

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” HOLY THURSDAY

Exodus 12: 1-8, 11-14 Psalm 116 1Cor. 11: 23-26 John 13: 1-15

Dear Preachers:

The readings are of a piece for this special evening eucharist; they are about meals. Which gets me thinking about meals, first of all---ordinary daily meals. Family meals, where all are seated around the same table, are becoming an extinct reality due to the daily press of work and after-school activities. These days, modern families consider themselves lucky to have weekend meals together and at that, maybe only one. During the week fast food restaurants are often the places for a quick supper with the kids. For single-parent families sometimes a meal at Mc Donald's is the only way for the family to eat together at a reasonable hour to allow time for homework and housework afterwards.

Wherever we are, we bring a lot to the table when we share a meal with family and friends. It would take a skilled psychologist to map out the interactions. We come to meals with an array of emotions: workday satisfactions and frustrations; school and playground achievements and failures; love and tensions between spouses and siblings; fatigue and high energies. We so rarely have leisure at these meals. There's the need to eat, clean up, do homework or housework and then to bed for not-enough sleep. I can remember another time that seems other-worldly or lost in the mist of times gone by. We ate together every night, weekdays and weekends. My mother didn't work outside the home; my father was at the table for dinner. It was at those meals that I heard the stories of the family, past and present. At that table we became family, for we heard the same stories and ate the same food passed down from the "old country."

As a preacher I am cautious to talk about such meals from a past age, when things weren't as rushed and families had more time together. Such meals may seem very foreign to a modern congregation. But even in a fast-food world, we still have occasions for special meals together. Easter, just a couple days away, may be such an occasion; as well as Memorial Day and the Fourth of July (meals together don't only have to be indoors), birthdays, anniversaries, First Communion and Confirmation meals, wedding anniversaries, etc. At some of these meals there are special links with today's scriptural meals. These special meals become occasions to set a table, light candles, have favorite foods (at a recent five-year old's

birthday party the child requested chicken nuggets and chocolate cake). On such occasions, time allows for stories, past and present. Again the next generation hears the family stories, eats the family's unique foods and so becomes more embedded and aware—"this is my family".

These celebrational meals help us appreciate today's scriptural ones. The Exodus reading tells of the Passover meal. In some ways the first Passover meal had a lot in common with modern meals. It was an eat-and-run meal. Those eating are dressed and packed for travel. They must have brought different and deep emotions to the meal. They were worn out by their Egyptian slavery, yet they couldn't acquire their own freedom by themselves. They must have been apprehensive, would God really be able to get them out? And once away from their slave masters, would they survive the long trek across the desert? Suppose they perished in the desert or were caught by their pursuers? Surely the Egyptians wouldn't let them go without a struggle. If they were caught, what punishment would they receive? Surely some at the meal would have had second thoughts about this venture and may have argued to stay put and live with "the devil we know". There must also have been those filled with excitement—God was coming to help them--- finally freedom! But this was not a once-only meal; the Jews are instructed to celebrate again; it is a "memorial feast for you, which all your generations shall celebrate with pilgrimage to the Lord, as a perpetual institution".

Future generations would eat this meal of lamb, unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The family story would be repeated. It would tell of past deliverance; but told in the present tense, "Why is this night different from all others?" What new slaveries, addictions, fears and dreams of liberation would succeeding generations bring to this table? If God could free their ancestors, trapped in a far-off slavery, then God could do it again and lead a new generation, step by step to freedom.

Paul reminds us of the new table story and meal being handed on to us. The story and meal are both past and present. We remember the life and death of the One who also provides this meal for us. What do we bring to this meal tonight? Our world is so troubled and fears crowd our thoughts around the table. What modern slaveries tie us up or keep us imprisoned? What current world powers and decisions cause us to feel passive, impotent, profoundly affected--- yet unable to control our destinies? What is our personal "Egypt", our place of captivity? Paul

reminds us how we were delivered by the broken bread and poured-out life of Jesus. We remember and are given courage; what God once did for us, God is doing again: helping us pass over from death to life; from despair to hope; from the darkness of our own making, to the new light that only God can provide.

When we gather for our “family” meal and tell the story of our new Passover in Jesus, John reminds us to make sure we tell the full story. In his account of the meal, with its Passover overtones, we hear who we are---- the story that links us to Jesus, includes the washing of his disciples’ feet. The washing is a centerpiece of John’s narrative. There are Christian communities that use the towel, basin and pitcher of water as their symbols. Some churches have mosaics or paintings of these three items alone. No need to paint Jesus or his disciples into the scene, the symbols speak for themselves. They are our Christian coat of arms; they link us to our Christian family past and present. Some ancient coats of arms have swords, castles and war banners. These days military coats of arms are very visible on the sides of Bradley mechanized vehicles, air craft carriers, cannons and war planes. We have seen a lot of our military coats of arms these days.

At formal meals the lowest slave would have been given the job of washing feet. Instead, Jesus takes the role of slave and washes his disciples’ feet. Just when the disciples were getting comfortable at a special meal, Jesus does something that really throws them off balance! Any strivings or ambitions to move up the discipleship ladder they might have had have just been turned on their ear. The “successful disciple”, Jesus tells them, is one ready to take up pitcher, basin and towel to wash and dry feet. A person could lose one’s dignity washing feet! Exactly and they might gain another form of dignity, they might become known as companions of Jesus.

Our “coat of arms” is not the military type, nor does it depict the usual signs of power. Instead it depicts the towel, basin and pitcher of water. We don’t paint this coat of arms on swords and shields. The disciples of Jesus paint it on their hearts.

JUSTICE NOTES

We join with Pope John Paul in the conviction that war is not "inevitable" and that "war is always a defeat for humanity." This is not a matter of ends, but means. Our bishops' conference continues to question the moral legitimacy of any preemptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq. To permit

preemptive or preventive uses of military force to overthrow threatening or hostile regimes would create deeply troubling moral and legal precedents. Based on the facts that are known, it is difficult to justify resort to war against Iraq, lacking clear and adequate evidence of an imminent attack of a grave nature or Iraq's involvement in the terrorist attacks of September 11. With the Holy See and many religious leaders throughout the world, we believe that resort to war would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for the use of military force.

If there is armed conflict, we must be prepared for all of its implications and its aftermath. An already long-suffering Iraqi population could face terrible new burdens, and a region already full of conflict and refugees could see more conflict and many more refugees, with ethnic and religious minorities particularly vulnerable. A post-war Iraq would require a long-term commitment to reconstruction, humanitarian and refugee assistance, and establishment of a stable, democratic government at a time when the U.S. federal budget is overwhelmed by increased defense spending and the costs of war.....

At times like these, we turn to the Lord and ask for wisdom and courage. We Christians are called to be "sentinels of peace," the Holy Father reminds us. We join with him in urging Catholics to dedicate fasting on Ash Wednesday for "the conversion of hearts and the long-range vision of just decisions to resolve disputes with adequate and peaceful means." In the days ahead, our community of faith is called to reflection and discernment, dialogue and action, and especially to prayer and worship. As we approach the Lenten season, let us pray and fast that our nation and world will find effective ways short of war to secure justice, increase security and promote genuine peace for all of God's people.

----Most Reverend Wilton D. Gregory, President, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, February 26, 2003

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

What better time to write to someone on death row than during Holy Week? 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)

Frank Chandler #0072498 (7/8/93)

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

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)

Our webpage address:

(Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes these reflections and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

<http://www.op.org/exchange/>

"Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by four friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Carmen Mele, Brian Pierce, Angel Del Rio, Angel Mendez, and Dolorita Martinez, of the Grand Rapids Dominicans. 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

"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.

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.

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,
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