

“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:

This feast marks the end of the Christmas season. Like Christmas and the Epiphany, this day manifests Christ to us. Today the baptismal font might be decorated to show the connection of this feast to our own baptism. It's also a day to incorporate the rite of sprinkling in the Mass. It is still appropriate to sing Christmas carols as well. The readings lend themselves to the celebration of this feast, for they say much about Jesus' baptism and the identity of the Lord revealed in his baptism. And, by extension, they also speak to our own baptism, our incorporation into the community of Jesus' followers.

The Isaiah reading comes from the time of the Exile. The people are in desperation, their lives completely displaced and they are in foreign surroundings. What happened to God's promises to be with them, to be their God? Israel has to reflect on its own behavior; it had not lived up to its calling to be God's people. After all, they were the "chosen" people and to be such not only entailed the special relationship they had with God, but called for a response. They, by their lives, were to be upright, to be a "light" to the nations, they were to live by the commandments God had placed before them. They had not, and in exile there seemed to be nothing left. Their condition was most miserable. They had fallen far from their chosen state.

But here in today's reading, one of the "Servant Songs", in Isaiah, God is renewing the pledge with them. God sees their desperate situation and has chosen one who is faithful to rescue them. Through this gesture God seems to be reconciling the people to God's self, they will see this servant as a reminder of the covenant, and a reminder of God's fidelity. Notice the healing suggested in the bruised reed imagery--this shall be God's gentle servant towards the broken. This servant will also be a light; the light image is often used to refer to teaching. The teaching of this chosen one will be light to those lost in their ways and in other teachings.

Of course, the Servant figure is also applied to Israel. Israel will be the same kind of people, a servant of God, chosen to be a sign of God's love for people who live in darkness. Our baptism makes us chosen ones as well, and we are called to reflect this relationship with God and God's concern for the world. As a new semester begins, the preacher might allude to our school teachers who bring light to the minds of the young and searching. You might also want to acknowledge teachers of faith, those who in the community, communicate the light of faith to both the young and adults in religious education programs. All who teach faith share in the identity of the Servant, they open eyes, they bring light into darkness.

The reading from Acts follows the emphasis on Baptism. (Read all of Chapter 10, to get a better sense of what is being said.) It is from Peter's discourse and it marks the acceptance of the Gentiles into the community of Christians. God shows no partiality. Many of the Jewish people,

chosen by God, responded with works that showed them to be a covenanted, clean, observant people. Their outward sign of their special place before God, was their strict observance of the Law, circumcision, the dietary practices and feasts. They had the outward assurances of their special place with God. Now Peter is suggesting the Gentiles, with no prior observances and no prior selection, are accepted by God. There truly is no partiality with God, no one is outside the favor of God now, everyone is welcomed to be baptized. The preacher might allude to the barriers that still seem to exist in our congregations; how we judge each other on external norms of lifestyle, economics, race, country of origin, etc. We claim a parish to be "ours" because our grandparents built it, and we resent recent arrivals and their "foreign" ways. This is not to be the way of those baptized into a new community formed by a God who shows now partiality or priority.

There are links in the Gospel with the first reading. For example, the word used for "son" is also equivalent to the Hebrew "my servant". Jesus' is the Servant we heard about in the first reading. Through him healing and salvation will be offered to all people. But, when John the Baptist refers to one "mightier than I", he seems to be expecting more than Jesus brings. When Jesus is first mentioned he is at prayer. Is that where his "might" will come from? John has been promising one who is to judge; yet we learn throughout Luke's Gospel of Jesus' less than powerful birth, his gentle ways with sinners and eventually his defeat in death. Out of this weakness his strength is manifested. The great act of power, his Resurrection, clearly shows God's approval of Jesus' way. His "might" is of a different type.

We will need to follow Jesus through this Gospel as it unfolds on the Sundays of this year to learn more about his might, through what appears to be weakness. As his mother Mary has already said of God, whose Servant Jesus is, "God has confused the proud in their inmost thought, ...and deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places." The Servant who will accomplish this has entered the scene in prayer and been appointed by the Spirit to fulfill the promises of God. The actual baptism is minimized, and John is not even mentioned. It's as if Luke is putting John aside and stating that with Jesus, God's promises are being kept and a whole new age has begun. What is stressed: Jesus was at prayer, the Spirit comes and Jesus' true identity is proclaimed. We have another epiphany of Jesus.

The context of this story helps us understand its meaning. After this scene, the genealogy of Jesus is given and it goes all the way back to Adam and then to God. This One is a true child of God, this is what God has in mind for all descendants of Adam and Eve. Next, Jesus is tempted in the desert---he resists the usual ways to popularity and power in favor of what he announced in the synagogue (4: 14 ff.). His will be a ministry to the poor, sick, imprisoned---the outcasts. A Christian, baptized into Christ, hears the same words: "You are my beloved child". Our lives take on the same direction as his; we resist the usual ways of power in the world in favor of lives lived in the presence of God, in service toward the oppressed.

Prayer punctuates Luke's Gospel. At crucial moments in his life and ministry, Jesus is at prayer. We see that at his baptism, but also when he chooses his disciples, at the transfiguration, prior to

his teaching to his disciples on prayer, at the last supper, in the garden, etc. Following the way of Jesus, that starts for us in our baptism, requires that we too be at prayer so that at our own, and the church's, crucial moments, we might be open to the Spirit. For Luke, the disciples have to pray so as to be enabled to live the life of Christ. From the beginning of the church's life, trials and persecutions will be an everyday reality. Prayer is what will help Jesus' followers persevere in their identity and mission.

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Waznak, Robert. Sunday After Sunday: Preaching the Homily as Story. New York: Paulist Press, 1983.

A well written book which focuses on the ministerial demands of frequent preaching. Discusses what's involved in creating a homily that houses three stories: God's, the preacher's and the listener's. A final chapter discusses the creative process as it applies to integrating all three stories in preaching. A very fine introductory book which also helps demonstrate the connection of narrative theology to preaching.

#### QUOTABLE:

The society to which we belong seems to be dying or is already dead. I don't mean to sound dramatic, but clearly the dark side is rising. Things could not have been more odd and frightening in the Middle Ages. But the tradition of artists will continue no matter what form the society takes. And this is another reason to write [to preach?]. People need us, to mirror for them and for each other without distortions-not to look around and say, "Look at yourselves, you idiots!," but to say, "This is who we are."

(Ann Lamott in, "**Bird by Bird**", p. 234)

#### 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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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