

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” CHRISTMAS DAY
Isaiah 52: 7-10 Hebrews 1: 1-6 John 1: 1-18
(Shorter Version John 1: 1-5, 9-14)

Dear Preachers:

The busy preacher may find him or herself preaching both on Christmas Eve (Midnight) and then, after a brief night's sleep, again on Christmas Day. The readings are different, so that means preparing another preaching. I thought it might be helpful to reflect on the Christmas Day readings, since they often get short-changed in the busy preaching schedule. The Gospel is very familiar to us “old time Catholics,” since it is the Prologue to John's Gospel, the “last gospel” reading that used to come at the end of every Mass. It is a passage rich in poetic and narrative language. Patricia Sanchez recommends reading the shorter option since it will eliminate the added narrative about John the Baptist and have more flow to it. I tend to agree with her suggestion, it provides concentration on the proclamation of the Word made flesh.

Let's face it, this is a difficult passage for the preacher. Each verse has enough for a preaching. And that is the choice you may want to take--- focus on one verse or section and draw out its implications. Whatever preaching strategy you take, I do think it necessary to get the sense of the entire passage before focusing on part of it. This will help keep the preaching in accord with the sense of the whole. While the preacher should not overwhelm the hearers with background material, it is necessary for us to do our exegetical homework in preparing this preaching. So, here is an overview—and it is much too brief considering John's riches, but we don't have a lot of space here, so please bear with me.

John wrote this gospel for the majority Greek Christian audience that characterized the late first century church. When he wrote the Gospel message had spread well beyond its first local Jewish community. You can imagine the difficulty John faced since he could not draw upon the Jewish traditional hope for the messiah. Thus, he had to reflect on the beliefs about Jesus the first Jewish converts had and figure out a way to address his Greek readers. He resolved his difficulty by drawing upon what he found in the Jewish tradition that might speak to Greek believers: the Jewish notion of word, and in particular, the Word of God. For the Jews, God's word is active and dynamic. As we see in Genesis, the Word is the

source of creation. For people in the East, once a word is spoken, it has a life of their own. Remember the blind Isaac giving a blessing to Jacob, thinking he was really blessing Esau? Even though the fraud was discovered, once the word of blessing was spoken it had an independent existence and could not be taken back. In later Jewish writing the term “word of God” became synonymous for God. A devout Jew hearing the term “word of God” would think “God.” Similarly in Jewish Wisdom literature, Wisdom was also identified with God, and was used in the way God’s Word is—as active, creative and life giving.

When John looked at Greek thought for a parallel to the Jewish sense of Word and Wisdom, he found the notion of “Logos”. It is translated in today’s gospel as Word. For the Greeks, Logos meant Word or Reason, in the same way the Hebrew texts speak of Word and Wisdom. The Greeks had developed a philosophy of the Logos. For them it was the ordering principle of the world, the pattern for all created things. All had life and design through the Logos, which controlled all living things. Thus, John could address a Greek Christian in terms of the Logos, but still be faithful to the Jewish roots that spoke about the Word of God.

This summer I had an opportunity to visit the underground War Rooms in London. In these bunkers deep below the central London streets, Winston Churchill and his councillors devised and conducted the war strategy for the embattled British people. It was also in this place that Churchill wrote and broadcast his stirring speeches to the English citizens suffering, along with Churchill and his colleagues, the awful Nazi blitz. During England’s darkest hour these speeches did much to keep British spirits from collapsing under the awful pounding of the bombs. No one hearing these words could doubt the power of words to revive and even create life in the human spirit. While we have tended to doubt the promises of many politicians made during their campaigns, labeling their speeches as empty words, and to doubt the promises about dishwashing detergents advertized on television -- - we still have enough encounters with the effects of words to know how powerful they can be. Just ask the British people who remember Churchill’s words or those here in our country who found Martin Luther King’s words so life giving during the struggle for civil rights. In these experiences and others like them, we get some sense of what John is saying when he says “the Word was God,” and “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

Recall how the other evangelists begin their gospels. Matthew first gives Jesus’

genealogy, locating him in a Jewish–Davidic lineage. Mark starts with John the Baptist’s preparation for “the One more powerful than I.” (1:7) While Luke starts with the Infancy narrative. John’s beginning is very distinctive, in the Prologue he takes us back before creation. The two opening verses repeat four times “was”—the Word was in timeless existence, was in relationship to God and was God. John first uses the past tense, “was,” to indicate the pre-existence and pre-eminence of the Word. But notice how he shifts to the present tense, (verse 5), “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” All of creation came through the Word, it is the source of life and has come to bring light where sin has caused darkness.

This is where I am going to enter with the preaching. I would name the places in the world where we are experiencing the apparent victory of darkness. At this writing our military and the rebels of Afghanistan are attacking the hills where the Taliban are making a last stand; the once tentative peace between the Israelis and Palestinians seems shredded by violence and counter violence; Africa continues to be racked with civil wars, while AIDS is consuming a generation all over the continent; etc. There are personal experiences of darkness as well, as the unemployment rate rises and wipes out the gains made in recent years by the lowest paid in our society; in our country we live in fear of the next terrorist attack; the poverty rate is rising; and many have to deal with sickness, either for themselves or in their own families.

John is not just speaking about the past. After he establishes the power and authority of the Word, he makes it clear that God has not stopped speaking the light-bearing Word, “light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” Don’t we need this Word’s creative power and light in our world? What feels old, tired, violently shaken, discouraging, and “under the shadow of death,” is still being addressed by God through the Word. The Word’s entering our world and taking flesh among us did not happen just two thousand years ago. Today we don’t just celebrate a 2000 year old birthday. Rather, the Word continues to take flesh among us today and, despite the devastating effects of darkness in our world, God’s light will not be overcome by it.

John’s Greek hearers, receiving this message about the divine Logos, would know that God will never let us be overcome by chaos and the disorder caused by sin. The Jewish Christians hearing this message about God’s Word would be assured

that the very source of creation is still at work to bring light where darkness seems to hold sway. Whether of Greek or Jewish origin the faithful hearer knows that God dwells with us and joins our struggles to overcome forces that have their origin in our human deviation from God's message and plan for us.

Since we are soon to begin a new year and may be wondering what new year's resolution to make, John might be suggesting one to us today. In the light of the power of the Word, and the reminder that the Word's taking flesh is present tense, we might resolve to a more attentive and disciplined listening to the Word of God. There are many places God speaks to us, but our touchstone for the Word is the bible. What about a new year's resolution to be more faithful and prayerful in our reading of scripture? If the parish publishes next Sunday's readings in the bulletin then the preacher might suggest a daily ten or fifteen minutes' reflection on one of those readings each day. Make it practical, busy people are not going to be able to do much more and at least this is a beginning for those who do not have bible reading in their daily routine. (This presumes the preacher does!)

JUSTICE NOTES:

"The New York Times Magazine" (December 7, 1997) had a special edition dedicated to "God Decentralized." Barbara Grizzuti Harrison (p. 73), who had formally been a Jehovah Witness, reflects on the Incarnation and makes an important link to Jesus' suffering and death. She writes:

At the core of my belief is the Incarnation, which breaks and exalts my heart. One could simply not wish to approach a God who had not shared the human condition and who did not suffer. ("Oh, Loving Madman! Was it not enough for Thee to become Incarnate, that Thou must also die?"--St. Anselm.) The greatest drama ever told is the greatest justification of faith.

To say that the incarnation is at the heart of belief is also to say that the orthodox Trinitarian model is at the heart of my belief. The Witnesses insisted that Jesus was merely a Son of God, not God Himself [sic]; but how very much less desirable and attractive He is if He is only Daddy's brave best boy, prophet, social worker, revolutionary. It is because God suffered in His flesh and soul the torments and anguish of human life that we, broken and askew, are able to cast ourselves upon Him. Hippolytus, martyr and saint, wrote of Christ: "His divine spirit gave life and strength to the tottering world, and the whole universe became stable once more, as if the stretching out, the agony of the Cross,

had in some way gotten into everything." For me, He has gotten into everything. I see Him in the timely, unaffected gestures of friendship and in the unruly passions of human life; I see Him in the face of a doctor who serendipitously entered my life at time which I thought I had no more life left. I saw Him once and will see Him forever in a dead teacher of mine, who rescued my injured spirit. I see him in my daughter's merry eyes and in the merry play of her mind; I see him in my son's hands, the hands of a painter who loves the given world.

"Give the benefit of the doubt to the poor," a saint writes, "unless it is proven otherwise." I try to see him in the poor.

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."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:

David Ward

Jerry Hamilton

James Gell #0143603

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

QUOTABLE

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1.1, from the Gospel for next Sunday)

Let's assume that the Incarnation, as originally conceived, was not about gifts, jingling bells, make-or-break retail sales, school holidays or turkey.

Let's assume that the Resurrection was not about bunnies, candy, flowers or ham.

Let's assume that Jesus did not die so that one market town could construct a grander cathedral than its neighbor, or so that cross-bearing soldiers could slaughter Muslims, Anabaptists or Incas; or so that TV preachers could

sell their prayers.

Let's assume that the events which unfolded in Bethlehem long ago were more like the day of creation, when God planted a garden; more like the word of hope which Isaiah spoke to exiles; more like Jesus' cry of submission from the cross.

Let's assume that, in the beginning, God had something in mind - something that has not yet been expressed by the sons of Jacob turning against their brother Joseph; warring tribes conniving with their enemies; vain Solomon building a grand temple to impress other royalty; vain Peter pretending to be heroic; vain bishops competing for power; vain parishioners sniffing at lesser souls.

Let's assume that, in the beginning, God had something to say and a need to say it, and that no amount of arguing over religion's scripture can stifle God's determination to be heard.

Let's assume that the slate is relatively blank, that 2,000 years of Christian history have produced some great music and art, that believers have done good works like establishing hospitals, schools and orphanages, but that most of what God intended to say remains to be heard.

What, then, would we do?

We would start, I think, in listening. We tend to be talkers, not listeners. How can we receive God's Word if our mouths are filled with words and our hearts with noise?

We would start close to home. We would listen to our partners, children, parents and friends. Listen for their yearnings, for their goodness, for their deepness. In time, we might risk listening to our own hearts. We might hear our yearnings, our sadness, our joy, our incompleteness. We might see our hands reaching out for love. We might sit still. We might imagine life without toys and tinsel, without thrones and thrashing, without false conquests. We might become at peace with ourselves.

I have no specific vision of what would come next. I doubt that we would build churches, establish hierarchies, promulgate religious laws, or erect barriers. We inherited those structures, and we have struggled bravely to sustain them and breathe life into them. Sometimes it works. Mostly, I think we are worn out. If someone said we could proceed without adopting a budget, replacing the slate roof, recruiting teachers, attending conventions and committee meetings, and arguing about who is worthy to worship with us, I

doubt we would complain.

I am sure we would gather, for love seeks to love, but the nature of our gathering would take surprising shape. I am sure we would sing, for the soul touched by grace cannot keep from singing. I am sure we would touch each other, for incarnation means incarnation.

Beyond that, I do not know. But I would like to find out. Not because I am angry, bitter, frustrated or rebellious. I do not feel any of those emotions. I feel blessed beyond my deserving, and I know that God's grace has touched my life.

What I feel is yearning - a yearning to know what God had in mind. If the Word could be heard, what would it say? If the light could shine, what would it reveal? If the heart could sing God's song, would tune would it carry?

----(Tom Ehrich,'s, "On a Journey Meditations," is a daily email reflection sent to readers who request them. You can receive these reflections by dropping a note to: oaj2000@earthlink.net.)

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,

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