

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Acts 1: 1-11 Psalm 47 Ephesians 1: 17-23 Matthew 28: 16-20

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Imagine what it felt like to be one of Jesus' first disciples. What a roller coaster ride they had had! There were the heady first days of traveling with him; listening to his powerful preaching; being wonder-struck as he performed miracles and feeling pride when people learned they were his intimates. Except for the arguments with Pharisees and Sadducees, things were going pretty nicely for this band of followers. Formerly, they were nobodies; now they were somebodies---they were disciples of Jesus. It was all very fine, and things seemed to be getting bigger as they entered Jerusalem with Jesus with the sound of the crowds in their ears and the feel of palm branches under their feet on the road into the city.

Then the roller coaster plunged straight down, as far down as it could go. Jesus was arrested, hastily tried and dispatched to his executioners and the burial party. The formerly enthusiastic followers fled to lay low and figure out their escape. But just days later, things took another dramatic swing---he was alive, back with “many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the reign of God.” But here it is, the Ascension and their emotions are in for another rapid shift in direction, Jesus has left them again. I wonder what they were thinking as they “looked intently at the sky as he was going”? “Why can't he stay? Just when we need him the most, he leaves us. Who'll be with us to show us how to be his witnesses? Who'll intervene when we argue among ourselves? Or, when scandal rocks our community and we feel like we are going to collapse? Who'll teach us how to answer his enemies' objections? What should we do next? This evening? Tomorrow morning? Should we go home and lead good lives or go on the road to be preachers? What does ‘preach the gospel’ mean anyway?”

These may have been some of their ponderings as they stared up to the heavens. It took the “two men dressed in white garments (were these the same two at the empty tomb?) To shake them out of whatever nostalgia or anxiety they were feeling. The motion-sick disciples drag themselves from the mountain and return to the midst of the world, Jerusalem. They don't have a clue what to do next, but Acts tells us that Jesus' Spirit will find them and equip them for the tasks that lie

ahead. They will discover that they won't be on their own in their uncertain future, that Jesus' life with God will be the source of more than enough gifts with which to spread the news of the reign of God.

The Ascension sounds like a conclusion, and in some ways it is. It concludes the earthly ministry of Jesus and ends one way the disciples have known him. But the Ascension is also a bridge to another, new and surprising way the disciples will know Jesus. This new experience of his life with them will be may known by the coming and activity of the Holy Spirit. Their Jewish belief taught that heaven is where God dwells. No human could seek to attain such a place, for the Almighty and transcendent One dwelt there. (Elijah and Enoch were taken up to heaven, but they were the exception and not the rule.) Now that Jesus had been "lifted up," his followers can believe that he had not only risen from the dead, but is in a new life with God. His being there gives us hope that one day we will also be there. Jesus in now in God's company, his appearances to his disciples have ceased. But since he is with God, like God, he is present to all, no longer limited by time and place. Absent, yet fully present. Since Jesus is alive with God, we are assured that he will come again. Meanwhile, because of his present status as Lord of all, he works with his servants to bring about God's plan. We, on our part, work diligently here on earth, in collaboration with him and as we do, we keep an eye on Jesus--for where he is, we will someday be. A lot revolves around the Ascension. Because of it, we believe Jesus will come again; that he rules over all creation; sends us the Holy Spirit; is our priest and reveals God to us. This feast gives us great hope.

After the Ascension, what must the disciples do to get things going? There was a lot to do; a gospel to be preached, works of compassion and healing to be performed. Did some of the disciples want to get on with their assigned task? You could picture them rolling up the sleeves of their tunics, ready to get to work. Did they feel that since they had learned a lot from Jesus while they were with him and since he had showed himself to them after his resurrection, they had more than enough experience and training to go out and change the world? Some may have felt timid and not quite ready, but there are always the enthusiastic and energized who want to do something, anything, right away. This group may have felt frustrated to hear that they must "wait for the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak." When there is a lot to do, most people don't want to first stop and do nothing.

The early church is about to undergo a big change. The Ascension is an in-between time, when one period is ending and a new is about to begin. But not quite yet. Rather than rush off fired by their own enthusiasms and plans, the disciples are told to wait. So, they will do that, letting themselves be ready and waiting for God to have an influence over them. I think of all the church gatherings and meetings when we say a perfunctory prayer and then hurry on to the work at hand. Whether it be dealing with important home or church issues, I am so task-oriented, I forget the partnership we have in the community with the Holy Spirit, “the promise of the Father.” The Spirit’s coming will begin a new age, when the words and actions of the disciples are the fruits of the Spirit’s life with us. With the Spirit’s guidance our projects might take an unusual shape, a new routine, an unexpected turn. Maybe we will be less driven, less success oriented, more accepting of the voices of others and more willing to be flexible when change is needed. How will these disciples and us be more open to the coming Spirit?

First, the instructions are to wait and receive what God wants to give us. As a church, and as individuals, we are going to have to figure out what form our “waiting” takes, our attempts to be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We need to devise “strategies for waiting” that reflect our dependence on God. More deliberate prayer for guidance by communities of faith might reflect the Ascension-hope of the community that believes Jesus’ promise to give us his Spirit to guide us.

It’s possible to be quite actively involved in our work for God and still keep within our busy schedule and active a sense of waiting--- even as we go about our projects. Some people start the day with a few quiet moments expressing in wordless prayer openness and dependence on God for life and nourishment. Others, busy in their world of family, work and service, carry in their hearts through the day brief mantras, short repetitious prayers, that state and reiterate openness and dependence on God for initiative and direction for the form their response to God should take. “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” “Here I am O God, ready to do your will.”

QUOTABLE

“Indeed, any sermon that remained entirely in the realm of abstract thought, never touching the real world of field and crops, parents and children, employers and workers, feasts and banquets, toil and play, would hardly qualify as Christian preaching at all.”

-----Thomas Long in, *The Witness of Preaching*.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Obviously, as in most everything else, there are some major differences among the various denominations as to how these teachings of Jesus are understood and applied. However, despite these differences, there is essential consensus on the major points. With few exceptions, all Christian denominations hold and teach the following principles:

All people in this world have equal dignity and should enjoy equal rights in terms of respect, access to resources, and access to opportunity.

God intended the earth for all persons equally. Thus the riches of this world should flow equally and fairly to all people. All other rights, including the right to private property and the accumulation of riches that are fairly earned, must be subordinated to this more primary principle.

The right to private property and the accumulation of wealth is not an absolute one—but must be subordinated to the common good the fact that the goods of the earth are intended equally for everyone.

No person, group of persons, or nation may have a surplus of goods if others lack the basic necessities. That is the present situation within our world, where some individuals and nations have excess while others lack the basic necessities. This is immoral, goes directly against the teachings of Christ, and must be redressed.

We are obliged, morally, to come to the aid of those in need. In giving such aid, we are not doing charity, but serving justice. Helping the poor is not an issue of personal virtue and generosity, but something that is demanded of us by the very order of things.

The laws of supply and demand, free enterprise, unbridled competition, the profit motive, and private ownership of the means of production may not be seen as morally inviolate and must, when the common good, justice, demands it, be balanced by other principles. No one has the moral right to earn as much

—Ronald Rolheiser

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

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