

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2ND SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 2: 42-47 Psalm 118 1 Peter 1: 3-9 John 20: 19-31
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Unless the first Christians were from another planet, I can't believe they got along as well as the reading from Acts describes today. They sound too perfect, too put-together as a community. After all, they were a community under a lot of tension from without, suffering at the hands of the religious leaders and then by the Romans. There just had to be more tension among them. They were also a very diverse group, members from different social, economic, cultural and religious backgrounds. In the community there were even differences and tensions among those who had formerly been part of the Jewish community. I imagine that even if they were all from the same village, and of course they weren't, there would still have been the kind of differences we, in our modern local churches, experience---- conflicting personalities, interests, backgrounds, etc. The conclusion I draw is that Luke is trying to capture the very best of the early Christian community. He wants to emphasize this was a community enlivened by Jesus' recent gift of his Spirit and that this Spirit made enough change in its members to mark the community apart as something special in the world.

Later in Acts, Luke will show us some of the internal struggles the early church faced. The preacher needs to keep this in perspective lest we so idealize the first Christians that we make them sound unreal to modern believers. In addition, describing a “perfect” community that, “unlike us modern Christians”, shared everything, will only inflict a sense of guilt and inadequacy in modern believers as we measure ourselves against that first generation of the church. While keeping in mind the larger picture Acts eventually presents to us, we can still note what made the first Christian community distinctive and attractive to outsiders. As Luke describes it, they were united in hearing the Word taught to them from the apostles; came together for prayer and the “breaking bread in their homes” (Cf. “Quotable” below); and they cared for one another's needs.

What a sharp contrast their way of life must have been to how their contemporaries lived—for whom social status, economic resources, cultural and ethnic backgrounds did more to separate people than they did to unite them into a

community. The same kinds of divisions are at work today, still exerting pressures to separate rather than unite our world. And we know our Christian communities are not exempt from these same pressures. What we hear in Luke's reflection is how the early believers were animated by a new Spirit that had been let loose in the world through Jesus' death and resurrection. This young community was distinguished by their faith and the distinctive life their faith formed in them. No wonder "outsiders" were attracted to them. These "outsiders" found that, rather than being confronted by an exclusive club of religious elites, they were welcomed with open arms. Luke reports the results of the impact the life of the believers had on those around them: "Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

We modern Christian communities are far from the ideal. Nevertheless, the life of the first community of Christians shows us what it will take for the community to witness to the gospel we profess. With renewed Easter faith we recommit ourselves to what our first brothers and sisters taught us: to focus on the Word passed on to us by the apostles, prayer, the breaking of bread, sharing one another's burdens and being attentive to the needs of those around us. We are reminded, by our reading of Acts, that the first Christians were no holier than we are today. They did not have a bigger dose of the Spirit than we do now. They were not a "super" model of Christianity in comparison to the "inferior" ones we are today.

What they had, and we have too, was a new life in God through the Christ. The Spirit guided them and is our guide too. They didn't have a clearer more visible proof of the Spirit—no spectacular and frequent explosive manifestations—to keep them all fired up than we do now. Luke, who before today's passage, just finished describing the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2 ff.). At the moment in Acts we find ourselves today, Luke is showing manifestations of the Spirit in what turns out to be, quite powerful ways: mere humans like us, are Spirit-formed into a joyful, devout and charitable community. That is always a powerful sign of the present life of the Spirit in a community.

That same Spirit is with us today at worship, forgiving our breeches in community; strengthening the ties that bind. The Spirit is nourishing us so we can witness to the living Christ in our midst by how we live together and care for one

another. What a sign of contradiction the Christian community can be in a world marked by another spirit of competition and deadly isolation.

This Sunday is just a week after Easter and we are reminded that of the resurrection's influence; we live differently because of our Easter faith. In Acts, Luke shows us that the early believers certainly were influenced by their resurrection faith. Easter egg hunts and bunny rabbits can seem to outsiders as essential parts of this great feast; the way Santa and Christmas trees (and shopping!) seem integral to Christmas. But what our first reading shows is that the early Christians took the news of Christ's resurrection quite seriously and so set about living its consequences in their daily lives. Christ was risen----and now, through them, he has entered every aspect of their lives.

Our presence at liturgy today is to celebrate our risen Lord—but not just as individuals, but as a believing community. With our Easter faith we are committing ourselves again to being a community united by Christ's Spirit. This doesn't mean we will be perfect or put up a false show of unity. Our differences will not just evaporate. Nevertheless, we will work hard at listening to those in the community who differ from us; will practice forgiveness when we have been offended; will celebrate our faith in the breaking of the bread; will respond to those in need in our midst----and beyond.

Being part of this Easter community will also strengthen us when crisis threatens our faith. We already know that faithful witnesses with us in our worshipping community have inspired us to stay on the path, even when shadows threaten to obscure it. I am reminded of the slogan of the three Musketeers, "All for one and one for all!" What those fictional characters would chant in times of need, is really our chant, or mantra. We will, because of the risen Christ in our midst, stand together in community. Who knows how many will see how we live and want to be part of us?

QUOTABLE

(On "breaking bread in their homes"--- from today's first reading)

Archaeologists have found Eucharistic vessels that people used to bring home pieces of the consecrated bread. The custom of celebrating Mass during the week (between Sundays) did not emerge until the fourth century or so. When people left mass on Sunday, they brought Eucharistic bread home to receive the Lord during

the week, to stay linked to the Church's praise of God, and to be strengthened physically and spiritually until the gathering again on the following Sunday.
----WORKBOOK FOR LECTORS AND GOSPEL READERS. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2005, page 146.

JUSTICE NOTES

[The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of Migration and Refugee Services, has spearheaded a plan to spread awareness and encourage action against the growing tide of human rights abuses through slavery and human trafficking. This is a continuation of last week's notes on slavery in the USA today from the parish bulletin of San Agustin, in the Monterey, California diocese,.]

"Those enslaved in the USA may be working in many venues. Indentured slaves can be found in sweatshops (clothing manufacturing), in commercial agriculture settings (fields, processing plants, canneries), in ordinary neighborhoods (maids, baby sitters), on construction sites, in restaurants and as custodial workers, or in the sex industry (under the guise of massage parlors, escort services, adult bookstores, modeling studios, or bars and strip clubs)."

"Eliza is a 14-year old Mexican girl. She was working cleaning hotel rooms when a man, Pogerio Cardena, approached Eliza's parents, telling them about a well-paying job he could get for Eliza, doing the same work north of the border in the US.

Eliza was eager to go. Her parents were reluctant. But the smooth-talking man said Eliza would be in "good hands." Eliza was taken to Houston, TX and from there to Orlando, FL. It was there that Eliza was told she would have to work as a prostitute until she paid off the \$2,200 debt for her passage out of Mexico."
(READER'S DIGEST, April, 2001)

"Trafficking in persons—in which men, women and children from all over the globe are transported to other countries for the purposes of forced prostitution or labor—inherently rejects the dignity of the human person and exploits conditions of global poverty."

(US/Mexico Bishops Pastoral Letter, 11/2002)

"Forced labor in the Us is hidden, inhumane, widespread and criminal."

(Study by the University of California, Berkeley Human Rights Center and Free the Slaves 9/2004)

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:.....

Terry A. Hyatt #0199877 (On death row since 2/7/00)

Lyle May # 0580028 3/18/99

Cerron T. Hooks #0199877 (2/9/00)

Jonathan E. Leeper #0493734 (2/22/00)

---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,

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