

## PREACHING THE SUNDAYS OF EASTER----Year C

Dear Preachers:

I have been thinking and reading about these weeks after Easter and have found some ideas I think useful to preaching during this time. I draw my initial thoughts for this preaching from an excellent social commentary on the seasons and readings (Cf. Below) The following might apply to any of these weeks, thus I am submitting this as a separate reflection rather than concentrate on a particular Sunday of Easter. What follows might be focused by a particular reading for a Sunday. Let me explain.

Notice how the Resurrection stories of Easter have shifted during these Sundays to readings from John's Gospel where Jesus is encouraging the disciples in their mission. The Acts are used for the first reading and Revelation is used for the second. Acts shows the birth, life and works of the new community. There are social implications in the Easter Lectionary and we might miss them because of our tendency to over-personalize the application of the readings. The social implications go back to the Vigil service when it is clear that God is delivering a people, rescuing them from slavery and creating a free nation. Easter is not so much for individuals as it is for a community being birthed. This new community is for all.

Thus the readings from Acts show a community with specific characteristics:

- this is an inclusive community. It's a shame we don't have readings from the Hebrew scriptures at this time. They would show how the community in Acts is fulfilling long held promises and dreams of the Israelite people. Thus, for example, the inclusive vision of Isaiah 56, is fulfilled in the new community of Acts where all peoples are welcomed: foreigners, eunuchs, women, outcasts, etc, Note how central in Acts is Paul's mission to the Gentiles (e.g. 4th and 5th. Sundays of Easter). A New Age has dawned. At the Pentecost Vigil we will hear the promise made through Joel, "I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your elders shall dream dreams, and your young people shall see visions. Even on the servants and the handmaids, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." (Joel 3: 1-2)

- the prophetic vision of a dominion with justice and abundance takes flesh in the sharing and concern for the poor in the Acts community. Justice means an ordering, (Micah 4:4) so that all will have what they need. The goods of the earth will be more fairly divided. For the early church, a new age had dawned and they

were living out its new life. They saw themselves as the first fruits of God's Reign. Those who believed in the Resurrection could no longer live in the old order of things.

-the powerless are empowered. This is a constant theme in the new church. For example, it is clear from the way they speak that the disciples are "Galileans". The crowd that gathers at the sounds of the Pentecost event remark upon hearing the disciples speak, "Are not all of these who are speaking Galileans?" Remember that Galileans were considered religious and social inferiors to the Jerusalem religious establishment. Thus, the most unlikely people are empowered by the Spirit. Humble Galileans are manifesting the gifts of God and confronting the prestigious and the wise. All that society puts down, now is exalted. Remember I Cor. 1: 26, "God chose those whom the world considers absurd to shame the wise,...the world's lowborn and despised those who count for nothing to reduce to nothing those who were something."

-this community will be marked by persecution. (3rd. Sunday of Easter). To witness to God's call is to endure suffering and practice forgiveness. This response is shown in Stephen who prays for his persecutors as he is dying. (7th. Sunday of Easter)

-the rapid growth of the Church, despite this persecution. This new community presented an attractive picture to others by its common life and the readiness of the disciples to respond to need.

-to be in the community was to know that Jesus had not left them, they were not on their own. There is a strong theme in Acts of the presence of Jesus' Spirit and its working in their midst: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us...." (6th. Sunday)

-the community "broke bread together". This was not only seen as a remembrance of the past, but as a celebration of the actual presence of the Risen Christ at their table and a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

The readings these Sundays from Acts announce, through the words and deeds of the disciples, that the Reign of God has dawned. Either we are its members or we are not. Either we take the side of the outcasts, the eunuchs, Galileans, Gentiles and other social rejects or we take the side of the old order and deny the Resurrection, which we may have affirmed verbally but not in fact. Do we stand with "the blasphemer Stephen" or are we with the civil religion of our country? Barriers fall in the light of the Risen One and Acts shows this by showing a mixed group of people united by their Baptism and the gift of the Spirit.

What is the situation in our local churches? How are we like or unlike the community in Acts? Are the poor, uneducated, ill, disabled, unemployed, at home among us? Do some people come to church for years and never feel like they really belong? Some people say the hour in church on Sunday is the most segregated time of the week. Do minorities, refugees, and others feel a part of us? Are convicts visited by our faithful?

The Second readings for these Sundays of Easter (2nd to 7th) are taken from "Revelation". Well here is a challenge to the preacher! When was the last time we ever preached (or read) this book? Why do we leave preaching from the Book of Revelation to fundamentalist preachers?

This is apocalyptic literature and is strong in symbol. It is not meant to be read literally. It has the usual dualism of such writing--- the struggle between good and evil. We know this struggle in our own lives and in our world. What concerns us in the midst of this struggles is the outcome. It is often hard to tell whether good or evil will eventually win.

These reading begin with the risen Jesus' appearance to John on the Lord's Day (2nd. Sunday). John says he identifies with the suffering of his Christian brothers and sisters. He is on the island of Patmos, imprisoned by the Romans for his preaching. He describes to his readers a vision he has had there is captivity. It is a dramatic and sudden appearance of the risen Lord who encourages persecuted Christians to trust in their Easter faith. The risen Lord has not abandoned the early community, and is with it to help it fulfill its mission of being a sign and witness.

This book is the culmination of much meditation and thought. It shares a mystical experience with us, hoping that we too will catch its vision. It hopes, in a time of distress and persecution, to encourage and strengthen the fragile early community and us. We have had the Hebrews prophets to strengthen us in darkness. Now we have this Christian mystic, to help us look at the future with confidence. The details of what that future will look like are not spelled out, but what is evoked in strong poetic language is a confidence that God, through "the Lamb", is making the universe anew. The present world is passing away, along with the past where the battle between good and evil played itself out with such painful and drastic consequences for us.

God is creating a new Jerusalem (6th Sunday) where God will dwell with the

faithful ones. Sin has terribly damaged the original creation that was called 'good' in Genesis. Now God is doing something new and the Risen Christ is assuring us that it will be completed. Whatever harm was done by sin is wiped away by the work of "The Lamb", thus we will be gathered up into the "holy city" (5th Sunday). Those who receive the message, who are still in the battle, are buoyed up by this word of the ultimate triumph of good, even if we do not yet see the completion of this promise.

Easter is not just about life after death. The Pharisees already believed that. They expected it at the end time. But Jesus's resurrection is within history, this is a sign that the kingdom has already dawned, the OT promises are being realized in the new community of the Risen Christ. These Easter Sundays stress the character of the community formed as a witness to the kingdom. This community has been given the power to be free from the fear of death. It measures its meaning and purpose not by the achievements of this life. It shares Christ's sufferings because it stands on the side of the excluded, and those without power. It makes their cause its own.

The readings over these weeks have as their major concern how we Christians will live in the world that does not share the vision of a "new city".

I will be approaching the readings during these Sundays of Easter with the above principles in my mind. I can see specific readings that are coming up in which the generalities will become more focused in the reading. The preacher will have to see how these Easter realities, highlighted by the reading, take flesh in his/her own life and setting.

[Cf. Hessel, Dieter T., ed. Social Themes of the Christian Year: A Commentary on the Lectionary. Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1983.]

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