

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 3rd SUNDAY OF EASTER (A)

Acts 2: 14,22-33 Psalm 16 1 Peter 1: 17-21 Luke 24: 13-35

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

“I’ve come to the end of my rope.” That’s an expression we use when we feel we have exhausted our resources; when we have met a situation beyond our abilities. We were taught as children to face challenges in our life by determined application of our interior and exterior resources. “Keep your nose to the grindstone”—another dictum drummed into our heads by supportive family and friends. The implication being, that diligence and hard work can surmount difficulties and that we have within ourselves the necessary resources to overcome most of what life throws in our way. But not every obstacle can be hurdled simply by hard work and determination. Certainly not death. We all face it. As the saying goes, “At the end of the game, the rook and the pawn are put away in the same box.”

Death defeats even the most powerful and influential. No potentate can issue a command that will stave it off. All the money in the world cannot buy a stand-in to take our place when death comes calling. It isn’t just that death comes with our final breath to frustrate our human plans and expectations. We get clear and sometimes blunt hints through our lives of what lies ahead for us: we experience one ending after another along the way to our final physical end.

I watched a once-vibrant man, now drained by constant and severe back pain, slowly struggled to get out of a car at church last week. A loving daughter rushed from the driver’s side to open his door, hold his recently-acquired cane and help him out of the car. I could see how much persistent pain had drained him, it was plainly written on his face. But there was more than the physical pain showing in his limited mobility. His eyes and a subsequent conversation revealed his sadness over the loss of his former energy and independence. “That,” he said, “is worse than the pain.”

Death comes in many ways: we lose a loved one and our former life is gone; we don’t make the college of our choice and we have to realign our career plans; an injury on the job deprives us of our former income and we worry about the welfare of our families; and, even in good health, we face advancing limitations as we age (my grandmother used to quote an Italian expression, “Every day, after forty, a new pain.” I have shared that with others and people nod their heads with

agreement—the over-forty crowd knows from personal experience); we get a divorce and we have to adjust to “visitation rights”; our job gets “outsourced” and we have to take any work we can get, with lower status and pay,...and on and on. It is hard enough to face our final endings, but the pain is compounded by all the mini-deaths life throws at us.

Some people claim that the Resurrection was the result of Jesus’ followers’ wishful thinking. His death was so shattering, they claim, that their fervent attempt to have him remain with them created the “phantasy” of his being resurrected. They “saw,” the argument goes, what they wanted and needed to see---“the Risen Christ.” But these resurrection stories don’t show the community that way, they truly were at “the end of their rope.” The stories reveal complete loss and Jesus’ members were doing what we might do in such situations; huddle together, and go about the grim business of returning to and rebuilding their former lives. Some even returned to the grave to do what we also do, visit the burial sights of the dead to grieve there and tell stories of a former time when the loved one was alive. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were not about to fictionalize an account of the risen Christ. They tell the “Stranger” who joins them about the account the women gave about Jesus’ being alive. But these two, and we know others, did not believe them. So much for a collusion on the part of the early church to make up a resurrection story. As today’s gospel shows, the disciples had closed the chapter on that part of their lives and seemed to be returning to what and who they were before they followed Jesus of Nazareth.

Before Jesus joins them, the two already are traveling with a companion—disappointment. Not only had Jesus died and his movement crushed, but they had experienced his death in personal ways. Their dreams of a new life for themselves, their families, their religion and their very nation also died with Jesus’ crucifixion. You can hear their shattered lives in what they tell the Stranger who joins them on their journey, “We had hoped....”

You hear people start sentences that way---- “We had hoped that when our son returned from Iraq he would continue his college studies, but....” “We had hoped that going to marriage counseling would save our marriage, but....” “We had hoped that our parents wouldn’t ever have to go to a nursing home, but....” “We had hoped that we would be able to meet the mortgage payments on our house, but....” “We had hoped that we could rebuild our lives after the flood, but...” “We had hoped that the experimental drug would help our mother conquer her cancer, but....”

No need to continue, we can all fill in the blanks---“We had hoped....”

Our hopes and dreams don't always get dashed; a lot of them get diminished or watered down, a little at a time. How many times have we started projects with enthusiasm and high hopes, and then, with the passage of time and facing obstacles, we discover we are investing less and less of ourselves in the effort. For example, a parish council makes plans to rejuvenate the liturgical or educational life of the parish. Initially enthusiasm is high, but over the long haul, the council's attention turns elsewhere, fewer funds are allocated, volunteers burn out, etc. “We had hoped....”

We need our hopes nourished because if what we hope for is important----peace, care for the elderly, an end to the death penalty, a rejuvenated and healed church, good liturgy and preaching in our parish, housing for the elderly, an end to domestic violence, equality of women and gays in our churches and communities, fair treatment for immigrants, and so much more----then we will need encouragement, perseverance, passion, clear thinking and the support of a believing and hoping community. We need the Word of God and the Eucharist.

Which is why Jesus opens the scriptures for the dispirited disciples on their journey and why he gathers them to pause with him and to break bread. Like them, we constantly need our eyes opened to see Jesus alive and with us—in the Word and the Sacrament. But the disciples didn't just continue their journey with their hopes renewed, after their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus. They returned to the community to discover that the Risen Christ had appeared among them too. That is where we also discover him----risen and in the midst of the community.

When our hopes are dissipated or limping we too return to where hope is renewed—in the scriptures, the Eucharist and in the community of believers. Which is exactly what we are doing and where we find ourselves on this Third Sunday of Easter, at our eucharist celebration.

ONE GOOD RESOURCE FOR THE PREACHER AND COMMUNITY

At election time the American bishops have published, “Faithful Citizenship.” It is a reflection to help Catholics form our consciences as we make decisions at election time. They have an accompanying two-sided summary, which will make a good handout, called “The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.”

To order for your community go to their website: www.usccbpublishing.org Or call 800-235-8722

READER RESPONSE

Dear Fr. Jude,

I am a member of the RCIA team for St. John Neumann's Parish in North Las Vegas. As a Team member, I lead the dismissal of the Catechumens and Candidates at Sunday Mass about one week in four. At these dismissals, I use your "First Impressions" reflections for that Sunday to advance the discussions we have on the Liturgy of the Word and how it applies to our lives. I cannot begin to tell you how helpful it has been to me, and to the members of the group, as your reflections not only makes valuable historical/scriptural connections of the readings, but they also provide very valuable examples of how these teachings apply to our daily lives. I have given the "First Impressions" website to all of the sponsors, candidates, catechumens, and team members in our group with the hope that more of them will visit your site directly.

God bless you for the work you do.

Damian FitzRoy

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Were not our hearts burning within us?" (Luke 24:32)

Striving to live the life of peace and justice of the Gospel will also call us to a deeper life of prayer.

Centering Prayer is one *method* of prayer, which prepares us to receive the gift of God's presence, traditionally called contemplative prayer. It consists of responding to the Spirit of Christ by consenting to God's presence and action within. It furthers the development of contemplative prayer by quieting our faculties to cooperate with the gift of God's presence.

Centering Prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God. At the same time, it is a discipline to foster and serve this relationship by a regular, daily practice of prayer. It is Trinitarian in its source, Christ-centered in its focus, and ecclesial in its effects; that is, it builds communities of faith.

Centering Prayer is drawn from ancient prayer practices of the Christian contemplative heritage, the Fathers and Mothers of the Desert, Lectio Divina, (praying the scriptures), *The Cloud of Unknowing*, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. It was distilled into a simple method of prayer in the 1970's by three Trappist monks, Fr. William Meninger, Fr. Basil Pennington and Abbot Thomas Keating at the Trappist Abbey, St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts.

The Guidelines

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.

2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Darrell C. Woods #0479100 (On death row since 5/22/95)

Timothy Richardson #0492102 (6/1/95)

Richard Cagle #0061528 (5/16/95)\

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"**

"Liturgical year A," which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for 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.

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 and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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: <http://www.preacherexchange.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, Jose David Padilla, 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://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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

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