

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 3rd SUNDAY OF EASTER (B)
Acts 3: 13-15, 17-19 Psalm 4 I John 2: 1-5a Luke 24: 35-48
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I am sure you have noticed by now that the first readings these Sundays are taken from the Acts of the Apostles. That will continue to be the case right up through Pentecost Sunday (May 31st). This provides a good opportunity then, to preach at least once from Acts during these weeks. I am sure it will be a rare treat for our hearers and certainly a stretch for us preachers if we were to focus on Acts, at least once. Let's try it.

In a way it is unfortunate during the Sundays after Easter that we have dropped our first readings from the Hebrew Scriptures and not made Acts the second selection. The possible consequence of singling out Acts is to detach it from its Old Testament roots. Just a cursory glance at today's readings, for example, will show how reliant Acts is on the Hebrew texts for its historical, literary and religious background. Disconnected in this way Acts can give the impression that is merely an instruction manual on how the church should be organized and behave as a community.

Acts is also more than an idealized or romanticized view of first-generation believers. Instead, we see throughout Acts the early signs in the community of the presence of the kingdom of God – hoped for by the Jewish people, preached and fulfilled in Jesus. When Luke's first volume, his gospel, was coming to a close, Jesus referred to the prophetic literature that pointed to himself. "Beginning then, with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted for them every passage of Scripture which referred to him" (24:27). Peter draws on similar biblical texts when he tells those who witnessed the cure of the cripple beggar at the temple's Beautiful Gate, "...God has brought to fulfillment what God had announced beforehand through the mouth of all the prophets..." Thus, there is a truth to what people say: for a fuller understanding of Acts, we have to be readers of the Old Testament as well.

Peter is announcing what the whole Acts of the Apostles also proclaims: the time of fulfillment has arrived. So, Acts is through and through connected to the Hebrew Scriptures. The first-generation Christians believed in the resurrection of Jesus and that with him a new age had arrived. The old order of injustice and

inequality was passing away. Through Jesus' resurrection God was creating a whole new people, emboldened and fired up by the gift of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus. The opening chapters of Acts quickly demonstrates the abiding presence of the Spirit in the community (2:1). Things "ain't what they used to be." No kidding! Jesus is risen from the dead and his followers are already showing signs of his life and powers – witness today's reading!

Peter, accompanied by John, has just cured the crippled beggar. Lest the beggar and the awed bystanders think the man's cure was by any other force, or by Peter's own powers, Peter stops to speak a word. As Mary Catherine Hilkert, OP has shown (cf. below), Peter is "naming grace": he is calling attention to the very active presence of God who has reached out to heal. Peter is also doing what preachers are called to do: with the sight the scriptures provide, we look at human situations and point to God's presence, showing how God is doing now what God has always done – coming to help us in our need.

Peter is quite clear about who this God, working through the "acts" of the disciples is: "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors...." This is the same God, Peter says, who also gave us Jesus, "the author of life." In his preaching Peter connects the dots: from the "God of the Old Testament" to the "God of the New Testament," revealed in Jesus. He reminds us that, in fact, God is not divided between "old" and "new;" – i.e., once angry, now benign; once punishing, now, thanks to Jesus, merciful. No, instead, Peter explains that God, in Jesus, has now "brought to fulfillment" what God had "announced beforehand" through the prophets. We preachers have a lot of work to do to obliterate those old divisions; that split personality we have given God. Honestly, it sometimes sounds as if God had a change in personality at the end of the last book in the Hebrew Scriptures and decided to act kindly towards us in the New Testament!

There have been a lot of charismatic leaders in history who have drawn large followings. Some have been cult leaders whose devoted followers have done some extreme things in the name of their leader. But, most often, when the "inspired" leader dies, the followers soon disband. Not so with Jesus' followers. In fact, after his death his disciples became emboldened, went out and proclaimed publicly that Jesus was the long-awaited one sent by God. They preached that he was God-made-flesh and was risen from the dead. Jesus' spirit now animated his followers. The once-weak and scattered band now coalesced into a very public and

witnessing community to their Risen Lord. As we see in today's reading from Acts, Jesus' disciples were doing in his name the very things he did – reaching out to the needy and healing the sick.

Soon after healing the beggar and giving today's address to the crowds, Peter was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin for his preaching and healing in Jesus' name. Disciples, who once denied Jesus, are now publicly proclaiming him as the Christ, the Anointed sent by God.

Peter refers to Jesus as “the author of life.” We take Peter's words to heart and call on the “author of life” to anoint us, his disciples, so that we can: raise up life when it is broken; work for peace when there is conflict; protect life when it is threatened; nurture it when it is frail or young; support it when it is faltering; gather it into a community when it is scattered or divided; encourage it when it is dispirited; accompany it when it is lonely and celebrate it whenever and wherever it rises from death to life.

Finally, Peter and the other disciples will do something very paradoxical. They will accept martyrdom for their faith in the risen Christ. Those who abandoned him when he was captured in order to save themselves, will henceforth offer their lives in memory of the “author of life.” And more: followers of the Christ will not be afraid to engage the world in life issues concerning: the unborn, those on death row, the dying, permanently impaired and anyone cast out of the community for being “different.”

Who is this Easter God we celebrate and profess our faith in today? Peter has told us: God is the God of our Jewish ancestors, who is also manifested in Jesus, the author of life who nevertheless died for us and was then raised from the dead.

Those early Christians did as we do today. They didn't just celebrate the Lord's Supper to recall the past when Christ had once walked among them. They celebrated the meal to experience Christ's presence with them at table as they proclaimed scripture and shared the bread and wine. Which is what we are doing today with the Risen Christ in our midst and the Holy Spirit forming us as a community and sending us to do as Peter did – reach out to those in need and show them by our deeds and words that Christ is truly present among us. The time of fulfillment is at hand.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Hilkert, Mary Catherine, O.P. Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination. New York: Continuum, 1997. ISBN 0-8264-0925-3

Provides a solid theological background and spirituality for a Catholic perspective on preaching. But is also deeply conversant with Protestant theology. In addition, women's experience of the Word and the effects of social location on hearing and preaching are also explored.

QUOTABLE

[Mary Catherine Hilkert commenting on today's passage from Acts]

Only after preaching through concrete action does Peter deliver his formal sermon. He starts with the concrete event the community has just witnessed: "People of Israel, why do you wonder at this? Why do you stare at us as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" (Acts 3: 12). First, Peter describes the experience of salvation that has happened in their midst, and only then does he speak of the power of God. That is the art of any ministry of the word: to speak the name of God neither too soon nor too late. As preacher, Peter interprets what has been operative in the depths of the community's human experience; he points to the power and presence of God. He names grace.

—page 45.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. "Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From the Acts of the Apostles:

Peter said to the people.... The author of life you put to death,
but God raised him from the dead;
of this we are witnesses.

Reflection:

After curing a crippled beggar, Peter announces what the first generation of Christians and we believe: Christ is raised from the dead and a new age has dawned. The old order of death is passing away. Jesus is alive and his followers are showing in their words and actions bold signs of his healing presence working with

them.

So, we ask ourselves:

- Can I name some ways I witness to my faith in the risen Christ?
- How am I a sign to others of Jesus' healing presence in the world?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Jesus was made known to the in the breaking of bread."

(Luke 24:35)

Today's Gospel tells us that after the Resurrection, "Jesus was made known to his followers in the **breaking of bread**." We are made in the image of a God who, in the person of Jesus, responded to the desperation of the sick, the poor, the stranger, and the **broken**. It is the vocation of *all of us* to break open our own lives, to share our very selves in all our brokenness as Jesus broke and blest and shared the bread and declared it His own body. The words of Jesus call us to pour out our very selves, to pour out our lives as Jesus poured out his blood.

This "**breaking and sharing of bread**" is about being part of the Body of Christ in such a real and wonderful way that at each Mass we are commanded by the words "*Do this in memory of me...*" to see each and every one in the church and in our families and in our lives as part of this **broken** body of Christ. We are called to be "**bread**" for each other, and especially for those most in need.

Did you know?

Even the youngest members of our community are aware that we are called by Jesus and His Gospel to share with those in need. Over the past months, a number of our parish children have given donations to the Door Fund. We want to thank them especially in this column. They are making Jesus "known in the breaking of bread".

§ Olivia had a lemonade stand and donated the money she made to Sacred Heart's *Door Ministry* with the words: "*I love you*" attached to her gift.

§ Evan gave a donation "*to the poor*".

§ Jonathan gave a gift of \$5.00 and some small toys. His gift was accompanied by the words: "Dear Friend, *I hope you have fun with the toys. Love, Jonathan*"

§ We also received a gift of \$2.00 in a Door Fund envelope from Brandy.

§ Other children offered gifts and love but with no name to identify them. We want to thank them as well.

What can I do?

§ Join Olivia, Evan, Jonathan, Brandy and the other generous children in our parish in breaking open your life and sharing your gifts and resources with those most in need through serving in one of Sacred Heart's many outreach ministries or by giving a donation to Sacred Heart's Door Fund which is the single source of help for those who come in their need to our parish door. Envelopes marked "**Door Fund**" are in the back of the church.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Charles P. Bond #0036850 (On death row since 3/24/95)
- Thomas M. Larry #0233526 (4/28/95)
- Darrell C. Woods #0497100 (5/22/95)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you. -

"Blessings on your preaching" - Jude Siciliano, OP - FrJude@JudeOP.org

