

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:

I made the suggestion last week that during this Easter season we preachers consider preaching from the first or second readings. The Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation constitute these readings up to Pentecost. Last week we reflected on Revelation and today we will begin with a general introduction and then a look at today's Acts selection.

Luke ended his gospel with Jesus' promise to the Eleven, "See, I send down upon you the promise of my Father. Remain here in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (24: 49). At the beginning of Acts, Luke's second volume, the promise is renewed. Jesus tells the apostles not to leave Jerusalem, "Wait, rather, for the fulfillment of my Father's promise, of which you heard me speak" (1:4). We join Jesus' followers as we too wait for the coming of the renewing Spirit, both for ourselves and our church. We keep a prayerful vigil till Pentecost day, when our Acts reading announces the tongues of fire coming upon each of the gathered disciples--- the fulfillment of Jesus' promise. "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit..." (2:4).

Today's passage comes from a section of Acts that describes the mission of Barnabas and Paul (13:1-15:35). Paul had given a sermon in a synagogue (13: 16-41) which, at first, got a favorable hearing. But on the following sabbath (today's section) he meets hostility from "the Jews." As a result, Paul and Barnabas shift their attention, "... we now turn to the Gentiles." This is a critical moment in the early church, a time when they realize that God's gift of redemption is not only meant for the Jews, but for the whole world.

The move to be more inclusive was not an easy one for the early believers. The early church, with deep roots in Judaism, had to come to accept the "newcomers," who didn't have the traditions and religious customs of the first Jewish Christian converts. Israel had suffered terribly at the hands of gentile conquerors. The exile was just one example of the pain and subjugation wrecked on Israel by outside oppressive forces. In addition, the Jews considered Gentiles idolaters, demon

worshippers and immoral. While one part of the Jewish tradition did have a missionary consciousness and wanted to bring Gentiles to the one, true God, the other wanted nothing to do with Gentiles and considered contact with them religious defilement.

Opening the doors to the larger world community caused conflicts and divisions among the early believers. Even now different religious traditions and customs cause tensions in our parishes and dioceses. People also lament what, seems to be, the waning of the ecumenical movement that, in recent years, seemed to hold such promise for christian unity. What is it we fear in such dialogue? What are we afraid of losing or changing? Why are we hesitant about lowering the barriers that separate us? Are we afraid we will lose our heritage and, with that, our identity as well? It is not difficult to put ourselves in the place of the early believers, as Paul and Barnabas decided to “turn to the Gentiles.” It was a profound shift to the two apostles themselves.

One of the characteristics of these early apostles was their willingness to suffer rebuff and persecution. As we notice today, if one place or people did not accept them, they simply “shook the dust from their feet” and moved on. Rejection did not cause them to become insular or self-protecting. Another trait was their sense of mission, “For the Lord has commanded us...,” and, as we saw in last week’s passage, they were even joyful when their witnessing caused them suffering. “So they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name” (Acts 5:41). When the apostles went on their first mission (Mt. 10:5) they excluded the Gentiles. But today we read of the turn Paul and Barnabas made to them. Indeed, Paul came to be known as the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” The two seem to have picked up Jesus’ insistence that the apostles had a mission to the Gentiles, for he had instructed them to, “make disciples of all the nations” (Mt. 28:19). The gospel has a universal outreach; Jews and Gentiles were to be included in its embrace.

“We now turn to the Gentiles.” Now that’s a challenge to any parish community! Who are the modern outsiders we need to reach out to and invite in? Are there any in our own parish community who feel like outsiders because they aren’t “mainstream” enough? Besides minorities, divorced and gay parishioners there are others who may feel outside the general congregation. A young widow once told me she never heard her situation addressed in a preaching. Those without full time

employment, single parents and the elderly can also feel sidelined by parish activities, recognition, liturgy and preaching.

In the spirit of Paul and Barnabas, we may have to make a “turn” within our immediate worship and parish settings. Do our parish councils and committees reflect the diversity that’s already in the pews? And are all voices respected, or do the more established have stronger influence on parish life? Do our liturgies show seeming indifference to the cultures and traditions of our newest members? And how can we offer welcome to those newcomers who don’t feel that welcome from the rest of our country? We are also conscious that the modern equivalents of the Gentiles are to be found even in our own families and among our friends. The promise Jesus made to the disciples before his ascension was that they would receive the Spirit. On Pentecost we will celebrate the Spirit’s coming and staying with believers. That Spirit brought Paul and Barnabas to Antioch and there they made their turn to the Gentiles. We have that same Spirit. Towards which Gentiles shall we turn?

Now a turn towards the gospel. Prior to today’s brief section we learn that Jesus is walking in the temple area during the feast of the Dedication (10: 23ff). This was a feast that celebrated the rededication of the temple after its desecration by Antiochus and the Seleucids. Judas Maccabee lead the people in the overthrow of their enemy and the feast commemorated Israel’s triumph. So, in that context, when rebellion and revolutionary leadership were remembered, Jesus is asked the question, “How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you really are the Messiah, tell us in plain words” (10: 23-24). They seem to be expecting another Judas Maccabee. Today’s passage continues Jesus’s response to his questioners. Jesus’ oppressed country people were looking for someone to free them of the Roman slavery they were under. Jesus could have easily called for armed rebellion, as others had done and were doing, and he would have had a peasant army behind him.

Instead, Jesus offers another kind of leadership; he turns to the image of the shepherd. That must have stirred up religious memory for those who heard him. David had been a shepherd. But God, after rejecting Israel’s other rulers for being unfaithful shepherds, promised to be Israel’s shepherd. If people were going to be set free, it would be in God’s way and under God’s loving care. Jesus, the shepherd, was God’s messiah and his works had already revealed who he was. His

shepherd's voice, would lead those who would listen. Shepherds stay with their sheep constantly and the sheep recognize and follow the shepherd's voice. Nothing will scatter those who follow the Good Shepherd----not even death itself. "I give them eternal life and they shall never perish."

As we face the daily dyings discipleship requires, as well as our final physical death, following and relying on the voice of our shepherd will see us safely through. Maybe that is why we have today's reading, which is taken from the middle of John's gospel, but is placed in the Easter season. The voice of the resurrected one, if we listen to it and observe it, will enable us to keep choosing and staying close to Christ---right up to and through our death. Since that voice comes from one who has eternal life, we too receive that life, which has begun now. Trusting in that voice, we "shall never perish." So, as with the rest of the gospel, today's passage stirs up our Easter faith. We have Christ's life in us now and, because he is one with the Father, we have God's life ---- "no one can take [us] out of the Father's hand." Jesus cannot say it any strong, "The Father and I are one." They are one in their care for us, the flock that follows Christ.

PRAYER BEFORE PREPARING A HOMILY

Holy Jesus, Model of Preachers, you who delighted those who heard you with your simple stories and profound insights, come to my aid as I prepare to create this homily.

My personal gifts for such a work seem limited, but I believe profoundly that if I but empty my heart of myself, that you will flood that heart with words that you want spoken.

May the Sacred Words of Scripture fall like seeds upon my spirit to be nourished by the flesh and blood of my own sufferings and struggles to be holy.

Help me, Lord to speak only what I believe, and to will to live what I shall proclaim, so that my whole life may be my homily.

May I experience this time of preparation as prayer. May my efforts to re-shape the message of the gospels to fit this age and to launch those persons who seek You in the midst of their daily lives be truly prayerful.

Send forth your Spirit and touch my heart as I now begin this prayer, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

---Submitted by Deacon Louis Bauer Slidell, La.

A POEM

PRAYING

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest, but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak

-----Mary Oliver, Thirst

JUSTICE NOTES

“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (*Revelation 7:14b-17*)

Today's Second Reading from the Book of Revelation tells us that “every tear will be wiped away”. But what are we to do with this Easter promise of Life in the face of so much death in our world? In his Easter message, Pope Benedict named just a few of the horrors in our world for which countless tears are being shed by God's children, our brothers and sisters.

“How many wounds, how much suffering there is in the world! Natural calamities and human tragedies that cause innumerable victims and enormous material destruction ... the scourge of hunger, of incurable diseases, of terrorism and kidnaping of people, of the thousand faces of violence ... of contempt for life, of the violation of human

rights and the exploitation of persons. ...peace is sorely needed: in Sri Lanka ...Darfur ...Afghanistan ... the Middle East, and in Iraq, torn apart by continual slaughter...

The Pope continues with these words:

“Christ is risen and he is alive among us. It is he who is the hope of a better future... United to him and ready to offer our lives for our brothers, let us become apostles of peace, messengers of a joy that does not fear pain – the joy of the Resurrection” (Pope Benedict XVI ,Easter Message 2007)

“Easter declares that God is neither a product of our best selves (our best hopes and dreams) nor is God limited by our worst nightmares. **Resurrection is God being God.** In the face of human destruction, in the face of human rejection, God cannot and will not be less than God. God will not be mocked. God cannot be defeated. Newness, wholeness, and fullness of life will define holiness now and in the world to come. **Resurrection is God in a single moment of glory reinventing everything and then inviting us along for the ride.**” (*Wrestling with Presence, Reflections for Lent: Pax Christi USA*)

What can I do?

We can open our hearts and our prayers to the suffering and tears of the world.

We can remind each other, when it's hard to remember, that Easter has happened and continues to happen, all around us, within us and among us. We are called to be witnesses to this. Rejoice!

(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:.....

Jamie L. Smith #0376917 (On death row since 5/10/96)

Robbie D. Locklear #0246186 (5/14/96)

Archie L. Billings #0471315 (6/5/96)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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"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 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 Or 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.

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Thanks you and blessings on your preaching,
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