

An excerpt from "Preaching the Word: Homiletics" by Raymond F. Collins that appears in *Emmanuel* 115:2 (2009) 170-186.

Augustine's famous commentary on the Our Father appears in his letter to Proba. In the letter, the great theologian of the Christian West's first millennium explains each of the prayer's petitions and then shows how each of them corresponds to something in the Old Testament. He concludes, "If you study every word of the petitions of Scripture, you will find, I think, nothing that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer."

In somewhat similar fashion the scriptural readings for the Lenten and Easter seasons indicate that the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus fulfill what is written in the Old Testament.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

April 5, 2009

LITURGY

Philippians 2:6-11 contains the great christological hymn of Philippians 2.

Mark 14:1-15:47 is the oldest of the Passion narratives.

Isaiah 50:4-7 is a lengthy excerpt from the third Servant Songs of Second Isaiah (see Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 52:13-53:12). The liturgical lection omits the canticle's last two verses (Isa 50:8-9). These verses continue the thought expressed in verse 7 and speak of the help that Yahweh affords to the Servant, sustaining him in his suffering. What remains in the liturgical lection is that part of the canticle that portrays the Servant's mission and his suffering.

The Servant of the Lord is personified and ideal Israel. In the third canticle, as in the second, the Servant himself is the speaker. In this canticle he addresses Israel, particularly those among the Israelites who have fallen away from God.

Verses 4 and 5 speak of the teaching and prophetic function of Israel. In the words of the scripture, the Servant has been given "a well-trained tongue." What he speaks is what he has heard; Yahweh "opens his ear." His mission is to speak to "the weary," exiled Israelites. The Servant's mission is one of consolation, encouragement, and support. He is resolute in fulfilling this mission; the Servant neither rebels nor retreats.

Despite his fidelity to the mission that Yahweh has entrusted to him, the Servant is made to suffer (cf Isa. 42:4; 52:13-53:12), apparently at the hands of Israelites who do not accept his message (cf. Jer 20:7-13). Despite his suffering, the Servant remains determined. He is confident of the Lord's help and his own ultimate vindication (cf. Isa 50:8-9).

BROKEN FOR US

Matthew twice uses material from the Servant Songs, albeit the fourth and the first (Isa 53:4 in Matt 8:17, Isa 42:1-4 in Matt 12:18-21), in showing how Jesus fulfills the Scripture.

John, Acts, Paul, and 1 Peter reference the songs in speaking about Jesus. Then, from the time of Justin (*Apology* 50; *Dialogue with Trypho* 13) Christian interpreters have taken the Servant passages, particularly Isa 52:13-53:12, as referring to Jesus, seeing in them a kind of messianic prophecy.

There is, therefore, ample precedent for using the Servant Songs as a scriptural model for reflection on Christ. Use of this model in today's reading reminds us that the suffering of Jesus, the Servant of the Lord, cannot be separated from his mission nor can it be separated from his ultimate vindication.

EASTER SUNDAY: THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

April 12, 2009

LITURGY

Colossians 3:1-4 challenges us to think about the consequences of our being raised with Christ while **1 Corinthians 5:6b-8** urges us to celebrate the Paschal Feast in a specifically Christian way.

John 20:1-9 or **Mark 16:1-7** are the Johannine and Markan versions of the discovery of the empty tomb. **John 20:1-9** describes Mary Magdalene telling Peter and the Beloved Disciple about her discovery of the empty tomb. **Mark 16:1-7** describes Mary, accompanied by two other women, going to the tomb to anoint Jesus.

Since Mark 16:1-7 is read on Easter Sunday only in Cycle B, it would seem that the Markan text should be read in preference to the Johannine. It is to be noted that the "young man's" announcement of the Paschal event, "He has been raised; he is not here" (Mark 16:6), gives precedence to the resurrection effected by God rather than to the empty tomb.

Acts 10:34a, 37-43 is this year's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the biblical book that provides the first readings for the Sunday liturgy throughout the Easter season.

Acts 10:34-43 is the last of three speeches attributed to Peter in the Acts of the Apostles. The earlier speeches are Peter's Speech on Pentecost, Acts 2:14-36, and his Speech in Solomon's portico, Acts 3:11-26, part of which is read on the Third Sunday of Easter.

In keeping with the practice of writing about speeches in Hellenistic literature, Luke has composed all three speeches—the vocabulary and themes are clearly Lukan—and placed them on the lips of Peter as part of his narrative. The three speeches summarize the gospel message. Luke's narrative strategy included his placing a speech to the Jews (Acts 3:11-26) and a speech to the Gentiles (Acts 10:34-43) on Peter's lips just as he places a speech to the Jews (Acts 13:16-41) and a speech to the Gentiles (Acts 17:22-31) on Paul's lips.

Peter's speech is theocentric. God is mentioned five times in the relatively short speech, twice in verse 38, once each in verses 40, 41, 42. Addressed specifically to Cornelius, Luke's representative Gentile, the speech is devoid of explicit citations of the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament. The lectionary

version of the speech even omits verses 34b-26, verses that speak about the spread of the gospel message throughout Galilee and Judea.

"Peter's" narrative portrays Jesus as a prophetic figure in keeping with one of the characteristic features of Luke's christology. As a prophet, Jesus is anointed with the Spirit (cf. Luke 4:18) and God is with him. Jesus is the anointed one, the Christ, the Messiah. The evangelist highlights Jesus' healings and exorcisms as characteristic of his prophetic ministry. They symbolize the inbreaking of the power of the Kingdom and the breaking of the power of the devil.

Describing the crucifixion, Luke says that "they," presumably a reference to "the Jews" in the phrase "the country of the Jews" (v. 37), hung him on a tree. "Hang on a tree" was a contemporary and biblical idiom for "crucify," going back to Deut 21:22-23 (see Gal 3:13). The pictorial image is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QpHab 3-4 i.6-8; 11QTemple 64:7-8) and was used earlier in Acts (Acts 5:30).

With the early Christian credal formulas preserved in the New Testament, the speech affirms that God raised Jesus from the dead.

God is the one who acts by raising Jesus from among the dead. God is also the enabling agent of Jesus' resurrection appearances.

This early Christian focus on the activity of God in raising Jesus from the dead is not to be overlooked.

In Luke's theology an apostle must be witness to both Jesus' public life and his resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). Thus Luke presents Peter, spokesperson for the Twelve, saying that "we" have been witnesses to what he did and to his appearances (cf. 1 Cor 15:5). The witnesses are a select group, chosen by God and set apart from "all the people" to preach the gospel. Their eating and drinking with Jesus harkens back to the tradition reflected in Luke 24:41-43.

Peter also says that the prophets testify to Jesus. This is one of Luke's favorite themes (see Luke 4:21; 24:26-27; 44-46). The apostles' proclamation of the gospel, encompassing the prophetic witness, testifies both to Jesus' role as judge at the parousia and to his forgiveness of sins (cf. Luke 24:47).

BROKEN FOR US

The reading from Acts places Jesus' resurrection within the context of the history of salvation accomplished by God. From that perspective the resurrection is the culmination of Jesus' life and ministry. God overcame the opposition to Jesus' ministry that came from the devil and some Jews.

Raising Jesus from the dead, God established him as judge of the living and the dead, a role which will be fully manifest at the parousia. Those who believe will receive forgiveness of their sins. That is the good news, the Easter gospel.

Taking Luke's narrative one step further, we who celebrate the paschal mystery are witnesses to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In the eucharist we eat and drink with Jesus. With the apostles, the first official witnesses, we are to preach and bear witness that Jesus has been raised from the dead for the

forgiveness of our sins.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 19, 2009

LITURGY

1 John 5:1-6 explains what loving God really entails.

John 20:19-31, also read on the Second Sunday of Easter in 2008, describes the risen Jesus' appearance to the disciples on two successive Sundays. On the second occasion, Thomas was present.

Acts 4:32-35 is the second of Luke's classic summaries which describe the early church in Jerusalem in idyllic terms in order to portray an ideal or model church (see Acts 2:42-47, read on the Second Sunday of Easter in 2008, and Acts 5:12-16).

The summary in Acts 4 describes the early Christian community in terms of its common ownership of all things but it has nothing to say about meals in common. Sharing goods in common was a most effective way for the community to take care of the needy among them (cf. Deut 15:4-5; Rom 12:8; 1 Cor 13:3; Heb 13:16).

The assembly of believers, Luke notes, were "of one heart and mind." Luke Timothy Johnson observes that the language of this phrase reflects the Hellenistic topos on friendship, reflected in the writings of Euripides, Aristotle, Plato, Plutarch, and Cicero (see Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Sacra Pagina 5. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992], 86). Writing for a Hellenistic readership as he did, the cultured evangelist appropriated familiar motifs like friendship and the sharing of goods in order to make the community of Jerusalem a model for Hellenists. Use of this model does not imply that everyone in the community sold everything that he or she possessed; Acts 10:32 says that the community possessed "everything in common."

Luke highlights the role of the apostles in this primitive Christian community. Their primary role was to bear witness to the resurrection of the Lord through their preaching with great power, that is, the power of the Spirit of God. That the proceeds from the sale of believers' property was placed at the feet of the apostles is an indication of the authority of the apostles within the community. They seem to have been in charge not only of the collection of goods but also of the distribution of the community's wealth to the needy among them.

BROKEN FOR US

As was generally the case during Lent, there is virtually no correlation among today's readings. During the Lenten season the first readings are taken from Acts, the third readings from the Fourth Gospel, while the second readings are selected from among the New Testament's different apostolic letters. At most one can see in the Jerusalem community's sharing of goods a practical expression of love for the children of God (1 John 5:1-2).

While we recognize that the sale of property, especially by those of limited means, to take care of the need is a form of

heroic charity and that Luke is describing in idealized fashion what a Christian community ought to be like, the second reading challenges each and every Christian community to take care of the needy, particularly, the needy in the community itself. All too often Christians contribute, and generously, to a variety of good causes but neglect the needy downtown or in a nearby shelter for the homeless. Sometimes this neglect derives from the perception that those who care for these needy folk do not wave the banner of being a Christian cause or a Catholic agency.

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 26, 2009

LITURGY

1 John 2:1-5a describes the risen Jesus as our advocate with the Father.

Luke 24:35-48 tells about the report of the Emmaus' disciples to the Eleven and those who were with them and an appearance of the risen Jesus to the entire group, the Eleven, their companions, and the pair of disciples who had been on the road to Emmaus.

Acts 3:13-15, 17-19 is an excerpt from Peter's kerygmatic speech to the Jews. The liturgical reading omits verse 15, Peter's commentary on the crippled beggar who had been healed (Acts 3:1-10). Luke describes Peter's speech as having been delivered in Solomon's Portico (Acts 3:11), a place whose location cannot be determined with any degree of certainty.

The Jewishness of Peter's representative speech to the Jews is evident. It is addressed to the people, that is "you men of Israel" according to Luke's Greek text (v. 12). God is identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the god of the Patriarchs. Jesus is described, in biblical fashion, as "holy" and "righteous" (cf. Acts 7:52; 22:14). The "Christ," a Jewish epithet, was to suffer. The suffering of the anointed one is a Lukan theme (Luke 24:26, 46; Acts 17:3; 26:23), perhaps echoing the Suffering Servant canticles. Finally, Jesus' death was announced by the prophets.

The account also highlights the role of the Jews. They "handed Jesus over." The verb (*paredokate*) was used as a technical term in early Christian literature to describe the betrayal and handing over of Jesus to the Roman authorities (see, for example, 1 Cor 11:23 and Luke 9:44; 18:32; 22:4, 6, 21, 22, 48; 23:25). In the presence of Pilate (Luke 23:1-6), Jews gave false witness as to who Jesus really was.

On the other hand, Luke mitigates the blame to be laid on the people. First of all, he states that they acted out of ignorance.

Then, he distinguished their guilt from the guilt of their leaders, presumably those who were principally responsible for Jesus' death (Luke 22:2, 52-53, 66; 23:27). Finally, the evangelist affirms that what the men of Israel had done allowed God's plan of salvation to be fulfilled (cf. Acts 2:23).

The announcement that God had raised Jesus from the dead is the heart of Peter's speech (v. 15; see Acts 10:40) as is the affirmation that the Twelve were witnesses (see Acts 10:39) to the resurrection, that is, witnesses of Jesus' resurrection appearances.

The speech ends with a call to conversion and a change of life, the appropriate response to the preaching of the gospel (see Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38). This results in the forgiveness of sins.

BROKEN FOR US

Today's first reading calls the homilist to once again proclaim the Easter message. Emphasis on the role of the Jews might easily lead to a homily that smacks of anti-Semitism. Emphasis on their sin might lead to uncalled for moralizing.

Peter's speech challenges the homilist to preach about the resurrection of Jesus, the fact that it fulfilled the Scriptures, the reality that it proved Jesus to be the holy and righteous one of God, that it was an act of God, and that it entails the forgiveness of human sin, including that of the men of Israel. The fitting response is that we change our lives and believe in this good news (see Mark 1:15).