

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

A few months ago, I attended an international biblical symposium hosted by my Alma Mater, the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. During dinner conversation one evening I had an interesting discussion with a well-known and well-respected British biblical scholar who lamented our current three-year lectionary cycle. Not a Catholic, she pined for the four-year lectionary cycle to which she had been accustomed in her earlier years. That arrangement allowed for the proclamation and exposition of each of the four canonical gospels in order.

We Roman Catholics have been blessed by the introduction of the three-year cycle of Sunday readings introduced as part of the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council. In keeping with the wishes of the Council Fathers, we now have a much richer fare on the Scriptures on which to feast.

Nonetheless, as I look at the readings for March and April, I understand my interlocutor’s point of view. Year B is the year of Mark. Yet, in the coming two months we will proclaim Mark’s Gospel only two or three times, depending on whether or not we read Mark on Easter Sunday. Otherwise, we proclaim the Johannine Gospel at least five times, six if we opt for the Johannine reading on Easter. And our lectionary asks that we proclaim the sequel to Luke’s story of the anonymous pair of disciples meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus on the Third Sunday of Easter.

Given this situation, it is all too easy for us to forget this year’s concentration on Mark during the next two months, but we should not do so. For years, scholars have said that the Gospel according to Mark is a passion narrative with a long introduction. The passion narrative is, in many ways, the highlight of Mark’s Gospel. Palm Sunday provides us and our congregations with an opportunity to savor the text to the full.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

March 4, 2012

LITURGY:

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 is taken from the Genesis story about the Binding of Isaac, long considered to be a biblical figure of Jesus’ death on the cross and his being raised from the dead.

Romans 8:31b-34 is Paul’s prelude to his reflection on the all-powerful love of God for us (Rom 8:31-39).

Mark 9:2-10 contains the oldest literary attestation to Jesus’ transfiguration in the presence of the inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John (cf. Mk 3:16-17). The location of the scene on an unnamed mountain recalls a traditional motif in the biblical theophany accounts. The motif of bright whiteness recalls the traditional place for the appearance of heavenly beings (e. g., Dan 7:9).

The appearance of Elijah and Moses is generally associated with the “law and the prophets,” but the sequence in which Elijah is mentioned before Moses calls for further thought. It is likely that the name of Elijah occurs before that of Moses because the figure of Elijah is an important part of Mark’s literary contextualization of the transfiguration scene. Shortly before the transfiguration, some of Jesus’ disciples reported that some people identified Jesus with Elijah (Mk 8:28). Immediately after the transfiguration Jesus spoke to the trio of disciples about the coming of Elijah (Mk 9:9-13).

According to biblical tradition both Elijah and Moses experienced theophanies on a mountain (1 Kgs 19:11-18; Exod 19:16-25). Elijah is reported to have been transported into heaven (2 Kgs 3:9-12), a happening that is often mentioned in Jewish history (see Sir 48:9; 1 Macc 2:38; *1 Enoch* 89:52; 93:8;

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 9.28). Deuteronomy 34:5-8 describes the death and burial of Moses; but later Jewish tradition speaks of Moses’ exaltation to heaven (*Assumption of Moses* 11:5-8; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3.5, 7; 4.8, 48; Philo, *The Life of Moses* 2.288, 291-292; *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1.86). Accordingly, the presence of Elijah and Moses at the transfiguration of Jesus is a literary foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus, as is the transfiguration event itself.

The transfiguration story develops two main ideas: the relationship between Jesus and God (cf. Mk 1:1; 9:7), on the one hand, and the weakness and misunderstanding of the disciples, on the other. Mark’s narration of this scene is another example of the way in which his story about Jesus centers both on Jesus and on the disciples, the two foci of interest in his story.

Peter, as is usual in the Markan narrative, takes the lead. He addresses Jesus as “rabbi,” seemingly putting his previous confession of Jesus as Messiah (Mk 8:29) on the back burner. In awe and in fright (cf. Mk 4:41; 6:50), Peter suggests that a permanent shrine should be erected.

The cloud symbolizes the presence of God. From the cloud, comes a voice that identifies Jesus as God’s beloved Son (cf. Ps 2:7). The Father’s recognition of Jesus identifies Jesus in a way that people (see Mk 8:28) and even Peter (Mk 8:29; 9:5) were unable to identify him. The Father’s words are addressed to the trio of disciples, along with the solemn exhortation, “Listen to him.”

As Jesus and the disciples were coming down from the mountain, Jesus told them not to speak about their experience until after the resurrection (cf. Mk 8:30). Apparently they heeded Jesus’ command, but they continued to be puzzled by the idea that he would be raised from the dead, a notion that Jesus had previously broached in the first prediction of the passion (Mk 8:31; cf. 9:30-32; 10:33-34).

BROKEN FOR US:

The story of Jesus’ transfiguration is read on the Second Sunday of Lent in all three years of the triennial liturgical cycle. In Mark’s story of Jesus, the transfiguration episode leaves the trio of privileged disciples still wondering about his resurrection from the dead. The episode is intended to buoy up the three key disciples as the intensity of the confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities increases, eventually leading to Jesus’ suffering and death.

With the discipline of Lent barely upon us, the reading of the story of Jesus’ transfiguration should serve to buoy us up, not only in the midst of Lent’s penitential practices but also in the context of the many difficulties of our lives. The transfiguration is a God-given sign of the resurrection. Like the disciples, we may wonder what the resurrection means, but in faith we realize that it provides our lives with hope and meaning.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

March 11, 2012

LITURGY:

Exodus 20:1-17 contains the oldest version of the Ten Commandments (cf. Deut 5:1-11).

1 Corinthians 1:22-25 presents the crucified Christ as the power and wisdom of God.

John 2:13-25, the first in this year’s Lenten series of readings from the Fourth Gospel, describes the cleansing of the temple. It is well known that the Synoptic evangelists place their narrative of the incident just prior to their accounts of the passion of Jesus, so that the cleansing of the temple triggers the series of events that lead to Jesus’ death (see Mt 21:12-13; Mk 11:15-17; Lk 19:45-46). The Fourth evangelist places his much longer account of the incident towards the beginning of his narrative in order to provide

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

the reader with an incident that foreshadows what is to come.

The first verse of the reading sets the scene. It describes Jesus going up to Jerusalem for the Feast of “the Passover of the Jews.” This is the Fourth Gospel’s first mention of the Passover of the Jews (cf. Jn 6:4; 11:55), a festival celebrated during the month of Nisan, on the 14-15th. Mention of the Jewish feast allows the evangelist to focus on “the Jews,” that is, the Jewish authorities whose antipathy towards Jesus will be the subject of many subsequent narratives in the Fourth Gospel.

After the scene has been set, the Johannine narrative includes a dramatic sequence of four short scenes. The first scene (vv. 14-17) describes the action of Jesus and the reaction of his disciples. People were selling animals and changing money in the temple precincts. Both activities were in function of Jewish worship. Animals sold on site were presumably unblemished and therefore suitable to be offered in sacrifice. These animals would lack any “blemish” that might happen to an animal driven down from the Galilee over the course of several days. Money was exchanged so that the temple tax could be paid in shekels rather than in the image-bearing Roman coinage.

Jesus says that the temple was the dwelling place of his Father and so should not become a market place (cf. Zech 14:21b). The evangelist’s Greek text plays with the notion of house; it contrasts the *house* of my father (*oikos tou patros mou*) with the *house* for shopping (*oikos emporiou*). The reaction of the disciples is captured in their remembering a passage of Scripture, Psalm 69:10. The psalm verse provides them with interpretation of what happened. In view of the forthcoming passion, the evangelist has changed the verb in the quotation from a past (aorist) to a future tense.

The second scene (vv. 18-20) presents the first confrontation between Jesus and the Jews in the Fourth Gospel. The evangelist now introduces a third designation of the temple into the narrative. Previously he had written about the “temple” (*hieron*, vv. 14, 15) and the Father’s house (*oikos tou patros*, v. 16). Now he writes about the “sanctuary” (*naos*, vv. 19, 20, 21). As so often in the Fourth Gospel, the Jews misunderstand what Jesus is saying. Their focus is on the magnificent Second Temple whose construction took forty-six years.

In the third scene (vv. 21-22), the evangelist offers his own explanatory comment. He notes that Jesus was not talking about a stone building; rather, he was talking about his own body, which would be raised up after three days. Once again, the disciples’ memory helps them understand, but only after Jesus had been raised from the dead. Only the resurrection of Jesus makes sense of what Jesus said to the Jews (v. 19). Only the resurrection of Jesus makes sense of the Scripture that the disciples remembered.

The fourth scene (vv. 23-25) is transitional. The evangelist notes that faith in Jesus began to increase as of the Passover festival but adds that a faith based only on the signs that Jesus did was insufficient. Jesus alone “understood” the meaning of his signs.

BROKEN FOR US:

Today’s gospel lection provides a meaningful reflection on the nature of faith. “The Jews,” increasingly the antagonists of Jesus as the Johannine drama unfolds, are picky. They can only see what is merely physical. Some people begin to believe; but their faith is based only on signs. That faith is insufficient for real union with Jesus. The disciples are on their way to real faith, but they need to remember the Scriptures and Jesus’ resurrection from the dead before they understand.

The three reactions to Jesus continue to be seen at the present time. Many folks, some of whom are antagonistic, do not accept Jesus. They refuse to be his disciples even if they occasionally admit that Jesus did some good things. Other people have an insufficient faith. Their loyalty to Jesus is based on his miracles, to which might be added an expectation that Jesus will reward them for their “faith.” Still others have a growing faith, based on Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and some understanding of the Scriptures. Hopefully, we belong to this third group.

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 18, 2012

LITURGY:

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23 describes the contamination of the temple and the exile into Babylon.

Ephesians 2:4 -10 tells how God’s love for us leads to our being saved from our sins and raised with Christ.

John 3:14-21 is part of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and Jewish leader (Jn 3:1). The lectionary *incipit*, “Jesus said to Nicodemus,” reflects John 3:9-10.

The first two verses of the reading speak of the revelation of the Son of Man. As a title, the “Son of Man” is an important epithet for Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (see Jn 1:51; 3:13, 14; 5:27; 6:3, 53, 62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23, 34 [2x]; 13:31). As a common expression, the words simply mean a “male human being.”

The story of Moses lifting up the serpent in the desert is told in Numbers 21:8-9. The wandering Israelites had faced the peril of being bitten by poisonous snakes, a punishment that God had inflicted upon them because they had grumbled against him and against Moses, his prophet. Moses prayed to God on their behalf. In response, God revealed that whoever looked upon the bronze serpent that Moses was to raise up on a pole would be saved from the danger.

An element of divine necessity must be discerned in Jesus’ “so must.” Jesus *must* be lifted up. The one who believes in him when he is lifted up will receive eternal life.

At this point in the Johannine story there is some ambiguity about Jesus being lifted up (*hypsōthenai*) but as the narrative unfolds it becomes clear that this lifting up is a reference to Jesus’ death (see Jn 12:32-33). The verb is one of the Johannine *double entendres*. It refers both to the physical lifting up of Jesus on the pole of the cross and to the exaltation of Jesus which occurs in his salvific death on the cross. In verses 14-15 Jesus tells Nicodemus that salvation accrues to those who believe in his saving crucifixion/exaltation, the high point of divine revelation.

Jesus’ “commentary” on the “lifting up”—in all three aspects of its references—Moses lifting of the serpent, Jesus’ being lifted on the cross, and Jesus’ exaltation—attributes the gift of salvation to the love of God. God’s love for the world (*kosmos*, here with a neutral meaning rather than with the negative connotations generally associated with the term in the Fourth Gospel) is the source of the salvation that occurs in Jesus’ exaltation. The universal aspect of salvation is a bit unusual in Jesus’ “Jewish” conversation with Nicodemus but for the reader of the gospel the idea was foreshadowed in the prologue to the gospel (Jn 1:12-13).

The language of the prologue continues to be echoed in Jesus’ words as he speaks about life, light, and darkness (cf. Jn 1:4-8). In verses 18-10 the evangelist introduces the language of judgment and condemnation (*krisis, krinein*) into his narrative for the first time. He does not, however, speak about a future judgment. Rather he affirms that the one who does not accept Jesus’ revelation in the present stands condemned. These people judge themselves because they do not accept that saving revelation which reveals God’s love for humankind. The notion of present self-judgment is a consequence of the evangelist’s “realized eschatology.”

BROKEN FOR US:

The Johannine story told in today’s gospel reading is a reminder that now is the decisive time. We know that salvation occurs in the exaltation/glorification of Jesus on the cross, an event that we celebrate on Good Friday when we read the story of Jesus’ passion in its Johannine version. We also know that salvation is a present reality, something in which we participate by reason of the baptism that we celebrate in the Easter Vigil. Today’s gospel reading calls us to accept that saving revelation, the mystery of God’s love for us, in all its ramifications. But there is no time to lose for now is the decisive moment.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 25, 2012

LITURGY:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 contains the promise of a new covenant.

Hebrews 5:7-9 describes the suffering and prayer of Jesus.

John 12:20-33 is a passage in the Fourth Gospel that follows immediately upon the evangelist’s account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Jn 12:12-19). The narrative is easily divided into four parts.

The setting of the scene (vv. 20-22) involves Philip and Andrew, the only two disciples in the Fourth Gospel whose names are rendered in Greek. Philip is said to come from Bethsaida, a town just north of the Sea of Galilee, close to the spot where the waters of the Jordan River enter into the lake. Some non-Jews, “Greeks” (*Hellenes*, v.20), obviously “God-fearers” since they had come to worship during the Passover festival, approached Philip and asked to “see” (*idein*) Jesus. The evangelist’s language may suggest that these outsiders wanted to explore an initial faith in Jesus.

In the second part of the narrative (vv. 23-26), Jesus announces his impending hour (cf. Jn 2:4). His hour is the hour of his salvific death/exaltation. Metaphorically, Jesus speaks about his death, using the image of a seed that must be implanted in the ground where it will die. Only then will it bring forth fruit. The imagery draws attention to the effect of Jesus death.

In the discourse about life which follows, “life” (*psyche*, twice in v. 25) refers to the human experience of life. Those who hang onto “life” and are not willing to sacrifice their lives for others’ sake, as Jesus did, will lose what they have. Alternatively, those who are willing to let go of their lives, as Jesus did, will receive eternal life (*zoe aionios*) and be where Jesus is, that is, they will be with the Father. They will be honored by the Father in a way that a mere servant could not expect.

The third part of the narrative (vv. 27-30) bears some similarity with the Gethsemane tradition preserved in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 26:36-46; Mk 14:32-42; Lk 22:39-46). Jesus’ hour begins with an experience of anguish. Confident in the Father’s oversight of his life, Jesus appeals to the Father. The glorification of the Father is the purpose of Jesus’ life and ministry. The Father will see him through his anguish.

Then an interruption occurs. A voice from heaven announces that Jesus’ ministry did indeed glorify the Father and that further glorification is yet to come, that is, in Jesus’ forthcoming death. Another interruption occurs when the narrator, in yet another example of the misunderstanding motif in the Fourth Gospel, observes that the bystanders didn’t understand what had happened. Jesus then “explains” what had happened. Those who see Jesus must come to believe in Jesus whose death will glorify the Father and is his own glorification.

The fourth part of the narrative (vv. 31-33) continues the themes of lifting up and judgment found in last week’s gospel lection (John 3:14-21). Jesus announces that the reference to his being lifted up is a reference to death on the cross. He also announces that the moment of his death is the moment in which the “ruler of this world” (*ho archon tou kosmou toutou*) will lose his power and be tossed out. The universal perspective of “the world” and “everyone” hearkens back to the setting of the scene, where Greeks, non-Jews, are present to see Jesus and listen to what he has to say.

BROKEN FOR US:

As church-going Christians prepare for Holy Week, today’s gospel reminds us that the hour of Jesus—to use Johannine terminology—is the hour of Jesus’ death. The discourse focuses on a number of different aspects of Jesus’ death: its fruitfulness, the necessity for Jesus’ disciples to “give up” their lives as Jesus did, Jesus’ death as his glorification, Jesus’ death as the culmination of his ministry’s glorification of the Father, the revelatory nature of Jesus’ death, universal salvation, and the end of the reign of the ruler of this earth.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

April 1, 2012

LITURGY:

Isaiah 50:4-7 is taken from the third Servant Song in Second Isaiah.

Philippians 2:6-11 contains Paul’s great Christological hymn.

Mark 14:1-15:47 is the oldest written story about Jesus’ passion. The evangelist apparently put the narrative together from bits of tradition that had been transmitted orally during the four decades between Jesus’ death and his writing of the gospel. These traditions would have focused on the anointing of Jesus (Mk 14:1-9), the final meal (14:10-13), the agony in the garden (14:32-42), Jesus’ betrayal and arrest (14:43-52), a Jewish trial (14:53-72), a Roman trial (15:1-20), the crucifixion (15:21-41), and the burial of Jesus (15:42-47). See also the story of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem (11:1-10), a story that is read at the procession with palms. Some of the stories in the passion narrative may have already have been preserved in a pre-Markan written form before the evangelist incorporated them into his story about Jesus. The end product is the result of the evangelist’s inspired literary work and betrays his own theological interests.

The Markan narrative is comprised of twenty short scenes, eleven in chapter 14, nine in chapter 15. Ten scenes featuring persons other than Jesus are each followed by a scene that features Jesus. Thus, the Mark’s story of Jesus’ passion begins with a short scene that speaks about a plot by Jewish leaders to kill Jesus (14:1-2) which is followed by a short scene that describes Jesus’ anointing at Bethany by an anonymous woman, apropos of whom Jesus says “wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (14:3-9). The final two scenes in the passion narrative describe Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, and Salome watching the crucifixion from a distance (15:40-41), followed by a scene which recounts Jesus’ burial (15:42-47).

Mark’s focus on the individuals whose lives intersect with Jesus is to be noted. Some of these individuals are named while others are left in anonymity. Many of these individuals occur in Mark’s Gospel only in the passion narrative. Among the new characters who appear in the Jesus’ story in the passion narrative are several whose response to Jesus is clearly favorable. Among them are the three women who watch the crucifixion (15:40-41), two of whom saw where Jesus’ body was laid (15:47), Simon, the Cyrenian, who was pressed into service to help Jesus carry the cross beam (15:21), the centurion who proclaimed, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (15:39), and, surprisingly, a member of the council, Joseph of Arimathea, who attended to Jesus’ burial (15:43-46).

The centurion’s confession that Jesus is the Son of God hearkens back to the beginning of the gospel, where Jesus Christ is identified as the Son of God (1:1). “Christ,” the properly messianic title found in the gospel’s first verse, recurs in 15:32, when scoffers taunt Jesus, calling him the Christ, the King of Israel, challenging him to come down from the cross. The Christological title that is most emphasized in the Markan narrative is, however, King of the Jews. This title is found six times in the passion narrative (15:2, 9, 12, 14, 18, 26) and is the *titulus*, the capital “offense” affixed to Jesus’ cross (15:26).

The highlight of the eleven scenes that comprise Mark 14 is the story of Jesus’ final meal with his disciples in which he speaks the interpretive words over the bread and over the cup and makes reference to the kingdom of God (14:22-25). The highlight of the nine scenes in chapter 15 is undoubtedly the crucifixion of Jesus (15:20b-25). As he looks upon the crucified Jesus in a later scene (15:39), the centurion utters his remarkable confession, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (*alethos autos ho anthropos huios theou en*).

BROKEN FOR US:

In many ways the passion narrative speaks for itself. The homilist should assist the congregation to understand and respond in faith to this final chapter in this story of Jesus, the denouement of Mark’s story about Jesus. His story is not intended to be a tear-jerker; the homily should not be lugubrious. Mark wants

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 164-184 by Raymond F. Collins.

his readers to understand who Jesus is and how different people react to Jesus, each in keeping with his or her station in life. Those two foci provide points of emphasis for the Palm Sunday homily.