

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 119:5 (2013) 455-473 by Raymond F. Collins.

It is no secret that among the four writers of the canonical gospels Luke is the best writer. His use of the Greek language and his familiarity with Hellenistic literary devices would merit him first prize were he to be engaged in a literary contest with Matthew, Mark, and John. In so many different ways, Luke’s two-part composition, Luke-Acts, gives evidence of his literary skill.

The prologues to both the gospel and Acts show that Luke consulted various sources in gathering material for his two-part narrative. He found a way to hold this disparate material together in a unified composition. From our earliest acquaintance with the apostle Paul, we have been familiar with the three missionary voyages featured in Acts. This “travelogue” enabled Luke to share so many things about the apostle with his readers.

Equally important is the travelogue that appears in the Gospel according to Luke (9:52-19:27). It encompasses more than one third of the entire narrative. The evangelist composed his account of the journey to Jerusalem with material coming from different sources, Mark, the Sayings Source (Q), a tradition peculiar to him (L), and some material of his own composition.

Various episodes and different teachings of Jesus are often juxtaposed with one another in what seems to be—and may well be—haphazard fashion. They hang together as various incidents on the long journey to Jerusalem. All of the gospel readings during this month are taken from the Lukan travelogue.

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 6, 2013

LITURGY:

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4, taken from the beginning of the Book of Habakkuk, reminds us that we are to remain strong in our faith even when we are surrounded by violence and injustice.

2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14 is the first of the three lections that constitute the Sunday liturgy’s semi-continuous reading of the Second Epistle to Timothy.

Luke 17:5-10 begins with the first appearance of the twelve apostles in Luke’s long account of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:52-19:27). Their request for an increase of faith (literally, “add faith to us”) appears abruptly in the travel account.

Jesus’ response suggests that the apostles were men of little faith. In Greek, the grammar of Jesus’ response suggests that the apostles’ faith did not measure up to the size of a mustard seed. The agricultural imagery, with the contrast between the seed and a large mulberry tree, implies that they had only a small amount of faith. The mulberry tree was so large that rabbinic tradition forbade the planting of a mulberry tree within twelve yards of a water-collecting cistern.

Were the apostles’ faith to have been only strong enough to be positively compared to the small mustard seed, they would have been able to work wonders and do things that were beyond

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human expectation but their faith—at least at this point in their journey with Jesus—was not that strong.

The faith of which Jesus speaks is trust in God and acceptance of the teaching that God gives through Jesus, his prophet. The point of the story is that those who follow Jesus must ask for an increase in faith.

Because Luke composed his account of the journey to Jerusalem in the way that he did, using disparate material from different sources, Jesus’ teaching about unprofitable servants (vv. 7-10) follows immediately after his challenging teaching about faith, with which it seems to have no real connection. The teaching derives from Luke’s proper source (L) but may have had another point of reference in that source. As the story appears in the gospel, it is directed to the apostles (v. 5) or to the disciples (Luke 17:1).

The story begins with a rhetorical question and reflects the setting of a dining room, a setting that appears often in Luke’s gospel. There is a subtle contrast in the story. In the first part of the story (vv. 7-9), reflected in the hypothetical question, the apostles are implicitly asked to compare themselves with the master. Even though his servants had been about their assigned tasks, the master would naturally expect them to prepare and serve his dinner before they took their own meal.

Then comes the application of the story (v. 10). The apostles are explicitly told to compare themselves with the servants. They are not masters; they are servants. When they have carried out all their duties, they have only done their duty. They should expect neither thanks nor special reward. They are only useless servants, almost like interchangeable parts that an owner can change at will. The point of the story’s application is that no mere human being can justifiably lay claim to receiving a reward or thanks from God. No matter what disciples do in serving God, they only do what they are expected to do.

The story reminds us of a saying in the Mishnah’s “Sayings of the Fathers” attributed to Antigonos of Sokho: “Do not be like servants who serve the master on condition of receiving a reward but be like servants who serve the master not on condition of receiving a reward. And let the fear of Heaven be upon you” (*m. ‘Abot* 1:3).

BROKEN FOR US:

The pair of sayings in today’s gospel teaches about little faith and little service. If even the apostles were told to consider that their faith was not as strong as it might be and that their service was a fulfillment of an obligation on their part, so much more should we consider that our faith is weak and that we are just servants who do what is required of us.

Accordingly, we must pray, “Increase our faith.” Accordingly, we must remember that God owes us nothing. We have no just claim to whatever reward a compassionate and gracious God might give us.

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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October 13, 2013

LITURGY:

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

2 Timothy 2:8-13, written by a third-generation disciple of Paul, contains one of the Pastoral Epistles’ “trustworthy” sayings (cf. 1 Tim 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; Titus 3:8).

Luke 17:11-19 begins with Luke reminding his readers that Jesus was en route to Jerusalem. Commentators often note the evangelist’s unawareness of or inattention to Palestinian geography. The evangelist’s Greek suggests that Jesus passed between Samaria and Galilee, implying an East-West axis. In fact, Jesus was travelling north to south and would have left Galilee before entering into Samaria. The geography matters little. Luke simply wants to remind his readers that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. The road taken by Jesus enabled him to encounter a Samaritan leper.

The story of the cure of the ten lepers is found only in Luke’s gospel. In itself, the story is simple enough. Jesus was about to enter a village when he was met by ten lepers. Religious custom dictated that lepers keep apart from others and that they cry out to passersby, warning them to say away. These lepers do call out. But instead of saying, “Keep away from us,” they cry out, “Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!” (*Iesou epistata, eleeson hemas*, a cry echoed in the liturgy’s *Kyrie, eleison*).

The story has all the features of a typical miracle story in three parts. First, the difficulty: there were ten of them and they were at some distance from Jesus. Second, the authoritative command: “Go show yourselves to the priests” in accordance with Lev 13:3, 10, 13. Third, the realization that the miracle was effected: the lepers’ realization that they were cleansed as they began their own journey to Jerusalem, where the temple and its priests were located.

As the gospel readings of the past few weeks have shown so well, Luke adds an appendix which contains the message that he wants his readers to understand. In this case, the zinger is that only one of the healed lepers returned to say thanks. He glorified God—a typical Lukan response to a miracle (e. g., Luke 5:25-26; Acts 4:3:21)—and thanked Jesus, giving gesticular expression to this two-fold attitude on his part by falling prostrate in front of Jesus. Luke adds a dramatic flair to the narrative with his short sentence, “He was a Samaritan” (*autos en Samarites*). Luke does not identify the ethnicity of the other nine who were cured but readers are led to believe that the Samaritan leper might have been the only Samaritan in the group. Ironically, the only one to thank Jesus belonged to an ethnic group that had rejected Jesus (cf. Luke 9:53).

Jesus comments with a series of three rhetorical questions. The questions highlight the contrasts between gratitude and the lack thereof, between Jew and Samaritan (“foreigner,” *ho allogenēs outos*, literally, “a person of another race”), and between a marvelous happening and viewing the miracle through the eyes of faith. Mention of a saving faith concludes other miracle stories in Luke’s gospel (cf. Luke 7:50; 8:48; 18:42).

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BROKEN FOR US:

Luke’s add-on contains the meat of today’s gospel reading. All human beings are the beneficiaries of God’s wondrous deeds, if only of the sun that rises each day and the falling rain that provides water to drink and allows crops to grow. Many humans are the beneficiaries of truly wondrous gifts of God, the birth of a child or recovery from a serious illness or accident, for example. But few have the faith to appreciate these gifts and give glory to God and thanks to Jesus, the Word through whom God has created all that is (John 1:3; Col 1:16).

As people of faith, we are called to glorify God for his manifold gifts, not only for the gifts that God has given to us individually but also, because we are members of a priestly people, to give thanks to God and praise to Jesus for the wonderful gifts that God has bestowed on all humankind each and every day.

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 20, 2013

LITURGY:

Exodus 17:8-13 presents us with the picture of a weary Moses at prayer, his hands held up in the gesture of an orant by Aaron and Hur.

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 contains a parable, found only in Luke, that illustrates the importance of continuous prayer. Jesus’ teaching on prayer, his teaching on social and economic justice, and a focus on women in the life and teaching of Jesus are themes that are constantly emphasized in the Gospel according to Luke. The story of the persistent widow makes use of two of these motifs. Unusually, the parable is preceded by an introduction that expresses its main point.

The parable begins with a focus on a dishonest judge who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow comes to him seeking justice. At the time of Jesus, a widow, bereft of a man’s support, was considered particularly vulnerable. The widow served as the paradigm of the really poor person. The Old Testament Scriptures required that particular care be taken to provide for the needs of widows (cf. Deut 10:18; 14:29; etc.). Commenting on justice and equity, Deuteronomy 24 repeatedly talks about the obligation to take of the widow (vv. 17, 19, 20, 21).

The dishonest judge was callous. Disregarding the demands of the Torah, he refused to heed the widow’s plea. Recognizing his own injustice, the judge finally caves in to her demands and decides to render justice to her. His reason: “lest she finally come and strike me.” Commentators often note that “strike” (*hypopiaze*) is terminology taken from the world of boxing (cf. 1 Cor 9:27) and could well be rendered “give me a black eye.”

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Verse 6 provides a transition to the moral of the story. The unjust judge has rendered a just judgment, albeit belatedly. The just God takes care of his chosen ones speedily. In the argument from the lesser to the greater (*a minore ad majus*), there is a double contrast. The judge’s disregard for people is contrasted with God’s care of his chosen ones. The slowness of the judge’s just action is contrasted with the speed of God’s response to those who call out to him. God hears the persistent prayer of those who call upon him.

Verse 8b, “But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” is a Lukan addition to the story. Even though fifty or sixty years had elapsed since the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Parousia had not yet occurred at the time that the evangelist composed his gospel. So, the evangelist asks an important question, will there still be people of strong faith when the Parousia does take place? The role of the Son of Man as judge picks up on the parable’s imagery of the judge.

BROKEN FOR US:

Although today’s reading is short and superficially simple, it intertwines two motifs, either of which could serve as the subject of today’s homily. One is the importance of persistence in prayer. God heeds the prayers of those who call upon him day and night. “Pray without ceasing,” St. Paul writes (1 Thess 5:17).

The other is the “delay” in the coming of the fullness of the kingdom. The world in which we live is one in which there is much injustice. Weak and vulnerable people, like the widow in the parable, are those who suffer the most injustice. Is our faith strong enough that, abiding this injustice we maintain our hope that God will, in his own good time, render justice to his chosen ones? Our hope that God will respond to this injustice and “make things right” for those who suffer does not, of course, absolve us from the obligation to eradicate in the injustice in our society and respond to the needs of the weakest and most vulnerable among us.

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 27, 2013

LITURGY:

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18 is a passage in which the sage speaks about the prayer of the lowly, exemplified by the weak, the orphan, and the widow.

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 is the memorable story of the Pharisee and publican at prayer in the temple. As was the case with last week’s parable of the unjust judge, Jesus introduces the story with a preliminary comment. With his introductory remarks, Jesus says that the parable is addressed to those self-righteous persons who look down on everyone else.

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The story begins with the presentation of two men who went up to the temple mount in Jerusalem in order to pray. One was a member of the Pharisaic sect, a law-abiding Jew, whose public conduct was that of keeping the law in its every detail. The other was a tax collector, probably a customs agent, generally held in low esteem by the people not only because of their employment by the occupying Roman power but also because of the system. Tax-collectors earned their money by adding an additional amount to the stated tax. The system was primed to promote extortion.

Adopting the customary position of prayer, the Pharisee stood up to pray. Among interpreters, there is some difference as to what “spoke this prayer to himself” (*pros eauton . . . proseucheto*) actually meant. Does it mean that he was speaking quietly? Or that he was speaking about himself? The grammar allows for the meaning that he was praying to himself but that cannot be the meaning of the text since the prayer is addressed to God (“O God,” *ho theos*). In his prayer, the Pharisee rehearses his virtue, affirming that he is not greedy, dishonest, or adulterous like the rest of humanity. For all this, he can thank God.

He compares himself favorably with the tax collector, then continues with the rehearsal of his virtuous life, saying that he fasted twice a week and paid the tithe on his entire income. His fasting, probably on Thursdays and Mondays, the traditional days when Moses went up Mount Sinai and came down from the mountain (cf. *b. Ta’an* 12a), is a sign of extraordinary asceticism. Apart from a few designated days, Jews were not required to fast.

The tax collector, on the other hand, stood just within the temple. He refused even to raise his eyes to heaven, a traditional sign of prayer. Instead, he beat his chest and prayed for mercy, perhaps using the words of Ps 51:3, “Have mercy on me. God, in your goodness; in your abundant compassion, blot out my offense.”

It is the tax-collector, not the Pharisee, who is justified by God. The punch line recalls Luke 14:11, the bottom line of the gospel lection for September 1, the Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time.

BROKEN FOR US:

The parable is a forceful reminder that religious people can easily become self-righteous. We say our prayers and go to church. We are not like other people who do not go to church and do all sorts of things that the religious would never be caught doing.

We should thank God for the gifts that God has given us, not because we are good and religious persons. “There go I, but for the grace of God,” each of us can say—and then we should thank God for that grace.

But rather than compare ourselves to others, we should admit our sin and ask God to have mercy on us. None of us is without sin. No group exists that is without fault, including the church and any given parish. It is not by way of exception that the eucharistic liturgy begins with a penitential rite. Yet, how many of us take it to heart?

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