

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” BAPTISM OF THE LORD -C-  
Isaiah 42: 1-4, 6-7 Acts 10: 34-38 Luke 3: 15-16, 21-22  
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Christians have struggled with Jesus’ baptism from the beginning. John was preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sin. What reason then would Jesus have to be baptized? Baptism was a ritual requirement just for Gentile converts to Judaism. So, John’s baptism was different; it removed privilege and exclusivity on the path to God. All are equal; all need forgiveness; all are God’s children; all are embraced in God’s merciful arms; all now have access to God. Jesus’ baptism identified him as God’s “beloved Son”—he is for all, not just for one class, nation, or religion.

What then would Jesus say about our own zealous nationalism that sets us apart from other nations and their concerns? What would Jesus say about the religious intolerance that is more and more vocal and strident, so easily dismissing other religious traditions? Or, about the huge and still growing gap separating rich nations from poor; rich individual from their poorer neighbors? What would Jesus say about our current political world where two major parties seem more intent on their internecine squabbles than on improving the conditions of the neediest in our society?

Faced with our individual and communal sinfulness, Jesus went down into the waters to be with us. He emerged to receive the Spirit’s affirmation as the chosen one, and to set out to bring to us the work of healing divisions. His Spirit, given to those who accept him, would indeed start the fire John promised. True, it wouldn’t look like what the Baptist was anticipating. But it would be hot and it would purify. The Spirit is hot enough to burn away the walls we construct to separate us from “others.” It could burn away the chill that lingers after we have been hurt and can warm us to forgiveness. The fire Jesus did come to ignite would put an intensity in believer’s hearts strong enough to maintain life-long commitments to struggle against war, poverty, hunger, homelessness, racism and all the chill evil causes to make our hearts and world so cold.

There is a shift in the intensity of today’s gospel. In the first part, we have the

“expectation” of the people. The prophet John got them excited—was John the messiah they had been hoping would deliver them? John himself is promising one who would, “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Fire is a rich biblical image, one meaning it has is, purification. In verses left out of today’s reading, John uses fire to describe how chaff is separated from wheat and burned—leaving the desirable wheat behind. What is evil will be destroyed and the fire John speaks of, would purge, not just individuals, but the community itself, to make it ready and worthy of God’s promises. It sounds intense and I can imagine the crowd’s excitement—maybe even its fear. When John speaks you can hear the crackling of the purging fires in the background.

When things are bad, when unbelief is rampant and it is hard to find support for our faith from the outside world, who wouldn’t want to call on an intense fire to destroy evil? But we also know from religious zealots, that fire in the wrong hands can burn and cause widespread pain. Maybe what we need is a fire to intensify, turn up the heat, on our own tepid faith. Bring on the fire! Help us, we pray, not be so wishy-washy in our prayer and faith practices.

Fire does come, but not in the way John anticipated. What a strange shift takes place in Luke’s story. Jesus appears, almost as an after thought. He comes to be baptized, Luke tells us, after all the people have been baptized, “...and Jesus also had been baptized....” Instead of bursting on the scene with trumpet, drum roll and flashing strobe lights, Jesus enters the water quietly. He is, it seems, just one of the people. He comes after they all declare their sinfulness and are baptized. Jesus seems much more like the simple, prayerful believers we have already met in this gospel: the elderly priestly couple Zechariah and Elizabeth; the aged Anna and Simeon, constantly at prayer in the Temple and Jesus’ own mother, who received God’s Word and pondered it in the quiet of her heart. These are quiet people with great spirits long schooled by the Spirit in waiting, acting and hoping.

Various reasons have been given for Jesus’ submitting to the ritual washing. Some think Jesus was manifesting a strong consciousness of sin and its effects on humans. Others, that Jesus was showing God’s approval of John’s ministry to the people. Or, Jesus may have undergone the ritual as a sign of unity with those outside the Law; his future death would free people from sin. (Later, Jesus will refer to his passion and death as a “baptism” he will undergo.) There are those who believe Jesus was a disciple of John and in accepting baptism Jesus was

taking the first step towards establishing his own ministry. He may have been taking the first steps away from John and on his own.

I think about Jesus' being in the same water the crowd had just left. He gets wet with water that touched them and what they left there with John's baptism. Think of what they brought down into the Jordan, what was clinging to them. Not just the sins; but the pain of their lives; the struggles against the big evils that surrounded them--- terrorism, crushing taxation by a foreign power and daily fears of unpredictable violence. What burdened their hearts when they went into the water? Did they wonder what God was doing to help them out of the mess of their lives— their dyings, the crippled children, the feeble elderly, the deaths from painful sickness? What about their feelings of inadequacy for not being able to provide enough food for their families or to protect them from the vagaries of daily life? Did they feel they hadn't done enough for God or taken God seriously enough? If this eucharistic congregation went down into the same water, what would we bring with us? Wouldn't we want Jesus to join us in the places we feel most frail, pained, inadequate and sinful? We bring a lot to this eucharist today. Jesus does not remain aloof from us, judging us from on high. He comes right to where we are gathered with all our burdens and takes them up into himself, as we wait for the Holy Spirit and fire.

The Holy Spirit plays an important role in Luke-Acts. We have already seen the activity of the Spirit in this gospel: the announcement of John the Baptist's birth (1:15); the overshadowing of Mary (1:35); in Elizabeth's praise of Mary in the visitation scene (1: 41-42) and in the promptings that brought Simeon to the Temple when the holy family arrives (2:27). At Jesus' baptism the Spirit descends on him and in the next verse (v.23) Luke tells us that Jesus "began his work." Now the Spirit swings into full-time labors for us in Jesus. The role of the Spirit in Luke-Acts is varied and hard to systematize into categories. What we do know is that God is active and moving on our behalf. What we also know, having heard Mary's "Magnificat," is that with Jesus' coming and the Spirit's work, the accustomed order of the world, its ways of thinking, its values and criteria, will be undermined. Powers, Mary says, will be overthrown, and what the world considers secure and certain, will be shaken. The world's powers will hear and see this message in Jesus and, in attempt to stop the Spirit's work, will put him to death, as it did with the other prophets. John the Baptist will be the first to feel the retaliation by the world's powers to what God has set about to do. The mid-

section of today's passage (3:19-20—omitted in today's reading) tells of John's arrest by Herod. The powers have begun to descend. They will do their best to stop this work God is doing. They will even seem to succeed—for a while. But God's Spirit will not be squelched.

How and where will that Spirit's works be evident? Jesus' own quiet entrance on the scene gives us a clue. God certainly has worked in spectacular ways; but if we look for spectacle we most often will be frustrated. Jesus makes an anonymous entrance that the crowd missed, even though they had been "filled with expectation." Even the voice from heaven is not a public broadcast, but a voice directed to Jesus. It will take the Spirit's gift of fire to burn away the veil over our eyes and our false expectations to purify us so that we notice Jesus' daily entrance—there among the ordinary, especially the downcast, people.

#### JUSTICE NOTES

##### UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS GENEVA

Message of Mr. Bertrand Ramcharan, Acting UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women - --25 November 2003

The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women takes place this year at a time when we are also marking the tenth anniversary of the Declaration and Program of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, adopted by the General Assembly in 1993. This triple anniversary provides both an opportunity to assess progress achieved in the advancement of women's rights and the actions still required to meet the challenges ahead. The Vienna World Conference was a watershed for women's human rights. It acknowledged that "women's rights are human rights". Shortly after the Vienna Conference, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing adopted a Platform for Action which remains a crucial landmark in the recognition of women's human rights. Some progress has been made in the development of human rights standards at the international, regional and national levels. A recent example is the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which received its 40th ratification at the end of September and will come into force on 26 December 2003. However, despite international commitments made by Governments to end violence against women, it remains an

endemic crisis in all regions of the world. Governments must provide the leadership to make the end of violence against women a reality.

The challenge ahead is to implement these standards on the ground and to save women's lives! This must be done through national human rights protection systems. Each country must strive to absorb and implement the international norms for the protection and promotion of women's rights and freedoms. Each country's constitution and laws should be reflective of international human rights norms and its courts should be able to draw upon those laws. Each country must take every possible step, in consultation with human rights defenders, academics and other experts to prevent, investigate and prosecute violence against women and provide support and remedies to victim-survivors of such violence. This duty to act with due diligence extends to violations by both State and non-State actors. Each country should provide human rights education, have specialized national human rights institutions, and should be monitoring the situation of women with a view to detecting key areas where resources are needed to prevent violations of their rights.

On this International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, I call on all Member States which have not done so to ratify or accede to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its protocol, and I urge governments and civil society alike to act on the recommendations made by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences; other Special Procedures of the Commission on Human Rights; and the UN treaty bodies. Protecting the rights and interests of women has never been more urgent, and is the responsibility of all of us. We must work together to confront and erase this scourge inflicted upon half of humanity! Women's lives depend upon it.

I make a special appeal for international mobilization against the trafficking in women. It is my strong hope that 2004 will see a rallying of conscience against this evil phenomenon.

#### 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:.....

Christene Kemmerlin #0564016 (On death row since 10/18/00)

Marcus D. Jones, Sr. #0217326 (11/9/00)

James L. Millsaps #0678436 (11/22/00)

Shan E. Carter #0486636 (3/19/01)

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

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

1. *CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>*

2. *I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)*

3. *Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)*

4. *"Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, Juan Torres, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)*

5. *"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.*

### ***DONATIONS***

*If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com>*

*Thank you.*

*Blessings on your preaching,*

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