

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118:3 (2012) 267-285 by Raymond F. Collins.

Although Cycle B is the year of Mark, only three passages from the oldest of the canonical gospels are read during the months of May and June. And one of these passages, the reading for the Feast of the Ascension, Mark 16:15-20, was not part of the original gospel written about the year 70 A.D.

The reason, of course, is that during the month of May we are still in the Easter season, when the readings are taken from the Fourth Gospel. The readings for the fifth, sixth, and seventh Sundays of Easter, as well as the reading for the Feast of Pentecost, are taken from the most recent of the canonical gospels and reflect its distinctive Christology and ecclesiology. We return to the semi-continuous reading of Mark on June 17, the eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time.

The following Sunday, June 24, the reading of Mark is again interrupted as we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist. The feast calls for the Lukan narrative of the birth, circumcision, and naming of the Messiah’s precursor. With the first Sunday of July, the reading of Mark resumes but not for long. Just two weeks later, on July 20, the seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we shall read from the Johannine reflection on the Bread of Life found in John 6. That account will provide the Sunday gospel readings from then until the end of August.

On this year’s celebration of the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, we shall proclaim Matthew’s account of the Great Commission, the finale to his story about Jesus.

It is rare that, in any given two-month period, the Sunday readings come from all four canonical gospels. That they do not do so this May and June gives us who preach an opportunity to reflect on the unique character of each of the four canonical accounts of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. That awareness should accompany us whenever we go to the pulpit to preach. We should see Jesus through different eyes so as to be able to appreciate more fully the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

## ***THE MOST HOLY TRINITY***

June 3, 2012

### **LITURGY:**

**Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40** speaks about the power of God and contains a reminder that we must keep the Lord’s commandments.

**Romans 8:14-17** says that we are children of God because we have received the Spirit of God. Consequently we are co-heirs with Christ.

**Matthew 28:16-20**, the final scene in the Gospel according to Matthew—an account that is found only in Matthew—describes an appearance of the risen Jesus to the Eleven. Judas is no longer part of the group of Twelve (cf. Mt 27:5). Jesus appears on an unidentified mountain in Galilee. The Eleven had gone to Galilee in response to Jesus’ order, conveyed to them by Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Mt 28:10; cf. also 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 (Mt 5:1-8:1) and as a setting for the Transfiguration (Mt 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 the mention of doubt in the phrase “they worshiped, but they doubted” as meaning that some of the disciples worshiped Jesus while the others doubted. Those who worshiped Jesus bent their knee in homage (*prosekynesan*), a particularly Matthean turn of phrase (see Mt 2:2, 8, 11; 4:9-10, etc.). That some of the disciples doubted suggests that the disciples’ doubt about the resurrection was not restricted only to “Doubting Thomas” (cf. Jn 20:24-29).

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 Daniel 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

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Gospel had emphasized that Jesus and his message of salvation had come only for Jews (Mt 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 (Mt 1:22-23). It also recalls Jesus promise to be with his disciples whenever two or three gathered in his name (Mt 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. Its teaching authority is to teach what Jesus taught. To this end, Jesus has promised that he will remain with the church forever.

## ***THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST***

June 10, 2012

*LITURGY:*

**Exodus 24:3-8** describes a covenantal blood ritual in which all Israel participates.

**Hebrews 9:11-15** speaks of Christ’s self-sacrifice in terms that recall the sacrificial offerings of the Old Law.

**Mark 14:12-16, 22-26** is an amalgam of two Markan stories, a story of Jesus securing a room in which to celebrate the Passover and the evangelist’s version on the institution [of the Eucharist] narrative.

Mark 14:12-16, the first section of today’s gospel reading, contains four references to the Passover (*Pascha*). Thus it is clear that the evangelist wants his readers to understand that the meal that he is about to describe is a Passover meal. The Passover was a pilgrim festival, to be celebrated only in Jerusalem (cf. Deut 16:2, 5-6). Preparations took place on Nissan 14, with the meal celebrated after dark, when it was Nissan 15, according to the Jewish manner of counting time. With the number of people in Jerusalem for the festival and the requirement that at least ten people share the meal (cf. Exod 12:3-4), a venue sufficiently large for the celebration had to be secured in advance. Typically the Passover was celebrated with one’s family, but the Passover that Mark describes is one shared by Jesus and his disciples, a new family (cf. Mk 3:31-35; 10:28-31).

The narrative focuses on Jesus’ initiative. While he was still in Bethany, just a short distance outside the Holy City (cf. Mk 14:3), Jesus sends two of his disciples into the city to secure a place for the celebration. Previously Jesus sent two disciples to secure an ass for the entrance into Jerusalem (Mk 11:1-6). It was rare for a man to be carrying a jug of water, but Jesus provides this token of recognition for the pair of disciples. When they go into the city, the man carrying the water is on his way to meet them. The disciples give him a message that he is to convey to a householder, presumably his master, that “the Teacher” needs a room in which to celebrate the feast.

The story underscores Jesus’ foreknowledge, authority, and initiative. Visualizing the event, the reader may not realize that houses built near the Temple Mount were often built into the hill so that the

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upper room was not always a “second story,” as we understand it, with the second floor directly above the first floor.

In Mark’s version of the etiological narrative (cf. Mt 26:26-29; Lk 22:15-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26), Jesus assumes the role of the head of the family as he breaks bread. Jesus’ words do not include any soteriological interpretation of his gesture, for example, the “for you” found in Paul’s account of the event (1 Cor 11:24). Sharing the cup with his disciples, Jesus identifies its contents with his own blood in words that identify his blood with the blood of the covenant (cf. Exod 24:8, in the first reading). This means that Jesus’ death is the means of God’s covenant making with his disciples. Jesus’ blood is “for many,” that is, according to the Hebrew idiom, for all who constitute a large number rather than a small number.

The “Amen” saying recalls the traditional image of the eschatological banquet, a great feast in which there is food and drink in abundance for all the saved (cf. Isa 25:6-9; *1 Enoch* 62:13-16; Lk 13:29; etc.).

The *Mishnah* (*m. Pesahim* 10:5-7) stipulates that the Hallel Psalms, Psalms 113-118, were to be sung in conjunction with the Passover festival. Jesus and his disciples apparently followed the custom as they went out to the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives was across the Kidron valley.

Given the large number of pilgrims in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover festival and the requirement that celebrants remain in Jerusalem until the next day (Deut 16:7), rabbis declared that part of the Mount belonged to the city of Jerusalem.

#### *BROKEN FOR US:*

Today’s gospel reading calls for a retrospective and a prospective view of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. His meal recalls the Passover celebration that he, as a faithful Jew, celebrated in the holy city. The covenant motif recalls God’s abiding covenant with his people, renewed forever in Jesus’ death. Prospectively, the narrative looks ahead to the eschatological banquet in which all the saved will participate.

## ***ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME***

June 17, 2012

#### *LITURGY:*

**Ezekiel 17:22-24** uses horticultural imagery to speak about God’s promise of beneficent action for his people.

**2 Corinthians 5:6-10** speaks about Christ’s judgment of people on the basis of the good or evil that they had done during their earthly lives.

**Mark 4:26-34** contains two of the three seed parables in the Gospel according to Mark. The first of the Markan seed parables is that of the sower (Mk 4:1-9) but this parable does not appear in the Sunday lectionary for Cycle B. The first parable in today’s reading, Mark 4:26-29, the parable of the seed growing by itself, is the first of the Markan parables to be explicitly called a parable of the kingdom of God. It is one of the small number of passages in Mark’s gospel that has not been taken over by either Matthew or Luke or both of them.

The three phases of the seed’s growth, the blade, the ear, and then the full grain represents the eschatological view of the periodization of time. The motif of the sower’s sleeping while the growth occurs suggests the imperceptibility of God’s activity (cf. Gen 2:21). Divine activity is imperceptible; the result of God’s activity is clearly manifest. The reference to the sickle, echoing Joel 3:13, is a stock reference to the eschatological harvest.

The seed is most likely a symbol of Jesus’ message of the kingdom. It is sown by those who preach his word. The parable indicates that the result of their preaching does not depend on them; it depends on

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God alone (cf. 1 Cor 3:6). God alone decides when the sown seed is ripe enough for the harvest. The Parousia will occur in God’s good time.

Mark 4:30-32, the parable of the seed that becomes a tree, is the only parable found in Mark, the Sayings Source, Q, used by Matthew and Luke (cf. Mt 13:31-32; Lk 13:18-19), and *The Gospel of Thomas* (G. Thom.20). The imagery in the parable is similar to the imagery of Ezekiel 17:22-24; Daniel 4:12, 21 but it is much more modest than that of the biblical stories.

In Palestine, mustard trees can grow to a height of eight or nine feet. Plants of that size would be rare in the arid soil of Palestine. In Palestine mustard plants are an invasive species, really, weeds, and are not always considered to be desirable. That farmers considered the mustard seed to be a weed suggests that Jesus was not well-received during his life-time.

The modesty of Mark’s description of the mustard plant contrasts the kingdom preached by Jesus with the imperial cedar of Ezekiel and Daniel. The kingdom of God is not the reversal of Israel’s political fortunes, as many of Jesus’ generation expected it would be. The wood of the mustard plant is not like valuable cedar wood.

The last section of today’s reading, Mark 4:33-34, is the third and final segment of Mark’s reflections on the nature of parables (cf. Mk 4:10-12; 21-25). Although the crowds did not understand Jesus’ parables (Mk 4: 10-12), Jesus spoke to them in such a way that they should be able to understand. As for the disciples, Jesus explained to them privately the meaning of his words (cf. Mk 7:17-23; 10: 10-10:12).

#### *BROKEN FOR US:*

The first lessons of today’s readings are for the homilist himself or herself. The first is that the success of preaching owes not to the homilist’s skills but to God who is active in the audience/congregation. A second lesson is that the homilist, like Jesus, should speak in such a way that “they were able to understand.” Jesus’ images were drawn from the real life experience of people in first century Palestine.

Aware of these things, the homilist can speak about how God’s kingdom comes about from small beginnings, in some ways the common theme of the two contrast parables. Aware of the way that people in first-century Palestine considered the large mustard plant to be a weed, the homilist might also reflect that the coming of the kingdom can make people uncomfortable. The message of the coming of the kingdom is one that many people do not want to hear.

## ***THE NATIVITY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST***

June 24, 2012

#### *LITURGY:*

**Isaiah 49:1-6** speaks of the Servant of the Lord who is called from birth.

**Acts 13:22-26** is the part of Paul’s missionary appeal in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:16-41) which makes reference to the preaching of John the Baptist.

**Luke 1:57-66, 80** skips over the Canticle of Zechariah (Lk 1:67-79).

Before telling the story of the birth of Jesus in fulfillment of the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary, Luke narrates the story of the birth of John in fulfillment of the same angel’s announcement to Zechariah (Lk 1:14). The word of God will come to pass.

The birth is an exciting event in their village; after all, Elizabeth was beyond the normal child-bearing age when she conceived. Since Zachariah and Elizabeth were pious Jews, as were Joseph and Mary, the villagers were looking forward to the day of the child’s circumcision (Gen 17:12; Lev12:3). This was the day that the new-born would be named and officially introduced into the people of God. Following the traditional custom, people were already beginning to call the newly-born child Zechariah, after his father.

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But Elizabeth would have none of that. She said that the child would be called John (cf. Lk 1:13b), a name which means “Yahweh has shown mercy.” The villagers and the newborn’s kin objected. John was not a traditional name in the family.

Appeal was made to Zechariah, the head of the household. Unable to speak (Lk 1:20, 22), Zechariah gestured for something to write on. He was given a tablet and wrote, “John is his name.” With that, God enabled Zechariah to speak. His first words were words of praise to God. The whole experience awed the villagers. Throughout Luke-Acts, awe is a standard response to God’s wonderful deeds (cf. Lk 2:9; 5:10; Acts 2:43; 5:5; etc.).

The evangelist concludes his account of the events with two additional comments that are again typical of his gospel: the word spread, in this case throughout Judea (cf. 2:17-18, 38), and people contemplated the meaning of what had happened (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). They speculated about what the child would grow up to be, knowing that the power and guidance of the Lord would be with him. In some ways, the Cantic of Zechariah which proclaims that the child would be the prophet of the Most High (Lk 1:76) provides the answer to their speculation.

The final verse of the gospel reading (Lk 1:80) is a summary comment on the child’s growing up. This is yet another indication that the Lukan stories of the birth of John and the birth of Jesus should be read in tandem.

*BROKEN FOR US:*

Luke’s story of the birth of John is captivating and heart-warming. Who cannot relate to the story of the birth of a long-awaited child, born against the odds? What young family has not been involved in disputes, generally mild but sometimes heated, about what a child would be called.

Yet there is more to this story than at first meets the eye, for it is a story of how human expectations and God’s will are sometimes at cross-purposes with one another. The villagers want to preserve local custom and name the child after his father. God had another idea. Through Gabriel, he wanted the child to have a symbolic name, one that spoke volumes about the story that the evangelist was to tell in Luke-Acts. Despite human reluctance and opposition, what God wills will be accomplished.