

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

A few months ago, I attended an international biblical symposium hosted by my Alma Mater, the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. During dinner conversation one evening I had an interesting discussion with a well-known and well-respected British biblical scholar who lamented our current three-year lectionary cycle. Not a Catholic, she pined for the four-year lectionary cycle to which she had been accustomed in her earlier years. That arrangement allowed for the proclamation and exposition of each of the four canonical gospels in order.

We Roman Catholics have been blessed by the introduction of the three-year cycle of Sunday readings introduced as part of the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council. In keeping with the wishes of the Council Fathers, we now have a much richer fare on the Scriptures on which to feast.

Nonetheless, as I look at the readings for March and April, I understand my interlocutor’s point of view. Year B is the year of Mark. Yet, in the coming two months we will proclaim Mark’s Gospel only two or three times, depending on whether or not we read Mark on Easter Sunday. Otherwise, we proclaim the Johannine Gospel at least five times, six if we opt for the Johannine reading on Easter. And our lectionary asks that we proclaim the sequel to Luke’s story of the anonymous pair of disciples meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus on the Third Sunday of Easter.

Given this situation, it is all too easy for us to forget this year’s concentration on Mark during the next two months, but we should not do so. For years, scholars have said that the Gospel according to Mark is a passion narrative with a long introduction. The passion narrative is, in many ways, the highlight of Mark’s Gospel. Palm Sunday provides us and our congregations with an opportunity to savor the text to the full.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

April 1, 2012

LITURGY:

Isaiah 50:4-7 is taken from the third Servant Song in Second Isaiah.

Philippians 2:6-11 contains Paul’s great Christological hymn.

Mark 14:1-15:47 is the oldest written story about Jesus’ passion. The evangelist apparently put the narrative together from bits of tradition that had been transmitted orally during the four decades between Jesus’ death and his writing of the gospel. These traditions would have focused on the anointing of Jesus (Mk 14:1-9), the final meal (14:10-13), the agony in the garden (14:32-42), Jesus’ betrayal and arrest (14:43-52), a Jewish trial (14:53-72), a Roman trial (15:1-20), the crucifixion (15:21-41), and the burial of Jesus (15:42-47). See also the story of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem (11:1-10), a story that is read at the procession with palms. Some of the stories in the passion narrative may have already have been preserved in a pre-Markan written form before the evangelist incorporated them into his story about Jesus. The end product is the result of the evangelist’s inspired literary work and betrays his own theological interests.

The Markan narrative is comprised of twenty short scenes, eleven in chapter 14, nine in chapter 15. Ten scenes featuring persons other than Jesus are each followed by a scene that features Jesus. Thus, the Mark’s story of Jesus’ passion begins with a short scene that speaks about a plot by Jewish leaders to kill Jesus (14:1-2) which is followed by a short scene that describes Jesus’ anointing at Bethany by an anonymous woman, apropos of whom Jesus says “wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (14:3-9). The final two scenes in the passion narrative describe Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, and Salome watching the crucifixion from a distance (15:40-41), followed by a scene which recounts Jesus’ burial (15:42-47).

Mark’s focus on the individuals whose lives intersect with Jesus is to be noted. Some of these

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

individuals are named while others are left in anonymity. Many of these individuals occur in Mark’s Gospel only in the passion narrative. Among the new characters who appear in the Jesus’ story in the passion narrative are several whose response to Jesus is clearly favorable. Among them are the three women who watch the crucifixion (15:40-41), two of whom saw where Jesus’ body was laid (15:47), Simon, the Cyrenian, who was pressed into service to help Jesus carry the cross beam (15:21), the centurion who proclaimed, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (15:39), and, surprisingly, a member of the council, Joseph of Arimathea, who attended to Jesus’ burial (15:43-46).

The centurion’s confession that Jesus is the Son of God hearkens back to the beginning of the gospel, where Jesus Christ is identified as the Son of God (1:1). “Christ,” the properly messianic title found in the gospel’s first verse, recurs in 15:32, when scoffers taunt Jesus, calling him the Christ, the King of Israel, challenging him to come down from the cross. The Christological title that is most emphasized in the Markan narrative is, however, King of the Jews. This title is found six times in the passion narrative (15:2, 9, 12, 14, 18, 26) and is the *titulus*, the capital “offense” affixed to Jesus’ cross (15:26).

The highlight of the eleven scenes that comprise Mark 14 is the story of Jesus’ final meal with his disciples in which he speaks the interpretive words over the bread and over the cup and makes reference to the kingdom of God (14:22-25). The highlight of the nine scenes in chapter 15 is undoubtedly the crucifixion of Jesus (15:20b-25). As he looks upon the crucified Jesus in a later scene (15:39), the centurion utters his remarkable confession, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (*alethos autos ho anthropos huios theou en*).

BROKEN FOR US:

In many ways the passion narrative speaks for itself. The homilist should assist the congregation to understand and respond in faith to this final chapter in this story of Jesus, the denouement of Mark’s story about Jesus. His story is not intended to be a tear-jerker; the homily should not be lugubrious. Mark wants his readers to understand who Jesus is and how different people react to Jesus, each in keeping with his or her station in life. Those two foci provide points of emphasis for the Palm Sunday homily.

EASTER SUNDAY OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

April 8, 2012

LITURGY:

Acts 10:34a, 37-43 is an excerpt from Peter’s speech to Cornelius in which he proclaims that God raised Jesus on the third day and chose the apostles to give witness to the resurrection.

Colossians 3:1-4 proclaims that Christ sits at the right hand of God (see Ps 110:1). The alternative reading, **1 Corinthians 5:6b-8**, describes Christ as the Paschal Lamb (see Exod 12:3-13).

John 20:1-9 or **Mark 16:1-7** are the two passages from which a choice must be made as a gospel lection for Easter Day. John 20:1-9 is the gospel reading for the Mass on Easter day in all three years of the triennial liturgical cycle. *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 168-186, 183-185 contains my reflection on the Johannine text.

Mark 16:1-7 is the assigned gospel lection for the Easter vigil and may be read during the Mass of Easter Day. This text is generally unfamiliar to Christians, so it behooves the homilist to preach from this text not only during the Easter vigil but also during the Masses of Easter Day as well.

This would be in keeping with the mandate of the Second Vatican Council that richer fare is to be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s Word (*Dei verbum*, 51).

The manuscript tradition shows that throughout the centuries, scribes have been puzzled by the fact that Mark’s Gospel does not include any stories of the appearance of the risen Jesus to his disciples. Given this absence, a so-called shorter ending and a longer ending (Mk 16:9-20) were appended to the

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

Markan story during the first half of the first millennium. Some ancient manuscripts include both the shorter and the longer ending.

Today biblical scholars are convinced that Mark’s story about Jesus concluded with the words of Mark 16:8, “Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Scholarly exegesis of the Markan text takes seriously the fact that the inspired text ends in this fashion, without scenes depicting the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples similar to those found in the canonical gospels written later than Mark. The gospel lection for today does not include this final verse of the Markan text. The reading concludes with a command and a promise, “He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you” (Mk 16:7).

The first part of today’s reading sets the scene (vv. 1-4). The women who had seen Jesus crucified (Mk 15:40-41) and buried (15:47) go to the tomb to pay their respects to the deceased. It was daybreak on a Sunday morning, the first day of the week. The darkness that overcame the earth at the time of the crucifixion (15:33-37) had been dissipated. God was at work, but the women were unsuspecting.

On the way to the tomb, they asked a question that they should have thought of previously, “who will roll back the stone at the entrance to the tomb?” God answered their question. The large stone had been rolled back. The passive voice of the verb suggests divine activity. Biblical scholars refer to this use of the passive voice as a “theological passive.” The unnamed agent of the action is God.

The second part of the reading (vv. 5-7) begins with the women’s utterly amazing experience. They met a young man, clothed in a white robe, sitting on the right side of the tomb. Their amazement and his apparel echo the language of traditional theophanies. The white clothing suggests that the young man was an angel, a messenger from God. Sent by God, the appearance of the young man in white contrasts with the young man who tossed his clothing aside as he ran in fear when Jesus was arrested (Mk 14:51-52).

The angel announces the Easter message, highlighting the transforming power of God. Another passive voice, “he has been raised,” is used to speak of God’s action in raising Jesus from the dead. The resurrection had occurred prior to the women’s arrival at the tomb. Jesus is now elsewhere. “He is not here,” says the angel, who then invites the women to look around the now empty tomb. This confirms their Easter message that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Finally, the angel commissions the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is going before them into Galilee. Jesus’ promise (Mk 14:28) was to be fulfilled. Jesus will lead the disciples away from the place of his passion and death to the place of his activity, symbolized by Galilee throughout the entire Markan Gospel.

In Mark, the disciples constitute a group larger than the twelve called to be apostles (Mk 3:13-15). Peter is the outspoken leader of the group of twelve. In Galilee the disciples and Peter would “see” Jesus. The narrative thus ends with the promise that the disciples will see Jesus in the place where Jesus wants them to be, the place where they are to follow him.

BROKEN FOR US:

As the homilist was challenged to preach the Markan story of the passion on Palm Sunday, so the homilist is challenged to preach the Markan Easter story today. Mark’s story features the presence of the women and, implicitly, the absence of the disciples. The homily should focus on the angel’s Easter announcement, that God has raised Jesus from the dead and the promise that the disciples—including the latter-day disciples who are seated in church—will see the risen Jesus if only they follow him where he leads.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER (Divine Mercy Sunday)

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

April 15, 2012

LITURGY:

Acts 4:32-35 provides a summary description of the early Christian community in Jerusalem.

1 John 5:1-6 speaks about our love for God, expressed in keeping the commandments.

John 20:19-31 **John 20:19-31** was the conclusion of the Fourth Gospel before the epilogue (Jn 21) was added.

The first section of the gospel lection (vv. 19-25), whose first verses may be used as the gospel lection for the Feast of Pentecost (Jn 20:19-23), describes Jesus’ appearance to his disciples on the first day of the week. The author’s mention of the first day of the week in verse 19 and, implicitly, in verse 26 suggests the early Christian practice of Jesus’ disciples gathering together on the first day of the week.

Jesus appeared to his “disciples.” The author of the Fourth Gospel does not once mention “the apostles.” The disciples would include some of those known as apostles in the Synoptic Gospels, but would include others as well. The disciples had gathered in a locale where locked doors served as their protection against “the Jews.” “The Jews” is Johannine code for those leaders of the Jewish nation who were opposed to Jesus and were instrumental in bringing about his death. The homilist must be careful when he or she preaches on this passage lest his or her manner of speaking about the Jews leads to or reinforces anti-Semitic sentiments in the congregation.

This first section of the gospel reading is the Fourth Gospel’s account of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit to the disciples. In this Johannine account, the link between Jesus and the gift of the Spirit is clearer than it is in the well-known account of Pentecost in Acts 2. Jesus’ breathing on the disciples is a reminder that the Greek *pneuma* and the Hebrew *ruah* can be translated “breath” or “spirit.” Jesus links the gift of the Spirit with the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness comes with the sacrament of baptism. Much later in its history the church used this text as a proof text for the institution of the sacrament of penance by Jesus. At best, this later usage is an accommodation of the text.

The final verses of the first unit introduce the figure of Thomas. He is presented as someone who initially doubts the core Christian belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It is noteworthy that only one other person in the Fourth Gospel is identified as “one of the Twelve.” That other person is Judas who betrayed Jesus (Jn 6:71). Presented as “doubting Thomas,” Thomas serves as a scapegoat for the doubt of the disciples (see Mt 28:17; Mk 16:11, 13, 14; Lk 24:11).

This is in keeping with the evangelist’s way of creating a dramatic account. Just as he uses Mary Magdalene as a representative of the Galilean women to whom the risen Jesus appeared (Jn 20:11-18), so he uses Thomas to represent the doubt of a larger group of Jesus’ disciples. The evangelist presents a graphic description of Thomas’ doubt. Not only does he want to put his finger into the nail holes of the crucifixion, he also wants to put his hand into the hole in Jesus’ side. The Fourth Gospel is alone in mentioning the hole in the side created by the soldier’s lance (see Jn 19:34).

The second section of today’s gospel narrative (vv. 26-29) replicates the scenario of the first unit, except that this time the group includes Thomas. The repeated greeting, “peace to you” (vv. 19, 26), is the traditional *shalom*, but since the Johannine narrative functions on two levels, that of the story and that of symbolism and theology, the reader should realize that the greeting speaks of peace as a gift of the risen Jesus to his disciples. Jesus recalls Thomas’ strong language (v. 25) and challenges his disciple to do as he had boasted.

Thomas does not do so. Instead he confesses Jesus as “my Lord and my God,”—the strongest Christological confession in the Fourth Gospel. The Roman Emperor Domitian, whose reign, 81-96 C.E., ended just before the Fourth Gospel was written, demanded that he be called “our lord and god” (See Suetonius, *Domitian*,13). It is therefore not unlikely that there was some anti-imperial polemic in the confession of Jesus that the evangelist placed on the lips of Thomas.

The focus of verses 26-29 is the dialogue between Thomas and Jesus. Thomas makes a confession of faith in the risen Jesus. Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who, without the benefit of a “physical” appearance, have faith in him. Jesus’ question to Thomas (v. 21) serves to emphasize the beatitude.

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

Blessed are those who have not “seen” but nevertheless believe in the risen Jesus. The beatitude is remarkable. Not only does it speak of the faith of believers for generations to come but it also appears at the end of the gospel and is the only true beatitude in the Fourth Gospel (cf. Jn 13:17). The final words of Jesus in the first draft of the Johannine gospel—that is, excluding the epilogue in chapter 21—are those of this beatitude, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.”

The third section of today’s reading (Jn 20:30-31) was the original ending of the gospel narrative. In a final editorial comment, the evangelist tells his readers why the gospel was written. His story about Jesus was written so that the believer might believe that Jesus was Messiah and Son of God. “Messiah” (= “Christ”; see Jn 1:41) is one of the oldest Christian confessional titles for Jesus. “Son of God” is a particularly Johannine title.

The consequence of belief in Jesus is that those who believe in him have eternal life because of him. That Jesus came to give life, eternal life, is a major theme in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, for example, “the water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14; cf. Jn 10:10).

BROKEN FOR US:

Today’s gospel reading is very rich. It offers any number of themes for a homilist to develop. Among the many themes that can be developed are Jesus’ gift of the Spirit and his gift of peace, baptism as a sacrament of the forgiveness of sins, faith in Jesus as both confessional and life-giving, and Jesus’ blessing of those who believe without having been the recipient of a vision of the risen Lord.

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 22, 2012

LITURGY:

Acts 3:13-15, 17-19 is an excerpt from Peter’s speech in Solomon’s Portico that proclaims that the God of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has glorified Jesus, his servant.

1 John 2:1-5a puts the keeping of the commandments in correct focus.

Luke 24:35-48 continues the story of Jesus’ encounter with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. That story was read on the Third Sunday of Easter in Cycle A. Today’s reading begins with the two disciples telling the Eleven and their companions (Lk 24:33) that they had recognized Jesus in the “breaking of the bread,” Luke’s favorite designation of the eucharistic meal (Acts 2: 46; 20:7, 11; 27:35; cf. Lk 22:19; 24:30).

While they speaking about this, Jesus appeared and greeted the assembled group with the traditional *shalom*, “peace be with you.” That the group was startled (cf. Exod 19:16) and thought that they were seeing a ghost (*pneuma*, literally, a spirit) suggests that they had experienced a theophany (*in casu*, a Christophany). These traits indicate that for the group this experience of Jesus was different from the way that they had experienced him prior to his death on the cross, when he was still with them (v. 44).

Jesus tries to allay their fears and settle their doubts with two requests which show that the risen one is indeed the one who was with them. The first request is that they look at his hands and his feet, undoubtedly bearing the tell-tale marks of crucifixion. The reality of Jesus is emphasized as he tells them to touch him. Mere ghosts (again, *pneuma*) do not have flesh and bones (cf. Gen 2:23). Jesus’ second request is that they provide him with something to eat (cf. Lk 8:56) which he then shared with them. Their emotions overwhelmed them; they were overcome with joy but apparently they did not believe fully. Their faith awaits the word of Jesus.

Jesus then explains to them the meaning of his words, principally his words that spoke about his suffering, death, and resurrection (Lk 9:22, 44; 18:32-33). He tells them that everything in the Scriptures,

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

the law, prophets, and psalms, the entire *Tanak*, had to be fulfilled. Divine necessity was at work in the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Jesus then enabled them to understand the Scriptures (*hai graphai*; cf. Jn 20:9). In sum, the assembled group shared the experience that the pair of disciples had on the road to Emmaus (Lk 26:26-27, 34).

Having thus set forth the formal elements in the prophecy-fulfillment schema, the Lukan Jesus explains its material contents (cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* [Sacra Pagina 3. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991] 402). The Christ, the Messiah, was to suffer and rise from the dead (cf. 24:26; 18:31), as Jesus had predicted during the time that he was with them (Lk 9:22, 44; 18:31-33). But that is not the end of the story. More is to come. Repentance (*metanoia*) for the forgiveness of sins is to be preached in Jesus’ name, starting in Jerusalem and spreading to all nations. Jesus’ words anticipate the preaching of the disciples in the Book of Acts. The preaching of the gospel will begin in Jerusalem, from which it spreads throughout Palestine and extends to the end of the earth, as Jesus will command (Acts 1:8). Of all this, the assembled disciples will be “witnesses” (*martyres*), a leitmotif of Acts (cf. Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39-41; 13:31; 22:15, 20; 26:16).

BROKEN FOR US:

The beautiful story in today’s gospel is a reminder that the church begins with the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is present with the assembled disciples, albeit in a form different from the form that he had when he walked with them along the Palestinian roads. In him, who died and was raised, the Scriptures, the “Old Testament” of Christians, receive their fulfillment. But the story must continue. It is continued in the preaching of the gospel to all nations and the *metanoia* of those who accept the gospel message.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 29, 2012

LITURGY:

Acts 4:8-12 is Peter’s defense before the Sanhedrin after he and John had been arrested.

1 John 3:1-2 announces that because of the Father’s love for us, we have become children of God.

John 10:11-18 features a pair of “I am the good shepherd” sayings. In both instances, the adjective “good” (*kalos*) suggests a real or genuine shepherd rather than being a hint of Jesus’ divine status (*agathos*, used of the one God in Mk 10:18; Lk 18:19).

The first good shepherd saying is polemical, the second is not. The first introduces a short speech by Jesus (vv. 11-13) which contrasts the good shepherd with a hired hand. The second introduces another short speech (vv. 14-18). In this speech Jesus speaks about his relationship with the sheep (vv. 14-16) and his relationship with the Father (vv. 17-18).

The image of the shepherd to describe the anointed leaders of Israel, in succession of David, the shepherd king, is well known in Jewish tradition. The prophets (Jer 23:1-8; Ezek 22:27; 34; Zech 10:23-3; 11:4-17) and later Jewish literature portray Israel’s unworthy rulers as bad shepherds who let the sheep, exposed to an attack by wolves, fend for themselves.

Since the Fourth Gospel was written towards the end of the first century C. E., about a quarter of a century after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, some scholars opine that the Johannine narrative is colored by the memory of Jewish leaders who fled from Jerusalem to Jabneh (Jamnia) just prior to the destruction of the temple. In any case, the contrast between the good shepherd and the hired hand contrasts Jesus with irresponsible and unworthy leaders of God’s people, his flock.

In the second short speech, as he speaks about the relationship between himself and the flock, the Johannine Jesus highlights their mutual “knowledge,” their profound experience of one another. Such mutuality is grounded in the mutual knowledge between Jesus and the Father. The relationship between

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

Jesus and the sheep is so strong that he lays down his life for the flock. This notion has no antecedent in Jewish messianic expectation.

Another novelty is the idea that other sheep, those who were not presently among the disciples of Jesus, would be brought into the flock, with the result that there will be one flock, one shepherd. The other sheep (*alla probata*) enter into the fold because Jesus laid down his life for the sheep, a sign of the Father’s love for him. The notion that there would be a single shepherd leading the one people of God has its roots in biblical (Mic 5:3-5; Jer 3:15; 23:4-6; Ezek 34:23-24) and later Jewish tradition.

The consequence of Jesus laying down his life is that he takes it up again. He has the power (*exousia*) to do both of these things. Nonetheless all falls within the Father’s mandate, for “this command I have received from my Father.” This is a somewhat different view of the resurrection from that which is found in the letters of Paul and the Synoptic Gospels. In those earlier texts, God is the agent of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. God raised Jesus from among those who had died.

BROKEN FOR US:

Last year, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we read the parable of the sheepfold (Jn 10:1-10). This year’s gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Easter continues that reading with the image of Jesus, the good shepherd.

Jesus did what he did for our salvation because of the Father’s love for him. One could almost say that Jesus’ self-gift of his life was the sacrament of the Father’s love, for through it the Father shows his love for us. In the story of Jesus, the primacy of the Father is underscored in various ways. In this narrative it appears in the form of the Father’s love and the Father’s command.

The Johannine community was familiar with teachers other than Jesus. These teachers are symbolized by the hireling. The Johannine community realized that those who would benefit from Jesus’ death and resurrection constituted a group larger than the group that acknowledged Jesus at the time. The “one fold” had not yet been realized.

The believing community that gathers in church today should be encouraged to share both of these aspects in the faith-consciousness of the Johannine community, the death of Jesus as the sign of the Father’s love and the idea that salvation will also be given to those who do not yet acknowledge Jesus.