

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” PENTECOST

Acts 2: 1-11 Psalm 104 I Cor 12: 3b--7, 12-13 John 20: 19-23

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

A friend tells an incident that happened while he was having lunch in a diner. A Carolina wren flew through an open door into the restaurant. It got panicky and flew around the room skirting over peoples' heads and avoiding light fixtures. Seeing the large window pane and probably thinking it was a way out, the bird slammed into the glass. It fell to the floor--- dead-like. A woman went over to pick it up and it fluttered, stumbled around and tried flying. It flew only a few feet and fell to the ground again. My friend went over and picked it up. It was quivering with fear, its beak wide open, gasping for air. He took the trembling and exhausted bird outside and placed it on a ledge safe from stray cats. It stayed there for a while, its beak open, sucking in air. The bird's heart beat was visible in its chest and my friend saw it slowing back down to normal. The bird's breathing got calm and finally it flew off.

Pentecost may find us like that bird—if not now, then who knows when? At points in our lives we feel like our world is a bewildering and strange place for us—spiritually, geographically, emotionally or psychologically. “How did I get here,” we ask. “How will I get out?” “Where am I going?” We may be flying around in circles, slamming into one part of our life or another. What looks clear and a quick exit to a difficult situation, turns out to be one more obstacle to freedom. People with panic attacks find their breathing becomes shallow, their heart races and they become confused. Even simple activities seem too threatening. But we don't have to have a panic attack to feel like that bird, looking for freedom, gasping for air and tired from trying. And these symptoms aren't the sole characteristics of individual Christians, they can also mark a local, national or international church community. We want to rise to the occasion, the challenge of the moment, but we can't do it on our own. By ourselves we slam into walls .

Today is Pentecost. We celebrate that God has not left us on our own. We celebrate the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to send us a Helpmate, an Advocate; what we have been hearing Jesus say to us these previous weeks about not leaving us orphans ---is fulfilled. God is like a mother bird who takes us under her wings

to protect us and breathe new life into us so that we can catch our breath, have our fears calmed and our trust renewed. God shelters us, but that doesn't mean we are in permanent retreat from the world. Rather, God's breath of the Spirit comes anew to us today to encourage us to try flying again; maybe to more open space which fear or confusion has kept us from entering.

Today we are like those who "were all in one place together." The tongues of fire, the sign of the Spirit, rested on each of those gathered. We are told in the first chapter of Acts that the group with Peter, who met regularly, consisted of Mary, other women (1:14-5), and "...one hundred and twenty gathered together." On the day of Pentecost, those "in one place..." were a very diverse group. There is also a lot of diversity among us in worship today. Some, or most, of us don't even know each other and if we did, we might not even like one another! Even in worship differences emerge: we might not like the hymns chosen, the chapel or church design, the silence or lack of it, the manner of the presider and preacher, etc. Nevertheless, at the root of it all, we are "all in one place together." Like those at Pentecost, we have a deeper union, we are baptized into this community and we all have been given breath and our wings by the Spirit. God wants to be generous with us all—not just with some. "All" were in the one place to receive the Spirit.

God wasn't parceling out the Spirit in different doses—Peter got a gallon, Thomas the Doubter a quart, the servant women a teaspoon. Same today---the pope, bishop or clergy don't have more of the Spirit than anyone in this room. They have more advisers, but not more of the Spirit. So a refreshing breath, maybe even a driving wind, is given to urge us on, get us out of our confined and narrow space so that we can fly. God, through the gift of the Spirit, opens our imaginations to see the possibilities for new life and freedom of flight today.

Haven't we already noticed that the Spirit of Jesus has taken flesh in our lives? When we find ways that help our families be and do their best? When we took one arduous step at a time towards breaking old and destructive patterns of behavior? When we, who felt freshly wounded, were helped by being here at worship and by other believers who were further along than we? When we found ourselves speaking up for others, defending rights of children or a coworker and those with no voice, with an eloquence we didn't think we had? This is a church of the Holy Spirit--- not just the church in general--- but this local community,

which has gathered “in one place.”

Oh yes, let’s not ignore the realities. We are “all in one place together,” in other ways as well—raw and offended, sorrowful, and angry, puzzled and struggling. We wish these weren’t our realities as we offer worship. We find ourselves panting for a refreshing breath in a scandal laden church—priests, sisters and laity. We are breathing together, but feeling a shortness of breath and a panicky feeling. Fluttering in which direction? Will our new pope be inspired and help us find the way? All needs we place before God today, waiting on the Spirit’s renewed arrival.

On this Pentecost we profess again our faith, though, like the disciples, we may feel huddled together in a room that’s got its doors shut and lacks fresh air. But there is no stopping the Spirit, even when the atmosphere is limited, cramped by secrecy and cover-ups. While we may feel the Spirit isn’t around as much as it was on that first Pentecost, or that his/her wings are crimped, the reality is that the Spirit is not like that Carolina wren flying aimlessly around the place and slamming into walls. Rather, we celebrate that the Spirit is a driving and purifying fire and nothing can prevent it from blowing through each of us and all of us, to start still one more fire. So with all the breath within us, let’s invite the Spirit to come and refresh this community.

We abide for just one hour in this “one place.” Here we admit our need, let down our guard and stand together with outstretched arms waiting for a gift we cannot get on our own; but which God wants to give us. We want genuine passion and faith and those are gifts our willing God has for us. Like a woman in labor let’s breathe deeply during our prayer, who knows, but God might notice us, come over to us and breath new life into our lungs—and spirits.

ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER

“HOLY SPIRIT,” THE LIVING PULPIT, January-March 1996, Volume 5, No. 1. This excellent quarterly focuses on one theme each edition and then provides essays, quotes, biblical commentary, poetry and book reviews to help the preacher study the theme from various perspectives. Previous themes include, Advent, Jesus, Forgiveness, Prayer, Grace, Suffering, Sabbath, etc. Back issues are available.

THE LIVING PULPIT, 5000 Independence Avenue, Bronx, NY 10471 Phone:
914-757-5109 Membership dues \$39 per year.

QUOTABLE

Everyday Mysticism. ...the experience of the Spirit I talk of here is also to be found in a mysticism of everyday life outside a verbalized and institutionalized Christianity, and therefore may be discovered by Christian in their lives when the encounter their non-Christian brothers and sisters, or in their study of religious history, Christians need not be shocked or astonished at such a revelation. It should serve only to show that their God, the God of Jesus Christ, wants all men and women to be saved, and offers God's grace as liberation to all human beings, offering it as liberation into incomprehensible mystery. The grace of Christ takes effect in a mysterious way...and...allows people to share in the paschal mystery of Jesus, even where people who are loyal to their conscience have not yet been reached in any convincing way by the explicit message of Christianity and have not been molded by the Christian sacraments.

—Karl Rahner, quoted in LIVING PULPIT, Volume 5, No.1

JUSTICE NOTES

Three Catholic Environmental Heros for this year:

Sister Dorothy Stang was well known for her tireless work on behalf of the poor and largely landless settlers in a part of the Brazilian rain forest that was under constant threat from unscrupulous loggers and ranchers. Because of her advocacy for the poor, she was assassinated on February 12 of this year.

Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize last year for her incredible environmental work in Kenya.

Winner this week of the prestigious Goldman Prize:

Father José Andrés Tamayo Cortez, 47, is a charismatic Catholic priest leading the struggle for environmental justice in Honduras.

<http://www.goldmanprize.org/>

---Social Justice News-----Diocese of Oakland

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

At 2 am on Friday, May 6th. the state of North Carolina executed Earl

Richmond, at Central Prison, Raleigh. It was an unusually cold and blustery night and there weren't many outside the prison. One of his cousins was in the group of vigilers. She said she felt pain and sorrow for the victims and their families, but pain for her own family as well, who were mourning a loved one's execution.

“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:.....

Lemorris Chapman #0696838 (On death row since 11/02/01)

Ronald Poindexter #0325786 (1/29/02)

Reche Smith #0379083 (3/14/02)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

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)

Our webpage address: <http://www.op.org/exchange/>

(Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes "First Impressions" and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

“Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by two friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, Angel Del Rio, and three sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP, Doris Regan, OP and Sr. Anna Marie Reha, SSND. 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

"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.

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.

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

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)

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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