

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 119:6 (2013) 547-560 by Raymond F. Collins.

As we come to the end of the liturgical year, our Sunday readings lead us to think about Jericho, Jesus’ last stop on his way to Jerusalem. There we meet the intriguing Zacchaeus, to whom Jesus promised the gift of salvation on the day of salvation.

On entering the Holy City, Jesus was met by a group of Sadducees who denied any possibility of resurrection from the dead. The evangelist Luke, whose gospel story about Jesus we have been following throughout the liturgy’s Cycle C, wants us to contemplate the resurrection as we think about the place of Jesus’ death. The Teacher’s death is not the final chapter in the evangelist’s story. The final chapter is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the world-wide mission to which it will give rise.

The death and resurrection of Jesus has many implications. The evangelist wants his readers to know that, as the final times begin to draw near, the lives of Jesus’ disciples will not be easy. The coming end means that the disciples are to enter into a period of hardship and oppression, a time of difficulty that continues to the present day. Nonetheless, Jesus urges his disciples not to succumb to despair. Every hair of their heads is counted. God will take care of them, if only they persevere.

Balancing hope with the reality of oppression, the believer arrives at the end of the liturgical year, contemplating Jesus Christ, the king of the universe. Only the believer can recognize that the kingship of Jesus is revealed in a salvific death on the cross in the Holy City of Jerusalem, from where Jesus will be raised to share his paradise with those who acknowledge their faults and look to him for salvation.

## ALL SAINTS

November 1, 2013

### 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 1) the crowds, 2) Jesus teaching, and 3) the mountain forms 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.

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“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 (cf. Luke 6:20-21). The evangelist has created additional beatitudes 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, especially in his Letters to the Romans and to the Galatians. 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 the study by an Ecumenical Task Force, *The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2012).

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

## 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 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 3, 2013

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 119:6 (2013) 547-560 by Raymond F. Collins.

**LITURGY:**

**Wisdom 11:22-12:2** depicts God’s mercy and love for all in contrast with the immediately preceding passage, Wis 11:15-20, which describes God’s punishment of the wicked.

**2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2** begins this year’s semi-continuous reading of the pseudepigraphic Second Thessalonians. Passages from this epistle will be read on the next two Sundays.

**Luke 19:1-10**, the touching story of Zacchaeus who climbed a tree in order to see Jesus, is the final episode in Luke’s account of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:52-19:27). The story appears only in Luke’s Gospel.

The scene is set in Jericho a frontier town on the bank of the Jordan, which was famous, then and now, as being a settlement in an agricultural oasis in an otherwise deserted region. As Jesus was approaching the town, he met a blind beggar whose sight he restored. The account of that miracle (see Luke 18:35-43) immediately precedes the story of Jesus’ dramatic encounter with Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus is identified as a chief tax-collector (*architelones*), rich (*plousios*), and short (*mikros*). His slight stature provides Luke with the opportunity to describe the lengths to which Zacchaeus went in order to see Jesus. Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree. Crowds have regularly appeared in Luke’s travelogue but this is the first time that the evangelist writes about a tree-climber. Luke does not indicate why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. He leaves the impression that Zacchaeus simply was curious about the source of the commotion in town. He wasn’t expecting that Jesus would want to talk with him but Jesus did, in fact, want to talk with him.

Jesus tells Zacchaeus to get down from his tree “for today i must stay at your house.” A superficial reading of the story would lead the reader to suspect that Jesus was looking for lodging. Jericho was about seventeen miles from Jerusalem. So, it would require a full day of walking for Jesus to go from Jericho up to Jerusalem. Jesus had to put up somewhere for the night.

A closer reading of the story reveals that Luke’s “for today I must stay at your house” includes two theologically pregnant words, “today” (*semeron*) and “must” (*dei*). In Luke’s Gospel, “today” is the day of salvation (see Luke 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 13:32-33; 23:43), as Luke’s Jesus himself makes clear when, later in the story, he tells Zacchaeus, “Today (*semeron*) salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). “Must” indicates the theological necessity of the fulfillment of God’s plan (see Luke 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 13:16; 17:25; 21:9; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44).

Zacchaeus immediately and joyfully responds to the divine invitation mediated by Jesus. He takes steps to receive Jesus into his home. As so often in the gospel stories about Jesus, the on-lookers take issue with Jesus’ association with those whom they deem to be sinners (e. g., Luke 5:3, 29-32; 7:34, 39, 14:2, 28-32). Such is the case with Jesus and Zacchaeus. Luke highlights the intensity of the on-lookers reaction by writing that everyone (*pantes*) saw what had happened and began to grumble.

The evangelist leads the reader to believe that, because of the grumbling Zacchaeus stops on his way home and tells Jesus, now addressed as “Lord” (*kyrios*), how rightly he had used his

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wealth. The proper use of wealth is a major theme in Luke’s Gospel. There may be some hyperbole in the words that Luke places on Zacchaeus’s lips but the point is made. Zacchaeus has tried to use properly and justly the wealth of which he had a considerable amount. The punch-line of the story is that “today” salvation came to Zacchaeus house.

Jesus’ final words are a statement about his mission: Jesus came to seek and to save. In some ways, the story about Zacchaeus is another illustration of the message of the three parables of the lost and found in Luke 15.

#### *BROKEN FOR US:*

Today’s gospel reading is not so much about someone who wanted to gawk at Jesus as it is about a person who was curious and who had endeavored to live righteously by using his money in the best possible way. He fulfilled his religious monetary obligations and more than paid back anyone to whom he had caused a loss. In this sense, Zacchaeus was a merciful person.

Jesus proclaims that salvation comes to such a person. God’s plan is that the home and family of such persons are the recipients of God’s gift of salvation. Salvation is received within the home and family.

As we draw near to the end of the liturgical year, we are reminded that salvation is a gift of God, primarily experienced within the home and family. This is a large part of the reason why we must take seriously the idea that the Christian family is a domestic church, a gathering of believers and disciples. We celebrate the gift of salvation when we come to church on Sunday; we experience it within the home and family.

### **THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

November 10, 2013

#### *LITURGY:*

**2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14** is an excerpt from a story about seven brothers and their mother who were ready to die rather than violate the law of God during the regime of the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (187-175 B. C. E.)

**2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5** includes a wish prayer in which has been embedded a request for prayer.

**Luke 20:27-38** is another story about seven brothers. Unlike the brothers of the first reading, these seven brothers probably never existed. They were probably a fictive creation of a group of Sadducees for the sake of their *reductio ad absurdum* argument against the possibility of resurrection from the dead. Luke has taken over the story from his Sayings Source (cf. Matt 12:18-27).

The Sadducees are known to us from Matthew and Acts but they do not appear in John’s Gospel. In Mark (Mark 12:18) and Luke the Sadducees are mentioned only once. The group took its name from Zadok, a priest at the time of King David (2 Sam 8:17). They belonged to the wealthy aristocracy in Jerusalem and constituted a priestly caste, whose influence waned after

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the destruction of the Temple in 70 C. E. Theologically conservative, the Sadducees rejected the oral tradition of the Pharisees as well as the existence of angels and the possibility of resurrection from the dead.

The doctrine of resurrection from the dead was a late development in Judaism. First attested in Dan 12:2-3, the belief is also attested to in the Second Book of Maccabees, as we hear in today’s first reading (2 Macc 7:9, 11, 14; cf. v. 23). First-century Pharisees accepted the doctrine (see Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.163) but the Sadducees did not. Luke exploited this doctrinal disagreement when he wrote about Paul’s appearance before the Sanhedrin I Acts 23:6-10.

The background for the hypothetical case proposed by the Sadducees is the law of levirate marriage according to which if a son is not born to a couple before the husband dies, his brother is legally bound to marry the widow and produce a son in his brother’s name (see Deut 25:5-10. The first verse of this passage is loosely quoted in today’s gospel reading).

Jesus’ response to the Sadducees’ absurd argument contrasts life in the present world with resurrection life, life in the coming age. In the coming age there will be no need for human reproduction and marriage because humans will enjoy immortality. In the age to come, those whom God judges worthy to enter will be like angels (*isangeloi*), not disembodied but “children of God, being children of the resurrection” (NRSV, a more literal translation of the Greek than is found in the NAB). The idea that those who are raised will enjoy an angelic-like existence in the age to come is also found in 2 *Baruch* 51:10, “they shall be made like angels.” See 1 Cor 15:35-41 for Paul’s thoughts on the resurrection body.

All this is possible because the living God—the primal characteristic of God in the Old Testament is that God is living—is the God of the living. As a proof text, Jesus makes use of the Exodus passage that describes Moses’s encounter with God at the burning bush. God revealed himself to Moses by saying, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob” (Exod 3:6). God then told Moses to say that this God,” the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob sent Moses to the people (Exod 3:15).

#### ***BROKEN FOR US:***

The story of the dispute between Jesus and the Sadducees is one of the Synoptic Gospels’ “Jerusalem controversies.” The setting is important. Jerusalem is the natural setting for a dispute with the Sadducees. Jerusalem, with its temple, was their power base.

More importantly, Jerusalem is the site where Jesus will be put to death and from which he will be raised from the dead. Both Matthew and Luke place the controversy in Jerusalem to affirm the possibility of the mysterious resurrection from the dead just prior to their respective accounts of Jesus’ death and resurrection from the dead, the core belief of the Christian faith (see 1 Cor 15:1-8).

Today, midway between Easter 2013 and Easter 2014 is a good time for us preachers to reiterate the importance of the resurrection, pronounced in the Nicene Creed that we profess every Sunday and celebrate in each Sunday’s eucharistic liturgy.

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## THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

November 17, 2013

### LITURGY:

**Malachi 3:19-20a**, containing the penultimate words of the Book of Malachi, is the only reading from this book of a minor prophet, that is used in the triennial cycle of Sunday liturgical lections.

**2 Thessalonians 3:7-12** portrays Paul as a model for believers to imitation. It draws particular attention to the fact that Paul supported himself so as not to be a burden to others.

**Luke 21:5-19**, part of Luke’s mitigated apocalyptic discourse (Luke 21:5-36), is read appropriately as the church’s liturgical year comes near to its end. Mark 13 is the literary source of the reading. Luke has removed some of the apocalyptic language that he found in Mark rather than increasing it, as Matthew does in Matthew 24. Luke concentrates on the situation of Jesus’ disciples prior to The End rather than on the sometimes fantastic imagery that was characteristic of much of the apocalyptic literature of his era.

The setting of the account is the Temple precincts, a site where people frequently congregated. The Temple, one of Herod the Great’s major construction projects, was a marvel to behold. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus describes its beauty in such passages as the *Jewish War* 1.401, where he writes, “The expenditure devoted to this work was incalculable; as evidence one would have pointed to the great colonnades around the Temple courts and the fortress which dominated it on the north” (cf. *Jewish War* 5.184-227; *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.380-425).

Luke tells us that people were milling around, admiring the Temple when Jesus began to speak. Addressing them, Jesus says, “All that you see here,” but then Jesus interrupts his thought—the literary device of anacoluthon—and speaks about the coming days. The “days to come” are a feature of Jesus’ discourse about the future in Luke’s Gospel (cf. Luke ...). Jesus speaks about the destruction of the Temple, something that factually occurred in 70 C. E. Josephus gives a dramatic rendition of the event in *Jewish War* 6.220-287.

Capturing the mood of people dialoguing with philosophers, Luke says that the people addressed Jesus as teacher (*didaskale*). They had a two-part question. When was the destruction of the Temple to happen? Would there be any warning sign (*to semeion*) that the destruction was imminent?

Jesus’ indirect response was a two-part warning. He first talks about the false seers who will begin to make their voices heard. Jesus instructs his hearers not to listen to these false prophets. Then Jesus tells the people not to panic as a number of inevitable occurrences take place. “Such things must (the *dei* of God’s plan) happen first” (v. 9). In virtually staccato-like fashion Luke rehearses some of the things that will happen. Some of them are political; some are cosmic. The idea of a nation rising against a nation may be a reference to the Jewish rebellion against Rome.

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With “before all this happens,” Luke introduces Jesus’ words spoken directly to his disciples. The disciples will be persecuted. They will be handed over to Jewish and imperial authorities. This will give them an opportunity to bear witness to the gospel message (cf. Acts 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 20:26; 26:22). There is, however, no need for the disciples to prepare a defense before the authorities. By means of the gift of the Spirit (cf. John 15:26-27) Jesus will enable them to know what to say (*sophian*, literally, “wisdom”).

The persecution will be all the more intense insofar as their own families will participate in handing them over to the authorities. The acceptance of Jesus’ message by some of his disciples will lead to divisions and antagonism within their own families (cf. Mic 7:6; Luke 12:51-53). This was something that Jesus himself had experienced (see Mark 3:21, an embarrassing incident in the story of Jesus that was not taken over into Luke’s Gospel; cf. Luke 4:28-29). Luke accentuates the opposition that the disciples will encounter by adding, “you will be hated by all (*panton*).” The disciples will face difficulties from all sides, from everyone, including their own family and circle of friends. Jesus had previously spoke about the disciples being hated in the beatitude found in Luke 6:22-34 (cf. Matt 5:11-12).

Nevertheless, the disciples had nothing to fear. Not a single hair on their heads will be destroyed (cf. Luke 12:7). The virtue of perseverance (*hypomene*, a virtue that the New Testament’s epistolary literature often links with the experience of persecution (cf. Rom 5:3, 4; 2 Cor 1:6; 1 Thess 1:3; etc.) will see them through and their lives (*psychas*) will be saved.

#### ***BROKEN FOR US:***

The emphasis in today’s gospel reading is on the experience of the disciples before the end time. Luke reminds us that the life of the disciple will not be an easy one. In certain parts of Asia and Africa, Christians are even now being persecuted. Sometimes they are killed.

But there are many forms of persecution. We ourselves may encounter opposition within our own families. Rather than resort to the courts, some people use slander, calumny, gossip, and alienation in order to persecute people who want to be faithful disciples of Jesus. Some even resort to these tactics in the name of Jesus or to uphold the faith as they see it or want it to be.

Jesus challenges us to hang in there. He said, “Even the hairs of your head shall all be counted. Do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows. I tell you, everyone who acknowledged me before others, the Son of Man will acknowledge before the angels of God” (Luke 12:7-8).

#### **OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE**

November 24, 2013

#### ***LITURGY:***

**2 Samuel 5:1-3** proclaims the legitimacy of David’s rule over Israel.

**Colossians 1:15-20** contains this epistle’s epistolary thanksgiving and its magnificent christological hymn.

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**Luke 23:35-43** is an excerpt from Luke’s Passion Narrative.

In the presence of an onlooking crowd (v. 35a) the rulers of the people mocked Jesus. Luke carefully distinguishes the people (*ho laos*) from those who mocked Jesus. The taunters were the rulers (*hoi archontes*) and soldiers (*hoi stratiotai*). The jeering of these two groups makes it clear that the gospel passage is intended to highlight the nature of salvation (see Luke 4:23). The rulers and the soldiers are obviously thinking about salvation in terms of Jesus coming down from the cross and getting away.

They link their challenge to Jesus with titles by which he can be identified. That Jesus is the chosen one and the Christ of God recalls nomenclature used in the Transfiguration account (see Luke 9:35) and in Peter’s confession (see Luke 9:20). The soldiers’ mockery may have been inspired by the *titulus* affixed to the cross. Their offer of wine was a gesture intended to mitigate pain but in Luke the gesture can also be seen as an allusion to Ps 69:22, “for my thirst they gave me vinegar.”

While Matthew and Mark (Matt 27:44; Mark 15:32) portray those crucified with Jesus as joining in the mockery, Luke portrays only one of the criminals as jeering at Jesus. His taunt is similar to those of the leaders insofar as he uses a title for Jesus and urges Jesus to save himself, adding “and us.” This criminal was hoping that the pair crucified with Jesus would also be able to escape the fate that awaited them—if only Jesus would exercise the power that was his as the anointed of God!

The other criminal—one who has been called Dismas since the third century—tries to quiet the taunter by telling him that he should be thinking about God’s judgment on him. Both he and the other criminal are justifiably hanging on the cross because of their misdeeds. This acknowledgement serves as a confession of the criminal’s sinfulness.

Jesus, however, was no criminal; he was innocent. The “good thief” concurs with Pilate’s three-fold affirmation of Jesus’ innocence of any criminal activity (cf. Luke 23:4, 14, 22). Rather than asking Jesus for help in escaping the punishment of death by crucifixion, this second criminal asks to enter into Jesus’ kingdom, the kingdom of God. Strikingly, he addresses Jesus not with one of the titles that came from the lips of the various taunters but with his personal name, “Jesus,” a theophoric name that means “Yahweh saves.”

Replying to his plea, Jesus says, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Luke underscores the importance of the statement by means of a solemn introductory lemma, “Amen I say to you.” The “Amen” draws attention to the truth of what Jesus says. “Today” (*semeron*) is the Lukan day of salvation (see Luke 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 13:32-33; 19:9). “Paradise” alluding to the pristine garden of Genesis 2, often appears in Jewish literature as a place of salvation (see *I Enoch* 60:8; *2 Enoch* [A] 8:1-3; *Testament of Levi* 18:10-14; etc.). The term is, however, rarely used in the New Testament. Luke 19:34 is the only place in the gospels which mentions Paradise (cf. 2 Cor 12:4; Rev 2:7).

The conversation between Jesus and the good thief is substantially reproduced in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* 10:2. Sometimes known as *The Acts of Pilate*, this document originated no earlier than the fourth century. In its account of the conversation, the apocryphal



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text identifies the “good thief” as Dysmas. Dysmas is explicitly said to address the one whom the narrator identifies as Jesus. Dysmas, however, addresses Jesus as “Lord,” saying “Lord, remember me in your kingdom.”

#### *BROKEN FOR US:*

In keeping with the nature of today's end-of-the-liturgical-year feast, a homilist would be well-served if he or she were to preach on the nature of Jesus' kingship. His kingship is not revealed in his engineering a wonderful escape from the Roman forces nor is it revealed in his acceptance of high christological titles. Those who make use of such titles mock Jesus. They do not accept Jesus for who he is, a king whose royalty is revealed in his death on the cross.

The death of Jesus occurs on the “today” of salvation. Jesus' death is a saving death. The salvation that results from Jesus' death is prototypically promised to a sinful thief who acknowledges his sinfulness and guilt. We, too, are the beneficiaries of salvation insofar as we acknowledge our guilt before the Lord and accept the salvation offered by Jesus as a gratuitous gift from God, a gift that we do not deserve.

#### **An epilogue**

With this celebration of the Feast of Christ the King, king of the universe, this liturgical year comes to a close. So, too, does my writing of “Breaking the Word.”

I wrote my first article for *Emmanuel* forty-five years ago. Entitled “A Sign of Contradiction,” the article appeared in the first issue of *Emmanuel* in 1969. During the course of the past forty-five years my pastoral responsibilities and academic duties have led me down a path that I hardly expected to walk when I wrote that article. One unexpected turn on the road took place ten years ago, when Paul Bernier wrote to me and asked that I take over responsibility for writing “Breaking the Word.” Little could I have imagined that I would still be at it some ten years later.

During the past nine years, I devoted my attention to the second reading of the Sunday liturgy in Cycles A, B, and C. Then I looked at the first reading of the liturgy appointed to be proclaimed on the several Sundays of the three cycles. Finally, during these past three years I have focused on the third reading, selections from Matthew in Cycle A, selections from Mark and John in Cycle B, and selections from Luke in Cycle C. With this year's celebration of the Feast of Christ the King, the circle is complete.

On completing the circle, I have two thoughts. One is a thought of gratitude to Paul Bernier who invited me to assume this responsibility. The other is an expression of hope that what I have written has enabled the readers of *Emmanuel* to appreciate fully the Word of God and more fruitfully nourish the flocks that have been entrusted to your care. As I bring my reflections to a close, I remember the words of the anonymous author of Second Timothy, “I have finished the race” (2 Tim 4:7)—and a race it has sometimes been, a race to meet the editor's and printers' deadlines.

In solidarity with you, I have endeavored to practice what I preach. So, for three years I preached on the second reading. For the following three years, I preached on the first reading. And, now, for the three years leading up to the Feast of Jesus Christ, I have preached on the third

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reading. May the King of the Universe rule in the hearts of those to whom you preach by means of the word that you have broken for them!