

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118:5 (2012) 461-479. by Raymond F. Collins.

A couple of weeks ago, I attended the funeral of a well-liked priest who was a pastor of a large parish at the time of his quite unexpected and tragic death. The large church was packed with parishioners—standing room only!—and more than a hundred priests. The parishioners had been speculating as to whether there would be a eulogy. The deceased did not allow eulogies to be delivered during funeral liturgies in his church.

The homily was to be given by a neighboring bishop, a friend of the deceased since their grammar school days. The bishop delivered a beautiful tribute to his friend of many years. But there was no homily. The bishop made no reference whatsoever to the scriptural readings of the day nor to the liturgy that was to be celebrated. His only scriptural allusion was to Mary at the foot of the cross as he spoke about the deceased’s devotion to Mary.

The glowing tribute was simply not what the Fathers of Vatican Council II called a “liturgical homily,” in which “the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 52). The Council Fathers went on to say that the liturgical homily “is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself” (*Ibid*).

Omitting the homily is one extreme in utilizing the temporal space assigned to the homily. At the other extreme is a short explanation of each of the readings on a Sunday morning. In my recent time in the pews during the past winter, the Sunday homily began “today’s first reading.” These introductory words were followed by a very brief reading of the Old Testament lection.

This was followed by “today’s second reading” and another short explanation. This, in turn, gave rise to “today’s third reading” and yet another short explanation. Quite often the third explanation was a bit longer than either of the others but not always. Sometimes all three explanations were roughly of the same length. Sometimes one or the other reading would merit the longer explanation.

A proper liturgical homily falls somewhere between these two extremes. It is best to concentrate on one reading so that the word of God may be broken open for the greater benefit of all who hear.

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

### **October 7, 2012**

#### **LITURGY**

**Genesis 2:18-24** is the Yahwist’s story of the creation of the first human couple.

**Hebrews 2:9-11** begins a series of readings from the so-called Letter to the Hebrews that will continue until the end of the liturgical year.

**Mark 10:2-16** tells the story of Jesus being tested by a group of Pharisees on the issue of divorce and a story about accepting the Kingdom of God as a child would. The story of Jesus being tested is perhaps better known in its Matthean version (Matt 19:3-10) which has a number of significant differences from the older version that we read in today’s gospel passage.

It is likely that Mark who has already narrated several episodes in which Pharisees tested Jesus has created the conflict story in order to highlight Jesus’ saying on divorce, the most quoted saying of Jesus in the New Testament (cf. Matt 5: 32; 19:9; Luke 16:18; 1 Cor 7:10). On this issue, see further my *Divorce in the New Testament* (Good News Studies 38. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 65-103.

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The conflict has the form of a rabbinic dispute. The Pharisees ask Jesus a question, “Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife.” The question is a bit implausible in a first century Palestinian setting as is seen in the reference to Deut 24:1-4 that the Pharisees cite in response to Jesus’ counter-question. It is clear that the law permits a man to divorce his wife. Jesus, however, says that this was allowed because of the “hardness of your hearts”—“your” referring not only to Jews of old but also to first century Jews. Jesus then comes back with another scripture, Gen 2:24, which places the whole debate in the context of God’s creative will from which Jesus draws the challenging inference, “What God has joined together no human being (*anthropos*) must separate.”

At this point in the narrative, the Pharisees’ question about the law--“is it lawful?--has not been directly answered. So, back in the house—the privileged locale for Jesus’ teaching the disciples according to Mark’s narrative (cf. Mark 9:33, in the gospel reading of two weeks ago)—the disciples question Jesus about the matter. This time Jesus responds that divorce and remarriage is tantamount to adultery.

Jesus’ response contains two ideas that are particularly striking. First of all, Jesus says that a man who divorces his wife and remarries sins against his wife. In his society, adultery was considered to be an offense against the husband of an adulterous woman. Second, Jesus says that women also are not allowed to divorce. Since it was all but impossible for women to divorce their husband in first-century Palestine this second part of Jesus’ saying was probably created by Mark in the Greco-Roman culture within which he wrote his story about Jesus.

Mark adds another “family story” to the controversy about divorce. The episode focuses on children and recalls the somewhat similar story in Mark 9:36-37, read two weeks ago. The disciples were not comfortable with such virtual non-entities as children—at least that is how they were considered at the time—coming to Jesus. They scolded the people who brought the children to Jesus. Jesus became angry—Matthew and Luke drop this idea from their stories of the episode (cf. Matt 19:14; Luke 18:16)—and announces that the kingdom of God can be accepted only by those who, like children of ages past, recognize their “worthlessness.”

## BROKEN FOR US

The homilist must make a choice as to which of the two stories should be the focus of the homily. Should the homilist choose the first, he or she must take care lest he or she speak so strongly about divorce that those in the congregation feel as if they are pariahs or outcasts. The homilist should focus on the challenge of fidelity in marriage, taking a cue from Mark that men and women have a similar responsibility in this regard.

Should the homilist choose the second reading, he or she must take care lest they exalt the status of children with all their naiveté and innocence. The gospel story is about accepting the Kingdom of God in full consciousness of one’s unworthiness, fully aware that one has no claim on the Kingdom. Only when the kingdom is accepted as a gift from God can one experience the ultimate divine embrace.

## TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

**October 14, 2012**

### LITURGY

**Wisdom 7:7-11** compares the relative value of wisdom and riches.

**Hebrews 4:12-13** beautifully describes the penetrating nature of the word of God.

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**Mark 10:17-30** in Mark’s story about Jesus follows immediately upon the gospel passage that was proclaimed in last week’s Sunday liturgy. Today’s reading consists of three scenes.

The first scene (vv. 17-22) consists of a dialogue between Jesus and an anonymous man whom we learn to be rich only at the conclusion to the episode (v. 22). Drawing an inference from the man’s protestation that he had kept all the commandments from his youth, Matthew portrays the anonymous individual as a young man, perhaps twenty or so years of age (Matt 19:20, 22) but Luke does not draw the inference (cf. Luke 18:18-25). Mark sets the episode as occurring while Jesus was “on the way” (cf. Mark 8:27; 9:33, verses in recently read Sunday gospels).

The man wants to inherit eternal life (cf. “treasure in heaven,” v. 21) so asks the teacher the personal question, “what I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus rejects the epithet good—reserved for God—and gives the man a double response. The first is negative, the “Thou shalt nots” of the Ten Commandments. The second response is positive. It is an invitation to become a disciple with the proviso that the man sell his possessions. This, the rich man was unwilling to do despite Jesus’ love and penetrating glance.

Two remarks can be made apropos Jesus’ listing of the commandments. First, Jesus interprets the “tenth” commandment (Exod 10:17; cf. Deut 5:21) as an action, not a thought in keeping with the original meaning of the precept. Second, the commandment of filial piety was considered a swing commandment, the transition between the “first” table and the “second” table. Hence its appearance at the end of the list.

In the second scene (vv. 23-27) Jesus instructs the disciples about wealth and the kingdom of God. Jesus explains to the disciples that it is virtually impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples were amazed at Jesus’ response. Popular opinion held that wealth was a sign of God’s favor. Addressing the disciples as children (*tekna*, the only such usage in Mark) and using a graphic image, Jesus repeated his words about the rich entering the kingdom of heaven.

The history of the interpretation of the episode downplays the severity of Jesus’ words by saying that “the eye of a needle” was one of the gates of the city of Jerusalem. This disingenuous interpretation appears for the first time in the ninth century; moreover, there was no such gate in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. According to Jesus neither the accumulation of riches nor doing anything else can assure entrance into the kingdom of God. Entrance into the kingdom is a gift that only God can give.

The third scene (v. 28-31) consists of a dialogue between Peter and Jesus on the rewards of discipleship. It begins with Peter’s protest that the disciples’ discipleship has meant that they left everything. Jesus’ response is phrased in apocalyptic language in which we recognize the use of hyperbole and the two-age motif of apocalyptic literature, this age and the age to come.

That a disciple like Levi was able to throw a large dinner party for Jesus in his own home (cf. Mark 2:15) is an indication that Jesus’ words are not to be taken literally. The brief mention of persecutions introduces a note of realism into Jesus’ words which may be colored by the fact that the house church constitutes a new family (of God).

## BROKEN FOR US

Each of the three scenes in today’s gospel reading may of itself provide ample material for a good homily. Should the homilist want to consider the lection in its entirety, one of the best ways to do so may be well be to consider the reading as one that speaks about priorities. Keeping those commandments in the Decalogue that deal with humans’ relations with one

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another should be a given. What, then, are the believers’ priorities?

For many in our capitalist society wealth is the supreme value. Jesus puts monetary possessions in perspective. It is, impossible, says he, for a person for whom wealth is the primary value to enter the kingdom of God. His statement is counter-cultural, as even Peter realized. But Jesus insists. The pursuit of wealth must be abandoned if one is to receive eternal life in the age to come. There are many in the church today who continue to say, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” (John 6:60).

## **TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME** **October 21, 2012**

### **LITURGY**

**Isaiah 53:10-12** is taken from the closing words of Second Isaiah’s Fourth Servant Canticle. **Hebrews 4:14-16** speaks of the great high priest, who shared the vicissitudes of our humanity and now has passed through the heavens.

**Mark 10:35-45** tells the story of a pair of ambitious brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who seek status in the kingdom of God. Just as the second prediction of the passion (Mark 9:30-32) was followed by a story about the status-seeking disciples, so this story about status follows the third passion prediction (Mark 10:32-34). The disciples simply do not get what the passion prediction means for them. They didn’t understand what Jesus told them when he spoke about the person who wishes to be first (Mark 9:35). They want to be Number 1 and Number 2 when Jesus enters into his glory. So, Jesus tells them square out, “you do not know what you are asking.”

At the present time and probably at the time when Mark composed his narrative, the metaphors that Jesus used as he asked the pair whether they are able to share his fate evoked the Christian practice of baptism and the eucharist. In the Old Testament, at Qumran, and in later Jewish literature, however, the “cup” was often used as a metaphor for suffering imposed by God as a punishment for disobedience (cf. Ps 75:8-9; 1QpHab 11:14-15; 2 Bar. 13:8; etc.). Jesus took this suffering upon himself. The idea of being immersed, endangered by deep waters is common in Jewish tradition (2 Sam 22:5; 1QH 3:13-18; etc.). Jesus took this upon himself as well.

Full of self-confidence, the brothers answer Jesus’ question, “yes, we can.” We can drink the cup and experience the baptism. In historical retrospect, the disciples did share Jesus’ fate but that goes beyond the Markan narrative. The evangelist simply describes Jesus telling James and John that they will share his fate but adds that only God can assign status in the kingdom.

Observing the dialogue between the brothers and Jesus, the other ten become angry at James and John. Like others of their time, they were probably hoping for favorable status for themselves. So Jesus addresses them. His “you know” echoes the “you do not know” with which he began to address the sons of Zebedee. You know, Jesus said, what power is like in the “real world.” Then he tells the ten that they are not to be like those who exercise power in that world. Status is not an acceptable mode of leadership for Jesus’ disciples. As Jesus had previously told them when there was an issue of status among them (cf. Mark 9:35), being a servant is the way of leadership.

The reading concludes with one of the most important utterances in the Markan narrative (cf. Matt 20:28). Jesus affirms that his mission and ministry is a mission and ministry of service, not only in his individual actions but in its totality.

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Jesus’ death, announced in the three passion predictions, is then “explained.” It will be a death that will free many. Jesus’ “ransom” language will later give rise to a theology of redemption. Using Semitic idiom, Jesus says that his death is for the sake of “many.” The turn of phrase means “all,” the all who are not few in number.

#### BROKEN FOR US

The episode in today’s gospel serves paradigmatically to speak about leadership among the disciples. Its proper actualization is the mode of leadership by bishops, priests, deacons, and lay leaders of the community. Should the homilist fit into any one of these categories, he or she should take serious stock of himself or herself as the homily is being prepared. Jesus’ words are primarily meant for those who exercise leadership positions within the church.

Only secondarily and by way of extension does today’s gospel pertain to the body of disciples as a whole. It reminds all of us that following Jesus means a life of service and giving one’s life for the sake of others.

### THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME October 28, 2012

#### LITURGY

**Jeremiah 31:7-9** is an oracle that speaks of Israel’s return from exile.

**Hebrews 5:1-6** is a beautiful description on the high priesthood of Christ, the only “Christian” priesthood in the New Testament.

**Mark 10:46-52** narrates the cure of Bartimaeus. The cure takes place outside the city of Jericho, a location for which the gospel stories express little interest. Located in the rift of the Jordan, the city is about a day’s journey from Jerusalem. In the scenario envisaged by Mark, it would have been the last stop on Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem.

The subject of the cure is a blind beggar whose name, “Bartimaeus,” literally means “son of Timaeus,” from the Aramaic *bar/son* and the common Greek name Timaeus. The narrative highlights the man’s persistence and features the title “son of David.” Apart from Simon Peter (Mark 8:29), Bartimaeus is the only character in Mark’s gospel who uses a christological title for Jesus.

As the disciples rebuked those who were bringing children to Jesus (Mark 10:13), so people in the crowd rebuked him. But once again, the blind man sitting by the roadside called out, “Son of David, have pity on me.” Hearing the cry, Jesus stops walking toward Jerusalem and calls the man. The people relay the call to Jesus. The blind man tosses aside his beggar’s cloak and moved rapidly toward Jesus. A short dialogue follows in which Jesus asks what the man wants; he responds “Master (*rabbouni*), I want to see.” Strikingly, there is no ritual gesture nor an authoritative command by Jesus.

Instead, Jesus tells him to get moving (*hypage*, “go”) and speaks of Bartimaeus’ faith. Bartimaeus has been saved/healed (*sesoken*). Mark’s characteristic “immediately” (*euthus*) confirms that the cure took place. The man is enabled to see and then follows then followed Jesus along the way (*en te hodo*).

Ostensibly a miracle story, this final episode in Mark’s story before Jesus arrives in the neighborhood of Jerusalem is ultimately a story of a call to discipleship. The notion of call is highlighted through the story’s three-fold use of the verb “call” (*kaleo*). Bartimaeus’

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“following” (*ekolouthei*) Jesus does not so much mean that he walked behind Jesus as that he became Jesus’ disciple, a follower of Jesus.

#### BROKEN FOR US

Without allegorizing the narrative, three traits of the call story deserve to be emphasized since they are paradigmatic of later calls to discipleship.

First, disciples are called to be disciples despite their physical or other handicaps and despite opposition by the locals.

Second, what is required is faith, evident in this story in Bartimaeus’ double use of the messianic title, “Son of David.”

Third, Jesus enables those whom he calls to be his disciples. Jesus himself overcomes the obstacles so that those who are called can be disciples.

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