

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 453-470 by Fr. Raymond F. Collins.

With the arrival of Labor Day weekend in the United States, we generally begin not only the school year but also our parish religious education programs. When I think of religious education programs, I think of those catechetical giants with whom I have had the privilege to be associated during the course of the years. Berard Marthaler was one of those giants. A Conventual Franciscan, he retired as an ordinary professor in the School of Religious Studies of The Catholic University of America some twelve years ago. For a long time he served as editor of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ *The Living Light* and was a consultor to the Congregation for the Clergy, the Vatican congregation responsible for catechetics.

On the occasion of Berard’s retirement from CUA, his colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies presented him with a festschrift written in his honor. I was happy to be able to contribute to the festschrift with an article entitled “Jesus within the Jewish Catechetical Tradition: Matthew’s Portrayal of a Teacher at Work.” See Catherine Dooley and Mary Collins, editors, *The Echo Within: Emerging Issues in Religious Education. A Tribute to Berard L. Marthaler, O.F.M. Conv.* (Allen, TX: Thomas More, 1997), 89-102.

Among other things, the article showed how the evangelist, particularly in the fifth chapter of his gospel, portrayed Jesus as using passages from a collection of writings that his disciples would call the Old Testament to proclaim his new message. We preachers of the gospel might be better homilists if we followed Jesus’ example by doing as he did, rooting our proclamation of the good news in the Jewish scriptures.

## **TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

October 4, 2009

### **LITURGY**

**Hebrews 2:9-11** is a marvelous little passage in which an anonymous author combines thoughts about Jesus’ role in creation and thoughts about his humanity to speak about believers being consecrated, as Jesus was. The consequence of this is that Jesus recognizes us as his siblings, his brothers and sisters.

**Mark 10:2-16** contains Mark’s version of the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees on the subject of divorce.

**Genesis 2:18-24** is part of the Yahwist’s creation narrative in Genesis 2 in which Yahweh is portrayed as a sculptor. Yahweh proceeds the creation of woman in a deliberative manner. His deliberation focuses on man (Adam, the generic human) as a social being. It is not good for a social being to be alone; hence, Yahweh decides that he will form a “suitable partner” (NAB) for him. Older translations render the underlying Hebrew expression as “helper.” The NRSV translates “helper as partner.” Modern translations of the text, like the NAB and the NRSV, want to show that the Hebrew text does not imply the subordination of woman but rather a relationship of mutual interdependence between woman and man.

A brief poetic story of the creation of animals and birds is embedded into the story of the creation of woman to highlight the distinctiveness of the creation of woman. The animals were formed out of the ground, the same soil from which the primal human being was formed (see Gen 2:7). The man named the animals, thereby symbolizing his dominion over them and his ability to use them for his own purposes. None of the animals was, however, a suitable partner for the man.

The narrative indication that the man was asleep when woman was formed suggests that

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 453-470 by Fr. Raymond F. Collins.

there is no human witness to God’s creative activity. Creation is a mystery. To describe the common human nature of man and woman the Yahwist portrays Yahweh as taking a piece of the human body and forming it into a woman by adding additional flesh. Creation from a part of man’s body, rather than from “the ground,” indicates a kind of compatibility and relationship that was not possible between man and the animals.

The creation of woman leads man to break forth in a cry of exultation. The affinity between man and woman is symbolized by means of a play on words, “this one shall be called woman (*‘ishshah*), for out of man (*‘ish*) this one was taken” (verse 23). The pun is effective only in Hebrew. This serves as a reminder that this creation story can be understood properly only when due attention is paid to Hebrew idiom. Attention has already been drawn to the Hebrew-sensitive “suitable partner.” Moreover, and more importantly, prior to the cry of exultation, the Hebrew term translated as “the man” is *Adam*, a term that connotes humanity. Terms for sexually distinct human beings occur for the first time in verse 23. Finally, most translations refer to the part of the body from which woman is formed as “a rib.” This has been the subject of paintings and of jokes, incorrectly so. The Hebrew term is nowhere else used for the human body, let alone, specifically for a rib.

Verse 24, the final verse of the reading, is a reflection on the creation of humanity in two sexes. The sexual impulse draws man and woman together so that they become one flesh. Sexuality is of divine creation. “One flesh” is a not so subtle reference to sexual union in marriage. That a man leaves father and mother symbolizes that a new kinship unit is formed when man and woman come together in marriage.

#### BROKEN FOR US

In Mark’s conflict story (see Raymond F. Collins, *Divorce in the New Testament* [Good News Studies 38. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992], 65-103) Jesus refers to the biblical creation narratives, citing not only Genesis 1:27 but also Genesis 2:24, the reflection that concludes the Yahwist’s creation account.

The Old Testament text provides a basis for several different homilies. One homilist might like to remind the congregation that the dignity of woman and the equality between man and woman are rooted in God’s creative activity. Hence he or she might preach on woman, her dignity and her equality with the male human being. Another homilist, sensitive to the pansexual character of contemporary culture, might want to reflect on sex and sexuality as a good to be received with thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:3-4). Sex is not evil. It is God’s good gift to us, a gift that must not be exploited. A third homilist might want to reflect on marriage itself, rooted as it is in God’s creation of man and woman.

These three topics are obviously interrelated but it would behoove the homilist to focus on or another rather than to try to bring them all together into a single homily. In the situation in which we North Americans currently live it is important that the homilist focus on the Word of God. Due attention can well be drawn to current political and social issues and situations but the homily should not become a political speech.

#### **TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

October 11, 2009

#### LITURGY

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 453-470 by Fr. Raymond F. Collins.

**Hebrews 4:12-13** reminds us that God’s word is sharper than any two-edged sword.

**Mark 10:17-30** contains two related conversations of Jesus, one with rich man in search of eternal life, the other with his disciples. The punch line of each of the conversations focuses on the importance of sacrificing some temporal goods.

**Wisdom 7:7-11** is a wise man’s reflection on Solomon’s prayer for wisdom (see 1 Kgs 3:1-15). Solomon needed to pray for wisdom because, after all, he was only human (Wis 7:1-6). He “pleaded” for wisdom, that is, he invoked the name of the Lord, asking God for help. And his prayer was answered.

The wise man describes Solomon comparing wisdom to some of the things for which human beings strive. Political authority and power is one of them, but the author’s Solomon says that he prefers wisdom. Wealth is another, but his Solomon says that riches are as nothing when compared to wisdom. Even the gold and silver that symbolize wealth are to be considered as so much sand and mud. Health is yet another human goal, but the author’s Solomon says that he loves wisdom more than he does good health or a nice physical appearance. Daylight is another human *desideratum*. When day comes we humans regain our energy and can accomplish our goals, but the author’s Solomon says that he prefers wisdom because it lasts forever, unlike daylight which disappears with the setting sun. This four-fold comparison is a literary device that highlights the value of wisdom.

Although Solomon was willing to forgo political power, riches, even good health and daylight if only he could have wisdom, he found that along with wisdom he received all these things, including friendship with God (Wis 7:13-14) and a profound understanding of all that is. The biblical verse that follows today’s liturgical reading (Wis 7:12) portrays Solomon rejoicing because he realizes that all the assets that he received along with wisdom were not of his own making. They were the result of God’s gift of wisdom.

In his Anchor Bible commentary on this passage, the Jewish scholar David Winston suggests that we read the text against the background of the philosophical debates between members of the peripatetic school of philosophy and the Stoics. Although he was not an active participant in these debates, Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus and Paul, takes a mediating position. Like the wise man’s Solomon, Philo says, “For those who possess stored up in Heaven the true wealth whose adornment is wisdom and godliness have also wealth of earthly riches in abundance. For under the providence and good care of God their store-houses are ever filled, because the impulses of their minds and the undertakings of their hands are never hindered in carrying out successfully the purposes which they ever zealously pursue” (*On Rewards and Punishments*, 104; see David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon* [AB 43. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979], 167-168).

Philo’s reflection explains that the gift of wisdom enables the wise to accomplish that which they intend and obtain the goals that they pursue. The wealth of earthly riches that is theirs is not a miraculous gift, dropped down from heaven above.

## BROKEN FOR US

Mark describes the rich man as unwilling to forgo his possessions in order to become a disciple of Jesus. Jesus comments on the difficulty of giving up riches. In his response to Peter who interjected that the disciples had given up all things in order to be disciples, Jesus says that his disciples will be well rewarded. The response is couched in oriental hyperbole; “a hundred times more” is not to be taken literally.

Jesus speaks of discipleship as the value that goes beyond wealth. The Book of Wisdom

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 453-470 by Fr. Raymond F. Collins.

states that wisdom is the value that goes beyond wealth. Wisdom and discipleship are far more important than riches.

The scriptural readings’ emphasis on the relative value of material possessions comes as a useful reminder in these difficult economic times. The economy has made many people realize that they have “too much stuff.” Many have learned to do without. They have learned about the values that really matter, particularly the value of important relationships, family, friendship, God. Some who have suffered the most economic hardship have experienced an increased sense of dependence on God while their reliance on money and material goods has decreased.

The homilist must surely be sensitive to the sometimes dire economic straits of those in the congregation, particularly of those who have lost their homes or jobs. The homilist might also remember President’s Obama’s frequent observation that the economic crisis creates a challenge and an opportunity. The scriptures remind us that dire economic times challenge all of us and provide an opportunity to get our values straight. The Markan Jesus also challenges those who have some riches to share them with the poor as a necessary condition of discipleship (Mark 10:21).

## **TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

October 18, 2009

### **LITURGY**

**Hebrews 4:14-16** speaks about Jesus as our high priest, one of the major themes of the Letter to the Hebrews.

**Mark 10:35-45** vividly portrays the ambition of the sons of Zebedee, the reaction of the other disciples, and then the reaction of Jesus who puts everyone in their place. The question put to Jesus by James and John demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of the nature of the Kingdom of God and of Jesus’ role in it.

**Isaiah 53:10-11** comes from the Fourth Servant Canticle in the Book of Isaiah (Isa 52:13-53-12). The third canticle was read a few weeks ago, on September 13.

The first verse of today’s reading recapitulates the central point of the hymn’s earlier verses (Isa 53:1-9); Yahweh is responsible for the Servant’s suffering. The Servant’s suffering is seen as a reparation offering. The Servant is Israel. Its suffering during the exile is something that Yahweh willed so that the sins of the nations would be forgiven. Two of Yahweh’s characteristic traits are presented in this verse, namely, his justice and his mercy. The Servant’s suffering demonstrates Yahweh’s judgment on human sin, his justice. That these sufferings count as a reparation offering for the forgiveness of sin demonstrates Yahweh’s mercy, his willingness to forgive.

The second part of the verse says that although the Servant was apparently a failure, the will of Yahweh was accomplished through the Servant and the Servant will be rewarded. In ancient Israel longevity and abundant offspring were considered to be among God’s greatest gifts. The author of the canticle portrays Israel in personified fashion as he describes the Servant as enjoying a family and long life. The description suggests that Israel will flourish.

In their recent commentary on Second Isaiah John Goldingway and David Payne note that much of the language of verse 10 comes from Jeremiah 22:28-30 creating a contrast between the Servant and King Jehoiachin who reigned for three months before he was carried into exile under Nebuchadnezzar. Of Jehoiachin Yahweh says, “Write this man down as one childless,

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 453-470 by Fr. Raymond F. Collins.

who will never thrive in his lifetime” (Jer 22:30). Jehoiachim is the negative image of the Servant. See John Goldingway and David Payne, *Isaiah 40-45*, 2 (International Critical Commentary. London-New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 283, 322.

In verse 11 (and 12, the concluding verse of the Fourth Servant Song) Yahweh himself speaks, just as he did in the hymn’s opening verse, Isaiah 52:13. Yahweh confirms what has been said in verse 10. The Servant will “see the light in fullness of days,” that is, he will be joyful and successful in a long life. He will find satisfaction in his life.

Because of the Servant’s suffering, many are justified. The many are not only Israel but also the nations and specifically Babylon (cf. Isa 13:9, 11) which had inflicted the exile on Israel. The Servant lived with what the wrongdoing of the many had done. The way that he did so is fruitful for them. [Should the homilist happen to refer to the NRSV in preparing the homily, he or she might note that verse 11 includes the phrase “through his knowledge” that is not found in the NAB. The phrase is found in the Hebrew Massoretic text and means something like “through his knowledge of God,” through his experience of God.]

## BROKEN FOR US

The New Testament often uses passages from the Servant Canticles to portray Jesus and his ministry. In the judgment of most biblical scholars, Mark 10:45 alludes to Isaiah 53:10-12. Thus, the link between today’s first and third readings is rooted in the New Testament text itself.

Mark 10:45 is widely regarded as one of the most important passages in the New Testament on which a doctrine of vicarious atonement can be based. More radically, however, Jesus’ pregnant saying affirms the value of service, even service that brings suffering to the one who serves, saying that it is an element in God’s plan for the salvation of humankind. Suffering service was Jesus’ mission: he came for this. His service, like that of the Servant of the Lord, accrues to the benefit of “the many” and the forgiveness of their sins.

Leaders of the Christian churches and all the faithful are to follow the example of Jesus and the Servant of the Lord. In their service, they will likely suffer, but they should know that their service is of benefit to others, even if it entails hardship and suffering. They should also know that they will be vindicated by the Lord, just as the Servant and Jesus were, albeit in different ways.

## THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 25, 2009

### LITURGY

**Hebrews 5:1-6** continues the letter’s moving portrayal of Jesus, the high priest.

**Mark 10:46-52** describes Jesus’ cure of the blind Bartimaeus.

**Jeremiah 31:7-9** is an oracle (“Thus says the Lord”) that dates from the early years of the preaching of Jeremiah during the reign of King Josiah.

Addressing an unidentified audience, presumably people in the Southern Kingdom, Yahweh tells them that they can cry out and shout exultantly for Jacob, their kinfolk in the Northern Kingdom who were then languishing in Assyrian and Median cities. “Head of the nations” is a boastful epithet, hyperbolically applied to Jacob as the remnant is about to be delivered. We might say that they were on cloud nine.

Praising Yahweh and addressing their kin from the north, the southerners cry out, “The

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 453-470 by Fr. Raymond F. Collins.

Lord has delivered his people, the remnant of Israel.” This is a cry of victory, victory at last.

Yahweh responds to their cry by saying that he will indeed bring the remnant of Israel back from its northern exile but he will also bring home those who were scattered here and there in other places. The gathered returnees will include not only the strong and able-bodied but also the weak and vulnerable, the lame and the blind, pregnant women and women in the final stages of pregnancy, about to give birth. The reading for September 6, Isaiah 35, with its similar images, had a similar theme.

For those returning from exile, the road home will be long but the journey will be more joyful than the trek into exile had been. Then there had been tears of sorrow, now there are tears of joy. The text is preferably to be translated “with weeping they shall come” [NRSV] rather than “they departed in tears.” The returnees are moved with emotion, tears are tears of joy, as they return to their homeland.

Yahweh promises to guide the returnees, assuring that the path that they take is on level ground so that none of them stumble and fall. Their destination is “brooks of water,” not only the streams from which they will drink on their return journey but also and especially their homeland, the Promised Land, “a land with streams of water, with springs and fountains welling up in the hills and valleys” (Deut 8:7).

The reason why Yahweh has delivered his people is that he is father to them; they are his children, a favored child, his first-born (see Exod 4:22). The reunion with their father is a realization of what is promised in Jeremiah 3:22-35. The reader familiar with the techniques of Hebrew poetry will recognize in the last verse of the reading an example of synonymous parallelism. The reader might also remember that although “father” is not a common description of God in the Old Testament, it is occasionally to be found. Another thing to be remembered is that Ephraim is an alternative name for the Northern Kingdom, commonly called Israel.

## BROKEN FOR US

The appearance and salvation of the blind (a blind person) is the common thread of the first and third readings. The liturgical readings would have us realize that Jesus’ cure of Bartimaeus, a name that means “son of Timaeus,” is an example of Yahweh’ ongoing care for the blind.

In preaching from today’s readings the homilist must surely remember that the blind constitute one category of vulnerable people who merit Yahweh’s care. The biblical tradition constantly affirms that it is the weak and vulnerable for whom Yahweh particularly cared. They needed his help and he would grant that help, for example, in Jesus’ cure of Bartimaeus whose subsistence depended on begging.

The Christian community has a responsibility to continue that tradition. We must take care of the weak, the sick, vulnerable, and handicapped among us. Perhaps the homilist could focus on the blind, calling for support for organizations that help the blind or drawing the congregation’s attention to a caring and responsible concern for the blind that driver and pedestrian alike must exercise. Perhaps the pastor might ask why there are so few, if any, blind folks in the pews. How can they come to church is a question that the homilist and the congregation might well ask. The question begs for an answer (cf. John 5 :7).