

FIRST IMPRESSIONS BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (A)

Deuteronomy 8: 2-3, 14b-16a Psalm 147 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17 John 6: 51-58

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

It is amazing that the author of Deuteronomy could ever describe the Israelites' experience in the desert in terms that would make that terrible time seem attractive! Today's reading encourages the people to look back to their desert wanderings, after their departure from Egypt, as a period worth remembering—even cherishing. Is there a kind of “selective memory” going on here? The 40 years in the desert was a time of extreme hardships, temptation, physical exhaustion, despair, death, failure and rebellion against God and Moses, God's representative. It got so bad the people turned in anger on Moses and wondered why he even brought them out of slavery. They would prefer, they told him, to return to the slavery they knew, rather than face their arduous present and a very uncertain and perhaps deadly future.

The Deuteronomy reading starts off a bit too edgy for me. It describes the people's suffering as a “test” from God to see if they would stay faithful and obedient to God. If that's what it says, well fine; but that is not what I get from my overall reading of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Instead, I discover that the journey out of slavery of any kind—egoism, addiction, indifference, sin, anger, materialism, war—is a painful, slow and tedious journey. It is a desert travail. Perhaps, for a people who saw both good and bad coming from God, as they did in the 7th Century B.C.E., any pains along the path to freedom might feel like a test from God. But the God who comes through the second part of today's reading, and all of the bible for that matter, is a God who brings us out of slavery; guides us “through the vast and terrible desert with its saraph serpents and scorpions, its parched and waterless ground,” feeds us daily with one form of manna or another and gives us water to drink—even from the hardest “flinty rock.”

Deuteronomy encourages us to remember the desert; but anyone who has gone through one needs little reminder. Who among us hasn't traveled one desert or more in our lifetimes: times of spiritual emptiness; a long illness; the death of a loved one and its accompanying range of emotions; the onslaught of a sudden illness that throws us into chaos; the struggles to make a marriage work; the despair as we watch our children make foolish decisions or marriages we don't think are good for them; the trials of our church in recovery mode; the frustration and sadness we feel as we watch peoples and nations in turmoil, etc. No one has to tell us to

“remember” the deserts of our lives. We would rather forget them!

That’s not what Deuteronomy says. The people are not told to merely remember the hard times they went through for 40 years in the desert; but to remember how God was with them each step of the way. Israel remembered not only the afflictions they experienced during their wanderings, but how they came to know God’s constant care and love for them. When they were taxed to the breaking point, God provided water from, of all places, the “flinty rock.” When they were hungry, God gave them bread, manna, each day. They were forbidden to hoard the bread and were told to collect only one day’s supply at a time; except for the day before the sabbath when they collected a second day’s supply. Each day they were invited to trust that God would provide for them, again---and each day God did. That’s what the author of Deuteronomy wanted the people to remember; that they were not on their own in their distress, past or present, but that God was with them each step of the way. There! That’s the God I recognize throughout the bible; not the “gotcha-getcha” God who puts burdens on us to test our faith.

Even as God provided manna and water for the struggling desert wanderers, God gave them and gives us, something even more nourishing—the Word of God. What kind of life would we have if we had all we wanted to eat, drink and wear, yet we also had emaciated spirits? It is God’s Word that feeds our longing to know God; helps us discern God’s ways in our daily lives; gives us wisdom and enlightenment and guidance in the many daily and sometimes life-altering decisions we must make. Daily attention to and study of God’s Word, can also help us pray and meditate on the very mystery of God and help us grow in our relationship with God. Who is it that gave water and manna to the Israelites in the desert? It is the same One who sees our wanderings and meanderings and has come to help us. We remember the desert and the God who feeds us with more than enough and quenches our thirsting spirits.

At today’s liturgy God once again gives us the Word to hear and ponder so that we can receive guidance and strength, lest we get lost in our many contemporary desert places. Just walking through a glittering and enticing mall can feel confusing and enervating to one who is trying to live a less consumer-oriented life and who is encouraging one’s children to do the same. It is a desert wilderness out there! We need to eat the daily bread of God’s Word.

After we are fed on the Word, John reminds us today, we are fed the living bread

that has come down from heaven. We are in the midst of John's bread of life discourse (6:1-58); it begins with the multiplication of the loaves (6:1-14). Today's passage is eucharistic. In Jesus' culture, "flesh and blood" referred to the whole person. So, when Jesus speaks of eating and drinking, he is inviting his hearers to a personal communion with him. And not only with him, but with the Father who sent him. God sent the Son with the gift of life for all who would receive him. This communion with Jesus gives us life now in union with him and is also his pledge of life for us after death.

Previously, in the first part of the discourse (6: 36-50), Jesus stressed the importance of believing in him and the revelation that faith brought to believers. Communion was described in terms of faith in Jesus. Now, John is emphasizing our eucharistic eating and drinking that unites us with Jesus. To eat and to drink is to be receptive—to take into oneself.

In some Christian traditions there is an "altar call," a moment when those who have heard the Word are invited to come forward to "accept Jesus into your life." Each time we come forward to receive the eucharistic bread and wine we are expressing our desire to take Jesus into our lives. We are responding to an "altar call" after hearing the Word. We not only want him to be more a part of our lives, but that our lives look more and more like his. So, we come forward to receive the One whose life can shape our lives. In receiving his body and blood, his life, we are asking that our lives reflect, as his did, our compassionate and forgiving God.

Jesus' words stirred contention among his hearers. The eucharist, which is meant to be a sign of unity, unfortunately continues to split Christians. To receive the Eucharist today is also to receive the fragmented body of Christ and is an encouragement to pray for unity among all who profess Christ to be the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

We all share equally in today's banquet. The meal is simple, but more than enough for our hungering spirits. No one gets, or should get, preferential treatment. Paul reminds us that the "cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?" We share the same cup. Those who thirst are invited to drink. Paul also tells us, "though we are many, [we] are one body, for we partake of the one loaf." The bread and cup we share makes us one. Unlike the world, in which we live, there are to be no favorites or privileged; no "insiders" and "outsiders" in our community or around this table--- for we all eat the same food and drink from

the same cup. We call it “holy communion,” and so should it be. It is the community celebrating the Holy One in our midst who is making us one in his life and vision by our sharing in his body and blood.

If we share in the Eucharist today, if we answer the “altar call,” doesn’t that mean that we have committed ourselves to its meaning? Shouldn’t we live out what we believe and accept again into our lives the One who gave his life for others? “...this is my body, which will be given up for you....this is the cup of my blood...it will be shed for you and for all...” How far we still are from the sacrifice and service for others modeled for us by Jesus. How reluctant we are to face the many deaths being a Christian asks of us.

That is why we need to keep answering the invitation and coming forward to receive the One who gives himself to us, so that we can give ourselves to others. Eating Christ’s body and drinking his blood gives us a share in his sacrificial death and moves us to give up our own lives for the well being of others.

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

“Whoever eats this bread will live forever”(John 6:51)

Each of today’s readings speaks of being fed and they lead us to think about the growing crisis of world hunger. “Rising food prices are fueling the global hunger crisis. It is taking an immense toll on the world’s poorest people, who typically spend up to 80 percent of their income on food. As many as 100 million more poor people could be made worse off by this burgeoning hunger crisis. After 30 years of progress against hunger and poverty, that is a setback that the United States and the rest of the world cannot afford to let happen.” <http://www.bread.org/learn/rising-food-prices.html>

“The prayer which we repeat at every Mass: “Give us this day our daily bread,” obliges us to do everything possible, in cooperation with international, state and private institutions to end or at least reduce the scandal of hunger and malnutrition afflicting so many millions of people in our world, especially in developing countries.” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI, 2007)

Did you know?

- In March, Catholic Parish Outreach provided food for 5,311 people, 33 percent more than the same month last year.
- 854 million people across the world are hungry, up from 852 million a year ago
- Every day, almost 16,000 children die from hunger-related causes--one child every five seconds.
- 35.1 million people in the US—including 12.4 million children—live in households that experience hunger or the risk of hunger.

-The U.S. Conference of Mayors reports that in 2006 requests for emergency food assistance increased an average of 7 percent. The study also found that 48 percent of those requesting emergency food assistance were members of families with children and that 37 percent of adults requesting such assistance were employed.

What Can I do?

---Join Sacred Heart Cathedral's Social Concerns Committee members who have agreed to donate the total amount of their "Federal Economic Stimulus Check" to a food bank or other charity.

---Fast for a day to better understand the experience of hunger and to be in solidarity with the hungry of the world.

---Learn about issues of hunger and how you can make a difference.

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

---Join one of Sacred Heart's parish ministries which address issues of hunger: Wake Interfaith Hospitality Network (WIHN), Moore Square Ministry, Shelter Meals, Catholic Parish Outreach.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

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:.....

George F. Page	#0310202	(On death row since 4/26/96)
Guy T. LeGrande	#0238344	(4/26/96)
Jamie. L. Smith	#0376917	(5/10/96)

---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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