurrection is still in the future. We are very aware this new state of union, grafting into Jesus, is far from a perfected state. We are in the in-between time, awaiting what Paul assures us will come, “we shall live with him.”

And so the human struggle against the “bad air” of sin continues. It is an atmospheric pollution in our lives; hard to take a breath without breathing it in. But we are not on our own. We first of all have a new life in us and Paul reminds us that, “Christ died to sin, once for all.” That means that, though sin killed him, it did not defeat him. He triumphed over sin in his lifetime, and he won the final battle over sin at his death. Now his new life contains that victory and our being grafted to him passes that victory to us. The union brings his resurrected life with its power over sin to us. Now we live directed and energized by a new life force. We look to the completion when, because of our union with him, we will be “united with him in the resurrection.”

QUOTABLE

Christianity is not merely a religion that was marketed well with just the right political spin by gifted writers. It is a living, breathing, ongoing conversation

between God, humanity and all creation empowered by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Without the resurrection, there would have been not Christianity, no Christendom, no hymns, no seminaries, no churches and no nativity scenes. Jesus lives, not in the sense that King Lear or Hamlet or Handel's Messiah live on in the hearts and minds of the people, but in the sense that something totally new has happened and keeps happening. The resurrection is the ultimate breakthrough of God into our world that transcends all nature and history.

Without it, we wouldn't care one whit about Bethlehem and the manger, which is why every year my wife and I try to send Easter letters instead of Christmas cards and I congratulate all the once-a-year visitors for choosing Easter above all others.

At least they picked the right Sunday to come!

—William J. Carl III, in "The Living Pulpit" (January-March 1998)

JUSTICE NOTES

Justice Reflection for EASTER

Connie Schoen, OP (Promoter of Preaching, Oxford, Michigan)

One of the greatest preaching challenges is to proclaim Easter Resurrection in the midst of world history. We can be enticed to a place of comfort too easily and too soon. The Christian church celebrates and places all of its hope in Jesus the Christ, risen from the dead. We proclaim a God of life whose love cannot be pierced, shattered, or destroyed by even the most grotesque and obscene forms of evil and darkness. There is nothing and no one beyond the embrace of God, pure love. In the face of Divine love, not even death can prevail.

Peter recounts how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power as he went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil. Jesus' life reflected the very compassion of God. Jesus' life reflected God's deepest desire for the salvation, the wholeness of all of humanity. We might remember, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" The Resurrection is God's final and definitive answer to our every imaginable fear.

The truth of the Resurrection and its deepest meanings unfold as we go with Mary

Magdalene to the tomb, while it is still dark, and see the stone removed. Yes, we rejoice and shout alleluia because Jesus is risen. But, even more, we are to recognize the power of the Risen One to move away the stones from our tombs. Lest we succumb to the notion that the "Resurrection" is an ancient event, we proclaim and claim, again and again, God's anointing so that 21st century disciples too, go about doing good. The good that is called for is nothing less than the radical undoing of every conceivable act, word, and thought of violence. Those who "see and believe" as John did, are awakened to the insanity of the deaths of 5,000 Iraqi children every month, grieved by the absurd inconsistency of "pro-life" and "pro-death penalty," anguished by the death of innocence as a handgun wielding 6-year-old bears the disfigured marks of his adult role models.

St. Irenaeus once said that "the glory of God is the [human person] fully alive." Resurrection is participation in the glory of God; resurrection is life in all its fullness. We search and keep vigil, like Mary Magdalene, until the darkness gives way to the fullness of dawning light and the good, which God has prepared for us in Christ Jesus, moves the stones of fear and death. There shall be no more violence on God's holy mountain.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP
FrJude@JudeOP.org