

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 117:1 (2011) 68-87, .by Raymond F. Collins.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (par. 1965) teaches that “the Law of the Gospel is . . . the Law of Christ and is expressed particularly in the Sermon on the Mount” (par. 1965).

We are blessed in that six gospel lections taken from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1-8:1) are found in the readings for Ordinary Time which begins on January 16. While the Sermon on the Mount is well known, one important feature of Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ teaching is often overlooked. That feature is that the evangelist adapted the demands of the good news to the real social situation of his Jewish-Christian church a half century after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This adaptation to the times is particularly evident when the Sermon makes reference to institutional Judaism in the form of the Sanhedrin or when the evangelist introduces the exception clause into Jesus’ teaching on divorce because of contemporary Roman and Jewish jurisprudence. Matthew writes about those who impressed into service by Roman authorities and reflects rabbinic discussions about the service of two masters.

Matthew was concerned that the teaching of Jesus be part of a living tradition relevant to the lives of people in his church. Homilists are called to follow the evangelist’s example. One important way of doing this is to apply the gospel message to the real social situation of the church in the year 2011.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 6, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 58:7-10 contains an oracle echoed in Matt 28:7-8.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 is a passage in which Paul denies that he made use of sophisticated rhetorical techniques in his efforts to bring people at Corinth to believe in Christ.

Matthew 5:13-16 is a short passage containing two parables that are found together only in Matthew. The parable of the salt appears in slightly different form in Mark 9:50 and Luke 34-35, the simile of the lamp in Mark 4:21 and Luke 8:16. The pair of metaphors speak of the mission of Jesus’ disciples.

The point of the simile of the salt is that, like salt, Jesus’ disciples are important for the religious life of the world. Scholars debate among themselves as to what particular use of salt Matthew’s tradition might have had in mind. Salt is use for seasoning and for preserving food. It is used for purifying and for fertilizer. As visitors to Africa know well, a salt lick attracts animals. In the ancient world, salt sometimes served as a symbol of wisdom. There is no sure way of knowing which, if any of these uses, the tradition might have referenced.

Equally difficult to determine is the reference to salt losing its saltiness. The reference seems to echo a rabbinic proverb preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, *Bekorot*[*Firstlings*]8b. Some scholars opine that the reference is to salt that has become adulterated; others think that the

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reference is to the covering of salt put on oven walls to help with the burning of dung that was used as fuel.

Since the value of salt was well-known in the ancient world, it is probably best to take Matthew’s parable as simply pointing to the importance of Jesus’ disciples in the world in which they live. Sir 39:26, for example, says, “Chief of all needs for human life are water and fire, iron and salt, the heart of the wheat, milk and honey, the blood of the grape, and oil and cloth.”

The second simile has its origin in the biblical tradition, found especially in Isaiah, which describes Israel as a light to the nations (see Isa 2:2-5; 42:6; 49:6; 51:4-5; cf. Rom 2:19; see also Isa 58:8 in today’s reading from the Old Testament). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus identifies himself as the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5; 12:46; cf. 11:9, 12; 12:36). The point of the simile is that Jesus’ disciples, like Israel and Jesus before them, should live in such a way that the presence of the kingdom of heaven is manifest to everyone. Their righteous behavior redounds to the glory of God when people realize that Christians act the way they do because of who they are, namely, disciples of Jesus.

Let me add a few exegetical notes for the benefit of the homilist. That the light shines to everyone in the house suggests that the house is a one-room house similar to those in which some Palestinians live even today. Because of the allusion to Isa 2:2-25, the city on the mountain probably refers to Jerusalem and Mount Zion though some commentators take it as a reference Safed, where there was considerable construction during the Second Temple period and the life of Jesus. Safed is one of Judaism’s four holy cities and the highest city in Galilee. “Heavenly Father” is a typically Jewish and Matthean way of referring to God, especially in prayer (Matt 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 9, 14, 26, 32; 7:11, 21; 10:32, 33; 11:25; 12:50; 15:13; 16:17; 18:10, 14, 19, 35). The epithet reflects Jewish sensitivity to the transcendence of God, as does the familiar Matthean “kingdom of heaven.”

BROKEN FOR US

The image of the light of the world is a rich one. It is a metaphor that speaks of the ethical and religious responsibilities of Jesus’ disciples. As Israel and Jesus were light to the world, so we have a responsibility to be a light to those with whom we come in contact. Third Isaiah reminds us that feeding the hungry, providing homes for the homeless and oppressed, and providing clothing for those in need are specific ways in which we can let our light shine before others.

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SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 13, 2011

LITURGY

Sirach 15:15-20 describes the consequences of a human’s choice to keep the commandments or not to do so.

1 Corinthians 2:6-10 speaks about the ineffable wisdom of God.

Matthew 5:17-37 contains the first four of the great antitheses that illustrate how Jesus’ teaching fulfills the law. The passage offers examples of ways in which the disciples of Jesus should live in such a way that their righteousness that goes beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees, ogres in Matthew’s gospel narration. The evangelist’s animosity towards the Pharisees and their scribes (see Matt 7:29) reflects more the situation of Jewish Christians in the years after the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. than it does the historical situation of Jesus’ lifetime.

The four antitheses have a similar structure, the first part of which includes a passage of scripture introduced, with some variation, by the formulaic “you have heard that it was said to your ancestors.” The ancestors were the generation of the Exodus, to whom the commandments of the Law were given, but Jesus’ audience could also think of their immediate ancestors who would have listened to the familiar scriptural passages during the sabbath gathering.

The second element of the structure contains teaching of Jesus, introduced by a solemn and formulaic “But I say to you” (*ego de legohymen*). The lemma includes an emphatic *ego*, “I,” which underscores the authority of Jesus as an interpreter of the Law. Much of the material in Jesus’ explanation is similar to material attributed to early Jewish rabbis.

In the first, second, and fourth antitheses, the cited scripture is essentially a passage from the Decalogue, namely, the fifth (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17), sixth (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18), and eighth (Exod 20: 16; Deut 5:20) commandments. In each of these instances, Jesus’ authoritative interpretation goes beyond the letter of the law to the heart of the matter. Avoiding murder, adultery, and perjury is not enough; it is necessary to respect human life, the dignity of a woman, and the value of truth. Jesus provides examples of conduct that is contrary to the real challenge of the commandments. Angry remarks, lustful looks, and indiscriminate oaths violate the spirit of the commandment. Jesus’ words about lust are similar to statements that Matthew repeats in 18:8-9 (see Mark 9:43, 47).

The third antithesis, on divorce, has been added to the antithesis on adultery because of its related subject matter and the catchword “adultery.” The scriptural passage cited by Jesus is Deut 24:1. His explanation is similar to one that reappears in Matt 19:9, a passage that is not read in Cycle A since its source, Mark 10:11-12, is read on the twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time in Cycle B.

In his explanation of the Deuteronomic text, Jesus takes issue with those who would use the scripture as a warrant for issuing a bill of divorce (the rabbinic *git*) on frivolous grounds.

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The translation of the exception clause in the NAB implicitly refers to Lev 18:6-18. This interpretation continues to enjoy currency among some Catholic interpreters, but most contemporary interpreters, including Catholics, take the exception to be a reference to adultery by a married woman. See the discussion in Raymond F. Collins, *Divorce in the New Testament* (Good News Studies 38. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 84-213, 324-326.

BROKEN FOR US

Each of the antitheses offers material for a homily. The group of antithesis has much to say about a Christian attitude towards law and the commandments.

The homilist might be tempted to preach about marriage. The topic is ever timely and today is the eve of Valentine’s Day. In the Christian calendar of the East February 13 is the feast of Prisca and Aquila, perhaps the best known of early Christian couples. We could possibly reflect on the fact that now just over half of American adults over 18 are married. The percentage has dropped by more than five points in the past decade.

Perhaps it is more urgent, however, that the homilist address the evil of name-calling, as Jesus did. It has long been observed that war-time name-calling is a way to demonize and dehumanize the enemy but calling people names seems to be characteristic of today’s society. On the political scene, “socialist” is used by many to demean politicians who take a stand in favor of social justice. CNN News anchor Rick Sanchez was recently fired after calling Jon Stewart a bigot. The number of suicides of young people who have taken their own lives after they have been call “faggot,” “gay,” or “bitch” is a sad but real commentary on the power of name-calling. And some of the name calling comes out of the mouths of and from the pens of people who consider themselves moral and church-going Christians.

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 20, 2011

LITURGY

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18 challenges the Israelites to be holy as God is holy.

1 Corinthians 3:16-23 proclaims God’s wisdom in dwelling among his people, making of them the temple of God

Matthew 5:38-48 contains the fifth and sixth antitheses of Matthew’s great series of six antitheses (see Matt 5:21-37, read last week). Explaining a passage from Scripture, Jesus rejects an interpretation of the Law which uses a specific precept as a warrant for acting immorally.

The fifth antithesis takes up the law of talion (Exod 21:24-35; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21). The biblical precept suggests that the punishment should be appropriate to the crime but limits the extent of punishment to the severity of the crime. The precept readily became a warrant for revenge. Jesus’ commentary on the law moves beyond legalism and judicial principles. He teaches that retaliation is out of the question. His disciples should not resist an evildoer, that is, they should not react to an evil deed with another evil deed. Jesus offers three illustrations of

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non-resistance, one from ordinary human experience, one based on Jewish law, and one based on the demands of Roman law.

If someone strikes you on the cheek with the back of their hand—an insulting gesture—you should turn the other cheek. The saying is found in Luke 6:29; so it may come from Q, where Jesus’ Aramaic language sometimes shows through in the Greek text. Some commentators suggest that “the other” [“cheek” is supplied in the NAB’s translation of the Greek text] may reflect the Aramaic word for “back,” suggesting that the one who has been insulted should turn his back and walk away.

Jewish law had strict regulations about seizing a poor person’s possessions. The law stipulated that if anyone took someone else’s tunic as a down payment on a debt, the tunic had to be given back before sundown (Exod 22:26-26). Jesus says, let that person have your tunic and your outer garment, which also served as a covering by night, as well.

Roman law had provisions similar to those of eminent domain. If a Roman authority required (see the use of the same verb in Matt 27:32) a person to go a certain distance, that person should be willing to go twice the distance.

The sixth antithesis brings the entire series of antitheses to a close. The scriptural passage at issue is Lev 19:18. Leviticus speaks of love of neighbor. Using a minimalist interpretation, one could take the commandment to mean that there was an obligation to love only one’s neighbor. In effect, it was okay to hate one’s enemy since the enemy was not included within the ambit of the commandment. The Essenes seemed to have adopted this interpretation; they urged their devotees to hate the sons of darkness (1QS 1:10). Jesus would have none of that. Loving those who love you is an attitude found among Gentiles and publicans. In contrast, Jesus urged his disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who hate them.

BROKEN FOR US

Topics for two homilies come readily to mind. One is legal minimalism. How often Catholic Christian abide by the letter of the law! If we “attend” Mass on Sunday we have fulfilled our obligation to pray. If we are willing to exact the proverbial pound of flesh from those who have hurt us, that is okay so long as we act within the parameters of the law. If we do not commit adultery, that’s fine, no matter what our attitudes toward women are. And so forth.

The other homily focuses on love for the enemy. How often do we pray for those whom we consider our enemies? For almost a decade prayers of intercession in our churches have included a prayer for the coalition armed forces serving in Iraq. When was the last time, if ever, that the prayers of petition included a pray for Iraqis, the majority of whom are unarmed civilians? On a personal level, how difficult is it to pray for our enemy, even to pray for someone whom we perceive to have harmed us or even slighted us?

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FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 27, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 49:14-15 presents a poignant picture of God as mother.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5 speaks of Paul’s loyalty to God. Paul is a trustworthy steward of the mysteries of God. He has no need to fear the judgment of human authorities.

Matthew 6:24-34 is an exhortation to trust in God’s power. To a large extent the material contained in the exhortation comes from the Sayings Source used by Matthew and Luke (see Luke 12:22-32).

The gospel lection begins with a statement of principle that urges total commitment to God. Jesus’ words proclaim that it is impossible to live out a divided commitment. The sharp contrast between loving one and hating the other reflects the language of Deut 21:15-17. The social situation evoked by Jesus’ statement appears to be one in which a slave was owned by more than one master. Several rabbinic texts pondered the situation. Jesus’ verdict is clear. We cannot serve two masters. Divided loyalty is impossible. Service of one’s master demands total loyalty and undivided commitment. To make his point even more clearly, Jesus gives an illustration. We cannot serve both God and money (*mamonas*, “mammon”). Real loyalty will be to one or the other, not both at the same time.

“Mammon” is a transliteration of an Aramaic word meaning wealth. In ordinary usage, it did not have negative connotations. The proverbial negativity associated with mammon derives from the way that the word is used in Matt 6:24 and Luke 16:9, 11, 13.

There follows another general statement of principle, namely that we should put aside undue anxiety, worrying not even about our own nourishment and clothing. There are realities that are even more important than what we eat and wear. Life and bodily welfare are more important than a particular diet or kind of apparel.

Thus far Jesus has not indicated why we should not worry but his mention of our body (*soma*) and our life (*psyche*) suggests an answer. Our bodies and our lives are God’s gift to us. With this cue to his listeners, Jesus returns to his illustrations. As for nourishment, we have only to look at the birds flying around. God, “our heavenly Father” (see Matt 5:16, read on February 6), provides them with food. Matthew’s Saying Source identified the birds as “ravens” (see Luke 12:24). Matthew seems to have had Jesus speaking more generically about birds since Jewish tradition considered ravens to be unclean (Lev 11:15; Deut 14:14). As for apparel, consider the beauty of flowers growing in the wild. Solomon was especially noted for his wisdom, but he was also a man of great wealth (see 1 Kgs 10:4-5, 14-27; 2 Chr 9:13-22). Yet the splendor of Solomon’s royal raiment does not measure up to the beauty of the flowers in the field.

Using the rabbinic argument from the lesser to the greater (*qalwa-homer*), Jesus says that if God takes care of birds and wild flowers he will certainly take care of his children. The

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designation of God as “heavenly Father” implies that we humans are his children on earth. We can look to our Father to provide food and clothing for us. “Pagans” (*ta ethne*= “Gentiles”) who do not know the God of Israel enjoy no such confidence because they do not know the Father. They worry about food and clothing; we should not do so.

“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” is the climax of Jesus’ teaching on anxiety. If we make God our real priority, God will take care of us. Jesus’ words can be related to the opening words about loyalty to a single master. In Jesus’ day the slave owner provided food and nourishment for his loyal servants.

Matthew’s final aphorism does not come from the Sayings Source. Rather, it reflects Jewish common-sense wisdom to the effect that we should live day by day. For similar sayings, see Prov 27:1; Qoh 2:23; James 4:13-15; and from the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 100b and *Bekhorot* 9a. In the Lord’s Prayer, we ask that the heavenly Father give us this day our daily bread (Matt 6:11; Luke 11:3). We are to live day to day with utter trust that God will provide for our needs.

BROKEN FOR US

Whom do we trust? Whom can we trust? These are important questions in a society where only a minority of people trust public officials. Moreover, one does not have to be professional marriage counselor to know that one of the leading causes of marital breakup is that spouses have lost trust in one another.

Whom can we trust? Every dollar bill that Americans carry in their wallets bears a reminder of the national motto, “In God we Trust.” Today’s scriptural readings remind us of why we trust in God. God is mother and father to us, the one who takes care of us, the one in whom we can have the utmost confidence.