

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 116:3 (2010) 264-284 by Raymond F. Collins.

As the Easter season continues, the first reading of the Sunday liturgy continues to be taken from the Acts of the Apostles. These readings not only help us to know better the history of the early church but also provide some insight into what the church of today is called to be. Homilists should use these texts to help their congregations understand and more fully appreciate the church to we belong.

With the Feast of the Holy Trinity on May 30, the reading is again taken from the Old Testament, as it will be on the Sundays of June. Once again we remember that “the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament . . . and in turn shed light on it and explain it” (*Dei Verbum*, 16).

## **FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

May 2, 2010

### **LITURGY**

**Revelation 21:1-5a** uses many different images to describe the “new Jerusalem.”

**John 13:31a, 34-35** portrays the departing Jesus giving the new commandment to his disciples as his legacy.

**Acts 14:21-27** describes the end of Paul’s first missionary voyage. The narrative begins with a brief mention of the success of Paul’s and Barnabas’s preaching in Derbe, a city about sixty miles away from Lystra. The apostles had fled after rocks were thrown at them in Lystra. They were dragged outside the city, where they were left to die (Acts 14:8-19). The apostles’ gospel message was favorably received by a great number of people in Derbe. Having evangelized Derbe, Paul and Barnabas decided to return to Antioch in Syria (Antioch on the Orontes), from which they had sent almost eighteen months earlier (Acts 13:3).

The apostles retraced their steps to Lystra, Iconium (Acts 14:1-6), and Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:14-50), cities in which they had enjoyed some success before being expelled by riled-up crowds. The apostles’ stops in these cities were intended to encourage the neophyte faithful to persevere despite the hardships that they might have to endure because of their new-found faith in Jesus Christ. Luke highlights the preaching of the kingdom of God as a summary of the gospel preached by the apostles. Not only did the kingdom of God recall the teaching of the Old Testament prophets and the teaching of Jesus but it also contained a hint of anti-(Roman) imperialism. Appointing elders to be in charge of the new communities, Paul and Barnabas provided these new churches with some form of initial structure. Luke identifies the appointed leaders as “elders” (*presbyteroi*), a term that the evangelist uses to describe the leaders of new churches. Elders were not necessarily old men; what was required of them was that their faith be solid and that their virtue and wisdom be recognized by the community.

With prayer and fasting (cf. Acts 13:3) the members of the new churches were commended to the Lord. Then Paul and Barnabas left Antioch, travelling through Pisidia until they reached Perga in Pamphylia (Acts 13:13), where they again seized the opportunity to evangelize. Continuing on to Attalia, the port of Perga, they set sail for Antioch in Syria, the city where they had been commissioned as evangelists by the Holy Spirit as hands were laid on them while the community was engaged in prayer and fasting (Acts 13:1-3). Returning to their home base after a journey of a year and a half, the two apostles reported on what God had accomplished through their efforts of evangelization. Using a familiar Pauline image (1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12), Luke writes about God having opened a door for them. The image is not only

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a good metaphor; it also serves as a reminder that the apostles preached the gospel in people’s homes.

#### BROKEN FOR US

In this Year of Evangelization, today’s reading from Acts comes as a useful reminder of the way that evangelization took place in the first decades of Christianity. Luke’s summary may lead the reader and congregation to have a feeling of the wonderful things that God accomplished through gifted missionaries like Paul and Barnabas. Our thanksgiving to God for those wondrous accomplishments should not lead us to neglect some of the details in Luke’s account.

Among the not-to-be-overlooked details are the following. The proclamation and reception of the gospel is not without some difficulty. The local church needs leadership. Successful proclamation of the gospel is accompanied by prayer and fasting, not only by the evangelizers but also by the evangelized and those who send evangelizers forth. And the home is a primary locus of evangelization.

#### SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 9, 2010

#### LITURGY

**Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23** continues the seer’s image-laden description of the new Jerusalem (see last week’s second reading).

**John 14:23-29** contains the promise of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father is to send in Jesus’ name.

**Acts 15:1-2, 22-29**, along with the account of the baptism of Cornelius in Acts 10, describes an important turning point in the evangelist’s story of the early church. The story of Cornelius provides a warrant for the introduction of Gentiles into the church, which until that time had been a Jewish community. The story of the “Council of Jerusalem” in Acts 15 establishes the principle that Gentile Christians were not bound to observe the precepts of the Jewish Law, as symbolized by the practice of circumcision. Henceforth faithful Jews and believing Gentiles could be part of the one faith community that was the church.

The narrative opens while Paul and Barnabas are still in Antioch on the Orontes (see Acts 14:24-28, last week’s reading from Acts). Some of the so-called Judaizers came to Antioch, claiming that it was necessary for Gentile believers to be circumcised if they were to be saved. This created some dissension in the church at Antioch. So it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and a few others would go to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the leaders of the Jerusalem church. In Galatians 2:2 Paul tells us that he went to Jerusalem because of a revelation.

Today’s liturgical lection omits the account of the delegates’ travel to Jerusalem and of the warm welcome that they received in Jerusalem (Acts 15:3-4). The reading also omits Luke’s account of the deliberations of the gathering in Jerusalem (Acts 15:5-21), including Peter’s intervention which referred to Cornelius’ embrace of belief in Jesus and his reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:7-9).

The liturgical reading resumes the narrative in Acts with an account of the follow-up to the deliberations and decisions that had taken place. A delegation was to be sent back to Antioch. Heading the delegation were Paul and Barnabas. They were accompanied by a man

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named Judas, the son of Sabbas, about whom nothing else is known. Luke probably identifies Judas by his kinship to distinguish him from Judas Iscariot. Also in the delegation was Silas, who was to join with Paul in his work of evangelization. He appears several times in Acts and, is mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:19 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1, under his Hellenized name, Silvanus.

According to Luke’s account the delegation carried with them a letter from the leaders of the church in Jerusalem to Gentile believers in Syria (in which Antioch was located) and Cilicia (Paul’s home area). The letter follows the format of the usual Hellenistic letter with its opening greetings and a customized closing. Most probably the letter was composed by Luke who took advantage of a customary practice of historians to comment on a situation by means of a letter (sometimes a speech) that the historians themselves composed.

According to the letter, Gentile believers were to avoid four things prohibited by Jewish law (see Leviticus 17-18), meat sacrificed to idols, blood, meat from strangled animals, and “unlawful marriage.” These four prohibitions, deriving from the Jerusalem deliberations (Acts 15:20), essentially required Gentile believers to eschew food that had been offered to idols (see 1 Corinthians 8, 10), food that had not prepared in *kosher* fashion, and “fornication” (*porneia*), perhaps a reference to incestuous marriages. Gentile believers’ observation of these prohibitions would enable Jewish Christians to associate with them and participate with them in a common table fellowship.

#### **BROKEN FOR US**

Almost from the very first moments that the gospel began to be proclaimed to the nations, the church experienced difficulties in accommodating different religious and cultural expressions. Jewish believers’ observance of the Law and their practice of circumcision was a major obstacle to the unity of the church. At issue was whether Christ had come for Jews alone or whether he had come for Jews and Gentiles. Today’s first reading proclaims the church’s conviction that salvation was extended to Jews and Gentiles alike and tells about the diffusion of that message to “the world.”

Less critical but culturally important social and religious practices continue to impair the unity of the church today. Immigration into the United States and Canada has brought with it various religious practices that are unfamiliar to many people in the pews. Sometimes these practices make our parishioners uneasy; sometimes the reaction is much harsher, “we’re not going to church anymore at St. . . ., if . . .”

In the world church, there is the matter of allowing the practice of the faith to be clothed in the traditional practices of various indigenous populations. History shows that evangelization has been seriously impeded because of an unnecessary rigidity. Still today, many fail to grasp that we must have unity in the essentials of our faith but allow for diversity in its practice.

#### **THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD**

Thursday, May 13, 2010 or Sunday, May 16, 2010

#### **LITURGY**

**Ephesians 1:17-23** speaks of the resurrection of Christ and his being seated at the right hand of the Father. The alternate reading, **Hebrews 9:24-28; 10:19-23**, poetically describes Jesus’ entrance into the heavenly sanctuary not made by human hands.

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**Luke 24:46-53** contains the Ascension narrative with which Luke closes his "gospel," the first book of his two-part work.

**Acts 1:1-11** is the introductory section of the second book of the evangelist's two-part work. Its opening verses (vv. 1-2) are a literary prologue which recalls the prologue which opens the Gospel according to Luke (Luke 1:1-4). The use of related prologues is conventional in Greek historical works with two-parts. Similar prologues appear, for example, in the two parts of the Jewish historian Josephus' essay, *Against Apion*.

Both the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are addressed to an anonymous Theophilus, a cultured Hellenistic "God-lover" (*Theo-philus*). The prologue tersely recapitulates the Third Gospel, specifically recalling its final pericopes (Luke 24:44-53). Then Jesus gives final instructions to his disciples before commissioning them and being taken up into heaven. Joseph Fitzmyer dubs these instructions (vv. 3-7) Jesus' "last will and testament to his chosen followers" (*Acts* [Anchor Bible 31; New York: Doubleday, 1999], 199). The instructions contain four key points.

The first is an instruction on the kingdom of God, a reality not yet understood by the apostles. Their question about the imminence of the kingdom prompts Jesus to reply that the coming of the kingdom is dependent on the will of the Father alone (Acts 1:6-7). The apostles' question not only indicates that the apostles do not yet have sufficient understanding of what the kingdom really is but also that with Jesus departure a new era ("this time") in the history of salvation has begun. This new era is the time of the Church.

Secondly, Jesus orders the apostles to remain in Jerusalem (cf. Luke 24:49b). Jerusalem is the point of departure for the proclamation of the gospel (cf. Luke 24:47, 52-53). The first part of Luke-Acts began with the temple service of Zechariah in Jerusalem and ends with Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension in Jerusalem. The second part of Luke-Acts begins in Jerusalem and concludes with Paul in Rome, the end of the earth.

The third instruction contains the promise of the Spirit (Luke 24:49a; Acts 1:4-5, 8). The descent of the Spirit, portrayed in the narrative of Acts 2:1-13, is described as the promise of the Father (v. 4) and as the baptism of the Holy Spirit (v. 5). The descent of the Spirit, coming down upon the apostles, contrasts with the ascent of Jesus, who goes up from among the apostles. In the ensuing narrative of Acts the Holy Spirit will be mentioned almost sixty times.

Jesus' final instruction is the commissioning of the apostles (v. 8). The commissioning statement is different from that of the Great Commission at the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel (Matt 28:16-20). Luke's version of the commission (v. 8) is a programmatic statement for the narrative in Acts. Peter will be the principal spokesperson for the gospel in Jerusalem and Judea. Philip will fulfill that role in Samaria. Paul will carry the gospel message to "the end of the earth" (singular in Greek, not a plural as is suggested by the popular translation "ends of the earth"). The end of the earth denotes Rome, where Paul is under house arrest when Luke brings his narrative to a close (Acts 28).

Witnessing to Jesus is a characteristic trait of the disciples (Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 7:58; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 22:15, 22; 26:16). Having commissioned the apostles to be his witnesses, Jesus departs from them to heaven. The "ascension" is Luke's manner of speaking about the glorification or exaltation of Jesus. To stress its reality, Luke graphically describes it as a reality to which the apostles are eye-witnesses; five references to the sense of sight are found in vv. 9-11 ("looking on," "from their sight," "looking intently," "looking at," "you have seen").

Two other features of the nature deserve to be noted. The first is the emphasis on the Father. Luke's use of verbs in the passive voice ("was lifted," "has been taken up") continues the emphasis

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on the activity of God found in the mention of the kingdom of God, the promise of the Father, and the Father having authority over the time of the church).

The second is that the ascension of Jesus looks ahead to the Parousia: the glorified Jesus will return in an apocalyptically described scenario in God's good time.

#### BROKEN FOR US

The Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord does not so much celebrate the absence of Jesus as it does his glorification and the time of the church. Crucial to the existence of the church is the realization of the Father's promise, the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples of Jesus. Equally important is the role of the disciples as witnesses to Jesus and giving testimony to the kingdom of God. The church's submission to the authority of the Father should make us realize that the church is not an end in itself. The church is a subservient and provisional reality established by the Father until the return of Jesus in glory. In the meantime all Christians are called to give witness to Jesus.

#### SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 16, 2010

#### LITURGY

**Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20** is part of the last chapter of the Book of Revelation. The book ends with the Maranatha prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

**John 17:20-26** is a segment of Jesus' high priestly prayer.

**Acts 7:55-60** describes the stoning of Stephen. Stephen's long defensive speech to the Sanhedrin concluded with a counter-argument against its members as being opposed to the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:2-53). This enraged them. They ground their teeth in a menacing and defying grimace (Acts 7:54).

In contrast with the angry Jewish leaders, the calm Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. His impending death provided another opportunity for the revelation of God's glory. In Luke's two-part narrative, God's glory had previously been associated with Jesus' transfiguration (Luke 9:32), his resurrection (Luke 24:26), and his future coming (Luke 9:26; 21:27). In Stephen's vision, Jesus appears standing at the right hand of God (cf. Ps 110:1). What Jesus himself had said during his own trial before the Sanhedrin had come to pass (see Luke 22:70; cf. Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62).

Since, the vision, "Behold, I saw," was Stephen's personal experience, he interpreted the vision for the benefit of the Sanhedrin. Stephen testified about the opened heavens, a typical image used of revelation (see Luke 3:21; cf. Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10). He spoke about Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He identified Jesus as the Son of Man, the very language that Jesus had used before the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:70 and parallels). In the Synoptic gospels "Son of Man" is often used of Jesus to speak of his role as an eschatological figure but the title is generally not used outside of these three gospels. Apart from Matthew, Mark, and Luke the epithet occurs only here and in Revelation 1:13.

The rage of the members of the Sanhedrin increased in intensity. They started to scream and shout, making such a noise that they covered their own ears. They dragged Stephen outside of the city and began to throw rocks at him. Stephen's fate was not very dissimilar from the fate that the members of the synagogue at Nazareth, likewise enraged by what they had heard, intended to mete out to Jesus (see Luke 4:29).

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Witnesses, those legally required to cast the first stones at the offender (Deut 17:7), took off their cloaks to prepare for their task. They put their garments in front of a young man named Saul, who agreed with what was taking place (Acts 8:1). With this literary *tour de force* Luke introduces Saul/Paul into his narrative. Almost immediately the focus of Acts turns to Paul and his singular role as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

As Stephen was about to die, he prayed that the Lord Jesus receive his spirit. His prayer, echoing Psalm 30:6, was similar to that of Jesus of the cross who prayed that the Father receive his spirit (Luke 23:46). Stephen's final prayer was a prayer that those who took his life would be forgiven. Stephen's prayer, addressed to Jesus, echoed Jesus' prayer on the cross (Luke 23:34).

With the death Stephen, the first of the disciples to give his life for bearing witness to Jesus, Luke concludes his account of the community of believers in Jerusalem. He then turns his attention to Paul and his witness to the end of the earth.

## BROKEN FOR US

In the Lenten and Easter seasons there is little correlation among the readings assigned for the Sunday liturgy. Today would seem to be an exception insofar as all three readings speak of the glory of Jesus. The focus of the first reading is, however, on Stephen who is graced with a vision that enables him to see that the words of Jesus have been fulfilled.

Stephen was a faithful disciple. In his paradigmatic role as the first disciple to die for the sake of the gospel, the evangelist Luke wants readers to understand that Stephen was a faithful witness. Hence, the long account of his witness to the Sanhedrin. Stephen's fate was similar to that of Jesus. Like Jesus, Stephen was charged with blasphemy (Acts 6:12) and false witnesses were brought forth against him (Acts 6:13). Like Jesus, he was forthright in speaking to the Sanhedrin when he was on trial for his life. Like Jesus, the dying Stephen commended his spirit to God and prayed for those who were putting him to death.

Patterning our lives on that of Jesus may be difficult. Some of the difficulty may come from within; some of the difficulty may come from the opposition of others. Despite the difficulty, modeling our lives on that of Jesus is not an impossibility. Of that, Stephen gives living and dying proof.

## PENTECOST SUNDAY

May 23, 2010

### LITURGY

**Romans 8:8-17**, is a description of the role of the Spirit in the life and destiny of Christians. The alternate reading, **1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13**, is the assigned reading for the feast in Cycle A and may be used as an alternate in Cycle B. The passage compares the many different gifts that the Spirit gives to the members of the church to different parts of the human body.

**John 14:15-16, 23b-26**, is an account of Jesus' promise of another Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

The alternate reading, **John 20:19-23**, a short narrative that some have described as John's "Pentecost," is the assigned reading for the Feast of Pentecost in Cycle A. It also appears as an alternate reading in Cycle B.

**Acts 2:1-11**, Luke's description of the first Christian Pentecost, provides a dramatic description of the gift of the Spirit to the members of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. The occasion was the celebration of the Feast of Weeks. The Feast of Weeks was originally an agricultural

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celebration in which first fruits and lambs were offered (Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Leviticus 23:15-21; Deuteronomy 16:9-12, 16). Fifty days (hence, "Pentecost") after Passover, a large number of Diaspora Jews gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast, the most important of the Jewish "pentecosts."

On the occasion of the feast, the Jewish-Christian community in JerusalemC120 members strong (Acts 1:15)Cgathered in one place (Acts 2:1). A sound like a roaring wind filled the whole place. The sound that these believers heard recalls motifs found in biblical narratives of theophanies, particularly the Sinai (Exodus 19:16-19) and Elijah theophanies (1 Kings 19:11-12). The tongues of fire which came to rest on each of them signifies that the experience is that of baptism with the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5). That the Spirit came in the form of tongues implies that their charism was that of speaking. Filled with the Holy Spirit, as Jesus was (Luke 3:21-22; 4:1), the disciples were enabled to speak out boldly.

Luke clearly indicates that the apostles' gift was one of speaking. Not only did the parted fire descend on the disciples in the form of tongues but those who listened to them heard them speak in different languages. It was not the out-of-the ordinary or ecstatic nature of the event that mattered to Luke. What mattered to the evangelist was that the disciples were able to communicate. Luke's message is that, because of the gift of the Spirit, the gospel is to be proclaimed to people of different languages.

The amazed and disparate group of people who heard the disciples included immigrants (Acts 2:5) as well as pilgrims (Acts 2:10). Using the literary convention of a list of nations (cf. Genesis 10:2-31), Luke suggests that the gathering of Diaspora Jews who heard the disciples came from fifteen different areas. Luke arranged the areas in an order that generally goes from east to west. Similar lists were used by Hellenistic Jewish authors to emphasize the extent of the Diaspora (cf. *Sibylline Oracles* 3:160-172, 205-209; Philo, *Gaius* 281-282; *Flaccus* 45-46). Luke uses the device to symbolize the spread of the gospel throughout the Mediterranean basin and the Near East.

## **BROKEN FOR US**

Some verses later Peter and the Eleven stand up in the group. In Acts 2:14, a verse that follows after today's liturgical reading, the Twelve are distinguished from all the others in the Jerusalem community who had received the eschatological gift of God's Spirit. The entire community participated in the first Christian Pentecost.

Luke's narrative tells about the entire community being gifted with the Spirit and being involved in the ministry of evangelization. This being so, the first Christian Pentecost can rightly be considered the "birthday" of the church. On the first Christian Pentecost, the members of the church were baptized with the Spirit. On that occasion, the Spirit inspired the members of the church of Jerusalem to foreshadow the preaching of the gospel to people of many languages and different cultures.

The cultural imperative of the first Pentecost impinges on the church today not only in its classic missionary outreach to people of different lands, with their various languages and customs, but also in its ministry in the United States and CanadaCand some other places as wellCwhere the residential population consists of people with different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural heritages. The gospel must be preached to people of different languages and cultures in such a way that they truly "hear it." Doing so is one of the great challenges that face the church of the third millennium.

## **THE MOST HOLY TRINITY**

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May 30, 2010

## LITURGY

**Romans 5:1-5** has been chosen as a reading for today’s liturgy because of its mention of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

**John 16:12-16** highlights the role of the promised Spirit as the Spirit of Truth.

**Proverbs 8:22-31** is part of the longest speech of Lady Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs. The long poem, Proverbs 8 is the “most majestic and revealing portrait of personified Wisdom in the book” (See Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs* [Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999], 93).

The third part of the poem (Prov 8:22-31) provides us with today’s first scriptural reading. Its rich imagery is designed to enhance the authority of Wisdom by showing its presence with God and its role at the time of creation.

The first unit (vv. 22-26) is a cosmogony that portrays Lady Wisdom as being of divine origin and existing before everything else. A variety of images are used to describe the birth of Lady Wisdom. Some of these images employ language that had previously appeared in Canaanite and Ugaritic creation myths. To accent the notion that Wisdom was created before all else, the poet provides a negative mirror image of creation (vv. 24-26). When Wisdom was created there were no waters, no mountains and hills, no surface suitable for inhabitation.

The second unit (vv. 27-31) is a cosmogony that portrays Lady Wisdom’s role in creation. Wisdom was present with God at the time of creation. The imagery used to describe creation is similar to that of Genesis 1:6-10. Biblical creation stories often begin with God’s channeling of the cosmic waters. Thus we have the encompassing and circumscription of the waters in the Genesis creation story and in Prov 8:28-29, as well as in Prov 8:24, albeit negatively in this verse.

Not only did Wisdom concur with God in planning creation, Wisdom had a role to play in its beauty and variety. This thought is expressed in the final two lines of the poem (vv. 30-31). Wisdom enjoys being with God as God creates the universe. She delights in Yahweh; she delights in his creation. As the first to be created (“the beginning of his ways,” v. 22), Wisdom is an apt mediator of God’s gifts to the human race.

The *New American Bible*’s translation of the poem provides its readers with beautiful imagery, whose thrust I have attempted to capture in the paragraphs above. In fairness to you, the readers, I must mention that there are serious exegetical issues with the Hebrew expressions translated as “possessed me” (*qānāh*, v. 22) and “craftsman” (*‘āmôn*, v. 30). Those who want to read more about the discussion of the meaning of these terms can consult, Clifford, *Proverbs*, 98-101, or R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes* (Anchor Bible 18. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 71-72. The interpretation of these disputed expressions played a role in the Arian controversy, leading to the formulation “begotten, not made” in the Nicene Creed.

## BROKEN FOR US

Commentators on John 1:1-18, the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, often take note of the similarities between that poem and some of the poems in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Christian tradition has seen in these poems not an explicit affirmation of the Trinity but a foreshadowing of the plurality of divine persons that would be revealed when Jesus came among us.

Those who preach on today’s first reading might find it useful to explain that we know



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about God in his relationship with creation. Theologians would speak about the “economic” Trinity, that is, the persons of the Trinity revealed in the complexities of the history of salvation. Another useful point to make is that the wise God delights in his creation. Genesis reminds us that God saw everything that he had made and it was very good (cf. Gen 1:31).

From this derives the moral imperative that human beings respect the goodness of God’s creation. We have a particular responsibility for care of the waters that play such an important role in creation.