

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 7th SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 1: 15-17, 20a, 20c-26 Psalm 103 1 John 4: 11-16 John 17: 11b-19

Dear Preachers;

[Many dioceses in our country will be celebrating the feast of the Ascension on this Sunday. We are posting this reflection from a previous year; in case your diocese is celebrating the 7th. Sunday of Easter.]

The Gospel this Sunday is another section from the Farewell Discourse. Jesus is preparing to return to God, and the disciples are left behind, soon to be scattered by Jesus' violent death. They will feel alone, even abandoned, afraid and confused. So, the discourse has his farewell words for them. This part of the discourse, from chapter 17, takes the form of a prayer by Jesus. It is an intimate moment the disciples share with him as they overhear his pastoral concern.

Because John's material is so dense, I found Fred Craddock's overview of this Section helpful. He divides the subject matter as follows: The apostles were given by God to Jesus (v.6); Jesus gave them the Word of God (vv. 6-8); they received that Word, believed it, and kept it (vv. 6- 8); they had not been corrupted by the world, for they were not of the world, which, in fact, hated them(vv. 9-16); even though one of them had gone stray, even that was within God's knowledge and according to Scripture (v. 12); just as Jesus had sanctified himself in total dedication to God, so were the apostles set apart (consecrated) for the truth (vv. 17-19); and the apostles had as their sole purpose the continuation of the mission that Jesus had from God, (v.18).... For those who, need to examine the credentials of the church's life and message, here is truth's pedigree: from God, to Christ, to the apostles, to the church. (PREACHING THROUGH THE CHRISTIAN YEAR B. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993, pgs. 277-8 ISBN 1-56338-068-4).

The world Jesus lived in put a lot of emphasis on group identity. People belonged to a group, it might be a family, tribe, city, or nation. They thought in group terms. In John's Gospel some of this group thinking shows in his use of the term, "the world." That's a "group against Jesus' group." The "world" in this Gospel, represents the forces against Jesus and his followers. Jesus' community (group) is under stress and soon will suffer the loss of its leader. Up until this point they have

held together and had meaning because of their commitment to Jesus. Now he is facing his death. He would no longer be with them, clarifying their vision, encouraging them, teaching them, redirecting them when they strayed from his way and holding them together, despite their obvious differences. They were losing their leader, would their group/community collapse? (For more on the customs and thinking of New Testament times I recommend: John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996. ISBN 0-8146-2287-9.)

Jesus is praying for his disciples, knowing what difficulties they will have to face. And the prayer is for us as well. He reminds them and us, that we have been called and consecrated. In the Hebrew tradition, to be consecrated meant to be set apart for a specific purpose. Things were set apart for use in the temple, but more importantly, people were set apart to do God's work. To be set apart doesn't mean we go into protective hiding, but that we realize we have been called and are to be agents of God in the world. We are "consecrated in truth." This sense of being consecrated was a repetitious theme of the prophets as well. The People of God were a consecrated, a chosen people. They were not to gloat and feel privileged but had a responsibility. They, and we as Jesus' community, must live out the responsibility of that call, that "consecration in truth." We are called to work for justice, peace, love and ethical behavior in the world. The forces against us belong to "the world" that Jesus mentions in his prayer and knowing the power of "the world," he is praying for us as we go out to bring his message.

It is evident from Jesus' words that he has planted something in us that gives us a different vision, a different way of being and acting. He has planted in us a Word that he has received from his Father. It causes us to see things in another light, to evaluate ourselves and others by Another's standard; a standard of love. Jesus doesn't want his disciples to pull out and start a nation on some distant island. He sends us equipped to go into the world and make a difference. The preacher needs to look for concrete examples of Christians living in the world that is according to another way and standard. The preacher, in other words, needs to put flesh on the notion of being "consecrated in truth." For example, the struggles of Northern Ireland have long contained stories of offenses of one side against another and then reprisals for the offenses. An Irish Methodist minister, Cheryl Jane Walter, tells a story that exemplifies being "in the world but not of it ."

A bombing of civilians in the town of Ennishillen, Northern Ireland in 1987, killed

many civilians. The IRA claimed responsibility, leaving no doubt of the perpetrators. A 20-year-old student nurse Marie Wilson, was trapped in the rubble with her father, Gordan. She asked him if he were all right, and clutching his hand said her last words, "Daddy, I love you very much." She was removed from the rubble but later died in the hospital. Gordan Wilson grieved for his 20-year-old daughter, yet he said he felt no ill-will. Indeed, he said he would pray for the people who planted the bomb. Normally reprisals are the response to such an act. Gordan Wilson's words of forgiveness defused the community's anger. Isn't that what it means to be in the world but not of it? And isn't that what it means to be "consecrated to truth" and, as Jesus prays in the opening of the prayer, protected by God's Holy Name?

Next week is Pentecost. We have been celebrating the Resurrection for seven weeks now, but it is hard to keep our Easter enthusiasm and commitment up for the long haul. We live in a society that claims a religious perspective; "one nation under God," but fails to live up to the "name" of God. We need Pentecost to seal our faith, to stiffen our backs against opposing winds, to help us persevere. And more than just "keep on keepin' on"----we need the Spirit to fill our lives with the joy that comes with being members of Jesus' community. For a joyful community is surely the sign of the presence of Christ in the world.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

AUTHENTIC WORSHIP, by Dennis C. Smolarski, S. J. New York: Paulist Press 1986.

This is a very helpful book for those of us who preside or are responsible for planning liturgical celebrations. It presents guidelines for good liturgical celebrations and then gives the rationale for each guideline. The following quote is an example of what one will find in this book.

QUOTABLE

Never proclaim God's Word from disposable missalettes or typewritten pages.

In the 1981 *Introduction to the Lectionary*, we read (#37):

Because of the dignity of the word of God, the books of readings used in the celebration are not to be replaced by other pastoral aids, for example, by leaflets printed for the faithful's preparation of the readings or for their

personal mediation.

Frequently pastors and people are caught in a mutual bind--readers are so poor that no one in the assembly can truly understand the proclamation of God's Word, so the church must be filled with missalettes. But that is no excuse for using the missalettes by the ministers of the Word. To read God's "two-edged sword" from a disposable missalette is like putting the Blood of the Lord into paper cups--most Catholics would be aghast at the latter but do not bat an eye at the former. Yet in the realm of symbol, both are equivalent. The Word of God is present in the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist and the containers we use for the Word of God is also present in the Scriptures proclaimed and we attest to that presence by using physical books indicative of our belief in the importance of God's Written Word in our lives. Nothing less will do.

One might also reflect on why we are not more sensitive to reading God's Word from an appropriate book. Once again, this may be a situation of *ex opere operato* still reigning supreme. Since the words said are the same, whether they are printed in a magnificent, well bound gospel book, or a newspaper print missalette, the "how" aspect is overlooked. In addition, the Catholic bias to seeing the only "real" presence of Christ as that which is in the Eucharist, causes our sensibilities to demand well-made and artistic chalices and plates encrusted with jewels, but at the same time to ignore the equally "real" presence of Christ in Scripture! (I do grant, however, that the scriptural real presence is of a theological different category than the eucharistic real presence, but both are still REAL.)

-----Pages 47-48 in, AUTHENTIC WORSHIP.

JUSTICE NOTES

African American children in "extreme poverty" hits record numbers

The number of African American children living in extreme poverty is at its highest level in 23 years, according to an analysis released on April 30 by the Children's Defense Fund. Despite several years of a booming economy, nearly one million African American children in 2001 lived in a family with an annual income of less than half the federal poverty level (disposable income below \$7,064 for a family of three). In early 2000, only 686,000 African American children were that poor, the study said, indicating that the economic circumstances of the United States' poorest black families deteriorated sharply from 2000 to 2001.

The CDF charges that the Bush administration plans to dismantle Head Start, block

grant Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, and slash and freeze crucial services designed to help these poorest children.

The Children's Defense Fund has been a consistent critic of the vast overhaul of the American welfare system carried out during the 1990's.

"The study shows that in the first recession since the welfare law took effect, black children who have the fewest protections are falling into extreme poverty in record numbers," Deborah Weinstein, the director of the division of the Children's Defense Fund, who oversaw the research that produced the study, told the *New York Times*. "So, as we consider our federal policies, are we going to help children who need help the most, or rich people who don't need help at all?"

While recent studies show overall poverty has declined among African American children, they fail to show the record-breaking increase in extreme poverty among these children. According to the CDF, further analysis shows that safety nets for the worst-off families are being eroded by Bush Administration policies, which cause fewer extremely poor children of all races to receive cash and in-kind assistance that could help out.

Children's Defense Fund President Marian Wright Edelman said the numbers are clear indicators that the U.S. must invest in children now instead of passing "irresponsible" tax breaks for the rich.

"It is shameful that one million black children are left behind in extreme poverty," said Edelman. "It is hard to be poor. It is harder to be an extremely poor black child in America when our President, who says we should leave no child behind, is proposing massive new tax breaks for the richest Americans."

-----from the Claretian webpage: "Salt of the Earth"

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:.....

- Jerry W. Connor #0085045 (On death row since 4/30/91)
- Charles Walker #0420511 (2/7/95)
- Isaac J. Shroud #0476925 (2/9/95)
- James E. Thomas #0404386 (2/24/95)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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