

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 364-380 by Raymond F. Collins.

On the last Sunday of June, June 28, I celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of my ordination to the ministerial priesthood. The following day, June 29, the Pauline Year came to its end. The convergence of these two events gave me ample cause to step back and reflect.

I had never intended to be an academic. My desire, a desire that remained with me throughout most of these fifty years, was to be a parish priest. My bishop thought otherwise. The Second Vatican Council had been called just prior to my ordination. My bishop thought that some men in his diocese should receive doctoral training so they might help shepherd the diocese in whatever the Council would bring. With that, although I didn’t know it at the time, my career as an academic was underway.

They say that the ride is exciting and so it has been. Nonetheless in these recent days of pondering have led me to consider how infrequently I personally have preached on the Old Testament writings. Writing “Breaking the Word: Homiletics” since the First Sunday of Advent, 2007, has brought about a change in my life. I try to practice what I preach and so have preached on the Old Testament for the past year and a half. Prior to that I used to preach on Paul, the apostle for us Gentiles. Paul’s message, even in this Pauline Year, often falls on deaf ears because it has not been broken for the people.

As I ponder these fifty years I hope and pray that my writings and lectures have helped preachers to break open the gospel of Paul for the people. And I continue to hope and pray that the people of God are more fully nourished by the Word of God because the message of the Old Testament has been broken for them by the readers of these pages.

## FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 5, 2009

### LITURGY

**2 Corinthians 12:7-10** is the passage in which Paul speaks about the thorn in his flesh, an imaginative way of speaking about his hardships in a letter that often speaks about the difficulties encountered by Paul in the exercise of his apostolate.

**MARK 6:1-6a** describes the people of Jesus’ town taking umbrage at his ministry

**Ezekiel 2:2-5** follows a short scene (Ezek 2:1) in which the Lord addresses the prophet Ezekiel who had fallen down in homage, commanding him to get up.

In this introduction to a long speech (Ezek 2:2-3:11) the sixth-century B.C.E. prophet Ezekiel is constantly addressed as a simple mortal, a human being. “Son of man” is not a title, it is a literal rendering of a Hebrew term that identifies the male offspring of a human being. The long speech can be divided into smaller units, each of which begins with the Lord addressing Ezekiel as a mortal, as “son of man“ (2:3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3, 4, 10).

The first verse of today’s reading sets the scene for Ezekiel’s prophetic call by describing the spirit as entering into him, enabling him to rise as the Lord had commanded, and the voice of the Lord speaking to him. Being filled with the spirit and hearing the word of the Lord are two of the essential characteristics of a prophet.

The first verse describes Israel of Ezekiel’s era as being rebellious, just as previous generations of Israelites had been. Yahweh’s speech commissioning Ezekiel as a prophet reprises this motif, describing Israel as hard of face, obstinate of heart, and a rebellious house.

Commissioned as a prophet in 593, Ezekiel is to speak in the name of the Lord to this people in revolt against the Lord, rejecting his covenant. Given the description of Israel, it is hardly likely that the Israelites will listen to the prophet. Nonetheless, the Lord tells Ezekiel, the

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people will recognize that the word that he speaks to them is the word of the Lord, that his voice is that of a prophet.

#### BROKEN FOR US

An obvious link exists between this first reading and the gospel narrative. Like Ezekiel, Jesus speaks to his own people but the people of his own home town (Capernaum) do not accept his message. Such rejection seems to be the lot of a prophet, as Jesus indicates in a statement that speaks of a prophet without honor. This saying is the only saying of Jesus that appears in all four canonical gospels (Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24; John 4:44).

Equally obvious is the link between the biblical passages of today's liturgy and those who proclaim the word of God in contemporary society, clergy and laity alike. Pastors are often harshly treated, even by their parishioners, when what they preach does not please one or another member of the parish. I am sure that I am not alone in having been told that I should apologize for what I said, particularly when I speak about war and peace or the just distribution of the world's wealth. Similarly Christians who dare to speak about the value of God-given human life, whether in the context of a discussion on abortion, the war in Iraq, or immigrant populations, are strongly and often hurtfully criticized by those who disagree (see Matthew 5:10-11; Luke 6:22-23).

#### FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 12, 2009

#### LITURGY

**Ephesians 1:3-14** is the beautiful benediction, a *berakah*, that takes the place of an epistolary thanksgiving at the beginning of the Epistle to the Ephesians.

**Mark 6:7-13** is Mark's version of Jesus' missionary charge to The Twelve.

**Amos 7:12-15** contains a short confrontational dialogue between Amaziah and Amos. Amos, one of the so-called minor prophets, worked during the mid-eighth century B.C.E, during the reign of kings Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel (see Amos 1:1-2). Many of the oracles in the prophetic Book of Amos derive from him. Amaziah was a priest of Bethel, a sanctuary established by Jeroboam I to compete with Jerusalem as the royal sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom. Amaziah is therefore to be considered as a representative of the state priesthood.

The two verses that precede today's reading describe Amaziah reporting to the king that Amos had prophesied that the king would perish by the sword and that Israel would go into exile. Essentially Amos was being accused of being part of a conspiracy to overthrow the government. The accusation was not totally impossible since the dynasty of Jehu, Jeroboam's lineage, came into power as a result of a conspiracy launched by the prophet Elisha and his followers (see 2 Kings 9:1-10). Amos did not prophesy directly against the king but he had pronounced an oracle of woe against the sanctuaries of Israel and the royal dynasty (Amos 7:1-9).

Having reported to the king, -- the biblical text makes no message of the king's response to Amaziah's message -- Amaziah tells Amos to "get out of town." Amaziah addresses Amos as a visionary, not as a prophet. Although the epithet is appropriate, some commentators interpret Amaziah's form of address as a derogatory remark intended to underplay Amos' prophetic role.

It is unclear whether Amaziah's words are a friendly bit of advice or a threat. The oracle subsequently addressed to Amaziah (Amos 7:16-17) would seem to indicate the latter. In any event the net effect is that Amos is to recognize that he is *persona non grata* in Israel and leave

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the kingdom with due haste. Amaziah's suggestion that Amos earn his bread in the northern kingdom (Judah) is a mild-mannered taunt.

Amos responds that he prophesied as he did because the Lord had commanded him to do so. Unlike the "court prophets" he was not someone who had inherited the prophetic office or took it upon himself. Like most of the classical prophets he was unprepared for the task that the Lord assigned to him.

The last two verses of Amos 7 describe a terrifying oracle of doom pronounced against Amaziah who had attempted to deter Amos from the exercise of his God-given mission.

## BROKEN FOR US

The first and third scriptural readings of today's Eucharistic liturgy describe the vocations of an Old Testament prophet and Jesus' chosen Twelve, all of whom were commissioned to speak in the name of the Lord. The opposition to Amos is explicit in Amaziah's threat; the opposition to the Twelve is implicit in the narrative note that they expelled many demons.

Each of the accounts should lead us to ponder our own receptivity to the message of the prophets in our midst. Amaziah dismissed Amos, telling him that he should direct his message elsewhere. The Twelve preached repentance, challenging their audience to change their lives.

From time to time prophetic figures arise among us, telling us things that we would rather not hear. It is all too easy to dismiss their prophetic words as directed to "someone else." All too readily, we are unwilling to change the way we live, even if it is God's intention that we should do so.

## SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 19, 2009

### LITURGY

**Ephesians 2:13-18** is a metaphorical description of Jesus breaking down the barrier of hostility between Jew and Gentile, thus creating peace and "one person" in Christ.

**Mark 6:30-34** describes the enthusiasm of the large crowds that sought out Jesus after The Twelve had accomplished their mission.

**Jeremiah 23:1-6**, using the beautiful metaphors of shepherds and their flocks and the branch of a tree, offers Israel a powerful messianic message of hope.

The first four verses consist of three related oracles. The first oracle (v. 1) is a powerful woe pronounced by Yahweh against the leaders of Israel who are like shepherds who scatter the flocks and destroy the sheep. The figure of the shepherd was a commonly used metaphor for leaders in the Ancient Near East (cf. Jer 22:22; Ezekiel 24). Unnamed, the leaders indicted by the woe are the royal houses of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. The scattering of the flock is a metaphorical reference to the Babylonian exile.

In the second oracle (v. 2), Yahweh speaks directly to these failed leaders, pointing his finger with an emphatic "you," as Jack Lundbum observes. The leaders have not acted responsibly and have not called the people to account. Their *laissez faire* attitude is a failing on their part. Consequently, Yahweh will reckon with them. The punishment befits the crime. The text's use of the same verb ("cared for," "take care to punish," *NAB*) expresses the equity of Yahweh's sentence. The New American Bible's "cared for" translates a Hebrew expression meaning something like "reckoned with" or "attended to."

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In the third oracle (vv. 3-4), an emphatic "I" proclaims that Yahweh himself will take responsibility for his people. Like a good shepherd he will gather them together and bring them back (from exile). Yahweh will appoint responsible shepherds to care for the sheep whom he has restored to their proper pastures. The restoration is a kind of new creation; the phrase, "increase and multiply," recalls the words of God the Creator in Genesis 1:28.

Both Jewish and Christian tradition read verses 5-6 as a messianic oracle, but given the absence of the word Messiah ("anointed one") messianism should not be overly emphasized as one reads the text. Jeremiah, whom Carol Dempsey styles as a "Preacher of Grace and Poet of Truth," portrays Yahweh as promising to raise up an ideal king from David's stock. The reunification of Israel and Judah will take place during his reign. He will be called "the Lord, our justice," an epithetic that ironically contrasts with the name of the weak king Zedekiah, whose name means "The Lord is justice."

### BROKEN FOR US

"Sheep without a shepherd" is the motif that links today's third reading with the reading from the prophet Jeremiah. Among the canonical gospels, only the Gospel of John describes Jesus as the good shepherd (John 10) but the motif is at least implicit in the Matthean and Lukan versions of the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:10-14; Luke 15:3-7).

An actualized reading of these biblical texts leads us to reflect on leadership in the church. Preachers and the congregation may well reflect on them in different ways. The first two oracles in Jeremiah serve as a stern warning to those appointed shepherds over the flock (cf. 1 Peter 5:3-4). They must act responsibly and call the people to accountability. Otherwise, "woe unto them." The third oracle reminds all of us that, despite the failings of church leaders - - in recent years there has been far too much evidence of that failure -- God will take care of his people, but in God's due time.

### SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 26, 2009

#### LITURGY

**Ephesians 4:1-6** cites seven aspects of the unity of the church.

**John 6:1-15** is the first of five readings from John 6. These readings take the place of Mark's account of the feeding of the multitude that would normally follow after Mark 6:30-34, last week's "gospel."

**2 Kings 4:42-44** is the last pericope in the fourth chapter of the Second Book of Kings, a chapter which attributes several miracles to Elisha, authenticating him as a prophet in the tradition of his mentor, the great prophet Elijah. The most striking parallels to Elisha's feeding one hundred men are, as virtually all commentators note, to be found in the New Testament accounts of Jesus' feeding the multitudes (Matthew 14:13-21; 15:32-38; Mark 6:30-42; 8:1-9; Luke 9:13-17; John 6:1-13, today's third reading). The feeding of the hundred people also recalls the Exodus stories of the miraculous feeding of the multitudes (Exodus 16; Numbers 11).

The narrative begins with the account of an anonymous man coming to the prophet Elisha, identified as a man of god, offering to him twenty barley loaves made from the first fruits of the barley crop. Since "first fruits" is traditionally a cultic term, it may be that the writer

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wants to suggest that Elisha is both a prophet and a priest of the Northern Kingdom. The place from which the man came is named “Baal-shalishah,” named after the Syrian storm god, Baal, but not otherwise identified. Some think that it is to be located in the Jordan valley or on the slopes opposite Gilgal.

The twenty barley loaves, far more than the five barley loaves of the gospel narrative, were hardly food enough for a crowd of a hundred. The double emphasis on the word of the Lord (“thus says the Lord;” “as the Lord had said”) may well be a subtle argument against the worship of Baal. Baal does not provide for the people but the Lord does.

Twice the narrative mentions that there will be leftovers. The Lord promises that some food will be left over and some was left over. The Lord is faithful to his word and provides food, even in abundance, for his people. Similarly, the reading from the Fourth Gospel emphasizes that there was more than enough to eat.

### BROKEN FOR US

The readings from the Second Book of Kings and the Gospel according to John are similar in many respects. Among the similarities are the small supply of food brought by an unnamed person, the large crowd, the satisfaction of the hunger of so many people, with food left over. Both narratives mention that the available food consisted of “barley loaves,” the daily bread of ordinary people. Shortly after the Fourth Gospel was written, the *Didache* stipulates that barley loaves, the people’s bread, are to be used in the celebration of the eucharist.

Reflection on these readings may well focus on the fact that food, significantly, staples, is God’s gift to human beings. Most people in the North Atlantic countries have food in abundance but those in other hemispheres and increasing numbers in our own countries do not have sufficient food to eat. Many food banks have seen the demand for food more than doubled because of the near-depression that we have been suffering.

This lack of food must be a source of moral concern for the Christian conscience even as Christians are called to say thanks to God for the food that they have. The duty to be responsive to this need particularly falls upon those of us who have more than enough food to eat. In the parish is not involved in the effort at the present time, this eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary time might be a good time for it to start a food bank ministry or some related effort to feed the hungry.

A second level of reflection might focus on the eucharist, the bread of life given to us to eat. To some participation in a eucharistic celebration is a matter of obligation rather than a god-given privilege for which we should give thanks. It should be a matter for Christian concern that so many Catholic Christians are deprived of the opportunity to receive the eucharist since the eucharist is celebrated in their area only once or twice a month, if that.