

First Impressions4th SUNDAY OF EASTER (A)

Acts 2: 14a, 36-41

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2: 20b,-25

John 10: 1-10

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

For those of us who like things orderly and exact, today's gospel is a mess! It is hard to figure out how to interpret even just the surface details---- much less its deeper meaning. What is Jesus saying about himself? Is he the "gate keeper?" Is he "the shepherd?" Is he "the gate?" We tend to want to pin these images down so we can say something precise about Jesus and his relationship to both believers and non-believers.

But John's gospel is much too rich to yield to our desire for order and limitations on the text. In the rest of his gospel he uses other images to describe Jesus: "bread," "living water," "light," etc. These cannot be simply reduced to fixed meanings to satisfy our desire for exactness and categorization. To do so, would rob the gospel of its deep and multi-layered riches. Modern interpreters tend not to treat John in an allegorical way, i.e., by trying to figure out what "sheep," "thieves," "robbers," etc represent. If we do that, we risk limiting the power of the text to speak to each of us and to different ages of the church.

However, St. John Chrysostom did take an allegorical approach to today's passage. He saw the scriptures as "the door," because they bring us to God and knowledge of God's ways. Like a door, Chrysostom says, the scriptures also bar the entrance of false teachers who would pull us away or divert our attention from God. If we cut ourselves off from the scriptures, he argues, and try to "climb" over elsewhere, then the person who does that robs and deprives the community of its life. Chrysostom wrote a long time ago, he was the bishop of Antioch in the 5th century. But I wonder how much those of us raised before the scriptural renewal of Vatican II missed by not being taught to read, pray and preach the biblical word? Our liturgical and spiritual lives were deprived of the life Chrysostom tells us the scriptures hold for us. Does that poverty still exist among us? Do we read and pray the scriptures? Does our preaching reflect the influence of the scriptural texts? If Chrysostom were around today, what would he say about how well we are entering through the "door" of the scriptures. He would also advise us that the scriptures can help us distinguish false shepherds from the true ones.

It might be helpful to know a little about shepherding customs in Jesus' times. The shepherds would gather several flocks in the same fenced-enclosure. The sheepfold might be constructed in a pasture using brush and sticks; or, it would adjoin a wall of a house and have makeshift walls for the other sides. Owners of small flocks of sheep would have combined them in the secure enclosure at night. Someone would then guard the flocks. The "gate" would have been a simple entrance, but the shepherd might even stretch out across the opening and literally be the "gate."

As today's narrative suggests, the shepherds would arrive early and be admitted by the gatekeeper. They call out to their sheep and the members of the flock recognize the voice of their own shepherd, who would assist the fold—"leads them out." The shepherd then walks in front of the flock and they follow.

The evangelist is emphasizing the close relationship Jesus, the shepherd, has with his community and stresses the distance we must keep from false leaders. He suggests that "thieves and robbers" were destructive people who "came before" Jesus and are seen in opposition to him, his flock and his teachings. False prophets and false messiahs did come before Jesus, claimed allegiance and led people astray. Sometimes the followers of false prophets were massacred by the military fist of Rome. For various reasons it was dangerous to follow such leaders.

Aren't there false messiahs now who claim easy solutions to people's ills? There are:

- voices that call out for war to settle ancient and modern difference between people
- the voice of excess tempts people to follow life-draining work patterns
- the voice of indulgence lures us to drain our natural resources for temporary satisfaction that will leave future generations in want and stress
- the voice of isolation cuts us off from the needs of people beyond family and immediate community
- the voice of gluttony causes us to damage our health, while ignoring the hunger of others
- the voice of discouragement causes us to give up on efforts that help others, but require perseverance and long-range commitment.

We may no longer be a pastoral people, but who hasn't heard the voice of one "shepherd" or more who have lead us away from our faith community on paths that took us to foreign and strange pastures?

Why this gospel in Easter time? Because the shepherd described in it is among us today, doing now what he said he would do. Our first impressions of the passage may border on the saccharine. Our life and direction as Jesus' church is determined by his defense and care for the flock against an enemy that seeks "only to steal, slaughter and destroy." So much for mere sentimentality! Jesus knows the world his disciples must go out into and he promises to lead them in it and be their faithful shepherd.

The shepherd isn't just a leader of a flock: we are not just part of a crowd. He "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." It's good to know we are not lost in the crowd, one of the anonymous sheep. There are times in our lives when we need to be reminded that we are known "by name." In biblical language, to know a person's name is to know the person. So, we are well known and our needs are recognized by the Risen Christ in our midst.

There are times when: we face opposition because of our faith: feel vulnerable and diminished by sickness; are overlooked because of age, gender, sexual orientation or handicap; are committed to a just cause, but are ignored or misunderstood by those closest to us, etc. At these times we turn an attentive ear to the Risen Christ, remember his teachings and are strengthened by the fact that he knows us by name, leads and protects us. How shall we remember his teachings? St. Chrysostom may have had it right, the Scriptures are the "door," one way, through which he comes to us.

One way we can respond to today's scripture is to get to know people "by name," i.e., to try to get to know the person whose name we are given. Not just those acquaintances we are introduced to, but those who are different from us. Instead of passing over people in our busy rush, could we take a little more time to get to know them or at least acknowledge their presence at counters, our workplace, in our classes, the repair shops, etc. It is not that we are out to make still more friends; but to find ways to notice people. If our faith tells us that Jesus knows each of us by name, with all that implies, then how can we go about helping others also feel significant and appreciated?

READERS' RESPONSE

Fr. Jude:

1. I was thinking about the road to Emmaus, and a simple phrase struck me: "Stay with us." The disciples did not get the full benefit of Christ's teachings until they invited him to stay. Then he broke the bread and their eyes were opened. Especially enjoyed this week's (4/6) reflections

Mike Ghiorso (Our Lady of Mercy Parish, Daly City, California)

2. Hi ! What a lovely piece on Christ's peace and the giving of the Spirit for the Second Sunday of Easter. Thank you! Yes, me, too. I would have said "where WERE you guys when I needed you?" before giving peace and the Spirit...

[I would like to add though] that the gospel doesn't say that Jesus came through the locked door. That would have meant he wasn't there to begin with. If you focus on that, you could miss the teaching that the risen Jesus is always present with us. Don't we believe that? So, then, he was there all along, they just didn't see him. He must have just made himself visible so they would believe that.

Saying he passed through a locked door is like saying he did a magic trick. Then you lose the point of his abiding presence, which I think is very important, don't you? You can't have both, both being there already and coming in from the outside.

It's like the Mary Magdalene thing. Somebody started teaching that all the sinful women in the gospels were Mary Magdalene, even though there is no textual evidence for that, and so we passed it on, generation after generation. So it was easy to miss that she was the first witness to the Resurrection and the first proclaimer of the Good News.

Deanna Rose Von Bargaen

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN COMMENTARY ON SCRIPTURE: NEW TESTAMENT, Iva. John 1-10.

Edited by Joel C. Alkana. General editor Thomas C. Open. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2006) ISBN 10-0-8308-1489-2.

This is part of a 29 volume series on the Scriptures that offers opportunities to study the important writings of the earliest church commentators. Too expensive for one's personal library, but available in theological and biblical libraries. Just thought you would like to know about this series.

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"If you are patient when you suffer for doing what is good this is a grace before God." (1 Peter 2:20b)

A Framework of Access and Inclusion *A Statement of the U.S. Bishops*

Twenty years ago the United States Catholic Bishops issued a statement calling for inclusion of persons with disabilities in the life of the Church and community. In 1995 the Bishops strengthened their commitment with passage of the ***Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities***.

They said: *“We hope that the following principles will assist the faithful in bringing the principles of justice and inclusion to the many new and evolving challenges confronted by persons with disabilities today.”*

“We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd.” There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities. Each person is created in God's image, yet there are variations in individual abilities. Positive recognition of these differences discourages discrimination and enhances the unity of the Body of Christ.”

“Our defense of life and rejection of the culture of death requires that we acknowledge the dignity and positive contributions of our brothers and sisters with disabilities. We unequivocally oppose negative attitudes toward disability which often lead to abortion, medical rationing, and euthanasia.”

“Defense of the right to life implies the defense of all other rights which enable the individual with the disability to achieve the fullest measure of personal development of which he or she is capable. These include the right to equal opportunity in education, in employment, in housing, and in health care, as well as the right to free access to public accommodations, facilities and services.”

“Parish liturgical celebrations and catechetical programs should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity.”

“Since the parish is the door to participation in the Christian experience, it is the responsibility of both pastors and laity to assure that those doors are always open.” Costs must never be the controlling consideration limiting the welcome offered to those among us with disabilities, since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty.”

<http://www.nccbuscc.org/doctrine/disabilities.htm>

----(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:.....

William Herring # 0180479 (On death row since 7/22/95)

Leslie Warren #0487180 (10/6/95)

Darrell Strickland #0393145 (10/27/95)

---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 two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has 15 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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