

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD (B) JUNE 1, 2003

Acts 1: 1-11 Psalm 47 Ephesians 1: 17-23 (Ephesians 4: 1-13) Mark 16:15-20

Dear Preachers:

During the years I preached in West Virginia I remember small towns, “up the hollows,” where there were churches whose ministers and members of the congregation, as a test of their faith, would plunge their hands into a box of rattlesnakes, pull one out and hold it before the congregation. Others would drink strychnine poison. Why not, isn’t that what Jesus is saying, in today’s gospel; believers will be able to do as we go about proclaiming the gospel? The rural communities that performed those tests of faith saw their ability to do these feats as a sign that the living Christ was in their midst fulfilling his promises to them. Some of the faithful were able to handle snakes and drink poison and survive. Their community supported them and celebrated their faith. Others suffered snake bites and the effects of drinking deadly poisons...some even died. But even then, their communities took the failure on themselves as a congregation, they didn’t fault the individual preacher or believer’s faith. They saw the failure as a sign that the whole community needed to turn more fully to the Lord.

I belong to a church community that interprets these signs of belief in another way. I hear in today’s gospel a promise that signs will accompany believers. In Jesus’ time there were large cracks between the human world, what we could see, measure and explain, and God’s. Illnesses and negative human conditions that were beyond their ability to explain or heal, were credited to evil spirits and demons. So, for example, a person suffering from mental disease was said to be “possessed.” Since the afflicted weren’t their usual selves, the community reasoned, it must be the fault of an outside and malevolent spirit possessing the person. Nowadays, science, modern medicine and drugs have filled in a lot of the cracks between what was once unknown, mysterious and frightening and is within the realm of the measurable and explainable. We have narrowed the void, answered a lot of “mysteries.” So, then, where is God in all this and what about Jesus’ mission and the signs he promises we will perform as a testimony to our faith?

Jesus tells us we will be able to “drive out demons.” New medical drugs can now alleviate schizophrenia and bi-polar disorders. But there are more powerful

demons medication can't deal with, that concerned Jesus and continue to require believers to confront and drive out. For example, the demon poverty: even in a wealthy country it grows and continues to victimize the young and elderly. The demon of ignorance: it holds people captive and locked in darkness, superstition and prejudice. The demon of war: it seduces the powerful into thinking that problems can be solved quickly by force. The demon of racism: a sometimes-subtle demon that even the so-called enlightened discover is still a part of our lives. The demons of homophobia, sexism and agism and all the other "isms" that permeate our institutions and churches. These are demons that may not be driven out with a prayer of exorcism. But they may be driven out by a prayer for conversion, a prayer to have our own hearts and attitudes changed; a prayer for wisdom, to know where and how we must get involved to do something; a prayer for strength, to keep us in the struggle against these demons over the long haul; a prayer for courage, as we face opposition; a prayer for hope, as we deal with discouragement and lack of quick progress.

Jesus says we will lay on hands to cure the sick. We do this in our prayers and sacramental anointing of the sick. (This might be an opportunity for the preacher to do a brief catechesis about the sacrament of the sick.) But we also show the sick and very old, who are often on the periphery of our communities that we want to stay in contact with them through visits and gentle touch—"laying on of hands." Several years ago, Vernon Jordan, a presidential aid was shot in the back. While acknowledging the expertise of the doctors who worked on him, he said what really saved his life, was the doctor who sat with him and held his hands—day after day. We lay hands on the sick in many ways. We stay by the side of someone struggling with illness, despair, loneliness, addiction, divorce and death. Someone said to me once, "I don't always know what I am to do—I just show up." That's a way of "laying hands on the sick"--- just show up.

That's also one way to face the powerful forces that surround us and need to be driven out; we "show up." The risen Christ acts through his disciples who show up, giving them: wisdom, when serious problems and issues arise; power, when we face the evil forces of unjust systems, policies and governments; a healing touch, when someone just needs a faithful presence standing with them in the valley of the shadow of death.

What are we doing here at this Eucharist? Are we holding a memorial service for someone long gone, who once inspired the world? Lamenting his absence saying,

“If only Jesus were here, he would know what to do.” No. We are celebrating the signs of his presence we have experienced in and through his community, the Word and the sacred bread and wine we eat at this meal.

The Acts of the Apostles starts with an injunction by the risen Christ to wait. I wonder if the activists in that early community weren’t frustrated by his directive. You can see that they were ready to get on with things---- and they would have gotten it all wrong. It’s their question that reveals their mis-direction, “Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?” Of course, they mean a purely external, politically and militarily dominant kingdom of Israel. No, they will have to wait for the baptism with the Holy Spirit, then they will know how and where to be Jesus’ witnesses.

He wants them to break free of their limited view, their biases and tendency to misinterpret the meaning of his life. What he also wants is that they witness to him far beyond the boundaries of Israel. They will, he says, have to be, “my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” For all this they will need help, so they must acknowledge their dependence on God and wait for God’s pleasure to pour that help out on them.

Jesus tells the disciples to “wait for the promise of the Father.” They cannot go off spreading the news of his resurrection on their own. They are a small, fearful community that has no power on its own and, as the Gospels showed, they have a tendency to get Jesus’ message all wrong. What’s more, they flee when things get tough. On their own they will be misguided, perhaps engage in ways that are not of Jesus. Haven’t we made some pretty big mistakes in our history about his message and in his name? Our history has tales of promoting our religion by forced baptisms and by trampling over the dignity and cultures of whole civilizations. And like the original disciples, we have been cowardly when courage and resistance to force was required.

So the disciples and we must “hold our horses,” restrain ourselves and wait for God’ promise to be fulfilled. What’s more, the fulfillment will come at God’s timing, not our own. We are action oriented aren’t we? We have our projects and plans, we want to get on with things. Even when our plans and intentions are noble and serve a good purpose, how does God figure into them? Do we know? Have we asked? Do we wait for an answer, some direction? Maybe we have to “hurry up and wait.” “Don’t just do something, stand there!” Waiting on the

Spirit is a reversal of our usual mode of operating.

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

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org