

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD’S PASSION (Luke 19: 28-40) Isaiah 50: 4-7 Philippians 2: 6-11 Luke 22: 14- 23:56
PLUS--- NOTES ON PREACHING DURING THE TRIDUUM
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

It's the Passion according to Luke for this Sunday. It's long and people will be standing and have spent more time than usual listening to the Word. The preacher wants to say a few words; but because of the length of the reading, how do you focus? How do you avoid generalities that come out sounding like platitudes? One possibility is to focus on the distinctively Lucan qualities to this passion account. How is Luke different? What point is he trying to get across? Who is Jesus in this account?

Another possibility is to plan a really good rendition of the reading and let it speak for itself. Let the people hear it and get immersed in it. But to help them hear it, you may want to spend a few minutes before the Gospel and address some aspects of the account distinctive to Luke. In what follows, I offer some notes for either approach you take. Thus, here are some things to notice in Luke's account of the Passion:

---first of all, invite participation in the story: with which person does the listener identify? Be sure to point out that since we all received palm at the beginning of the service, we may tend to identify with the crowd. But could we be the fleeing disciples who abandon Jesus when the going gets tough? Might I have been like the sincere religious leaders who didn't want to upset the tradition and who thought they would be serving God by getting rid of this trouble maker? etc.

---since this is Luke, there are strong reminders of prayer in the account. Jesus seems to gather strength after prayer. He prays in the Garden and ends in subordination to the will of God (God immediately responds to his prayer and sends an angel to assist him).

--key in the account is that this is an innocent man. Notice how many times someone admits he is innocent. Pilate says it 3 times, Herod finds no guilt, the centurion calls him innocent, the criminal next to him says he did no wrong.

--note the confidence in the dying Jesus, "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

--forgiveness is strong in the account. The crucifixion for Luke is clearly a moment of forgiveness. Jesus arrives at the spot and prays for them, "They know

not what they do." The good thief "steals heaven"; people leave the scene beating their breasts. Luke doesn't blame people the way the other accounts do, e.g. the people don't mock the crucified Christ.

--Jesus is shown faithful each moment along the way; he doesn't back away from his commitment

--there are strong suggestions and encouragements in this account to take up the cross and follow Jesus. E.g., Simon of Cyrene and the crowd on the way are described as following behind Jesus. We can't sentimentalize this moment: to follow Jesus is to take up the cross and enter into a relationship of tremendous power and strength. Remember in 4:18-19, Jesus saw his mission as setting captives free, proclaiming a year of favor, etc. This moment of the Gospel shows that to follow Jesus will precipitate an encounter with the organized world system that is contrary to his way. Even the religious powers organize against the Reign of God. The cross shows that tribulation and conflict may confront those who follow Jesus and thus we will share in the cross. To bear the cross is not to endure some mysterious suffering which is thrust upon us, nor is it an interior psychological orientation. It is a path freely chosen, it means committing oneself in this world to realities of the world to come.

Here's some input on the TRIDUUM. It is an overview of the days and suggests to the preacher some things to ponder as we prepare preaching and are involved in the liturgical celebrations. So, what follows are "notes from a preacher's file for the preaching of the Triduum." I leave it to you to apply them to each preaching.

1. Be careful these days not to caricature the Jewish faith. The Gospels portray its piety and leaders in a very unsympathetic light. Don't become an unconscious anti-Semite. Such bashing of the Jews can reveal an insecure faith, seeking assurance in caricaturing the faith of others. Jewish people suffered their worst pogroms during Holy Week at the hands of Christians. So, be careful of subtle forms of anti-Semitism. For example, in John's gospel there are many references these days to "the Jews." What he really means are the Jewish authorities, so why not make the substitution when "the Jews" show in opposition to Jesus in the readings? Call them the "Jewish authorities."
2. Be careful to respect the integrity of each Gospel. Don't harmonize or fill in to make a composite picture. Stay within the text and treat it distinctively, learn how each writer saw and witnessed the Christ event.

3. Remember that the principle actor is God. There are some key figures in the stories for meditation (Peter, Pilate, etc.), but in the Gospels this week Jesus absorbs our attention. Put aside all else, even the "moral lessons." We see nothing but Jesus, and him crucified. What is God doing and saying to us this week?
4. The Triduum is a unity: this contradicts the conventual wisdom that sees each day as a separate unit. Note that in each day of the Triduum there is explicit reference to the whole paschal liturgy. Each particular day commemorates the whole of the mystery, while at the same time emphasizing one aspect of the events. So we preach Good Friday in its defeat and pain in the light of the hope of the resurrection; we preach Easter in its glory, reminded of the seeming hopelessness of Good Friday. The renewed emphasis isn't on "holy week," but on the consciousness of the passion and resurrection as intimately bound to our own lives as church.
5. This is a good time to work with the lectors. The Word this week is powerful in its drama, lively in the hearing. The congregation won't need to follow along with a written text if the lectors and participating preachers are well prepared.
6. I want to be careful how I preach about suffering and death during these days. I wonder how we can think of them as positive? In the Scriptures of the Jewish people, suffering and death are to be avoided and, where possible, alleviated. The hope we have as Christians is that God will do away with both at the end. It also seems to be always the poor who suffer the most, who always are the victims. So, during these days the preacher might invite the congregation to become more fully involved with God's plan to alleviate suffering by working to end the suffering of the poor by our deeper involvement in social programs and in the electoral process itself. Good Friday, for example, should not be a day that keeps a silence of inattention to the suffering of others. If we keep a silence this day it may be to ponder the suffering of those around us and to resolve to do something about it.
7. During Lent I have had a few occasions to use a service of the Cross used in parishes and retreat houses. It may be useful on Good Friday for a small group reflection or, if it is not too late to prepare, even for a parish. You'll need twigs four or five inches long to have each participant make a cross. Red or purple twine is used to tie them together. Invite people to reflect as they make the cross on their own cross and on the crosses people of the world carry. Invite them to place all these burdens on the cross they are making. Then they can bring their

crosses and lay them at the foot of a large cross. If the assembly is small enough, you can invite them to share some aspects of the cross (darkness, and death) they see in the world. (I did this the other night with religious and the sharing became powerful.) After they put their crosses at Jesus' cross and you have some Scripture and a hymn, you can invite them to take another's cross home with them and ask them to pray for that unknown person's cross.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

A CRUCIFIED CHRIST IN HOLY WEEK: ESSAYS ON THE FOUR GOSPEL PASSION NARRATIVES, by Raymond E. Brown. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989. Paper, 72 pages.

An eminent biblical scholar reflects on the four Passion narratives. His strong pastoral interests come through these very readable essays. Good for preachers. Also good for those who want to do some meditative reading during Holy Week.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

What better week than this one to remember inmates on death row? They are the most forgotten people in the prison system. In memory of Jesus' execution you might want to drop a line to one or all of the inmates listed below. 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.....

Kenneth B. Rouse #0353186 (On death row since 3/25/92)

Michael Reeves #0339314 (5/14/92)

Eddie C. Robinson #0347839 (5/19/92)

-----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 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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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