

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 116:4 (2010) 365-383 by Raymond F. Collins.

Many Christians and perhaps more than one homilist do not perceive the importance of the Old Testament for Christian tradition. Those who might entertain any doubt the value of the ancient biblical texts should have their doubts dispelled by the readings of the next two months. The first reading on the fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time reminds us of the maternal attributes of God. This is something that a number of women in our congregations have been trying to point out to us for the past few decades.

The first reading on the fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary time is a passage from the Book of Deuteronomy that the apostle Paul exploits in his letter to the Romans (Rom 10:8-10). Many Christians are more familiar with its Pauline use than they are with its biblical origins. The third reading on this Sunday portrays a lawyer well-versed in the study of the Scriptures who was able to cite Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 as a summary of the key demands of the Law.

The Book of Revelation’s vision of the woman in heaven serves as the first reading for the Feast of the Assumption. It is impossible to fully appreciate the vision without understanding that the author of Revelation uses Old Testament motifs as so many pieces of mosaic tile that he puts together to compose an impressive picture.

The Fathers of the Church were indeed on the right track when they used the Old Testament to explain the message of the New.

August 1, 2010

LITURGY

Colossians 2:1-5, 9-11 speaks of the ethical consequences of baptism.

Luke 11:13-21 tells the story of a rich man who wanted to retain his many possessions.

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23 is from a piece of Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom Literature composed in Palestine between 450 and 350 BCE. Its unknown author, who describes himself as a “wise” man (*hakam*, in Eccl 12:9), has taken the pen name Qohelet, which may mean “gatherer,” although some render it as “teacher” (NRSV) or preacher. The author has gathered together various bits of ancient sapiential adages that are intended to goad the reader in a way similar to the way that a herder uses a staff to move the herd along (Eccl 12:11).

The Book of Ecclesiastes is rather pessimistic in tone; its key word is “vanity.” The word “vanity” (*hebel*) encompasses the book as a pair of bookends (Eccl 1:2; 12:8). The literal meaning of the term is “breath, whiff, vapor, or steam.” The term connotes a reality that is essentially transitory. In Hebrew the numerical value of the word is 37. The word occurs thirty-seven times in the book, indicating to some authors that the entire book is a carefully composed composition rather than a haphazard collection of sayings.

The preface (Eccl 1:1-11) focuses on the theme of vanity (see Eccl 1:2, the first words in today’s reading). “Vanity of vanities” is a Hebrew superlative, used to express utter futility. The author continues to expound of the theme of vanity in the first major section of the book (Eccl 1:12-2:26), from which the last three verses of today’s reading are taken. The verses belong to a kind of fictional royal biography intended to exalt a ruler at the expense of his contemporaries and predecessors. The reading presents the case of a hypothetical someone who acts wisely and with knowledge of what he is doing. He achieves a certain amount of success [=“skill,” NAB]. Yet even this person lives with the frustration of ephemeral realities. The wise man toils arduously only to give what he possesses to others who come after him, who have not

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labored for what they have received and may well be fools (Eccl 2:12, 18-21).

The author expands his picture of the wise man by noting that by day he has labored under the heat of the sun. He works hard and is anxious about the success of his endeavors. His days are full of pain; vexation preoccupies him. Even at night he does not rest easily as the day’s occupations continue to concern him. His heart, the author says almost poetically, does not sleep.

Qohelet goes on to say that all the human being can do is eat and drink but the very provision of food and drink is the gift of God (see Eccl 2:24-26). In addition, God gives wisdom and knowledge to those who please him.

BROKEN FOR US

The reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes sets the stage for the parable of the rich man whose fertile land produced a great harvest. He takes appropriate measures to store up his produce but all for naught. He, too, shall die, just as the wise man of Ecclesiastes 2 had to die and leave his possessions to others.

Both readings challenge us to value what is truly important. In essence they are a critique of capitalism which places self-interest and the pursuit of wealth above all else. In this regard, it might be useful for the homilist to peruse Benedict XVI’s economic encyclical, *Truth in Charity*. Rather than devote their efforts to amassing wealth, Christians are called to focus on “what matters to God” (Luke 12:21).

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 8, 2010

LITURGY

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19 continues the semi-continuous reading of the Epistle to the Hebrews which had been interrupted at the end of Ordinary Time in 2009. Today’s segment speaks of the faith of Abraham and Sarah, our forebears in faith.

Luke 12:32-48 contains a parable about the watchfulness that is required as we await the coming of the Son of Man.

Wisdom 18:6-9, a reading from a sapiential book traditionally ascribed to Solomon, the wise king, but not actually written by him. Some scholars speak of its author as “Pseudo-Solomon.”

A good part of the book of Wisdom is devoted to an expanded consideration of five antitheses that contrast the fate of Egypt and the fate of the Israelites at the time of the Exodus. The fifth antithesis (Wis 18:50-25) uses the tenth plague (see Exodus 12:29-32) to contrast what happened to the Egyptians and what happened to the Israelites at that time. Today’s reading comes from the beginning of the author’s double portrayal.

The night of the first Passover was the night on which the firstborn of the Egyptians were slain (see Exod 12:42). “Our fathers” knew what was going to happen that night. The author, however, does not clarify who these fathers are. They may have been the heads of the families of Israel at the time of the Exodus (Exod 6:6; 11:4) or they may have been the patriarchs to whom Israel’s delivery from the house of slavery had been revealed (see Gen 15:13-14). Rabbinic writings make a connection between the promise made to Abraham and Israel’s deliverance at the time of the Exodus.

Because of this foreknowledge, the Israelites were courageous and awaited both their

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own salvation and the destruction of their oppressors. The two were to take place by a similar act of divine power. The New American Bible’s “in this” is rendered “by the same means” in the New Revised Standard Version. Some think that Pseudo-Solomon was alluding to the consecration of first-born Jewish males (see Exod 13:1-2) while the first-born of the Egyptians were slain (Exod 12:29-30; 13:15). Others opine that as the Egyptians attempted to destroy boy babies among the Israelites by drowning them (see Exodus 1), Egyptian males were destroyed by water when the Red Sea returned to its normal flow (Exod 14:23-28). In any case, Israel’s deliverance from slavery to the Egyptians marked the beginning of its national life as God’s chosen people.

The Israelites who had been spared by the Lord offered sacrifice to God and agreed to live according to his law. What the author meant by the reference to their offering sacrifice “in secret” is a matter of scholarly debate. Philo allegorized a phrase in Exod 12:39 and spoke of buried unleavened loaves of bread. Perhaps Pseudo-Solomon, who seems to have been familiar with the Egyptian tradition of wisdom literature, was comparing Israel’s experience of salvation with the “salvation” experienced in the mystery cults of Isis and Osiris. At the end nothing can be said about the strange reference to secrecy with any degree of certainty.

BROKEN FOR US

The compilers of the lectionary appear to suggest that the reading about the Exodus should clarify the gospel reading’s contrast between vigilant servants who are rewarded by the Lord (Luke 12:36-38, 43-44) and servants who take advantage of their master’s absence to act unruly or slough off (Luke 12:45-48a). Both texts suggest that God’s chosen ones who remain faithful to their calling will be rewarded while those who are not will be punished.

The readings are minatory. They warn us that misdeeds, especially the mistreatment of others, will not go unpunished by the just judge. The Egyptians mistreated the Israelites who were their slaves. The servants of the parable mistreated their fellow servants, men and women alike.

The homilist might focus on the various contemporary forms of social abuse and mistreatment of others that plague our society. Those who engage in this kind of conduct should expect to experience a measure of divine vengeance.

THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

August 15, 2010

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 15:20-27 describes the participation of all people in the resurrection of Christ, the first fruits of those who have died.

Luke 1:39-56 describes Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, her kinswoman, and narrates the beautiful paean of praise that Mary offered to God on this occasion.

Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab begins with the opening of the heavens at the sound of the seventh and last trumpet. The blast of the trumpet announced the coming of the Kingdom of God (Rev 11:15-19).

The woman is the heavenly representative of God’s people, both Israel and the church. The imagery used to describe her comes from various sources, principally the Old Testament but perhaps also from a widespread myth about a pregnant goddess pursued by a monster eventually

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killed by the son to whom the goddess gave birth. It is quite likely that the author of the Book of Revelation had no particular individual in mind.

Only the seer saw the vision of the woman. Clothed with the sun, she had a particularly close relationship with God. With the moon under her feet, she enjoyed an exalted status far above that of any human being. The twelve stars on her crown represent both the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. Brian Blount comments, “The twelve stars represent the completeness of the church that finds its foundation and its genesis in this woman” (*Revelation* [New Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009] 227). The woman is pregnant with God’s Lamb (see Rev 12:5). Her birth pangs are a traditional feature of apocalyptic imagery (see Isa 66:7 [LXX]; Mark 13:8; Rom 8:22; etc.).

Then another sign appears in the heaven, that of a great red dragon (see Ps 74:13-14; Ezek 32:2-3), similar to the mythical Leviathan or Rahab of the Old Testament. Its red color symbolizes destruction (see Rev 6:4). Its seven crowned heads and ten horns signify the forces of evil (see Dan 7:20, 24). This description links the dragon with Revelation’s beast from the sea (see Rev 13:1-10; 17:3, 7, 9, 12, 16). The crowns point to Satan’s sovereignty over the kingdoms of this world. Blount suggests that the dragon is best understood as the satanic force (see Rev 12:9) behind Roman imperial power (*Revelation*, 229). The dragon stands opposite the woman, ready to devour her. Able to sweep stars from the sky, the dragon is unimpressed by the twelve stars on the woman’s crown.

The woman gives birth to a son, the Messiah (see Ps 2:8-9). The imagery suggests that the son not only shepherds (*poimainein*, “rule” in the NAB) his people but will also employ the necessary discipline to rule over the nations. The son is a threat to the dragon because he is about to (*mellei*, translated by the simple “to” in the NAB) rule and will lead people to God and away from their allegiance to Satan.

God snatches the child up to himself and his throne, the place of the Lamb/Son in the Book of Revelation (Rev 5:6-7, 13; 7:9-10, 17; 22:1). Some see in the rapture a reference to Jesus’ ascension into heaven, but this interpretation reads too much precision into the symbolic apocalyptic language with which the seer describes his vision. Should it be a reference to the “Ascension,” the story of Jesus would have sequed directly from his birth to his ascension.

God enabled the woman to flee into the desert (see Rev 12:14), the traditional place of refuge for the afflicted and the legendary place of salvation according to the Exodus story. In the desert God’s people are nurtured, disciplined, and provided for (see Exod 16:32; Deut 2:7, 15-16; 29:5; 32:10; Josh 24:7; Neh 9:19, 21; Ps 78:15, 19; 136:16; Isa 40:3; Jer 31:2; Ezek 34:25).

Apocalyptic imagery is noted for its fluidity. At this point in the story the woman who has given birth now represents the people to whom she has given birth, the church. The 1260 days during which the church is to be nurtured is half of seven years, a symbolic representation of the temporary nature of the church.

The reading concludes with a loud voice proclaiming a hymn of judgment, the kingdom of God has arrived, the authority of the Lamb is acknowledged (Rev 12:10ab). The hymn continues with the announcement that Satan has been conquered (Rev 12:10cd) but that part of the verse has been omitted from today’s liturgical reading.

BROKEN FOR US

Christian piety has often seen in the seer’s vision of the woman in heaven a symbolic portrayal of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Those who write in this way are making a legitimate use of literary license. The seer’s vision was not, however, intended to give a picture of the woman

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Mary, mother of Jesus.

Notwithstanding the license that authors and the liturgy takes, Mary is a model of believers (see Luke 11:27-28). She represents those who are nurtured by God in this era of salvation. Raised by God into heaven, she is a harbinger of the return of all believers to the Father. She represents for us a sign of hope.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 22, 2010

LITURGY

Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13 contains a teaching about God’s disciplining his children, as any parent disciplines a beloved child.

Luke 13:22-30 is a passage in which Jesus exhorts his followers to live as befits those who are his disciples. He then gives a parable about the Parousia to add emphasis to his exhortation.

Isaiah 66:18-21, like the reading on July 4, the fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, is taken from the final chapter of the Book of Isaiah.

In today’s passage, the author of Third Isaiah takes up one of the favorite themes of Second Isaiah, namely, that the restoration of Israel will prove to be a sign of God’s glory to the nations. God is described as the All-knowing one who can assess the thoughts and deeds of the nations. Peoples of various cultures and languages will come to Jerusalem to experience the glory of God. Together with the returned exiles, they will gather in the holy city. For these non-Israelites, restored Jerusalem is a sign of God’s glory.

At Yahweh’s signal (see Isa 11:12; 49:22), some of “fugitives of the nations,” that is, Gentile proselytes to Judaism, (see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66* [Anchor Bible 19B. New York: Doubleday, 2003], 314-315), will serve as missionaries who announce the glory of God to the peoples of the Mediterranean basin. The author begins his geographic panorama at the Straits of Gibraltar. Tarshish was a port city, well-known for its trade in silver and other precious metals and located either in southern Spain or north-western Africa, more likely the former. Put is Libya. Lud, identified in the text as a place noted for its military prowess, may be the name of a region in North Africa but Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1.144) identifies it with Lydia, a region in west-central Asia Minor. “Mosoch and Tubal,” the latter once known for its slave trade (see Ezek 27:13; 32:26; 38:2-3; 39:1), designated a region in Anatolia in eastern Asia Minor. Javan is Ionia, a Greek settlement on the coastland of southwest Asia Minor. The missionaries are to be sent to people unfamiliar with the God of Israel; hence, they were not to be sent to the east, the Mesopotamian location of the major center of the Jewish diaspora.

The author himself may have had only a vague acquaintance with these geographical locations and may not have known their exact locations (cf. the Table of Nations in Gen 10:2-5, 6, 12). Nevertheless, he affirms that the new proselytes, using all available means of transportation, will flock to Jerusalem to worship in the temple of the Lord alongside the Israelites. Some of the proselytes, perhaps some of the missionaries, will be co-opted into the Levitical priesthood. Thus, the Book of Isaiah concludes with an oracle proclaiming that Gentiles will worship the one God of Israel and serve as God’s priests (see Isa 56:1-8; Isa 66:22-23).

Most probably the enigmatic reference to them (who are “they”?) bringing brothers and sisters from the nations as an offering to the Lord in verse 20 is a later addition to the original

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text. It appears to have been intended to moderate the oracle’s unmitigated optimism about the salvation of Gentiles.

BROKEN FOR US

The gospel passage and the reading from Third Isaiah speak about universal salvation. Words of Jesus recalled in Luke 12:28-30 echo the words of the prophetic oracle. In the eschatological age salvation will come to the Gentiles.

We live in this eschatological age. The final age of salvation was inaugurated with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This age is one in which God extends salvation to all people, no matter their ethnicity, culture, or language (cf. Matt 28:19-20). The “people of God” now includes believers from around the world. They, too, worship the God of Israel. From among them are chosen the priests and levites in God’s new age of salvation, the ministers in the Christian sanctuary.

Most of us are among the Gentiles, to whom God has graciously extended his salvation. For this we must give thanks.

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 29, 2010

LITURGY

Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a uses imagery drawn from the Bible’s story about Moses at Mount Sinai as a comparison with the author’s description of the people of God gathering around God and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.

Luke 14:1, 7-14 tells the parable of the man who wanted a privileged place at table, only to be put in his place.

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29 comes from one of the very few biblical books whose author is known to us. The book was written by Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach (see Sir 50:27). Known as Ecclesiasticus because of its use in the church, Ben Sira’s book was probably written at the beginning of the second century BCE and translated into Greek about fifty years later.

Today’s reading from Sirach marks the third occasion this month that a reading for the Sunday liturgy has been taken from the Old Testament’s wisdom literature. The reading consists of three distinct segments. The first unit (verses 17-18, 20) speaks about the virtue of humility, a frequent topic in the wisdom literature (Prov 11:2; 15:33; 22:4; Sir 7:16-17; 10:28). Humility allows a person to measure the value of his or her abilities. Those who appreciate the might of the Lord and judge their own achievements with humility will find favor with the Lord. Ben Sirach notes that the truly humble do not strive for what they cannot understand; they do not seek to achieve goals that lie beyond their God-given abilities to achieve.

The second segment (Sir 3:28) praises the wise and attentive person. The truly wise person listens to proverbs, drawing wisdom from them. He or she is a good listener. The ability to listen to others and learn from them is a source of joy for good listeners.

The third segment of the liturgical lection (Sir 3:29) compares alms-giving with water’s ability to quench fire. Jesus extolled the value of alms-giving (Matt 6:2-4) while the author of First Peter reminds us that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8).

Those who read Sirach 3:17-20, 28-29 in a text other than that of the lectionary itself might note that there are a number of textual issues regarding the text. Many versions, including

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that of the New American Bible used in the lectionary and the New Revised Standard Version, do not include verse 19 in the edited text. Textual issues also lead to some variation in the numbering of the verses in the passage.

BROKEN FOR US

Jesus’ story of the self-inflated person who sought the place of honor at his host’s table, only to be told to move to a place of less esteem, led to his exhortation, “everyone who exalts himself or herself will be humbled, but the one who humbles herself or himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). This exhortation provides the crux of the comparison between today’s first and third readings.

As Christians and as humans, we are called to be humble. Humility is not a matter of self-deprecation; it is a matter of judging oneself accurately. It is a product of self-knowledge and of conduct in accord with that self-knowledge. It allows us to appreciate the qualities, talents, and achievements of others and gives us the ability to give thanks to God for those gifts. It enables us to appreciate our own abilities and talents as so many gifts of God.

“One and the same Spirit produces all of these,” Paul writes, “distributing them individually to each person as he wishes” (1 Cor 12:11). In sum, the virtue of humility is the ability to appreciate the work of the Spirit.