

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

Dear Preachers:

The words of the gospel have a bucolic or rural sound to them—at least on first hearing. They evoke paintings on stain glass windows we have seen of the Good Shepherd leading his sheep besides a lovely stream, bordered by fields of grass and gentle hills. But besides seeing this scene in tranquil chapel settings, we have also seen the same setting on the holy cards provided at funeral parlors with the name and dates of our beloved dead printed on the other side of the card. One side has a pastoral image that seems so free of turmoil; the other has in print the bare facts, a loved one’s date of birth and death. We place our hope that somehow the two sides of the same card merge, that our loved ones are now in the embrace of the shepherd.

In the gospel quote that sounds so magisterial and serene we can hear a note of reality. Jesus says about his sheep, “No one can take them out of my hand.” He also says, in a similar manner, “No one can take them out of the Father’s hand.” There are forces at work that threaten to snatch us out of the hands of the Shepherd. Some of them are subtle and everyday promptings to renege on our faith, while other forces carry immediate dire threats to what we believe as Christians. Jesus’ words assure us that at the moment of death, or facing death in its other manifestations, when death seems to be winning the final victory, our lives are secure in God’s hands. Jesus’ words of security had meaning for the early church; they needed to hear and embrace in faith what he said, for being a Christian when this gospel was written, was a matter of life and death.

John wrote his gospel towards the end of the first century when Domitian was persecuting Christians. The emperor had applied cruel tactics to take Christians out of the hands of Christ. Of course the Jewish community, source of the first Christians, also wanted their former members back into the fold. Early Christians has pressures on all sides to persuade or force them to renounce their new-found faith in Christ.

Patricia Datchuck Sanchez [CELEBRATION, May 2001] points to the context of Jesus’ words as important for understanding today’s text. Jesus said these words

on the feast of the Dedication of the Temple—today we call it Hanukkah. The feast celebrates the rededication of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus, after it had been defiled by Antiochus IV, the Greek emperor who built an altar to Zeus in the Jerusalem temple. The Maccabean revolt followed and the temple was regained and then rededicated.

Thus, while the people were celebrating this feast of the temple's rededication, Jesus was saying that they wouldn't need a temple to celebrate God and God's presence among them. Instead, they could find in Jesus one united to God ("the Father and I are one"). If we want to see God made visible, Jesus is saying, we need to look to Jesus. In fact, if we listen to Jesus' words, we are listening to God. We have, therefore, a new holy place in Christ, and now that he is resurrected, we can enter the holy presence of God whenever we turn to Christ in prayer, community and to those he calls us to serve. The implication of what Jesus said was quite clear to his listeners, the next verse says they took up rocks to throw at him (verse 31).

At this moment we can ask ourselves if what he says is equally clear to us. In Christ we have an intimate union with God. This union is strengthened today as we listen to Christ's words with ears of faith. The eucharist we will receive is also food from God's hands to nourish us on our journey and help us fulfill the vocation we have already heard from the risen Christ this Easter time—"feed my lambs." We are about that task in so many ways—among our families, and friends, through paid and volunteer ministries in our parish communities and through the many ways we reach out to both friend and stranger in need.

It always seemed strange to me when I heard readings from the Book of Revelation how the robes of those before the throne of the Lamb could come out white after having been washed "in the blood of the Lamb." That inconsistency alone was a signal to me that we are not in the laundry, but in a realm rich in symbolic language.

John wrote Revelation during some horrible times for Christians. Nero had blamed them for a destructive fire in Rome and began persecuting them. Domitian carried out a systematic persecution throughout the Roman empire. Either Christians worshiped Domitian as divine or they were tortured and killed. John writes from these terrible times. And of course he writes in a style that will

capture the imagination of those Christians whose lives are tormented because of their faith. These Christians were not part-time believers. They didn't practice a religion that blended into the mainstream with other citizens of the empire. To live at this time eliminated the possibility of being a Sunday-only Christian. Because of militant paganism they lived a faith that could cost them their lives. So, John is writing to these Christians to console them and, through visionary language, to fill them with hope.

Those who are gathered before the throne of the Lamb are from "every nation, race, people and tongue." John's vision challenges our provincial attitudes about church. Believers, once rejected, even punished for their faith, will come from around the world. They will be wearing robes washed in Christ's blood—they are baptized. Because of this baptism they are united and all stand on equal footing in the community of believers. Since baptism has already had that effect on us, there should be no distinction among us between "first class and second class Christians." Whether people resemble us, speak our language, are born in our neighborhood, have been life-time members of our parish, were around to build the church, have paid for the stain glass windows, or serve on the parish council—we are all robed alike, called by our baptism to a life of holiness and service.

John holds out hope for us whose martyrdom is not as dramatic as those who suffered under Nero or Diocletian. Nevertheless, baptism has set us on a path to life through daily little deaths---personal sacrifices that come from our faith. We choose to surrender time, energy and profit so that we can serve others. We stay faithful in our daily response to commitments and promises we have made to help others. We show up when there is a call for help, though it means we have had to put aside a cherished project or our spare time. Both the gospel and the second reading from Revelation were meant to strengthen and give hope to Christians. The early church and we have been waiting for Christ's return for a long time; meanwhile daily stress can cause discouragement in our faith. Whether there be severe tests or just the daily slippage that can happen to believers, we lean on the assurance of the Word today that God will not let us slip away, but is providing at this very eucharist what we need to keep us strong and faithful to our call during times of doubt and trial.

QUOTABLE

Though historians debate many aspects of the life of Jesus and that of the

early church, one thing they do not debate anymore is that a Christian is by definition someone who believed that the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead. Of course, the world, pagan and Jewish, thought this claim to be ridiculous. If the resurrection really happened, its occurrence would be so great a jolt to our assumptive world—in our world, what’s dead stays that way—that we would have great conceptual difficulty getting our minds around such an event. That difficulty is seen in the diverse accounts of the resurrection appearances in scripture. Yet be well assured that despite the difficulty of saying just what happened *something* had happened. That *something* all Christians, every last one of them, called, “God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Accuse these early Christian preachers of being ridiculous, but there are no historical grounds whatsoever to accuse them of having “faith” despite the fact that nothing had happened. As Paul puts it, without resurrection, we really have nothing interesting to say (I Cor. 15:14).

---William H. Willimon, JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS, Easter, 2004, page 3.

JUSTICE NOTES

All must realize that there is no hope of putting an end to the building up of armaments, nor of reducing the present stocks, nor, still less--and this is the main point--of abolishing them altogether, unless the process is complete and thorough and unless it proceeds from inner conviction: unless, that is, everyone sincerely cooperated to banish the fear and anxious expectation of war with which men are oppressed. If this is to come about, the fundamental principle on which our present peace depends must be replaced by another, which declares that the true and solid peace of nations consists not in equality of arms but in mutual trust alone. We believe that this can be brought to pass, and we consider that, since it concerns a matter not only demanded by right reason but also eminently desirable in itself, it will prove to be the source of many benefits.

---Peace on Earth, #113, John XXIII, 1963

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

---Jeanette Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree

murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

Rayford L. Burke #0057308 (On death row since 4/1/93)

John Burr #0058316 (4/21/93)

Eugene Decastro #0104984) (4/28/93)

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

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,

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