

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 6th SUNDAY OF EASTER, -C-
Acts 15:1-2, 22-29 Psalm 67 Revelation 21: 10-14, 22-23 John 14: 23-29
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We are approaching Pentecost, just two weeks away. And so we are hearing rumors of the Holy Spirit's role among the believers in two of today's readings. Let's look in particular at the Spirit's role in the first reading, when the early Christians had a conflict of significant weight.

Christians of Jewish origins in the Jerusalem church (perhaps former pharisee Christians) wanted Gentile converts to take on observance of the Mosaic law, especially circumcision and dietary observance. In effect, they wanted the Gentiles to become Jews first, as they had been. On the other side of the argument were Paul and Barnabas, the latter was a Gentile convert himself. In their missionary activity among the Gentiles they taught that faith in Jesus, his death and resurrection, was all that was required for salvation. God's salvation had now been made available to all humankind through Jesus' saving death, without the observance of the Old Law, the former testament.

The Jerusalem community had the decision making power in the early church and so Paul, Barnabas and their company went to Jerusalem to meet with the elders there. This gathering, the first church council, is often called the Jerusalem Council. The church had faced the incorporation of Gentiles into the largely Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem without much difficulty. The Jewish converts were in the majority; there weren't many Gentiles. But Paul's preaching had established whole churches of Gentiles with no roots or previous affiliation with Judaism. These new churches must have seemed a little too "free" to the traditional Christians in Jerusalem. They must have felt uncomfortable with the thought that Christianity might become much larger and less localized. It was becoming a Gentile religion. What would the original believers' place in it be? How could they influence it? What would keep it from going astray from the faith the original believers had in Jesus, the Messiah? Who would guide it on the right path once it had gotten so big? So far away?

The community agreed with Paul and his company, the Gentiles were not expected

to enter Judaism on their path to Christ. A letter was sent to the Antioch church with this decision. The dietary restrictions were minimal and while James, the leader of the Jerusalem community, taught them to the churches he influenced, Paul didn't. Having every custom exactly uniform did not seem to be a major issue for these early Christians. Raymond Brown points out that no one in the discussion ever said that Gentiles should not be given this freedom because Jesus had never exempted them himself. The argument could have gone, "If Jesus wanted to exempt the Gentiles from Mosaic observance, he would have said so." (The argument about what Jesus said or didn't say continues to this very day in other heated church discussions, e.g. the ordination of women.)

The Acts of the Apostles is often called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Through experiences such as this one, the early church was learning about the presence and the action of the Spirit in its midst. They were learning that Jesus would continue to be with them through the Spirit's presence. Their conclusion is a rather bold one, "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials...." What makes them so confident that the Holy Spirit was with them in this? First of all, their conclusion fits with the good news of Jesus that they were preaching; Jesus sat at table with both "insiders" and "outsiders." They are placing their faith in Jesus, rather than observance of laws and regulations, to ensure salvation.

Diversity was first seen as a threat in the early church. "They are different." "Why can't they be more like us?" In his writings, Paul would say that the "late comers," the Gentiles, are not to be considered as "resident aliens" (cf. Galatians 2: 11-22), but as full citizens. I am reminded of airports and the signs that greet you when you return from another country. There are signs and arrows that direct citizens to lines designated for them, quick access to the "homeland." Then there are signs for "resident aliens", people who live here but are not quite as privileged as citizens. Immigrants will report that even though they may be citizens, they are sometimes challenged and made to feel like second class citizens. "Why can't they speak our language?" "Let them follow our rules and our ways."

In dioceses and parishes around the country a lot of resources and personnel are being directed to the large influx of immigrants to our communities, especially from the Caribbean, Latin America and Asia. A lot of thought and energy are being expended to address the special needs of these newly arrived Christians.

Liturgies and environmental spaces are adapted to make the recently arrived feel welcome. But the transition is hard for some of the old timers who feel “they are invading our church.” Prior presence and membership in a parish make some condescending in what they will “allow” for the newcomers: liturgies that incorporate another language and customs, worship space, meeting rooms, places for community celebrations, etc. To use the airport metaphor: in our church there are some carrying platinum or gold cards--- those having lots of mileage, who get upgrades to first class with special privileges; while the others travel in the coach section.

With similar differences at the very beginning of our church, we note what those meeting in Jerusalem did. They didn’t rely on someone having a pre-packaged answer. There were marked differences between the debating groups, nevertheless they met, and listened to each other’s arguments. They came to a faith-based consensus, an expanded way of becoming a church. Had they taken the quick solution of what the Jerusalem elders had been teaching and practicing, Christianity would never have expanded beyond the small confines of Jerusalem and its surrounding towns.

Pentecost is soon, and on that day we will celebrate a diversity of peoples and languages and also a unity of belief. Everyone heard the Spirit in his or her own language. Pentecost preceded the Jerusalem Council and the Jerusalem community seems to have learned the Pentecost message quite well, for in their decision this day they were acknowledging that the Spirit was speaking to them again through the language of the Gentile experience of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel: A little caution here: there are three themes in today’s Gospel reading: (1) love as the force that unites us to God; (2) the promise of the Holy Spirit; (3) the peace and joy that comes from Jesus’ return to God. All three would be too much for the preacher to cover adequately, it might be best to choose one.

Thus, in anticipation of Pentecost, the preacher might choose to focus on the coming and the role of the Spirit in the church. The community to whom this Gospel was written (circa 90) was at a crucial stage. The apostles and eye witnesses to Jesus were dead, and still he had not returned. They were a persecuted community and needed his presence desperately. Thus, they would be encouraged by signs that his Spirit was still with him. Here is another example of

the graciousness of God, for the disciples do not have to earn the Spirit. The Spirit is crucial for the living faith of the church and so we need the Spirit to survive and thrive. We learn from Jesus today that this Spirit will be sent “in Jesus” name and so will link us with the life of Jesus. The Spirit will also teach what we need to know to more fully incorporate the life of Christ in our daily lives. With these activities of the Spirit in our midst there will be ample signs of Jesus’ continued presence in the life of the church and the public witness of its members.

Another preaching focus might be the gift of peace that Jesus leaves with his disciples. This word (“shalom”) has rich meaning in the Jewish community. It was used in greetings and partings—a wish for a life of harmony in God’s community; a life lacking nothing; a life of complete fullness. This life would be instituted with the arrival of the Messiah. Jesus brings his “peace” and all that it implies to his followers. The peace he gives us also stirs up in us a desire that such a peace be experienced by all and so the disciple is spurred to make this peace a reality in the world. Rather than being a source of contention or division, the disciple at home and in the market place works to create a healthy and life sustaining harmony in the community.

And sometimes, to create a truly caring and healthy community, a community of shalom, the disciple may even have to disturb an unhealthy and superficial harmony so as to create one that is true for all members. For example, a group working to change unhealthy working conditions in sweat shops in the inner city or a third world country might seem troublesome to those who gain from such oppressive labor practices. They might be accused of disturbing the peace. While the reality may be that the disciple of Christ is really working so that all might enjoy his “shalom”, all might live enjoy fullness of life.

Thus, if we experience the peace and assurance of Jesus at this eucharistic celebration today, what will we do to make such a peace available to others? How can we help them experience a more complete life? What do the lives of those around us still lack so that they too can experience the peace Jesus offers us today?

QUOTABLE and ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER

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A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops

"Unity in diversity is the vision that we bishops, as pastors of the Church in the United States, offer to our people as they welcome the new immigrants and refugees who come to our shores. . . . This diversity of ethnicity, education, and social class challenges us as pastors to welcome these new immigrants and help them join our communities in ways that are respectful of their cultures and in ways that mutually enrich the immigrants and the receiving Church."

Here's a description of the publication from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' webpage:

"Designed for both ordained and lay ministers at the diocesan and parish levels, this new document from the U.S. bishops challenges us to prepare to receive newcomers with a genuine spirit of welcome that provides a bridge for them to cross from one culture into another. Sidebars interspersed throughout the text provide examples of successful programs throughout this country. A wonderful resource for communications and religious education committees, seminaries, school superintendents, and all who wish to help promote unity in diversity."

English: No. 5-375, 80 pp., \$3.95

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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