

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.

SOLEMNITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

January 1, 2011

LITURGY

Numbers 6:22-27 contains the blessing of Aaron, which Moses’ brother and, later, the priests of Israel pronounced over God’s people.

Galatians 4:4-7 speaks of the consequences of our being called children of God.

Luke 2:16-21 is a striking passage in which lowly shepherds provide interpretive responses to the birth of the child.

At the time of Jesus shepherds were not held in very high esteem but Luke portrays them as men who responded in faith to the angel’s message (Luke 2:11). Their haste symbolizes the enthusiasm of their response. Having seen the child, they communicated the good news to others. In the gospels and other early Christian literature, “make known” (*gnorizo*) suggests that a message is conveyed with a certain degree of solemnity. In the New Testament the verb essentially functions as a technical term in reference to the proclamation of the salvation event in Christ. Luke asserts that all who heard the gospel message proclaimed by the shepherds were amazed by it.

In contrast with the role of the shepherds as evangelists, Luke presents Mary as a woman of faith who ponders the meaning of recent events (see Luke 2:51). Throughout the gospels Mary is principally portrayed as a woman of faith, as she is in verse 19. For more about Mary in the scriptures, read Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

With regard to people, the shepherds functioned as evangelists. With regard to God, the shepherds imitated the angels in glorifying and praising God (see 2:13). Having fulfilled their evangelical mission, they returned to give thanks and praise to God.

The gospel lection concludes with a short note about Jesus’ circumcision. The parallelism between John the Baptist’s circumcision and naming and Jesus’ circumcision and

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naming is obvious (see Luke 1:59-60). That Jesus was circumcised as the law required (see Gen 17:10-11; Lev 12:2-30) is one of several narrative features in the first few chapters of Luke’s gospel which presents Joseph, Mary, and Jesus as pious and law-abiding Jews. That Jesus receives the name given by the angel shows that Mary and Joseph were not only obedient to the law but that they faithfully fulfilled the will of God as made known by the angel (Luke 1:31).

BROKEN FOR US

The characters in today’s gospel story have much to teach us about the virtue of faith. The shepherds teach us that faith should lead us to share our faith with others, to be evangelists in the basic sense of the word. They also teach us that faith should lead to joyful prayer and thanksgiving. Men and women of faith join with the angels in offering thanks and praise to God for God’s gift of salvation effected in and through Jesus.

Mary teaches us that people of faith reflect upon what they believe. What does it mean to believe that Jesus is the son of the Most High (Luke 1:32)? Mary also teaches us that faith requires that men and women of faith respond to God’s will as that is revealed to us in the scriptures but also as God’s will is made known to us in other ways.

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

January 2, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 60:1-6 describes people coming to Jerusalem from different nations. They were guided by the glory of the Lord that has descended upon the holy city.

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 proclaims that Gentiles are co-heirs with Jews in the promise that has been realized in Jesus Christ through the gospel.

Matthew 2:1-11 describes the magi’s search for the newborn king of the Jews.

The third main character in the story is King Herod. The Roman senate had appointed the powerful Idumean as king of the Jews in 40 B.C.E. He gained control of Jerusalem in 37 B.C.E. reigning as king until his death in 4 B.C.E. His reign was noted for its important construction projects, especially Caesarea Maritima and the temple at Jerusalem. Paranoid, he built a number of fortresses scattered around Palestine, the most famous of which is the one at Masada. Just three years ago, Israeli archeologists discovered yet another sign of his extravagance: a 400-seat private theater decorated with beautiful Roman paintings in the winter palace at Herodion. King Herod’s cruelty was legendary; he put to death even members of his own family. Herod’s story is the background against which Matthew wrote today’s narrative. Matthew’s story of Jesus’ infancy is similar in many respects to the Jewish stories about Moses that feature his escape from the clutches of pharaoh (see especially Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities* (9:9-15).

The narrative does not indicate the number of magi in the caravan. The West’s traditional “three magi” is based on their offering three gifts. In the Christian tradition of the East, there are typically four magi. Four is a symbol of fullness. “Magi” is impossible to translate. Of Persian origin, it would suggest that the magi came from Persia (modern Iran). Their interest in astrology—the “star” was probably a comet—suggests that they came from Babylon (modern Iraq). The gifts, however, suggest that they came from the desert areas of Arabia or Syria. Their announced intention was to “do homage” to the newborn. The verb

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(*proskyneo*) is one that appears frequently in Matthew’s gospel to describe the reverential posture of those who approach Jesus with due respect. The word is used three times in today’s story (Matt 2:2, 8, 11; see 4:9, 10; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 20:20; 28:9, 17).

Jesus is identified by name only once, namely, at the beginning of the narrative. The magi speak of him as “king of the Jews,” the title that would be affixed to the identification plaque at the crucifixion (see Matt 27:11, 29). Since this was Herod’s official title, the magi’s use of the title would suggest that they were looking for someone who would someday usurp Herod’s throne. Herod implicitly speaks of the newborn as the Christ, a designation whose messianic (and political) connotations would be well understood by Jews (see Matt 1:1, 16, 18). Bethlehem, Jesus’ birthplace (see John 7:42), is the town of David. Matthew uses a fulfillment citation, based on Micah 5:2 to underscore the historico-theological significance of the village. Entering the house where the child and his mother were, the magi accomplished what they set out to do, namely, pay homage and offer their gifts. Christian tradition speaks of the gift of gold as a sign of Jesus’ royalty, the frankincense as a token of his divinity, and the myrrh as a sign of his humanity culminating in his death.

The story of representatives of the Gentile world coming to Jesus at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel anticipates the gospel’s final story, the commissioning of the disciples to preach the gospel to the whole world (Matt 28:16-20).

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

January 9, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 contains the first of the four canticles of the Servant of the Lord in Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12).

Acts 10:34-38 comes from Peter’s discourse in Cornelius’ house and describes Jesus’ baptism as his anointing with the Holy Spirit and power.

Matthew 3:13-17 gives Matthew’s version of the baptism of Jesus (see Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; cf. Acts 1:22). With the baptism of Jesus the preparatory mission of John is essentially fulfilled.

Matthew’s relatively short narrative has three foci. The first is the dialogue between John and Jesus, a feature that appears only in Matthew’s gospel. It is difficult to determine the nature of John’s reluctance to baptize Jesus. It may be that John’s hesitancy was due to his awareness of Jesus’ superiority and the superiority of Jesus’ baptism with fire and the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:11). On the other hand, the dialogue may have served to provide an answer for Christians who, being aware of Jesus’ sinlessness (see 2 Cor 5:2; Heb 7:26; 9:14; cf. John 3:30, in next week’s gospel reading), found it difficult to understand why Jesus received a baptism for the repentance of sins (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). To this embarrassment Jesus responds, “It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” This is the first of nine mentions of righteousness in Matthew’s gospel. In his narrative “righteousness” (*dikaio syne*) describes God’s plan of salvation, the fulfillment of his will in every respect (see Matt 21:32, in reference to John the Baptist).

The second focus is on the vision experienced by Jesus after the baptism. The open heavens, a common motif in apocalyptic literature, suggest new possibilities of communication between God and humans (see Ezek 1:1; 2 Macc 3:25-26; 2 *Baruch* 22, John 1:51; Acts 7:55-56; 10:11; Rev 11:19 19:11-21). The verb is in the passive voice, indicating that God opened the heavens so that this communication could take place. The other element in Jesus’ vision was the

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descent of the Spirit, indicating that the age of the Spirit (see Isa 61:1), the final times were about to begin. The four evangelists concur in describing the descent of the Spirit by means of the symbol of the dove. Since rabbinic lore used the symbol of the dove in reference to the Spirit's hovering over the water at the time of creation, it is likely that the dove points to the beginning of a new creation.

The third focus is on the divine announcement, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22 describe the heavenly voice as one that speaks directly to Jesus. Matthew, on the other hand, uses a verb in the third person singular thereby making the divine communication a formal pronouncement. This required the evangelist to modify the text of Psalm 2:7, to which an allusion to Isaiah 42:1 (see today's first reading) has been added. Since Psalm 2 is an enthronement psalm, the divine announcement proclaims both Jesus' royal status as Son of David and his role as the Servant of Yahweh. With these functions, Jesus is "the Son of God."

BROKEN FOR US

Each of today's scriptural readings shows that today's liturgical celebration has a christological focus. We celebrate the person and mission of Jesus as they have been revealed in the events that accompanied his baptism by John. This christological focus should be at the center of today's homily.

The homilist might want to highlight the idea that the beginning of Jesus ministry is the beginning of the new creation, the inauguration of the final times, the eschatological era. An alternative approach might be God's plan of salvation, his "righteousness," to which both Jesus and John the Baptist faithfully adhere.

Taking a cue from the reading from Isaiah, the homilist might want to preach about Jesus as the Servant of God, a role that Jesus assumes upon his baptism. That Jesus is the son of David is a notion that appeared in the pre-Christ season, in the gospel reading for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (Luke 1:32) and the gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent (Matt 1:20; cf. Matt 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15).

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 16, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6, taken from the Second Servant Canticle (Isa 49:1-6), contains an oracle in which Yahweh speaks to Israel, explicitly addressing the nation as "servant."

1 Corinthians 1:1-3 begins the semi-continuous reading of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, a letter that is read on the first Sundays in ordinary time in all three cycles of the liturgical year. Today's reading is particularly rich in christology.

John 1:29-34 interrupts the semi-continuous reading of the Gospel according to Matthew that marks Cycle C in ordinary time. A similar interruption of the readers each year on the Second Sunday in Ordinary time as the compiler of the liturgy use a Johannine passage to flesh out the implications of Jesus' baptism.

John 1:29-34 is, in fact, the Johannine version of the "baptism of Jesus" but it does not mention the actual baptism. What it does is use the testimony of John to flesh out the implications of the initial encounter between Jesus and John. Six points are particularly relevant.

1. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Exegetes debate

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among themselves as to whether the “Lamb of God” title (see John 1:36), not found in the Synoptic gospels, is best understood as a reference to the Paschal Lamb or in reference to Deutero-Isaiah’s Suffering Servant motif. The Fourth Evangelist uses the title to underscore Jesus’ role in the redemption from sin.

2. Jesus’ preexistence is affirmed by the Baptist. The evangelist emphasizes this point since Jesus’ ministry comes after that of John.

3. The real purpose of John’s ministry is that Jesus might be revealed (see John 1:6-8).

4. The Spirit came down upon Jesus like a dove from heaven. The Synoptics associate the descent of the Spirit with Jesus’ baptism (see Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). The Fourth Evangelist prefers to stress the idea that the Spirit remained with Jesus.

5. The descent of the Spirit is the divine action that identifies Jesus as the one who will accomplish eschatological baptism with the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16).

6. John testifies that Jesus is the Son of God (see Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22).

With these emphases the Fourth Evangelist articulates the christological implications of Jesus’ baptism without specifically mentioning that Jesus had been baptized by John.

BROKEN FOR US

As was the case with the readings of last week’s liturgy, the first and third readings in today’s liturgy remind us that the focus of the liturgy of the word is predominantly christological. Accordingly, the homily should focus on the reality of Jesus Christ. The Suffering Servant motif is a reminder that the public ministry of Jesus, whose beginnings we celebrated last week and this, culminates in Jesus’ redemptive role. That Jesus is the Son of God and bearer of the Spirit tells us about the innate authority with which Jesus teaches. What better way to begin our year as Christians than to reflect on who Jesus is and what he means to each of us!

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 23, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 8:23-9:3 celebrates the accession to the throne and beginning of the reign of King Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.E.). In the Greek Bible and some modern versions, the text is identified as Isa 9:1-4.

1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17 is the core of Paul’s exhortation to the Christian community at Corinth to overcome their divisions and become a single community, the church of God (1 Cor 3:2).

Matthew 4:12-23 locates the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry in Galilee and narrates the call of a pair of fishermen brothers, Simon and Andrew, James and John.

The distinguishing feature of the first part of the narrative is the evangelist’s use of Isa 8:23-9:1 as a scriptural warrant for Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. The prophet used these words, somewhat modified by Matthew, in his description of the territories of Israel that had been conquered by the Assyrians in 622 B.C.E. The description of Galilee as “Galilee of the Gentiles” is an allusion to the Gentile population of the area. The northern part of Galilee had experienced the immigration of substantial numbers of Gentiles. That Matthew draws his readers’ attention to their presence within the ambit of Jesus’ ministry from its outset anticipates

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the great commission with which his narrative concludes, including the note that Jesus’ disciples are to make disciples of all nations [=the Gentiles, “the peoples,” Matt 28:19].

Capernaum is “the village of Nahum.” Located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, the village was on the Galilean frontier. Capernaum was the home of Simon Peter (see Mark 1:21, 29) and was apparently Jesus’ adopted home town (Mark 2:1). From Capernaum Jesus was able to go out to the towns and cities of Galilee to proclaim the good news.

Matthew summarizes Jesus’ proclamation as “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In contrast with Mark who summarizes Jesus’ preaching as “The kingdom of God is at hand, repent” Matthew places the call to repentance before the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of heaven. This is in keeping with the Matthean emphasis on righteous behavior.

“Kingdom of heaven,” is a well-known rabbinic paraphrase of “kingdom of God.” Its usage is characteristic of Matthew’s gospel (see Matt 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19 [2x], 20; 7:21 [2x]; 8:1; 10:7; 11:1, 12; 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 43, 45, 47, 52; 16:19; 18:1, 3, 23; 19:12, 14, 23, 24; 20:1; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1). This way of speaking about God reflects Jewish sensitivity to the transcendence of God, as does Matthew’s calling God “our Father in heaven.”

The evangelist’s story of Jesus’ calling the pair of brothers is quite similar to his Markan source (Mark 1:18-20), but Matthew drops the “artless detail” about James and John leaving not only their father, Zebedee, but also their father’s hired hands (Mark 1:20). It is to be noted that the call to be “fishers of men” (*alieis anthropon*) is addressed only to Simon and Andrew and that the Greek text uses the gender-inclusive *anthropon*, “people,” “persons,” rather than the gender-specific *andron*, “men” in the programmatic epithet.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 30, 2011

LITURGY

Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13 is a composite of two texts (Zeph 2:3 and Zeph 3:12-13) linked together because each of them speaks about people who are humble.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 describes God’s choice of the foolish, the weak, and the have-nots of this world to belong to the church of God at Corinth.

Matthew 5:1-12a contains Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes.

The passage opens with the pair of verses with which the Sermon on the Mount begins. The sermon comes to a close in Matt 7:28-8:1, where mention of the crowds, Jesus teaching, and the mountain form a literary inclusion with Matt 5:1-2. By means of this literary device the evangelist delineates the sermon as the first of the five great discourses in his gospel (see Matthew 10:1-11:1; 13:1-53; 18:1-19:1; 23:1-26:1). Passages from the Sermon on the Mount on Sunday will be read from now until the beginning of Lent.

The scene is set on a mountain that evokes for Matthew’s Jewish-Christian readership Mount Sinai and the figure of Moses as the great lawgiver and teacher of Israel. Jesus is presented as a teacher, seated as rabbis were accustomed to be while teaching, with disciples coming to him to listen to what he has to say. “He began to teach them, saying” is a felicitous translation of Greek words whose literal translation is, “Opening his mouth, he taught them, saying.” The redundancy of the three expressions emphasize the importance of what Jesus is about to say.

“Beatitudes,” so called from the word *beatus* with which they begin in Latin, are essentially one-liners, expressions of congratulations. They state that someone is happy or

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fortunate and give the reason why. They are similar to things that we might say, such as, “how happy you must be since . . .” or “how fortunate you are that . . .” (see Raymond F. Collins, "The Beatitudes: The Heart of Jesus' Preaching," *The Living Light* [Fall 1996] 70-81).

Matthew’s collection of eight beatitudes is a literary creation by the evangelist who has rephrased the beatitudes found in his Q-source (Luke 6:20-21) and has created others out of passages in the Old Testament. When Matthew’s beatitudes are compared with those in Luke, the reader immediately observes that the Lukan beatitudes are phrased in the second person so that they are expressions of direct address and that they describe the situation of marginalized persons in society. Matthew’s beatitudes are phrased in the third person. All of them have religious and catechetical import. For example, Luke’s “poor” are those without material wealth while Matthew’s “poor in spirit” is a Jewish religious category that describes people who acknowledge their total dependence on God.

The result of the evangelist’s editorial work is that his collection of beatitudes is an eight-part formula for happiness. The collection can be divided into two groups of beatitudes, each of which draws attention to “righteousness” (*dikaiosyne*). In Matthew’s gospel “righteousness” has a connotation different from what it has in Paul’s correspondence. Matthew’s notion of righteousness is of a correct relationship between God and human beings that results in appropriate action on the part of both God and human beings.

As is obvious, Matthew’s eighth beatitude is a short version of the long ninth beatitude (Matt 5:11-12), found in a still longer version in Luke 6:22-23 (see Luke 6:26).

BROKEN FOR US

Today’s homilist would be well advised to consult *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1716-1729, which has much to say about the beatitudes, especially in their Matthean format.

Since each of the beatitudes is pregnant with meaning, the homilist should not try to say something about each one of them. Rather he or she should focus on the nature of the beatitudes as a whole or concentrate on one or another of them. Should the homilist take the latter tack, today’s Old Testament reading suggests that the first and third beatitudes – those that speak of poverty of spirit and meekness – might well be the focus of attention. “Blessed are the meek” is a paraphrase of Ps 37:11 in the form of a beatitude,. In his gospel “meekness” is properly a quality of Jesus (see Matt 11:29; 21:5) that, says the evangelist, should be emulated by the disciple of Jesus.