

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 548-570 by Raymond F. Collins.

On November 29, the Latin church begins its reading of the Scriptures on Sunday by gracing its Sunday eucharistic liturgy with readings from the Gospel according to Luke. The evangelist Luke is clearly a well-educated Hellenistic writer. Despite being a Hellenist, Luke invites his readers to consider Jesus in the light of the Old Testament. He does so by using the well-known literary device of ring construction; the writer opens and closes a text on the same theme, often using the same words.

The Gospel according to Luke opens its description of Jesus’ public ministry with Jesus going into his home-town synagogue where he looked for and found a couple of passages in the Book of Isaiah (Isa 6:1-2; 58:6) which he then read to the assembly. Jesus’ commentary on these Old Testament Scriptures was simple, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). After his resurrection from the dead, during his final appearance to the disciples, Jesus “said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:44-45).

Among the evangelists, Luke alone draws this kind of attention to Jesus’ helping his disciples to understand the scriptures. Only Luke offers his readers this comprehensive commentary on Jesus’ ministry. As preachers of the Gospel according to Luke during this liturgical year, it would seem inappropriate for us homilists to fail to open the minds of Jesus’ disciples so that they understand the scriptures of the Old Testament.

ALL SAINTS

November 1, 2009

LITURGY

1 John 3:1-3 describes Christians as children of God and speaks of the realization of our hope, when we shall see God as he is.

Matthew 5:1-12a contains Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes (compare with Luke 6:21-23).

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14 is a reading from what has been called the most enigmatic book of the Bible. The most recent English-language commentary on this book, *Revelation: A Commentary*, appeared in the New Testament Library series, published by Westminster John Knox, earlier this year. It was written by Brian Blount, President and Professor of New Testament at the Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. What follows is based upon Blount’s useful commentary.

The reading opens with the appearance of a fifth angel arising from the East. This fifth angel addresses the four angels previously introduced into the narrative, ordering them not to harm the earth, sea, or trees which were their concern (Rev 7:1). The angel’s loud voice shows that he is speaking in a tone of judgment. This fifth angel is God’s agent in judgment but his command to his fellow angels means that the execution of judgment has been put on hold until such time as the servants of God had been marked with a seal. That the fifth angel has the seal in his possession shows that he is acting with God’s authority.

The seal would have been a signet ring or a cylinder used to stamp something as a sign of ownership, in this case, stamping believers to show that they belong to God. That faithful believers are protectively sealed in this fashion recalls a number of biblical stories, especially those that describe the mark that God put on Cain (Gen 4:15), the blood of the lamb at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 12), and the mark on the forehead of some inhabitants of Jerusalem in the

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story of Ezekiel 9:4-8. The Book of Revelation often alludes to passages in the Old Testament, to the point that some texts in Revelation are virtually a re-reading of biblical texts. This seems to be the case for the first verses of today’s reading which is surely based on the narrative in Ezek 9:4-8.

The 144,000, taken from the twelve tribes of Israel, constitute God’s cosmic army. The number is obviously symbolic. What does it symbolize? Blount responds, “The presentation of the 144,000 as the restored remnant of Israel’s twelve tribes is, then, John’s eschatological imaging of the universal church” (p. 147).

The second part of the reading describes another vision, this time of a great multitude, dressed in white and waving palm branches. The color of their garb shows that they have been faithful witnesses; they have contributed to the destruction of Satan’s rule. The presence of palm branches shows that they are celebrating. These faithful witnesses are celebrating salvation, which comes from God and his lamb.

Today’s reading of Rev 7:9-14, the first of three salvation texts in Revelation (see Rev 12:10; 19:1-2), is the reading of a text that has political overtones. Salvation does not come from the Roman Empire; it comes from God and the Lamb. In affirming this truth the Book of Revelation is not reacting against Roman persecution of Christians; rather it is challenging the dominant political, religious, and economic dimensions of imperial ideology. See, in this regard, the January 2009 issue of *Interpretation*, a well-respected American biblical journal. The title given to the collection of articles in the January issue is “Revelation as a Critique of Empire.”

The choir of angels, worshipping God, responds to the multitude’s song of salvation with an Amen and a doxology. The angelic response indicates heavenly approval of the critique of imperial ideology. But the question remains to be asked, who are these people clothed in white? They are not martyrs. They are faithful witnesses who remained faithful in the great tribulation that precedes the coming of the Day of the Lord.

BROKEN FOR US

The readings appointed for the Feast of All Saints are the same in all three years of the liturgical cycle. As happens so often on feast days, there is no correlation between the first and third readings as there is on the Sundays in Ordinary Time. The first reading, reeking with the imagery that runs throughout the Book of Revelation, lends itself to two homilies. Each of its two visions provides material for a homiletic reflection.

The first vision, Revelation 7:2-4, tells us about the universal church, comprised of God’s chosen people, and representing an eschatologically renewed Israel. Perhaps the homilist would want to develop the idea that baptismal anointing is similar to the sealing with which the fifth angel sealed the 144,000. The ritual of anointing and the sealing are signs that people belong to God.

The second vision, Revelation 7:9-14, yields a different kind of homily. It looks to the end time and proclaims as faithful witnesses those who did not buy the imperial ideology of the time. Today those who acknowledge God and his Lamb in 2009 are also called to critique current imperial ideology, for example, the notion that unbridled capitalism is the real source of our welfare (see Benedict XVI’s recent encyclical, *Charity in Truth*) or the patriotic attitude summed up in “my country, right or wrong.”

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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November 8, 2009

LITURGY

Hebrews 9:24-28 compares the sacrifice of Jesus, the high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, with the sacrifices of the high priests of Israel.

Mark 12:38-44 includes a verbal condemnation of honor-seeking scribes and a narrative critique of the rich.

1 Kings 17:10-16 tells the story of Elijah’s visit to a widow of Zarephath during a great drought (see 1 Kgs 17:1-7). Zarephath, a Phoenician city, was located on the Mediterranean coast. It was about eight miles south of Sidon, a city that continues to exist in twenty-first century Lebanon. In 1 Kings the town of Zarephath was also the site of the contest between the prophets of Baal and Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh (1 Kgs 18:19-40).

The story of the feeding miracle in today’s reading is the middle of three episodes concerning Elijah’s activity during the drought. The first episode describes Elijah hiding in Wadi Cherith (1 Kgs 17:2-7), the third, the raising of the widow’s dead son (1 Kg 17-24). Elijah probably recognized the widow by her widow’s garb (see Gen 38:14). The woman recognized Elijah as an Israelite—hence, her mild oath, “As the Lord, your God, lives”—but the text gives no indication of the reason why the woman acceded to the prophet’s request for a cup of water.

The prophet then asks for some food. The widow’s response to this second request graphically describes the dire situation. She has only a little bit of food with which to feed herself and her son. When that is gone, they will die. Elijah responds by asking that she feed him before she feeds herself and her son. After she does so, she can feed herself and her son. The request, to say the least, is forward, but the prophet assures the woman that if she does as he asks, she will have sufficient food. She does so and the miracle takes place. She is blessed with the gift of food for as long as the drought lasted, enough food to feed herself and her son for the entire year.

The narrative, told in the classic form of a miracle story—1) the difficult situation; 2) an authoritative command; 3) proof that the miracle has taken place—is the bearer of two important theological truths. The first is that Yahweh’s activity was not limited to the land of Israel. The omnipotent God acts beyond the confines of *Eretz Israel*. The second is that the woman believed the word of the Lord spoken by the prophet (see 1 Kgs 17:24; cf. 17:1).

BROKEN FOR US

The presence of a widow in the first and third readings is the common theme of the two lections. In the first reading God, through the prophet, takes care of the widow during a period of drought. In the second reading, Jesus praises a widow who so trusted in the Lord that she contributed her entire livelihood to the temple. These widows, one by obeying the prophet’s command, the other by giving her all, demonstrated that they were to be counted as “the poor,” that is, the biblical *Anawim*, who are not only materially poor but who also maintain their trust in the Lord in the midst of their poverty. People who do not have much have only the Lord in whom to trust. Hence, they are singled out for praise in the Hebrew Scriptures

Those who preach on today’s first reading would do well to focus on the importance of trusting in the Lord. In contrast with the widows in today’s Scripture are we who have so much. Those who have a lot tend to rely on themselves, their abilities, their status, their wealth, their intelligence, their physical prowess, rather than on God. Those of us who have much must learn to trust in God.

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THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

November 15, 2009

LITURGY

Hebrews 10:11-14, 18 proclaims the eternal value of the one sacrifice of Christ.

Mark 13:24-32 is a reading from the Markan apocalypse (Mark 13).

Daniel 12:1-3, the beginning of the last chapter of the Book of Daniel and the final section of the angelic revelation that began in Daniel 10:20, contains the Old Testament’s only clear reference to the resurrection of the dead. Other texts, especially Isaiah 26:19 and Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones (Ezek 37:1-14), are better understood as describing the restoration of Israel after a period of great disaster.

The liturgical *incipit*, “In those days, I, Daniel, heard this word of the Lord,” is not part of the biblical text. Composed on the basis of similar statements in the Book of Daniel apropos Daniel’s seeing visions (Dan 7:2, 15; 10:7), the *incipit* applies to Daniel’s hearing the word of the Lord (Dan 10:11, 19).

The oracle is in the form of a judgment scene, with Michael (cf. Dan 10:13, 21), Israel’s guardian angel, standing to defend the people. In the biblical tradition, the end times, when God intervenes to set things straight, are characterized by natural disasters and political upheaval (cf. Exod 9:18; Jer 30:7; Joel 2:1-2; Matt 24:29-31; Mark 13:19; Rev 16:18). These tribulations precede the final inauguration of the Reign of God. In the scene before us, Michael is the agent through whom God intervenes. As God’s agent, Michael fulfills his role as Israel’s patron and protector during the difficult periods of its history

The book of God’s predestination contains the names of the faithful remnant of Israel (see Dan 11:33-35). Such a book, sometimes called “the book of life,” is a common motif in Jewish apocalyptic literature (see Isa 4:3; Ps 69:29; 4Q *I Enoch* 47:3; 81:1-2; 103:2; 108:3; *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* 3:6-9; and several passages in the Qumran texts) and some Christian writings (Phil 4:3; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; Hermas, *Similitudes* 2:9; cf. Luke 10:20). The biblical “book of life” lies at the origin of the book of remembrance, better called a “book of life,” that many parishes use during the month of November.

Contrasted with those who remain in horror and disgrace, the faithful remnant, “the wise,” shall be raised from the dead. They and their leaders shall shine like the stars. The image of shining stars suggests that the faithful remnant will join the angelic hosts (cf. Dan 8:10; *I Enoch* 104; Mark 12:25). The prophet’s announcement of the glorious future that awaits the faithful remnant was intended to sustain them and provide them with hope during the cruel persecution that they were suffering.

The homilist should be aware that the primary audience for Dan 12:1-3 was the loyal group of Jews who suffered persecution under the Seleucid emperor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BCE). A general resurrection of the dead was beyond the purview of the author’s intention in writing about resurrection from the dead. Moreover, the resurrection of the wicked, such as appears in John 5:28-29, seems also to have been beyond the author’s purview. Some commentators nonetheless hold that the resurrection of the wicked is implicit in the text. For the text to imply the resurrection of the wicked dead requires not only that “many” (*rabbim*) be taken as a Hebrew expressing meaning all, who are many and not just a few, but also that the “others” of verse 2 be included among the “many.”

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Despite the limited scope of Dan 12:1-3, “the author must be credited with giving the first sure teaching on life beyond the grave” (Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. DiLella, *The Book of Daniel* [AB 23. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978], 309).

BROKEN FOR US

The first and third readings of today’s liturgy belong to the apocalyptic genre of religious writing. Characterized by images drawn from powerful religious imaginations, this genre of writings speaks about the unknown future. Its message is one of hope, even though much of it imaginatively describes the terrible turmoil from which God will one day rescue his people.

Today’s first and third readings speak about the final salvation of those who are faithful. They are called “the many” and “the wise” in the Book of Daniel; they are called “the elect” whom the angels will gather when the Son of Man comes in glory in the Gospel according to Mark. Their salvation is the main point of the two readings.

This focus of the liturgical readings should lead the homilist to preach about God’s eschatological future as a reality that sustains us the many difficulties that we encounter at the present time. Economic crises, wars, and health issues are real and serious; those who, despite the serious difficulties of our times and the personal difficulties faced by so many, remain faithful to God can expect to shine brightly like the stars.

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST THE KING

November 22, 2009

LITURGY

Revelation 1:5-8 attributes three important titles to Jesus, “faithful witness,” “firstborn of the dead,” and “ruler of the kings of the earth.”

John 18:33b-37 describes Jesus’ conversation with Pilate about Jesus, King of the Jews.

Daniel 7:13-14 is certainly one of the most widely commented passages in the Old Testament. In it, the seer describes a vision in which he sees “one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” (v. 13). “Son of Man” is not a title; rather it is a Semitic way of describing a human being. The figure is distinguished from the beasts that appear in the earlier verses of the chapter. These beasts represent various kings including the notorious Seleucid emperor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The figure of one like a Son of Man is also distinguished from the Ancient of Days, a “mythic realistic symbol for God” (John J. Collins, *Daniel* [Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 305

What the seer saw was not, however, really a human being; it was a figure that resembled a human being, one *like* a Son of Man. Some scholars observe that the Hebrew text reads that this figure came *with* the clouds, rather than on the clouds, the translation given in the NAB and today’s liturgical reading. Had the Hebrew text said *on*, this might have pointed to the figure’s divinity. As it is, the figure appears with the clouds rather than on the clouds. The presence of the clouds symbolizes that he is approaching the divine presence.

Like the beasts and the Ancient of Days, “one like a Son of Man” is symbolic. Some scholars think that this mysterious figure represents faithful Jews, but most contemporary scholars think that the human-like figure represents an angel. Human figures represent angels in a wide variety of biblical texts (see Gen 18:2; Josh 5:13; Judg 13:6, 8,16; Ezek 8:2; Ezekiel 9-10;

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Zech 1:80) as well as in *1 Enoch* 87:2, an apocalyptic text like Daniel 7:13-14. Some believe that the figure represents the angel Gabriel (see Dan 8:15-16; 10:16-18) but it is more likely that the figure represents Michael, Israel’s patron and guardian angel. See Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1 and the commentary above, on last week’s reading of Dan 12:1-3.

To Michael, the angelic protector of Israel, will be given dominion, glory, and kingship. These terms recall the attributes of the Babylonian kingdom under Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2:37; 5:18). The phrase “all peoples, nations, and languages” (Dan 7:4a) and the indestructibility of the kingdom (Dan 7:14b) recall God’s sovereignty (Dan 3:33; 6:27). The message of verse 14 is that, under the patronage of Michael, the attributes of an eschatologically renewed Israel would surpass even those of Babylonia, the standard of imperial power at the time.

Traditionally Jewish and Christian scholars identified the “one like a Son of Man” as an individual, a messianic figure. Among Christians this kind of interpretation of the text was abetted by the expression, “son of man,” which so often appears on the lips of Jesus in the synoptic tradition. Since the end of the nineteenth century, however, most interpreters say that the vision somehow relates to the Jewish people. Reflecting the contemporary scholarly consensus, Collins writes, “There is no doubt that the exaltation of the ‘one like a son of man’ represents in some way the triumph of the Jewish people” (*Daniel*, 309).

BROKEN FOR US

As so often happens on feast days, there is little, if any, correlation among the three readings in today’s liturgy. The homilist should not attempt to draw from the readings a mixture that respects the reality of any of the three biblical texts. The result would be mish-mash that is not appropriate for a homily.

Should the homilist choose to focus on the reading from Daniel, he or she might find it useful to speak about hope. The Book of Daniel was written to sustain the hope of Israel, in a period of history when the nation and its faith were being persecuted. Symbols and comparisons provided the language used by the prophetic author to speak about Israel’s hope.

Today, Christian believers are subject to physical violence in some parts of the world but only rarely do accounts of violent attacks against Christians and Christian institutions appear in the mainstream press or in the internet news. In most parts of the world, however, believers are not subject to physical threats. Even if there are not physical threats, the Christian faith is being assaulted on many fronts, ranging from those on the left who would totally eradicate the influence of religion from public life to those on the right who would reduce Christianity to a limited moral code, as if opposition to permissive abortion legislation and gay marriage was the basic core of the gospel message.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

November 29, 2009

LITURGY

1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2 contains the first of Paul’s wish prayers (cf. 1 Thess 5:23).

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36 is a selection from Luke’s mitigated version of Jesus’ eschatological discourse (Luke 21:5-36).

Jeremiah 33:14-16 comes from a book of the Old Testament which has a complicated textual history. Some passages in the Hebrew text of Jeremiah do not appear in the Greek text (the

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Septuagint version) of Jeremiah. Today’s first reading is the beginning of the longest passage in Jeremiah (Jer 33:14-26) that does not appear in Greek. The Hebrew verses are the conclusion of the so-called Book of Restoration (Jer 30:1-33:26). Its four chapters conclude with four oracles that speak about David (Jer 33:14-16, 17-18, 19-22, 23-26). The first of the four oracles, Jer 33:14-16, today’s reading, echoes the messianic oracle of Jer 23:5-6.

The reign of the weak king Zedekiah, whose name means “The Lord is justice,” is the horizon against which the oracle must be read. The oracle begins with formulas that are typically Jeremican, for example, “the days are coming” (Jer 7:32) and “in those days, in that time” (Jer 50:4, 20). An announcement of a royal savior, the oracle promises that a new Davidic king will arise and that he will rule with righteousness and justice. Jeremiah 33:17, the first verse of the second Davidic oracle, not included in today’s reading, indicates that the “just shoot” of Jer 33:15 is the beginning of a new Davidic dynasty.

When the just king rules with righteousness and justice, Judah, and its capital, Jerusalem will be safe and secure. The city will earn a nickname, “The Lord our justice” (see Isa 1:26). The epithet reflects the idea that Yahweh is ruling over Judah through the just king whom he has raised up from among David’s offspring.

The appearance of the nickname for the city of Jerusalem is an important feature of today’s reading. The use of nicknames will continue to be important in the Old Testament readings in December. Nicknames appear in the first readings on the second Sunday of Advent, the fourth Sunday of Advent, and in the Mass at dawn on Christmas day.

BROKEN FOR US

What the first and third readings have in common is that they both speak about the future. Jeremiah’s oracle speaks about a future ideal king who will rule with justice and righteousness; the Lukan apocalypse speaks about the tribulation that will precede the coming of the Son of Man. Christian tradition has often held and its liturgy often implied that the vision of a future ideal king is realized only in Jesus.

Since Advent is a season of preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus and is the beginning of the church’s liturgical year, it might be well for a homilist to focus on the biblical notion of justice. The theme will recur on the second Sunday of Advent, when Bar 5:1-9 is the Old Testament reading.

One of the oldest of Christian texts, the *Epistle of Barnabas* (early 2nd century C.E.) teaches that the Lord has given us three basic doctrines. Along with hope and love, writes the author, there is “justice, the beginning and end of righteousness.” Almost forty years ago the 1971 Bishops’ Synod on Justice affirmed that justice is a constitutive element of faith, but often the people in the pews and those who preach to them do not fully appreciate the meaning of the biblical concept. Many are not even aware that “righteousness” is a synonym of “justice.”

“Justice” is a word that sums up a right relationship with God and with other human beings. In the Bible’s legal texts, it has to do with impartial arbitration, equitable treatment, and an adherence to an idea of what is right. It includes both the punishment of evil-doers and the equitable treatment of aliens, orphans, and the poor. In the prophets and the psalms, justice has to do with humanitarian social relationships. It is the antithesis of oppressive and dehumanizing behavior.

Much has been written about the biblical notion of justice; much more needs to be written, as the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* has noted. While we wait for the symposium of biblical scholars meeting in Rome to complete its work of responding to

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the declaration’s challenge, we can find good summaries of the biblical understanding of justice in the articles on justice by PHEME PERKINS and HAROLD BENNETT in volume 3 of *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008, pp. 475-477).