

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 116:4 (2010) 365-383 by Raymond F. Collins.

Many Christians and perhaps more than one homilist do not perceive the importance of the Old Testament for Christian tradition. Those who might entertain any doubt the value of the ancient biblical texts should have their doubts dispelled by the readings of the next two months. The first reading on the fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time reminds us of the maternal attributes of God. This is something that a number of women in our congregations have been trying to point out to us for the past few decades.

The first reading on the fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary time is a passage from the Book of Deuteronomy that the apostle Paul exploits in his letter to the Romans (Rom 10:8-10). Many Christians are more familiar with its Pauline use than they are with its biblical origins. The third reading on this Sunday portrays a lawyer well-versed in the study of the Scriptures who was able to cite Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 as a summary of the key demands of the Law.

The Book of Revelation’s vision of the woman in heaven serves as the first reading for the Feast of the Assumption. It is impossible to fully appreciate the vision without understanding that the author of Revelation uses Old Testament motifs as so many pieces of mosaic tile that he puts together to compose an impressive picture.

The Fathers of the Church were indeed on the right track when they used the Old Testament to explain the message of the New.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 4, 2010

LITURGY

Galatians 6:14-18 brings the semi-continuous reading of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, which began this year on June 13, the eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, to a close with a reminder that in Christ we are a new creation.

Luke 10:1-12, 17-20 contains the missionary charge that Jesus gave to his seventy-two disciples when he sent them out in pairs to preach the gospel.

Isaiah 66:10-14c is a reading taken from the last chapter of the Book of Isaiah. The chapter belongs to a part of the book, known as the Trito-Isaiah or Third Isaiah (Isaiah 24-27, 56-66). Third Isaiah was written in Jerusalem by a disciple of Isaiah almost two centuries after the great prophet’s ministry in that city, shortly after Israel’s return from exile had begun (537 BCE). Isaiah 66 will provide the church with another liturgical reading (Isa 66:18-21) on the twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 22.

Today’s reading is from an oracle that portrays Jerusalem, “Mother Zion” (see Isa 66:7-9), as God’s instrument in the restoration of peace and prosperity to those who had returned from exile. The oracle begins with Yahweh telling the people to share in the joy of the reborn city. Those who had mourned for the city during the exile are particularly urged to let their mourning give way to joy.

Maternal imagery describes Jerusalem as having an ample bosom, rich in milk with which to provide nourishment for her children. Maternal imagery continues in the following two verses (vv. 12-13). A geophysical image, the river, and an economic image, the bringing of foreign wealth to Jerusalem (see Isa 45:14; 60:5-13; 61:6) enhance the oracle’s poetic description of the bliss that Jerusalem is about to enjoy. The maternal imagery portrays the inhabitants of Jerusalem as children at the breast, whom a mother carries in her arms and consoles when they

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cry for attention, to be fed or changed. The referent of the image then changes so that the maternal imagery is used of Yahweh. God is the mother who comforts her children.

The final verse uses physical imagery to speak of the joy of the people. They shall rejoice in their hearts, the very core of their being. Their “bones,” a Hebrew term used metonymically for their bodies, as the translation implies, will flourish like grass. The imagery attempts to capture the vibrancy of fresh grass coming to life during spring time. When this happens, God’s servants, the righteous among the returned exiles, shall recognize that God’s power was at work in restoring the peace and prosperity of his holy city.

BROKEN FOR US

The relationship between this reading from Isaiah and the passage from Luke’s gospel appears to be minimal at best. A point of comparison is to be found in the joy that God’s people will experience when they see the power of God at work. The inhabitants of Jerusalem saw the prosperity of their city restored after it had suffered so much destruction and had been abandoned (see Isa 27:10-11). The seventy-two disciples saw the power of God at work as unbelievers came to faith, the sick were cured, and demons cast out from those who had been possessed.

The reading from Isaiah provides the homilist with an almost unique opportunity to preach about the maternal qualities of God. Typically our image of God is that of a father. Who of us does not remember a picture of God as an elderly bearded man? Jesus addressed God as father. Paternal imagery enables our imaginations to elicit rich images of God. For some who take the imagery seriously, the image of God as Father is not a happy one. I’ll never forget the young man who told me that he couldn’t pray to God the Father because of the abuse that he suffered at the hands of his own father.

The biblical imagery of God as Father must be complemented by the image of God as mother. Interpreting today’s reading from Isaiah, some commentators suggest that Mother Zion is identified with God. Even those who would not posit such identification note that God is portrayed as mother. The image allows us to think of God as nourishing her children, carrying them lovingly in her arms, and taking care of their every need. These qualities of God are not to be neglected in our understanding of God and his attributes.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 11, 2010

LITURGY

Colossians 1:15-20, the beginning of the liturgy’s semi-continuous reading of the Epistle to the Colossians, is one of the New Testament’s great christological hymns.

Luke 10:25-37 contains Jesus’ dialogue with the inquisitive lawyer who astutely responds that the two-fold love commandment is the epitome of the Torah.

Deuteronomy 30:10-14 is a passage of Scripture which proclaims that no one, including the illiterate, can plead ignorance of the law. People may be unable to read or write but they are able to comprehend the Law because knowledge of the Law lies deep within them. The Law was very near to them, in their hearts, the very depths of their being (see Jer 31:33-34; Rom 10:8-10). In essence the Law existed in a form of which none could be ignorant, which none could resist. No one could plead ignorance of the demands of the Law. The prescriptions of the covenant are readily attainable.

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To emphasize his point, the author uses a pair of spatial images. First he looks up and tells the people that they don’t have to find some means of getting to the sky to retrieve the law. They have it within them. Then he looks around and tells the people that they don’t have to find some means of transportation across the sea to get the law. They already have it. All that remains is for them to carry it out.

The only requirement is conversion. They must turn to the Lord with all their hearts and minds. Moses pleads with the people, “if only you will listen to the voice of the Lord, your God.” If they listen to the voice of the Lord, they will be able to have his commandments and statutes in their mouths. They will be able to talk about them at home and abroad, but especially to their children (see Deut 6:7; 11:19). If they listen, they will have the Law in their hearts and not readily forget it (Deut 6:6; 11:18).

It might also be noted that this passage speaks of the “Book of the Law” (Deut 30:10). The speeches of Moses had been carried down through several generations of oral tradition. Then they were written in a book which could be used in a covenant renewal ceremony. The reference to the book indicates that today’s passage comes from a period in Israel’s history when Israel’s traditions had already been written down. The Book of Deuteronomy was most likely written in the seventh century BCE.

BROKEN FOR US

The Law is the focal point of the first and third readings. In the gospel passage Jesus is described as answering a lawyer’s question about the attainment of eternal life. Using the “Socratic method,” Jesus responds with a question. He elicits a response from the lawyer which indicates that this scholar had internalized the demands of the Law as Moses had urged. The lawyer identifies Deut 6:5, love of God, and Lev 19:18, love of neighbor, as the epitome of the Law (cf. Matt 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 18:18-21).

The pair of readings suggests that the homilist concentrate his or her attention on the internalization of the demands of the law. The letter of the law is only a key to the real meaning of the covenantal requirements. Quibbling about what the words might mean takes moves the quibbler away from the covenant itself. The quibbler possesses the Law neither in his or her heart nor on his or her lips.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 18, 2010

LITURGY

Colossians 1:24-28 speaks of the mystery of God that has been made known to us.

Luke 10:38-42 describes the visit of Jesus to the home of Martha and Mary.

Genesis 18:1-10a is a narrative taken from a Yahwist-based part of the Book of Genesis. The narrative begins with a picture of Abraham, the old patriarch, sitting at the entrance to his tent on a hot day. Genesis’ ancestral narratives typically place the appearance of the Lord at particular landmarks, such as a terebinth (12:6; 18:1), a mountain (12:8), or water source (16:7, 14; 26:24-25; 32:22-23). This time the geographical feature was a terebinth, a kind of oak tree, at Mamre, a sacred place, located a bit north of Hebron that was particularly associated with Abraham.

The old patriarch sees three travelers standing nearby and offers them hospitality. With oriental gesture of reverential greeting, he says, “You will do me a favor, if you will accept my

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hospitality.” Downplaying what he is about to offer, Abraham says that he will give them a little water and a bit of bread. Thus refreshed, they would be able to continue on their journey.

Abraham proves to be the perfect host. He and Sarah, along with their servant, get to work to prepare the finest meal that they could. Meat was normally reserved for only special occasions. The servant prepared the best calf, which Abraham himself chose, for dinner. Abraham took the curds and milk, a common Middle Eastern dairy product similar to yogurt and set it before the visitors. In the meantime Sarah was taking a half bushel of the finest flour, three measures, so that she could bake rolls for the visitors to eat. What a feast! Abraham was the consummate host—and he served the meal himself.

Before taking leave of Abraham, the visitors inquired about Sarah who by this time had returned to the tent. They told Abraham that in due time (“about this time next year,” NAB), most probably a reference to the duration of pregnancy, they would come back. By that time Sarah shall have borne a son. The narrative continues (Gen 18:10b-15) with a description of the reaction of Abraham and Sarah to the prediction by the visitors. The visitors’ prediction was the promise of the birth of Isaac, son and heir to Abraham.

Abraham hospitably received the visitors as ordinary human travelers, men (see Gen 18:16, 22). The Hebrew language of Abraham’s discourse with the visitors, often in the singular, indicates that he considered one of the three to be the leader. In verse 10 one of them acted as spokesperson. Genesis 19:1 suggests that the visitors were messengers, “angels,” and subsequent lore has identified them as such. The author’s narrative setting (Gen 18:1) and Gen 18:13 indicate that the leader was Yahweh. In any case, Abraham did not perceive that he was the beneficiary of a theophany. The Yahwist tradition sometimes blurred the lines between human beings and the divine (see Gen 32:22-32).

BROKEN FOR US

Although the Genesis narrative culminates in the divine promise of the birth of a son to Abraham and Sarah, the liturgical reading has been cropped from Genesis 18 so as to focus on Abraham’s hospitality. The liturgy pairs his hospitality with the hospitality that Martha and Mary offered to Jesus.

In ancient cultures, including the Near Eastern culture and the Israelite culture, in particular (see Gen 19:1-11; Josh 2:1-21; cf. James 2:25), hospitality was a way of life and an important value. The New Testament continues this tradition with several references to hospitality in addition to the story of Martha and Mary. See Mark 1:31b; 2:15; Luke 19:5-7, Acts 28:1-10; Heb 13:12; etc. Jesus, moreover, criticized Simon the Pharisee for not offering proper hospitality (Luke 7: 44-46). Hospitality is often mentioned as one of the Christian virtues (Rom 12:13; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8; 1 Pet 4:9). Third John 5-8 praises those who offer hospitality to strangers. The practice of Christian hospitality was an important feature in the spread of the gospel in the early church.

Today’s homily might well focus on hospitality, not so much perhaps as an element of social culture, but as a specifically Christian virtue. On this day we should also remember that the practice of hospitality is an integral element of the Benedictine charism.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
July 25, 2010

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LITURGY

Colossians 2:12-14 describes baptism as the means by which we participate in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Luke 11:1-13 contains Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer and pertinent instruction on the nature of prayer.

Genesis 18:20-32 continues the story of Abraham that was read in last week’s liturgy. The narrative, an interruption in the Genesis account of the birth of Isaac, begins with Yahweh’s citing the legendary evil of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The cities, whose exact location is unknown, are traditionally located on the southern shores of the Dead Sea. Despite their legendary evil, the cities often had a positive function in the patriarchal narratives (see Gen 12:6-7; 13:18; 18:16-18).

Even more than the account of the sin and punishment of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, the story of the sin and punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah served biblical authors, both of the Old Testament and of the New, as the archetypal account of sin and its punishment (see Amos 4:11). Different authors characterize the sin in different ways; thus the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah is described as a failure in hospitality (Gen 19:4-5), a lack of social justice (Isa 1:9-10, 3:9), a disregard for the poor (Ezek 16:46-51), and general immorality (Jer 23:14; see Jer 50:40). The “outcry” against Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:20, today’s reading) suggests that the author views the sin as one of social and economic injustice.

New Testament authors frequently refer to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah with without specifying its nature (see Matt 10:15; 11:23-24; Luke 10:12; 17:29; Rom 9:29 [with the quotation of Isa 1:9]; 2 Peter 2:6; Rev 11:8. Jude 7 identifies the sin as sexual immorality and unnatural lust, for which a severe penalty was imposed (Jude 14-15). See the discussion of these texts in Raymond F. Collins, *Sexual Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief* [Companions to the New Testament. New York: Crossroad, 2000], 172-177, 181, notes 19-32).

The Lord heard the outcry of the victims and decided that he must do something. Whereupon Abraham intervenes, pleading that mercy be shown to the cities’ righteous inhabitants. That Abraham chooses to act in this way is a natural consequence of the link between the blessing that he received and the blessing of the nations (Gen 12:3; 18:18). Abraham’s attempt to dissuade God from punishing the innocent along with the guilty is the Bible’s first example of humans pleading with God in this fashion. Later examples are found in psalms of lamentation (e.g., Pss 10; 22), Jeremiah’s confessions, the prophecy of Habakkuk, and the Book of Job. The story of Abraham bargaining with God serves to legitimize human pleading with God when divine actions appear to be arbitrary and unjust.

As a theological tale, the narrative emphasizes the idea that the God of justice (Gen 18:25) is also a God of compassion. Biblical scholars note that in the narrator’s own account, God is identified as Yahweh. When Abraham intercedes with God, “Lord” is the title by which God is addressed.

BROKEN FOR US

The power of prayer is the common theme of today’s first and third readings. Abraham intercedes with God, pleading that divine salvation be accorded to those who are innocent despite the evil that surrounds them. Even in the midst of evil, those innocent of crime should be spared from punishment.

The Lukan version of the “Our Father” contains three prayers of petition: for daily food, for forgiveness, and for final deliverance. The appended parables underscore the importance of

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persistence in prayer (Luke 11:5-8) and the idea that “father,” a divine attribute, establishes a claim to be heard (Luke 11:11-13). An intervenient exhortation (verses 9-10) speaks about constancy in prayer and underscores the notion that prayer will be heard. The three-fold repetition provides useful emphasis; the present tense of the verbs [in Greek] suggests repeated activity. So, “keep on asking.”