

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 119:1 (2013) 66-85 by Raymond F. Collins.

A few days ago, I returned to my home in Rhode Island from a stay in Michigan where I spoke on the scriptures during the three-day annual convocation of the priests of the Grand Rapids diocese. Their theme this year was preaching the Gospel of Paul and the Gospel according to Luke in Year C. The focus was to have been the Advent readings and it was.

Now Advent is behind us and the remainder of Year C lies in front of us. The challenge of preaching the writings of the apostle and the story written by the evangelist continue to face us. It is a challenge that homilists must successfully meet if they are to build up and spread the faith in this Year of Faith.

One part of our challenge is to enable those who hear our homilies to see and appreciate Jesus through the eyes and insights of Luke, the evangelist of the year. I shared with the priests of Grand Rapids an example that I often use.

Take any man, one that we might ask to stand up in church on any Sunday morning. People in the congregation have different impressions of him because their relationship with him is different from that of others. To one woman he may be a husband. To a child or several children he may be a father. To an old couple or a widow, he may be a son. To others, he may be a scout leader or Peewee league coach. To still others, he may be one of the readers at the 10 AM liturgy. To still others, he may be the manager of the local Staples. To others, he may be a neighbor. To others, he may be a poor driver, behind whom you do not want to be while you are in your car. And the list can go on. The point is that you come to know any human being from a particular perspective.

So it is with Jesus of Nazareth. There are many perspectives from which we can get to know him. Year C, when we regularly have readings from the Gospel of Luke, gives us a singular opportunity to appreciate the one whom we call Lord from the perspective of Luke, evangelist for the Hellenistic world.

SOLEMNITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD

January 1, 2013

LITURGY:

Numbers 6:22-27 contains the blessing of Aaron, which Moses' brother and in a later period of time 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 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 brought about in and through Jesus.

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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)? Have we reflected upon what we believe so that our faith is truly a mature faith, a faith of a mature man or woman? In the age in which we live it is even more important for believers to have a mature faith than it was just a generation or two ago.

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 6, 2013

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.

Apart from Jesus and the magi, an important figure in the story is King Herod. From a literary point of view, he should be seen as the narrative’s third main character. The Roman senate appointed Herod, a powerful Idumean, to be king of the Jews in 40 B.C.E. Herod gained control of Jerusalem in 37 B.C.E. and reigned as king until his death in 4 B.C.E. His reign was noted for its important construction projects, especially the settlement at Caesarea Maratima 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 five 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. Today we recognize the magi as having come from what we call the Near East.

Their announced intention was to “do homage” to the newborn. The verb (*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, the *titulus*, at the crucifixion (see Matt 27:11, 29). Since “king of the Jews” was Herod’s official title, the magi’s use of the title would suggest that they were looking for someone who would someday succeed Herod on the throne or perhaps usurp the 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).

BROKEN FOR US:

The Matthean story of Gentiles coming from a far-off region in the East to worship Jesus tells us that Jesus

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came not only for Jews; he came for Gentiles as well. Accordingly our faith in Jesus should be celebrated not only within Catholic churches and our culture, but is to be shared with those whose belief in God and his Christ receives an expression that is different from ours. It is to be shared by those who do not share our culture.

In the youth of this Year of Faith, we might remember that so many young people—members of our own family—share neither our faith in God nor our culture. We must reach out to them in this year of faith.

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

January 13, 2013

LITURGY: The optional readings for Year C

Isaiah 40:1-5 speaks of the consolation of Israel, concretized in the coming of the Lord God as a shepherd who takes care of his sheep.

Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7 is from an epistle which does not appear very often in the Sunday lectionary. Nonetheless, the epistle contains significant christological statements, especially with regard to the appearance of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ.

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22 is a passage whose first verse has no parallel in the Synoptic Gospels. The theme of John the Baptist’s identity is, however, raised in John 1:24-25. In Luke the question about John’s identity is presented as one that everyone was thinking about; in the Fourth Gospel the issue becomes explicit in the questioning of John by a delegation of priests and Levites sent by Pharisees in Jerusalem.

John responds to the popular musing about the messiah’s identity by affirming that he is but a precursor of a mightier one to come. The evangelist’s underscoring of the importance of this mightier one is illustrated by the contrast between the baptisms that each of them confers. Luke has appropriated this contrast from his Markan source (Mark 1:7-8), from which he also borrows the image of John being unworthy of the servant’s task of untying the master’s sandals. John baptizes with water; the might one with the Holy Spirit and fire, a clear reference to Pentecost (Acts 2:3, 19), the baptism with the Holy Spirit of Acts 1:5, 11:16.

The gospel lection omits the Q material found in Luke 3:17-18 and the Markan material in Luke 3:19-20. The lectionary does so in order to focus on the baptism of Jesus, described in Luke 3:21-22.

The short scene differs from the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark (Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11) in three significant respects. First, the narrative context in Luke is the baptism of a crowd of people; the other evangelists make no mention of others being baptized at the time.

Second, the Lukan narrative fails to mention who it was that baptized Jesus. Luke’s account had just stated that Herod had put John in prison (Luke 3:20, one of the verses omitted from the lectionary text). The result is that Luke simply states that Jesus “had been baptized.” The qualifying participle in the passive voice without further specification (*baptisthentos*) would normally be construed as a divine or theological passive, inferring that God is the one who really baptized Jesus.

Third Jesus is said to be praying when the revelation occurred. This is the gospel’s first mention of a major Lukan motif, namely, that the significant moments in Jesus’ ministry occur in the context of his prayer (cf. 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 28-29; 11:1; 22:41; 44-45; 23:46). Jesus will also be at prayer when another revelatory experience occurs, namely, at the moment of his Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-29).

Some particularly Lukan features also occur in the revelatory event in which the open heavens symbolize the nature of the event. Most prominent among the Lukan traits is the mention of the Holy Spirit. Mark speaks of the Spirit (Mark 1:10) while Matthew speaks of the Spirit of God (Matt 3:16). Luke’s “Holy Spirit” had previously appeared in his narrative (1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25, 26) and will continue to be featured in Luke’s gospel as his story about Jesus continues.

Luke emphasizes the reality of the descent of the Holy Spirit by speaking of its “bodily form” (*somatiko eidei*), a trait not found in Mark and Matthew who nevertheless and like Luke, make the comparison with the dove. With Mark, Luke describes the voice as making a private revelation, “You are my beloved Son,” rather than the public presentation found in Matt 3:18, “This is my beloved Son.” The voice of God speaking from heaven is, of course, a well-known biblical motif (cf. Exod 19:3; 20:22; Deut 4:12, 36).

BROKEN FOR US:

In order that the congregation be fully nourished—look at the use of the metaphor in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 21, 53, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 51!—the presider and homilist should make use of the optional readings for this feast.

The gospel lection subtly emphasizes that the baptism of Jesus was really an act of God. It also proclaims

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that Jesus’ true identity was proclaimed at his baptism. As we reflect on the baptism of Jesus, we might also recall that Christian baptism is likewise an act of God—we call it a sacrament!—and that it establishes the true identity of the person who is baptized.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 20, 2013

LITURGY:

Isaiah 62:1-5 is a text chosen as the first reading because of the marital imagery with which it concludes. The imagery is consonant with the wedding theme of the gospel lection.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 begins the semi-continuous reading of the third part of Paul’s First letter to the Corinthians. The reading presents a first overview of the spiritual gifts given to the members of the church of God at Corinth.

John 2:1-11 is the first of the seven sign stories in the Fourth Gospel. The evangelist describes Jesus’ miracles as “signs” (*semeia*) rather than “acts of power” (*dynameis*), as they are in the Synoptic tradition, because of their christological import, what they reveal about Jesus.

The basic structure of the Johannine story is that of a miracle story. There is a problem, a lack of wine. There is a solution to the problem; Jesus turns the water into wine. There is a successful outcome, to which the steward attests. The miracle’s success is further underscored by the disciples’ coming to belief in Jesus.

There is, however, more to the story than the tale of a wonderful miracle. The story is rife with Johannine symbolism (see Raymond F. Collins, “Cana (John 2:1-2)—the First of His Signs or the Key to His Signs,” in *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 2. Louvain:Peeters/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 158-182).

A striking indication that there is more going on than at first meets the eye is that the bride is remarkably absent from this story of a family wedding feast while the groom is but incidentally mentioned (v. 9). The mother of Jesus is presented in genealogical terms rather than being named (cf. John 19:26). The stone jars symbolize the Jewish rites of purification but the water that they contain serves another purpose; it is turned into a great quantity of wine—180 gallons would be a bit more than 900 (0.75 liter) bottles of wine. And there is literary “slippage” between the figure of bridegroom and that of Jesus.

At bottom the story symbolizes the messianic wedding banquet (cf. Matt 22:1-14). It celebrates the union of Christ with his church, a development of the prophetic motif of God’s marital union with Israel (cf. Isa 54:4-5; 62: 5; Jer 3:29; Hos 2:4-25). The abundance of wine symbolizes the extravagance of the messianic gifts, as it often does in Jewish apocalyptic literature (cf. *1 Enoch* 10:19; *Apoc. Bar.* 29:5; etc.). The evangelist’s mention of the “hour” (v. 4) and the presence of the mother of Jesus (v. 3) who is addressed as “woman” (v. 4) prompt the reader who has read Fourth Gospel in its entirety to think ahead, to Jesus’ hour, his exaltation on the cross in the presence of the woman called mother. At that moment the messianic wedding takes place and the messianic banquet can begin.

BROKEN FOR US:

At first sight, the reading from the Fourth Gospel is unexpected in this year of Luke. It appears in the liturgy, however, to complete the Epiphany triad. The Fathers of the Church often spoke of three initial manifestations, three epiphanies of Jesus. The first was his manifestation to the magi from the East. The story of that manifestation was told on January 6. The second was the manifestation at the time of Jesus’ baptism. That story was told last Sunday, January 13. The third was the beginning of the manifestation of his glory, the subject of today’s reading.

Found at the beginning of the Fourth Gospel and with its anticipatory motifs, the story of the wedding feast at Cana reminds us that the coming of Jesus represents the fulfillment of Yahweh’s marital union with his people. The union is consummated when Jesus is lifted up in glorification on the cross. This idea overshadows the story of Jesus of Nazareth, at least from the perspective of the author of the Fourth Gospel.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 27, 2013

LITURGY:

Nehemiah 8:2-4a 5-6, 8-10 describes Ezra’s reading the Scripture to the people.

1 Corinthians 12:12-30 speaks of the body of Christ of we are “individually parts.”

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Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21 is a two-part lection that includes two beginnings, the beginning of the Gospel according to Luke (Luke 1:1-4) and Luke’s account of the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

The four verses that comprise the prologue of Luke’s gospel not only show that he set about his writing in self-conscious fashion but also that he was familiar with at least some of the canons of Hellenistic literary works. Since the beginning of Acts (Acts 1:1) recalls the prologue of the gospel, this prologue should be construed as the prologue to Luke’s two-part work, “Luke-Acts,” as it is commonly designated in biblical scholarship. The compilers of the New Testament text were responsible for the separation of Acts from the gospel; the separation was not intended by the evangelist himself.

Luke indicates his familiarity with previous attempts to write about Jesus. The Lukan narrative reveals that the evangelist was familiar with at least Mark’s gospel and the written form (in Greek) of the Sayings Source (Q), sources upon which he relied as he was writing his own work. Luke was also dependent upon oral sources, the traditions handed on by eye-witnesses who were also ministers of the word. The two nouns should not be construed as if they referred to two different groups. In sum, as Luke himself said, he evaluated his sources and set about writing an orderly account about Jesus (the gospel of Luke) and the church (Acts).

The Lukan project is dedicated to Theophilus, otherwise unknown to readers of the New Testament apart from Acts 1:1. The symbolic name, “God-lover” may refer to the believing Hellenists whom Luke thought would read his gospel but there is no serious reason to doubt that Theophilus was a real person. Since the third century B. C. E. the name Theophilus was familiar to people living in the Hellenistic world, by Gentiles and Jews alike. Luke concludes the prologue by telling his readers that he was writing in order that they might have full confidence in the teachings that they had received, now confirmed by Luke’s own well-researched account.

The second part of today’s reading contains Luke’s account of Jesus’ public ministry in Galilee. In place of Mark’s summary description of the gospel, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15), Luke offers a homily that Jesus delivers in the synagogue of his home town. Luke sandwiches the account between the story of Jesus’ temptation by the devil (Luke 4:1-13) and a short narrative that describes Jesus’ trip to Capernaum, where he expels a demon from a man in the synagogue of Capernaum (Luke 4:31-37).

Luke’s narrative continues the presentation of Jesus as a pious Jew begun in the Infancy Narrative (Luke 1-2). Jesus is one who customarily attends the synagogue. Any Jewish male had the right to read the scriptures and Jesus is invited to do so. He finds the passage in Isaiah that he wants to speak about, namely, Isa 61:1-2. Those who have seen the Isaiah scroll from Qumran in Jerusalem’s Shrine of the Book have an idea of how much unrolling of the scroll Jesus had to do in order to the passage that he wanted to read and comment on. Several must be unrolled before the reader arrives at Chapter 61.

The passage was not chosen by accident. Luke’s Jesus deliberately chooses a passage that will be programmatic for his entire ministry. Jesus’ ministry is a ministry to the marginalized of this world, those whom Third Isaiah describes as the poor, captives, the blind, and the oppressed. Jesus ministry to the “poor” (cf. Luke 6:20) is a leitmotif of the Lukan gospel. Today’s gospel reading announces that this ministry is in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

The reading also announces that Jesus’ ministry to the poor is the ministry for which has been consecrated and anointed by the Spirit. It is the task for which he has been appointed by God. Luke’s mention of the anointing by the Spirit is basically a commentary on Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:21-22). What it means for Jesus to be the Son of God is for him to do the Father’s will, a task for which he has been anointed by the Spirit, a task whose parameters are outlined in the prophetic text that Jesus reads in his home-town synagogue (see Raymond F. Collins, “Luke 3:21-22, Baptism or Anointing?” *The Bible Today* 84 [1976] 821-830).

BROKEN FOR US:

A homilist might want to focus on the first four verses of today’s reading. Making a choice of these verses as the focus of the homily allows the homilist to explain to the congregation the way in which Luke’s gospel came into being and the purpose for which it was written. This kind of homily would serve to introduce to the people the Gospel according to Luke which will be regularly read on the Sundays of Cycle C.

Alternatively the homilist might focus on the longer, second part of the reading. Concentrating on this part of the reading yields much food for thought and many subjects for preaching, the most important of which is the nature of Jesus’ mission among us. The homilist should not overlook the deliberateness with which Jesus searched out a particular scripture in order to define his ministry.

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