

## **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”**

PENTECOST -C-

Acts 2: 1-11 Ps. 104 Romans 8: 8-17 John 14: 15-16, 23b-26 or John 20: 19-23

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Without the Spirit, there is no church; there is no memory of Christ; there is no grace in our lives, and there is no hope for our future. Drawing logical conclusions from the shortcomings and effects of sin that we see in our church and ourselves, we might lose hope and conclude that we should pack up and close the shop----but for the Spirit.

There is a Latin hymn we used to sing and occasionally still do, “Veni Creator Spiritus.” Perhaps some choirs will sing it today. In the hymn we pray, “Come Creator Spirit,” in other words, we are aware of some absence or incomplete presence of the Spirit in ourselves or our church community. We know God is always with us, yet the hymn-prayer acknowledges our lacking and our need for the Spirit to bring completion. The work list for the Spirit is long. We are not yet the healed, renewed and energetic Christian witnesses our baptism calls us to be. Come Creator Spirit, give us life, form us into your community and renew the face of the earth.

We see signs of our need for the Spirit everywhere: from the fractures in our own beings and communities, out to and including the natural world that surrounds us. All creation is groaning, waiting for the Spirit. Often we have been irresponsible stewards of all life, violating the Spirit’s creative intentions and efficacy. We desperately need the Spirit’s renewing life. The Spirit’s arrival gathers humans to work together for the well being of the human and natural world, to renew, establish justice and bring peace. Let’s not limit, then, our expectations of the Spirit’s arrival to a small piece of our own ecclesiastical landscape.

We will need a new infusion of the Spirit to reanimate our efforts to bring God’s reign more fully to the world, especially among the oppressed and outsiders. Last week we heard in the second reading, the closing words of the Book of Revelation. A long-waiting and suffering people were invited to “come forward” to “receive the gift of life-giving water.” Jesus promised, “Yes I am coming soon.” “How soon?” we ask, “When will you finally return?” We don’t know.

But to help us in our waiting, the “not yet” time, with all its ambiguities, temptations, compromises, sinful detours and suffering, today we are again given the Spirit to keep our faith steady and ever-young with enthusiasm and confidence.

The Spirit has been with us. Whatever builds and shapes the community is a sign of the Spirit’s presence. So, we see the fruits of the Spirit in wise leaders, courageous prophetic voices, elderly seers, musicians, dancers, painters, poets, defenders of the vulnerable, happy children learning about God, gifted preachers and spiritual advisors. We also know the Spirit is at work among those in our community who are examples of prayer, compassion, tenderness and welcome. Present too when the sick are nurtured, healed; the sad comforted and we are in solidarity with the needy. The Spirit is also viably among us when through our liturgies and education programs a person’s eyes are opened, as if for the first time, to God’s presence in his or her life. In other words, the same Spirit who made Jesus a life-giving spirit in the world, makes him present to us now with all his gifts. As Paul tells us today in Romans, the Spirit, “who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also thorough his Spirit that dwells in you.” Jesus is continuously present to us, through his Spirit. Without the Spirit’s animation in our church, this would not be the case and our Christian life would be impossible.

We are very familiar with the Acts account of the coming of the Spirit. We describe it as the day the church was born. Pentecost is our yearly reminder of who we are as a church and the gift God has given us to complete the work of making us a church. But Pentecost had a history in faith before it was a Christian event and reflecting on its Jewish roots will enrich our understanding and our faith response today.

Pentecost is a many-faceted feast: it was named after the feast of the Spring harvest. Leviticus (23: 15-16) instructs that it be celebrated 50 days afer the Passover. These were days of harvest for the Israelites and for this feast farmers celebrated the end of the harvest by offerings of grain and first fruits in the temple (2 Chronicles 8:13). The poor and foreigners in the land were also to celebrate in the harvest by sharing in the communal celebratory meal. In later Judaism this feast was linked to another “fruitful” gift of God—the gift of the law at Sinai. The tradition taught that Moses traveled seven weeks with the people from the Egyptian slavery to Mount Sinai. On their journey God formed them into God’s

people through Moses' teachings and finally, at Sinai, God gifted them with the law. So Pentecost also became a feast on which the people acknowledged their willingness to accept God's ways.

The three manifestations of the Spirit's coming in today's Acts' account have roots in the Hebrew scriptures as well: the sound of a "strong driving wind," fire and the speaking in tongues—all gifts that can't be boxed or neatly categorized. The wind wasn't a breeze, but a powerful driving force. While Genesis describes God's gentle breathing into the first human, this wind of Pentecost is not that kind. It is more like the wind in Ezekiel (37:5-10)---a very strong, life-giving wind. It is strong enough to get the timid Christians out of their gathering place and into the harsh and needy world outside. In the Hebrew texts fire often symbolized judgment; God's judgment on a sinful world. But it also symbolized the fire on Sinai where God gave the law. A new moment in God's covenant with the people is happening and the fire lights the way for it. Speaking in tongues. On Pentecost the speaking was not an esoteric gift, unintelligible to others and reserved for a few. Instead, through this gift, the disciples communicated with people "from every nation under heaven." God wants this new church to reach out beyond its own circle to other cultures, classes and races—to all people. If we look out into our congregation today and see that everyone looks the same, speaks the same language and celebrates in the same way, then maybe we have to call on the driving wind and the gift of tongues to get us out of our rut and help us look more like the Pentecost church.

For seven weeks we too have been taught, through the Word, about the resurrection and its consequences for our life. We are a people invited to be God's faithful community and on this day God has the gift of the Spirit for us, the One who will teach and form us on our journey into a community that will yield a harvest of good works. All will be welcome at our table as we share what God has given us. For us Christians, Pentecost is a celebration of the gathering of people, a new harvest, to receive the Spirit and to be sent out as Spirit-filled people to witness to Christ. It is a feast on which we, like the Israelites at Sinai, are covenanted to a new life by God.

In Luke's gospel, the Spirit comes upon Mary and she brings Jesus to the world. On Pentecost the Spirit comes upon the gathered faithful and a new birth of Christ happens in us and we go forth empowered to continue Jesus' ministry of healing,

service and reconciliation. It is the Spirit who makes this possible that is why we call today the birthday of the church.

### QUOTABLE

To be a disciple means to put one's feet in the footsteps of Jesus and, in the power of his Spirit, to continue in one's own historical time and place his mission of announcing and signing the coming of the reign of God. Together as church, the community of disciples is in a unique way called to be the instrument of the reign of God in history. Since peace and justice are among the most powerful signs of the reign God present in this world, it belongs to the essential mission of the church to make these realities more visible in our time, so marked by oppression, violence, injustice and threat of total destruction. Following Jesus on this way may well cost disciples their lives—the servants are not greater than the master. But the community of disciples must go on witnessing throughout the conflicts of history, drawing courage from their memory of Jesus, from their experience of his continuing presence in the Spirit, and for hope in the final victory of the coming reign of God.

—Elizabeth A. Johnson in *CONSIDER JESUS: WAVES OF RENEWAL IN CHRISTOLOGY*. (New York: Crossroad, 1990), ISBN 0-8245-0990-0; 0-8245-1161-1 (pbk), page 77.

### JUSTICE NOTES

#### Sabbath Prayer

Slow us down, O Lord,  
So we may "let the land lie fallow,"  
So we may take the time  
To view your Creation with Reverence,  
To see the needs of all Your family,  
To share with our brothers and sisters,  
To celebrate with them  
the abundant life You offer,  
As we create Sabbath time in our own lives  
And in our communities.  
Help us to become sensitive to  
The rhythms of Your seasons  
And to rest in the security

Of Your grace.

Amen.

-----from "Center for Concern's" webpage.

### 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.'"

----Jeanetter 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:.....

Frank Chandler #0074948 (On death row since 7/20/93)

Daniel Gamer #0141374 (9/3/93)

Johnny R. Daughtry #0099090 (10/4/93)

-----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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA  
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: [judeop@juno.com](mailto:judeop@juno.com)