

**First Impressions 3<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER -C-**

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

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

These Sundays during the Easter season, till Pentecost, the first readings are from Acts; the second are from the Book of Revelation. So, let me suggest we attempt one preaching from each over the next Sundays. For those of us who rush to the gospel, this will give us an opportunity to broaden our field of preaching. The experiment might breathe some fresh air into our preparation process and preaching. This week I'll reflect on the Revelation reading and then the gospel.

Revelation (or the Apocalypse—both terms mean “unveiling”) is often a misrepresented and misused book. People assume it is about how and when the world will end; as if the author has some privileged information to share with us about the future. Some people have worked out detailed keys to interpret the symbols and to show how they relate to our time. E.g., “the Beast” equals Hitler, the Soviet Union, Catholicism, etc.

Revelation is a difficult book even for the experienced bible reader. It was written around 92 C.E. by a Jewish Christian prophet named John—not the author of the gospel or the epistles. In our modern literature we don't have a comparable genre to Revelation. Biblical apocalyptic literature usually is a narrative that tells of a revelation given to a person by a being from the other world. The person is taken to a far off place for the vision, sometimes to the heavens. The vision is about large scale change, the present realities will be ended and a new age introduced. Such a vision is a consolation because the faithful are suffering and the revelation sustains hope by promising the triumph of good over evil.

The visions are rich in symbols, cosmic upheavals and numbers. Because the people are suffering so severely, apocalyptic literature promises intervention from outside the readers' world. Apocalyptic literature invites people to hope and be filled with anticipation. It looks beyond the present to an idealized future. While prophets may have had visions, they told of the end of worldly powers. But apocalyptic writing tells of a new heaven and a new earth.

Revelation was written during Nero and Diocletian's persecution of the church. As a Roman emperor Diocletian claimed to be a deity, so the stage was set for a conflict between the empire and followers of Christ. When Jews and Christians feel unable to help themselves, they look to divine intervention. As such times apocalyptic literature thrives. It tends to stir up more feeling and emotion than rationalistic deliberation. The literature is powerful and can inspire deflated spirits and provide vision for those beaten down in the present time.

Last week, in our initial reading from Revelation (1: 9ff), we heard the commissioning vision John received. He identified himself as a "brother," a Christian who shared in the "distress." He was exiled in Patmos, an island for Roman's political enemies, for his beliefs. In his inaugural vision he saw "one like the son of man" royally clothed, standing amid "seven gold lamp stands." The figure is Christ, "I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever." John is directed to write down the vision. It is not to be a private vision, but is meant for the suffering churches.

Today's Revelation reading is from chapter 5 and is part of a longer account of a vision (4:1-5:14). We are in the throne room of God, at a liturgical celebration where all the heavenly hosts are praising "the Lamb that was slain;" a reference to Jesus as God's suffering servant and the Passover Lamb, whose sacrifice is the source of our healing and rejoicing. The throng, consisting of every creature in heaven and on the earth, living and dead, cries out a doxology, both "to the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb."

Well Diocletian is long dead, but the church undergoes persecution in places and in some others is considered irrelevant and languishes. A recent "NY Times Magazine article (April 8, 2007) focused on Pope Benedict's desire to revivify Catholicism in Europe, where only about 20% of people (with one or two exceptions like Poland) attend church regularly. Pentecostal churches are the exception to this rule of decline. In many first and third world countries their numbers are on the rise. Is it "pure emotionalism," or do these churches appeal to people because they offer more personal attention and services, as well as exuberant celebrations of their faith?

I can't say all the churches I've been to recently reflect such enthusiasm judging, at least, by their singing and facial expressions as Mass! But there was quite a bit of enthusiasm in parishes where there were dedicated staff, liturgists and musicians

and active outreach. People who attended such churches came from hectic lives and were trying to keep faith in a world that doesn't always support what they believe and practice. Parishes where liturgies were carefully prepared and celebrated did seem to provide respite and refreshment for world-weary believers. They did have opportunities through prayer, preaching, community and music to offer "blessing and honor, and glory" to the One on the throne and the "Lamb," just as John's vision suggests

At our eucharistic celebrations we join the heavenly throng in their "Amen." The vision is one that conveys God's grandeur and power. Despite current disillusionment and discouragement, one day the faithful will celebrate God's final victory—good over evil. It is the holy and all powerful One who will accomplish this triumph and so here at Eucharist our hope is fed and our vision restored. We bow together with all of creation to the source of all good and to the Lamb who triumphed over worldly powers and delivers us from them.

This sounds like grandiose and inflated language and it is; but sometimes we have to yield to high spirits for they open us to the hope that is their source. John has provided us with a much needed vision, for he reminds us that, current evidence to the contrary, God will deliver the faithful from the trials we face for our faith. In the meanwhile, God strengthens us through the body and blood of the Lamb we receive at this Eucharist.

As Yogi Berra, the great New York Yankee catcher, once said, "It's déjà vu all over again." Today's gospel sounds like it should be at the opening of one of the synoptic gospels, when Jesus calls his first disciples away from their fishing occupation to their new vocations—following him and fishing for humans. Instead, we are at the end of the gospel and the disciples are back in Galilee at their old occupation—and not being very successful at it.

I wonder why John, the evangelist, saved this story? There must have been a situation in his early church community that required hearing this fishing account. Apparently, after the resurrection, the disciples slipped back to their former ways. Jesus appears to them and calls them back to what he had originally sent them to do. Peter represents the group and is told three times to tend/feed Jesus' sheep. Christ commissions them to be faithful to their original call. Maybe John found his own church slipping back and forgetting their calling. Perhaps they were

undergoing persecution and were having second thoughts or questions about their faith. They might have felt tired out by their long wait for the Lord's return. Like us they needed reminding about who they were and what Jesus called them to be: a community of Jesus' disciples on a fishing mission to the world.

The story reminds a weary church that Jesus has not abandoned us, he is still calling out to us and we need to keep within earshot of his voice. Which is what we are doing at today's liturgical celebration. We are listening because the church needs reinvigorating through his word. We need to be kept on track and not give up even when our efforts seem less than rewarding. Today's story reminds us that Jesus has not left us to labor on our own. He is calling out to us in our personal and church lives and we are doing our best to listen and respond.

Nor does he want us to be hungry, so at the lakeside and here at Eucharist, Jesus feeds hungry and tired disciples. "Come and have breakfast." Even those who have failed dismally, like Peter, who denied Jesus thrice, are given another chance to express their love and then they are renewed in their calling, "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep."

Christ comes to us in the Eucharist today. We are celebrating and receiving again his love for us. But he is also asking us the question he asked Peter (and the disciples), "Do you love me?" When we receive communion our "Amen" can be our "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." With our "Amen" comes Jesus' commission to each of us and to the church, "Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep." He is rather insistent, isn't he? We need to care for others in Jesus' name. With Simon Peter we are also reminded that our service in the Lord's name will require our life's energies and dedication, all the way to our death. That's why we gather to hear his Word and receive him in the Eucharist, so we can be renewed and strengthened in our mission to feed the hungry we meet.

### **QUOTABLE**

Ministry and peaching in a multicultural environment must involve the language of hospitality. Ministry to Latino peoples is not a crisis to be solved but a blessing to treasure. The open door is an effective and universal language without words. The church, its ministers, and its peoples welcome the Hispanic community with joy. Those who preach can extend the welcome of hospitality through God's Word,

creating a safe shelter within an often discriminatory and racist culture. Radical hospitality is rooted in what the guest needs and who the guest is above all else. To be attentive to the congregation as guest means to recognize them as valuable listeners in the homiletic text..... A good host knows the language of the guest and does not dominate those who are welcomed; the host allows them to speak and even draws them out into good conversation.

—Guerric De Bona, OSB in, *FULFILLED IN OUR HEARING: HISTORY AND METHOD OF CHRISTIAN PREACHING*. New York: Paulist Press, 2005, page 144. ISBN0-8091-4359-3. Paper, \$19.95.

### **PRAYER FOR PREACHERS**

Dear Lord, let me be your voice today.  
Send your Spirit of Wisdom to flow through me.  
In the homily we have prepared together,  
help me to remember all the words your people need to hear today,  
and forget all the ones they don't. Amen.

---submitted by Fray Paul Schloemer, OFM Conv. Convento San José de Cupertino, Honduras C.A.

### **JUSTICE NOTES**

***"I was a stranger and you welcomed me."  
Matthew 25:35***

"As Catholics we are called to take concrete measures to overcome the misunderstanding, ignorance, competition and fear that stand in the way of genuinely welcoming the stranger in our midst and enjoying the communion that is our destiny as Children of God." (*Welcoming the Stranger Among Us, U.S. Council of Bishops, 2000*)

"The local people, especially public authorities, should all treat immigrants not as mere tools of production, but as persons, and must help them to arrange for their families to live with them and to provide themselves with decent living quarters." (*Second Vatican Council, Gaudium et Spes*)

The Catholic Church has historically held a strong interest in immigration and how public policy affects immigrants seeking a new life in the United States. Based on Scriptural and Catholic social teachings, as well as her own experience as an immigrant Church in the United States, the Catholic Church is compelled to raise her voice on behalf of those who are marginalized and whose God-given rights are not respected.

The Church believes that current immigration laws and policies often undermine immigrants' human dignity and keep families apart. The existing immigration system has resulted in a growing number of people living in the shadows as they toil in jobs that would otherwise go unfilled. Close family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents must wait years for a visa to be reunited.

The Church has a responsibility to shine the message of God on this issue and help to build bridges so that an immigration system can be created that is just for all and serves the common good. *US Catholic Bishops*

### **Did you know?**

Over 300,000 North Carolinians, including hundreds from our parish family, are undocumented immigrants.

75% of today's immigrants have legal permanent visas. Only 15% of immigrants today entered the country illegally.

What I can do:

Read the bishops' statement, "Strangers no longer" at [www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml) and join the Immigrant Justice Action Network there.

After mass today, pledge to call your Congressperson.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

### **POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES**

***"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person."***

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

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:.....

Eric Murillo                      #0499258                      (On death row since 4/18/96)

George F. Page                      #0310202                      (4/26/96)

Guy Le Grande                      #0238344                      (4/26/96)

---Central Prison    1300 Western Blvd.    Raleigh, NC    27606

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### 1. Two new CDs Available:

**"First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year C."** Begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

**"Liturgical Years A, B and C."** Reflections on the three-year cycle, with **Year C** updated.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: [www.preacherexchange.com](http://www.preacherexchange.com) and clicking on the "First Impressions" CD link on the left.

2. **"Homilias Dominicales"** —These Spanish reflections on the Sunday and daily scriptures are written by Dominican sisters and friars. If you or a friend would like to receive these reflections drop a note to fr. John Boll, O.P. at

[Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) Or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews, daily homilies and other material pertinent to preaching.

4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to fr. John Boll, OP 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 payable to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thanks you and blessings on your preaching,

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