

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4th SUNDAY OF EASTER -C-
Acts 13: 14, 43-52 Psalm 100 Rev. 7: 9, 14-17 John 10: 27-30

Dear Preachers:

This gospel reading presents, what may be, the earliest image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. This representation of Jesus was used even before that of the crucifix, perhaps because there was so much ignominy associated with the way Jesus was killed. The image of Jesus carrying the lost sheep on his shoulder was an early, if not the first, image embraced by the church. It sounds like such a pastoral image, so much so that it becomes a romanticized presentation of Christ. But the passage suggests a less than peaceful setting. There is the danger of the ravenous wolf coming to snatch and scatter the sheep. This image alone serves as a caution to the preacher not to wax sentimental in this preaching. The first part of the passage suggests a life and death situation.

Notice too, the Shepherd is speaking of the entire flock; he is leading and addressing the flock who "hear my voice." He challenges us to embrace what we have come to adopt since Vatican II, that the church is the people of God and that all the baptized share in the "priesthood of believers." All have a role in the church, all are supported and lead by the voice of the shepherd. While we cannot roll back the clocks and return to the days of the early church, we certainly are reminded that Jesus declared himself Shepherd of a flock that hears his voice. We have lost somewhat this sense of belonging.

Over the centuries we have paid less attention to the voice that speaks to the entire community/flock and instead have placed the major responsibility for hearing God's Word and teaching it on the clergy and hierarchy. The preacher needs to help all hear the responsibility and empowerment that comes with today's Good Shepherd Sunday reading. The preacher might also suggest ways for people to respond to the empowerment we have received: where is the voice of the Shepherd directing us to service? Preachers should direct us to the places where we can hear the Shepherd's voice in our church community. But we also need help hearing the Shepherd as he speaks to us in our world through modern prophets and witnesses, as well as through those closest to us, those in our very households, schools and places of employment.

Try to steer away from the "dumb sheep" image we often use to describe the flock. There is no image of stupidity in today's reading, but one of care by the shepherd for the flock. This flock, guided by the voice of the shepherd, is encouraged to trust that voice and do what it can to promote the unity of the community as well to reach out to others. The sheep of this Shepherd are not passive and dumb, but activated by the life that has been laid down for them.

This gospel passage directs the congregation's attention to the liturgical celebration. Sheep get hungry; the trip is long and we need food to be sustained. Today at this celebration, we come aside for a while to eat, to hear God's nourishing Word (the shepherd's voice) and be fed with the food for travelers. We need a sense of direction and we need to hear his voice so as not to get lost, discouraged or burdened by guilt. So the Shepherd speaks to us. These are not words that beat us down or discourage, but words that draw us together from our various side-trips, solitary treks, and detours, to a renewal of our common vision.

That really is what he wants, that we don't get lost, seeing ourselves "out there" on our own as individual Christians. What he does through his Word is to remind us we are a community traveling together. We are distracted by so many visions and sights along the way that divide us, cause us to evaluate each other by another standard. Here, in the presence of the Shepherd speaking to us, we can see more clearly our true identities as followers of the same Shepherd. We can look at each other with appreciation, for we can see around us at this Eucharist others who have heard the voice and are trying to follow it with us.

We are hungry. Other food we found along our journey has failed to nourish us for more than a short time. We will need a food to keep alive the vision we have been given. It must be a food that strengthens our determination to keep following the Shepherd's voice and keep finding ways to serve, to do as he did and "lay down" our lives.

The food he gives is none other than himself, the one who now joins us in the gift of ourselves in service. The Shepherd knows his flock and the food we need.

We gather expecting Christ's love for us to be the way ours is for others. We are surprised at how enduring and tender his love is for us and for our sisters and brothers. We are gathered at this Eucharist because a familiar shepherding voice has called us here. We leave here wondering how our lives can reflect the life of the One who died for us. What can we do to freely lay down our lives in service for another? This gathering has empowered us to love in the same way we have been loved.

It is several weeks since Easter. We have returned to the ordinary part of our lives, the way we live most of the year. We are "back home" after the Resurrection. We need guidance, someone to walk with us and speak to us as we go along, lest we wander off. What a wonderful image then, this shepherding Christ. The Scriptures are filled with images for God and Christ. Each image conveys some reality about who God is to us---God is rock, liberator, ruler, creator, father, mother, etc. In John's Gospel, there are ample images for who Jesus is to us---truth, way, life, bread, living water, etc. Each suggests some facet of our relationship with him, each tries to help us catch the depth of the reality of Christ in our lives. The Shepherd image suggests a profound relationship: "I know my sheep and my sheep know me, in the same way that the Father knows me and I know the Father." The bond between the Shepherd and us is likened to the bond that exists between Christ and the Father. Does this powerful expression of intimacy with us encourage us to trust Christ each step of the journey, both in the arduous times and the easier ones?

QUOTABLE

"The dialogic nature of liturgy and the redemptive event it expresses in Christ, who is both Word and Answer in this encounter, means that a holy meeting takes place in the convergence between the sacred texts proclaimed and the assembly who engages them. The sacramental quality of our worship does not divorce the temporal, bodily and historical fact of our gathering from the Scriptures around which the community gathers. From this perspective, the liturgical homily is not a talk, nor does it speak about God or even the Scriptures. Rather, preaching reveals

God's utterance of grace in our midst, to us and for us."

----Paul Janowiak, S.J. "Gathered Around the Story of Our Lives: The Liturgy of the Word", in LITURGICAL MINISTRY: LITURGY AS FAITH-IN -ACTION. Fall, 2000, Volume 9.

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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 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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