

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 67-86 by Raymond F. Collins.

January 22, the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, begins the reading of the Gospel according to Mark in earnest. Mark is the oldest of the canonical gospels, written if not in 70 C.E., the year of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, in close proximity to that year. This makes Mark almost twenty years older than any of three other gospel stories in the New Testament.

Part of God’s gift of inspiration to the evangelist was the inspiration to proclaim the gospel in the form of a story about Jesus. Prior to Mark, the good news of our salvation had been proclaimed orally not only in short vignettes about Jesus but also in the form of short confessions, acclamations, and hymns. Ten to twenty years before Mark wrote his story the gospel was written in the form of Paul’s letters to Christians in Thessalonica and other places. Mark proclaimed the gospel in the literary form of a story about Jesus of Nazareth.

The story that Mark tells is clearly episodic. Any narrative consists of a series of episodes placed one after another in the development of its “plot.” Mark strung a number of episodes together but each of these episodes existed on its own in Mark’s tradition. It is Mark who has provided an apparently biographical structure in his arrangement of the sequence of episodes. The structure is Mark’s inspired literary achievement; it does not represent the historical sequence in which the events occurred.

2012 gives us an opportunity to appreciate more fully God’s gift of inspiration to the evangelist. An interruption will occur during the summer months when passages from John 6 are added to the sequence of liturgical readings as a complement to Mark’s introduction of the second story about Jesus feeding a large crowd of people (Mark 6:30-34). Apart from this five-week interruption, homilists should take advantage of this year of the Lord to enable their congregations to appreciate Jesus more fully with the help of the inspired mind and pen of the evangelist Mark.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 5, 2012

LITURGY

Job 7:1-4, 6-7 is a passage in which Job speaks to God from the depth of his suffering.

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23 is a passage in which Paul describes himself as a slave constrained to preach the gospel without any recompense.

Mark 1:29-39 is a continuation of Mark’s story of a day in the life of Jesus. After teaching in the synagogue, the scene of his confrontation with an unclean spirit, Jesus, accompanied by James and John, visited the house of Simon and Andrew. Today’s visitors to the ruins of Capernaum can see a fourth- or fifth-century church built on the site of a first-century dwelling. An old tradition has identified the house as the house of Peter.

Jesus’ visit to the house of Simon and Andrew is significant in many respects, not the least of which is that this is Mark’s first mention of a house, a prime local for the ministry of Jesus throughout Mark’s gospel (cf. Mark 2:1; 3:20; [4:10-12]; 7:17, 23; 9:28, 33; 10:10). Mark’s locating so much of Jesus’ teaching and activity in a house reflects the fact that at the time the

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gospel was written, believers gathered in houses to listen to Jesus’ teaching and experience the power of Jesus in their lives.

“They,” apparently Simon and Andrews, told Jesus that the former’s mother-in-law was suffering from a fever. Before the development of modern medicine, fever was considered to be an illness, not a symptom of illness. In any case, Mark distinguishes the illness of Simon’s mother-in-law from the demonic possession suffered by the man in the synagogue.

Mark’s account of the mother-in-law’s cure follows the typical outline of a miracle story, illness, ritual, result. Jesus takes the initiative in effecting the cure, just as he took the initiative in exorcising the demon from the man in the synagogue. That Jesus’ cure was effective is illustrated by the fact that Simon’s mother-in-law was able to offer the hospitality that she had not previously been able to offer. She was able to serve her guests. Note that throughout this narrative, the evangelist writes about “Simon.” The name “Peter” does not occur in his story about Jesus until Mark 3:16.

Coupled with the story of the exorcism, this short narrative demonstrates that women as well as men are the beneficiaries of Jesus’ ministry. Commentators who are attentive to the role of women in the church note that the verb which Mark uses to describe the mother-in-law’s activity is the verb “serve” (*diekonei*, “wait on” in the NAB translation). The verb and its cognates are used throughout the New Testament to describe the “ministry” of Jesus’ disciples. From this perspective, Simon’s mother-in-law can be seen as the forerunner of ministerial women in the early church.

With sunset came the end of the sabbath observance and the lifting of the prohibition to walk any long distance on the sabbath. In his summary Mark continues to distinguish between cures of the sick and exorcism of the possessed and notes that Jesus didn’t want to get into any shouting matches or name-calling with the demons whom he was going to expel. Apparently Jesus remains in the house while performing the cures and exorcisms. With his use of “all” (*pantas*) and his mention of the “whole” (*hole*) town, Mark underscores the importance of what Jesus had done. His “many” (*pollous*) serves the same function. The semitism emphasizes that the “all” to whom Jesus ministered were not few in number.

The third segment of today’s reading begins with a mention of Jesus leaving Capernaum to go to a deserted place and prayer. His prayer is an indication that he acts as an agent of God, as one who relies of God’s power. The description of his followers, “Simon and those who were with him,” anticipates the leadership role that Simon Peter will exercise among the disciples of Jesus. He serves as their principal spokesperson throughout Mark’s narrative. Simon says that everyone was looking for Jesus, apparently expecting him to return to Capernaum. Jesus, however, says that his ministry is not to be confined to Capernaum. He has to go elsewhere. The Markan summary in v. 39, the final verse in today’s gospel lection, indicates that Jesus’ Capernaum ministry was extended throughout Galilee.

BROKEN FOR US

The complex narrative found in today’s gospel reading offers many possibilities for homiletic development. The importance of the home as a locus of ministry, Jesus’ outreach to people of both sexes, the role of men and women in the church, Jesus constantly taking the initiative,—a harbinger of a theology of grace and vocation!—the importance of prayer, the expansive nature of Christian ministry,—it must not be confined to where it has already been experienced!—and the idea that so many are effected by Jesus’ ministry are among the many different themes evoked by today’s gospel which a homilist might address.

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SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 12, 2012

LITURGY

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46 deals with the ritual impurity incurred as a result of "leprosy," a term that the Bible uses, both in the Old Testament and the New, as a generic designation for various skin diseases. Modern medicine uses different terms to distinguish these skin ailments, including the term Hansen's disease which is leprosy in the proper sense of the term.

1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 reminds us that all we do should be done for the glory of God.

Mark 1:40-45 not only shows that Jesus' ministry extends beyond normal social structures but also demonstrates the respect that Jesus, a faithful Jew, had for the law, the temple, and the priesthood.

In Jewish Palestine at the time of Jesus, in keeping with the provisions of Leviticus 13-14, a leper was ostracized from society. The common assumption might have been that the disease was communicable; hence, the leper was obliged to live outside of town. The leper was required to warn people when he came near to them (Lev 13:45-46).

This social outcast, a man rejected by society for no fault of his own, approached Jesus and asked to be cleansed. The observation that the person suffering from an illness asks to be cured is characteristic of healing stories. Were the leper to be cleansed, not only would he be cured of his ailment, he would also be allowed to reenter society. His "if you wish" acknowledges Jesus' ability to do what he asks. Taking pity on the poor fellow, Jesus physically reached out to the man and touched him. It was a daring thing to do. According to the dominant social conventions, such a touch would have made Jesus "impure." But no impurity was contracted since the man was immediately (*euthys*) cleansed. Power went out from Jesus to cure the man (cf. Mark 5:27-30).

The word that Jesus addressed to the man, "be cleansed" (*katharistheti*), is in the passive voice. Biblical scholars describe the use of the passive voice in passages such as this as a divine or theological passive whose use implies that God is the one who is acting. Through Jesus God cleansed the man of his leprosy.

Jesus sternly ordered the man not to say anything about what had happened. He also ordered him to show himself to the priest who should examine him outside of town (cf. Lev 14:2-3). The cleansed leper was also told to offer a sacrifice of two male lambs, a ewe, and a quantity of choice flour mixed with oil, as prescribed in the Law (Lev 14:10). Satisfaction of these ritual requirements would assure everyone that the leper had been cleansed and was no longer impure.

Mark leaves it to the reader's imagination as to whether or not the leper followed the prescriptions of the Law as he was told to do. On the other hand, Mark lets his readers know that the cleansed leper did not obey Jesus command to keep silent about the incident. Instead, he talked openly about what had happened with the result that Jesus could not publicly enter a town. Again, it is typical of healing stories that a person who asks for healing tells the story of the successful cure.

Literary irony characterizes the conclusion of Mark's narrative. On the one hand, the expressions "publicize" (*keryssein*) and word (*logon*) used to describe the leper speaking about what had happened are technical terms used to describe the gospel and its content. On the other hand, Jesus stayed outside towns, in deserted places (*exo ep' eremois*), the areas where lepers usually lived.

BROKEN FOR US

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The gospel reading describes Jesus’ ministry to a person who is socially ostracized. His behavior is a paradigm for his disciples.

In the nineteenth century Damien Josef de Veuster (1840-1889), showed that he was a true disciple of Jesus. A statue of Damien is to be found in the Capitol’s statuary hall. Damien spent his life ministering to lepers on Molokai, an island in what is now the state of Hawaii. He contracted the disease from those to whom he minister, eventually dying from it. Beatified by John Paul II in 1995, Damien of Molokai was canonized by Benedict XVI in 2009.

In the twenty-first century, many people consider themselves ostracized from the church, the divorced, gays and lesbians, those on drugs, young (and old) people living together, those who don’t belong to the same social level as others in the parish—to name only a few who consider that they don’t belong in church. Often they perceive the church as a community that does not welcome them. Sadly, their perception is often accurate.

How does the church reach out to these people? How do members of the parish reach out to these people? How does a pastor reach out to them? How does the individual Christian reach out? The answer indicates whether a person is a true follower of Jesus or not.

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 19, 2012

LITURGY

Isaiah 43:18-19, 21-22, 24b-25, tells the Israelites that rather than think about the past, they should think about something new, the future, the equally great but still future return of the Israelites to the Promised Land.

2 Corinthians 1:18-22 is part of Paul’s response to the Corinthians’ complaint that he was fickle because he had not gone back to them as soon as he had promised.

Mark 2:1-12 begins with a setting of the scene. After taking refuge in deserted places outside of town (Mark 1:45), Jesus returned to Capernaum. When people heard that he was in his house—see the remark on the house in Mark’s narrative in the commentary on Mark 1:29, a verse in the gospel lection for February 5—people flocked to him. The house was not able to contain them all, so they gathered outside the door to listen to him as he spoke the word. Mark’s setting of the scene echoes the enthusiasm that pervades the first part of the Markan narrative. Everyone seems to be responsive to what Jesus says and does.

That is soon to change. Now for the first time in Mark’s story about Jesus, Jesus has a conflict with another human being. Previously Jesus had confronted demons (Mark 1:24-26, 34), now he is confronted by a group of scribes (Mark 2:6-11). Contemporary studies suggest that only about three percent of the population of Roman Palestine was literate. The scribes were among those who could read and write. Jewish scribes were not necessarily Pharisees but they knew the Law. There is, nevertheless, a strong likelihood that Jewish scribes in Galilee shared the Pharisee’s concerns about the faithful observance of the Law. The episode in today’s gospel reading is the first in Mark’s series of Galilean controversies (Mark 2:1-3:6).

The occasion for the controversy is Jesus’ cure of a man who was unable to walk. Mark’s description of the cure follows the outline of a typical miracle story. First, the scene is set in such a way as to highlight the difficulty of the miracle. Not only is the man unable to walk to Jesus—he has to be carried!—but, in addition, the stretcher-bearers’ access to Jesus is impeded by the crowds gathered around the door of the house. A hole must be dug through the thatch roof so that the

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paralytic can be brought near to Jesus. The four stretcher-bearers were men who trusted in God; they had faith. Second, Jesus effects the miracle by means of an authoritative statement, “Rise, pick up your mat, and go home” (v. 11), preceded by “your sins are forgiven” (v. 5). Third, that the miracle took place is affirmed. Not only does the previously paralytic do what he was told—he picks up his mat and walks away—but there is also a choral response. “Everyone” (*panton*) who saw what had happened joins together in saying “We have never seen anything like this” (v. 12). It is to be noted that the crowds glorified God who worked through Jesus; they did not glorify Jesus.

Mark places the controversy within the miracle story. The occasion for the controversy is that Jesus had said to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven.” In the societal thinking of the day, diseases and infirmities were considered to be the consequence of sin. The forgiveness of sin would result in the cure of these maladies.

The scribes, faithful Jewish monotheists, object to Jesus’ statement about the forgiveness of sins with the rejoinder, “God alone can forgive sins.” Jesus does not reject their assertion. Rather, he asks a question, the first of many posing questions that come from the lips of Jesus in Mark’s gospel. Knowing what is on the minds of the scribes, Jesus asks whether it is easier to *say* “your sins are forgiven” or *say* “Rise, pick up your mat and walk.” If his sins were forgiven, the man would be able to walk. It would be impossible for Jesus to demonstrate that he can forgive sins, but everyone could see that the man can walk. Hence, he tells the man to get up and walk. Jesus did what was verifiable so that the onlookers could infer something that could not be verified, namely, that Jesus actually forgave the man his sins.

Jesus refers to himself as the “Son of Man,” a significant title in Mark’s gospel, where it occurs fourteen times. The expression is a Greek translation of a Aramaic and Hebrew two-word term that means, ‘human being.’ Since the term appears in Mark not to distinguish Jesus from animals but from God, the connotation of the term is “the mortal one.” The cure of the paralytic is, however, the only miracle that is specifically attributed to the Son of Man in the Markan narrative.

BROKEN FOR US

The controversy in today’s gospel is about Jesus’ ability to forgive sins. His cure of the paralytic was proof that he was capable of forgiving sins.

A central tenet of Christian faith is that Jesus died for our sins. How is that radical once-for-all forgiveness mediated to each of us? Roman Catholics hold that the sacrament of reconciliation is a privileged mediation of the divine forgiveness brought about through Jesus’ death and resurrection. The sacrament of penance is not, however, the only activity which we are involved which mediates God’s forgiveness to us. The *Baltimore Catechism* spoke about a perfect act of contrition. The Fathers of the Church drew attention to other realities of the Christian life that mediate forgiveness, the community’s celebration of the eucharist—which includes the penitential rite and the priest’s prayer for forgiveness—prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and other acts of Christian love.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

February 26, 2012

LITURGY

Genesis 9:8-15 tells the story of Noah and his family being rescued from the Great Flood.

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1 Peter 3:18-22 speaks of Christ’s suffering and death as leading us to God. The anonymous author of the letter considers the episode of the Great Flood to be a figure of baptism.

Mark 1:12-15 is a short narrative located at the beginning of Mark’s story about Jesus.

The first part of the narrative (vv. 12-13) gives Mark’s version of Jesus’ temptation by Satan (cf. Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). It begins with the eschatologically urgent *euthys*, “immediately,” “at once,”—not found in the NAB translation—characteristic of the opening episodes in Mark’s story. In the narrative, Jesus is passive. He does nothing. The actors are Satan and the angels. Satan tempts Jesus; the angels minister to him.

The little scene is programmatic. The “forty days” symbolize an entire period of time. Jesus is tempted throughout the forty days. The forty days represent the entire time of Jesus’ ministry. The time of Jesus ministry is a time of cosmic conflict between the powers of evil, symbolized in the temptation scene by Satan, and the power of God, symbolized in the temptation scene by the angels. Apocalyptic imagery is used in the visual, a scene of wild beasts with Jesus in their midst (cf. Ps 91:11-13). Jesus is the agent of God in the struggle with the powers of evil. He is not destroyed by the wild animals; the power of God cannot be overcome by the forces of evil.

The second part of today’s gospel reading (vv. 14-15) describes in summary fashion Jesus’ first activity as God’s agent, his proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand and that now is the time for repentance. This part of the narrative was read on the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 22. Additional interpretative remarks on these verses can be read under this date.

BROKEN FOR US

In preaching today’s gospel passage, the homilist should be aware that he is preaching the Markan story. The triple temptation and the idea that Jesus was fasting for forty days are not part of the Markan. These familiar motifs come to us from the later gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Each of the two parts of the reading offers food for Lenten thoughts. Verses 12-13 describe Jesus’ temptation by Satan. As God’s agent, Jesus withstood the temptation. In this, he was supported by messengers from God. During the course of his life, he was confronted by evil powers. Lent season reminds us that we, too, are tempted. Evil confronts us throughout our lives. As baptized Christians, we are called to be faithful to God but we cannot withstand temptation by ourselves, relying only on our own power. We need God’s help and the help of God’s servants, other believers, in order to withstand the forces of evil that pressure us each and every day of our lives.

Verses 14-15 announce the impending coming of the Kingdom of God. In the light of this announcement, we are called to change our lives, to adopt the behavioral pattern of conversion. Lent is not a time for giving up something other than sin; it is a time for us to do something. It is a time for us to focus on our personal and communal patterns of conversion. It is time for us to consider what needs to be changed in our lives. Then we must do what we can to make that change effective.