

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 7th SUNDAY OF EASTER -C-
Acts 7: 55-60 Psalm 97 Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17 John 17: 20-26
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We are on the road to Pentecost, one week remains. We are praying for the gift of the Spirit who will continue the transformation process begun in us at our baptism. The landscape of our lives shows us much remains to be done if we are truly to take on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. As we near the great feast of the Spirit we hear in Acts an encouraging word. Stephen is held up as an example of the potential we all have when the Spirit is offered and accepted by us.

Steven is the first martyr. Notice the way Luke tells the story. Stephen is to be executed for his blasphemy against the Sanhedrin. He claims to see in his vision Jesus " the Son of Man" at God's right hand. Well the members of the Sanhedrin don't want to be told that the man they found guilty and had executed was, as Stephen claimed, alive and with God. Not only with God, but standing along with God in power. So they execute Stephen and like his Master, Stephen prays for his executioners; asks the Lord, "not [to] hold this act against them." Luke is drawing a deliberate parallel between Stephen and Christ's death. Notice too the difference: whereas Jesus, at his the hour of death, prayed to God, Stephen prays to Jesus, the Lord. Christ and God are one and Stephen is following Christ in taking up his cross and laying down his life.

I just finished preaching in a large New York City parish. I got to meet some wonderful people. I ask myself how does the martyrdom of Stephen play out in their lives? They don't have visions of the heavens opening and Lord standing at the right side of God, as Stephen did. Nor are they threatened by rock-bearing crowds who will execute them for their faith.

Quite the contrary: these parishioners lead routine lives. Many commute to Manhattan offices, a bus ride, one man told me, that could last, depending on traffic, from 1 1/4 to 2 hours each way. This husband and father (I'll call him Jim) said to me, " I feel like I spend half my life in that bus!" He certainly does spend a lot more than half his life at work---probably most of his waking hours. He donates some time to help at parish functions, he counsels some youth, helping them find entry-level jobs. He says he wishes he had more time to give those needy young people, but he wants to spend time with his two teenage daughters and his wife. In addition, his wife's mother is in a nursing home and they visit her,

keep track of her medications and supervise her care. Last week his mother in law had pneumonia and that meant the family cancelled their planned trip to Disneyland.

Now this man wouldn't call himself a martyr. He is much too self-effacing for that; such a heroic title would embarrass him. But he is like a lot of modern Christians who give away their lives in teaspoons and tablespoons— a little at a time— all the time. But like Stephen, Jim has seen a vision. As a believer he sees Jesus at God's side and believes, as the gospel today tells us, Jesus has welcomed him into an intimate union with God. Jim will probably hear the story of the courageous Stephen this weekend in church and he will admire the martyr's courage. The preacher might want to help men and women like Jim to see that they too are laying down their lives for Jesus, one day at a time.

During these seven weeks between Easter and Pentecost we have a chance to reflect on the difference Jesus' death and resurrection make on our lives. So, we read these weeks from the Book of Acts to see how the early church fared during its first critical days. We notice that this community was mission minded, going out immediately to tell others the good news. The first Christians looked out at a large and often hostile world, as Stephen's execution shows us. Instead of doing the "logical" thing and closing ranks, withdrawing to a protective enclave, the early church moved out into the world. Acts shows, and Stephen is a good example, that the believers were not afraid to confront those in power even when it meant punishment and loss of life.

Luke is making his point in Acts: the Holy Spirit is the chief Actor in the community after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Earlier in Acts we heard that Stephen was named a deacon, one among a group of deacons who would tend to the daily distribution of food to the needy (6:1 ff.) so as to free the apostles to do their work of preaching the gospel. Nevertheless, Stephen is called upon to speak his faith, which he does and for which he dies.

The irony of Stephen's death is that instead of quieting those who professed their faith in Christ, it only encouraged others to join the faith. Which suggests to us that those who give witness to their faith in Christ, like "James", the family man I met in New York, will draw others to Christ by their deeds as well as by their words. I listen to Stephen's story and I hear in it Christ's as well. But as I listen to James tell me about his life, I hear the same Christ story: a person of faith laying down his life in self-sacrifice for others. Both Stephen and James

withenss to the gospel and reveal the Spirit's active presence, for no one can imitate Christ by sheer will power; it takes the Spirit and our cooperation with its movements in us, to conform our lives to Christ's. We are told that at Stephen's execution was Saul, later to become the great evangelist Paul. I wonder if there was anything Saul saw or heard that day from Stephen that may have influenced Saul's later conversion on the road to Damascus.

We have walked in towards the end of the life and death drama between Stephen and the Sanhedrin. (Only the most biblically literate in the congregation is going to be aware of this.) Stephen is a leader among the Greek speaking Jews who converted to Christ. He had been arrested on false charges of blasphemy in his preaching (6: 5-15) and was brought before the elders to defend himself; rather than do that, he preaches a long discourse to them in which he reviews the history of God's dealings with Israel and then makes an argument for God speaking again to them through Jesus Christ.

Stephen cannot deny Christ's exalted position, that Christ was more important now than their Temple ("The Most High does not dwell in buildings made by human hands" 7:48) and even more important than the Mosaic law. The sharp distinction between the former beliefs and the new faith in Christ are becoming more articulated in the nascent church. Initially the new converts to Christ continued worshiping in the Temple. Christians will quickly have to leave the environs of the Temple and the rift will separate them from the rituals and customs of their ancestral faith. This confrontation between Stephen and the Sanhedrin will hasten the departure. The speech Stephen makes to the Sanhedrin stirred up anger in his listeners; after all, he accused them of, "always opposing the Holy Spirit just as your ancestors did before you" (7:51). Their response: they were "stung to the heart; they ground their teeth in anger at Stephen." (7:54)

Stephen, on trial, is finishing his speech before the elders, and that's the moment that begins today's reading. Rather than back off, or make conciliatory remarks to the people he has just offended, he clinches their case against him. From their faith perspective, he blasphemes. What he says about Jesus, no longer dead but at God's right hand, is a scandal to their pious ears. This clear statement of Jesus' identity and present dignity becomes the reason he is killed. The leaders can take no more, they cast him out of the city and stone him. Have you noticed in reading the passage the strong parallel to Jesus' own death? Luke wrote both, Jesus' in the gospel and now Stephen's in Acts. Both refer to the Son of Man seated at God's right hand (Lk. 22: 69 and Acts 7:56). Both have the victim praying for

forgiveness of his executioners (Lk. 23:34 and Acts 7:60). Finally, both accounts have the dying victim surrendering his soul into God's hands (Lk: 46 and Acts 7:59).

Luke is showing that Jesus' work and his preaching have not ceased with Jesus' death, but are carried on by the apostles and by disciples like Stephen. Jesus' death was not the end of his mission, nor the end of a person living a heroic God-life. Through the Spirit's active presence in the apostolic generation, Jesus continues to live and spread the gospel's good news. Stephen, a Greek speaking Jewish convert, was an outsider. After he is killed, his cloak is laid at the feet of Saul. Stephen's preaching mantle is being passed on to one whose name will be Paul, the church's great preacher to the outsiders, the Gentiles.

One of things I have noticed over the years of liturgical changes since Vatican II, is that we don't hear as much about the lives of the saints as we formerly did. Well, here is a chance to shine a light on the life of Stephen and the consequences of his life for modern believers. Stephen is the first martyr for the new faith. His witness is bold, explicit and without compromise. He is a challenge to us moderns of how much one is willing to give up for one's beliefs. We hear stories like his and we wonder what we might do in his place. Would we have his courage to sacrifice everything for our belief in Christ? Would we have the boldness to witness to Christ as he did? In fact, there are, right now, places in the world where people are jailed and punished for their faith.

But that doesn't seem to apply to most of our situations. Mostly we are quite comfortable being Christian, quite at home in the circles we frequent, the social settings of our lives. Many of us keep our faith well below the water line. Are we even willing to sacrifice a little for that faith? Many shun any public display of their faith and would rather let things just slip by. We may not be dragged before tribunals because of our beliefs, we may not have to be quite as outspoken and confrontational as Stephen was that day when his faith was on trial. But even if it's just around the water cooler at work, would any of our coworkers even know that our faith made a difference in our lives--- was the primary directional force that gave meaning to all of our priorities, stands on important issues, political choices, friendships, goals and desires?

And more--- would any of us consider ourselves spokespersons for our faith? Stephen got in trouble for speaking about the things he believed. He was an EVANGELIST. There, the dreaded word! We almost never hear it uttered in

main line churches. Yet it is not just the mission of some paid clergy and full time lay ministers in our parish. It is our task, our vocational call since our baptism, when our ears were blessed to hear the Gospel and our lips were blessed to proclaim it. Before we picture ourselves picking up a bible and going on a soap box at the nearest street corner, we might start closer to home...and work...and school....and yes, even parish.

It is rare that we Christian would find ourselves in such a life threatening situation as Stephen did. Nor would we want, in most situations, to be as confrontational before those whose beliefs differ from our own. Some might, not this preacher. In the 70's, we had an Dominican sister and priest evangelization team in the diocese of West Virginia. We were wisely advised by our diocesan supervisors not to try "stealing Christians from other churches." Since 40% of the state was unchurched, we had plenty of room to travel and share our faith. And to invite members of the parishes to do the same with us.

Most of the dioceses in which I preach have offices of evangelization. Their task: to encourage an evangelistic spirit among the faithful, to stimulate a willingness on our part to share our faith.

The starting point for this sharing draws its inspiration from Stephen; we don't start talking church doctrines and customs, ritual and sacramental practices. We start where it all began, with what God is doing for us in Jesus. Does Jesus make a difference in our lives? Have we ever told anyone that?

Last year our Raleigh diocesan office of evangelization sent church members a list of simple, and I thought, practical ways to share our faith with others. I remember some of these suggestions and I can add a few more that I have picked up along the way. The list risks sounding too simple, too everyday, too easy. However, that may just be the point about evangelization, and the thing for the preacher to do is to make it sound as easy, practical and as simple as it really is. Here is just the start of such a list, add your own suggestions from your experience of how people have shared their faith in Jesus Christ.

- offer to fill in for a person caring for a home bound family member
- when someone tells you a family member or friend is sick, tell them you will pray for them
- when a current news tragedy is discussed, mention that you are praying for the victims
- keep your eyes and ears open to the needs of others, especially the poor
- suggest blessings before meals at family gatherings

- at church meetings help keep awareness of the place and guidance of scriptures
- when new neighbors move in, bring over a cake and welcome them
- have input so as to keep your parish from being just focused on its own needs
- notice if there are any people on the fringe of the parish not being addressed by parish liturgies and activities
- support parish evangelization efforts; get involved in the R.C.I.A. program

These are just starters. Remember that St. Frances Cabrini, who was a missionary to the Americas, said, “This will be the main purpose of all that comes my way as work...to love Jesus, to speak of Jesus and to make Jesus known.”

Each of us has to look to our own situations to find creative ways to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. But just deciding, in some way, on how we can share our faith with others will also have the effect of quickening that faith in our own lives, of deepening our experience of what Stephen proclaimed, “Behold I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Mary Catherine Hilbert, *SPEAKING WITH AUTHORITY: CATHERINE OF SIENA AND THE VOICES OF WOMEN TODAY*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001.) 168 pages, paper, \$9.95.

A reflection on the life and ministry of Catherine of Siena as a lens through which modern women of faith can examine the challenges they encounter in the church. She examines three interrelated sources of Catherine’s authority—the authority of vocation, the authority of wisdom and the authority of compassion. An inspiration for both women and men to continue to preach the truth of the gospel to both our church and our world.

QUOTABLE:

Sometimes the words of protest are the only words we can speak clearly in the face of complex forces of evil woven into the fabric of our lives and world. We cannot always see or name the way forward. Further, no liberation front or political or social program can be identified with the reign of God. But even the cry of protest is a word of grace that moves us to resistance and to searching for another way. The beginning of finding a new path is speaking the truth of what clearly is not God’s will for human life or for the church. But for experiences of negativity to be ones of contrast, rather than mere confirmation of life’s absurdity

and harshness, one must have had at least fragmentary moments of meaning, love, and joy. It is precisely the life of love we have known, the compassion of God we have tasted, that prompts us to say that life could be different, that peace is possible, that relationships can be mended. Likewise, it is the experience and promise of a welcoming community, a shared table, and the unconditional forgiveness of God, that sustains our commitment to become more full the body of Christ and to call the body as a whole to be more of a sacrament of salvation in our world. Our hopes are shaped by the stories and ritual that form the horizons of our imaginations.

---Mary Catherine Hilkert, p. 131-132.

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, 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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