

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 168-186.

On the Sundays of Ordinary Time in this year (Cycle A) we proclaim the Gospel according to Matthew. The liturgy’s focus on the Matthean text continues throughout March and April. Not only is a selection from Matthew read on March 6, the ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time but lections taken from this gospel are also read on the First and Second Sundays of Lent. Palm Sunday’s liturgy features the story of Jesus’ passion according to Matthew and the reading appointed for the Easter Vigil is the story of Jesus’ resurrection as found in Matthew 28:1-10.

A great interruption in the reading of Matthew occurs on March 27, April 3, and April 10, the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent. On these Sundays we read three dramatic stories found in the Fourth Gospel, the stories of the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. Paragraph 97 of the Preamble to the Sunday Lectionary tells us that these readings have been restored in Year A because they are of major importance in regard to Christian initiation. Our homilies on these Sundays should reflect the importance that the church assigns to these gospel passages and to Christian initiation, especially the Christian Initiation of Adults.

NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

March 6, 2011

LITURGY

Deuteronomy 11:18, 26-28, 32 contains Moses’ exhortation to obey the commandments of the Lord.

Romans 3:21-25, 28 speaks of the righteousness of God that has been effected through redemption in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 7:21-27, the final reading from Matthew before the semi-continuous reading of the gospel is interrupted by the Lenten and Easter seasons, is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. Its first verse is taken from Matthew’s Sayings Source (Q) but it differs in two notable respects from its parallel in Q. First of all, Matthew has inserted the phrase, “enter the kingdom of heaven.” Coined in the language of Matthew’s characteristic vocabulary the phrase points to the eschatological dimension of a person’s reaction to the teaching of Jesus. In addition, whereas Luke 6:46 reads “and not do what I command,” Matthew reads “but only the will of my Father in heaven.” The designation of God as Father in heaven (Matt 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 9, 14, 26, 32; 7:11, 21) as well as the reference to the Father’s will (Matt 6:10; 7:21; 12:50; 21:31; 26:42) are typically Matthean. The double “Lord, Lord” is a way to address a highly respected teacher; it is not an affirmation of the divinity of Christ.

The second segment of the reading, verses 22-23, is found only in Matthew. The eschatological perspective introduced by Matthew’s “kingdom of heaven” continues with the reference to “that day,” the Day of the Lord, the day of judgment (see Matt 25:31-46). Activities that publicly show that one is a disciple of Jesus, prophesying, doing exorcisms, or working miracles, are not enough to merit a favorable judgment on the Day of the Lord. Rather it is

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necessary for a person to heed the words of Jesus, as verse 24 suggests. Those who can only demonstrate external signs of discipleship, no matter how striking these may be, will not be acknowledged as disciples on that day. Because of their wayward lives, they will be told to depart (see Matt 31:41).

The third segment of the reading, verses 24-27, begins with an echo of the biblical pairing of hearing and doing (see Deut 31:12; cf. James 1:22). The material is substantially taken from the Sayings Source but Matthew has so modified the wording of his source that Jesus' words about the house built on rock anticipate his other words about a house built on a rock, the house whose keys are given to Peter (Matt 16:18; see Raymond F. Collins, "The Transformation of a Motif: 'They Entered the House of Simon and Andrew' [Mark 1,29]," *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* 18 [1993] 5-40). The words of Jesus are dynamically preserved in the teaching of Peter. The house built on rock withstands eschatological turmoil whereas the house built on sand succumbs to the cataclysmic events that symbolize the end times (see Matt 24:29; Mark 13:24-25; Luke 21:25-26).

BROKEN FOR US

Rhetoricians describe the final words of the Sermon on the Mount as a peroration. It summarizes the entire Sermon and provides strong motivation for heeding its message. The reader is to accept the entire Sermon as the will of God. There is to be no picking and choosing of one or another exhortation, one that a particular reader would like to hear. What Jesus has said expresses God's will and must be obeyed. Disobedience will result in ultimate destruction. Not even the presence of external signs of discipleship will rescue an evil-doer from eschatological punishment.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

March 13, 2011

LITURGY

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7 offers segments of the Yahwist's story of the temptation of the primordial human beings.

Romans 5:12-19 compares what Christ has done for the human race with what Adam has done to it.

Matthew 4:1-11 is Matthew's version of Jesus' temptation in the desert (see Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:13). Matthew agrees with the other Synoptic authors in attributing Jesus' presence in the desert to the work of the Spirit. Taking his material from the Sayings Source, Matthew speaks of three different temptations as does Luke. Matthew and Luke describe Jesus' forty days in the desert as a period in which Jesus fasted, thus setting the stage for the first temptation.

In both Matthew and Luke the first temptation is about turning stone into bread, but there is a difference between the narrative accounts. Luke speaks of a single stone and a single loaf of bread, whereas Matthew speaks of stones and loaves of bread. This means that the diabolic

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challenges are different. In Luke, Jesus is challenged to change stone into bread in order to satisfy his hunger; in Matthew, Jesus is challenged to show himself a prodigious miracle worker. Since the Exodus story serves as the backdrop of the temptation stories, particularly in Matthew, it may be that the quantity of bread suggested by the devil reflects the amount of bread needed to feed the hungry Israelites in the desert. Jesus responds to the devil’s challenge by citing Deut 8:3. In their biblical setting, the words belonged to a speech of Moses in which the prophet explained to the people that God had humbled the Israelites by letting them hunger. God then fed the people in order to show them “that not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord.”

The second temptation takes place in Jerusalem, on the parapet of the temple. Many scholars believe that the spot to which Matthew is referring is the southeastern corner of the temple, which rises high above the juncture of the Hinnon and Kedron valleys. Josephus reports that if someone were to peer out from that corner of the temple, he would get dizzy. Here, the devil suggests that Jesus jump. He cites a passage from Scripture, Ps 91:1-2, encouraging Jesus to jump and telling him that angels, God’s servants, would prevent him from being injured in the fall. Jesus again responds by quoting Deuteronomy. In Deut 6:16, Moses tells the Israelites not to test the Lord as they did when they murmured against him against him at Massah and Meribah (see Exod 17:7; Ps 95:8-9) because they wanted water to drink.

A very high mountain is the site of the third temptation. From that vantage point, the devil is able to show Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. Matthew uses a bit of authorial license in writing about a very high mountain (absent from Q) and *all* (present in Q) this world’s kingdoms. It may be that Matthew intended his Jewish-Christian readers to recall the biblical mountain, Pisgah (Deut 3:27) or Nebo (Deut 34:1-4), from which Moses could look into the Promised Land into which he was not permitted to enter. All that Jesus needed to do in order to obtain authority over all these nations and take possession of their wealth, said the devil, was bend his knee before the devil as an act of obeisance. Jesus refuses to fall for this third temptation. Rejecting this temptation, Jesus cites the Book of Deuteronomy for a third time. Addressing the devil as Satan, Jesus tells him to get lost and quotes Deut 6:13, most likely a generic rebuttal to the incident of the Golden Calf. On hearing this, the devil left Jesus (see Luke 4:13). After his departure, Jesus was served by angels who ministered to him (see Mark 1:13).

What it means for Jesus to be the Son of God is what is at stake in the temptation narrative. The devil begins the first two temptations by saying, “If you are the Son of God” (vv. 3, 6). The temptations are that Jesus consider his divine sonship—to be understood in the Hebrew manner, functionally, rather than in a Hellenistic manner, ontologically—to be demonstrated by his ability as a wonder-worker, as someone who controlled the temple and its precincts, or as a political potentate. None of these postures would provide evidence of divine sonship. By rejecting all three Jesus showed that, unlike Israel at the time of the Exodus which worshipped a Golden Calf and murmured against the Lord when they needed food and water, he was a faithful son of the Father, truly the “Son of God.”

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The reader of the Matthean narrative should not overlook the fact that the tempter is described by three different epithets in the narrative. The narrator calls him the devil (vv. 1, 5, 7) and the tempter (v. 3). Jesus calls him Satan (v. 3; cf. Matt 16:23). The accumulation of names suggests that the devil represents the embodiment of eschatological evil.

BROKEN FOR US

The obvious focus of today’s gospel reading is the issue of Jesus’ identity (see Matt 16:13-20). What does it mean for Jesus to be the Son of God? What does it mean for Jesus to be the Messiah? A christological homily would be well-suited to the text that has been read.

Should, however, the homilist want to actualize the text in such a way that it is pertinent to the faithful who begin their Lenten journey, the homilist might speak about the nature of a person’s identity as a Christian. What does a believer need to reject in order to live a life that is truly consistent with his or her Christian identity and the vocation to which God has called that particular individual.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

March 20, 2011

LITURGY

Genesis 12:1-4a contains God’s promise to Abram that he would be “the father of a great nation.” “The father of a great nation” is the meaning of the symbolic name, “Abraham.”

2 Timothy 1:8b-10, speaking of the manifestation (*epiphaneia*) of our Savior Jesus Christ, is an appropriate reading for the Sunday of the Transfiguration.

Matthew 17:1-9 is Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration of Jesus. The narrative is quite similar to that found in Matthew’s source document, Mark 9:2-10, and the parallel account in Luke 9:28-36. The differences among the three accounts are few.

Peter, James, and John were among the first disciples called by Jesus (see Matt 4:18-22). Matthew identifies John as James’ brother, just as he did in the account of their calling by Jesus. The three are often described as an inner circle within The Twelve (see Matt 26:37). A high mountain is a typical location for a theophany (see Matt 28:16). Since the fourth century Mount Tabor, eleven miles to the west of the Sea of Galilee and a little less than 2000 feet high, has been revered as the site of the transfiguration. The beautiful church of the Transfiguration, now in the care of the Franciscan friars, was built atop the mountain in the mid 1920s.

On the mountain the chosen three are beneficiaries of a vision of the transformed Christ whose radiant face recalls the face of Moses that shined in the presence of God (Exod 34:29-30, 35). Jesus is accompanied by Moses and Elijah who represent the law and the prophets (see Matt 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40). As usual, Peter serves as the disciples’ spokesperson (see Matt 16:15-16). Reflecting Matthew’s avoidance of the term “rabbi” in reference to Jesus, Matthew’s Peter addresses Jesus as “Lord” (cf. Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33). With reference to the tents erected for the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:39-43), Peter expresses a desire to prolong the experience. Mark

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and Luke, but not Matthew, express the idea that Peter was beside himself when he expressed this desire.

As Peter was speaking, a bright cloud appeared, casting a shadow on the six men. In biblical tradition, the cloud serves as a vehicle for the divine presence (see Exod 16:10; 19:9; 24:15-16; 33:9; etc.). From the cloud came a voice, uttering substantially the same message that was heard at Jesus’ baptism (Matt 3:17). The heavenly voice identifies Jesus in terms that recall the Servant of Yahweh (Isa 42:1; 44:2) and the Jewish hope for a messiah (Ps 2:7). That the disciples were told to listen to Jesus is an indication of Jesus’ prophetic mission.

Overcome with awe at the theophany, the three disciples fell prostrate. Their vision ended when Jesus touched them and spoke to them, returning life, as it were, to normal. As they came down the mountain, Jesus told the chosen three not to tell anyone else about the vision “until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” This first mention of the resurrection from the dead in Matthew’s gospel suggests that the disciples’ vision was a foretaste of the vision of the glory of the risen Lord, to whom the Law and the prophets gave witness, the risen Lord whose divine sonship was manifest in his being raised from the dead (cf. Rom 1:4).

BROKEN FOR US

The story of the transfiguration traditionally serves as the gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Lent. It serves as a reminder that the season of Lent is a season of preparation for Easter, the Feast of the Glorification of Jesus.

While Lent is a season of fast and abstinence, we, with our awareness of what we have given, with our two-days of fasting and our Friday abstinence, should not be the focus of Lent. Our focus should be on Jesus whose disciples we are, on Jesus whose glory we hope to experience one day. All that we do during Lent is but a prelude to our sharing in the glory of Jesus.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

March 27, 2011

LITURGY

Exodus 17:3-7 tells about Israel’s grumbling against the Lord because they were thirsty.

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8 speaks about peace and hope.

John 4:5-42 is the story of the woman at the well. It is noteworthy that one of the most important recent studies of this passage in the Johannine Gospel was written by a Nigerian Religious, Sr. Teresa Okure, whose book, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (Tubingen: J.C. B. Mohr [Siebert]) was published in 1988. A member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, she teaches at the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Moved by God to pass through Samaria (John 4:3), Jesus arrives in Sychar, a place whose exact location remains unknown to this day even though a well known as “Jacob’s Well”

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is often pointed out to pilgrims in the city of Nablus, the center of the now-small Samaritan population of Palestine. A tired and hungry Jesus sits down at a well while his disciples go into town to get some food. It would be a social oddity for a woman to come to draw water at noon but that is what the evangelist suggests. His description of her as a “woman of Samaria” highlights two personal characteristics that make of her someone to whom Jesus should not talk. She is a female and she is Samaritan. In John 4:9 the evangelist identifies Jesus as a Jew. Jesus breaches social convention in two respects. He engages in conversation with an adult female; he talks with a Samaritan, asking her for some water.

The first part of Jesus’ dialogue with the woman (vv. 10-15) focuses on God’s gift of living water. As is often the case in the narratives of the Fourth Gospel, “living water” has a double meaning. On the narrative level, it designates running water, water that is healthy to drink, rather than stagnant water that might accumulate in a cistern. On the symbolic level, “living water” refers to the Spirit, or life mediated by the Holy Spirit. The anonymous woman wants to receive this gift.

The second part of the dialogue (vv. 16-30) focuses on the identity of the one who speaks with the woman (see John 4:10). The woman acknowledges that Jesus is a prophet, perhaps *the* prophet like Moses to be raised up from among the Jews as God had promised (see Deut 18:15, 18). In his conversation with the woman Jesus states that salvation is from the Jews (vv. 22) and speaks to the woman about true worship, worship in Spirit and truth, that is, devotion to God that is inspired by the Spirit and evidenced by one’s entire life.

On the disciples’ return the woman abandons her water pitcher behind—a sign of the change in her life—and leaves the scene. Jesus then engages his disciples in a conversation about mission. It is to be noted that the Fourth Evangelist never speaks about Jesus’ “apostles; he mentions only Jesus’ disciples. Although people are expecting the harvest to come in four months’ time, the fields are already ripe for the harvest. The “already” of the eschatological “already but not yet” is realized in the woman’s faith and the mission in which she is about to be engaged.

The last scene in the story portrays Jesus in the Samaritan town. Because of what the woman had told them, they were intrigued by Jesus and begged him to stay with them for a while. Jesus spoke directly to the inhabitants of the town and more people believed in him than had believed solely on the basis of the woman’s testimony.

Many features of today’s reading merit explanation but two interrelated themes deserve particular mention, the development of the woman’s faith and Jesus self-revelation. Initially the woman almost derisively calls Jesus a Jew. Then she addresses him as “Sir.” Then she acknowledges that he is a prophet. This leads to her suggesting that he might possibly be the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus’ response suggests that he is the revealer, God’s spokesperson (v. 26). Finally, because of his self-revelation he is acknowledged as the Savior of the world. The woman who had been a hesitant outsider had become a missionary.

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The story of the Samaritan woman inspired a religious song not so many years ago. The interesting tale is retold in the church’s liturgy on the third Sunday of Lent because it speaks of the living water, a symbol of the sacrament of baptism that catechumens will receive during the great Easter Vigil celebration just four weeks from now.

Baptism, symbolized by the gift of living water, should be the focus of today’s homily. Baptism is a gift of God, a gift given to the most unlikely of candidates. This gift initiates believers into faith, with its ever growing insight into who Christ is. This gift initiates the believer into discipleship, a life of giving witness to Jesus.