

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” Feast of the Holy Family -C-

1 Samuel 1: 20-22, 24-28 Psalm 84 Colossians 3: 12-21 Luke 2: 41-52

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today's gospel has a familiar ring. We have heard stories of famous people who showed precocious signs of future greatness while they were still young. Jesus, while still only twelve, declares his primary allegiance. He is to be in God's house, God's work will be his life's work. Jesus belonged to an observant Jewish family and so his parents take their firstborn to the Temple in Jerusalem. They are teaching him his Jewish heritage. St. Luke is brief about something that must have seemed like an eternity for Mary and Joseph--- for “three days” they search for their missing child. Read into that succinct narrative the anguish Jesus' parents must have felt searching for their son. What parent has not had a hint of that feeling when turning around in a mall they notice their child has wandered? How much greater the anguish experienced by those parents whose child has run away, or made decisions they were much too young to make, with consequences that may last the rest of their lives?

Parenting has profound joys and more than its share of worry, fright and anguish. I can only imagine the relief Mary and Joseph felt when, at last, they found Jesus. Mary's statement to him, about his parents having “great anxiety,” gives us a clue what the parents were feeling. The original Greek for “anxiety” suggests severe mental distress, sadness and intense anguish. For example, in Luke, it is the same expression used by the rich man who, having ignored the beggar Lazarus at his gate, winds up in hell begging Abraham for a drop of water to cool his tongue. He says, “. . . For I am in *agony* in these flames” (Lk. 16: 24). In Greek, “agony” is the same word Luke uses when Mary tells Jesus, “Your father and I have been looking for you with great *anxiety*.” Mary's tone sounds like what one would expect from a parent who has just gone through “great anxiety”— she is correcting Jesus. But his response isn't the humble request for forgiveness we might have expected. Instead, he seems to reproach them for their worry. Jesus, as Luke depicts him here, is a young man finding his calling for life. He will be about God's business and his choice of vocation will take him outside the influence of family and village.

Jesus's response doesn't clarify the matter for Mary and Joseph; they “did not understand what he said to them.” The call he has heard, “to be in my Father's house,” and to dedicate himself to God's ways, is exactly right for him---- and for us. But we can't ignore the mystery. That call will require him to be faithful to it all the way to his death. Others in religious and political power will take such exception to the way he lived out his vocation they will seek his death. This is just the beginning. Jesus will always cause continued questions and anguish for his parents, most especially for Mary, when she stands, wonders and grieves at the foot of his cross.

Let's look at the context of the passage, this may help in our interpretation. Luke begins his gospel with a two-part prologue (1:5-2:52). The first part (1:5-2:40) appears in the lectionary readings during Advent, the Christmas celebrations and on the feast of the Immaculate

Conception. This part of the prologue is about Jesus' origins. The second part (2:41-2:52) is much shorter and relates to his destiny. He will return to God. Hence, today's selection begins to show this destiny when Jesus says his place is in his "Father's house." Through this liturgical year Luke's gospel will follow a similar division. The first part will be about the origins of the Christian community in Galilee (4:14-9:50). In the second we will travel with Jesus to Jerusalem and discover our destiny with him.

There is a painting of the Holy Family I once saw, I think it was done by George de la Tour. It shows Joseph in his carpentry shop where he is teaching carpentry to the young Jesus. They are working on two pieces of wood that form a cross beam. De la Tour is suggesting the early appearance of the cross in the gospel. The artist depicts the same thing Luke is showing us. Earlier in the Gospel Luke tells us that the Spirit of God "overshadows" Mary enabling her to become the mother of the savior. This young, unlettered peasant girl discerns the voice of God and responds in the affirmative to God's will, becoming a partner with God in the work of redemption. Her "yes" began the story of God's taking flesh—but it also turned her world upside down. Her "yes" to God's ways required personal sacrifice. We begin to see today some of the consequences in her life to her consent to God. She must undergo the suffering of a parent whose son's ways cause her pain and questions. Besides the Spirit's presence in her life, the cross is also showing signs of its presence. We know that through Luke's gospel the cross "overshadows" Jesus' life—but we begin to see that it overshadows the family's life as well. It has already begun to show itself as Jesus chooses a way of life that will bring suffering before it brings new life. Luke tells us that the parents "did not understand what he said to them." They, like Jesus' disciples ---and we as well--- will have to walk by the light of faith that enables them to trust God, even when an answer to problems and pain is not immediately forthcoming.

Growing up I heard too many sermons that waxed eloquently on "the Holy Family." Preachers imagined an idyllic family that made me feel my loving family fell short of the ideal painted by the preachers. Painted images of the Holy Family in church and home only helped reinforce the unreality and distance between them and the families I knew. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in their immaculate, but simple home, seemed so peaceful, clean and starched. I used to think Jesus had it easy, he had no brothers or sisters to argue with over the biggest piece of birthday cake. Mary and Joseph looked like they never disagreed, worried about finances or had fears for the safety of their child growing up in an all-too-cruel world. I think we need to bring our human experience to today's gospel and not sanitize it to fit our preconceptions or pious presumptions about the kind of life the Holy Family lived. Having an unreal idealized view of Jesus' family only further separates us from his life and the lives of saints.

The closing line tells us that when they returned to Nazareth, Jesus was obedient to his parents and that he "advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and humans." This growth didn't happen in his sleep. Jesus is part of a human family, devout Jews, who passed on their faith and their family customs to their son. As his parents, they taught and nourished Jesus into manhood. God's taking flesh among us means Jesus grew and matured the way we do—under the influence of his parents, extended family, friends and neighbors. Jesus was not raised in the

Temple, in a rarefied atmosphere, far from the influence of his family. Instead, he was very much immersed among people who cherished, nourished and stood by him, even though they didn't fully understand him.

ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER

THE LIVING PULPIT, July-September, 1999. This whole edition is on the theme of family and has articles, quotations, book suggestions, scriptural studies, etc. that relate to this theme. This publication is an excellent preacher's resource. For subscriptions call: 1-800-447-9004. Check their webpage: <http://www.PULPIT.ORG>

QUOTABLE

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of person, who are tortured, bombed and exterminated. With those for whom there is no room Christ is present in the world.

—Thomas Merton

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Thanks to those who have told me how you have written to one or more of the inmates listed each week on this page. A deacon at a preaching workshop told me he now writes to three men whose names he got here. He said he preached on the death penalty and a woman requested a name to write to—again he got the name from "First Impressions." A pastor of a small country parish invited his parishioners to write to death row inmates at an Advent reconciliation service. A convent of retired nuns in Ireland has been writing postcards. The list of how people respond to this section of the homiletical reflections goes on and on. Thank you so much for your ministry to these people and thanks for letting me know. Here are some more names:

(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:.....

Terry Hyatt #0199877 (On death row since 2/7/00)

Carron T. Hooks #0561692 (2/9/00)

Jonathan E. Leeper #0493734 (2/22/00)

Terry L. Robinson #0340919 (4/10/00)

-----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, 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 or 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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