

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 119:4 (2013) 354-374, by Raymond F. Collins

Year C in the three-year cycle of liturgical readings offers us a semi-continuous reading of the Epistle to the Colossians. The text itself is rather short. The semi-continuous reading of it occurs on just four Sundays every three years. This year, those Sundays fall on July 14, 21, 28, and August 4.

Usually I would not be particularly struck by the Sunday liturgy’s second reading as I write these reflections on the Sunday gospel. This year I was, since I began to write my reflections on the Sunday gospels for the months of July and August just a couple of days after I had received my copies of the recently published Anselm Academic Study Bible. I wrote the introduction to the Epistle to the Colossians in this edition of the New American Bible.

The arrival of the author’s copies of the bible gave me not only the opportunity to see my work in print but also to reflect on the reason why the Anselm Academic Study Bible was published. When I was asked to contribute the introductions to several New Testament epistles to this publication venture, I was struck by the fact that its editors had decided to publish the previous introductions along with new introductions that were being commissioned. Writing a number of these introductions sometimes required an exegetical *tour de force* on my part.

We would be well served to compare these new introductions with the introductions that were written for the New American Bible back in 1970, when this Catholic version of the Bible was first published just after the Second Vatican Council as a response to the challenge of *Dei Verbum*. I write about the Anselm Academic Study Bible because its publication reminds us of how far biblical scholarship and Catholic biblical scholarship in particular has come in the last few decades. If we are to preach God’s word as it deserves to be preached, we cannot simply rely on what we learned about the scriptures twenty, thirty, or forty years ago. As ministers of the gospel, we should not allow ourselves to serve our congregations a stale diet.

As I write these words to encourage you to continue your study of the Scriptures, as you prepare your weekly, and perhaps daily, homilies, I am also thinking about our young people. Young people appear to be leaving the churches in droves. Many of them have taken a course or two on the Scriptures, in Catholic and secular universities. Many are then disconcerted by the disconnect between what they hear from the pulpit and what they have learned from a well-informed professor. We cannot afford to let that happen and, in so doing, encourage them to leave the church.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 4, 2013

LITURGY

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21-23 is a passage from a piece of Wisdom literature, sometimes called the Book of Qohelet. The book is generally pessimistic in tone but today’s reading reminds us that

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food and drink are gifts from God and that God grants wisdom and knowledge to those who please him.

Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11 speaks about the ethical consequences of baptism.

Luke 12:13-21 begins with a narrative introduction that sets the scene for Jesus to tell a parable about the riches that people accumulate. In the New Testament, both the introduction and the parable are found only in Luke.

The story of Martha and her sister, Mary, featured a dispute among sisters. Today’s narrative features a dispute among brothers. The story about the sisters evoked a quiet scene, two sisters at home hosting a guest. Today’s scene is rather different. A voice from a crowd jostling about addresses Jesus as a teacher of the law and asks him to adjudicate a dispute about an inheritance. The Torah contains inheritance laws in Deut 21:15-17 and Num 27:1-11 and 36:7-9. The rabbis later developed these laws, as can be seen in the Mishnah (*m. Baba Bathra* 8:1-9:10).

Jesus responds in almost dismissive fashion, addressing his interlocutor as “friend.” The Greek *anthrope* literally means “man” in the sense of human being. “Buddy” might be a good colloquial translation of Jesus’ way of addressing the man. Jesus then rejects the role that the interlocutor wants him to fulfill. The *Gospel of Thomas* 72 makes explicit the meaning of Jesus’ remark to the man. This Coptic text presents Jesus saying to his disciples “I am not a divider, am I?” immediately after he had answered the unnamed interlocutor.

Form-critically the encounter between Jesus and the anonymous individual can be described as a pronouncement story. It concludes with an important saying, “Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions” (Luke 12:15). “Take care to guard against” is a rather weak rendering of the Greek *orate kai phylassesthe apo*. In their respective commentaries on Luke, Joseph Fitzmyer and Luke Timothy Johnson translate the phrase as “Take care! Be on guard against” (Fitzmyer) and “Watch out! Protect yourself from” (Johnson). The enemy to be guarded against is greed (*pleonexia*), a vice that is a staple of the New Testament’s lists of vices (Mark 7:22; Rom 1:29; Eph 4:19; 5:3; Col 3:5; cf. 2 Pet 2:3, 14; 1 Tim 6:10), a vice frequently excoriated by first-century philosophic moralists.

Jesus explains by saying that what a person is is far more important than what a person has. The Fathers of the Church often said, “Possessions are not life,” as they tried to capture the flavor of Jesus’ words.

To illustrate his teaching, Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool. The story begins with a soliloquy, as the rich man ponders what to do with his acquired wealth. He decides to store it up and have a grand time. “Eat, drink, and be merry” (cf. Eccl 8:15; Tob 7:12) sums up the life of self-indulgent pleasure that he envisions for himself. God’s judgment is that the life of the rich man will be short. What will happen to all his wealth?

The punch line of the parable contrasts the rich man who stored up treasure for himself rather than for others, especially the widow, the orphan, and the poor, and those that are rich in what matters to God, who share their wealth with God’s little ones.

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BROKEN FOR US

Today’s reading consists of a pronouncement story and a parable. Each of these segments of the gospel lection can serve as the topic of a Sunday homily.

The pronouncement story calls for a reflection on one’s estate. To avoid family disputes, people should have a will. They owe it to their children to avoid the kind of bitter disputes that sometimes arrive when people die intestate. The will should make provision for God’s little ones, both those within the family who are in greater need and the charities that need our support.

The parable illustrates the folly of the vice of greed. Many in our society consider greed to be a virtue. After all, greed is the driver of capitalism. Benedict XV’s encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* is virtually the victim of non-reception in the United States, where some consider it sinful to criticize capitalism. Some church officials even say that greed is not a serious sin. Jesus’ parable should lead us to think otherwise.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 11, 2013

LITURGY

Wisdom 18:6-9 tells us that because of their foreknowledge of the Passover, the Israelites courageously awaited both their own salvation and the destruction of the oppressive Egyptians. **Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19** continues the semi-continuous reading of the Epistle to the Hebrews that had been interrupted at the end of Ordinary Time in 2012. Today’s segment speaks of the faith of Abraham and Sarah, our forebears in faith.

Luke 12:32-48 begins with a reworking of material from the Sayings Source that is otherwise found in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount at 6:34, 19-21. The idea of selling one’s possessions and giving alms is not found in Matthew’s version of the material. The idea expressed in verse 33 flows from Luke’s attitude towards riches and his concern for the poor.

The command to sell what one has and to give to other is a consequence of the kingdom of God, already among us (cf. Luke 17:21) as a gift from God. There is a startling contrast. God’s greatest gift, the gift of his kingdom, has been given to the “little flock” (v. 32; cf. Isa 41:14; Ezek 34:11-24).

Instead of being concerned about their possessions, Jesus’ disciples are urged to give away what they have. Their real treasure is in heaven. The consciousness of a heavenly reward should motivate the believer’s conduct, an idea well-expressed in the maxim, “where your treasure is, there also will be your heart” (v. 34). The value that we place on heavenly realities motivates the behavior that derives from our heart.

The first hortatory section of the gospel reading is followed by a number of sayings on vigilance and watchfulness which follow one another in rapid fashion. The series begins with a

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mashal, a figurative story, about a master who comes home from a wedding late at night (cf. Matt 25:1-13). If the servants are prepared for the master’s arrival, he will serve them a meal. The imagery evokes the idea of a heavenly banquet and the idea of Jesus as servant that is found in the Lukan farewell discourse at Luke 22:27. Luke envisions authority as expressed in table service.

The second, equally striking image is that of the thief who comes when the homeowner is unprepared. The image is well known in the New Testament. Luke, however, does not mention that the thief’s unexpected visit occurs at night, as do the other New Testament uses of the image (cf. Matt 24:43; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 16:15).

Peter’s intervention, found only in Luke, is not only one of the subtle ways in which the evangelist underscores Peter’s role as spokesperson for the disciples; it is also a literary device that allows Luke to speak about leadership and authority in the community in terms of household management (cf. Luke 9:12-17; 1 Tim 3:4-5; Titus 1:7). Using a rare Greek term *sitometrion*, “food allowance,” literally, “a measure of grain,” Luke points to the role of the leaders of the community in feeding their little flock.

Those in charge of others have, in turn, a master to whom they are responsible. They cannot do whatever might suit their fancy. A Lukan macharism, a beatitude, is used to express the idea that the steward who properly fulfills his duties will be rewarded (cf. Luke 19:15-19).

On the other hand, those who take advantage of their position, having a good time and abusing those over whom they are placed in charge, will be severely punished. The severity of the punishment will correspond to the severity of the abuse. Those who acted out of ignorance will be punished less severely.

The final logion (Luke 12:48b) expresses the moral of the contrasting parables. Those in authority are held to a higher standard because of the authority and responsibility that has been entrusted to them.

BROKEN FOR US

As was the case last week, the gospel reading can be conveniently divided into two parts each of which merits homiletic reflection. The first series of sayings (vv. 32-34) urge us to have our hearts fixed on heaven and the kingdom of God, conscious of the fact that this focus will result in our generosity to others. As God has shared the gift of his kingdom with us, so we should share what we have with others.

The idea of the master serving at table and Peter’s intervention turn the long, second, series of sayings into an exhortation on church leadership. Jesus’ words are directed to us who enter the ambo to preach the gospel. Leadership is service. In the church, service receives symbolic and sacramental expression in service at the eucharistic meal.

Unfortunately, there are leaders who fail to take care of those over whom they have been placed in authority. As the church continues to suffer from the sexual abuse scandal, today’s reading may provide us with an opportunity to say that many of us, at various levels, have failed.

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Perhaps the ambit of Jesus’ words can be expanded. What is said primarily of church authorities also applies to all who are placed over others in positions of leadership. “Much more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.”

THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

August 15, 2013

Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab contains excerpts from the Book of Revelation’s description of the appearance of a sign in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun.

1 Corinthians 15:20-27 stresses the order in God’s unfolding of eschatological events.

Luke 1:39-56 is a beautiful tale of the meeting of two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth. The two women had first appeared in the immediately preceding annunciation narratives (cf. Luke 1:5-25, 26-38). The story of their meeting focuses on what the two women have to say. Luke Timothy Johnson notes that, using words in this way, the evangelist employs the style of ancient historians who used speeches to interpret history rather than to give a verbatim report of what was actually said (see *The Gospel of Luke* [Sacra Pagina 3. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991], 43).

Elizabeth is identified as a prophetic figure, someone filled with the Holy Spirit, as a result of which she has something to say. She proclaims that both Mary and the child in her womb are specially chosen by God; they are “blessed” (*eulogogemene, eulogemenos*). Elizabeth considers herself to be privileged insofar as she has received a visit from the “mother of my Lord,” a striking title for the young woman from a little town in Galilee. Elizabeth interprets the movement of the child in her own womb as an expression of joy at the visit of the Lord and his mother. Elizabeth’s final beatitude is perhaps most striking. Mary is accounted “blessed” (*makaria*) because she believed the word of God (cf. Luke 11:27-28).

Mary’s words, the Magnificat, seem to be patterned after the similar words of Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1-10. Mary’s song, the “Canticle of Mary,” begins with her praising God for what God has personally done for her. She identifies herself as a “servant” (*he doule*), language that she had used in her response to Gabriel (cf. Luke 1:28). She announces that all generations will call her blessed. The first to do so was Elizabeth who had proclaimed that Mary was blessed (v. 45). Mary calls God “my savior,” introducing the theme of salvation which is so important in Luke’s gospel (cf. Luke 19:9; etc.). God is not only Savior, God is also almighty; his name is holy. As is customary in the biblical tradition, “name” represents the manifestation of God.

After extolling God for what God has done for her, Mary’s words move beyond her own situation to all those who fear God. Biblical anthropomorphisms are used to describe God’s attitude (“mercy,” vv. 50, 54) and activity (“strength of his arm,” v. 51). The song retrospectively and generically looks upon God’s relationship with Israel. It is a history of God’s reversing positions. God has taken care of the lowly and the hungry while punishing the arrogant, the all too powerful rulers, and the rich. What God has done in the past, he will

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continue to do in the future. God’s past actions presage future eschatological reversal (cf. Luke 6:20-21, 24-25).

The first chapters of Luke’s gospel, especially Luke 1-2, place Jesus’ ministry within the perspective of the history of Israel. Mary’s song does this in its mention of God’s servant, Israel, and of Abraham and his descendants. The promise that God made to them will endure forever. God’s word shall be fulfilled.

The brief mention of Mary’s departure completes the narrative framework (vv. 39-40, 56) that encompasses the speech of the Elizabeth and the song of Mary.

BROKEN FOR US

The words of the two women are part of the Christian prayer book. Elizabeth’s encomium is used in the familiar “Hail Mary;” Mary’s song is used daily in the office of Evening Prayer.

On this Feast of the Assumption, the homilist might want to talk about either or both of these prayers. Nonetheless, the homilist should not fail to evoke the memory of Mary as a woman of faith. Her prayer, deeply rooted in her biblical tradition, is an expression of her faith. She believed the word of the Lord that had been spoken to her. She understood that what God had done for her had to be understood within the context of salvation and God’s plan of eschatological reversal. In the narratives of the canonical gospels, Mary’s faith is her pre-eminent trait.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 18, 2013

LITURGY

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10 describes a plot against the prophet Jeremiah.

Hebrews 12:1-4 encourages us to live our life of faith with perseverance.

Luke 12:49-53 contains a number of enigmatic sayings about Jesus’ ministry.

The first saying (v. 49) has a parallel in the *Gospel of Thomas* 10, almost certainly derived from Luke: “Jesus said, ‘I have cast fire upon the world, and behold, I guard it until it is ablaze’” (*G. Thom.* 10). In the earlier, Lukan form, the logion is a mission saying, “I have come (*elthon*) to . . . “ The fire is, of course, figurative. The biblical tradition used the image of fire in reference to purification (e. g., Lev 13:32) and judgment (e. g., Gen 19:24). These are important aspects of Jesus’ mission. Jesus is portrayed as saying that he wished that the world were already undergoing purification and judgment.

The second saying (v. 50) recalls the words addressed to James and John in Mark 10:38, part of a Markan passage that Luke has not taken over into his gospel. The saying suggests that if the world is to be tested, as the previous verse has said, the missionary himself will be tested. Jesus longs that the time of testing be over. The evangelist does not tell his readers what that

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anguish will be but further reading into the gospel story reveals that the baptism of which Jesus speaks is a reference to his death.

The third saying—in fact, several sayings with the same message (vv. 51-53)—states that the result of Jesus’ mission is strife and discord. This saying, too, has a parallel in the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*: “Jesus said, ‘men perhaps think that I have come to cast peace upon the world, and they do not know that I have come to cast divisions upon the earth, fire, sword, war. For there will be five in a house; there will be three against two and two against three; the father against the son and the son against the father, and they will stand alone’” (*G. Thom.* 16).

Although Jesus came to bring peace on earth (cf. Luke 2:14; 19:38), there is another side to his ministry. Strife and discord will ensue from Jesus’ ministry. That this will happen was foreshadowed in Luke’s Infancy Narrative, when the aged Simeon said, in regard to Jesus, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted” (Luke 2:34). Then, addressing Mary directly, Simeon said, ‘You yourself a sword will pierce’ (Luke 2:35).

The gospel story bears witness to some of the conflicts that arose because of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus’ logion states that these conflicts will affect even the family, the building block of society. These divisions are reaction to Jesus’ prophetic ministry (cf. Mark 3:21). People tend to hate the prophet and those who follow him (cf. Luke 6:22).

BROKEN FOR US

Reflecting on today’s gospel, one can preach on the macro-level or on the micro-level. On the macro level, there is no doubt that the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of the church have stirred up no small amount of opposition and antagonism. That this is the situation of the world in which we live is to be expected. Jesus said that division would result because of his ministry.

Preaching the gospel message on the micro-level might be more difficult. Done delicately, it could be of great benefit to the congregation. How many families are torn apart by religious differences, even among believing Christians! How many parents are deeply saddened to see their children abandon the faith in which they have been raised! How many teenage and adult children look upon their parents as “out of touch” because they continue to go to church! How many other family relationships are sorely strained by the different religious attitudes of family members, even within traditional Christian families!

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 25, 2013

LITURGY

Isaiah 66:18-21, from Third Isaiah, announces that the restoration of Israel will prove to be a sign of God’s glory to the nations.

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Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13 contains a teaching about God’s disciplining his children, as any parent would discipline the child who is truly loved.

Luke 13:22-30 begins with the evangelist’s reminder that in this section of his gospel (Luke 9:51-19:27) Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. In the long narrative, the evangelist frequently describes a voice from the crowd saying something, to which Jesus responds with significant teaching (cf. Luke 9:57; 10:25; 11:15, 27, 45; 12:13, 41; 13:1, 22). In the incident described in today’s gospel, the anonymous interlocutor asks a perennial question about salvation, who and how many will be saved. “Lord,” he says, “will only a few people be saved?”

Responding in a manner that reminds us of his answer to the lawyer who asked, “Who is my neighbor?” (cf. Luke 10:25-37, the gospel reading for July 14, the fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time), Jesus turns the tables on the questioner. Rather than answering the theoretical question, Jesus responds by saying that the important thing is to act in such a way as to be saved.

Jesus’ response, “strive (*agonizesthe*) to enter,” uses language that first-century philosophic moralists used to describe the human struggle for truth or the struggle for the virtuous life. The way to salvation is not easy. The door is not so big and wide open that everyone can be saved without any effort on their part (cf. Matt 7:13-14). Such is Jesus’ indirect answer to the question.

The parable that follows, with a number of allegorical features, is a reminder that salvation is not simply the result of human striving. There is another player in the drama of salvation, the master of the house (*oikodespotes*) who lets people into his home. The Lord of the manor keeps out people who are not worthy, people who do evil things (*ergatai adikias*).

Those excluded includes some who claim sort of association with Jesus. In the Lukan narrative, this may well be an allusion to the righteous Pharisees in whose homes Jesus ate (cf. Luke 5:29-32; 7:36-50; 11:37-52). Matthew’s version of Jesus’ words suggests that the excluded group will include those who prophesied and exorcized in Jesus’ name (cf. Matt 7:22). The master of the house—clearly a symbol of Jesus—refuses to recognize these evildoers. “I do not know,” he says, “where you are from” (Luke 13:27; cf. Matt 7:23). Mere association with Jess does not ensure entry into the house of salvation.

The evildoers are excluded from the heavenly banquet. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, will be there. The threesome are frequently mentioned in the Old Testament (e. g., Deut 1:8; 1 Kgs 18:36; 2 Kgs 13:23) and are mentioned by Luke in Acts 3:13; 7:32. Luke adds that the prophets will also be present (cf. Matt 6:11), reflecting his own interest in prophecy and prophets. That these heroes of salvation history are present is not surprising. What is surprising is that those present for the banquet will include people from all over, from the four corners of the globe. Presence at the banquet is not restricted to the faithful members of the Jewish people.

The story concludes with a logion similar to one found in Mark 10:31 and Matt 19:30; 20:16. The saying is an expression of what is sometimes called eschatological reversal. Those whom popular opinion considers to be not worthy are the beneficiaries of God’s offer of salvation.

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The saying may well represent Jesus’ rejoinder to Pharisees who considered that they were in. They thought that they would be in because of their fidelity to the law; Jesus says that Gentiles are in. Today the logion should remind Christians not to consider themselves as automatically in. They do not have an exclusive claim to salvation. Others may come first.

BROKEN FOR US

Today’s gospel reading gives us an opportunity to reflect on the universal call to salvation. All are called; the appropriate response to the call is that we live in a manner worthy of our call.

In passing, we might reflect on the narrowness of the now-rejected theological assertion that, *extra ecclesiam, nulla salus* (“no salvation outside the church”). Who are the saints, the modern saints, who do not belong to the church? Who are the saints who do not belong to the Roman Catholic Church? I immediately think of Mahatma Gandhi and of Cecily Saunders, who founded hospice, but there are many others.