

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2ND. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C- JANUARY 14, 2001

Isaiah 62: 1-5 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11 John 2: 1-11

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We will have readings from 1 Corinthians this Sunday till late February. Why not consider at least one preaching from it? The preacher might want to focus on the unity and diversity of the church. Corinth resembled a lot of our modern cities. It was cosmopolitan, with people from all over the world. It had the extremes of great wealth and a very large poor population, many of whom were slaves. Paul preached there and he got followers from among both the rich and poor. Several passages show that there were internal conflict and problems in the Christian community (1: 11-12; 1: 19-2: 10; 6: 1-11). In addition to the internal struggles in the faith community, they were surrounded by non-believers and so struggled to keep the faith--- a faith which was bombarded by foreign beliefs and practices. Just as we do, the Corinthian community had to deal with both internal and external issues that threatened its vitality and unity.

The series of Sunday readings from 1 Corinthians begins with today's selection from chapter 12. It is about order in the Christian assembly. The question concerns “spiritual gifts”, “forms of service” and the different shapes they take in the community. The community has shown an ignorance about God's gifts. Notice how often Paul repeats that the individual's gifts are “by the Spirit.” One way of getting a handle on the passage is to think about spiritual “gifts” as spiritual “persons”. The Spirit works through individuals to benefit the community. In today's section, Paul is stressing the diversity that shows itself in the community. But, the first four verses of chapter 12 (prior to today's passage) state the fundamental on which diversity is possible: the first gift of the Spirit is the faith to profess, “Jesus is Lord.” This fundamental gift holds us together in all our diversity and struggles with differences.

Like the Corinthians, we are very aware of our diversity each time we gather for worship. In reaction to the differences, people sometimes choose to go to a particular church or join a smaller community so as to be with people who are “just like us.” It sounds like a platitude to say we share one faith in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. But Paul is saying that is the real basis for our unity. We may come from different political camps (how many voted for Bush, how many for Gore?); economic backgrounds (who came to church in the big SUV's and who came in battered pick up trucks this morning or had to walk?); age groups (how many have grey hair, no hair or look like a shampoo ad with a full head of tresses?); races (brown, black, white, red, yellow?); education (with framed advanced or professional degrees in their offices or barely able to sign their names?) etc. (The preacher can specify the differences based on your own “Corinthian community”.) The differences may be what first strike us as we enter our places of worship.

When the inevitable tensions arise, we will need to remember, as hard as it is (!), that we profess faith in the same Lord. Underlying Paul's argument in Corinthians is that the whole community is united by the same faith, the same profession that “Jesus is Lord” (12:3). We can't forget the One who is the reason for this crazy mix of people. All we do to hold together— the forgiveness,

patience, understanding, love, and all the times we bite our tongues or decided we have to speak up—all this is because of Jesus Christ, our convener, our focus. Who or what else would have the power to keep us from bursting apart under the pressures? We are a church that celebrates God's Word and Eucharist. We celebrate all the diverse ways the Spirit shines through each individual, the Spirit who "produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as the Spirit wishes." It is this Spirit who gives us the voice to express our common faith, "Jesus is Lord."

Strange to begin the "ordinary Sundays" with today's Gospel passage . It is out of sequence. On the Sundays through this liturgical year, we will be hearing from Luke, yet today we begin the season with John. Does this Gospel set up the subsequent Sundays? Has God come, as Isaiah promises in the first reading, to espouse a people? And is Jesus the sign that this espousal is taking place? Maybe the wedding feast of Cana is the best story to begin with since it speaks so richly of God's desire to be one with us. All Jesus' words and actions in forthcoming Sundays will be God's reaching out as a lover to the beloved. Not to just an individual beloved either; for the wedding is a community affair. The community will celebrate this new bond with God. We had run out of wine, did not have the means to celebrate, so God enters the scene and gives us reason to celebrate; a new wine in a new age.

The story is about more than turning water into wine. It is a "sign" and each "sign" would be an epiphany (i.e. "reveal his glory"), a manifestation of who Jesus is, so that people would accept him and the nearness of God that he brings. For here are the people wanting to celebrate, but not having the means to do that. Jesus makes possible our celebration of God's nearness. (Isaiah voices it today, "As a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.") In Jesus, God has come close, and given us the reason and the means to celebrate. God has saved the best wine till last. One commentator suggests that scriptural reflection groups might view the movie "Babette's Feast" as a way of feeling the significance of this Gospel tale of wine and celebration.

READERS' RESPONSE:

The first is from Tim Conlon in California:

Even though Jesus was just an infant, his message was so strong that it pulled three Wise Men from foreign lands to kneel at his crib.

I speculate, but I think that the three were temporally abandoning duties and families to answer the call to find greater fulfillment than power and authority. From my readings, I don't think they were disappointed in how their journey turned out and who they discovered.

Faith in Jesus Christ calls us to take adventurous trips--to leave old habits, to adopt new attitudes, and to camp in strange places where our old ideas and outlook are no longer relevant. Trust in Jesus' love for us is the "backpack" we need to make the trip, and to feel secure in new surroundings.

Dr. Seuss in his "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" does a neat job of capturing the benefits of breaking out of the old patterns, but intertwined with that benefit is the total uncertainty of where adventure takes you--and the absolute feeling of being alone--"All Alone! Whether you like it or

not, alone will be something you'll be quite a lot. And when you're alone, there's a very good chance you'll meet things that scare you right out of your pants. There are some, down the road between hither and yon, that can scare you so much you won't want to go on. But on you will go though the weather be foul. On you will go through you enemies prowls. On you will go though the Hakken-Kraks howl."

But, doesn't our Faith in Jesus assure us that we are not alone? And with that Faith and with our journeys, isn't that how we manifest our oneness with God to explore, empathize, love and reach out and do our part to energize and support our fellow humans to break out of old patterns, habits and fears...and embrace Jesus so we can use our talents to spiritually and morally enrich the world today?

All this is just a thanks for words of adventure as the Magi story tells us about the quest for Jesus.

This one is from John Mc Cormick and is about homilies for children:

Probably, one of the biggest problems children and young people have today is understanding how to cope with "losing" and "winning"... A good homily (and interesting) would be basically to explain to them that the loser is usually a winner because they have much to learn and learning is a positive and exciting feature of life. Now, don't encourage them to lose or else we'd have a society of big problems but just let them know that when you lose a fight or argument or whatever, try not to lose self-esteem or feel low about yourself. But rather find a way to explain to them (the children) that it's extremely noble to learn what they did wrong in any event resulting in defeat. Also, compare the winner and the loser.... If you were to win and win and win events or in business, I'd say these people would be the most bored and lonely people on earth....

Did you ever notice that the most interesting people are people who have experienced hardship and disaster compared to people who have everything (money, power, good looks, etc)... It is noble to lose an event ONLY if you are willing to learn what went wrong and do something about it...

---John McCormick

ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER:

THE LIVING PULPIT, October-December 2000. Volume 9, No. 4.

Each edition of this excellent ecumenical preaching resource is dedicated to one theme or topic. This edition was on titled, "Church" and will be useful for the upcoming Sunday readings from 1 Corinthians. It features essays, quotations, books and preaching connections that address the topic under study. (Subscriptions: 1-800-447-9004)

QUOTABLE:

Here I can offer only my own testimony: As grievously imperfect as the church is, and as often as its efforts on behalf of peace and justice are put to shame by other agencies, I know of no other place where testimony is maintained concerning the words and works of Jesus as Messiah,

a testimony maintained through the regular reading of Scripture, and through preaching and teaching in faithfulness to that scriptural record. As often as the church may misconstrue that scriptural testimony, and as often as the church may by its actions betray that testimony, within it there persists the opportunity to hear the testimony afresh, and (weeping bitterly) to be renewed in understanding and hope.

According to John's Gospel, Peter says "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." Considered in itself, the Church is an ambiguous body at best. But to consider the Church in itself is to consider an abstraction. It is in its ever-renewed testimony to Jesus as Messiah that the Church transcends itself and fulfills its calling.

—J. Gerald Janzen in THE LIVING PULPIT, October-December 2000, Volume 9, No. 4, page 21.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

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)

Our webpage addresses:

<http://www.opsouth.org> Under "Preachers' Exchange"

<http://www.op.org/domcentral/preach/exchange/>

<http://www.Mattdoyle.com/pe/peindex.htm>

"Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by two friars of the Southern Dominican Province experienced in Hispanic Ministry, Carmen Mele, O.P. and Isidore Vicente, O.P. 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. jboll@opsouth.org

"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.

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.

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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