

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 5th Sunday of Easter (A)
Acts 6: 1-7 Psalm 33 1 Peter 2: 4-9 John 14: 1-12
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Our reading from Acts gives modern Christians a reality check. The Easter season is a strong reminder that we are a diverse community united by our faith in the risen Lord. But we don't always feel so united or express our unity. We are aware of controversies, small and large, in our local, national and international church. Indeed, our differences and struggles can be so strong they break out on the evening news. It is not just about church scandal; but other issues as well. In the diocese where I am currently preaching, for example, there is a bitter controversy between diocesan leaders and parishioners being played out in the media, over which parochial schools are to be closed by September.

The growth and enthusiasm of the early church tends to get emphasized in the Acts of the Apostles. When we compare our present church scene with the one described in Acts, we can feel like inferior Christians, a long way removed from our ancestors---the “true Christian” community. But today's first reading dispels our fantasies about that “ideal” first generation of believers...they had their problems too!

It seems the Greek-speaking Jewish converts (Hellenists) in the community felt their needy were being neglected by the more dominant Hebrew speakers. The Hellenists challenged their leaders on this issue and, in effect, got the early church to face diversity and equality among its members. Early in Acts we discover that the community was already preaching about their risen Lord. But as a sign that Christ was truly alive and in their midst, his followers would also have to continue his works—by not showing favoritism and reaching out to feed the hungry and neglected in their own community. That is the challenge the believers face in today's passage.

What is remarkable about the early church is that the “whole community” was called upon to choose those for whom the apostles were to pray and lay hands. These chosen would be the ones to feed the hungry in the community's name. We pray at today's Eucharist that current local and church struggles don't divert us

from our primary concern as the baptized— faithfully proclaiming the Word of God and also remaining faithful to Jesus’ mandate to reach out to those in need.

Today’s gospel takes us back to the Last Supper. This seems strange since we are in the Easter season and expect such a reading during Holy Week. But we our own times are reflected in this reading. Jesus’ impending suffering and death will have unsettling effects on the disciples. Jesus is preparing his followers, not only for “the hour” of his passion and death, but also for the subsequent days during which they will find themselves without his daily, visible presence for guidance and strength. These times will become very difficult for them. So he needs to reassure them and us, that they will not be left to navigate through the storms on their own.

Jesus makes another “I Am” statement. Whenever he begins speaking to his disciples in this way, we know he is pronouncing another truth about himself that will form the foundation for faith in him. He says to those around the table, that he is “the way” to God. Instead of all the legalistic observances their religious leaders insisted upon in order for people to get right with God, believing in Jesus takes us into God’s grace-filled presence. Jesus’ way of loving is also the way for us to live.

He is “the truth” we can trust. He has taught us about God’s nature and we trust what he has said about God’s abundant mercy and forgiveness for us is true. If someone preachers another “truth” about a harsh, avenging and exacting God, we ought to reject that message. Instead, we trust that Jesus is the truth about God and living Jesus’ life will be how we live out God’s will for us--- the truth.

We are not just obliged on our own to live according to Jesus’ life; not just asked to model our lives on his. Rather, he is “the life.” When he tells his disciples, “I am going to the Father,” he promises that he will come back to take them to himself. As we approach Pentecost we yearn again for the Spirit Jesus promised us that will take us to himself, unite us with him and empower us to live the life he lived. This Spirit is his life for us and quickens our own spirits, enlivening us so we can live Jesus’s life. Through the promised Spirit, his is “the life” that is now within us.

A class of Catholic high school graduates had a home-coming celebration. They chose today's gospel as one of the readings for their worship celebration. The choice of scriptures seemed to be a natural, for Jesus speaks about going to prepare dwelling places for his followers and coming to take them to himself—isn't that a true homecoming? The graduates had traveled a long distance since their high school days and they were excited about their "homecoming," for they wanted to celebrate the close ties and support they felt during their school days. They were lucky, for not all students and graduates have such memories, but this class did.

There is something about Jesus' "way...truth...and life" that does promise us all a homecoming. In fact, those who knew him experienced the "dwelling places" he had provided for them. They learned that these dwelling places weren't just reserved for the next life. His life was a work that provided a homecoming for all. When he sat at table with people there were no place cards indicating rank and favorites. There was no list of places reserved for the most accomplished of the world. Jesus promised rest for the weary, comfort for the comfortless. All found a place of honor in his presence, in him, all were invited to feel at home with him and his Father.

People felt at home with Jesus; wherever he went he offered a dwelling place to those he met. For example, he talked to women in public, counted them among his followers; so unusual compared to other religious teachers. He put people ahead of religious customs, if they were sinners and considered unclean and banned from ritual, they would find a home in his company, for he was God's presence to them. When Jesus turned to the criminal on the cross he promised him a dwelling place with him in paradise. Even those caught in sin, like the woman caught in adultery, found in Jesus a place of forgiveness and acceptance. In many ways he was saying to those who would accept him, "Welcome home."

Jesus provided a "homecoming" to all who heard his words and accepted him as "the way...the truth... and the life." His message was that in God's Word there is a home for all, "Let's let bygones be bygones....make yourself at home....put aside your heavy burdens, ambitions and sins... be accepted for who you are, a child of God. I have prepared a place for you, and that place is secure in God and awaits you in all its fullness. Your acceptance of me gives you a secure dwelling place in God even now."

Meanwhile, keeping our eyes on the final homecoming and the dwelling place we will have with God, what shall we do now? We ought to look around: is there anyone we can make feel at home?----those of lesser economic, social or cultural status? Who are those who have achieved less in the world's eyes, but need to know how important they are before God? How can we make them feel at home? If we have faith in Jesus' name then we need, through our words and works, to make the places we live, work and socialize dwelling places that reflect the presence of Christ.

Faith in Christ is a dwelling place that empowers us. We have security in him and, as we gather for Eucharist, our worship should feel like home to all those who come---- the "regulars," and those we rarely see. But we know some in our gathering don't feel entirely welcome and equal. They don't feel our gatherings places are their homes too: single parents, divorced, gays, women, immigrants, migrants, etc. We pray that, while we find a home in Christ, we be strengthened to work for a church and a world that will be home to all. We wait for the Pentecost Spirit with anticipation of a renewal we cannot accomplish on our own.

JUSTICE NOTES

Nobel Peace Winner Appeals for Protection of African Forests in Rome

ROME - The 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner appealed Tuesday for better protection of Central Africa's forests in an attempt to eradicate poverty and bring peace to the region, a U.N. agency said.

At a meeting on forest management at the Rome headquarters of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, Wangari Maathai—currently Kenya's deputy environment minister—called for euro1.3 billion (US\$1.7 billion) for a 10-year project aimed at saving the Congo Basin ecosystem.

"It may be argued this is a lot of money, but it isn't if it is used to save such an exceptional ecosystem whose destruction would have a devastating impact . . . on the entire planet," Maathai said.

"Investing in the protection and conservation of the environment, including the Congo Basin Ecosystem, would be pre-empting future conflicts and instead investing in peace," she said.

The "Convergence Plan" project brings together 11 Central Africa countries, including Cameroon, Chad, Rwanda, Burundi and Angola. Maathai said one of the solutions to raise funds for forest management would be the cancelation or

conversion of countries' foreign debts.

"That money could be converted to do conservation projects," Maathai said. "This would easily give these countries up to 40 percent of what they're asking."

Concrete steps are yet to be defined, she said, hinting that July's meeting of the Group of Eight nations "might come up with a concrete suggestion."

Maathai argued that such "silent tsunamis" often pass completely unnoticed in Africa.

"Why is it that the same humanity that responded so passionately to the killer waves in the Indian Ocean respond so nonchalantly to the silent tsunamis in Africa?" she said.

Maathai contends the destruction of the Congo Basin would affect the world's climate as well as agriculture, energy sources and water systems. With its 241 million hectares (595 million acres) of forest, the basin is the world's second largest green lung after Brazil's Amazon.

The importance of forests in maintaining the ecological balance of the planet lies in their capacity to absorb carbon dioxide, combat the transformation of lush lands to desert and serve as shields against flooding and erosion, Maathai said.

"We've learned to link deforestation with the dry-up of the rivers, which has a negative impact on agriculture," she said. "This ultimately results in an inability of the environment to sustain livelihood."

Maathai, the first woman from Africa to be honored with the Nobel Peace Prize, has worked for the past 30 years to promote ecologically viable social, economic and cultural development in Kenya and other countries in Africa.

----(March 16, 2005) Marta Faloni, the Associated Press (from the webpage of "Friends of the Green Belt Movement North America")

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'"

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Shan E. Carter #0486636 (On death row since 3/19/01)

Travis Le Vance Walters #0567544 (4/5/01)

Fernando L. Garcia #0702066 (4/19/01)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A."** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right and follow the instructions.
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 webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (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

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com