

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 119:4 (2013) 354-374, by Raymond F. Collins

Year C in the three-year cycle of liturgical readings offers us a semi-continuous reading of the Epistle to the Colossians. The text itself is rather short. The semi-continuous reading of it occurs on just four Sundays every three years. This year, those Sundays fall on July 14, 21, 28, and August 4.

Usually I would not be particularly struck by the Sunday liturgy’s second reading as I write these reflections on the Sunday gospel. This year I was, since I began to write my reflections on the Sunday gospels for the months of July and August just a couple of days after I had received my copies of the recently published Anselm Academic Study Bible. I wrote the introduction to the Epistle to the Colossians in this edition of the New American Bible.

The arrival of the author’s copies of the bible gave me not only the opportunity to see my work in print but also to reflect on the reason why the Anselm Academic Study Bible was published. When I was asked to contribute the introductions to several New Testament epistles to this publication venture, I was struck by the fact that its editors had decided to publish the previous introductions along with new introductions that were being commissioned. Writing a number of these introductions sometimes required an exegetical *tour de force* on my part.

We would be well served to compare these new introductions with the introductions that were written for the New American Bible back in 1970, when this Catholic version of the Bible was first published just after the Second Vatican Council as a response to the challenge of *Dei Verbum*. I write about the Anselm Academic Study Bible because its publication reminds us of how far biblical scholarship and Catholic biblical scholarship in particular has come in the last few decades. If we are to preach God’s word as it deserves to be preached, we cannot simply rely on what we learned about the scriptures twenty, thirty, or forty years ago. As ministers of the gospel, we should not allow ourselves to serve our congregations a stale diet.

As I write these words to encourage you to continue your study of the Scriptures, as you prepare your weekly, and perhaps daily, homilies, I am also thinking about our young people. Young people appear to be leaving the churches in droves. Many of them have taken a course or two on the Scriptures, in Catholic and secular universities. Many are then disconcerted by the disconnect between what they hear from the pulpit and what they have learned from a well-informed professor. We cannot afford to let that happen and, in so doing, encourage them to leave the church.

## **FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**July 7, 2013**

### **LITURGY:**

**Isaiah 66:10-14** is taken 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.

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**Galatians 6:14-18** brings the semi-continuous reading of Paul’s letter to the Galatians with a reminder that in Christ we are a new creation.

**Luke 10:1-12, 17-20** is a two-part reading, whose first part (vv. 1-12) is found only in the Gospel according to Luke.

One of the great dilemmas for New Testament textual critics is whether Luke 10:1 should read that Jesus sent out seventy disciples or whether it was seventy-two that were sent out. Text critics say that it is virtually impossible to make a decision for one reading or the other. Those who treat the textual issue seriously generally inform their readers about their hesitation to choose. “Seventy” would evoke the memory of the seventy who accompanied Moses (cf. Num 11:16-17, 25) but there are good reasons to think that the “seventy-two” found in today’s Gospel lection is the preferred reading. In any case, Luke’s text makes it clear that Jesus was assisted by many disciples in the conduct of his ministry and that these did not work alone. They were sent out in pairs, literally, “two by two.”

Luke’s reference to the harvest (cf. Matt 9:37-38) represents the time when the full preaching of the gospel takes place. For that mission many workers are necessary. The lambs are, of course, the missionaries. Some scholars think that Jesus’ contrast between the lambs and the wolves was motivated by a mission to the Samaritans or a mission into hostile pagan territory but such a scenario is not immediately evident from a reading of the text. The references to the lack of possessions and not stopping to say hello are probably intended to show the urgency of the mission. Nothing should get in the way of the task at hand.

“Shalom” is the time-honored Semitic greeting (cf. Luke 24:36). In the context of today’s gospel reading, the implication is that “peace” is a cipher for the fullness of God’s benefits. The “peaceful person” is, literally, the “son of peace” (*huios eirenes*). The disciples are urged to refrain from moving about from house to house, just as the Twelve had been so urged (cf. Luke 9:4). The reason for this, namely, that preachers deserve financial support for preaching the gospel, is Luke’s version of a well-known New Testament logion (cf. Matt 10:10; 1 Cor 9:14; 1 Tim 5:18).

Those sent to announce the message are also sent to “do” the message, as it were. They are to cure the sick (cf. Acts 9:1-2, 9, 11). The healing of the sick is a sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The other side of the coin is that some folks will not accept the message. The dramatic gesture of shaking the dust of the city off the missionaries’ feet symbolizes the rejection of the message that the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus’ words to the disciples then fast forward to the end time. Rejection of Jesus’ message will warrant a fate worse than that of Sodom whose inhabitants similarly rejected God’s messengers (cf. Gen 19:24-28).

The second part of the reading (vv. 17-20) focuses on the return of the seventy-two. The disciples report on the exorcisms that they have performed. Jesus interprets this as Satan’s fall from power. Previously in Luke’s gospel the “devil” was the terminology used to describe the chief of the demonic powers opposed to the kingdom of God. Now, Luke writes about “Satan,” the nomenclature that he will use throughout the remainder of his gospel.

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Jesus’ final remark puts the disciples’ success in perspective. They are not to rejoice because of the power that was exercised through them or the success of their preaching. Rather, they are to rejoice because they have been found righteous. The ancient imagery of the book of names written in heaven, used in the Bible (cf. Exod 32:32-33 Ps 69:28) and in the Dead Sea Scrolls (cf. 1QS 7:2), attests to their righteous state.

#### BROKEN FOR US:

Since Jesus speaks about a time for the fullness of the preaching of the gospel, today’s gospel reading can well be applied to the present day. It is not only the church’s leadership, the “Twelve,” who called to proclaim the kingdom of God. Other believers are similarly called. But they never work alone. They always work with others. Sometimes, like lambs, they will encounter hostility and enmity but they are to remain committed to the task at hand.

Although the homily should concentrate on the mission at hand for large numbers of Jesus’ disciples—then and now—it should not neglect the account of the report on the mission of the seventy-two. Those who proclaim the kingdom in word and deed should not so much rejoice in the power that they might have and the success that they might enjoy as in the fact that their names are written in heaven, that they have done what God expects them to do.

### FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

**July 14, 2013**

#### LITURGY:

**Deuteronomy 30:10-14** is an imaginative passage in the Book of Deuteronomy in which Moses teaches that no one can plead ignorance of the Law.

**Colossians 1:15-20**, the start of this year’s semi-continuous reading of the Epistle to the Colossians, contains one of the New Testament’s great christological hymns.

**Luke 10:25-37** begins with Luke’s account of Jesus’ dialogue with a person versed in the Jewish scriptures who asked, not about the greatest commandment in the law but what he had to do in order to inherit eternal life (cf. Matt 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34).

In Judaism the idea of an inheritance is traditional. The object of the inheritance is the land (Gen 28:4; cf. Matt 5:5) or the Lord (cf. Ps. 15:5). The idea of inheriting eternal life is a new one, even though the motif of eternal life is sometimes found in Luke (cf. 18:18, 30) and is often found in the Fourth Gospel.

Jesus turns the tables on his interlocutor by asking what it was that the questioner read in scripture. The lawyer responds with a conflate reading of Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18 in such a way that the love of neighbor stands on equal footing with the love of God. Jesus commends the lawyer for his astute answer and tells him that this is what he must do if he is to have [eternal] life.

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The love of neighbor was problematic for the lawyer. Consequently, he puts a question to Jesus: “Who is my neighbor?” According to the precept found in Lev 19:18, the neighbor was one’s fellow Israelite. Leviticus 19:33-34 extended the notion so that “the neighbor” was also the resident alien.

Jesus picked up on the lawyer’s query by telling a little story, “the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The traveler is presumably a Jew, going from Jerusalem to Jericho, from west to east, a distance of about fifteen miles with a drop in altitude of about 1800 feet. The traveler was beset by a group of robbers, probably a group of highwaymen who carefully scanned the road looking for a potential victim. Finding one, they beat him up, took what he owned, including his outer garment, and left him to die by the side of the road.

The three travelers who happened upon the man are representative figures. Luke introduces each of them by “*tis*,” meaning someone who was a priest, etc. The priest and the Levite represent Jewish leaders, especially those who led the people in worship (cf., for example, 1QS 5:1-4, from the Dead Sea Scrolls).

At the time the hostility between Jews and Samaritans was almost legendary. John 4:9 is a hyperbolic representation of the situation between the two ethnic groups. Despite the ethnic antagonism and unlike the priest and Levite who crossed the road in avoid the dying man, the Samaritan, moved with compassion, went toward him. Despite his being held in no regard by Jewish leaders, he took care of the injured man. He took him to a traveler’s hostel and offered two days’ wages as a down payment on his care.

Jesus again turned the tables on the interlocutor by asking which of the three (representative) figures was neighbor to the victim. The lawyer had to reply that the Samaritan was the one who had acted in neighborly fashion. Jesus responded with a challenge to the lawyer. Jesus urged him to follow the example of the Samaritan. The point of the story is that it is more important to act with compassion than it is to try to figure out who it might be that is deserving of compassion.

#### BROKEN FOR US:

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is so well known to most of the members of our congregations that they may shut down their receptivity once the reading of the story has begun. Nonetheless, the point of the story needs to be heard in the Christian church, particularly in congregations whose members tend to be self-righteous.

All too often we have heard and continue to hear that some people don’t deserve compassion. If only they would find themselves a job, they wouldn’t be coming for a handout! If only they took care of themselves, they wouldn’t need medical attention! Variants on the theme go on and on.

Jesus’ question to the lawyer reminds us that the question is not whether “they” deserve our help but whether “we,” as believing followers of Jesus, deserve to help.

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**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**  
**July 21, 2013**

LITURGY:

**Genesis 18:1-10a** describes the hospitality that Abraham offered to three men, who proved to be messengers from God.

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

**Luke 10:38-42**, which tells the story of Martha and Mary welcoming Jesus into their home, is found only in the Gospel according to Luke. Apart from Jesus, the principals of the story appear only in Luke among the three Synoptic gospels. Luke is the evangelist who clearly has an interest in highlighting the role of women in Jesus’ ministry.

The story is set during Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. During the journey, a woman named Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. Hospitality was then and remains to this day an important feature of near-Eastern culture and a Christian virtue (cf. 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8). As a hospitable hostess, Martha sets about preparing a meal for her guest. [The Vatican’s guest house, where the cardinals resided during the recent conclave and where Pope Francis has chosen to live, is appropriately called the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, the house of St. Martha.].

In the meantime Martha’s sister Mary sat at Jesus’ feet, listening to him speak. The Greek words used by Luke, *ekouen ton logon autou*, literally mean “hearing his word.” Mary’s posture, at the feet of Jesus, (cf. Luke 8:35 41) is that of a disciple who recognizes the authority of Jesus, whom the evangelist identifies as “Lord” (*kyrios*).

Left to herself to prepare the meal, Martha asks Jesus to intervene. Luke’s words suggest that there was much to do, not that Martha was overly concerned. With so much to do, she wanted some help. Later in his gospel (cf. Luke 12:13-21, to be read on August 4), Luke will tell about another situation in which Jesus is asked to intervene in a situation of dispute among siblings. One of a pair of brothers asks Jesus to adjudicate the distribution of an inheritance (Luke 12:13). There, as here. Jesus responds with a significant pronouncement (cf. Luke 12:15; 10:42).

In the present set of circumstances, Martha’s request to Jesus is seemingly a violation of the law of hospitality. Key to good hospitality is paying attention to one’s guest and Mary is doing just that.

That Jesus addressed Martha twice by name, “Martha, Martha,” implies that he is chiding her a bit. He tells her that she is too concerned about things, about the cares of this world. There is only one thing that is necessary. The manuscript tradition shows that Jesus’ words were often misunderstood; some copyists wrote that Jesus said that only a few things are necessary. They took Jesus’ words to mean that Jesus told Martha that a simple meal was enough; there was no need for her to go all out, that she did not need to serve a lot of different dishes.

In fact, the one thing that is necessary is listening to the word of Jesus, as a faithful disciple should do. Mary has chosen to do that. She has made the right choice. She has received Jesus as Lord and has listened to his word.

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#### BROKEN FOR US:

Rather than reading the short story in today’s gospel as a tale about sibling rivalry, the story should be read as one that illustrates the importance—the singular importance—of listening to and hearing the word of Jesus. Martha was concerned with many things, the legitimate responsibilities of hospitality. Fulfilling these responsibilities properly caused her some anxiety and led her to overlook the significance of listening to the Lord’s word.

All of us can relate to Martha. We all have many things to do. Many of these things are things that we ought to do. Nonetheless, we must not let our many responsibilities—as priest or homilist, as parent or student, as employer or employee—deter us from the one thing that is necessary, namely, listening to the word of the Lord.

### SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 28, 2013

#### LITURGY:

**Genesis 18:20-32** tells the story of Abraham pleading with God, asking that mercy be shown to the inhabitants of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

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

**Luke 11:1-13** is a collection of sayings of Jesus, most of which come from the Sayings Source, Q. Luke has gathered these disparate sayings together to create an instruction on prayer.

As is often the case in Luke’s gospel, the evangelist highlights the importance of what follows by means of the biographical note that Jesus was at prayer. In this instance, the fact that Jesus was praying serves as a topical introduction to the subject at hand. Interestingly enough, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray just as John the Baptist had taught his disciples to pray. There is an implicit reference to John’s prayer in Luke 5:33 but nowhere does Luke give any suggestion as to what it was that distinguished the prayer of the Baptist’s disciples from that of ordinary Jews, who regularly prayed the Shema and the psalms.

Responding to his disciples’ request, Jesus teaches the Our Father. Ancient Christian sources preserve three versions of this prayer. The shortest version, with five petitions, is found in Luke. A seven-petition version is found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:9-13) and in the *Didache*, “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.” The *Didache* closely follows Matthew but adds a doxology based on 1 Chr 29:11-13 at the end of the series of petitions.

Despite its brevity, Luke’s version of the Our Father retains its key provisions. That God is addressed simply as “Father” (*abba*) reflects Jesus’ own prayer to the Father (cf. Luke 10:21). The first petition reflects the *kaddish*, the prayer for the sanctification of the Name that is a feature of Jewish prayer. The second petition, for the coming of the kingdom, is the central petition of the prayer and a response to Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom.

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The third petition is a prayer for daily sustenance. It is well known that an exegetical discussion about the meaning of the rare Greek adjective *epiousios*, which the New American Bible translates as “daily,” had been going on for centuries. The fourth petition, for the forgiveness of sins, uses the language of indebtedness to speak about the offenses of other persons against the one who prays. It is striking that the norm for our forgiveness by God is the way that we forgive those who have offended us. The final petition is a prayer for eschatological deliverance and is echoed in Jesus’ instructions to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane (cf. Luke 22:40-46).

The first segment of Jesus’ instruction on prayer, the parable of the persistent friend (Luke 11:5-8; cf. Luke 18:1-8), is the only part of today’s gospel reading that does not come from the Sayings Source. The story reflects near-Eastern views on hospitality. A guest has arrived and needs to eat—three pita loaves would have been considered enough food for a day. So the host goes to his neighbor to “borrow” some bread. He would have been expected to pay back the loan the next day, after his wife had baked bread for the family. Like the judge in the parable of the importunate widow (Luke 18:1-8), the sleeping friend is not inclined to satisfy his neighbor’s plea. Eventually he relents, not out of friendship but because of his neighbor’s persistence, literally, his “shamelessness” (*anaideia*).

The following instruction has parallels in Matt 7:7-8 and in the *Gospel of Thomas* 92, 94. It is also similar to the instruction in James 1:5-6. The point of the three-part saying is persistence in prayer. The verbs in the present imperative suggest continuous action. They mean “keep on asking,” “keep on seeking,” and “keep on knocking.” It is noteworthy that simple actions are used to describe human prayer. In prayer, neither fancy words nor the use of well-known formularies is necessary. What is necessary is simplicity and a trust that the prayer will be heard by a gracious God who responds to human need.

The final segment of this instruction on prayer parallels Matt 7:9-11. The imaginative story embodies a well-known rhetorical technique, the argument *a minore ad maius*, from the lesser to the greater. If a human father, with his sinfulness, knows how to give good things to his children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him for this most important gift. The mention of the Holy Spirit reflects Luke’s theological interests. In contrast with Luke 11:13, Matt 7:11 speaks of the good things that the Father in heaven will give.

#### BROKEN FOR US:

These thirteen verses provide material for any number of homilies. The good homilist will not try to compress all of the themes into a single ten-minute Sunday homily.

Each of the petitions of the Our Father deserves a homily in itself. That God is addressed simply as “Father,” in imitation of Jesus’ prayer, is noteworthy. The motifs of simplicity in prayer and repetitive prayer are important. So, too, is the fact that we should pray for what is truly necessary, our daily sustenance and the gift of the Holy Spirit.