

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 261-281.

June 5, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, marks the forty-fifth anniversary of the church’s World Communications Day. A few months ago Pope Benedict XVI announced that the theme of this year’s World Communications Day will be “truth, proclamation, and authenticity of life in the digital age.”

The theme underscores the importance of the authenticity of life in one who proclaims the truth. Those entrusted with preaching the Word of God have a ministry of proclaiming The Truth, writ large. The preacher’s life confirms or weakens the message that he or she preaches. What a challenge to each of us who have taken on the sharing of God’s Word with the people.

The challenge is all the more daunting in that not only do we have to contend with our personal failures and our moral weakness but we must also remember the competition, the manifold means of communication in the digital age, from TV to U-Tube, from Facebook to the I-phone, and the list goes on.

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Thursday, June 2, 2011 or Sunday, June 5, 2011

LITURGY

Acts 1:1-11 is the Lukan account of Jesus’ ascension into heaven.

Eph 1:17-23 contains a prayer that believers be enriched with the gifts of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ.

Matt 28:16-20, the final scene in the Gospel according to Matthew, describes an appearance of the risen Jesus to the Eleven. The appearance, described only in Matthew, takes place on an unidentified mountain in Galilee. The Eleven had gone to Galilee in response to the order which Jesus had told the Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to convey Matt 28:10; cf. Matt 26:32; 28:7).

In the biblical tradition a mountain is a place of divine revelation. Matthew uses the motif as a setting for the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1-8:1) and as a setting for the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-9). Matthew’s account does not so much stress Jesus’ appearance as it does the reaction of the disciples to his appearance and the commission that he gives to them. The Greek text that describes the disciples is ambiguous but it seems best to take “they worshipped, but they doubted, it as meaning that some of the disciples worshipped Jesus while the others doubted. Those who worshipped Jesus bent their knee in homage (*prosekynesan*), a particularly Matthean turn of phrase (see Matt 2:2, 8, 11; 4:9-10, etc.). That some of the disciples doubted suggests that doubt as to the reality of the resurrection was not restricted only to Doubting Thomas.

The scene set for the “Great Commission” begins with Jesus’ approaching the disciples. This is somewhat unusual insofar as the disciples typically approach Jesus rather than he them. The first part of the commission (v. 18b) is a declaration of Jesus’ authority. His words recall what was said about one like a Son of Man in Dan 7:14.

The second part of the commission (vv. 19-20a) includes the command to make disciples of all nations (*panta ta ethne*). This represents a breakout for the Matthean community. Previously Matthew’s gospel had emphasized that Jesus and his message of salvation had come

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for Jews (Matt 10:5). Now Jesus tells the disciples that the gospel is also to be preached to Gentiles. Gentiles are to be taught what Jesus had taught the disciples. Thus begins the process of tradition, from Jesus to the disciples, to Gentiles, with a constant message that is passed on from one generation to another. Jesus also tells the Eleven to baptize Gentile disciples. The baptismal formula is similar to one used in the Syrian church of the early second century (cf. *Didache* 7:1-3). This similarity suggests that the Matthean account has been formulated in the light of the experience of his community.

The third and final part of the commission (v. 20b) contains Jesus’ promise to remain with the disciples and assist them. His “I am with you” recalls Matthew’s use of the Isaian “Emmanuel” in reference to Jesus (Matt 1:22-23). It also recalls Jesus’ promise to be with his disciples whenever two or three gathered in his name (Matt 18:20).

BROKEN FOR US

Today’s homily might appropriately focus on the church that came after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. The Matthean text indicates that preaching the gospel is dependent on the all-encompassing authority of Jesus. That authority undergirds the church.

The mission of the church is to carry on faithfully the tradition that goes back to Jesus. The teaching authority that it has is authority to teach what Jesus taught. To this end, Jesus has promised that he will remain with the church forever.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

June 5, 2011

LITURGY

Acts 1:12-14 is, as is the first reading for the Second Sunday of Easter, Acts 2:42-47, a stylized portrayal of the life of the early Christian community in Jerusalem.

1 Pet 4:13-16 contains an implied beatitude, which recalls the long beatitude in Luke 6:22-23 (cf. Matt 5:11-12).

John 17:1-11a is part of Jesus’ high priestly prayer. The prayer has many themes that resonate with themes in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9-13; cf. Luke 11:2-4) and may well represent the Johannine version of that prayer. Today’s reading, the first part of the prayer, can be divided into three segments.

The first segment (John 17:1-5) begins with Jesus asking the Father to glorify his Son. Initially, the impending hour is given as the reason for Jesus’ petition. That hour is the hour of Jesus’ crucifixion/glorification. Jesus is cast as the one who glorifies God. That Jesus has authority over all people ascribes to him a divine prerogative, thus uniquely qualifying him as one who can give glory to God and is able to give eternal life to those whom the Father has entrusted to him. The idea that some people, the disciples, have been given to him by the Father will recur in Jesus’ prayer (see John 17:9, 24). These are those who receive the gift of eternal life.

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Many scholars believe that verse 3, which seeks to clarify the meaning of eternal life, is a Johannine note that was added to the original text by a later editor. Eternal life consists of the experience of God, the “knowledge,” of the only God and the only Son of God, Jesus Christ who has been sent into the world by the Father (see John 3:16-17).

The next two verses seem to reflect a tit for tat in Jesus’ relationship with the Father. Jesus has glorified the Father by doing the works that the Father has given him to do (see John 4:34; 5:36). Now, as the hour approaches, Jesus has accomplished his mission. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified (John 12:23). So Jesus asks the Father to glorify him, to restore him to the glorifying presence of the Father that was his before the world began. The Father had promised to glorify the Son, but this happens when the Son of Man is lifted up on the cross (see John 12:28, 32-33).

The second segment (John 17:6-8) summarizes Jesus’ ministry. He has made known to his disciples something of the reality of the Father, his name. That ministry has now come to its end and his disciples have reached a new level of faith. They now realize that everything that Jesus has is from the Father. They now know that Jesus’ words, his revelation, are the words of the Father, the revelation of the Father. And the segment reiterates a Johannine’ theme, namely, that the Father has taken the initiative in giving the disciples to Jesus. They are his own, those to whom he came.

The third segment of today’s reading (John 17:9-11a) is Jesus’ prayer to the Father for his disciples. Jesus especially prays for his disciples who will remain in the world after his departure. Because of the reciprocal relationship between Jesus and the Father, these disciples belong to the Father. Jesus virtually pleads to the Father on their behalf. He is about to depart the world but they must remain in the world. “World” has a variety of connotations in the Fourth Gospel but more often than not often those connotations are negative. Jesus prays for the disciples because they will be in a situation where there is some hostility to the reception of Jesus’ message.

BROKEN FOR US

One theme that emerges from today’s gospel reading is that the Father has taken the initiative in providing Jesus with disciples, his very own, who belong to him. We Christians sometimes think that discipleship is something of our own doing, a decision that we have made. We must never forget, however, that it is the grace of God that has brought us to Jesus. Baptism is God’s gift to us, creating within us a profound relationship with Jesus and with the Father.

Another theme is that Jesus prays for his disciples. The beneficiaries of his prayer are not only the first generation of believers. The beneficiaries of Jesus’ disciples are also us who belong to Jesus. In our efforts to live a Christian life in “the world,” we should find strength in the knowledge that Jesus prays for us. He is our intercessor.

PENTECOST SUNDAY

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June 12, 2011

LITURGY

Acts 2:1-11 contains Luke’s account of the Pentecost experience.

1 Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13 speaks of the different gifts of the Spirit and of the Spirit-facilitated unity-in-diversity of the body of Christ.

John 20:19-23, the Johannine account of the gift of the Spirit, was previously proclaimed on May 1, the Second Sunday of Easter. Some exegetical reflections were offered in the remarks for that Sunday, to which the reader might again refer.

[From the commentary on May 1:

The first unit . . . describes Jesus’ appearance to his disciples on the first day of the week. The author’s mention of the first day of the week in verse 19 and, implicitly in verse 26 suggests the early Christian practice of the disciples of Jesus gathering together on the first day of the week.

Jesus appeared to his “disciples.” The author of the Fourth Gospel does not once mention “the apostles.” The disciples would include some of those known as apostles in the Synoptic Gospels but would include others as well. The disciples had gathered in a locale where locked doors served as their protection against “the Jews.” “The Jews” is Johannine code for those leaders of the Jewish nation who were opposed to Jesus and were instrumental in bringing about his death. The homilist must be careful when he or she preaches on this passage lest his or her manner of speaking about the Jews leads to or reinforces anti-Semitic sentiments in the congregation.

The first unit is the Johannine account of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit to the disciples. In this account, the link between Jesus and the gift of the Spirit is clearer than it is in the well-known account of Pentecost in Acts 2. Jesus’ breathing on the disciples is a reminder that the Greek *pneuma* and the Hebrew *ruah* can be translated breath or spirit. Jesus links the gift of the Spirit to the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness comes with the sacrament of baptism. Much later in its history the church used this text as a proof text for the institution of the sacrament of penance by Jesus. At best, this later usage is an accommodation of the text.]

BROKEN FOR US

Most homilists use the Feast of Pentecost to preach about the birthday of the church and the gift of the Holy Spirit upon the twelve apostles. The homilist should however note that neither the reading from Acts nor the reading from the Fourth Gospel say the Spirit came to only the Twelve.

The reading from Acts says that the divided tongues came upon them (Acts 2:3). The natural antecedent of the third person plural in Acts 2:1-4 is the one hundred twenty persons of Acts 1:15. Among them the Twelve were the leadership cadre (see Acts 2:14). John 20:19-23 speaks about the disciples, a group larger than the Twelve. “The Twelve” not play a large role in the Fourth Gospel. They are mentioned only in John 6:13, 67, 70, 71; 11:9; and 20:24.

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Accordingly the Pentecost homily should speak about the gift of the Spirit to the disciples. The gift of the Spirit to the first disciples was the birth of the church. The excerpt from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians reminds us that the Spirit is the foundation of every church community, providing it with the vitality from which it lives.

THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

June 19, 2011

LITURGY

Exod 34:4b-6, 8-9 describes the Lord’s theophany to Moses. Moses’ responds with an act of adoration and a plea for his people.

2 Cor 13:11-13 is the final exhortation of Paul’s letter to a divided and troubled community.

John 3:16-18 begins with a proclamation of the saving love of God, a major theme in the Fourth Gospel which is articulated for the first time in the Johannine narrative.

The thrice-repeated mention of the world (*ho kosmos*) provides a universal frame of reference for Jesus’ proclamation. God so loved the world. God sent the Son into the world. This was so that the world might be saved. Universal salvation is the ultimate goal of Jesus’ mission, his being sent by the Father.

The evangelist’s “so” (*outos*), is the first word in the Greek text. Occupying the emphatic position in Jesus’ utterance, the particle stresses the immensity of God’s love for the world. God’s love is manifest in the sending of his Son, his only (*ton monogene*, see John 1:14) Son. His mission has as its purpose the giving of life and salvation. The evangelist indicates that the life that is given as the consequence of Jesus’ mission is eternal life, another major theme in the Fourth Gospel. The evangelist further emphasizes the reality of the life that is given by drawing a contrast between perishing and eternal life. The emphasis is on eternal life.

Although the mission of Jesus is designedly positive, life-giving and salvific, the thought of judgment and condemnation is raised by Jesus’ presence in the world (cf. John 1:10-13). Neither the Son nor the Father arbitrarily judges the world’s people. The judgment and condemnation that follow upon Jesus’ presence in the world result from a person’s decision to believe or not believe. Condemnation is really self-condemnation. Those who believe are not condemned; those who do not believe are condemned. Verse 18 contains the Fourth Gospel’s first reference to judgment and condemnation. In the Johannine narrative, the discourse continues with the thought that belief and non-belief are reflected in a person’s actions (vv. 19-21).

The belief of those who are not condemned is belief “in him.” This belief is identified as belief in the name of the only (*tou monogenous*) Son of God. In the thinking of the times, the name represented the whole person. Thus belief in Jesus as the unique Son of God embraces a belief in all that he has come for, an embrace of his mission and his teaching.

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Having seen “John 3:16”—only the biblical reference not the text of the verse—on signs held high during college football games, a friend of mine asked me about the verse. Obviously it was a favorite of some groups of Christians.

The first proclaims the importance of God’s love for the world as well, surely a theme worthy of today’s homily. God’s love is manifest in the sending of the Son so that everyone can receive eternal life and salvation. There is only one condition, namely, that people believe in his name. Whether God’s love achieves its intended result depends on our acceptance of Jesus and his mission.

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

June 26, 2011

LITURGY

Deut 8:2-3 urges the Israelites to remember God’s gift of manna to them when they were hungry.

1 Cor 10:16-17 is a passage in which Paul describes the eucharistic cup and bread as a reality that serves the unity of the body of Christ.

John 6:51-58 is the eucharistic segment of the long discourse on the Bread of Life found in John 6. The discourse is an extensive midrash on a text cited in John 6:24 in reference to the gift of manna, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” This text is not an exact citation of any one biblical verse. It appears to be a Johannine creation, based on Exod 16:14-15 and Ps 78:24. John 6:51-58 is a commentary on “to eat,” the final words of the cited text.

In the Johannine narrative, this first verse of the reading is the conclusion to the previous section of this discourse, especially John 6:41-51, as the paragraph division found in many of the modern translations indicates and a good number of commentators point out. The discourse increasingly points to Christ, culminating in this “I am (*ego eimi*) saying,” “I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” With this revelatory utterance, Jesus identifies himself with the gift of manna. Those who ate manna in the desert, even Moses died (Deut 34:5-8) but Jesus promises that those who eat the bread that he will give will have eternal life. The contrast between death (John 6:49; cf. 6:54) and the eternal life that Jesus gives enhances the import of the promise.

The Jews—once again Johannine code for those who reject Jesus, especially the Jewish leaders responsible for his death—take umbrage at what Jesus has said. They radically misunderstand what Jesus had said when he said that the bread that he would give is his flesh (*sarka*). They take his flesh in a physical sense.

Jesus’ response begins with the solemn, “Amen, amen, I say to you,” so familiar to the readers of the Fourth Gospel. He says that eating his blood and drinking his blood are necessary in order that someone have eternal life. The eucharistic language is obvious. This part of the discourse on the Bread of Life has been written with the Christian eucharistic meal in mind. It

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can be noted that the Greek word translated “eat” is not the common verb used to indicate eating but a much stronger verb (*trogo*) that connotes chewing, the Greek verb that was used in the text cited in John 6:31.

Eating the flesh of the Son of Man—the Fourth Gospel has its own spin on this christological title which appears in the Bread of Life discourse in verses 27, 53, and 72—and drinking his blood is the source of eternal life and is a pledge of future resurrection. This reference to being raised up on the last day is one of the few places in the Fourth Gospel that explicitly speak about future eschatology. Jesus affirmation that his flesh and his blood are true food and true drink is not so much an affirmation of the Real Presence as a claim that Jesus flesh and blood are authentically real food and drink.. They are the reality of which the gift of manna to eat was a foreshadowing.

Eternal life continues to be the dominant motif in the remainder of the reading. Eternal life means that a person remains or abides in Jesus and Jesus in that person. The Greek verb is *menei*, in regard to which see the comment on “dwelling places” in the commentary on John 14:1-12, the reading for the Fifth Sunday of Easter. That life-giving reciprocal relationship calls for Jesus to cite his fundamental reciprocal relationship, his relationship with the Father. He lives because of the Father. The chain relationship is a familiar motif for readers of the Fourth Gospel. Believers who eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man live because of Jesus who lives because of the Father. The Father lives in Jesus and Jesus lives in those who partake of his body and blood.

BROKEN FOR US

The Feast of Corpus Christi calls for a homily on the eucharist. The gospel reading speaks of what happens to those who eat Jesus’ body and blood. They receive the gift of eternal life. They become involved in the complex of reciprocal relationships which means that the life which they receive is a sharing in the very life of Jesus who shares in the life of the Father. The eternal life that they receive is a pledge of their being raised on the last day. These themes should be particularly stressed during the celebration of today’s feast.