

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 4: 8-12 Psalm 118 1 John 3: 1-2 John 10: 11-18
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I would like to comment briefly on the first reading, then go to the gospel and provide a current application. Then I will give a few thoughts for today’s celebration of Mother’s Day. A lot is happening today, don’t try to get it all in. If you want, you could address Mother’s Day by a blessing for all mothers and surrogate mothers in the congregation, after the preaching. I have included a blessing for mothers I like a lot. You may find it useful. Thanks to Elyse Marie Ramirez O.P., for the additional justice reflection she provides this week.

The Acts reading is out of context, if you preach from this reading, you may have to provide some background. Peter and John have cured a lame beggar at the temple gate. The cure attracts a crowd and Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin to defend their actions. There is no question that the cure happened, the issue is, “in whose name” did it happen? The Sadducees are most upset. While the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of the world, the Sadducees didn’t. The apostles are claiming the cure “in the name of Jesus the Nazarene whom you crucified, whom God raised.” They are emphasizing the resurrection and thus incurring the wrath of the Sadducees and the other members of the Sanhedrin. Notice the low regard the Sanhedrin members have for the apostles, “By what power or in whose name have men of your stripe done this?” The unschooled and rustic Galileans are confronting and challenging the powerful religious leaders. Maybe this is a sure sign of the risen Christ, the transformation of once cowardly disciples into bold people who speak out as witnesses to their risen Lord. The easily-skipped-over-opening phrase of the reading gives the source of the transformation. Peter is “filled with the Holy Spirit.” That makes all the difference and explains the transformation.

Recall the old saying, “If it were against the law to be a Christian, would there be any evidence to arrest you?” The apostles did a good deed, very much like the ones Jesus did in his lifetime; they cured a person. Like Jesus, they were also challenged as a result of the cure. The Acts of the Apostles really could be called the “Acts of Jesus...Continued.” Through the apostles the deeds and words of Jesus continue—now multiplied by as many as are baptized and follow his way. Would there be any signs in our deeds and words to give evidence to our faith in

Christ? Would that evidence be so obvious we too might suffer arrest... if it were against the law to be a Christian?

Because of the gospel, in some traditions today is called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” In my preaching travels I meet lots of shepherds. They are priests, ministers, deacons and religious women and men, who staff parishes, retreat centers, university chaplaincies, halfway houses, etc. But there are many less “official” shepherds who also “tend the flock.” Lay people create and direct programs for youth, outreach to the poor, train lectors and eucharistic ministers. They lead choirs, tend to parish finances and administer whole parishes. We do not lack for shepherds in the church.

These shepherds, like the Good Shepherd whose voice they hear, lay down their lives for their sheep in sacrifices of time and money in order to minister among God’s people. All are shepherds of the flock. Many of these shepherds reach out to other Christian denominations (of other “folds”) and participate jointly in ecumenical programs. They truly are helping us become one flock under one Shepherd. Other shepherds I meet, reach out to the unchurched to welcome them into our community. I think of all the “greeters” at church doors who welcome both familiar and new faces and thus help further the process of our becoming one community as we gather in the name of Jesus. All this shepherding energy in the church! Where does it all come from? but the Good Shepherd who has laid down his life for his sheep? The Spirit of this Good Shepherd is constantly calling shepherds to serve in the church, the flock he guides still? If the Good Shepherd tends to his flock by keeping watch over them, feeding and guiding them along right paths, clothing and healing their wounds then, judging by the signs of the shepherds I meet, he is doing so in myriad ways still. The preacher may find the naming and acknowledging of these shepherds in the community a way of proclaiming the risen Lord in our midst. He has not abandoned his flock, just look around!

Mother’s Day

Be careful in liturgical celebrations and preaching on this Sunday not to let Mother's Day overshadow the Easter Celebration. A word about the origins of Mother's Day might help keep our references about mothers from becoming sentimental. Also, there is a national Mother’s March on Washington on this day and the link can be made to the origins of Mother’s Day and this mothers’ event

today. As we make these references, we do not lose sight of the scriptures from which we preach.

From the "Sourcebook" published by Liturgy Training Publications:

"In 1872, Julia Ward Howe, the author of the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," made an eloquent appeal for an annual Mother's Day for Peace:

'Arise, all women who have hearts, and say firmly: Our husbands shall not come to us reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.'"

In the first years when Mother's Day was observed in Boston, many women gathered to mourn the war dead and to devise strategies for peace. This observance did not catch on anywhere else, but 35 years later Anna Jarvis of Philadelphia asked her church to hold a service in memory of all mothers on the anniversary of her own mother's death. Faced with the power of the women's suffrage movement, male politicians espoused this version of the day as a way of enshrining a more traditional view of motherhood. In 1914 President Wilson proclaimed the second Sunday of May as Mother's Day. We might choose Howe's version of the day as we refer to Mother's Day in our preaching. We can't perpetuate the restricted sense of mothers in domestic and private spheres, especially with the working mothers, both single and married in our congregations. We might also include women who have been surrogate mothers to us: godmothers, aunts, older sisters, religious educators, nuns and sisters, etc.

What the women in the congregation need from the preacher today is an acknowledgment of their dignity and power and even their ability to influence national policies. Every year 5,000 children die to gun deaths. Each day 12 more children die. Pertinent to the origins of Mother's Day as a resistance and protest to violence, is the "Million Mom March." This Mother's Day people from across the country will gather in Washington to say clearly:

"Guns do kill and too many of our children are dying. We want to see meaningful gun policy and sensible gun laws enacted to address the problem of gun violence in America....We are Moms from all walks of life who are sick and tired of the gun violence directed at kids and often by kids. We are mothers and others who have lost kids, husbands, siblings and friends because of the easy access to guns in this country. And we are Moms who have never lost anyone to a gun...and we want to keep it that way "

This march is endorsed by national faith communities. I think the march also links to the Good Shepherd image in today's gospel. Here are other shepherds leading us in the spirit of the One who came to bring his peace to the world.

If you want to have a blessing for mothers on this day, here is one by Edward Hays
(PRAYERS
FOR THE DOMESTIC CHURCH: A HANDBOOK FOR WORSHIP IN THE
HOME, page 80)

BLESSING PRAYER FOR MOTHER'S DAY:

God of Love, listen to this prayer.
God of Holy People,
of Sarah, Ruth, Rebekah;
God of holy Elizabeth, mother of John,
of Holy Mary, Mother of Jesus,
bend down Your ear to this request and bless the mother of our family.

Bless her with the strength of Your spirit,
she who has taught her child/children
how to stand and how to walk.

Bless her with the melody of Your love,
she who has shared how to speak, how to sing
and how to pray to You.

Bless her with a place at Your eternal dinner table,
she who has fed and nurtured
the life that was formed within her
while still helpless but embraced in her love.

Bless her today,
now, in this lifetime,
with good things, with health,
Bless her with joy, love, laughter
and pride in her child/children
and surround her with many good friends.

May she who carried life in her womb

be carried one day to Your divine embrace;
there, for all eternity,
to rejoice with her family and friends.

This blessing and all graces, we pray,
descend upon the mother of our family:
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (B) PREACHING JUSTICE
—reflection by, Elyse Marie Ramirez O.P. (Promoter of Preaching, Dominican Sisters, Springfield, IL)

Indeed, the heart of justice is compassion. Transformation of this world and its present order is at the heart of justice. No "us" and "them", only "us". The shepherd, the hired man, the sheep, the wolf...all "us".

The good shepherd, the hired man, the wolf. Two images of commitment to the gospel of compassion: are we more the one "hired" or the "good shepherd"? At what cost does compassion catch our hearts? Where do we go to hear the call of the sheep? Is our world inclusive enough to hear the calls of each sheep? Just some sheep? The whole flock? Can we hear the call of the ones left in the margins? The ones easily ignored, disenfranchised, stereotyped? Do they know my voice? Do I know theirs? Do I know God as compassion to such a degree that I know the call when I hear it from the sheep in distress? The sheep who is hungry? The one who is alone? The one imprisoned by the thorns and brambles of gender, unemployment, abuse, and more?

The one hired...has a limit to her compassion, a limit to his tolerance. The one hired has a limit to the self-invested in the risks she is willing to take, the judgement he is willing to receive. The one hired is waiting for a better day when the work is done...the responsibility over. The one hired does not understand the absolute transformation of the heart of compassion. The one hired just can not believe it is really possible in abundance and abandon. There must be limits to compassion.

The wolf...is there enough compassion even for the wolf? Does the good shepherd welcome the wolf, holding the sheep safely, does the shepherd offer a hand of concern, of care, of food, of acceptance to the wolf? Does the wolf transformed by

the act of compassion lay down with the lamb?

Ahh...we are reminded it is the Fourth Sunday of Easter. Easter...indeed all things are possible with God. Huge boulders roll away, tombs empty, fear becomes courage, wolves lie with lambs. Compassion in abundance.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you. -

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