

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (A)  
Deut. 8: 2-3, 14b-16a Psalm 147 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17 John 6: 51-58  
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today’s gospel stirs up controversy among Jesus’ hearers, “how can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Later we will learn that some of this disciples turned away from him because of this teaching (v. 66); others found what he said, “hard to accept” (v.60). Disagreements over this section of Jesus’ “bread of life discourse” (6: 25-59) didn’t end in the first century, but have continued up to this present day.

The crowds had eaten the bread Jesus provided for them, but they found his teachings too much to accept. They ate the bread, but missed what he was really offering them. Even today, the starkness of the language about eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood, sounds offensive. Was he speaking symbolically, as some through the ages have argued? Is the language about, “living bread that came down from heaven,” part of the wisdom tradition and thus, an emphasis on taking in Jesus as one takes in wisdom? Some have thought, but the original Greek vocabulary in this gospel definitely refers to physical eating—the way one eats meat.

In other words, Jesus wants to be “up close and person,” taken in hand--- bread to be eaten, a cup to be drunk--- taken into one’s life. He wants no safe distance, doesn’t want to be kept at arm’s length. The way the crowd has eaten the earthly bread Jesus provided for them, is what he wants them to do with himself; they and we must feed on him. He is a life-giving meal and he wants to give himself to us totally—flesh eaten, blood drunk. Is it because God has come so close to them in Jesus that they find him too much for them? After all, if everything is given for us, what will be asked of us to give in return?

It would be a much more organized religious practice if God would keep a safe distance from us. Then we could stay detached and know that not much is expected of us. But to consume God and then to be expected to offer all of ourselves in love to God and service to another, well that is a lot to ask and maybe that is why there is grumbling in the crowd at Jesus’ words.

But just as God fed the hungry Israelites with manna as they wandered for 40 years in the desert, and just as Jesus fed the hungry crowd, now he is offering them himself, the new manna, given by God to feed them. Feeding on Jesus gives us eternal life now, he tells them, so that they need never be hungry. Jesus promises that the meal he offers of himself provides a permanent union with him, he will “remain” in us; not as a temporary house guest, but as a permanent dweller. He is not the kind of food that fades away in a day or so, leaving us hungry again, instead he is a filling bread that satisfies the hungers life presents to us.

This is a feast about food and so it is also a feast about hunger, since food satisfies hunger. A food feast presents questions about our hungers. Our world stirs up “gotta-have” hungers; we see the newest, latest, fastest, largest and the most luxuriant placed before us and we “gotta-have” it. We discover hungers we didn’t know we had. Then when we have purchased or gotten what our new hunger stirred up in us, we settle down satisfied—for a little while.

But sooner or later a new ad or someone else’s latest acquisition will whet our appetites again. We will discover still one more hunger we didn’t know we had and we will want it satisfied. And so it goes. Our society, economy, relationships and even the natural world around us are all affected by our hungers and cravings.

Our God is not an uncaring parent. Indeed, our hungers have been noticed. Not the superficial wants and searchings, for they can distract us from our true and deeper hungers. Jim Wallace (cf. below) suggests we preachers address the hungers of the heart that are manifested in the liturgical assembly.

First, is the hunger for wholeness: we yearn at our deepest level to be whole, complete, fulfilled—“perfect,” as Jesus has called us to be. Let’s look at that hunger in the light of today’s feast. Jesus gives himself to us today as the food that fulfills our hunger for completeness. Social analysts describe the modern individual as fragmented and on an endless quest for a sense of self. Much in life reminds us of our fragility and brokenness. The cup, Paul tells us is a “participation in the blood of Christ” and the bread, “that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” In this meal, we are united more closely to one another and to Christ—who is our wholeness and the healing for our division. Through the eucharist, what Christ once did for us, is made present and active in our lives now—salvation/wholeness, is ours.

There is another hunger that draws us around this table today. The hunger for meaning, and no purchase or passing pleasure can sate it. We look out at the horrors of world conflicts and all forms of violence, some very close to home for us and we wonder, “What’s it all about?” Amid the chaos of world events and the distracting chatter of our over-scheduled lives, this sharing of bread and wine, which unites us to the life, death and resurrection of Christ, keeps us together as a people with a vision. Here we don’t get answers, but we do come into contact with our saving Lord who helps us see in the darkness and gives meaning to our joys and our sufferings.

Wallace also names another hunger: we have a deep-down desire to be connected, to be part of a community...to belong. Jesus says “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in [them]. The meal we take today connects us, not only to Christ, but to all who eat and drink with us today. We are made companions together. “Companions”—comes from the Latin, “com” (together) and panis (bread). A “companion” is “one who eats bread with another.” By eating and drinking at this table, we are formed as companions for our journey. We profess that we are not alone and have the assurance that eucharist today binds us more closely together with one another. We are brothers and sisters who have, through baptism and eucharist, committed ourselves to one another. We belong.

The body and blood of Christ also links to our ancestors in faith who have eaten and drunk at this table and now enjoy the eternal feast with God. These are our saints. They too are “companions” with us on the journey, praying for us, setting example through their lives and giving encouragement to us who still have a way to go before we join them. The bond this meal forges with Christ and each of us today will not end, even in death. Death has not and will not swallow us up. Jesus promises us that in the gospel today, “...whoever eats this bread will live forever.”

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

James A. Wallace, *PREACHING TO THE HUNGERS OF THE HEART: THE HOMILY ON THE FEASTS AND WITHIN THE RITES*. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), Paper, ISBN 0-8146-1224-5.

*Wallace first reviews the history of the homily since Vatican II. He concludes that preaching today needs to address three spiritual hungers: the hungers for wholeness, meaning and belonging. Then he shows how the preacher can address these hungers through the great feasts of the Lord, the sacramental rites and the*

*celebrations of the saints—with specific attention to the feasts of Mary. He includes examples from his own preaching. This is a very good book for beginner and experienced liturgical preachers.*

## QUOTABLE

We are a People of the Table.  
We continue to gather around the table—to eat bread and drink wine,  
the bread changed into his body and wine transformed into his blood.  
Sometimes we come in joy and sometimes in sorrow,  
perhaps even in fear, carrying our pain or our sickness,  
weighed down with heartbreak, or a sadness too deep for words.  
Sometimes we come confused, sometimes hurting,  
sometimes ready to give it all up or to take it all on.  
Sometimes we come with dreams deferred, plans defeated, expectations crushed.  
We might come enraged, excited, exhausted, or expectant.  
But we come.  
We come because we are a people of the table and here we know that  
we are part of something bigger than me or us or them.  
We are the People of the Table of the Lord.  
Here we can eat and be nourished, and celebrate  
and remember the sacrifice of a new covenant.  
Here we know the presence of the Lord, crucified and risen,  
present to us as food for us, his body.  
We, the people of his table.  
—from a homily by James Wallace, page 51.

## JUSTICE NOTES

The OP [Order of Preachers] after my name is a reminder of the Dominican charism and responsibility to preach the Word when “convenient and inconvenient.” The phrase refers not just to the obligations to preach when we may or may not feel like it; it embraces a more subtle meaning when applied to a Church where women’s gifts are not fully recognized or appreciated. For women, it is *inconvenient* to preach in a Church that limits the times and places we can preach; that does not offer women full participation in her ministries; that suffers poor or unprepared homilies rather than permitting a layperson to proclaim a well-

prepared word of faith and hope. This prejudice tugs at my self-worth, my self-confidence and my vocation.

The struggle for me doesn't get easier as it continues; it remains as poignant today as the day it began. I still wonder: Who will proclaim God's Word? If the Church excludes some who are qualified and gifted by the Spirit to preach, how will people come to know and experience God? In the Bible, God is described as a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in mercy and faithfulness; God's kindness last for a thousand generations (Exodus 34: 6). But who will know this God if there are not many of us proclaiming God's Word.

---Patricia Bruno, OP in, CRUCIBLE FOR: ENGAGING IMPASSE THROUGH COMMUNAL CONTEMPLATION AND DIALOGUE. Nancy Sylvester, IHM and Mary JO Click, eds. San Antonio: Sor Juana Press, 2004, page 42.

#### 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:.....

Quintel Augustine #0612123 (On death row since 10/23/02 )

John Henry Thompson #0406487 (11/14/02)

Terry Moore #0290634 (6/14/03)

--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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: [judeop@juno.com](mailto:judeop@juno.com)