

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 116:5 (2010) 455-471 by Raymond F. Collins.

A recent collection of essays, written from within the Protestant tradition and edited by Carol M. Betchel, tries to illustrate the claim that the Old Testament is indispensable for the practice of Christian worship. See Carol M. Betchel, ed., *Touching the Altar: The Old Testament for Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). As is the case with any collection of essays, these essays are of uneven quality, but the point is made. The Old Testament *is* indispensable for Christian worship and has been so since Christians first gathered to celebrate the eucharist.

One of the first to write about the Sunday celebration of the eucharist was Justin Martyr. About 150 C.E., this early Father of the Church wrote: “On Sunday we have a common assembly of all our members, whether they live in the city or in the outlying districts. The recollections of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time. When the reader has finished, the present of the assembly speaks to us; he urges everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard in the readings. Then we all stand up together and pray.” (*First Apology*, 66-67).

We would use the language of gospels, Old Testament readings, reader, and preside/homilist but the scene is as familiar to us today as it was to those second-century Christians. The Old Testament is part of our worship just as it was part of their worship.

## TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 3, 2010

### LITURGY

**2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14** encourages Timothy to respond to the gift of the Spirit that has been given to him and to look to Paul as an example of one who did respond to the gift of the Spirit in his life.

**Luke 17:5-10** uses the example of waitpersons to say that service is the role of Jesus’ disciples. **Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4** is the beginning of the Book of Habakkuk, the eighth book among the Minor Prophets. Nothing is known about Habakkuk except that he is identified as a prophet in Hab 1:1, “The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet received in vision,” and again identified as a prophet in Hab 3:1. Given the lack of any other information about Habakkuk, it is difficult to identify the date of the book attributed to him. The emerging contemporary consensus among scholars points to the writing of the book at sometime around 600 B.C.E.

The verses chosen for today’s reading are found at the beginning and at the end of the first part of the book, the so-called dialogue (Hab 1:2-2:5). The first words of the reading come from the prophet’s first complaint, the passionate prayer of a desperate man (Hab 1:2-5), to which Yahweh responds in Hab 1:6-11. The prophet complains again (Hab 1:12-17) and then says that he will wait to see what happens (Hab 2:1). God responds to this second complaint with a somewhat cryptic expression of assurance (Hab 2:2-5), of which the last verses of today’s reading form the major part.

The prophet begins his complaint with the familiar language of Old Testament complaints against God (see Job 19:1-7; Ps 18:6, 41). He complains that God appears to be indifferent, neither seeing nor hearing what is going on (see Ps 22:1-2). There is violence and destruction, fighting and contention all around but God does nothing. Law and justice appear to

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have no bearing on society (Hab 1:4). And God is responsible; Yahweh is fully to blame.

Older commentaries generally interpret Habakkuk’s protest in the same way that they interpret the complaints of Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, that is, as complaints about the sins of God’s people in the northern kingdom, Israel. Contemporary commentators, however, generally interpret the misdeeds as those of the Babylonians who serve as God’s instruments in the punishment of his people (see Hab 1:6). Seen in this light, the prophet’s complaint is a protest against the punishment that people are suffering because of their previous sins and failures.

The prophet, unhappy with God’s response, complains again (Hab 1:12-17). In response, Yahweh tells Habakkuk to write down the vision (see Isa 8:1-4; 33:1-9) and wait for it to be fulfilled. “Hang in there!” says the Lord, until Babylon falls. That will happen someday; the fall of Babylon will surely take place.

The reading ends with a contrast. The Lord tells the prophet to look at the arrogant. Because of their pride, the presumptuous will not survive. On the other hand, those who live righteously will survive; they will live because of their trust in the Lord. This encouragement of the just to live righteously is the heart of the Lord’s response to Habakkuk. Those who are faithful to the Lord have the power to live.

The apostle Paul appropriated Hab 2:4b as the theme for the Letter to the Romans (Rom 1:17). He also cited the verse in Gal 3:11 where he also wrote about justification by faith (see also Heb 10:38).

## BROKEN FOR US

With the apostles’ we pray, “Lord, increase our faith” (Luke 17:5). The prayer is one that we should pray often but, as Habakkuk reminds us, we must maintain our faith in God even when we are surrounded by injustice. We can complain to God about this injustice but we are to remain firm in the faith-based conviction that this injustice will one day be brought to an end by a loving and powerful God.

Habakkuk complained about the violence that Israelites were suffering at the hands of the Babylonians. In the twenty-first century we can legitimately complain to God about the injustice in the world, from that of the recent economic crisis in the North Atlantic countries to the violence in places like Dafur and Myanmar. Within the church we can legitimately complain to God about the injustice suffered by youths who have been molested by priests and we can complain, even to God, against the hierarchs who tried to cover up. All of this should make us angry and cry out to God with complaints.

As we make our complaints known to God, we must ask God’s help to remain steadfast in our faith. The injustice in the world around us should not lead us to fall into an agnostic attitude about the existence of a loving and powerful God. The injustice in the church should not motivate us to leave the church or reject the mission of Jesus. The complex situation in the world and of the church is challenging but with the apostles we must pray, “Lord, increase our faith.”

## TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 10, 2010

### LITURGY

**2 Timothy 2:8-13** contains one of the memorable trustworthy sayings of the Pastoral Epistles

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(see 1 Tim 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; Titus 3:8).

**Luke 17:11-19** is the story of the ten lepers who were healed by Jesus, only one of whom, the Samaritan, return to say thanks.

**2 Kings 5:14-17** tells a story about the healing of the Aramaean general Naaman who was cured of his leprosy (see Lev 13 for the Israelite ritual for cleansing leprosy).

In some ways the story of Naaman’s cure is about the miracles that God accomplished through the prophet Elisha. The role of the prophet is, however, rather minimal in this particular narrative. Elisha did not speak directly to the foreign general; rather he sent a messenger to tell the Aramaean to bathe in the Jordan (2 Kings 5:10). Naaman was angry that Elisha did not act like a real exorcist and rejected the idea that he should wash in the Jordan (vv. 11-12). Finally Naaman’s own servants convinced him that he should do as the prophet said (v. 13). At this point in the story the narrative continues with the text used for today’s reading. Naaman went down to the Jordan, bathing himself seven times in its waters. Seven was the number that symbolized perfection, it may be that the seven-fold washing symbolizes the perfection, the healing, of Naaman’s skin.

One of modern Israel’s tourist resorts is Hamat Gadar, “the hot springs of Gadara,” located in the Yarmouk valley near the Sea of Galilee. In the area there has been found a fifth-century slab of Byzantine pavement which preserves the tradition of Elijah healing lepers who bathed there in the hot springs. In the fifth century C.E., that part of ancient Israel was in the Eastern Roman Empire in a territory than known as “Second Palestine,” *Palestina Secunda*.

The experience of his cure led Naaman to acknowledge the one God and embrace the worship of Yahweh. Accompanied by an entire retinue, the king returns to the prophet acknowledging that the God of Israel is the only God and wanting to give a gift (*berakah*, “a blessing”) to the prophet. Elisha stubbornly refused the gift, swearing an oath that he would not accept a gift for his service to the Lord. The prophet’s oath began with the classic oath formulary, “As the Lord lives” (see 1 Kings 1:29).

Then Naaman asks for a gift. He wants the prophet to give him two mule-loads of soil. A typical belief of ancient peoples was that gods exercised influence over particular lands (1 Sam 26:19; 1 Kings 20:23; 2 Kings 17:26). Israelites lamented that they could not sing the Lord’s song in the land of Babylon (Ps 137:4). Because of the wide-spread belief that the deity had power in a particular locale, the land of Israel (*eretz Israel*) was so important in Jewish tradition. So that he could worship Yahweh, Naaman wanted to bring part of the land of Israel home with him. Then he would be able to offer sacrifice and holocausts to the Lord God [of Israel].

## BROKEN FOR US

The curing of lepers is the obvious similarity between today’s first and third readings. There is an additional similarity in that Naaman, an Aramaean, and the tenth leper, a Samaritan, were moved to gift thanks for the gift of healing. Neither of them were Jewish monotheists.

In the gospel story Jesus praises the unnamed Samaritan for returning to give thanks. In the Old Testament story Naaman returned to the prophet Elisha offering a gift to express his appreciation for the cure.

The point of the story is not, however, Naaman’s wanting to thank the prophet Elisha who had encouraged him to bathe in the Jordan. The prophet’s spurning the offered gift allows the narrator to focus on Naaman’s conversion. The Aramaean general realized that it was the Lord God of Israel, not the deities of Aram, who had effected the miracle. He became a believer.

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Naaman accepted Yahweh as the Lord alone and sought, as it were, to set up a sanctuary to the God of Israel within the territory of Aram.

Naaman believed in Yahweh because of his own experience of God’s wonderful deeds. His example should encourage all of us to allow our faith to be strengthened as we experience the powerful acts of God who has created the natural environment in which we live as well as the wonderful acts of God that each of us experiences in our ordinary lives, not the least in moments of crisis.

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

October 17, 2010

### **LITURGY**

**2 Timothy 3:14-4:2** is the primary biblical attestation for the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture even though at the time that Second Timothy was written “all Scripture” referred only to what we today call the Old Testament.

**Luke 18:1-8** tells the story of an insistent widow.

**Exodus 17:8-13** describes a battle in the war between the Israelites and Amalekites. The latter were a fierce desert tribe descendant from Esau (Gen 36:12). Traveling by camel (Judg 6:5; 7:12; 1 Sam 27:9), the Amalekites at various times claimed control of territory around Kadesh (Gen 14:7), in the Negeb (Num 13:29), and in a region east of Egypt (1 Sam 15:7).

The ancestry of the Amalekites means that they were related to Israel and makes their attack on Israel all the more heinous. In response to the attack, Moses decides to engage in a holy war (see Exod 17:16), for which he picked a select army of men. He appointed the young Joshua as his field commander and then withdrew to a nearby mountain from where he could oversee the battle.

This is the first mention of Joshua in the book of Exodus. He will later emerge as Moses’ chief assistant. The Book of Joshua recounts the story of Joshua’s leadership of Israel after the Israelites entered the Promised Land. His victory over the Amalekites foreshadows his conquest of the various tribes that inhabited the land of Canaan.

Moses went up the mountain accompanied by his brother Aaron, the priest, and Hur, a Judahite prince (see Exod 31:2). The pair would later wait with the elders of Israel when Moses went up another mountain to receive the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written (Exod 24:14). Aaron and Hur represent Israel’s priestly and royal leadership. Once Moses, Aaron, and Hur had ascended the mountain, Joshua could engage the Amalekites in battle.

The main theme of the story in Exod 17:7-16 is, in fact, the holy war (for comparable stories, see Deut 25:17-19; 1 Samuel 15) which entails the eradication of the enemy and the dedication of its property to God (Exod 17:14-16). The focus of the excerpt that serves as today’s reading is Moses’ gesture and his staff, the staff of God. The staff is a source of Yahweh’s power.

Holding the staff and standing, Moses stretched out his arms in the traditional gesture of prayerful supplication. As long as Moses’ arms were extended in prayer, Israel would be winning the battle. When Moses let his arms drop, the Amalekites had the edge. Then Aaron and Moses moved a stone closer to Moses so that he could sit down. When Moses was seated, Aaron and Hur could more easily support his arms. With their help Moses was able to keep his arms outstretched and Israel regained the edge in battle.

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The battle lasted until sunset. Assisted by Aaron and Hur, Moses was able to keep his arms outstretched until that time. Israel's military edge turned to victory. The Amalekites were routed, a good number of them killed in battle.

#### BROKEN FOR US

Luke's instruction on prayer (Luke 11:1-13) contains among other well-known sayings of Jesus this one, "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." This saying was preserved in the oral tradition of the early church for more than a half century before it was incorporated into the gospels of Luke and Matthew (Luke 11:9; Matt 7:7). In Greek the three imperatives, "ask," "seek," and "knock," are in the present tense, suggesting continuous action. Those who heed Jesus' advice keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking. A one-time petition is not enough.

The first and third readings of today's liturgy are virtual illustrations of Jesus instruction on prayer. Moses had to keep his arms outstretched in prayer in order for Israel to win the victory. The widow had to bother the unjust judge repeatedly before he would accede to her request. The point is that we must repeatedly ask God for the things that we need.

### THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 24, 2010

#### LITURGY

**2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18**, written after the death of Paul, contains what the author presumes would have been the final reflections of the dying Paul.

**Luke 18:9-14** tells the well-known story of the Pharisee and the Publican who went up to the temple to pray.

**Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18** is taken from a poem (Sir 35:11-19 in the NAB; Sir 35:14-22 in the NRSV and many other versions and commentaries) in which Ben Sira urges his affluent readers to beware of exploiting the powerless. The poem describes how God deals justly with his people. What does it mean for God to be just?

The wise man responds by saying that God shows no partiality, not even to the poor (Deut 10:17-18; 2 Chr 19:7; Job 34:17, 19; Wis 6:7; see Lev 19:15). Nonetheless the Lord hears the cries of those who have been wronged. He hears the cry of the poor, especially the orphan and the widow. The widow and the orphan are especially singled out because in a patriarchal society, widows and orphans, those without a patriarch or male protector, are particularly vulnerable (see Ps 94:3-7). They had no one to protect them; no one to plead on their behalf (see Exod 22:21-23; Deut 10:18; 24:17-18; 27:19; Zech 7:10; Ps 68:6; Prov 23:10-11). They can only appeal to God. In today's reading the virtually helpless widow cries out to the Lord against those who were oppressing her.

That God is a God of justice is the central affirmation in the poem. God's justice is revealed in his partiality and his protection of the legally helpless (see Deut 10:17-18). The protection of the poor, widow, and orphan was a common theme in ancient Near Eastern literature. The protection of the widow and the orphan was a particularly desired quality for kings to have. It was considered to be a royal virtue. Thus Yahweh, king par excellence and God of justice, was often extolled as one who took care of the widow and the orphan. The idea

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echoes throughout the psalms (see Ps 68:5; 82:3-4; 146:9).

Those whose willing service is pleasing to the Lord will be heard. The Lord may appear to be far off, but the prayer of the humble will attain to the Lord. That it reaches to heaven echoes typical biblical imagery (see Gen 18:20-21; Exod 3:7-9; Ps 68:5; 104:3). Nothing can prevent the prayer of the oppressed from reaching the Lord, declares the son of Sira. Indeed, he adds, the prayer of the humble will not disappear; it will not go away until the Lord hears the petitions.

The sage’s final observation is that the Lord Most High responds to these prayers by doing justice for the righteous and executing just judgments.

## BROKEN FOR US

The first and the third readings in today’s liturgy focus on the prayer of those who approach the Lord with humility. The Old Testament’s wisdom literature often speaks about the poor, the *anawim*, who appeal to the Lord because they realize that the Lord alone is their only resource. Totally reliant upon God and aware of their need, these *anawim*, especially widows and orphans, ask the Lord for the help that they need to live their lives. Today’s first reading teaches that God will hear their prayer.

Jesus’ parable contrasts the prayer of the self-righteous Pharisee with the prayer of the humble Publican. Aware of his sinfulness and his need, he prayed, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.” The far-off distance at which he stood symbolized his unworthiness before the Lord. He could only ask for mercy. God answered his prayer. Jesus says that he returned home justified, in right relationship with God and his neighbors.

That our prayer be heard it must be the prayer of a humble petitioner, one who knows that he or she is not worthy to receive neither the forgiveness of the Lord nor any of the many of the other gifts that the Lord God gives to each one of us.

## THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 31, 2010

### LITURGY

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

**Luke 19:1-10** tells the story of Zacchaeus climbing up a tree so that he could see Jesus, in response to which Jesus invites himself into Zacchaeus’ home.

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

Pseudo-Solomon had no way of knowing just how small planet earth is in the totality of the universe; nonetheless, he portrays earth as being just a tiny creature in the eyes of God. He uses two images to help his readers think about the smallness of the earth. The first is that of a small grain used to tip the scales and thus measure a precise weight on a delicate scale comparable to Isaiah’s “dust on the scales” (Isa 40:15); the other is a single drop of dew on the morning grass (see Hos 6:4; 13:3). Pseudo-Solomon offers these images to demonstrate the power and majesty of God.

One aspect of God’s power and might is God’s mercy, as not only Pseudo-Solomon but

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also Philo and the *Letter of Aristeas* observe (*Special Laws* 1.308; *Letter of Aristeas* 192). Reflecting this same idea, the Jewish hero Eleazar of the Maccabean era prayerfully addressed God as, “King of Great power, Almighty God Most High, governing all creation with mercy (3 Macc 6:2). God’s mercy derives not from any weakness on the part of God; God’s mercy is rather a manifestation of his strength. The purpose of God’s mercy is to allow people to repent.

From another perspective, God’s mercy is an expression of his love. God loves everything that he has made (see Ps 145:8-9). Conversely, he hates nothing that he has made (see Sir 15:11). God’s love is manifest in the preservation of all that is; God does not destroy nor does he allow anything that he has made to disappear. Such is, Pseudo-Solomon notes, the will of God. He wills that what he has made be spared from destruction.

God is addressed as the “lover of souls,” *philopsyche*, perhaps more accurately rendered “the lover of all that lives” since the Greek *psyche* does not so much designate the soul as it identifies the principle of vitality.

Because of his great love for all that he has created, God rebukes sinners little by little. One step at a time, God corrects those who have trespassed. He reminds them of their sin. The purpose of all this is that people might abandon their wicked ways and trust in the Lord. Although the NAB translates the final words of today’s passage as “believe in you, O Lord,” the nuance of the Greek is trust rather than belief.

## BROKEN FOR US

Jesus was frequently criticized for his association with tax-collectors and sinners. See, for example, Matt 9:11; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30; 15:1. The people of Jericho considered that Zacchaeus was a sinner. They took umbrage at the fact that Jesus went into the home of a sinner, at his own invitation. Jesus took the initiative in entering the sinner’s house.

Jesus does not deny that Zacchaeus was a sinner. His final words, “for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost” (see Matt 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31-32) imply that Zacchaeus is to be counted among those who are lost. Nonetheless, it was for Zacchaeus and the likes of him that the Son of Man has come.

Jesus’ visit to Zacchaeus’ home is a cameo expression of the mercy of God. The reading from the Book of Wisdom is a reflection on divine mercy. Pseudo-Solomon asks us to remember that God’s mercy is an expression of his love for us, whom he has created. Although we are sinners, God gives us a chance. He wants us to reject our sin and trust in him.

Pseudo-Solomon also asks us to consider that God is merciful because he is powerful. God controls everything that he has made. It is from a position of strength that God allows us who have stumbled to pick ourselves up and turn back to him. The image that comes to my mind and perhaps to yours is that of parent watching a toddler stumble and fall, then pick him- or herself up again in order to take a few more steps. From a position of power, the parent might carry or scold the toddler. The loving parent lets the child get up and try again.