

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 1118: (2012) 545-566 by Raymond F. Collins.

“The homily,” said the bishops who gathered during the Second Vatican Council, “is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 54). Traditionally the homily takes its theme from the scriptural readings of the day. Should the homily be devoted to a feast that is being celebrated, homilists should be encouraged to make ample reference to the Scriptures of that day.

We must bear this in mind as we come to the end of Cycle B in the three-year cycle of liturgical readings. Cycle B comes to a close with the celebration of the Feast of Christ the King of the Universe, celebrated this year on November 25. As was the case during the summer months, a reading from the Fourth Gospel, John 18:33b-37, supplements the Gospel according to Mark in our celebration of Christ the King of the Universe.

Come December 2, we celebrate the First Sunday of Advent and begin the semi-continuous reading of the Gospel according to Luke. The stories found in Luke’s Infancy Narrative are very much part of the Christmas story that we know. For the most part these stories are found only in Luke, a reality that helps us to concentrate on Luke’s telling of the good news and the points that he chooses to accentuate.

On the other hand, on the second and third Sundays of Advent our gospel readings talk about John the Baptist, the great Advent figure. Part of the reading for the Second Sunday of Advent includes material that Luke has taken from his Markan source and that he has adapted in the light of his own theology and christology. Part of the reading for the Third Sunday of Advent includes material that Luke has taken the Sayings Source, also used by Matthew. On Sundays such as these we must be careful to preach the Gospel according to Luke rather than the perhaps more familiar Gospel according to Mark or the Gospel according to Matthew. Luke has something to say; we and the congregation should listen to him.

ALL SAINTS

November 1, 2012

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 opens with a pair of verses which begin the Sermon on the Mount. 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 redundancy of the three expressions emphasizes the importance of what Jesus is about to say.

“Beatitudes,” so called from the word *beatus* 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” (*dikaiosyne*). 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. (See Walter Klaiber et al., *The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2012],

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).

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BROKEN FOR US

Today’s homilist would do well if he or she were 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-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

November 4, 2012

LITURGY

Deuteronomy 6:2-6 contains one of Moses’s exhortations to the Israelites, that they keep the commands of the Lord.

Hebrews 7:23-28 highlights the uniqueness of the priesthood of Jesus.

Mark 12:28b-34, with its two-fold love command, has the form of a scholastic dialogue. It begins with a question, to which Jesus responds. The interlocutor accepts Jesus’ response and, in turn, is commended by Jesus, the teacher.

The interlocutor is a scribe, a member of a group that, in the canonical gospel narratives, is generally presented as being hostile to Jesus. No hostility is evident in today’s gospel reading; rather, the scribe, a student of the law, seeks Jesus’ opinion as to the “first,” that is, the most important, commandment in the law. The question was a familiar topos in rabbinism. Rabbis would eventually identify 613 commandments in the law, from Exodus to Deuteronomy. Was one of these more important than the others? Was one of them a seminal commandment?

Jesus responds by reciting the *shema* (“hear”). The verse, Deut 6:4, is found in today’s first reading. The *shema* is a summary statement of allegiance and ethics which was recited twice daily by pious Jews and continues to be used in synagogue services today. It is a key part of Jewish morning and evening prayer services and is part of the good-night prayer of the child who belongs to a pious Jewish family.

The first part of the prayer stresses Jewish monotheism, the foundation of Jewish identity and the basis of moral obligation. The *shema*’s “heart, soul, and strength” is holistic. It does not divide the human person; rather its repetitive formulation emphasizes that one must love the Lord with the entirety of one’s being. Mark’s addition of “mind” (*dianoia*) to the traditional formula derives from the influence of Hellenistic Judaism.

The second part of Jesus’ response is a quotation of Lev 19:18. When the Pentateuch was composed, “neighbor” indicated a fellow Israelite. In Jesus’ day, the term indicated another human being. By itself Lev 19:18 might have served as a response to the scribe’s question but Jesus joins it to the *shema*. The combination of the two is unique with Jesus but is consistent with rabbinic principles of scriptural interpretation. The love of God implies the love of neighbor; conversely, true love of one’s neighbor does not exist without the love of God as its basis. The two commandments mutually imply one another.

The only religious authority in Mark’s narrative to agree with Jesus, the scribe responds to Jesus’s answer by repeating what Jesus had said. The repetition may well reflect the Jewish manner of rote learning. The scribe’s amplifies his response with allusions to Exod 20:3, Deut 4:34, and Isa 45:21, showing that he has understood the message. Love of God and neighbor are more important than holocausts and sacrifices. Love is more important than the cult.

Jesus then commends the scribe (v. 34), saying that he is not far from the kingdom of God. In Judaism, reciting the *shema* was taking the yoke of the kingdom upon oneself. Jesus’ commendation of the scribe continues in this tradition. Since Mark reserves the language of being “in” the kingdom to the eschaton (cf. Mark 14:25), the scribe is said to be “not far” (*ou macron*). Nonetheless, he is not said to be a disciple of Jesus.

BROKEN FOR US

Jesus’ summary of the law is much like the Ten Commandments, the primal commandments of the Jewish law, in joining allegiance to God with love of neighbor. Love of God implies love of neighbor, since one’s fellow human beings are God’s family. Every true act of the love of God is at the same time an act of love of neighbor. Rahner’s significant essay on the love of God was a marvelous attempt to show that the love of God whom we cannot see is expressed in love of the neighbor whom we can see (cf. Karl Rahner. “Reflections on the Unity of Love of Neighbor and of the Love of God,” *Theological Investigations*, 6 [Baltimore: Helicon, 1969], 231-249).

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THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

November 11, 2012

LITURGY

1 Kings 17:10-16 tells the story of the prophet Elijah fed by a widow of Zarephath.

Hebrews 9:24-28 compares Christ’s unique self-sacrifice with the sacrifices offered in the temple by Jewish priests.

Mark 12:38-44 is a reading in two parts:

The first part, a warning against the scribes (vv. 38-40), is comparable to similar material in Matthew and Luke (Matt 23:1-36; Luke 11:37-52) and may ultimately derive from a common source. The scribes are presented as being overtly pious, wearing festival robes almost daily. Thus identified and looked up to, they like to be greeted in the agora by their “inferiors.” Their positions of power enabled them to exploit widows, whose cause was advocated by God, as is noted in many scriptural passages (Exod 22:22; Deut 10:18; Isa 1:17; Jer 7:6; Mal 3:5; etc.). In the context of the historical Jesus, the warning should be read as pointing to the contrast between Jesus, a wandering prophet who taught with authority, and the learned scribes (cf. Mark 1:21-27). In the context of the church’s early tradition, the warning would underscore the contrast between official teachers who held forth in temples and synagogues and those who continued to reflect on Jesus’ teaching of Jesus for small groups of people gathered in one another’s homes.

The second part of the reading (vv. 41-44) contains another contrast. The episode concludes Mark’s account of Jesus’ great day in the temple (Mark 11:27-13:1). The setting is the area around the temple treasury. A contrast is drawn between the well-healed who come to make their offerings and a poor widow who came to offer what she had. All she possessed was a couple of small coins, two leptas, worth about what a day-laborer would earn in fifteen or twenty minutes.

The widow reminds the reader of the poor—and exploited--widows mentioned just a few verses earlier. She is praised by Jesus because she gave all that she had. Her offering of the entirety of her monetary possessions is a sign of her total devotion to God. Others were content to give God their extra cash, whose monetary value far exceeded the tiny amount the widow was able to offer.

BROKEN FOR US

The two part reading offers two distinct lessons. The first part is a challenge to religious leaders and those who wear their religion on their sleeve. It is a challenge to the clericalism that is once again on the rise. What kind of privileges do preachers and pastors expect to receive? They may forget to read the last line in the first part of the reading, “They will receive a very severe condemnation.”

The second part of the reading challenges us to think about what stewardship in the church really means. It is not a matter of how much; it is a matter of how sincerely.

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

November 18, 2012

LITURGY

Daniel 12:1-3 contains an oracle that speaks of distress and judgment at the coming end time

Hebrews 10:11-14, 18 alludes to Ps 110:1 in its portrayal of Jesus, the priest, seated at the right hand of God.

Mark 13:24-32, the last of the readings from the Gospel according to Mark in Cycle B, speaks about the end that will certainly come. Commenting on the readings’ first few verses (vv. 24-27), M. Eugene Boring writes, “There is a sense in which these verses represent the real conclusion of Mark’s story, a conclusion in which the story finds its resolution” (*Mark* [New Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006], 371).

The first verses use classic eschatology imagery to speak about the end time (cf. Isa 13:10; 34:4; Joel 2:10; 2 Esd 5:4; *Sib. Or.* 3:801-803; etc.). “Powers in the heavens” may refer, in general, to the heavenly bodies or to the spirits that were popularly thought to rule over them. Their being shaken and the stars falling indicate a change in dominion over these astral bodies. What distinguishes this section of Mark’s eschatological discourse from other apocalyptic descriptions of the end time is that the cosmic revolution of Mark’s gospel is accompanied by the coming of the Son of Man.

The coming of the Son of Man in the clouds echoes Dan 7:13. In the Markan context the Son of Man is clearly Jesus. Strikingly, there is no mention of resurrection or judgment in the Markan scenario. Attention is

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focused on the living, those who belong to the Son of Man, the “elect” (*eklektoi*). This last expression occurs only here in Mark but it occurs frequently in the Old Testament to refer to Israel. The angels are sent out to gather these chosen ones from the four corners of the earth; Jerusalem is no longer the center of the end-time events.

The next few verses (vv. 28-31) feature a parable, a “lesson” (*parabole*) that calls Jesus’ listeners to prepare for the end time. There are basically two seasons in Israel, summer and the winter. Leaves that begin to sprout on the fig tree are a sure sign that winter is coming to its end and that summer is at hand.

The evangelist does not explain what “these things” (*tauta*, vv. 29, 30) are. The expression could be a reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., or the vindication of the elect. Specifics seem not to have worried the evangelist who is more concerned with warning his readers to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man.

A solemnly expressed introduction, “Amen, I say to you,” is used to address the warning to the evangelist’s or Jesus’ contemporaries. Retained in the Markan narrative, it speaks of an imminent parousia. The reference to the words of Jesus not passing away hearkens back to Isa 40:7-8; 51:6. Like God’s words, Jesus’ words endure and have validity forever.

The final verse in today’s reading (v. 32) has been problematic throughout the centuries. Mark, however, knew nothing of future christological and trinitarian debates. He simply wants to affirm that everything will take place in God’s good time and according to God’s plan (cf. Mark 10:40).

BROKEN FOR US

The imagery and language of this segment of the Mark’s “little apocalypse” are difficult to understand, particularly for modern readers who are unfamiliar with Jewish apocalyptic language. Cutting through the imagery, the gospel lection makes three points: 1) the Son of Man will come in power; 2) the elect will be vindicated; people must be prepared; and 3) all this happens according to God’s inscrutable plan.

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE

November 25, 2012

LITURGY

Daniel 7:13-14 contains Daniel’s vision of “one like a Son of Man,” a seminal text for the New Testament descriptions of the Parousia.

Revelation 1:5-8 is taken from the letter to the seven churches of Asia.

John 18:33b-37 is a central part of the Johannine author’s description of the trial before Pilate (John 18:28-19:16a). Many in the congregation are familiar with the reading since it is part of the Johannine passion narrative read on Good Friday.

The reading features a dialogue between Jesus and the Roman emperor’s representative in Palestine. The dialogue bears upon Jesus being king of the Jews, and so serves as a key to the interpretation of the entire passion narrative (cf. John 19:1-5). The epithet served as the *titulus* on the cross of crucifixion (John 19:19-22).

The Johannine account of the trial before Pilate is a short story with seven episodes. This is the second of the seven scenes, distinguished from one another by the evangelist’s deft use of an inside-outside movement. This scene takes place “inside,” inside his Jerusalem quarters, the praetorium. There he is able to assume his official role as the Roman governor.

Pilate’s opening question assumes that the issue is one of *lese majeste*. The evangelist assumes that the governor knows that Jesus has been called a king (cf. John 12:13-15) and that there is a possibility of a violation of the imperial *Lex Iulia de maiestate*. The governor appears to be uninterested in the accusations offered of the Jewish leaders (cf. John 19:28-32); his concern is the possibility of an affront to the emperor. Jesus parries Pilate’s question with a question of his own. Pilate acknowledges the affront to his integrity and counters with another question, “I am not a Jew, am I?”

Jesus responds with an affirmation, “My kingdom is not of this world.” The traditional exegesis of this verse takes Jesus’ words to be a reference, to a spiritual, eschatological kingdom. Recently, however, exegetes such as Bieringer and Brandt take the words to mean simply that Jesus is simply rejecting royal power conferred upon human beings by other human beings. He is not a king in the ordinary sense of the term. Were he a king in the political sense of the term, his “attendants” would have put up a fight to keep him from being handed over to the Jews. “Attendants” translates the Greek *hyperetai*, a word that is sometimes translated as “soldiers.” “My attendants would be fighting” is a translation that overlooks the armed conflict present in the Greek text.

Pilate’s response, “Then you are a king?” (*oukoun basileus eiu su?*) can be taken in two different ways,

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either as a somewhat weak affirmation by Pilate that Jesus is a king or as an expression of doubt, “are you really a king if you don’t have any loyal soldiers?” In turn, Jesus replies “you are saying that I am a king” and immediately defines what it means for him to be king. He is to bear witness to the truth. He is to make God known (cf. John 1:18). That is the basic purpose of his mission among humans, the rationale for the incarnation. Those who belong to the Father listen to Jesus’ words (cf. John 10:3-4, 8, 16).

BROKEN FOR US

To counter the rising tide of nationalism and secularism accompanying the demise of Christian, specifically Catholic, monarchies, the Feast of Christ the King instituted by Pius XI in 1925. Originally the feast was celebrated on the last Sunday of October but in 1969, Paul VI transferred the feast to the last Sunday in the liturgical year and added the qualifying “of the Universe” to the name of the feast.

Then celebration of the feast gives us reason to pause and reflect on the recent campaign for the presidency in the United States. Among several foci for reflection, we should consider how much concern was voiced for the poor and indigent, a major characteristic of the kingdom of God. We can also consider the universe. How much concern was voiced for people throughout the world?