

An excerpt from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," *Emmanuel* 116:1 (2010) 75-94 by Raymond F. Collins.

The education of the laity, particularly the adult laity, is a major challenge for the staff of most parishes. Even mini courses are not very well attended. Those who do attend are generally only the most interested of our parishioners; and they are few in number. The less interesting the topic of a mini course, the smaller the attendance. Indeed, in most parishes it is only presentations on current hot button issues, followed by discussion, that generate any real interest.

Given this situation, most of us would probably not try to give a course, even a short one, on the Hebrew Scriptures. Our efforts, were we to make an effort, would for the most part be in vain. We have, nonetheless, an opportunity to teach the people about these Scriptures when we use the first reading of the liturgy as the basis for our homilies.

That this is so was brought home to me just a few weeks ago. Since I began writing these homiletic reflections with a concentration on the first reading, I have attempted to follow my own advice and preach on the first reading. I have done so on all but one or two Sundays in the past couple of years. And so it was that I was standing outside St. Luke's church in Barrington, Rhode Island, after Mass on Sunday a few weeks ago. One of the parishioners asked me if he could ask a question. The request was not unusual but it reminded me of the importance of speaking about the Hebrew Scriptures when we preach to the people. The parishioner's question came in the form of an inquisitive comment, "In your homily you called God 'Lord,' I thought that Jesus was Lord."

What a teaching moment the Lord had given me!

## THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

January 3, 2010

### LITURGY

**Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6** describes the revelation of the mystery, God's plan of salvation, to the apostles and prophets.

**Matthew 2:1-12** describes the visit of the magi to the newborn child.

**Isaiah 60:1-6** is an oracle addressed to Jerusalem that promises redemption. The personified city is spoken to as if it were a woman, a common personification in all three parts of the Book of Isaiah.

The city is invited to wake up, as a person does when the light of dawning day wakes him or her up from sleep. In the light of the day that is dawning, the city is invited to look into the distance where the darkness of night has not yet been dispelled. Turning its eyes from the distant darkness to the light that surrounds it, Jerusalem is invited to celebrate its salvation.

Three images flesh out the author's portrayal of salvation. The first is that of Israel/Jerusalem reflecting the Lord's glory to the nations (cf. Isa 6:3; Ezek 1:4-28; 10:4). Israel is called to be a light to the nations (Isa 42:6; 49:6). The nations and their leaders will profit from the light reflected by Israel. Seeking additional light they will stream to Israel (Isa 45:4). Israel will become the center of God's redeemed humanity.

The second image is that of the reunification of the nation. Israel's dispersed sons and daughters, even infants carried in arms, will come home. Earlier parts of the Book of Isaiah had mentioned Jews dwelling in Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, and Mesopotamia. The female figure of Jerusalem allows us to think of the city as a mother who is eager to welcome her children home. In its reestablished unity (Isa 49:18, 22), Israel will experience the salvation of God.

The third image portrays the experience of salvation in material terms. Reflecting the theme of eschatological reversal, the passage pictures the poverty of Israel replaced by the wealth of

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nations (Isa 61:6; 66:12). These riches will come to Israel from the west, transported by ships crossing the Mediterranean to Israel's shores. These riches will come to Israel from the east, carried across the desert regions by caravans of camels and dromedaries. Opposing east and west and contrasting water-born and desert-traversed gifts, the oracle speaks of the fullness of blessings that will come to Israel. The material blessings that God gives to his people come from everywhere.

## BROKEN FOR US

The church has chosen this reading as the first reading for the Feast of the Epiphany of the Lord because it finds in its language a symbolic description of the universality or catholicity of the church.

Isaiah's images present a challenge to the church. Like Jerusalem, the church is called to wake up, to rise from its somnolence and reflect the glory of the Lord to those who do not believe, to those who, as it were, live in darkness. Recurring scandals and virulent discussion have marred the church in recent years, seriously preventing it from realizing its God-given mission, from fulfilling its vocation as a light to the nations, *Lumen Gentium*. These are the first words of Vatican II's Doctrinal Constitution on the Church, the words that metaphorically speak about the nature of the church and announce its mission.

The second image found in today's reading presents another challenge to the church. We can think of the church universal and ask, what is preventing the unity of the church at the present time? What needs to be done to bring about the unity of the church? We can think of the Roman Catholic Church and ask, what needs to be done to bring about greater organic unity with the Roman Catholic Church? Why is it that sometimes acrimonious accusations divide Roman Catholics from one another?

In our self-satisfaction at the faults or deficiencies of others (cf. Rom 2:1), we can fail to recognize that our own failure to bring about greater unity within the church prevents the church from being a light to the nations. What steps towards church unity are we going to take during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity later this month?

## THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

January 10, 2010

LITURGY: Optional Readings for Year C

**Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7** is one of the important passages in the Pastoral Epistles that highlight the manifestation of God, using terminology that belongs to the *epiphaneia* word group. Verse 13 speaks of the appearance (*epiphaneia*, the epiphany or manifestation) of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ.

**Luke 3:15-16, 21-22** offers a brief description of the preaching of John and a narrative description of Jesus' baptism.

**Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11** is the beginning of Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), the Book of Consolation, which contains oracles by an anonymous prophet who spoke during the final years of the Babylonian Exile.

The setting of today's oracle is a session of the heavenly court in which the Lord addresses the hosts of heaven. The verbs, “comfort” and “speak,” are in the plural as the Lord speaks to the angelic beings, commanding them to console Jerusalem with the announcement that the exile, Israel's “service,” is coming to an end. In this passage “Jerusalem” is used metonymically as a designation for Israel. This is common usage in Second Isaiah, where

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“Jerusalem” is used in this way more than thirty times. Yahweh’s covenant with Israel provides the context for the Lord’s command to the angelic host; “my people” and “your God” belong to the vocabulary of the Lord’s covenant with Israel (cf. Jer 11:4). The time of the exile is described as a punishment endured by Israel because of its sins, its failure to live up to its covenantal relationship with Yahweh. That the Exile was a punishment for Israel’s sin is a common thought in Second Isaiah (see Isa 42:23-25; 43:26-27; 44:22; 48:9-11).

One member of the heavenly court speaks up, ordering that a road be prepared so that those in exile will have a relatively easy return trip from Babylon. The angelic order is addressed to no one in particular. This suggests that the way for the exiles’ return will be readied by a heavenly initiative rather than by human effort.

Unlike the difficulties that afflicted the Israelites’ ancestors during their exodus from Egypt across a barren desert, the return from Babylon will be relatively easy. When the exiles are restored to their land, the glory of the Lord will appear (cf. Ezek 1:28; 10:18-19; 43:1-5). The return of the exiled Israelites will be a manifestation of the Lord’s glory, a demonstration of his majestic rule over all things. Then the oracle will have been fulfilled.

In the second part of today’s reading (vv. 9-11), the returnees are given a prophetic mission. With a loud voice, they are to announce the good news (*euangelizomenos*) that God will revenge Israel’s enemies and that he will take care of his people. The message is expressed metaphorically. God is likened to a warrior who defends his people and overcomes their enemies; his mighty arm is a symbol of his power. To portray God’s caring for his people, the oracle employs the image of a kindly shepherd who carries the little lambs as he leads their mother to pasture.

## BROKEN FOR US

It is surprising that the compilers of the liturgical texts have omitted Luke 3:4-6 from their selection of a cameo of verses that portray the preaching of John the Baptist. Luke 3:4-6 is a citation of Isaiah 40:3-6. Had the gospel lection included these verses, the link between the reading from the prophet and the reading from the evangelist would be readily apparent. Despite being omitted from the liturgical lection, Isaiah 40:3-6 belongs to the context of the gospel reading, providing an unexpressed link between the first and third readings of today’s liturgy.

The first reading is a good example of the paradigm of God’s dealing with human beings. God’s call implies a mission; redemption involves responsibility. The oppressed Israelites were delivered from Babylon; returned to their native land they were told to announce the good news. Commentators on the writings of St. Paul commonly observe that an imperative follows an indicative and that the charisms are gifts of the Spirit given to the members of the church to be used by them so that the church might truly be the body of Christ.

Baptism is God’s free gift to us but it entails the responsibility to avoid sin and to participate in the mission of Christ, priest, prophet, and king. This thought should be the theme of today’s homily, with Isaiah 40:3-6 as its horizon.

## SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 17, 2010

### LITURGY

**1 Corinthians 12:4-11** is the first of Paul’s lists of charisms, gifts of the Holy Spirit given to members of the church to enable them to minister in the church.

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**John 2:1-11** narrates the story of Jesus' presence at the wedding feast in Cana.

**Isaiah 62:1-5** is the beginning of a poem that celebrates the vindication and restoration of Jerusalem, destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. Despite its destruction, Yahweh remains committed to the city and its inhabitants. Yahweh will not rest until he has saved the city, commonly called Jerusalem but also known as Zion.

Yahweh's saving activity is symbolized by the new (nick)names given to the city. When God gives a name to someone or something, he establishes his sovereignty over the one named. Yahweh's giving a new name to Jerusalem symbolizes a change in its status and its relationship with him. So it was with Abram/Abraham (Gen 17:5, 15), so it will be with Jerusalem. People, especially the conquerors of Jerusalem, had called the city "Forsaken" and "Desolate." These names symbolize the fact that the inhabitants of the city were in exile, the city itself forcibly abandoned. When Yahweh acts to save the city, it will be called "My Delight" and "Espoused." The city will be changed because it will have a pair of new names.

"My Delight" symbolizes the joys that the restored city will experience. The poet uses royal imagery to flesh out his picture of the glorious situation of restored and renewed Jerusalem. The city will be like the royal crown, held in Yahweh's hand. The surrounding nations and their kings will recognize the royal status of the city of Jerusalem. The name, "my delight," expresses Jerusalem's new status and the prominence that the Lord gives to the city.

The name "Espoused" symbolizes the relationship between the Lord and the city. The poet envisions this relationship as a marriage relationship. Jerusalem is the bride, Yahweh the bridegroom. As a husband rejoices in his wife, proud of her beauty and her achievements, so the Lord will rejoice in Jerusalem.

The use of marital imagery to describe the relationship between Yahweh and his people occurs several times in the Bible's prophetic books, notably in Hosea but also in such passages as Isaiah 49:18 and 54:4-8. The imagery expresses Yahweh's unconditional love for his people. Today's poem suggests that, although strains have been placed on the relationship, Yahweh will remain faithful to his covenant with Israel. Yahweh will take care of his bride, even in one of her darkest hours.

## BROKEN FOR US

The obvious link between the reading from Third Isaiah and the reading from the Fourth Gospel is the marriage theme. The readings use symbolic language to speak of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel, on the one hand, and the covenantal relationship between Jesus and the church, on the other. Not to be overlooked is the fact that each of the readings portrays the active expression of the divine bridegroom's love at a time of serious need. Yahweh restores royal dignity to the city that had been destroyed and abandoned. Jesus provides a super abundance of wine when the wine had run out. The quantity and quality of the wine symbolize the many covenantal gifts that Jesus gives to his church.

## THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 24, 2010

### LITURGY

**1 Corinthians 12:12-30** describes the local church at Corinth as the body of Christ.

**Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21** includes the prologue to the Third Gospel and the evangelist's description of the first episode in Jesus' public ministry.

**Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10** describes a scene in which Ezra the priest/scribe read the law to the

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people recently returned to the land of Israel from their exile in Babylon. This ceremony of (re)commitment to the law took place in the temple precincts on the first day of the seventh month of the year (Neh 8:1), sometime around Yom Kippur and the Feast of Tabernacles.

Today’s liturgical lection omits two lists of thirteen names. Nehemiah 8:4b gives the names of thirteen men, standing to Ezra’s right and left as he read from the law. Most probably these were heads of prominent families. Nehemiah 8:7 gives the name of thirteen Levites who assisted Ezra in instructing the people.

Returning to Israel from Babylon (Ezra 7:14), Ezra carried the book of the Law with him. The book was some version of the Pentateuch, probably not very different from contemporary copies of the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy).

So that the people could see and hear him, Ezra stood on a dais constructed for the occasion. From early morning to mid-day Ezra read the Scriptures aloud. Reading for six or seven hours would not have allowed Ezra to proclaim the entire Pentateuch but the span of time would have given him an opportunity to read a substantial portion of the text. Those who gathered for the reading of the Torah included men, women, and older children. The people stood up for the reading of the Scripture. It is significant that it was not only men but also women and older children who formed the assembly. Having heard the reading of Scripture, they proclaimed their fidelity to the law.

The reading began with a blessing by Ezra, to which the people, their hands outstretched in the gesture of prayer, responded with an emphatic double “Amen.” The response announced their agreement with the blessing and confirmed their acceptance of the Law. Then, prostrating themselves, they worshipped the Lord. The blessing of the assembly and the worship of the Lord having taken place, the reading could begin.

Most likely Ezra read the text in Hebrew. He was assisted by thirteen Levites who instructed the people, in accord with their traditional role (Deut 33:10; 2 Chr 17:7-9; 35:3). It is likely that Ezra read the text paragraph by paragraph with the assisting Levites translating what Ezra had read into Aramaic so that the people could understand what was being read.

As leader of the assembly, Ezra announced that the day was a holy day, a day of celebration rather than a day of mourning. It was a day for partying, for enjoying fine food and drink. Ezra sent the people home, to enjoy the day, encouraging them to share their food and drink with those who were not prepared to celebrate a festival. They could enjoy the day because they understood what had been read to them (Neh 8:12). They knew that the Lord was their strength and that they were the Lord’s people.

## BROKEN FOR US

The first and third readings in today’s liturgy focus on the reading of the Scriptures. Reading a passage from Third Isaiah, Jesus portrays his ministry as the fulfillment of Scripture and as a ministry to the poor and otherwise disadvantaged. The scene is strategically placed at the beginning of Luke’s account of the public ministry so that the readers of his gospel understand the true nature of Jesus’ ministry. Ezra reads from the Torah so that the people newly restored to their homeland from a place of exile can accept God’s word and begin their life as God’s people.

These readings are a reminder of the role that the Sacred Scriptures play in the life of the church. Like Ezra’s assembly of people, the church is a gathering of people who come together to hear and understand the Word of God. The reading from the Gospel according to Luke also has much to say about the importance of the Scriptures in the life of the church. It reminds us of

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the nature of Jesus’ mission, continued in the church. The church is a gathering of people called together to listen to the reading of the Word of God and accept it as a word addressed to them, to affirm them, to encourage them, and to challenge them.

This may be the occasion for the homilist to remind the congregation that only two of the documents promulgated by the Second Vatican Documents had the status of a dogmatic constitution. Those documents were *Lumen Gentium*, on the church, and *Dei Verbum*, on the word of God. Today’s homily really should focus on the role of the Scriptures in the life of the church. How do we, preachers and congregation alike, respond to God’s gift of his word to us?

#### **FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

January 31, 2010

#### **LITURGY**

**1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13** contains Paul’s famous paean on love.

**Luke 4:21-31** describes the people’s negative reaction, even violent hostility, to the words of grace that Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue.

**Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19** describes the call and commissioning of a young man from Anathoth, Jeremiah, as a prophet of the Lord. God called Jeremiah, a son of the priest Hilkiyah, while he was still in his mother’s womb. That Jeremiah was called by God even before his birth indicates that he was not a self-appointed prophet. He had no choice in the matter. From the time that Jeremiah began to exist God chose him to be a prophet.

The prophetic role that God assigned to Jeremiah had significance beyond Judah’s borders. Jeremiah was a prophet to the nations, proclaiming God’s word for the nations to see and hear (cf. Jer 1:9-10).

Jeremiah’s was no easy mission and he was reluctant to accept the challenge (Jer 1:6-7) but God prevailed, putting words into Jeremiah’s mouth. Those were the words that the prophet was told to announce. He was, after all, a prophet [pro-phet], one who speaks on behalf of another. Jeremiah, in effect, was to be God’s spokesman. He was to be ready for the task, girding his loins and standing tall while delivering the message.

The last verses of the reading describe God warning Jeremiah about those who would rise up against him, his enemies. God tells Jeremiah not to let the presence and opposition of enemies get him down. God will strengthen him so that the prophet can get the message out.

The biblical text uses the image of a fortified city, standing strong against its enemies, to symbolize the strength that the Lord will give to his prophet. Kings, and princes, and priests and people will assail the city but they will not be able to destroy it. Similarly, enemies will rise up against Jeremiah, attacking him fiercely. Nonetheless, the word of the Lord will prevail. And God will deliver his prophet.

#### **BROKEN FOR US**

The reading from the Gospel of Luke describes the reaction of the hearers to Jesus’ proclamation of the word of God. The skepticism with which Jesus’ words were first received turned to violent opposition. Almost miraculously Jesus escaped from the violence, reminding us that God stands by his prophets. The important thing is that the message be proclaimed, despite the opposition that might arise.

God’s word sometimes makes people uncomfortable but this is no reason for those who are appointed to preach God’s word to refrain from doing so. Preachers in non-liturgical

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churches have the “luxury” of being able to choose the readings that they would like to use in a given service. Preachers in the liturgical churches have no such option. We may not pick and choose among the scriptures those that we would like to preach.

The different sets of readings in Cycle A, B, and C have been chosen so that people have an opportunity to hear the word of God proclaimed to them in a breath that approximates as fully as possible the word of God. Some passages make us preachers uncomfortable; some passages might make the congregation even more than uncomfortable. Neither form of discomfort is adequate reason for the preacher to avoid preaching God’s word. Jeremiah and Luke remind us that God stands by those who preach his word faithfully, that is, when fashionable, and when not so fashionable (2 Tim 4:2).