

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:

A preacher friend of mine told me that when he was in theological training he had a semester's course on the Trinity. The learned professor assigned the class an appropriate thick textbook for their study. In the middle of the semester the professor stepped out of her role as theologian and put on the mantle of preaching instructor. She advised the future preachers in her class, "When the feast of the Trinity comes, if you are assigned to preach on that day----get the flu!" This theologian saw the challenge of preaching on such a "big feast." Today is sometimes called an "idea feast." (So is next week, The Body and Blood of Christ.)

Both preachers and worshipers can get stymied by this feast. What to say about a mystery? How to address the Trinity and apply it to our everyday lives? On feasts of Jesus, the New Testament readings are very vivid and, while never easy, still easier to preach than on a feast of this magnitude. But preachers, don't climb too high up the theoretical ladder today; stay close to our daily lives. A key way to do that is to focus on one of the scriptures assigned today and preach from it. What does the text tell us about the God who created and loves us; sent the Son to share our journey and redeem us and who graces us daily through the Holy Spirit?

Our first reading seems like a replay of a previous manifestation of God on Sinai. God attempted to make a covenant with the people through Moses. While Moses was on the mountain communing with God, his brother Aaron was following the dictates of the people to build them an idol. Which he did. When Moses descended the mountain and saw how the people had so quickly turned back to their pagan ways, he smashed the tablets in his rage. Today he is back on the mountain and once again trying to respond to God's initiative and attempts to form a people. What does God look like? We don't know. When Moses asks to see God's glory (33:18) God responds and passes in front of Moses and pronounces the divine name.

Who is this God who is so revelatory to Moses? Who is this God who is about to take a broken and recalcitrant people and make them new again? This is the God who chooses to be with us, despite our own unworthiness. This is the God we will

never comprehend, or understand because God acts in strange, mysterious and loving ways even after we have turned our backs on God. This is the God who comes in a cloud; who may not be seen, but certainly is experienced. And what do Moses and the people experience of this God? How shall they “name” God? Judging from today’s story God is: patient and compassionate; takes the initiative to reach out to us; is not dissuaded by our sins; is faithful to us, even when we have built our own idols to worship; can take a broken people and make them whole again.

This is an attractive God, wouldn’t you agree? Who can resist this God? So Moses, realizing the fickleness of his people and the constancy and mercy of God, does what any of us would do. We see our need and see our potential with God and so we say, with Moses, “If I found favor with you, O Lord, do come along in our company.” We might not feel we deserve God’s favor, let’s extend the invitation anyway----“do come along in our company.” It seems to be God’s nature to accept such invitations readily.

What we will learn, as we continue to delve into the scriptures and observe their evolution, is that the New Testament reveals God not only passes by, shrouded in a cloud, as depicted in our first reading, but comes to stay with us. God responded to Moses’ invitation to accompany the people. God does not remain aloof from human affairs, but even takes flesh among us; gets involved and stays with us right through death. The New Testament further reveals God to us in Jesus, who is “God with us.”

Paul’s community in Corinth was contentious. In his two epistles he confronts them and their false teachings about Christ. There was a split in the Corinthian church between those who saw the gospel as a restatement of traditional Jewish beliefs and those who, like Paul, saw Christ not only as a miracle worker and performer of powerful deeds, but as the One whose suffering, death and resurrection contained the self revelation of God to us.

In today’s reading Paul is concluding his second letter to the Corinthians, calling them to unity and peace so as to live out the love God has bestowed on them. It is as if Paul is another Moses, trying to hold together a new stiff-necked people. How will they continue to reflect the gifts God has poured out on them in Christ? What will preserve them so that they can witness to the life, death and resurrection of the Lord? It is what Paul says in his closing words that reveals the key to church

life—not just for survival, but for our life and faithfulness to the gospel in the world. It will be through the Trinity’s work among us that we will have life: “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 are very aware that, like the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, we are a frail and contentions community, so we once again take Moses’ prayer to ourselves and turn to God at today’s worship and pray: “...O Lord, do come along in our company...pardon our wickedness and sin and receive us as your own.”

Why didn’t God stay up on the mountain and send instructions to us here down below? Because we need more than an instruction manual on good living to pull our lives together and live as God’s people. If God had stayed “on high” we would have stayed stuck “down below” in the dark and struggling places. So, God sent the Son to us. But why? Because, as Jesus tells Nicodemus towards the end of their conversation, “God so loved the world.” People choose to do extraordinary things out of love; even give up their lives for a beloved. That’s what God did in Jesus, gave us the life of the only Son.

Love was what stirred God to make the first move towards Israel. When they needed a second chance, God gave it to them----many times—because God loved them. Love is what we experience again today at this Eucharist, another outreach on God’s part.

John reminds us that if we recognize and accept what God has done for us in Christ and believe that through Christ we are united to God, then we “have eternal life.” Eternal life has seemed to many as a prize we win by our diligent observance of God’s commandments. We have treated eternal life as a reward, after we die, for good behavior. But that is not what John means by eternal life in his gospel. For him a believer can have and experience eternal life now in this lifetime. What is it like? What do we experience? It is the relief of not having to earn God’s favor by slavishly observing rules and regulations. Instead, eternal life is knowing we are loved now by God and are being transformed daily by that love. We are becoming: more loving, patient, self-giving, forgiving, willing to endure pain and rejection for our faith in Jesus, desirous to stand with the needy and rejected, etc. All this and more, as we recognize and accept what God has done for us in Christ.

Eternal life means we will reflect in our lives the love God has always bestowed on us: from the moment of our creation when we were made in God’s image and

likeness; through all our turnings to false gods; our rejection of the prophets past and present; and our rejection of Jesus. Through all this our triune God said, “Nevertheless I love them and will continue to love them.” We have come to learn the true name of God. It is the same as God’s identity, it is “Persistent and Unfailing Love.

Shall we again say, “Yes” to our God today? Or, shall we worship at the altar of false gods?

- the God of militarism and empire
- the God of prosperity and self-indulgence
- the God of self-sufficiency
- the God of revenge and unforgiveness
- the God of fear and cowardice
- the God of formality and rigidity
- the God of pessimism and negativity

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Brothers and sisters, rejoice...encourage one another...live in peace." (2 Corinthians 13:11)

Last weekend on Mothers’ Day, while many mothers were celebrating with their children, tens of thousands of mothers were homeless. Family homelessness has emerged as a serious global problem. Our US Catholic Bishops say:

"The lack of safe, affordable housing requires a renewed commitment to increase the supply of quality housing and to preserve, maintain, and improve existing housing through public/private partnerships, especially with religious groups and community organizations. The USCCB continues to oppose unjust housing discrimination and to support measures to meet the credit needs of low-income and minority communities." (US Catholic Bishops' letter: Faithful Citizenship)

Did you know?

The number of homeless persons on any one night in Raleigh is estimated to be nearly 1500 and 46,000 across the State. The average age of a homeless family member is 4 years old.

A study conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors found 23% of all requests for emergency shelter went unmet due to lack of resources. For families, the numbers are worse: 29% of emergency shelter requests from families were denied.

Requests for assisted housing by low-income families and individuals increased in 86 percent of the cities during the last year.

Nationally, an estimated 1.2 million children are homeless.

A poor child in the US is more likely to live in a working family than to be on government assistance.

The City of Raleigh, with the encouragement of many congregations including Sacred Heart, has agreed to form an *Affordable Housing Task Force* so that the needs of poorer citizens will be included in the new City Plan.

What you can do:

Join Sacred Heart's MICAH ministry in its service to the homeless. Meals are served twice a month at Moore Square as well as to homeless families who are part of the Wake Interfaith Hospitality Network. For information call Anne and Bill Werdel at 832-6030 ex. 110 or email socialconcern@sacredheartcathedral.org

1

Make a contribution to Sacred Heart's "Door Fund" which helps families avoid eviction and homelessness.

2

Learn more about Homelessness: <http://www.naeh.org/> *The National Alliance to End Homelessness* or also: www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts.html,
(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

READER'S RESPONSE

[This is a response to "First Impressions," 6th Sunday of Easter, April 27, 2008]

Regarding your quote: "While it was Jesus' intention that his disciples would go to Samaria, what instigated the outreach?"

There is an important point that you did not bring up. In Deuteronomy 27, Moses institutes a 5-step ritual enactment of divine mercy that the Israelites do when they enter the promised land. The first of these is to proceed to Shechem. Shechem is the same as/or in close proximity

to Sychar, the place of Jacob's Well, which is located in Samaria. Jewish ears at the time of Jesus would know that the evangelizer is telling them that they are entering the promised land through this story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman.

Peace,

Barbara Quinby

READER'S RESPONSE

Hi, Jude,

I always deeply appreciate your insights, and this one is no exception. May I add something, though, to what you have said? Today there is real suffering for some of us who persist in being Roman Catholic Christians. And it takes a certain stubborn persistence to follow what we believe. I am a woman who is called to the priesthood in a church whose hierarchy wants to ignore me, pretend I'm not here, refuse to accept

the gifts I long to offer. And because I have a deep love for the liturgy of the church- where I am denied a place at the Table- the suffering becomes more intense. And I am not alone. There are other people who are denied a place as well- those who are homosexual and are named in hurtful ways, those who are divorced and re-married without the blessing of the church, men who have left the priesthood in order to marry and would still love to serve, and others, as well. So, the challenge for me (I will only speak for myself) is to move beyond the pain and anger, with the sure sense that Christ is leading me and all of us into a church that is a much fuller expression of the Gospel than we presently experience. The challenge is to name the truth I see, in a non-violent way. The challenge is to remain loving. The challenge is to try and follow this Jesus I believe in, with everything I know. That is the suffering for today, and my only hope is that those of us who continue to persist will help give birth to something beautiful.

Sincerely, Gloria Ulterino

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Kenneth Neal #0495163 (On death row since 2/26/96)

Elmer Mc Neill #0528622 (4/9/96)

Eric Murillo #0499258 (4/18/96)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS”**

“Liturgical year A,” which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

“Liturgical years, A, B and C,” reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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 webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

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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