

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 3rd SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 5: 27-32, 40-41 Psalm 30 Revelation 5: 11-14 John 21: 1-19

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Peter is pretty bold in today's account, considering his previous thrice denial of Jesus. Today's story has poetic links to the night Peter betrayed Jesus. For example, both stories had Peter at a charcoal fire. John seems to be subtly inviting us to make the link between the two incidents: the time Peter stood by a charcoal fire during Jesus' interrogation and today's resurrection appearance where Jesus has prepared the fish and bread on a charcoal fire for his followers. Peter's denial was in triplicate. In today's setting he is given a chance to state his love for Jesus, again in triplicate. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?...Yes, Lord, you know I love you."

We heard the Passion accounts and were stunned by Peter's denial of Jesus. He was the first among the followers, one who, at the Last Supper, had adamantly proclaimed he would follow Jesus even to death. A strong protest of loyalty, followed soon by a humbling fall. But let's not be too quick to blame Peter. Let's not stand in judgment, we who in our lifetimes have our own record of small and even large betrayals of the faith we profess in public. Peter loved Jesus and was well-intentioned; he spoke from his gut. He really wanted to stay by Jesus, even die for him. However, he was speaking on his own, relying on his own strengths and determination. As well-intentioned as he was, this was simply not enough. It takes more than our own best intentions and good will to lay down our lives for Christ. We need the gift of the Spirit, which Jesus would give Peter and the others after his resurrection.

Remember those "good news-bad news" jokes? There was one about Jesus: "The good news is that Jesus is coming back...the bad news is that he is as mad as hell." Based on our human expectations, we might have expected Jesus to be "mad as hell" when he returned resurrected to his frightened disciples. He could have fumed and said, "I told you so! Didn't I tell you I would rise?" He could have turned to Peter and said, "What a miserable disappointment you turned out to be! You were supposed to be the rock; you turned out to be butter!"

To compound the betrayal, in today's story Peter says, "I am going fishing." Was he turning away from Jesus completely? Was he giving up on his call and returning to his old way of life? Was he taking a different leadership role, one that would lead the others back to a past moment before they met Jesus and followed him? Peter's going fishing suggests the disciples were unable to sustain their Easter faith beyond the connection with the actual appearances. So, their belief in the resurrection hadn't been translated into life and mission. After all they have experienced in their time with Jesus, and after having encountered the resurrected Christ, they seem to have forgotten his charge to them. They are not going "fishing"---- as in going out to catch others for Christ. They are just returning to their old business, as if nothing has changed their lives! Even Peter's tone suggests a kind of resignation, "I'm going fishing," as if to say, "What else is there to do?" Things are falling apart and the call they received seems to have dissolved. While the disciples may have abandoned their call, it is encouraging to note that Jesus has not abandoned them. As in the beginning of the Gospel--- when he first calls them and after his resurrection, when he goes to them in the locked room--- he finds them and calls them again. And note where he finds them (and us)-- in the midst of their everyday working lives. They are at their old work and he goes there to meet them.

In the midst of this ambiguity and recent failures, Jesus returns to face his disciples and, surprise of surprises, he is not furious with them. In fact, despite their complete collapse and disappointing behavior at a crucial moment, he is quite forgiving. We hear a hopeful message for ourselves today. Despite any failure on our part, we can always receive forgiveness and return to Jesus' company of disciples. In addition, he is doing what he has called us to do: forgive those who have offended us.

Today our failures and lapses may not seem as dramatic as Peter's. Most likely we haven't publically denied Jesus three times, as Peter did. It is more likely that we have let things slip or not taken Jesus seriously enough in our lives. Our witness to his resurrection may be anemic. Perhaps we can recall an earlier time in our lives when our faith was filled with vigor and enthusiasm, but is now subdued and domesticated, made quite tame for appearances on the public stage of our lives. Another old saying comes to mind, "If it were a crime to be a Christian, would they have any evidence to convict us?" We bring these "betrayals" to this eucharistic meal today. Once again Jesus has taken the initiative. He has found us

back in old patterns of behavior, in failures large and small. But as with Peter, so with us--- we are forgiven and restored to Jesus' company.

The early community had to make a decision: should they keep the story of Peter's failures? How encouraging it is to us that they decided to keep this story and others that reveal Peter's all-too-many human frailties. While it might have been embarrassing to Peter, it is reassuring for us. Despite his betrayal, Peter is forgiven and restored. As Jesus' disciples we aren't perfect; but we are forgiven. So, let's put aside our protesting, "I'm no saint" and let's set about the work we are called to do. And the next moment in the story lays out that work quite clearly.

When the initial encounter is over between Jesus and his disciples by the seashore, Jesus is fast to get to the concern he has. He wants his ministry to continue through his disciples—to feed the hungry ("feed my lambs"). Now that Peter and the others are reconciled and their past failures put aside, Jesus once again issues his call to follow him. This time what is entailed in the call to discipleship is spelled out---they are to address the needs of the world. However, there is a sobering element added to the call; it will not be easy. We who would strive to live Jesus' life are reminded we too will die his death. Resurrection does not eliminate suffering or death. The disciples in the first reading rejoice because, "they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name." They had experienced the resurrection, they also experienced the cross.

While Jesus is sending Peter to a place "you do not want to go," he is not sending him on his own. Peter is restored to the table and to the meal that will nourish him for whatever self-emptying he must do. Jesus prepares a meal for Peter, he feeds him so that he can feed others. Have you noticed that in each of the resurrection accounts we have been hearing that there is always a call, a reminder of vocation?

We are gathered at the meal Jesus provides for us today. Each of us has received a call to feed others—we do it through raising children, teaching, listening, comforting, encouraging, guiding, defending, protesting, cheering, etc. (There is, after all, "evidence" that could be used against us if it were a crime to be a Christian.) This work requires food for the long haul. We are, after all, not part-time Christians or disciples for a week; our vocation is a lifetime calling. Only the life of Jesus we receive in the eucharist can sustain his followers for such a

marathon of fidelity and service.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Raymond Brown, *ONCE AND COMING SPIRIT AT PENTECOST*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994. (Paper, 95 pages. ISBN0-8146-2154-6.

A collection of essays on the liturgical readings from Easter till Pentecost.

Focusing on the Acts of the Apostles, the essays trace the development of the church from its Jerusalem roots to its diversification and eventual outreach to the gentiles. The book also includes brief reflections from the sections of John's gospel that are the sources for the gospel readings during this time.

QUOTABLE

"As I listened to the Book of Revelation over several weeks I found in it a healing vision, a journey through the heart of pain and despair, and into hope. And I was consistently reminded of how subtly this vision works on us. It asserts that the evils of this world are not incurable, that injustice does not have the last word. And that can be terrifying or consoling, depending on your point of view, your place within the world."

----Kathleen Norris in, *THE CLOISTER WALK*.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

The structures of our society are subtly racist, for these structures reflect the values which society upholds. They are geared to the success of the majority and the failure of the minority. Members of both groups give unwitting approval by accepting things as they are. Perhaps no single individual is to blame. The sinfulness is often anonymous but nonetheless real. The sin is social in nature in that each of us, in varying degrees, is responsible. All of us in some measure are accomplices. As our recent pastoral letter on moral values states: "The absence of personal fault for an evil does not absolve one of all responsibility. We must seek to resist and undo injustices we have not ceased, lest we become bystanders who tacitly endorse evil and so share in guilt in it."

-----*BROTHERS AND SISTERS TO US*, (United States Bishops' Conference, 1979)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

I have a friend on San Quentin's death row who just had his last appeal, to the U.S. Supreme Court, turned down. He has been moved to a cell closer to the guard's desk so they can keep an eye on him—some prisoners get suicidal at this time. Guards check in on him regularly. Since he was convicted 20 years ago, when the gas chamber was used in California, they are asking him questions like: "What form of execution would you prefer, gas or lethal injection? What would you like for your last meal?" The date of his execution has not yet been set, but it is close. I saw him on Holy Saturday. He could use some mail from the outside. If you would like to drop him a line, write to:

Garry Hines #D91000

San Quentin Prison

San Quentin, California 94974

-----Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

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.

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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com