

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 3<sup>rd</sup> 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:

Last Sunday our second reading began a series from the book of Revelation that will continue till Pentecost. So, each week our congregations will hear, what to them, are very strange sounding readings. Let’s face it, it sounds strange to us preachers as well. I’d bet we rarely, if ever, focus on Revelation for our preaching during this Easter season or ever!. Well, here is an opportunity to do just that, preach from Revelation. It might also provide us with a change of pace, a chance to break the routine of going all too quickly to the Gospel for our preaching. And that change of discipline might add some life to our preaching routine—and maybe to our preaching as well.

I found the book of Revelation very popular among bible reading inmates at San Quentin prison. They used a fundamentalist lens in their reading and Revelation seemed to them to reveal a proximate end of the world. As “lifers” or men on death row, they were all in favor of a quick end to the punishing world in which they lived. Revelation seemed to support their anticipation. But is that what Revelation is about, a book of metaphors and symbols prophesying the end of the world and salvation for a few elect? On first reading it certainly seems that way.

As the preacher attempts to interpret Revelation for our contemporaries, it helps to be reminded about this kind of literature. Revelation belongs to the genre of apocalyptic literature. It dates to the last decades of the first century, during the reign of Domitian. The prisoners at San Quentin did pick up one important message from Revelation, for it was written for believers who were enduring hard times. It was not meant to convey information, as much as to appeal to the listener’s emotions and speak to the heart. Thus, it employs language filled with symbols, images and happenings in a very strange world.

It’s tempting to try to figure out the “key” that will unlock the meaning of the symbols, put dates on the anticipated events and thus reveal the book’s “secrets”. But this figurative language is not written with a secret code in mind. People who first read Revelation knew what’s its allusions meant, for they were taken from the

everyday world of the early church. The author John (his identity is uncertain) wasn't trying to be mysterious to his hearers, he was trying to be quite clear. They could get the meaning because Revelation was written for their very concrete circumstances. Our problem is that we are almost 2000 years removed from their world.

The early Christian's world was very hostile to their faith. (On the other hand, in the world I travel, I don't encounter hostility towards my faith as much as benign smiles that seem to suggest I am out of touch with reality. As if to say, "How quaint." It could make one feel like a visitor from the past when things were simpler and where people practiced strange rituals.) Rome was violently opposed to the Christian belief in Jesus as Lord, since the emperor was venerated as lord of all the world, and Rome as the goddess of the world. There was a religious cult around the emperor; not to participate in this cult was considered treasonous. Christians had to decide which lord they would revere, would it be "the Lamb that was slain", or the emperor? Not to worship at the emperor's altar would incur punishment, hence Revelation's many references to persecutions. Revelation sees no in-between ground for the Christian; we are either worshipers of the emperor or the Lamb. The modern hearer must reflect on the daily altars to which we go, bow down, burn incense and pay homage. These other altars demand as much worship, sacrifice and allegiance as those that belonged to Rome.

As the readings from Revelation are proclaimed these weeks we will hear the encouragement to persevere against the temptations and persecutions presented by "the enemy of the Lamb". Last Sunday's selection from chapter one presented the inaugural vision that commissioned John to proclaim his message. Chapters 5 from which today's selection is taken, call us to worship our real Sovereign, whose greatness the angels and elders proclaim--- "worthy is the Lamb that was slain...."

Revelation offers hope to all who suffer, all who feel besieged by hardships. But it especially addresses those Christians whose choices put them at odds with the surrounding powers. Those who refuse to kneel at the "emperor's altar" of money, power, competition, consumerism, narcissism, militarism, etc. Revelation tells us that our history is in God's hands. Using hymns and triumphant praises the writer stirs is encouraging us to remain faithful ( e.g. "Worthy is the Lamb...", "To the one who sits on the throne and to the lamb be blessing...."). Someday we will

share in the glory God has prepared for us. Until then, even through we suffer for our faith, fear not, God is in charge and our plight has not gone unnoticed. We are encouraged not to focus on the current calamities but on Christ's ultimate triumph. Contrary to what seems to be happening, the emperor will not triumph; God will. Revelation makes it very clear, God and the Lamb are absolute Sovereigns over evil and death. Don't be fooled by temporary appearances to the contrary.

To be faithful to, "the one who sits on the throne and to the lamb," requires constant fidelity, practiced in big and small ways every day. Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, grounds the Christian in hope as we await, amid daily trials, a "new heaven and a new earth." When that new creation occurs, the faithful will find their names inscribed, we are told, in the "book of life."

In our preaching from Revelation during any of these Sundays after Easter, we may have to give our hearers some background information, but only to help apply the passage to daily life. One possible approach is to name the altars where we individuals and our society worship. What or whom do we believe is our real god? Upon what or in whom do we place our confidence? Where does meaning lie for us? Where will we find our ultimate and permanent security? Who or what we worship determines our life priorities, the rule under which we live. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain." Is that Lamb also the one whose rule directs our life?

Revelation has many references to liturgy. This worship is directed to God who has created us and Christ who has redeemed us. Notice that in the liturgy depicted in today's passage, all participate. So too in our worship today, we are trying, as best we can, to fully participate, to make offering of ourselves on the altar of the Lamb. We are also conscious that liturgical practice can be exclusionary both in the sanctuary and in the congregation. Not all voices are heard, not all faces seen, contrary to Revelation's depiction of universal praise.

For our reflection on today's gospel, I share with you thoughts by Janet Boeth Jones, one of our email recipients. Here's what she wrote:

I looked at this Gospel lesson, and the words "feed my sheep", in the context of the quotation about God's calling that I often attach to my e-mail signature, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Frederick Buechner (Presbyterian minister and author) in his book,

## WISHFUL THINKING.

I look to this definition of call, vocation, to save me from the type of self-sacrifice and martyrdom that arises from dutiful obedience and destructive self-denial instead of from loving gladness, and that does not feed either the sheep or the shepherd. I was married to an alcoholic for almost 20 years and I know first-hand the destructive side of self-sacrifice in the name of love. It was sacrifice of a Self I didn't know I had. So I think preachers need to look carefully at how they/we express a call to self-sacrifice, especially if many of their listeners are women over 60.

Older women were steeped in the message of their duty of self sacrifice, to the point of denying themselves and living vicariously through their husbands, children, and bosses, to the detriment of all. And all in the name of love and a woman's duty. Their brothers were more likely to be urged to personal achievement. Many in the congregation might need to be reminded that it is the false self that is called to be sacrificed, not the true self. (Though this sacrifice can clash with the outer world and bring its own suffering.) Out of loving and taking care of ourselves we become more able to love others and make sacrifices out of an overflowing of that love, and an honoring of our integrity. We are also then fed at the same time we feed Jesus' sheep. Otherwise we burn out, become resentful and bitter, or deny ourselves completely and become numb -- experiencing neither grief nor gladness, except perhaps vicariously.

What I see is Peter's original deep gladness in Jesus and Jesus' message being overpowered by grief, confusion, and loss. Maybe a sense of betrayal and abandonment. I think of how often people plunge themselves back into familiar work to save themselves from feeling anything. Then he was rescued by Jesus' reappearances. The energy of Peter's anger, fear and grief could now be refocused on wanting to spread the message of God's love. To share the meals he'd partaken of. I love the simplicity of the scene - Jesus building a little fire on the beach and offering to share breakfast. Meeting the fishermen where they were, in the ordinary.... the value of the imagery of shared meal. And of the everyday meals. And of Peter's impulsiveness.

QUOTABLE:

It is wonderful to know that after the dawn of Easter, the Bethlehem star will shine again. Mary of Nazareth will outlive Herod the Great and even Pilate....

It is wonderful to know the widow's tears turn to joy and that the Father's arms are always open.

It is wonderful to know that the Last Supper becomes the first Eucharist and that the farewell discourse is about never going away.

It is wonderful to know that the Samaritan finds us and that Peter is forgiven.

It is wonderful to know that the tomb is empty and our hearts are full

It is wonderful to know that the three women magi announce Easter and that all our doubts are changed into the bread and wine of faith....

It is wonderful to know that because Christ is risen, you and I are the resurrection and the life.

—Anthony Padovano, CHRISTMAS TO CALVARY: LIFE AND MEMORIES OF JESUS. New York: Paulist Press, 1987, page 82.

### **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](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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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