

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 364-380 by Raymond F. Collins.

On the last Sunday of June, June 28, I celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of my ordination to the ministerial priesthood. The following day, June 29, the Pauline Year came to its end. The convergence of these two events gave me ample cause to step back and reflect.

I had never intended to be an academic. My desire, a desire that remained with me throughout most of these fifty years, was to be a parish priest. My bishop thought otherwise. The Second Vatican Council had been called just prior to my ordination. My bishop thought that some men in his diocese should receive doctoral training so they might help shepherd the diocese in whatever the Council would bring. With that, although I didn’t know it at the time, my career as an academic was underway.

They say that the ride is exciting and so it has been. Nonetheless in these recent days of pondering have led me to consider how infrequently I personally have preached on the Old Testament writings. Writing “Breaking the Word: Homiletics” since the First Sunday of Advent, 2007, has brought about a change in my life. I try to practice what I preach and so have preached on the Old Testament for the past year and a half. Prior to that I used to preach on Paul, the apostle for us Gentiles. Paul’s message, even in this Pauline Year, often falls on deaf ears because it has not been broken for the people.

As I ponder these fifty years I hope and pray that my writings and lectures have helped preachers to break open the gospel of Paul for the people. And I continue to hope and pray that the people of God are more fully nourished by the Word of God because the message of the Old Testament has been broken for them by the readers of these pages.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 2, 2009

LITURGY

Ephesians 4:17, 20-24 urges believers to put off their old nature and put on a new nature.

John 6:24-35, a passage in which Jesus encourages those who had come out to hear him and had been marvelously fed, reaches its high point in Jesus' self-revelation as the Bread of Life.

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15 describes God’s gift of manna to the Israelites. The scene opens with the Israelites complaining against the leadership provided by Moses and Aaron. Suffering from a lack of food, the nomadic tribes yearned for the cooked meat and bread that they were able to eat when they were enslaved in Egypt. Mention of “the Lord” suggests that the Israelites’ grumbling was ultimately directed against the Lord. Why didn’t the Lord take their lives in Egypt, rather than submit them to death by starvation, the worst kind of death (Lam 4:9)?

Responding to the people’s complaint, Yahweh promises Moses that he will provide food “from heaven,” that is, as a gift from God (cf. Ps 78:25; Wis 16:20). Food normally comes from the earth and from the animals that inhabit the earth. The test to which the Lord submits the Israelites (Exod 16:5; cf. Deut 8:3, 16) apparently consists of their reliance on Providence, collecting only one day’s provision of food at a time.

Yahweh instructs Moses to tell the people about the food that he will provide. In the evening, there will be meat to eat; bread will follow in the morning. Verses 13 and 14 describe Yahweh fulfilling the promise that he had made. In the evening, an abundance of quail appeared (cf. Num 11:1-35). After the morning dew, edible flakes appeared on the ground. The presence of dew, a symbol of divine favor (Gen 27:28, 39; Deut 33:13; Hos 14:6), confirms that the

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provision of "bread" will come from heaven.

Over the course of the years, commentators have offered a number of suggestions as to what the substance might have been, but there is hardly agreement as to what it might be and many modern commentators avoid any speculation on the matter. One theory is that the substance was the secretion of insects that feed on the tamarisk tree. Our perplexity was matched by that of the Israelites, who asked "what is it?" (*man hu*). A pun on the question led to the creation of the word "manna," by which the marvelous substance was known from ancient times (Exod 16:31). Moses' answer to the Israelites' question was that the substance was the life-giving nourishment that God had provided.

BROKEN FOR US

Speaking of the bread of life from heaven in the Discourse on the Bread of Life, the Johannine Jesus makes clear reference to the biblical story of God providing manna for the people to eat. The homilist might do well to focus his or her remarks on the bread "from heaven."

In our societies huge agribusinesses are concerned with the production of wheat and other grains. Economists and development agencies are concerned with the distribution of food. The production and distribution of food are legitimate human concerns -- and the source of singular moral obligations -- but only a person of faith proclaims that bread is ultimately "from heaven," a precious gift of God to his people.

Today's Prayer of the Faithful would appropriately include a prayer that the hungry be fed.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 9, 2009

LITURGY

Ephesians 4:30-5:2 is a brief exhortation contrasting a list of vices with a list of virtues and encouraging believers to imitate God.

John 6:41-51 is Jesus' response, rich in theology, to "the Jews" -- let the preacher be sensitive to the fact that "the Jews" is a reference to a group of Jewish leaders -- who murmured against him.

1 Kings 19:4-8 follows a short narrative that describes Jezebel swearing an oath and vowing "to get" Elijah. Fearing for his life, the prophet fled to the south arriving at Beersheba. Located at the edge of the desert, Beersheba is the southernmost city in Judah. At that point, Elijah left his servant behind and proceeded a further day's journey south, into the desert. The "desert" was actually a steppe, with sufficient moisture to sustain nomads and their flocks.

Today's reading describes a physically and mentally exhausted prophet lying down under a tree and asking God to take his life (cf. Jon 4:8). He fell asleep, only to be awakened by an angel who touched him and told him to get up. Awakening, Elijah found a rock-heated loaf near his head along with a jug of water. Heeding the angel's command, Elijah ate and drank, then fell back asleep again. This was not the first time that Elijah had received a miraculous gift of food and drink (see 1 Kgs 17:6; cf. 1 Kgs 17:15-16).

A second time the angel woke Elijah up, telling him to eat and drink, suggesting that he do so in view of the long journey ahead. The text does not say that the angel ordered Elijah to undertake the journey but that is certainly the implication of the angel's wake-up call. Strengthened by the heavenly-provided food and drink, Elijah makes the forty-day trip to Horeb.

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Horeb was the name most often used to refer to the mountain where Moses received the law, the mountain that people in the southern kingdom called Sinai.

The short narrative is replete with motifs that recall the Moses tradition. The most prominent among them are the marvelous provision of food, presence on Mount Horeb/Sinai, and the forty days and forty nights, surely a symbolic number rather than a numerically accurate description of the length of Elijah's journey.

Once arrived at Horeb, Elijah went into a cave (1 Kgs 19:9) as Moses went into the hollow of a rock (Exod 33:22). Like Moses, Elijah was the beneficiary of a theophany on the mountain (1 Kgs 19:10-18).

BROKEN FOR US

The first and third readings of today's liturgy coalesce with one another in speaking about the gift of life-giving food. In both readings there are allusions to the story of Moses and the Exodus. The emphasis on food suggests that the homilist preach on God's gift of food for his people.

The gift of food is, however, the common theme of these five-weeks of readings, with today's liturgy being the half-way point in the pentad. It is important that the homilist be attentive to the message that he or she preaches each week lest he or she become repetitive. The emphasis of today's homily might be the relationship between food and life. Life is dependent upon the food that God gives. Food prepares us for activity, for life's journey and the mission that it entails.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 16, 2009

LITURGY

Ephesians 5:15-20, contrasting wise with unwise behavior, encourages believers to walk in the way of the Lord.

John 6:51-58 is "part two" of Jesus' response to "the Jews" who took issue with what he had to say about himself as the Bread of Life. This is the most clearly eucharistic passage in the Bread of Life Discourse.

Proverbs 9:1-6 contrasts with Proverbs 9:13-18. Lady Wisdom speaks in verses 1-6; the foolish woman in verses 13-18. The contrasting women offer contrasting invitations. Between the two invitations is a series of aphorisms (vv. 7-12).

Today's reading portrays Lady Wisdom who has completed her palace, then prepares a dedicatory banquet and issuing invitations with the help of her dedicated female servants, her maids.

The scenario evokes similarities with the scene described in 1 Kings 8:1-5 in which Solomon invites Israelites to a celebratory feast after building the house of the Lord. Ancient Near Eastern Literature offers a number of parallels, including one Ugaritic text that has similarities with the invitation of the foolish woman (see Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs* [Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1999], 103-104).

The house built by Lady Wisdom is most probably the world which often appears in biblical poetry as a house with foundations (e.g., Ps 104:5; cf. Wis 8:27-36). Seven is a significant but stylized number to which no particular significance should be attached other than

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that there is a sufficient number of pillars to provide a solid foundation for the house. The text particularly notes that in preparation for the meal meat has been specially prepared and the choice of wines has been made. The meal may well represent the wisdom that Lady Wisdom shares with her guests. With all in readiness, the invitations go out. The invitations are tendered by Lady Wisdom’s agents but the invitation ultimate comes from Lady Wisdom herself (see Prov 1:20-21).

The invitations of Lady Wisdom and the foolish woman are similar in that both women invite the “simple” to the dinners that they offer (vv. 5, 16) but Lady Wisdom adds a stipulation, namely, that the guests forsake foolishness so that they might live. Many commentators, including the editors of the *New American Bible*, suggest that Proverbs 9:11 properly follows after verse 6, the final verse in today’s reading. The add-on is this: “For by me your days will be multiplied and the years of your life increased” (Prov 9:11).

BROKEN FOR US

The connection between food and life connects today’s first and third readings. The speech of Lady Wisdom is metaphorical; Jesus’ discourse is Eucharistic. It can be noted that many commentators draw attention to the influence of the biblical Wisdom literature on the poetic sections of the Fourth Gospel.

The reading from the Book of Proverbs suggests that wisdom, coupled with a rejection of all that is foolish, leads to a long life, itself the gift of God. The reading from the Discourse on the Bread of Life suggests that eternal life is God’s gift to those who “sacramentally” consume the flesh and blood of Jesus. To be sure it is anachronistic to speak of “sacraments” at this stage of Christian tradition but it is the language of sacrament is most readily be understood by our congregations.

Two different homilies can be developed on the basis of today’s reading. The Book of Proverbs indicates that one who desires to live a long life must learn to live wisely. In itself, this is a bit of common-place wisdom that the first reading articulates in the language of poetic imagery. All too often the lesson of the ages falls on deaf ears. All too often, as well, we forget that long life is a precious gift from God.

The reading from the Discourse on the Bread of Life reminds us of the importance of the eucharist, of the reception of Jesus’ body and blood. Should the reception of the cup be offered to participants in today’s liturgy and few actually participate in this fashion, today’s homily might be an occasion to speak about the body and blood of Jesus present in the eucharist.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 23, 2009

LITURGY

Ephesians 5:21-32 is the first unit of the three-unit household-code in Ephesians. Based on the household code in Colossians 3:18-4:1, it uses the relationship between Christ and the church to describe the relationship between man and wife and vice-versa.

John 6:60-69, describing the reaction of Jesus’ disciples to the Bread of Life discourse, includes the Johannine version of Simon Peter’s confession of faith (cf. Matt 16:16-19; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20).

Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17,18b is taken from the final chapter of the Book of Joshua. The focus of

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the chapter is God’s covenant with Israel (see Joshua 24:25) but the excerpts chosen for today’s liturgical reading omit any explicit reference to the covenant.

The scene is set at Shechem in the Ephraimite hill country. One of the few major Canaanite cities not destroyed by the Israelites, Shechem often appears in biblical lists of cities, particularly cities of refuge. Joshua 24:1 is the first reference to the city as a center of worship. Shechem later becomes an important Israelite cultic and political center. Joshua is described as gathering all the tribes of Israel together at Shechem. The text’s mention of elders, leaders, judges, and officers effectively says that Joshua was concerned that the entirety of Israelite leadership be present for the covenant renewal.

Joshua’s speech (Jos 24:2-15, the first and last verses of which appear in today’s reading) summarizes the high points of Yahweh’s dealing with Israel. Its hortatory epilogue (v. 15) challenges the nation and its leaders to make a choice. If they do not choose to serve Yahweh, they can serve the deities worshipped by Abraham’s ancestors. Among his people, Abraham alone served Yahweh. Alternatively the Israelites could choose to worship the gods of the Amorites, that is, the Canaanite deities. “Amorite” is a general term used in reference to the indigenous peoples in and around the land of Canaan.

A third possibility is that Israel follow Joshua’s household in serving Yahweh. What is meant by Joshua’s “household” is not entirely clear. The reference could be to his immediate household, his clan, or the whole tribe of Ephraim. In any case, Joshua offers his own “family” as an example for the rest of Israel to follow.

The people make a clear choice. “Far be it from us to ... “ is a strong expression which might be translated “we are damned if ...” Even before articulating their desire to be faithful to the covenant, the people place themselves under covenantal sanction. They respond to Joshua’s speech by recapitulating some of the highlights of the history of salvation that Joshua had narrated in fuller detail (Jos 24:2-15). The reference to miracles recalls not only the plagues, by means of which they were freed from Egypt, but also the gifts of manna and water that sustained Israel during the time of the Exodus. The epilogue of their response consists of a commitment to serve Yahweh, the God of Israel, reprised in Joshua 24:24, just prior to Joshua’s renewal of the covenant.

BROKEN FOR US

The choice that Jesus asks his disciples to make (John 6:67) is the point of similarity between today’s first and third readings. Jesus’ Discourse on the Bread of Life had not been well received. Taking umbrage at what Jesus had to say, many of the disciples chose not to continue to follow him. Jesus then asks the Twelve, a leadership cadre among the disciples, to make a choice. Speaking on their behalf, Peter confesses Jesus to be the revealer, the Holy One of God.

It is noteworthy that, apart from the references to Thomas and Judas as “one of the Twelve” (e.g., John 6:71) John 6:67 is the only reference to the Twelve in the Fourth Gospel.

Perhaps more than ever before we have the opportunity to make choices. Even in difficult economic times, the media present all sorts of alluring choices for us to make. It is difficult to sort them out. More fundamentally we must make choices with regard to our value system and our leadership. Some suggest that profit and the self should be our primary motivators. Today’s readings call the assembled congregation to accept the covenant, including the covenantal prescriptions known as the Ten Commandments as our value system and Jesus as our ultimate leader and teacher.

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TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 30, 2009

LITURGY

James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27 is the first of five readings that constitute the Sunday liturgy's semi-continuous reading of the Epistle of James. Today's lection describes various aspects of the moral life and the nature of true religion.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 continues the semi-continuous reading of the Gospel according to Mark which had been interrupted by passages from the Bread of Life Discourse. Today's reading contrasts ritual impurity with moral impurity, the evil that comes from deep within the human being.

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 begins with "Hear, O Israel!" (*Shem'a Israel*), the familiar formula of direct address that introduces a didactic passage (cf. Deut 5:1; 6:4; 9:1; 20:3; 27:9). Moses' teaching in this and subsequent passages establish him as the first great teacher of Israel. Deuteronomy's first account of Moses' teaching (Deut 4:1-40) follows immediately upon Moses' lengthy rehearsal of recent event in the history of Israel's salvation (Deut 1:6-3:37). The didactic passage begins as it ends; apart from the introductory "Hear, O Israel," Deuteronomy 4:40 repeats Deuteronomy 4:1.

The statutes and decrees that Israel is to observe are laws and regulations similar to those made by kings. In Deuteronomy 4:44, they are comprehensively described as "the law (*torah*) which Moses set before the Israelites." The social nature of these laws is indicated by the possession of the promised land being given as a reward for their proper observance. The motif of the possession of land as a reward for proper behavior recurs in biblical literature (Ps 37:11; 22, 29, 34; Prov 2:21-22; 10:30; cf. Matt 5:5) with an individualistic slant in the Wisdom literature rather than with the national and social implications that it has in the Book of Deuteronomy. The warning not to add to or subtract from the collection of laws is an appendage typically added to collections of divine utterances (cf. Rev 22:18-19). It means that the substance of the law is to remain unchanged.

The communal nature of the precepts in the Book of Deuteronomy is manifest in verses 6-8. National observance of the laws will lead other nations to marvel at the uniqueness of Israel as a wise and intelligent -- and, in this sense, "great" -- people. The law, revealed only to Israel (cf. Ps 147:19-20), enables the nation to achieve this reputation.

Two other features are added to the author's description of the uniqueness of Israel, the closeness of Yahweh and the justice of Israel's laws. Israel's unique relationship with Yahweh is particularly important (cf. 1 Kgs 8:52; Ps 145:18). The central concern of Deuteronomy 4 is that Israel avoid idol worship. What happened with the Baal of Peor is cited as an example of what happens as a result of idol worship (Deut 4:3-4; cf. Num 25:1-5). Deut 4:9-20 is a virtual homily on the first commandments of the Decalogue.

That the laws which God gave are just is another reason for Israel to be admired by the nations. Mesopotamian kings frequently boasted that their laws and decrees were just (cf. Code of Hammurabi 4:9-10; 24:1-5, 26-31). In comparison with these other laws, Israel's laws are truly just. Some commentators suggest that Deut 4:8 might have originally been intended to contrast Israel's law with the well known Code of Hammurabi.

BROKEN FOR US

Observance of the moral law is the over-arching theme in both the reading from

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Deuteronomy and the reading from the Gospel according to Mark. Fulfilling the law, Jesus teaches that it is necessary to get to the heart of the matter. His emphasis on “the heart,” the very core of the human being (Mark 7:22) teaches that observance of the law is much more than attention to its external demands. Faithful observance of the law demands that the law be internalized. What is harmful to others must be avoided in all its forms. The thirteen vices in the list are but salient examples of conduct to be avoided. Neither Jesus nor the evangelist had any need to cite each and every vice that must be avoided.

The liturgical readings obviously call for a homily on the demand for the faithful observance of the law. At the present time three features of this observance need to be stressed: 1) the comprehensive nature of morality; morality is not a matter of picking and choosing; 2) the fundamental nature of morality; it is a matter of virtuous conduct rather than merely external behavior; “I didn’t break any law,” is so often heard; 3) the social nature of morality; it is a matter of “mores” not individual perfection.