

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 116:3 (2010) 264-284 by Raymond F. Collins.

Beginning with the Feast of the Holy Trinity on May 30, the first reading of the Sunday liturgy is once again taken from the Old Testament, as it will be on the Sundays of June. Once again we remember that “the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament . . . and in turn shed light on it and explain it” (*Dei Verbum*, 16).

## THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

June 6, 2010

### LITURGY

**1 Corinthians 11:23-26** provides us with our oldest description of the Institution Narrative.

**Luke 9:11b-17** is Luke’s version of Jesus’ feeding the crowd.

**Genesis 14:18-20** describes the encounter between Melchizedek, whose name means “righteous king” or “king of righteousness,” and Abram, who at this point in the narrative is not yet called Abraham. Melchizedek was king of Salem, traditionally identified as Jerusalem (cf. Ps 76:3). Hebrews 7:2 takes “king of Salem” to mean “king of peace,” the Hebrew *shalom* being close in sound to the Hebrew *shalom*.

The author of the book of Genesis used the narrative for several purposes, one of which most likely was to situate a significant event in the story of Abraham in Jerusalem, the royal city of the great King David. The bread and wine which Melchizedek gave to Abram were intended to provide food and drink for the returning troops (see Gen 14:14-17; cf. 2 Sam 17:27-29), a gesture of hospitality offered by the king. In some Ancient Near Eastern societies a single person served as both king and priest, but Israel did not follow this practice. In any case both a royal and a priestly role fell upon Melchizedek who was a Canaanite priest in the service of the “God Most High” (*El ‘Elyon*). This deity is to be distinguished from Yahweh, the god of Abram. The title was later appropriated by the Israelites as one of the epithets for Yahweh (cf. Num 24:16; Ps 47:3). In Gen 14:22, “God Most High” is used in apposition to “Yahweh.”

In his priestly role, Melchizedek blessed Abram and pronounced a blessing on the Canaanite deity, who is identified as creator of all things. The deity is blessed as one who had delivered his enemies into the hands of Abram (and his allies; see Gen 14:5, 17). It may be that the final author of the Book of Genesis took the name of the Canaanite deity as a reference to the God of Israel and wrote the blessing from this perspective.

Recognizing the priestly activity of Melchizedek, Abram offered him a tithe of what he possessed. In Israel the tithe was the traditional offering to priests and Levites (cf. Num 18:21-32; cf. Heb 7:4-10).

In later Jewish tradition Melchizedek was recalled as a noble individual and a righteous priest (cf. Ps 110:4). He appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls as an apocalyptic figure who will appear on the tenth jubilee to make atonement for the Sons of Light (11QMelchizedek). In early Christian tradition, Melchizedek is interpreted messianically. The Letter to the Hebrews uses both Genesis 14:18-20 and Ps 110:4 in its magnificent portrayal of Christ, the High Priest (see especially Hebrews 7:1-17).

### BROKEN FOR US

The first eucharistic prayer, the traditional Roman canon, interprets Melchizedek’s gifts

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of bread and wine as offered to God. The eucharistic prayer mentions the gifts of Melchizedek, along with those of Abel and Abraham, as biblical precursors to the eucharistic gifts of bread and wine. The offerings of these biblical figures pale in comparison with the offering of Jesus on the cross made present sacramentally in the celebration of the eucharist.

While we give thanks for Jesus' sacrifice and the sacrament that enables us to participate in it, we remember with gratitude those prior offerings and those who made the offerings since they help us to put into perspective and to understand God's great gift of God to us, the eucharist that we celebrate.

## **ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

June 13, 2010

### **LITURGY**

**Galatians 2:16, 19-20** speaks about justification through faith in Jesus Christ.

**Luke 7:36-8:3** tells the story of the repentant woman who anointed Jesus' feet while he was at dinner in the house of Simon, the Pharisee.

**2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13** is part of the rebuke to King David by the prophet Nathan. Nathan's rebuke followed upon David's adultery with Bathsheba and the king's murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite. The story of these events is told in 2 Samuel 11.

God was displeased with David and sent the prophet to rebuke him. The rebuke began with the prophet's telling a parable, a story about a rich man who stole a poor man's only sheep because he, the rich man, wanted to throw a feast. David was angry at the rich man until the prophet confronted him with the revelation that "You are the man!" (see 2 Sam 12:1-7a).

After making this confrontational and eye-opening remark, Nathan delivered the Lord's oracle to David. The oracle began with a rehearsal of the mighty deeds that God had done on behalf of David (see 1 Samuel 16-2 Samuel 5). The oracle mentions that among God's gifts to David were Saul's palace and Saul's wives. In a culture where royal wives were almost political pawns and kings had many wives, it would have been acceptable for David to take Saul's wives (cf. 1 Kings 2:17-25; 2 Sam 16:21-22). The Scriptures provide no other hint that David did take Saul's wives into his own harem but 1 Samuel 25:40-43 tells the story of two of David's wives, including the king's marriage to Abigail which served to strengthen his position within the Calebite family.

Verse 9 contains the nub of the accusation against David while verse 10 identifies the punishment. David's reign was to be troubled by warfare and rebellion. The story of David's punishment constitutes the narrative plot of 2 Samuel 13-18.

Confronted by the prophet's announcement of David's crime and its punishment, the king repents. He recognizes the truth of the prophet's words and confesses that he has sinned against the Lord. Because of David's repentance, Yahweh forgives his sin. He promises to spare David's life in the midst of the ensuing troubles, described in the following chapters of 2 Samuel.

### **BROKEN FOR US**

The story of David's compounded sin is intriguing and well-known. The story of Nathan's encounter with David is less well-known but it deserves to be well-known. The real point of the story is that a gracious God forgives even the most serious of sins provided that the sinner repents of his or her sin. This lesson is well-worth a good homily.

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Two aspects of the story are easily overlooked but should not be. One is that the sin of a leader of the people negatively impacts the people. This was the case with a political leader like King David, but it is equally true of the sins of leaders in our church, business, and government communities. Their sins have social repercussions.

Another lesson to be drawn from today’s first reading is that sinners often need the help of a prophetic voice in order to recognize their sin. Left to their own devices, sinners frequently fail to recognize the sinful nature of their conduct even if they do not make a sustained effort to cover them up or deny their sinful nature.

## **TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

June 20, 2010

### **LITURGY**

**Galatians 3:26-29** includes the baptismal statement that in Christ ethnic, class, and gender distinctions are overcome.

**Luke 9:18-24** describes Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ and Jesus’ teaching that the Son of Man must suffer, die, and be raised from the dead.

**Zechariah 12:10-11; 13:1** is part of an oracle on Jerusalem which proclaims that the holy city should lament its sin and be cleansed of idolatry (Zechariah 12:1-13:6).

The liturgical lection begins with the Lord’s promising to give a spirit of grace and petition to the royal house of Israel so that the future administration of the city would be kinder and more gentle than previous administrations which had maltreated the prophets.

In the messianic future, the people will mourn over a prophet or king who had been put to death as a result of having been stabbed with a sword. There is no way to identify any specific individual as the one who had been pierced but Zechariah’s description is similar to the description of the Servant of the Lord contained in Deutero-Isaiah’s fourth servant song (Isa 52:13-53:12). The Fourth Gospel cites Zechariah 12:10 in reference to Jesus’ side being pierced with a lance as he hung on the cross (John 19:37; cf. Rev 1:7).

The oracle uses two metaphors to describe the intensity of the people’s mourning. First it compares the mourning to that of parents’ grief over the death of an only child. The grief is all the more severe insofar as the child was a “first-born son,” with all that that implies in the society of the time.

The second metaphor’s compares the people’s grief at the death of the prophet or king to the mourning of Hadad-rimmon. Some exegetes have suggested that Hadad-rimmon is the name of an otherwise unknown person while others have opined that it was the name of a place near Meggido. Nowadays the exegetical consensus is that since “Hamad-rimmon” is a composite of names used of Canaanite divinities, Hadad [=Baal], and Rimmon, a fertility and a storm god, respectively, that the text’s reference is to the ritual mourning that took place at the end of summer. People mourned the return of the fertility god to the underworld at the end of summer. The ritual wailing called for the return of early rains so that the fertility cycle might begin anew.

The final verse of today’s reading, Zechariah 13:1, speaks of the purification of the royal house. Once cleansed, the royal house will be restored in the messianic future. Not only will the king be purified, so too will the people be cleansed. The fountain (see Ps 46:4; Ezek 47:1-12) reflects a cosmogony in which Jerusalem is the center of the world, a center from which life-giving and life-sustaining waters flow. In this case the waters are waters that cleanse.

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The link between the reading from Zechariah and the reading from Luke is the depiction of the suffering and death of a prophetic figure. The biblical oracle proclaims that mourning the death of the prophet is part of God's plan to restore his people and provide them with a king who will compassionately lead a purified people.

The oracle is a strong reminder that repentance for sin, mourning one's past sins, is an important part of restoration. The specific sin highlighted by the oracle is the people's rejection of the prophet and his message. Even more important in the restoration of the people is the gift of God, the spirit of grace and petition, the cleansing waters (cf. Jer 2:13; Isa 12:2-3).

In the light of today's first reading, a homilist is encouraged to speak about sin and God's saving and restoring grace. The specifics of the oracle's highlighted sin can be used to speak about the corporate dimension of sin and the rejection of the teaching of prophetic figures as important elements of sin. The specifics of the oracle's description of the restorative activity of God remind us that salvation is ultimately a corporate rather than an individual experience. The saving waters remind us of the saving waters of baptism.

## THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 27, 2010

### LITURGY

**Galatians 5:1, 13-18** speaks about freedom and the fulfillment of the Law.

**Luke 9:51-62** contains three important sayings of Jesus on discipleship.

**1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21** tells the story of the call of Elisha.

The voice, the tiny whispering sound (1 Kings 19:12-13), that spoke to the prophet Elijah commanded him to anoint two kings, Hazael and Jehu, as well as a prophet to succeed him. The way that the prophet obeyed the third of the Lord's commands is described in today's reading from the Old Testament. God identified Elisha, the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah, as the prophet who was to succeed Elijah. The location of Elisha's home town is unknown.

Elijah responded to the Lord's command by seeking out Elisha. He found him, plowing the fields with twelve yoke of oxen. Elijah did not anoint Elisha, rather he threw his cloak over him, thereby signifying a transfer of power and authority. Elisha's possession of the cloak meant that he had the rights of its owner, Elijah (cf. 2 Kings 2:13-14). This was because the cloak was supposed to somehow represent the personality of an individual (cf. 1 Sam 18:4).

Elisha was ready to respond to the call and his new responsibilities. He left the oxen to follow Elijah enthusiastically. He did, however, ask that he might express his filial piety by kissing his father and mother goodbye. The gesture would be a sign of his leaving his family to follow the call of the Lord conveyed by Elijah.

The senior prophet's response is a bit ambiguous. Was it a mild rebuke or an expression of permission? Most probably, Elijah's words meant something like, "Go, but come back to me because I have something important for you to do."

Elisha went home and organized a feast for his people. He slaughtered the oxen and used the yokes as fuel for the fire necessary to boil the water in which the meat was cooked. This dramatic gesture symbolized that Elisha was ready to leave his life as a farmer and start a new life as Elijah's disciple and servant.

Having said goodbye to his parents and celebrated his departure with his relatives, Elisha

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went and followed Elijah. Elisha then disappears from the narrative in the Book of Kings until he succeeds Elijah. Elijah ascends to heaven in the fiery chariot and Elisha picks up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-18). Successor to Elijah, Elisha fulfilled the first and second commands given to his mentor. It was Elisha who anointed Hazael as king of Aram and Jehu as king of Israel (2 Kings 8:13; 9:1-3).

#### BROKEN FOR US

Luke 9:61-62, the last verse in the reading from the Gospel according to Luke, implicitly refers to the call of Elisha. The contrast between Jesus’ not allowing a would-be disciple to say goodbye to his family is sharp. The contrast strikingly underscores the radical nature of discipleship of Jesus.

Today’s homily could appropriately focus on the radical nature of discipleship. Discipleship must be decisive and comprehensive. It embraces the totality of one’s life. On the other hand, today’s homily might well focus on the divinely-ordered succession in the prophetic ministry. Elijah was a great prophet but Israel needed a prophet to succeed Elijah. God’s choice fell upon the farmer Elisha, who said goodbye to his family and became a prophet in succession of Elijah. A homily that focuses on the need for prophets among God’s people and on the notion that God wills that there be succession in the prophetic ministry would appear to be most appropriate as the Year of the Priest comes to an end.