

“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:

The second reading from Revelation is a gem and worth the preacher's attention. In it, John describes the new Jerusalem promised by Isaiah. An age is coming in which all creation is to be renewed. It will bring with it the holy city, the dwelling place of God with humans. What a promise this reading holds out for those afflicted and those touched by death. No temple is evident in this city because in it God will be in our midst, a permanent presence with us. God will be our Comforter to wipe away our tears. The “former” will pass away. Death and its consequent grief will be no more. All that pained, limited, distracted and deceived us in the “old order” will be gone. The transformation will be complete—all things will be made new.

Things may look the same to the Christians in the author's community, but the resurrection of Jesus makes the old world new. Doesn't this reading touch our deepest yearnings for our tired old world? So much war and conflict, poverty and suffering around us. Even the earth, air and sea are tired as we deplete and pollute. We, along with our earth, long for this apocalyptic vision to become a reality. Does that sound like pie in the sky? Should we just put up with things now and wait till that happy day breaks upon us? Should we just leave it all into God's hands for some future day?

It makes a difference to me to hear this reading. I can get comfortable or complacent with the way things are, or despair at the size and complexity of the world's problems. How can we deal with all that's wrong with the world? I am tempted to just tend to my own corner of the world, see to my well being, take care of my own business. This reading serves as a warning: all the former things are going to pass away. That being so, I had better tend to where I put my confidence, where I think my security lies.

Revelation also serves as a consolation, as it must have been for the author and his hearers who were displaced from Jerusalem and its destroyed temple. Christians faced daily persecutions. Their past world was destroyed but,

encouraged by Revelation, they could look to the future. Someday God would draw things together in final triumph. This is not merely day dreaming, for this vision must also affect the present, as a hope during a time of distress--- and an agenda. How does this vision of a coming new order challenge my current priorities? The present is determined by my vision of the future; I live now by the lights of the coming new city. So, I will confront death in its many manifestations now. And if I can't "wipe every tear from their eyes," as God promises to do, at least in the meanwhile, that hope will urge me to wipe the tears from at least one person's eyes. If I am to be a citizen of this heavenly Jerusalem, I had better get used to acting like a citizen now.

Today's gospel will be a bit confusing to the congregation. It starts, "When Judas left...." Strange opening, it's out of context. Left where? Left whom? Left what? Does the line suggest more than his leaving a room? Had he left a way of life and a Person behind? His leaving might be like our breaking a relationship and leaving a former love. It might be like changing the course of our lives, for better or worse, and setting out on our own. This brief, though isolated opening passage, fits into the flow of the gospel story John has been telling. It takes place right after Jesus has washed the disciples' feet and told them, "as I have done, so you must do." He asks them, "...do you understand what I just did for you?" So, Judas leaves after the teaching about the leaders being servants to the community. He also leaves after Jesus offers him the morsel of food, a sign in that culture of friendship and reconciliation. Judas walked out on an opportunity to be restored to close relationship with Jesus and the community. He left a lot behind.

Strange, isn't it, that during these Easter Sundays we should have a reading from Jesus' Last Discourse? Feels like we are going backwards, finding ourselves prior to the resurrection; prior even to Jesus' death. What's going on here?

Jesus is at table with his disciples and Judas's departure precipitates the discourse about Jesus' glorification, which in this gospel means his death, resurrection and return to God. Jesus predicts his passion in very succinct terms, "My children, I will be with you only a little longer." The words have an endearing quality, "my children." He is like a parent speaking to his family, his "children", and he wants them to stay together after his departure—and the glue that will keep the bonds strong is love. Just as they loved him and he them, so must they love one another. There are lots of other passages in the gospels about loving others, especially

those most in need of love. But here he urges, indeed he commands, "...love one another." He wants love to be the tie that binds his community.

St. John's community needed to be reminded of this commandment. They were going through internal struggles (cf. 1 John 2-4) and feeling stress from outside forces putting tensions on the faithful. Sound familiar? Our gathering today for word and sacrament reminds us that we members of Christ's community need to be strengthened in mutual love, lest we burst apart into warring factions. Ronald Rolheiser, in his wonderful book, *THE HOLY LONGING: THE SEARCH FOR A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY*, (New York: Doubleday, 1999) describes in everyday terms, what our common life should look like.

"It demands that there be some real sharing of life together, namely, that we pray together; that we celebrate our rites of passage together; that we celebrate some of our everyday joys, fears, and feats together; that we are responsible to each other and open to each other as regards mutual correction and challenge; that we are responsible together for the ministry of the church; and that we have some common sharing of finances (even if this means only that we contribute financially to the support of our local church and its projects).

All these things together, in essence mean that, in some form or other, we are mutually accountable to each other for our lives. We may still live in our private houses and have our private bank accounts, but, once we belong to a church, we no longer fully own our lives. We now have to answer to each other and may no longer claim our own lives as an exclusive piece of private property. (Page 121)

A "new commandment"? Isn't it a put down of Judaism and other religious traditions to suggest Jesus' followers are to practice love for one another--- and that this is "new"? Don't all religious traditions teach love for each other? What is Jesus saying when he gives his disciples this "new commandment"? Maybe Jesus is opening a new period in the disciples' growth and is now speaking of the love they should have for one another. Maybe the kind of love he was about to show them, by giving his life for them, was the new way of loving he expected from them. Or, possibly what Jesus had in mind as a new way of loving was the love he had just shown Judas, the offer of reconciliation and renewed friendship even in the face of betrayal. There is also a new facet to the love the disciples will have for one another. They are to reflect the love Jesus had for them and showed

them as he washed their feet. Now the leader will be a servant. Peace will be achievable among them because the disciples will bring sacrificial love to their dealings with one another. The disciples will be showing love for each other in ways not usually associated with love in our world. It will not be a love based merely on looks, friendship, status, talents, status, etc. Rather, we will love one another the way God loved us—while we were still sinners.

This new way of loving Jesus was commanding, wasn't a feel good kind of love. Whatever our feelings towards each other in his community, he wanted us to act lovingly. Amid all the doctrinal, liturgical and political disagreements prevalent in our church today, acting lovingly towards even those opposed to our views, might make us the very kind of sign to the world Christ wants us to be. "See how much they love one another."

A word about Mother's Day

Be careful in liturgical celebrations and preaching on this Sunday not to let Mother's Day overshadow the Easter Celebration. And be careful not to wax sentimental. As wonderful as this day can be there are several pitfalls for our celebration today. First,, the holiday can take over the liturgy. Remember this is a celebration of the paschal mystery, that is the reason for our gathering. In addition, this day can be painful to some in our congregation. There are those who have wanted to be mothers but cannot due to infertility; those who have lost children; those who have had miscarriages; those who have painful memories of their mothers; and those separated from mothers due to family strife and broken relationships.

A word about the origins of Mother's Day might also help keep our references about mothers from becoming sentimental. As we make these references, we do not lose sight of the scriptures from which we preach.

From the "Sourcebook" published by Liturgy Training Publications:

"In 1872, Julia Ward Howe, the author of the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," made an eloquent appeal for an annual Mother's Day for Peace:

'Arise, all women who have hearts, and say firmly: Our husbands shall not come to us reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been

able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.”

In the first years when Mother's Day was observed in Boston, many women gathered to mourn the war dead and to devise strategies for peace. This observance did not catch on anywhere else, but 35 years later Anna Jarvis of Philadelphia asked her church to hold a service in memory of all mothers on the anniversary of her own mother's death. Faced with the power of the women's suffrage movement, male politicians espoused this version of the day as a way of enshrining a more traditional view of motherhood. In 1914 President Wilson proclaimed the second Sunday of May as Mother's Day. We might choose Howe's version of the day as we refer to Mother's Day in our preaching. We can't perpetuate the restricted sense of mothers in domestic and private spheres, especially with the working mothers, both single and married in our congregations. We might also include women who have been surrogate mothers to us: Godmothers, aunts, older sisters, religious educators, nuns and sisters, etc.

What the women in the congregation might need from the preacher today is an acknowledgment of their dignity and power and even their ability to influence national policies. Every year 5,000 children die to gun deaths. Each day 12 more children die. Pertinent to the origins of Mother's Day as a resistance and protest to violence is the “Million Mom March” still very much alive in communities around the country.

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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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