

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 6TH. SUNDAY OF EASTER
ACTS 10: 25-26, 34-35, 44-48 Psalm 98 1 JOHN 4: 7-10 JOHN 15: 9-17
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

During the weeks after Easter the gospels have been about Jesus’ resurrection appearances to his disciples. But last Sunday and today one detects a shift. Now we are hearing words from Jesus’ farewell discourses at the Last Supper. Though we are still in Easter time, the words proclaimed to us are from the night before the crucifixion. Why? Possibly because Jesus’ discourse is about farewell, assurances, last instructions and promises----though the disciples were going to lose him in one way, the church and world would have him in another. In our liturgical celebrations these recent Sundays we are preparing to celebrate the Ascension, Jesus’ return to the right hand of God and Pentecost, the sending of his Spirit upon the church. We can take heart that Jesus, like a departing parent, has seen to the welfare of his disciples who are to remain in the world to carry on his work.

One thing is clear in the final discourses and in today’s section; Jesus promises to stay in relationship to his church. He did not come just for a period of time to get things started, go away and then return someday to see how we did. To put it in another way: he didn’t come to live a model human life for us to imitate and then leave us on our own to live up to his example. He isn’t up ahead at the “pearly gates” waiting for us to arrive and check out how we measured up to his splendid example. Will he let us in, or tell us that we failed to do as he told us?

We don’t just need a model of ideal behavior upon which to fashion our lives. We need a savior who, once having lived and died for us, will stay with us to guide and enable us to imitate his own living and dying. Today, as last Sunday, we hear the importance of “remaining” or “abiding” in Jesus. This staying in Jesus will be the way we can live his commandment of love. One thing is very clear in this discourse; we can live Jesus’ life because he graces us to do so. Without our relationship with him, we would be left on our own to do our best to follow his life and live his commands. And the truth is, on our own, we wouldn’t be able to live such a life. Without Jesus’ abiding, grace-giving presence, neither we individuals nor our church, can live the life he calls us to today: “love one another as I have loved you.” His love is the kind that lays down his life for another.

Some people think the church has gone soft since Vatican II. Now, they complain, all we hear is talk about love. They would prefer the stricter black and white commands they remember from their childhood. But we are not children. The teaching about love goes back to our Founder; it is not a recent innovation or a new-age trend. Jesus does lay down a commandment for us today, but he does so, he says, not as a master talking to servants, but as a friend to other friends. Servants follow rules, their lives are dictated by the one who holds authority over them. Jesus' religion isn't based on such a model. Instead, love is the foundation of our faith. We are assured we already have God's love; it is not something we must earn by minute adherence to a code of proper behavior. Jesus is asking us to live out of the realization of that love. We are his friends, he tells us, so now we go out and live like friends with one another. "Friends" in this context means "beloved ones." We need to live out of that description for we are the beloved disciples.

We apply various titles to ourselves as Jesus' followers: we may, at different times or under unique circumstances, call ourselves his ambassadors, apostles, messengers, servants, etc. These terms certainly apply and are used elsewhere in the scriptures. But at this moment, before his departure, he wants to make sure his disciples know they are his beloved, so loved by him that he will give his life for them. Farewell speeches are important moments in a great person's life. They are often written down by devoted disciples eager to remember what a great teacher considered important enough to leave behind. Jesus knows the world will be rough on those who follow him and his teachings. He wants them to know that, no matter how difficult things get, they are beloved. Their "success" in the world won't be by the ordinary standards of achievement, stature, property acquired, popularity, etc. They won't have the usual measurable signs which people normally associate with a successful life or project. Instead, what they and we have are his words, "As the Father loves me, I also love you...remain in my love."

I am sure we have preached this before, but it might bear repeating. People generally imagine the love Jesus speaks of is the love we feel for our closest friends, sweethearts and family members. But his word here for love is "agape" and that means something else. It has nothing to do with instinctual feeling that is stirred up by something attractive in another person or because that person is a family member. It doesn't even necessarily mean liking another person. Rather, it means being willing to go out of the way for others; acting for their good and wellbeing; coming to their aid when they need help—even at our own personal

expense. Jesus showed how far agape can take someone when he gave up his life for us. God's love for the world has nothing to do with our being intrinsically loveable in the ordinary sense of the world—or even likeable! Jesus' death on the cross is a perfect reflection of how God feels about us. God loved us, was willing to go out of the way to show us that love and acted for our wellbeing.

Another aspect of this “remaining,” or “abiding,” with Jesus is that in this relationship we will “bear fruit that will remain.” The advantage of using metaphors is that they have so many applications. “Bearing fruit” is one of those multivalent terms that can be applied in innumerable ways. In John's gospel bearing fruit refers to preaching and giving witness to Jesus by the love we show to the world. Though Jesus is leaving, his disciples have an on-going relationship with him, we “remain” with him and he with us.

What are the characteristics of this relationship with Jesus? Like any relationship it is maintained by communication; Jesus continues to pour out his Spirit upon us and we both receive and respond to the Spirit's presence. The response Jesus mentions in this passage is one of complete joy. We may be in a world that confuses us and, at times, seems to want to swallow us up; but remaining with Christ gives us the assurance of his presence and this produces joy, even in situations we would not describe as “happy” or easy. Just as the world did not conquer him, our abiding in him assures us we will be able to navigate life's waters even in stormy and difficult times.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

John J. Markey, OP, *Creating Communion: The Theology of the Constitutions of the Church*. New York: New City Press, 2003. Paper, 192 pages. ISBN 1-56548-179-8.

Starts with a review of Catholic theology of the Church prior to Vatican II, and then presents a contemporary ecclesiology, with emphasis on communion and community. This is a very good introduction to ecclesiology and accessible to the educated lay reader. The author holds great hope for the future of the church and the book could be used as a study for parish religious education groups.

QUOTABLE

Whenever we as human family or local church gather either in small or large

groups, to celebrate or to make plans for the future, or to search for God's truth for ourselves and our world, we need likewise to look around and to ask, "Who's missing? Who's not here who should be here?"

-----Mary O'Driscoll, O.P.

JUSTICE NOTES

Recently the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC) initiated a program called "eating is a moral act" which promotes the "ethics in food choices." The program is founded on the following ideas from Catholic Social Teaching applied to the agricultural environment and the American way of life. To eat better and to live more justly we should take note and follow:

1. Human Dignity---- support fair wages, healthy working conditions for farmers, farm workers, food workers.
2. Human Dignity---- eater have a right to nutritious food. Obesity is a public health issue.
3. Universal destination of goods----support fair distribution of profits, not food cartel control.
4. Integrity of creation----support humane treatment of animals; restrict factory farms.
5. Integrity of creation----protect the environment by the food you eat.
6. Common good----people around the world have a right to food security.
7. Common good----limit "food miles" and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
8. Subsidiarity----affirm local food production and local purchasing as a preference.
9. Solidarity----encourage fair trade practices
10. Option for the poor----provide nutritious foods for those who are hungry.

-----submitted by Carmen Mele, OP, Justice Promoter for the Southern Dominican Province, USA.

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:.....

- Joseph E. Bates #0023098 (On death row since 11/9/94)
- Glenn E. Chapman #0072845 (11/16/94)
- Daniel Cummings #0095279 (12/16/94)
- Marvin E. Williams #0443375 (1/25/95)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

READER'S RESPONSE

I believe we need to think of Social Justice in Resurrection terms. Will the 9/11 terrorists be denied resurrection even though they killed about 3000 people? Demonizing them, we would react in horror - such an evil act could not merit resurrection! And we have showed how evil that was by crushing Iraq - a war that would not have happened without 9/11. But reality is expressed by Peter in a recent Gospel: "...I know that what you and your leaders did to Jesus was due to your ignorance." (Acts 3:17) We must view the terrorists in the same way. Fueled by the injustices they saw being done to their people and devotion to a warped view of an Allah who would reward such destruction of evil non-believers, they willingly sacrificed their lives for what they believed was good. Looking in the mirror at our own hope and belief in resurrection are we so sure that we are so much better than the terrorists? Haven't some of our soldiers died in the service of a lie? Would we totally empty ourselves, sacrificing our lives for true justice? Are we so sure we know the mind of God when it comes to resurrection?

-----Garth Stanton

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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