

First Impressions 7<sup>th</sup> 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:

There are libraries of books on prayer. But perhaps we can venture a few words ourselves since today's readings touch on the subject. If we are being honest when we pray, then we are speaking from our deepest identity. The prayer we voice from our hearts, in personal and private moments, can reveal: the condition of our spirits; where we are most vulnerable and in need; whether our hearts are open to receive or preoccupied with our own plans; whether we are willing to make the changes our prayers may necessitate. Our prayer reveals the disposition of our spirits.

In the gospel today and in other places where we are privileged to get a glimpse into Jesus' prayer, we learn where Jesus' heart and concerns are—he is praying for us. He wants “that they may all be one.” He wanted, then and now, that we be united to him, because union with him also means we are united to the Father and one another. His prayer is very inclusive and he prays at a time when events may soon tear his fledgling community apart.

Jesus' is praying right before the collapse of his life's project. Even with his pending death he prays for those at table with him and for the generations who will come to believe in him through their words. What optimism! What confidence he has in his Father. We are part of a vast community, then and now, who have heard the disciples' words and accepted them. In this we are one, united by hearing and responding to the word we have heard. While we may wonder how we can be one with so many different Christian denominations and lament the lessened spirit for ecumenism we sense these days, nevertheless, we can celebrate our unity in Christ. Jesus has prayed for us and his prayer has borne fruit, as evidenced by powerful Christian witnesses, famous and anonymous, in our world. Our faith in Christ and our response to the words of his disciples, have called us to be one in mind and heart for the well being of our world, to tend to the least and to work to bring peace in troubled times.

In Jesus we have seen the greatness and power of our God, i.e., God's “glory.” Now Jesus bestows that glory on his church so that in us, others may see God's glory. In John's gospel, glory is shown, not only in God's overcoming Jesus' death

and raising him to new life. Jesus' suffering and acceptance of his death also reveal God's glory because they show the power of God at work in Jesus. That glory now shows itself in the faithful church of Jesus' followers who are one in the struggle against sin and death's many manifestations in the world.

But our unity in following Jesus' ways, even through suffering and death, is not done in bloodless resolution and resignation. We are not just marching to orders shouted out from above. Rather, we are also one in love. That love is the love the Father and Jesus have for one another ("before the foundation of the world") and is now given us. We are loved in the powerful way God loves the Son. That love empowers and frees us to love others in return, as Jesus has shown us earlier at table when he washed his disciples' feet in loving service. Are we a united church yet? No. But we can and should love, and thus can be united in the love we have for one another. Jesus' prayer for unity has not gone unanswered.

One thing is clear in Jesus' prayer for his disciples. He prays for us, not that we might figure a way to escape the world with all its pains and complexities. Rather, he prays for his disciples because we must stay in the world and need to be kept safe and faithful to the task of proclaiming his word to an often unresponsive and sometimes hostile world. Jesus' prayer for believers wasn't just for those around the table then. It is a prayer for those of us gathered around the eucharistic table now. He prays that, despite our many differences and doctrinal variations we might, first of all, be one in love for him and one another. He is praying that our lives give witness to the love God has for us in Jesus. God loves Jesus and that same love is given us to share in the church so that we will be a sign for the world and draw others to the God we have come to know in Christ.

The first reading from Acts also contains a prayer and it too reveals the spirit of the one praying it. Stephen is being stoned to death because of his testimony about Jesus. "Behold I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand." His prayer reveals that Stephen has caught the Pentecost Spirit because, like Jesus' prayer from the cross, he prays for those who are killing him, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them...." Stephen's prayer reveals this disciple's spirit to us; he is a follower of Christ because like Christ he practices forgiveness. His last words challenge those of us who are witnessing his death through the eyes and ears the scriptures provide. Like Stephen, the first Christian martyr, we surrender our spirits into the Lord's hands. We pray for a deeper and renewed gift of the Holy Spirit that empowered Stephen to pray for his killers. As we look forward to Pentecost

next week, we pray that the forgiving Spirit will shape and mold us so that we will make flesh in our lives the forgiveness we have received.

Today's Revelation reading ends one verse shy of the end of the New Testament. So, how then does the bible end? It ends with a promise to those who are struggling under trial and encourages them to be faithful to the Lord. The Lord promises to come with judgment to the righteous ones under testing. Those who have been faithful will hear the closing beatitude pronounced over them, "Blessed are they who wash their robes...." These are a people cleansed and prepared to enter the city of God, the new Jerusalem. The vision stirs up hope and perseverance for those whose faith is being tested. We are not forgotten by our God and we will be welcomed finally into God's presence. The reading ends by placing a prayer on our lips: "Come, Lord Jesus."

Revelation stresses the imminence of the Lord's return, "Yes, I am coming soon," says the Lord to those whose thirst can only be quenched by his return. The immediate response to what the Lord says, is, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus!" This certainly is a prayer for us long-waiting Christians as we survey the world's wrecked landscape, filled with innumerable disaster scenes.

We fall short of the unity Jesus prayed for perhaps because we lack the spirit of forgiveness that characterized Jesus' life and was witnessed in Stephen's death. The Revelation reading provides a prayer for us today, we disciples know we do not yet live up to the life Jesus has shown us and prayed we would live. We pray in the spirit of Revelation, "Come, Lord Jesus!" This is our Sunday prayer around the table today, we who wait and hope for the completion of all things, in God's good time. We will need that new and refreshing drink of the Spirit on Pentecost. "Come, Lord Jesus!"

The bible ends with a prayer Christians have prayed through the ages in longing, "Come Lord Jesus." These days I want to add, "And what's taking so long?" Whatever the Lord's timetable may be, one thing the reading reassures us is that God and God's ways will, in the end, finally triumph. Those who decide to accept the way of the Lord are invited to trust in the One who is, "The Alpha, and Omega, the first and the last." This One, who brought everything into being at the beginning, will sustain us until the very end. No evil can overcome our God nor those who look to the Lord, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

## **ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER**

Nolan, Joseph T. The World, The Church and Preaching: The Best of Good News Commentary. New Berlin, Wisconsin: Liturgical Publications Inc, 1996.

*Taken from the "green sheets", the author's commentaries on liturgy, preaching, society, justice and the Church that accompanied his Good News homily service. Very practical comments for the preacher on liturgical preaching in a modern parish context.*

## **QUOTABLE**

We don't preach on doctrine; we explore an event. Even when it is a Sunday called Christ the King, or Holy Family, or Corpus Christi, the understanding (and the preaching) still rests on the key event of the paschal mystery. In the deepest sense, all our preaching is paschal, a passing over to fuller life that depends on the Spirit and the original event.

-----Joseph T. Nolan, (Page 106)

## **JUSTICE NOTES**

### **Twelve Reasons for a Moratorium on Capital Punishment**

1. Innocent people are sometimes sentenced to death. More than 120 people have been exonerated and released from our nation's death rows since 1973.
2. Death penalty states do not have lower homicide rates than states without capital punishment.
3. Death rows in the U.S. are disproportionately comprised of the poor and people of color.
4. Racism pervades the capital punishment process. Killers of whites are several times more likely to receive a death sentence than killers of people of color.
5. Many on death row are convicted based on the unreliable testimony of Jailhouse informants.
6. Many on death row were represented by lawyers who lacked the skills or resources to mount a strong defense.
7. Many of those executed or now on death row are seriously mentally ill.
8. Within death penalty states, there are rarely uniform standards to determine who is charged with capital murder. Rural communities are several times more likely to seek and obtain death sentences, even when the facts of the cases are very similar.
9. "Expert" witnesses are frequently wrong in their assessments of key evidence.
10. Many jurors cannot understand the complex instructions they need to follow in order to arrive at decisions of guilt, life, or death.
11. Prosecutors sometimes argue for sentences of death in order to "honor the

victims." Is the purpose of capital punishment to exact revenge on behalf of victims' families?

12. The enormous amount of resources used to secure death sentences and maintain them through the extensive appeals process could be better spent on services for victims' families.

-----"The Moratorium Campaign"

586 Harding Boulevard    Baton Rouge, LA 70807    225-223-4919  
info@moratoriumcampaign.org

### **Prayer Before Beginning to Prepare a Preaching**

Holy Jesus, Model of Preachers, You delighted those who heard You with Your simple stories and profound insights, come to my aid as I begin to prepare 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 on 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!

Edward Hays, S.J. – Prayers for the Servants of God

-----submitted by Deacon Richard Calkins    St. John of the Cross Catholic Church,  
Lacombe, LA

### **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:.....

Shawn d. Bonnett #0037215 (On death row since 9/27/96 )

James F. Davis #0510234 (10/2/96)

Melvin L White #0434355 (10/15/96)

William Gregory #0156529 (8/15/94)

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

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available:

**"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](http://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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) Or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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.

Make checks payable to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thanks you and blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

P.O. 12927 Raleigh, N.C. 27605 (919-833-1893, ex 224)

[judeop@Juno.com](mailto:judeop@Juno.com)