

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 5th SUNDAY OF EASTER -C-
Acts 14: 21-27 Psalm 145 Revelation 21: 1-5 John 13: 31-33, 34-35
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I am making a shift to the first two readings this weekend. I have neglected them for a while and they offer rich preaching material during the Easter season. And quite frankly, how many of us preachers make a habit of skipping over the first two readings and go immediately to the gospel? As is my habit, I will focus on just one reading in my preaching, but at this time, I am not sure which one. So, I will look at both, let them simmer and see which emerges with preaching possibilities.

The first readings since Easter have been from Acts; such will be the case till Pentecost. On Pentecost we will read from the opening of Acts and hear about the Spirit’s coming on the disciples. Yet, the readings these weeks BEFORE Pentecost are about what happened AFTER the event. Confused? Perhaps hearing about what happened among early believers once they had received the Spirit, will whet out appetites for the Spirit and the gifts we need in our lives. Thus, the Acts readings can prepare us for Pentecost and help us see its possibilities for our personal and communal faith lives.

Today we read that Paul and Barnabas are returning to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. Sounds like a travelog; the way we might say, “We drove from Louisville, to St. Louis and then to Chicago.” But readers of Acts will remember that these three towns were not easy places for these two early preachers. At first, when they preached in Antioch, Lystra and Iconium, Paul and Barnabas were successful, and gathered many believers to Christ. But then religious leaders and unbelievers challenged the apostles and turned the people against them. The apostles were thrown out of Antioch, persecuted and almost killed in Iconium. In Lystra, after Paul had cured the cripple, the crowds got excited, but religious leaders from Antioch and Iconium tracked the two apostles down and instigated the people to stone Paul (14:19), leaving him for dead.

You would think that Paul and Barnabas had had enough. They might have been tempted to return to their former trades the way Peter and companions returned to

fishing in our gospel story a couple weeks ago (3rd. Sunday of Easter—John 21: 1-19). Instead we read, “they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch.” There certainly is an atmosphere of energy, determination, courage and excitement in these stories of the early preachers. But these stories aren’t just told for us public preachers, for we sense vitality, not just in the outgoing evangelists, but in all the members of the early community that was gifted when the Pentecost Spirit gave birth to the church. Luke tells us stories of faithful believers as well as brave leadership. Doesn’t that make you want a new burst of the Spirit on our church this coming Pentecost? I think that is what these readings are supposed to stir up.

Come Spirit of God, renew your church. Heal the gapping wounds scandal has caused. Come down in double-dose upon us your preachers, so that we speak words of life and renewal for your believing-doubting people. Give us wise and bold leaders, like the first apostles, who are not afraid to return with us to places of pain and who will inspire us by their courageous and truthful ways. We, like the first believers, are a fragile people, facing dangers from both without and within. Stir up our baptismal waters, renewed at Easter, so that we can hear again the call to proclaim Jesus Christ with our lives, “in season and out of season.”

The Acts reading, like the ones we have been hearing, is a strong reminder that we are not Christians in isolation. Paul and Barnabas worked together; they formed communities and returned to them when a need arose. When they returned to their bases in places like Antioch, they gave an account of their travels to the community of believers, the church. So, today we offer thanks for our particular church community: family and friends, familiar faces and even strangers, whose faces we recognize from frequent gatherings on Sundays, though we may not have been formally introduced.

In this community, there have been times when we have been available to help others in need. Many of us are even permanent minister in our parishes. At other times, we have been on the receiving end of the parish’s ministry: comforted in our grieving; encouraged by the brave example of others; prayed for and brought the eucharist when we were sick; filled with joy at family baptisms and weddings. We have received a sense of companionship knowing that others are walking a similar path with us to God and in service to the world.

What will we receive in today’s eucharist? It is really not “what” but “who”—the

same living Christ whose Spirit continues to give birth, at times with arduous labor pains, to a new church in “Our Town, USA”—of wherever the Spirit has planted us and nurtured us within a Christian community.

The second readings these Sundays of Easter have been from the Book of Revelation. Today’s passage is a key moment in this book for it depicts the passing of the old order and the fulfillment of the promised new age. Remember this book was written to encourage a suffering church and so its message of the triumph of good and the final victory over evil is good news indeed. Pain is ended! Sin vanquished! Death done with! What could be better news? And amidst this triumph is God, the source of the victory, the One who makes it all a reality.

The promise of newness stirs up childhood memories of the beginning of the baseball season and the sight and smell of a new baseball right out of the box. School was over and I can still remember the feel of the ball unbruised by grass or infield dirt. I can still feel the hope—maybe this summer I’ll get to be the ball player I imagined in my daydreams. Well I never achieved that goal, but I always thought it possible as a new season began.

That’s what this reading stirs up. But it isn’t merely a daydream. It is the hope we have placed in our God. Jesus was raised to new life and because we have placed our faith in him, we will be too! Really believing in his resurrection and hoping in the promise we hear today can make all the difference as we struggle against the daily forces of death that seem very much alive and well—and even winning! We do not yield to despair, we do not give up the struggle because we hold this vision to be true. Someday, “the former heavens and the former earth” will yield to the new Jerusalem where we will dwell with God in our midst. “No more death or mourning, crying out of pain, for the former world has passed away.” We celebrate this Eucharist which renews the promise for us and keeps it alive in our hearts while we continue to live in the “meanwhile”.

QUOTABLE

“The mind is a wonderful thing. It starts working the minute you’re born and never stops until you get up to speak in public.”

—Roscoe Drummond in, *PROJECTING A BETTER IMAGE: VOLUME I*.

JUSTICE NOTES

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court handed down its historic decision, “Brown vs. Board of Education,” which declared that “separate but equal” schools and public facilities were unconstitutional. This decision set in motion the modern civil rights movement. This week we celebrate the 50th. anniversary of the Court’s decision. Here’s a quote from David Halberstam’s article, “Brown v. Board of Education: What it Means to Every American” (The News and Observer, Raleigh, April 18, 2004, in the “Parade” section.)

“But there...are, not just in the South, but in the whole country, heart-breaking reminders both of black poverty and black alienation.

Sometime, looking back at how I and so many others felt at the time of the Brown decision 50 years ago, I think we had no sense of the extent of the damage that we, as a nation, had inflicted on black Americans in more than 200 years of intense racism, starting with the harshness of slavery and ending with the bitterness of segregation.

The legal and political change that came in from the years 1954 to 1965 was, I not think, the easy part. The hard part—in this most difficult of American journeys—is overcoming the educational, economic and psychological damage produced over so long a period.

But that does not lessen the importance of the Brown decision as a towering historic act and the great new beginning that it represented. It allowed, to paraphrase Justice Jackson’s prophetic words, the new, second America finally to be born.”

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:.....

Nathan Bowie #0038561 (On death row since 2/5/93)

William Bowie #0039569 (2/5/93)

Elton Mc Laughlin #0272408 (3/17/93)

-----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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