

“First Impressions” Feast of Peter and Paul
Acts 12: 1-11 2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 17-18 Matthew 16: 13-19
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I am getting in a rut! I realize that I have been focusing on the Gospel for almost all of my recent preachings and also for these reflections. I need to remember my own experience from former preaching, that I have found it refreshing and challenging to preach from one of the other two readings. I especially find the first reading a rich source during Advent and Lent. Of the three readings, the second reading, usually a Pauline letter, is the most difficult to preach.

The Lectionary itself is a problem. It is designed to give emphasis to the Gospel reading. Notice how the first reading is selected to point to the Gospel selection of the day. The Gospel reading is mostly narrative and so each pericope can stand by itself; whereas, the Pauline one is brief, out of the larger context of its literary form, the letter, and is usually so didactic. Thus, it sounds so dry and out of context. He seems to be fired up about some very specific problems in the early church. Our listeners don't know what he is talking about; why he is writing what he writes and what it has to do with our lives anyway!? In addition, he also seems to assume a knowledge of Scripture, he frequently alludes to the Hebrew texts, and raises issues that seem so out of our experience. His cultural outlook is so different from ours, and he has such a poor reputation regarding his outlook on women (further study on this later topic alone would prove rich material for preaching, or at least, for bible study class).

So, why make preaching more difficult than it already is by introducing Paul into the mix? While Paul wrote for some very specific reasons, there is something very universal about his letters and they to speak to our common Christian experience. For the most part, he is addressing the early church communities about problems they are having that still plague the modern community. He is addressing very specific issues, and in doing this he shows how he “enfleshes” the Gospel message in the concrete reality of the evolving daily life of believers. He challenges us as preachers to do what he did, find how God's Word is speaking to our day with our unique problems. A way to do this is to pray and study Paul, what were the issues then and what was he saying about them? How are the issues we face today

similar and, guided by his approach, what should we say?

To interpret Paul requires some understanding of the situation that occasioned his letters. Once we have a sense of this background we can approach the particular passage under focus and preach it to our hearers. But rather than speak in theory and abstract notions, let's be specific and see what this Sunday's Pauline text might say to ourselves and our congregations.

The passage comes at the end of the letter. It has to be considered as part of the whole. Some extra work is needed here, first read the whole letter (just four chapters) and then do some work on the occasion for writing. It does require some work, but it doesn't have to be excessively time consuming. If you have a good commentary, *The Jerome Commentary*, or *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, these will provide you with some good overview material. Thus, my quick research reveals that this is one of the "Pastoral Letters" (*I and II Timothy and Titus*). It seems to have been written after Paul's time, probably by a disciple. This was not an unusual biblical practice, to use a beloved teacher's name to authenticate a teaching. The justification being, that it was written by someone who knew Paul's mind and what he might say were he facing these situations. The Pastoral letters show a more established church and they are written to church leaders stressing the value and need to maintain ecclesial and social order. Some of the old "fire" of the Paul's letters seems to be missing here. The former stress on conversion, grace, and redemption, is now replaced by the need to have correct doctrine. The church is beyond its first generation charismatic behavior, it now consists of people who have settled down, stopped stressing the immediate return of Jesus and are now being told to live full and rich lives. These shifts are not necessarily a loss of early enthusiasm, as much as a reflection of the need to adapt the Gospel to a new age of the church and to different needs. The letter shows a church not merely repeating old and sacrosanct formulas, but having freedom and flexibility to adapt.

The selection from II Timothy today uses metaphors taken from the surrounding Greek influenced culture to describe Paul's life, a life of commitment to Christ to the end. It was the custom at the end of a meal to offer a cup of wine to the gods. The wine was poured out in sacrifice. (The Jewish ritual sacrifices also included a libation of wine.) The writer anticipates the end of life coming and using the libation image, images his life and imminent death as a sacrifice. His life would

be taken from him, over this he had no control. But, what he does assert is that for him, this death would be a significant event of self-surrender of a long life of service. His final moments then would be a libation, an “amen”, an act of faith and surrender to the God he served.

The preacher might reflect on what that would be like, not just the initial offering of our lives to God, but the sense of final offering after a life lived in service, in trying throughout our lives to do God’s will. Being a Christian for “the long haul”, i.e., resisting passing attractions to compromise; choosing not to live an easier Christian life of mere church attendance while ignoring the more difficult options of discipleship, all this does take perseverance and sacrifice. A dedicated life of discipleship does set us apart, has us going against the stream of the majority, and consequently it does require long and consistent sacrifice. Such a life is only possible because God has been there with us, enabling us, helping us day by day to live out our faith in constantly changing circumstances.

We hope and pray at this Eucharist, that we will not give up our part of the struggle, that our determination to live out faith will not waiver. We hope that, like the author of this letter, we might live a long life of faithful service and living praise of our risen Savior whose risen life is reflected in our own.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to come to the end of our lives feeling the confidence of this author; that we had fought “the good fight”, finished the race and could trust God’s reward waiting us? We look to the future when Christ, who won “the merited crown” for us and made it possible to live faithful lives, will give us that crown. Meanwhile, the reading ends with a note on the present moment. There may be more to endure, more faithful service to live. However, we are not alone in the present struggle, and we do not just look forward to some future vindication, but we are assured that now, “The Lord will continue to rescue me from all attempts to do me harm and will bring me safe to his heavenly kingdom.”

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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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