

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” All Souls Day
Isaiah 25: 6-10 I Cor. 15: 12-26 Mark 8: 27-35

Dear Preachers:

A word of caution: The Lectionary gives several options for the readings on this feast. I have selected the readings provided in the “Workbook for Lectors and Gospel Readers” (Liturgy Training Publications) that I use when I travel. You may have a different selection in your worship this weekend. Thus, I have attempted to be more general in my comments so as to be more adaptable to your situation.

After New Testament times the notion of “soul” was influenced by Greek philosophical thought that contrasted what was concrete and empirically verifiable through the senses, with the world of the immaterial realm of ideas and thoughts. In Greek philosophy, these two realms are distinct--the material and the spiritual. Christian theology found the Greek notion of an independently living spiritual realm very adaptable, but it never fully incorporated the concept of an immortal soul adequate for its teaching about salvation.

Even as Christian theologians taught about the soul, they simultaneously presented the idea of the body’s resurrection. The entire human person is saved, not just one of its parts. Unfortunately many of us were raised with a dualistic sense of the human being, and that dualism between body and soul still affects our spirituality to this day.

There are those who emphasize the body only and do their best to keep it alive with a kind of “eternal life.” In late September the “New York Times Magazine” section featured articles on technology and its effects on us. One article entitled, “They Want to Live”, told about “fervent health buffs” trying to hang on until science can enable us to live forever. Larry Wood was quoted as saying, “I really believe we could be the first generation that live forever. Either that, or we’ll be the last generation to die.” The article told of people who believed that science will/could solve the mysteries of aging and indefinitely increase human longevity and maybe even shut down the aging process altogether. What the people in the article feel they have to do is just “hang on” till the cure comes.

People who are doing this “hanging on” have to invest a small fortune in health foods, exotic herbs, gym equipment, vitamins, etc. The life they are planning to extend indefinitely may not be attainable to them, but it most certainly wouldn’t be attainable for the poor who just can’t afford the expense of possibly extending life. Is deliverance from death going to be just for those who can afford it? The article explains that, for these people, the science that has taken away faith in the after life, has become their new deity--a deity for the few. (For those who don’t have all the money for the expensive life extenders, there are still plenty of us ordinary folk buying the 1995 best seller, “The Melatonin Miracle” that extolls the alleged anti-aging effects of melatonin.)

But scientists are throwing water on these dreams to extend life indefinitely. Whatever causes aging, they say, it is still a mystery. While life may be extended some years, scientists tend to believe the normal human cells have a “built in mortality clock”; after about 50 divisions, they die. Those who believe in the possibility of extending life endlessly, reject this scientific information as well as “the soothing lies of religion”. Instead, they have placed their faith in “techno salvation.”

On this day, All Souls Day”, we come face to face with the reality these people are doing a lot to avoid--death. For them, death is something we could, if we would only put enough money into research, overcome within a generation or two. But even those of us who profess faith in the eternal life God offers, must acknowledge that we too do our best to avoid the topic of death in our conversations, planning for living wills and organ donation, etc. What this feast does for people of faith is to enable us to name the enemy, look it in the face, acknowledge the toll it has taken in robbing us of our loved ones and evoking fear in all of us. What we need is a way of looking at death’s reality and this day encourages us to look at death through the filter of our faith expressed in the scriptures. Today’s scriptures don’t solve “the problem”, but they do help us see it through the vision of faith fed by some wonderful imagery of hope.

(Here is where each preacher must tend to the specific readings your congregation will hear for this celebration.)

The first reading: It is when life is most difficult that we need a vision to sustain us. One of life’s most difficult moments is the death of a loved one. And for most of us, we carry the sadness of more than one death in our lives. An older friend

said recently, “I have more dead friends than living.” This part of Isaiah was written prior to the Babylonian captivity. It is concerned not just with Judah and Jerusalem, but for the entire world order.

The promise is voiced in eschatological language--this age of sadness and tears will pass away and God will establish a city on God’s mountain. That will be a place where all will experience God’s favor. Note the inclusion of “all peoples” in the reading--this is a big vision, a universal message. Though the city on the mountain spoken of in this section of Isaiah is certainly Jerusalem, it is important to see God reaching out to all who have lived under a “veil” or been bound by “the web that is woven over all nations”---both strong images of death, the enemy that obscures our vision and binds us in fear.

Each generation waits under the veil of death, each generation passes away, soon to be forgotten. But God has not forgotten and God has a plan made long ago that will be fulfilled. When the day is fulfilled, we will all say with a sense of joy and completion the final verse of today’s reading, “Behold our God to whom we looked to save us! This is the Lord for whom we look...God has saved us.”

God is consistent, acting on behalf of those who are poor, needy and dispossessed. They may not now be able to afford the rich foods that will maintain their health or the expensive life extending potions and exercise equipment that will make them look younger as they age: but God is setting a table for them. At this table there will be no ranking or class distinctions. Those who have wept will have their tears wiped away. Death is a cruel leveler. Regardless of our backgrounds, we have been united by our common enemy, death. We have shed the same tears. We need a victor over death and that is what we celebrate at this Eucharist today. We have already tasted the meal that has “destroyed death forever.” At this table we already share “a feast of rich food and pure choice wine”. The Eucharist is a meal of promise for us as we wait for the complete and everlasting feast God has promised “all people” on the mountain where “the hand of the Lord will rest”. Under the victory and protection of that hand, we shall find rest from fear, deprivation, death and separation. At that table all our enemies, the companions of death, will be banished---war, injustice, sickness, hunger and separation. We celebrate this hope today as we remember those who have made the journey ahead of us.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Hoeftler, Richard Carl. Creative Preaching and Oral Writing. Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Co., 1987.

A gem of a book and very practical. The first half deals with the process of preaching preparation, design and basic principles of effective speaking. Even better is the second half which discusses oral style and the design of an oral manuscript for the pulpit. If you want to know how to put your homily on paper and still be able to deliver it in a natural way, this book is for you.

QUOTABLE:

The idea of God reaching out to embrace us through preaching is not original or innovative, nor should it be, though it has languished in the life of our churches, sometimes because we ourselves are not embracing an intimate God. Preaching cannot be conceived as just another functional task that we do in the course of a busy week, if we keep struggling with this idea that the sermon is God's event, that God is the one doing the acting, that God has called the preacher and the community of the church to this place and time, that God is the one who is empowering, the preacher to preach, that God is the one empowering the listeners through the hearing, that the sermon itself is a manifestation of God and God's grace, and that God will again be manifest in the lives of the people going out to the world. While the preacher obviously composes the sermon, and the listener is actively engaged in interpreting it, it is appropriate to speak of God's work in even these roles: We cannot testify to Christ, nor comprehend such testimony, separate from God's action in and through the Holy Spirit (I John 4: 2,15).

Paul Scott Wilson, in The Practice of Preaching.

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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