

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” The Ascension of the Lord May 23, 2004
Acts 1: 1-11 Psalm 47 Ephesians 1: 17-23 (Ephesians 4: 1-13) Mark 16:15-20
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

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.

We are not good at waiting. We tire out if we do not get quick results. Waiting on lines, for lights, for our children to come home from the dance with our aging parents at the doctor's office. These days we are particularly frustrated and tired of waiting for peace to break out in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East and innumerable places of conflict in our world. Waiting is not what we do well. Why is waiting so frustrating? Because it means someone else or some other power is in charge, not us. And being out of control and subject to other forces reminds us of our finiteness, and vulnerability.

Jesus tells the disciples to "wait for the promise of the Father." They cannot go off spreading the news of his resurrection yet. They are a small, fearful community that has no power on its own. 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 Christians made some pretty big mistakes about his message and ways? In our history are tales of promoting our religion by forced baptisms and by trampling

over the dignity and cultures of whole civilizations. We also, like the original disciples, have been cowardly when courage was required.

So, the disciples and we must “hold our horses,” restrain ourselves and wait for God’s 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.

Even as Christ talks to the disciples about their mission to the “ends of the earth,” Luke is making sure that we do not forget what had happened in Jerusalem. We recall the Emmaus story and the failed and frustrated hopes of the disciples on the road. “We had hoped,” they tell the Stranger. What they had hoped for was their version of triumph and success for Jesus —and themselves. But Jesus had to remind them, by interpreting the scriptures “beginning with Moses and all the prophets,” that suffering was to be part of his life and mission. Here, in today’s section of Acts, Luke reminds us again of that link between Jesus’ mission and suffering, when he says that Christ “presented himself alive to them by many proofs AFTER he had suffered.” Jesus and now the disciples, cannot escape the suffering that comes with fidelity to the message. Even in the presence of the risen Lord they are not far from the reality of suffering. So, for the disciples who will have to live out and proclaim the Good News, suffering will be the price they and we pay for our belief and for the mission.

We need to wait for the gift of the Spirit who sustains us when the going gets rough. We will be witnesses to Jesus by the integrity of our lives and the commitment to his ways. If we are faithful to what his Spirit teaches us at work, and with our families, in school and in the political arena, etc., there will be suffering. Or maybe worse, we will just be ignored, discounted as unrealistic and dismissed as impossible idealists. We will need the gift of the Spirit, and the wait is worth it.

Thomas Troeger, the Presbyterian preacher and homiletician, in a sermon preached on Ascension Day, recalls the frustration of the disciples and the early church in

their waiting and longing for the fulfillment of the reign of God. He says we too know that frustration. After having given our lives over to Jesus Christ, we experience not triumph, but a mixture of triumph and defeat. Has anything really changed? What difference does our faith make? “When will things come together in some whole and enduring pattern?” he wonders. And then Troeger quotes Yeats’ lines to describe our world:

“Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
the blood dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
the ceremony of innocence is drowned;
the best lack all conviction, while the worst
are full of passionate intensity.” (from, “The Second Coming”)

We are wearied by our waiting. With Yeats we voice our longing, “Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand.” It’s a lament, a prayer of need and dependence. We need help that we cannot provide for ourselves. Troeger invites us to hear again what the early church heard in its anguish and yearning, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by [God’s] own authority.” How difficult it is for us to hear these words surrounded, as we are, by the kind of events we see and hear on the evening news-- pictures and sounds of tens of thousands of refugees displaced by war and terrorism. What we have, Troeger reminds us, is the belief that Christ reigns and will send the Holy Spirit to help us live as we must. We cannot force the hand of this Spirit; it is a gift constantly coming upon us. And one that still requires waiting.

(Thomas’ Troeger’s sermon was preached in 1982 and is reprinted in, SEASONS OF PREACHING, pages 158-9.)

QUOTABLE

I am praying for Pentecost! It is not so much about people speaking “in a strange tongue” as it is about believers getting power to be faithful. The church does not need power to identify with the rich and privileged. One gets a subsidiary power from such an identification that makes the church at least a valuable adjunct of the values of the principalities and powers. One does not really need power (dunamis) unless one is standing in tension with the world as it is. If the church were to put the poor first, would we once again receive Pentecostal power?

Maybe we do not desire such power or the consequences of Jesus' liberation mandate. Yet, I cannot help hoping that such power would come and we would experience the power of the inbreaking, radical reign of God. Come, Lord Jesus, come!

—Keith Russell, "Pentecost: The Power of Liberation." The LIVING PULPIT, April-June 2004, page 13.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

International Facts on Hunger and Poverty

More than 840 million people in the world are malnourished—799 million of them are from the developing world. More than 153 million of them are under the age of 5.

6 million children under the age of 5 die every year as a result of hunger. Of the 6.2 billion people in today's world, 1.2 billion live on less than \$1 per day. The proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day has fallen from 29 percent to 23 percent in the past 10 years, although that masks significant regional differences.

East Asia has seen a drop from 28 percent to 14 percent.

South Asia has seen a drop from 44 percent to 37 percent.

Africa has seen a drop from 48 percent to only 47 percent.

The amount of money that the richest 1 percent of the world's people make each year equals what the poorest 57 percent make.

The richest 5 percent of the world's people have incomes 114 times that of the poorest 5 percent.

Malnutrition can severely affect a child's intellectual development. Children who have stunted growth due to malnutrition score significantly lower on math and language achievement tests than do well-nourished children. Virtually every

country in the world has the potential of growing sufficient food on a sustainable basis. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has set the minimum requirement for caloric intake per person per day at 2,350. Worldwide, there are 2,805 calories available per person per day . Fifty-four countries fall below that requirement; they do not produce enough food to feed their populations, nor can they afford to import the necessary commodities to make up the gap. Most of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa.

-----facts taken from the webpage of “Bread for the World.”

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

- Jeffrey Barrett #0021418 (On death row since 6/1/93(
- Norfolk Best #0030124 (6/7/93)
- James Campbell #0063592 (7/8/93)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”

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