

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 32nd SUNDAY -C-

2 Maccabees 7: 1-2, 9-14 Psalm 17 2 Thessalonians 2: 16- 3:5 Luke 20: 27-38

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

In today's gospel the Sadducees raise the question of the resurrection and the kind of life we will have in the next world. While their inquiry seems less than sincere and more a way to trip up Jesus, wouldn't we worshipers like more details about our future home? We certainly have lost enough loved ones and felt the anguish of separation. Where are they now? Are they alright? Will we see them again? When a child asks where a recently deceased grandmother has gone we say, "She has gone to heaven to be with grandpa." We were told as children to be good so that we would go to heaven. We teach children that heaven is where God lives with all the angels and saints. The saints----those recognized by our community as significant models of humanity; those who give us a glimpse of what we humans can become. Someday we will be there with them and enjoy each other's company. Heaven--- it's our goal in life. It animates our good efforts and comforts us in the death of our loved ones.

The ideal state of bliss we call heaven enters the thoughts and conversations of even our secular lives. When people are really happy they say, "It's like heaven on earth." "How was the apple pie?" we ask. "Heavenly!" comes the response, "Just perfect, couldn't be better." Couldn't be better—nice summary for what we believe about heaven. It is the very best place to be, no hint of defect, no unhappiness, no end of bliss. We enter a church, look up and see a huge mural. It depicts God, surrounded by the heavenly hosts and an array of famous saints from Jewish and Christian tradition. Not a trace of darkness or a hint of evil. It's heaven.

Considering heaven's importance in our religious imagination and iconography one would think there would be abundant descriptions in the scriptures of our resurrected life in heaven. Of course there are parables about "the Kingdom of heaven," but they have more to do with this life than the next. The scriptures are strangely agnostic about the details of what is waiting for us after death. Our traditional explanations of heaven have been of little help. Resurrected life is described in static terms. We will, we were told, enjoy the "beatific vision." I

must admit, when I first heard that in a college theology class, it sounded boring to me, lacking in energy and vitality, filled with sameness—for eternity.

So, I imagine the Sadducees' question to Jesus in today's Gospel might stir up interest in our listeners. It does in me. Yes, Jesus, what's it going to be like when we are resurrected? Will we have fun? Will we be better singers, always singing on pitch? Run faster? Tell really funny jokes and always get a big laugh? Will I always have my mother's tomato sauce and pasta for an eternity of Sunday dinners? (That would really be heaven!) If we were physically challenged in this life, will we have functioning arms and legs in the next? And to approach the problem posed by the Sadducees, if we were widowed, remarried and loved both spouses, to whom will we be married in the next life? And if a woman were married to a miserable son of a gun in this life, will she have to stay married to him in the next or could she try another?

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. They taught that only the first five books of the bible, those attributed to Moses, were normative for the Jews. Since there is no teaching in these books about resurrection and since Jewish teaching on the subject was still evolving, the Sadducees did not believe in it. The problem they present to Jesus of the seven husbands was an attempt to show by logic the absurdity of the notion of resurrection. They may be asking Jesus a question, but they have already made up their minds. No matter what Jesus says, he is not going to influence them.

Nevertheless, Jesus is gracious and treats their question seriously. Life in the next world, he says, will be radically different from this. Drawing conclusions from this life, or extending notions from this to the next, just won't work. This is an inadequate and useless approach. In early Jewish thinking, before the notions of resurrection developed, this was the only life conceivable. Marriage and having children would be the way to perpetuate one's family name. Your life continued on in your children and so marriage was essential. Thus there developed the "levirate marriage" (Deut. 25: 5-10). A brother would marry the widow of his childless brother. If they had children, they would be children of the first husband, the deceased brother. It was a law with the good intention of keeping the family memory alive, and preventing the loss of a family to the whole people of Israel.

But in the resurrection, Jesus explains, we will all be children of God. God does

not need marriage to make us into God's children; resurrection is an act of God and a free gift to us. "They are the children of God!" Jesus knows his biblical roots and to match the Sadducees' reference to Deuteronomy, he draws on Exodus 3: 6 to affirm God as the God of the living. What is it going to be life in the resurrected life? If only Jesus had given us the floor plans of our heavenly abode. But he hasn't. Even though he doesn't satisfy our curiosity, he has done much more for us. He has assured us that God will not stop being our God at death. If we have had God's life here, we will have that life in our resurrected state.

Barbara Brown Taylor (see below) commenting on this passage, says that, after all is said and done, the resurrection really isn't about us at all:

I think it is about God, and to focus on our own faith or lack of faith in it may be to miss the point altogether. Resurrection is not about our own faithfulness. It is a radical claim about the faithfulness of God, who will not abandon the bodies of his [sic] beloved. That is what Jesus is getting at in his answer to the Sadducees. Never mind marriage, he says first of all. Marriage is how we preserve our own lives in this world, but in the world to come that will not be necessary anymore. We will all be wed to God—the God who is able to make children out of dust, out of dry bones, out of the bits and pieces of genuine love we are able to scrape up over a lifetime of trying—"for he is God not of the dead, but of the living, for to him all of them are alive."

We can't prove resurrection by our rational arguments. What we read in these gospel stories is that Jesus went through death and came back. In some ways his resurrected body was like ours—he ate, talked and cooked fish for his disciples. But in other ways he was completely different—he could appear in a locked room, disappear before his Emmaus table companions and not be immediately recognized by even his closest friends. Something was so very different about him.

Brian Daley, writing on early Christian beliefs in the resurrection, says that at the bottom of our shared assumption is the hope that:

...the Christian can look forward to the resurrection of his or her own body to a merciful judgment, and to a lasting, transforming and utterly fulfilling union with God, because he or she is part of a community that believes Jesus is risen, reigns in glory, has sent forth his Spirit and will come again

as judge of history. (quoted in Elizabeth A. Johnson's, FRIENDS OF GOD AND PROPHETS: A FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL READING OF THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS, Page 183.)

When the scriptures do speak about our resurrected lives they are rich in describing our being together in final joy. We will "know" one another--- "know" God--- and be "known" by God. Knowing, in the scriptures means a full experience of another in a rich and intimate relationship. Heaven isn't static after all, but an intense sharing in life. We don't know what that means, but we do get glimpses of it here and when we do, we know we will not be bored!

READER'S RESPONSE:

Dear Fr. Jude:

Sister Catherine Murray sent you an essay "UNLEASHING OUR MOST POWERFUL WEAPONS". Very good, but her dream is difficult to realize. Justice must be guarded by the power, not by just a good will. In the world nowadays, there is no power, there is no justice. The enemy or the evil people will not put down their killing swords until they are struck down. We cannot unleash our struggle. Tooth for tooth or eye for eye is something reasonable, although it is not entirely correct. Now moral education fails. Few will listen to conscience's voice, only the firm hand that counts or holds. Justice and power should go side by side, support each other. Otherwise peace and justice are just empty words. To show mercy on the enemy or the evil people who will not correct themselves is to show violence on ourselves, on the innocent people, unless they really repent. You see God is infinitely merciful, at the same time is infinitely just. So the terrorists are unpardonable until they really repent. Never show mercy on the devil terrorists lest our good will be used to kill the innocent people

Domingo Jiang

-----One more on "the whole nine yards"

I agree with Gerry Downs that the phrase does not derive from football (else it would be "the whole TEN yards"), but I doubt that it comes from machine-gunnery either, since WWII machine gunners were taught to fire in bursts that would allow the barrel to cool down during the pauses; to fire continuously through a nine-yard ammo belt would likely cause the barrel to melt.

The most likely derivation I've heard is that the phrase came from delivering transit-mixed concrete in trucks with a nine cubic yard capacity. Transit-mix

trucks often deliver small batches to more than one job site; a job that required the entire load of concrete used "the whole nine yards."

Peace and blessings to you, and many thanks for the very valuable service you provide.

Fr. Doug Simonsen

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Barbara Brown Taylor, HOME BY ANOTHER WAY. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999.

These are selected sermons from the liturgical cycle and are an excellent examples of a great preacher's skills. Reading these sermons one admires the profound insights this preacher has in the biblical word and the great skill she has in articulating these insights.

JUSTICE NOTES:

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

IN RESPONSE TO EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

We join with all people of good will in condemning the unspeakable events that took place in New York, Washington, DC and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001. We grieve the massive loss of life and offer our deepest sympathy to the families, friends and colleagues of those who died. We pray for the victims and perpetrators of such carnage.

In the wake of this disaster we are particularly concerned for the safety and dignity of citizens of Middle Eastern descent and others who are erroneously being linked to such acts of terrorism. We call on the American people to treat them with respect and not attach blame to them for the actions of others.

Justice must be done. These were criminal acts that should be investigated, tried and prosecuted to the fullest extent possible. But we call on government officials and the media to stop the use and publication of inflammatory appeals for vengeance. We call on government officials to exhaust all legal means to obtain

peaceful settlements and to resist public appeals for vengeance and war.

Violence breeds violence. As a nation, we abhor what has been done. Can we resolutely pursue justice without resorting to ethnic or religious stereotyping? Can we seek justice without the loss of even more innocent lives through escalation of force? Can our nation exert global moral leadership by refusing to enter into a deadly cycle of retribution and violence that would endanger more innocent people?

We dream of a world
Where God's dwelling within us
And among us is celebrated
Where life in all its forms is revered and nurtured
Where hatred and injustice find no home.
(Prologue of the Adrian Dominican Sisters General Chapter Documents)

Let us together be co-creators of justice and peace.
Leadership Council of the
Adrian Dominican Congregation

-----this ad appeared in THE NEW YORK TIMES, Sunday, October 7, 2001

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 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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