

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 117:6 (2011) 544-562 by Raymond F. Collins.

The liturgical year’s semi-continuous reading of the Gospel according to Matthew comes to an end on November 20, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King. Thereafter the Sunday readings in Ordinary Time will be taken from the Gospel according to Mark. The oldest of the canonical gospels, Mark was written about 70 C. E., the year that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

Advent does not belong to Ordinary Time. Thus, the semi-continuous reading of the Gospel according to Mark does not really begin until January, 2012. Nonetheless, two readings from Mark have been appointed as Sunday gospel lections on the first two Sundays of Advent in Cycle B of the liturgical year. Respectively, these are an exhortation to vigilance and the beginning of Mark’s story about Jesus.

When preaching from the gospel according to Mark, homilists should remember that they are preaching from the oldest of the canonical gospels. The story of Jesus, as told by Matthew and Luke, is much more imbedded in contemporary Christian culture than is the story of Jesus told by Mark. We must be wary lest insert details that are found only in later texts into our exposition of Mark’s gospel. To the extent that we do so, we will be preaching from the Gospel according to Matthew or the Gospel according to Luke rather than reflection on the meaning of the Gospel according to Mark.

Liturgists often advise that we take the current liturgical year as an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the story that Mark tells. Among the books that can help us to do that are *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* by Francis J. Moloney (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), *The Gospel of Mark* by John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington (Sacra Pagina 2. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), and *Mark* by M. Eugene Boring (New Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006).

ALL SAINTS

November 1, 2011

LITURGY

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14 recounts a heavenly vision in which untold numbers of people of every nation, race, ethnicity, and language stand before the throne of God and the Lamb.

1 John 3:1-3 speaks about Christians as the beloved children of God.

Matthew 5:1-12a, Matthew’s expanded version of the Beatitudes, was read on the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 30. The commentary below is taken from *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 77-79.

The passage opens with the pair of verses with which the Sermon on the Mount begins. The sermon comes to a close in Matt 7:28-8:1, where mention of the crowds, Jesus teaching, and the mountain form a literary inclusion with Matt 5:1-2. By means of this literary device the evangelist delineates the sermon as the first of the five great discourses in his gospel (see Matthew 10:1-11:1; 13:1-53; 18:1-19:1; 23:1-26:1),

The scene is set on a mountain that evokes for Matthew’s Jewish-Christian readership Mount Sinai and the figure of Moses as the great lawgiver and teacher of Israel. Jesus is presented as a teacher, seated as rabbis were accustomed to be while teaching, with disciples coming to him to listen to what he has to say. “He began to teach them, saying” is a felicitous translation of Greek words whose literal translation is, “Opening his mouth, he taught them, saying.” The

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redundancy of the three expressions emphasize the importance of what Jesus is about to say. “Beatitudes,” so called from the word *beatuus* with which they begin in Latin, are essentially one-liners, expressions of congratulations. They state that someone is happy or fortunate and give the reason why. They are similar to things that we might say, such as, “how happy you must be since . . .” or “how lucky you are that . . .” (see Raymond F. Collins, “The Beatitudes: The Heart of Jesus’ Preaching,” *The Living Light* [Fall 1996] 70-81).

Matthew’s collection of eight beatitudes is a literary creation by the evangelist who has rephrased the beatitudes found in his Q-source (Luke 6:20-21) and has created others out of passages in the Old Testament. When Matthew’s beatitudes are compared with those in Luke, the reader immediately observes that the Lukan beatitudes are phrased in the second person so that they are expressions of direct address and that they describe the situation of marginalized persons in society. Matthew’s beatitudes are phrased in the third person. All of them have religious and catechetical import. For example, Luke’s “poor” are those without material wealth while Matthew’s “poor in spirit” is a Jewish religious category that describes people who acknowledge their total dependence on God.

The result of the evangelist’s editorial work is that his collection of beatitudes is an eight-part formula for happiness. The collection can be divided into two groups of beatitudes, each of which draws attention to “righteousness” (*dikaioσύνη*). In Matthew’s gospel “righteousness” has a connotation different from what it has in Paul’s correspondence. Matthew’s notion of righteousness is of a correct relationship between God and human beings that results in appropriate action on the part of both God and human beings.

As is obvious, Matthew’s eighth beatitude is a short version of the long ninth beatitude (Matt 5:11-12), found in a still longer version in Luke 6:22-23 (see Luke 6:26).

BROKEN FOR US

Today’s homilist would be well advised to consult *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1716-1729, which has much to say about the beatitudes, especially in their Matthean format.

Since each of the beatitudes is pregnant with meaning, the homilist should not try to say something about each one of them. Rather he or she should focus on the nature of the beatitudes as a whole or concentrate on one or another of them.

Another way of approaching the text is to speak about the text is to speak about the universal call to holiness, implicit in the reading from Revelation, and to cite the virtues praised in the beatitudes as the expression of holiness, signs that a person truly belongs to the Lord.

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

November 6, 2011

LITURGY

Wisdom 6:12-16 uses a personification of wisdom as Lady Wisdom (*Sophia*) to highlight the importance of this virtue.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, often read during the liturgy of Christian burial, is an apocalyptic description of believers being raised from the dead so that they might be with the Lord forever.

Matthew 25:1-13, the story of ten “virgins” (*parthenoi*), is a parable that appears only in Matthew’s gospel. The Greek term identifies them as unmarried young women. They are sometimes called “bridesmaids” but this translation is anachronistic. In our society groups of

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young women participating in a marriage ritual are bridesmaids but the women in the story are at the groom’s house, not the bride’s. What are they doing there? They are waiting for the groom who would be returning with his new bride to begin his marriage. At that time there were two steps in a Jewish marriage, betrothal and then, sometime later, the marriage itself at which time the groom introduced the bride into his own home, perhaps at this stage in the young couple’s relationship still the home of his father. To clarify that this is the scenario envisioned in the story some ancient manuscripts say that the young women were waiting for the bridegroom and his bride.

The story is one of Matthew’s kingdom parables, “the kingdom of heaven will be like.” The future tense of the verb (v. 1) draws attention to the full realization of the kingdom which lies in the future. The point of the parable is that the disciples of Jesus must be ready for the coming of the kingdom. And they must be ready for the long haul, as the motif of the bridegroom’s delay (v. 5) makes clear. Any number of factors could have contributed to the delay, perhaps including the groom’s negotiations with the bride’s father which may have been more complicated than anticipated.

The bridegroom represents Jesus. Early Christians had to deal with the fact that his Parousia, his coming in glory, did not occur as soon after his death and resurrection as they had anticipated. In the story, the bridegroom is delayed. He finally arrives at an unanticipated hour.

When it becomes clear that he is coming soon, the ten young women go out to meet him. Five of them were wise and brought with them an extra provision of oil. Five were foolish and had only enough oil to last a short time. The oil represents the activity of the faithful disciple. The wise young women were in for the long haul; the foolish women were prepared only for the short haul (cf. Matt 13:5-7, 20-22). Their activity as disciples came to an end. They no longer let their light shine (cf. Matt 5:14-16). And they were unable to borrow from the wise young women; they couldn’t take advantage of the latter’s faithful discipleship. They were not able to participate in the marriage feast.

The marriage feast is traditional imagery for the fully realized kingdom of God (see Isa 25:6; Matt 8:11-12; 22:1-14). The idea that some may not be able to participate in the feast because they are not properly prepared appears earlier in Matthew’s gospel at 22:11-14. The foolish young women appear at the door, trying to get in for the feast and pleading “Lord, Lord” but to no avail (see Matt 7:21-22). Their verbal acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord cannot compensate for their lack of faithful discipleship. Jesus does not heed their belated plea.

The exhortation in verse 13 is the punch line of the parable. The exhortation does not quite fit the context. It is not so much an exhortation to be awake as it is an exhortation to be vigilant, to be ready, to be prepared, no matter the day or the hour that the Lord will come.

BROKEN FOR US

The main point of today’s parable is clear enough, we must be vigilant, we must be prepared for the coming of the Lord. The temporal references in the story are important. They deserve to be exploited by the homilist.

The first temporal reference has to do with the delay. The Christian life needs to be lived fully over the long haul. How many clergy burn out? How many marriages do not survive? How many people abandon the faith? Particularly in its Roman Catholic configuration? How many people are enthusiastic after a weekend Cursillo or participating in an Alpha course but fail to maintain their level of commitment? These rhetorical questions highlight particular instances but it is probably true that most Christians at one point or another in their lives are tempted to

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give up.

The second temporal reference is midnight, whose import is reinforced by Jesus’ words, “you know neither the day nor the hour.” The focus of the parable is the coming of the kingdom at the end time but the idea of the uncertainty of the hour of judgment can be applied to each individual’s death. Our Christian commitment should be such that we are ready for judgment no matter when.

The story has been told of a person liked to play cards with friends. When asked what he would do were the kingdom to come as he was playing cards, he replied, “I would keep on playing.”

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

November 13, 2011

LITURGY

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 20-31 extols the worthy wife.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 uses two powerful images to speak of the uncertainty of the coming of the Day of the Lord.

Matthew 25:14-30, the parable of the talents, is the third in the series of Matthean parables that deal with the delay of the Parousia (see Matt 24:48; 25:5; 25:19).

The parable is an oral form of story-telling. As is the case with many jokes, the story approaches its climax with a series of successive episodes. The parable of the talents consists of three scenes, each with three episodes.

Scene one sets the stage. It describes a rich man going on a journey. He called three of his trusted servants, “slaves” (*douloi*) in the Greek text, respectively entrusting to them five talents, two talents, and a single talent, distributing the money according to each servant’s ability to handle it. A talent was a tremendous amount of money, roughly equivalent to three thousand shekels or six thousand denarii, the amount of wages that a man could expect to earn over a period of twenty years.

Scene two describes what the servants do with the amount that had been trusted to them. The first two use the money, making one hundred percent profit on their investments. The third servant takes the cautious route. He buries the money. His action was generally considered to be a prudent act in that society. It was a way to ensure that the money would not be stolen.

Scene three describes the accounting that takes place on the man’s return. The first servant reports on his successful use of his master’s money. Not only is this slave entrusted with greater responsibility but he is also invited to share the master’s joy. The addendum refers to being with the Lord in the end time, the joy of the kingdom of heaven.

It was not unknown for slaves to have weighty responsibilities in the ancient world. Some slaves, for example, were generals in the Roman army. In a large household, the steward (*oikonomos*) was generally a slave who had the responsibility of running the master’s household. The steward was also in charge of the master’s other slaves.

A similar report by the second servant merits a similar response by the master. The third servant, saying that he was fearful, returns the buried talent to the master. The master calls him wicked and lazy. Should not the servant have at least invested the money so that the man would have received at least a modicum of interest? Because this third servant was wicked and lazy he is cast outside into the darkness, where there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth (cf. Matt 8:12; 12:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51).

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A similar story circulated at the time of Jesus. In the popular version of the story the first two servants squandered the master’s money on “wine, women, and song.” The third servant buried the money and was praised for his prudence. The point of Jesus’ parable was all the more striking insofar as its conclusion was so different from the other and presumably better known version of the story.

While not a full-blown allegory, the parable of the talents has allegorical features. The man is obviously Jesus. His delay refers to the time of the Parousia, delayed as far as those expecting an imminent Parousia were concerned. The reward is the joy of the heavenly kingdom; the punishment, a reference to what is commonly called hell.

BROKEN FOR US

In the late first century C. E. the Matthean community was engaged in a vigorous debate with Jewish rabbis and their disciples. Matthew’s gospel was written in the context of that struggle. The story as it has been handed down may well have been told to encourage Jesus’ disciples to take the risk of discipleship rather than taking the prudent, the tried and true ways of Judaism.

A good homilist should not unduly pursue the details of this parable or any other parable, for that matter. A parable is a story, a story that generally makes a single point. Admittedly the allegorical details in today’s lection take away somewhat from the one-point only approach to the parables that one should ordinarily have in mind.

The point of Jesus’ parable the point of the story is not about using one’s abilities to the full. Rather, in Jesus’ story the third servant is severely judged because he did not take the risk of discipleship while those who took the risk of discipleship are invited to share a heavenly reward. In any case, today’s homilist should avoid a moralizing interpretation in the exposition of the parable. The parable is one that is easily moralized, especially since the term used for the large sums in the story is the origin, via Old English, of our use of the word “talent” to describe someone’s natural ability.

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST THE KING

November 20, 2011

LITURGY

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17 is an oracle in which the Lord God promises to take care of Israel as a shepherd takes care of the sheep, attending to the injured and seeking out those who had wandered off.

1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28 portrays the resurrection of Jesus as the harbinger of the resurrection of those who belong to him. The resurrection from the dead will take place before the definitive inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 25:31-46 is the final reading in this year’s semi-continuous reading of the Gospel according to Matthew. Found only in Matthew, the text follows immediately after Matthew’s version of the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30), last Sunday’s gospel lection.

The apocalyptic scene recalls various Old Testament stories that portray the nations gathered in the presence of God (cf. Isa 2:1-4; 66:8; Joel 3). It features the Son of Man coming in glory with his angels and sitting on the throne. This royal figure is identified not only as the Son of Man but also as king (v. 34) and Lord (v. 37). His judgment on the entire world’s

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inhabitants takes the form of a process of separation, previously announced in the parable of the weeds among the wheat and the parable of the net thrown into the sea (Matt 13:30, 40-43, 48-50).

The sheep represent God’s people as they do in today’s reading of Ezekiel 34 (cf. Matt 9:36; 10:6, 16; 18:12-14). In the rural situation of first century Palestine, goats often belonged to the same herd as sheep. Hence, the image of goats provides a counterpart to the image of the sheep. The sheep are on the king’s right. They are declared blessed and invited to enter the kingdom of God, prepared since the beginning of the world. In Judaism both Lady Wisdom (cf. Prov 8:22-32) and the Torah (see the Mishnaic tractate, “The Fathers” 5:6 [*m. ’Abot* 5:6]) were considered to have existed from the beginning of the world. The language of the invitation and the declaration of their being blessed recall the language of Matthew’s beatitudes (Matt 5:3-6). Works of mercy show that the blessed have participated in the kingdom of God. They have done what God wants (cf. Isa 58:6-9) and have been faithful disciples of Jesus, whose ministry they have imitated and continued. A list of six works of mercy illustrates and concretizes what they have done. Jesus identifies with the marginalized whom they have helped. He identifies them as members of his family, the little ones.

The goats are on the king’s left. They are called accursed and are sent away into the eternal fires of hell. Their fate is the opposite of the fate of the sheep. The king explains why they deserve the fate that is being meted out to them. They had none of the works of mercy that the blessed had done. As the blessed, they were unaware of Jesus’ identification with the marginalized. They ask, “When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs (*diekonesamen soi*)?” The final phrase sums up their question. The Greek really means “when did we not serve you?” As he responded to the question of those who were blessed, so the king responds to the question of the accursed by identifying himself with the marginalized.

The final verse summarizes the respective destinies of the accursed and the blessed.

BROKEN FOR US

When I drive by Catholic churches, the sign out front generally announces the time of Masses, sometimes adding the name of the pastor. When I drive by Protestant churches, a similar sign has a catchy phrase, one that is changed weekly. When I drive by St. Paul’s Lutheran church, the sign posted said “Matthew 25.” For years the wording on the sign was not changed. Now they have a new permanent sign. Above the name of the church is “Matthew XXV.” Throughout the United States various service organizations, with Christian roots, have “Matthew 25” as their name. The name is a reminder of the importance that Jesus’ attaches to the care of the poor, God’s little ones, Jesus’ brothers and sisters.

Referencing this Sunday’s gospel reading, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* identifies the six activities mentioned by the king as the corporal works of mercy (para.2447). As I reflect on this Sunday’s gospel reading in which the works of mercy are presented as the basis for final judgment and as this year of Our Lord draws to its end, I cannot help but recall how often the political discourse on the national, state, and municipal levels had “cut services to the impoverished and otherwise marginalized” as its dominant mantra. Many of our political leaders are determined that we should be a nation of goats.

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FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

November 27, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7 is a prayer for the redemption of sinful Israel.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 contains the greeting and the epistolary thanksgiving of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians.

Mark 13:33-37 is the final segment in Mark’s eschatological discourse, addressed to Peter, James, John, and Andrew (cf. Mark 13:3-5). Jesus’ initial plea, “Be watchful! Be alert!,” asks the disciples to pay particular attention as the discourse is coming to its conclusion.

Constant vigilance is required since no one knows the time of the Son of Man’s coming. “You do not know when the time will come” hearkens back to the verse immediately preceding today’s reading which says, “But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32).

A short example illustrates the point that Jesus is making. The notion that a man—later identified as the lord, *kyrios* (v. 35)—is about to travel abroad assigning specific tasks to his servants, *douloi*, his slaves, introduces the brief story in a way that is similar to the beginning of the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:13-14; cf. Luke 19:12-13), read on November 13. The gatekeeper appears to be in charge; he is told to be on the *qui vive*.

The master could be expected to return in daylight but in fact no one really knows when he will return. It may well be that he will return at night, during any one of the four “watches” into which the Romans divided the night.

Should the master return during the night, he expects the slaves to be alert and ready for his arrival. The idea that they might be sleeping rather than being awake and vigilant anticipates the disciples sleeping in the Garden of Gethsemane. The story of Peter, James, and John sleeping is told not very much later in Mark’s narrative (see Mark 14:37, 40, 41).

The final verse of today’s reading, “What I say to you, I say to all” (Mark 13:37) is a reminder that Jesus’ words were intended not only for the four disciples who were with him as uttered the eschatological discourse; rather his words are intended for all the disciples, all who read Mark’s gospel, as we do at the beginning of Advent.

BROKEN FOR US

The leitmotif of today’s reading is “be watchful” (vv. 34, 37, 38). The exhortation summarizes the ethical demands of the coming of the kingdom. In Jesus’ story, it is the one in charge, the gatekeeper, who first receives this command. The expectation of vigilance is then extended to all the slaves. Finally, Jesus’ directs that it be received by all who have listened to his discourse on the coming of the kingdom.

While challenging the congregation to live in such a way that they are prepared for the coming of the kingdom, the homilist must remember that Jesus’ exhortation was first addressed to the one in charge. Jesus’ closest disciples failed to keep watch (Mark 14:37-42). The faithful who listen carefully to this gospel proclamation might well—and appropriately—ask themselves “has anything changed since then?”