

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 116:2 (2010) 170-187 by Fr. Raymond F. Collins.

Talking about the instruction to be given to catechumens in the days preceding their baptisms and introduction into the community of the church, Ambrose, bishop of Milan and Augustine’s mentor, wrote, “We gave a daily instruction on right conduct when the readings were taken from the history of the patriarchs or the maxims of Proverbs. These readings were intended to instruct and train you, so that you might grow accustomed to the ways of our forefathers, entering into their paths and walking in their footsteps, in obedience to God’s commands” (“On the Mysteries,” toward the beginning of the treatise).

This sainted bishop and father of the church believed that it was important that Christians understand the pertinence of the biblical Scriptures before being admitted to membership within the Church. Homilists who preach the gospel in this time before the celebration of the Paschal Vigil will do well to learn from Ambrose’s reflection. We should give a homiletic reflection on the readings from what we today call “the Old Testament.”

After the celebration of Easter we in the church turn our attention from preparation for the great celebration to a reflection on its multiple sequels. In this we are guided by a series of readings from Luke’s Acts of the Apostles which sketch out for us the history of the early church, that is, they tell us how the first Christians responded to the proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

March 7, 2010

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12 urges Christians to consider their lives as the people of God in the light of the experience of an earlier generation of the people of God, namely, the generation of God’s people at the time of the Exodus.

Luke 13:1-9 contains a teaching on repentance and the parable of the barren fig tree.

Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15 tells the story of Moses’ call to be a prophet and leader of God’s people, Israel. The call takes place on a mountain, an elevated space which many ancient peoples considered to be a place of proximity to the deity. In the Old Testament, a mountain is a privileged venue for the imparting of divine revelation. Horeb, which the biblical tradition sometimes identifies as Sinai, was the mountain of divine appearances (Deut 4:10, 15; 5:2). The mountain on which Moses was called is generally identified with Mount Sinai, the location of St. Catherine’s monastery, in the eastern part of the Sinai peninsula.

An angel of the Lord sometimes acts as God’s agent in healing (Gen 16:7-17) or in waging war on behalf of Israel (Exod 23:20). In the narrative of Exodus 3, an angel of the Lord serves as God’s agent in the experience of Moses. The “bush” evokes the alternative name of the mountain. The Hebrew word for “mountain,” *seneh*, is virtually homonymous with Sinai. Fire is a prominent feature of the God’s appearances to human beings (Exod 19:18), yet Moses does not know who it is that is calling him.

God’s dialogue with Moses, “Moses, Moses . . . Here I am,” follows the traditional pattern of a prophetic call. God twice calls out the name of the person being called; in response, the appointed one says “Here I am.” God dispels Moses’ ignorance of his interlocutor by identifying himself as the God of the patriarchs, adding the names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as further identification. The theophany provoked a great fear in Moses; it was popularly believed that anyone who saw God would die (Gen 32:30).

Before entrusting Moses with any specific task, God clarified the situation for Moses.

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God had seen the people’s affliction and heard their cries. So God came down from heaven to be their Savior. The coming down from heaven is way of speaking about a major intervention of God in human history (Gen 11:5, 7). God had decided to lead his people into a land flowing with milk and honey, a symbol of the land of Israel’s resources (Num 13:27) but quite clearly a hyperbolic description of its bounty.

Moses’ question, “If they ask me, ‘what is his name,’ what am I to tell them?” –actually his second question; the first appears in verse 11 which has been excised from today’s liturgical lection—suggests a polytheistic environment. Moses needs to know the name of the God with whom he has been speaking in order to establish his authority with the people. To know someone’s name gives a person power over another; to know the name of a god brings power to the one who knows the name (cf. Gen 32:22-32).

The name which God gave to Moses as a response to his question is Yahweh., the divine tetragrammaton (=four lettered word). Lest the name be profaned, ancient Israelites substituted “Adonai,” “my Lord,” when reading the Scriptures aloud. Respectful of this tradition, many modern English versions of the Bible use “The Lord,” sometime in small capitals, whenever the four Hebrew letters, all consonants, appear in the biblical text. The Greek Bible translates Yahweh with *ho kyrios*, the Lord. The name Jehovah is a medieval hybrid, using the letters of Yahweh and the vowel sounds of Adonai. Jehovah is not today and has never been a Hebrew word.

The four letters of the divine name are evidence that the name that the Lord gave to Moses is an early form of the Hebrew verb “be” but it is difficult, if not impossible, to translate the name of God. The New American Bible’s translation “I am” points to the relationship between the divine name and the Hebrew verb but doesn’t capture the fullness of its meaning. The name implies much more than mere existence; it suggests activity and faithfulness. It evokes notion of life-giving creative activity and covenant making. It bespeaks the special relationship that exists between Yahweh and Israel since it is only Israel that knew the name and could call upon God in this privileged fashion by calling on the name of the Lord.

BROKEN FOR US

As is the case throughout Lent, there is no the first and third readings in today’s liturgy. The reading from Exodus, nonetheless, provides material for any number of homilies. Some homilists might want to deal with the figure of Moses, an unlikely figure chosen by God to be a prophet and leader of God’s people.

Another approach—and one that might be particularly useful to take during the Lenten season—is one that focuses on the transcendence and power of God evoked by the mountain and by Moses’ hiding his face in fear of the Lord. Initially, Moses didn’t even recognize the Lord, let alone know his name. Notwithstanding his transcendence, God chose to intervene in human history and, through Moses, to invite his people into an intimate relationship with him. Because of God’s self-revelation to Moses, God’s people were able to call upon the name of the Lord.

Lent is a season when we Christians focus on our sinfulness and our need for conversion. We are profoundly aware of the holiness of God and of our personal and collective unworthiness. Despite this unworthiness, God has invited us into an almost unimaginable intimacy with himself, an intimacy that is revealed and effected in the death and resurrection of Jesus. How privileged we are!

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 116:2 (2010) 170-187 by Fr. Raymond F. Collins.

March 14, 2010

LITURGY

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 speaks of God’s reconciling the world to himself and of Paul’s role in that reconciliation.

Luke 15:1-11 tells a story about a prodigal son and his righteous brother.

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12 describes the first celebration of the Passover feast. The excerpt begins with the Lord telling Joshua, Moses’ successor as the leader of Israel, that he, the Lord, had removed the reproach which the Israelites suffered in Egypt. Scholars do not agree among themselves as to what reproach the inspired author had in mind. Many think that the reproach was the abject condition of servitude that the Israelites suffered in Egypt; others think that the reproach was the Israelites’ inability to celebrate the rite of circumcision properly.

Gilgal was an old cultic place, associated in Israel’s history with stories about Samuel and Saul (1 Sam 7:16; 10:8; 13:4-15; 15:12, 21, 33). It was in Gilgal that Saul became king of Israel (1 Sam 11:14-15). The first Passover took place in Gilgal, most likely a location on the West Bank not far from Jericho, but there are competing traditions about the actual site of Gilgal.

The Passover was celebrated in the spring, on the fourteenth day of the month of Nissan. The day was the day of the first full moon in the Jewish calendar, still celebrated by Jews today as the Feast of Passover. The Jordan had been forded on the tenth day of the month. The fourteenth day is the completion of the week associated with preparations for the crossing of the river and preparations for the encampment.

The celebration of Passover, with the eating of the Paschal Lamb (see Exod 12:1-27; cf. Lev 23:5; Ezek 45:21) celebrated the transition from Israel’s enslavement in a foreign land to its freedom in the land of Israel. After that, “on the day after Passover,” the Israelites ate of the produce of the land. The author’s mention of their eating unleavened bread is a reminder that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was originally separate from Passover and followed the Passover celebration (see Exod 12:15-20). In possession of a crop-producing land, the Israelites no longer had any need of manna (Exodus 16; Deut 8:3). Consequently God’s gift of that life-sustaining food came to its end; it was no longer necessary. Giving the Israelites a land flowing with milk and honey, God provided them with the nourishment that was necessary for their continued subsistence.

The narrative ends with the observation that all this took place in the land of Canaan, the first reference to the land of Canaan in the Book of Joshua (cf. Jos 14:1; 21:2; 22:9-11, 32; 24:3).

BROKEN FOR US

The Passover festival, the major Jewish feast, provides the context for the saving events which we Christians celebrate during the Sacred Triduum. Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe Jesus’ Last Supper as a Passover meal. Paul reminded the Christians of Corinth that Christ is our Passover, our “Paschal Lamb” in some translations (1 Cor 5:7). The *Exultet* solemnly proclaims that Easter is our Passover feast. What is celebrated in Passover is fulfilled in Christ.

What is it that we celebrate in Passover? The rituals should not prevent us from looking at the essential meaning of the celebration. On the one hand, it is a celebration of the transition to a new phrase in a relationship with God. On the other hand, it is a celebration of freedom. These are the realities that the ancient Israelites, contemporary Jews, and we Christians celebrate—and for which we give thanks—as we celebrate Passover.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

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March 21, 2010

LITURGY

Philippians 3:8-14 is a passage in which Paul very personally and very enthusiastically about the gift of righteousness that God has given to him.

John 8:1-11 tells the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery.

Isaiah 43:16-21 is an oracle—“Thus says the Lord”—that iterates many of the themes of Second Isaiah. Alluding to the passage through the Red Sea (Exodus 14-15), the oracle begins by recalling the events of the Exodus. Israel’s return from the Babylonian Exile will be like a new exodus. It is that the saving events of the past will be repeated during the return from exile; rather a reminder of what God has done in the past grounds the Israelites hope for what God will do in the future.

What God is about to accomplish on behalf of his people will lead them to forget what he has done in the past. In comparison with those past events (cf. Isa 42:9), what God is about to do will be a far greater experience. What is “new” is the return from exile, which the oracle describes in almost poetic language. The description of Israel’s return from exile continues the pattern of allusions to the Exodus Story found in verses 16-17. “A way in the wasteland” (see Isa 40:1; Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4) recalls Israel’s forty-year-long trek in the desert, as does the reference to the wasteland.

The new exodus will be unlike the old insofar as the journey will be without many of the difficulties of the previous exodus. That journey was marked by all sorts of difficulties, particularly a lack of water to drink, a lack to which God responded by providing water from the rock (Exodus 17). Now there will be nearby rivers from which the returning exiles will be able to assuage their thirst. Moreover God will generally make of this second exodus something greater to celebrate than even the first exodus (see Isa 35:4-10; 41:18-20; 49:9-11). In sum, what is “new” about the second exodus is that there will be a road, a “way” in the wilderness, that there will be abundant water, and that God will take care of his people in many and different ways.

All this continues the formation of Israel into God’s very own people and gives the Israelites—and us—ample reason to offer praise to God.

BROKEN FOR US

Today’s reading from the Book of Exodus continues the concentration on the Exodus which is the theme of the first readings on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of lent. By suggesting that even Israel experienced something greater than the abundant and formative blessings of the Great Exodus, today’s reading reminds us to reflect on our present experience of salvation and the blessings that we have received in the light of God’s on-going and ever-increasing benefaction to his people.

As both the Israelites at the time of the first exodus and Israelites at the time of the return from exile need God’s intervention to free from the woes that God’s people experienced in an alien land, so we need God’s intervention in order to be free from the woes of sin and its consequences. God has brought about this freedom by sending into the world his Son who made our transition to a new life possible through his death and resurrection. We should regard this transition as God’s great gift to us, a gift that is on-going as we continue to live a new life in Christ. Together with the generations of Israelites of old we must proclaim the praises of the Lord.

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PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

March 28, 2010

LITURGY

Philippians 2:6-11 is a christological hymn that most probably pre-dated Paul and was somewhat modified by him when he included it in his letter to the Philippians.

Luke 22:14-23:56 is the Lukan passion narrative.

Isaiah 50:4-7 is a lengthy excerpt from the third Servant Songs of Second Isaiah, one of four such hymns in the second part of the Book of Isaiah (see Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 52:13-53:12). The liturgical lection omits the canticle's last two verses (Isa 50:8-9). The omitted verses continue the thought expressed in verse 7 and speak of the help that Yahweh affords to the Servant, sustaining him in his suffering. What remains in the liturgical lection is that part of the canticle that portrays the Servant's mission and his suffering.

The Servant of the Lord is a personified and ideal Israel. In the third canticle, as in the second (Isa 49:1-6), the Servant himself is the speaker. He addresses Israel, particularly those among the Israelites who have fallen away from God.

Verses 4 and 5 speak of the teaching and prophetic function of Israel. In the words of the scripture, the Servant has been given "a well-trained tongue." What he speaks is what he has heard; Yahweh "opens his ear." His mission is to speak to "the weary," the Israelites in exile. The Servant's mission is one of consolation, encouragement, and support. He is resolute in fulfilling his prophetic mission; the Servant neither rebels nor retreats.

Despite his fidelity to the mission that Yahweh has entrusted to him, the Servant is made to suffer (cf. Isa. 42:4; 52:13-53:12), apparently at the hands of Israelites who do not accept his message (cf. Jer 20:7-13). His suffering is described in physical terms that recall the sufferings of the prophet Jeremiah who was rejected by those to whom he was sent (Jer 20:7-13).

Unlike Jeremiah who so rues his sufferings that he bemoans the day of his birth (Jer 20:14-18), the Servant complacently accepts the suffering that he is forced to undergo. Despite his suffering, the Servant remains steadfast in his confidence that God will vindicate him (cf. Isa 50:8-9). He proclaims that God is his help; he has nothing of which to be ashamed and he will not be disgraced.

BROKEN FOR US

New Testament authors frequently use the Deutero-Isaian servant canticles in their biblical reflection on Jesus (see Raymond F. Collins, "Servant of the Lord, The," *The New Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 [Nashville: Abingdon, 2009], 192-195). With its use of a lengthy passage from the second of these songs the church invites us today to reflect on the ministry and suffering of Jesus in the light of what the inspired authors have written about the "Suffering Servant." Five themes come to the fore. 1) Jesus' ministry is part of a long narrative about God's ways in bringing about the salvation of his people. 2) Jesus' ministry is a prophetic ministry, intended to console those who are weary from the evils that they suffer. 3) Jesus' ministry, like that of the prophets before him, is not accepted by those who have hardened ears. 4) Nonetheless, Jesus remains steadfast in his obedience to God as he fulfills his ministry. 5) Jesus, as a faithful servant, is vindicated by God. Jesus' vindication is realized in his being raised from the dead.