

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THE HOLY TRINITY (A)

Exodus 34: 4b-6, 8-9 Daniel 3: 52-55 2 Cor 13: 11-13 John 3: 16-18

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We are in the season of big feasts—last week Pentecost, today the Trinity and next week Corpus Christi (the Body and Blood of Christ). Other important feasts in the church year celebrate great events in Christ’s life, death and resurrection: Christmas, Easter, Ascension, etc. Today’s feasts seem more idea-oriented, i.e, focusing on doctrine. The trap for preachers on such big feasts is to “rise to the occasion” and turn the preaching into something lofty, important, doctrinal and... out of the reach of the daily experience of our listeners. We risk turning our worship space into a classroom.

But if we stay close to the scriptures for this day, we notice the focus isn’t on ideas, but on actions and, the major actor is God--- front and center stage. We hear again through these readings that God has been very active on our behalf, from the time of our ancestors in faith, during Christ’s life, right up to this present moment of worship. We have been the recipients of our triune God’s continual outpouring of love, healing and forgiveness. Today our God invites us to respond as grateful, rejoicing people at this worship and in our lives. The scriptures today don’t attempt to “explain” the Trinity to us, but they do reveal how God works and, adapting a familiar saying, “By God’s fruits you shall know God.” The scriptures reveal that when God’s hand extends towards us, we get a pretty good idea what God is like. It is not a matter of doctrinal definition, but the experience of our lover-God who does not give up on us, even when we give up on ourselves and God.

The first reading comes from a section (34:1-35) in Exodus that focuses on the renewal of the covenant. Moses returns to the Mount of Olives after the “golden calf incident” when he smashed the original tablets against the base of the mountain. (Chapters 32 and 33 make wonderful reading in Exodus for many reasons, but in particular, the description of Moses’ intimate relationship with God.) The commandments are rewritten. Despite the people’s infidelity, God has taken the initiative towards them and renews the broken covenant.

In the ancient Near East, when a covenant between a ruler and subject was made, the first part of the treaty named the suzerain (overlord) and then the subjects. Following this pattern, first God's name is revealed. But we learn more; we learn the meaning of God's name, lest we wonder about the true nature of the "Lord" with whom we are covenanted. God, we are told, is a God of steadfast love. The heart of the revelation is about God's power to forgive, being slow to anger, and rich in kindness and fidelity. The revelation of God's name and nature come through strongly in this reading, hence the choice of this reading as a companion to the gospel.

Although Moses doesn't ask, God reveals God's personal name: YHWH ("the Lord"). Names were believed to contain the identity or essence of the person. God explains the meaning of the name: "The Lord, the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity." We are not concerned here with a dictionary definition. Instead, what the name and explanation reveal is God's relationship those who are invited into covenant. Dianne Bergant, (PREACHING THE NEW LECTIONARY: YEAR A, page 410, cf. Below) traces the roots and gives us insight into the meaning of the divine adjectives: "Merciful" –is womb love, what a mother feels for the child of her womb or what siblings born of the same womb feel for one another. "Gracious" –signifies compassionate or merciful. "Loving kindness" and "Fidelity," suggest God's steadfastness; God will not give up on this covenant with the people.

Just as Moses bowed down to worship God, so we at eucharist today "bow down" to worship the self-revealing God who entered into relationship with Moses and the people of Israel. That same God who found favor with them, also finds favor with us today. How can this be, since nothing in us humans has changed very much? We are still a "stiff-necked" people. But God did not enter into covenant with the people because they were better than any other tribe or nation at the time. Rather, the covenant began and was renewed on God's initiative and because of God's mercy. When Moses learns of God's identity he says, "If I find favor with you, O Lord, do come along in our company."

Who could resist wanting this God to travel with them? In today's eucharistic celebration we celebrate God's outreach to us in the permanent covenant made through Christ's self-offering. In Christ, God has literally come along with us---

“in our company.” Jesus reminds us in today’s gospel that God loved the world and continues to love the world and Jesus is the proof-positive of that love. Even when the world turns away, God does again what God did for Moses and the people, God extends forgiveness and a chance to renew the relationship. God comes along “in our company.”

It is clear that the second reading was chosen today because the closing verse is so trinitarian. It is St. Paul’s perspective on the Trinity—and it is a benediction! Notice who is mentioned first, not the One we call Father, but the Lord Jesus. What is emphasized again are the actions typical of each member of the Godhead. Christ’s grace is named first for it is through him that we come to know God and the Holy Spirit. Because of Christ’s generous act on our behalf we are recipients of the free gift of grace that transforms our lives. “The love of God” is mentioned next, for God’s love for us was shown in Christ’s life and death---as Paul says, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.” God’s love was made visible in Christ. The “communion of the Holy Spirit” is the loving relationship between the Son and God. The Spirit is also the life-source for our union with God and one another---our “communion.” From the Spirit we receive daily reminders and proof that God’s love has been poured out in us through Christ.

Paul reminds the community that the fruits of God’s love towards us must be manifested in our behavior: “Mend your ways, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace.” This harmonious way of living is only possible because we are the recipients of “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit....” Again, we know our triune God by the way God has acted towards us.

The opening verse of the gospel is probably the best known in the New Testament. If you’ve gone to a sports event or watched one on tv, inevitably someone holds up the “John 3:16” sign. I am willing to bet most of the fans give it no heed and probably don’t know what it means. But on this Sunday we certainly know the reference—and the experience. We celebrate God’s enormous love for us (even while we were still sinners) and the forgiveness and new life that love has brought us.

The quote comes from a longer passage. Nicodemus, an important Pharisee, has

come to Jesus in the night to ask a few questions. Maybe he has been impressed by Jesus' temple cleansing (2: 13-22) and wants to learn more about him. Maybe he is there as part of the Pharisee party to check out Jesus' orthodoxy. Regardless, Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born again; receive a new birth "from above," from God's Holy Spirit. Nicodemus falters; professes doubt, "How can this be?"

Unlike Nicodemus, we are not people groping in spiritual darkness and on our own searching for the way. Our spiritual birth in Christ has begun new-life in us. In the daylight provided by our faith, we see life as living in the loving embrace of God. The Holy Spirit, sent to us from the risen Christ, has breathed into us and formed us to be a holy people. We are not without weaknesses, faults and sin, but through the Spirit, God's love and rebirth flows to us, giving us eternal life, keeping us in union with God and one another. Paul calls the identity and the blessing of our God upon us, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

We speak about equality and community in the Trinity. If that is so, then these gifts overflow in us, the new community of the Trinity, made in the image and likeness of God. God is creator of a community where all are equal, even though we have different gifts and responsibilities. We are a community then that must work for a world where God's love for the world is felt, made visible. The barriers that separate us, nations, classes, genders, races, etc. are not to be present in our new community, and we must work to put them aside in our world, so that diversity is seen as a gift of the Creator God, a gift to us all.

God's community reflects the one revealed by the Word made flesh--who was crucified and risen for the sake of sinners, the poor, outcast, etc. A community made in the image of the Triune God then must show the same compassion, sacrifice and commitment for the people Christ offered his life to save. The Spirit who builds us as a community, breaks down the isolation of individuals and calls us to be "new wine" of joy for the world. The Spirit breaks down the distances of people from one another and the distance we might feel from God.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Dianne Bergant with Richard Fragomeni, *PREACHING THE NEW LECTIONARY: YEAR A*. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001) Paper, ISBN 0-8146-2472-3, \$29.95.

This is a very excellent commentary that includes biblical and liturgical commentary on the scriptures for Sundays, Solemnities and feasts. Each day's commentary ends with a "Themes of the Day" section that may open up preaching possibilities.

QUOTABLE

On this feast of the Trinity, we praise our God who is present with us on earth, who rules over all from the heavens, and in whose hands is control over chaos. The readings for this feast do not directly explain the doctrine of the Trinity as we have come to know it. We will have an opportunity to proclaim that faith when we recite the Nicene Creed later in the liturgical celebration. Rather, they offer us glimpses into the nature of our triune God.

----Bergant and Fragomeni, page 413.

JUSTICE NOTES

Citizens should cultivate a generous and loyal spirit of patriotism, but without narrow-mindedness, so that they will always keep in mind the welfare of the entire human family which is formed into one by various kinds of links between races, peoples, and nations.

-----Vatican II's, "The Church in the Modern World" (#75)

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:.....

Terrance Campbell #0064125 (On death row since 3/28/02)

Michael Eric Maske #0763486 (5/10/02)

Wesley Toby Smith #0765397 (5/29/02)

-----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,

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

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