

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 453-470 by 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 consultant 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-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 6, 2009

LITURGY

James 2:1-5 teaches that members of the Christian community are to treat one another impartially, particularly when the community comes together for worship.

Mark 7:31-37 describes Jesus’ cure of the deaf man who also suffered from a speech impediment, most likely because he was hearing-impaired.

Isaiah 35:4-7a is part of a long oracle coming from Second Isaiah (6th century BCE) that has been incorporated into First Isaiah. To remind readers of the oracular nature of today’s passage, the lectionary text begins with a classic introduction, “Thus says the Lord,” that is not part of the biblical text.

The opening exhortation, “fear not,” echoes a characteristic motif of Second Isaiah (see Isa 40:9; 41:10, 13, 14; 43:1, 5; 44:2, 8; 54:4, 14). The overall description is similar to Second Isaiah’s description of Israel’s return from Exile (Isaiah 40-55). Its almost euphoric portrayal of Israel’s almost well-being contrasts with Isaiah 34’s description of the final annihilation of Edom. According to Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Chapter 35 gives us a completely ahistorical and imaginative project which . . . draws on themes and turns of phrase in chs. 40-48 but also on chs. 1-33” (*Isaiah 1-39* [AB 19. Doubleday: New York, 2000], 457).

Before beginning his description of the great situation that awaits Israel, the prophet announces the coming of the Lord. The Lord will come with vengeance for Edom; he will come with salvation for Israel. The announcement serves to remind Israel that the good fortune that awaits the nation is due to the active presence of Yahweh.

In the restoration of Israel, infirmities and disabilities of all sorts will be removed. When

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the kingdom comes, the infirm will be strengthened. A reversal of previous suffering with the coming of the Kingdom of the Lord is often expressed in First Isaiah with the same kind of physical traits described in Isaiah 35:5-6a in First Isaiah (see Isa 29:18; 30:21; 32:3-4; 33:23; cf. Isa 62:10-12).

The prophet also announces that the reversal of the people’s ill-fortune will be accompanied by a renewal of the land. The people will not be made whole unless the land of Israel is restored. The oracle’s focus on the availability of water provides a subtle contrast with the arid conditions of the Exodus, Israel’s quintessential salvation experience.

BROKEN FOR US

Mark’s description of Jesus’ cure of the hearing- and speech-impaired man is written in language that evokes the fulfillment of the Isaian oracles. More than twenty-five years ago I addressed a regional SPREAD convention on this topic. I followed my presentation up with a couple of articles, one more popular, “Jesus’ Cure of the Man who was Deaf: An Exegetical Study of Mark 7:31-37,” in *Listening* 5:1 (1982) 3-4-13; 5:2 (1982) 3-4,” and one more academic, “Jesus’ Ministry to the Deaf and Dumb,” *Melita Theologica* 35 (1984) 12-36. As I look back at the title of the longer article, I am aware of how insensitive I was to the condition of the man whom Jesus cured. I am happy that the New American Bible and most of our contemporary translations uses more sensitive language than I did those many years ago. I hope that I, all preachers, and all Christians do the same.

Mark does not tell his readers explicitly, as Matthew and John do, that Jesus’ actions “fulfill the prophets” nor does he present Jesus teaching that the scriptures are fulfilled in our midst, as Luke does. Mark’s approach to the Jewish scriptures is more subtle. He uses language that shows that the prophets are being fulfilled. Linguistic analysts would say that Mark shows Jesus fulfilling the scriptures rather than coming right out and saying that Jesus fulfills the scriptures.

The oracle of today’s first reading has one major theme, namely, that the coming of the Kingdom entails the cure of human illness and the well-being of the environment. Health care and environmental concerns are political issues. The prophet would have us realize that they are also theological issues and that they constitute a moral challenge for those who claim that they await the coming of the Kingdom of God.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 13, 2009

LITURGY

James 2:14-18 offers useful examples to teach that works inspired by faith are the expression of authentic faith.

Mark 8:27-35 is a passage in which Jesus raises the question of his identity, gets an inadequate response from Peter, and then explains that he is the “Son of Man.”

Isaiah 50:5-9a is the third of the four Servant Canticles in Second Isaiah (see Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). The liturgical text omits the first verse of the canticle in which Yahweh is described as enabling the Servant to be one who teaches and consoles. The lectionary text also omits the last half verse of the canticle (Isa 50:9b), which describes the fate of those who oppose the Servant in rather earthy terms.

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Scholars generally agree that within Second Isaiah the canticles describe personified and faithful Israel. This portrayal of Israel with personal traits was such that many New Testament authors appropriated different verses of the Servant Canticles to speak about Jesus. This usage has led many Christian writers to speak about the Servant of Yahweh in Second Isaiah as a prophetic personage. The interpretation of the canticle as a prediction of the future does not take into account the biblical author’s use of personification.

Today’s liturgical reading begins with a graphic image, Yahweh opening the ear of his servant. This image portrays the Servant as one who has received the Word of God. Having received the Word of God and the mission to proclaim it (see Isa 50:4), the Servant professes his steadfastness despite the difficulties that he encountered.

In verse 6 the difficulties are described in terms of physical assaults. Those who oppose the Servant, personified Israel, are those Israelites who oppose the prophetic mission that has been given to Israel. The idea that a prophet is not accepted by his own people, that the prophet is tormented and oppressed by his own, is one that has a long biblical history. A classic example is Jeremiah who suffered, among other indignities, being mocked by Israelites who did not accept his message (see Jer 20:7-13). In the Synoptics’ long beatitude (Matt 5:12; Luke 6:23), Jesus alludes to this biblical tradition

Like Jeremiah (see Jer 1:18-19; 17:17-18), the Servant proclaims his reliance on the help of God. God will stand by him and strengthen him. This conviction enables the Servant to be resolute in the face of his oppressors. Using juridical language, he speaks of Yahweh as the one who will vindicate him. He is convinced that vindication is not far off. So disposed, the Servant taunts his oppressors, “who can prove me wrong?” With this and other taunts directed at his oppressors, the Servant proclaims his utmost confidence that God will vindicate him.

BROKEN FOR US

Those who proclaim the word of God, in word and action, inevitably encounter opposition coming from those who should be supportive of their prophetic mission but are not. “The Word came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him” (John 1:11) says the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel in a reflection on the Word’s presence in the world. Jesus had been anointed for a prophetic mission (cf. Luke 4:18-1), but he was a human being and would be rejected by the leaders of his own people and eventually be put to death through their machinations. That was too much for Peter (Mark 8:32, “say it isn’t so, Lord) but it was the truth.

The prophet’s vocation is not an easy one. The names that I was called by some of my fellow diocesan priests, more than forty years ago and since, still ring in my ears. The reaction of angry parishioners to one of my homilies about peace and justice still causes me some anxiety, leading me to look around the church as I begin to preach. I want to see if the protesters are present. I am not alone in having to suffer some opposition. The late Raymond Brown suffered much from those who did not like his exegesis of the biblical text. And our sufferings are minuscule compared to those of Oscar Romero and other truly prophetic figures.

Unfortunately, it is the fate of the prophet to suffer. We believe that Jesus is the prophet *par excellence*, the prophet beyond compare. In baptism we all share in his prophetic ministry. Jesus was reviled and put to death. We do not expect to experience the degree of rejection and oppression that he received but we surely know that we will experience some opposition if we remain faithful to the prophetic mission that is ours.

And one final note: before preaching on today’s Old Testament reading, the homilist

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might want to look ahead to next Sunday’s readings. The theme of today’s reading from Isaiah is echoed in next Sunday’s reading from the Book of Wisdom.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 20, 2009

LITURGY

James 3:6-4:3 is perhaps the most beautiful and most practical New Testament reflections on the gift of wisdom.

Mark 9:30-37 is a powerful pronouncement story in which Jesus teaches his disciples that leadership is service.

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20 is part of a long speech by some godless persons (Wis 1:16-2:24) who made a pact with death (see Wis 1:16).

Beginning with *Epistle of Barnabas* in the second Christian century, various Fathers of the Church quoted the first verse of today’s reading to show that the Old Testament revealed Christ’s sufferings in advance. Barnabas wrote, “For the prophet says concerning Israel: ‘Woe to their soul, for they have plotted an evil plot against themselves by saying, “Let us bind the righteous one, because he is troublesome to us””’ (*Barn.* 6:7). In the *City of God* Augustine wrote, “In one of these books that is called the Wisdom of Solomon Christ’s passion is most clearly prophesied. For surely it is his wicked slayers who are recorded as saying: ‘Let us set an ambush for the righteous man’” (*City of God* 17.20.1). See also Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 17; Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 13.13; and Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5.4.

Augustine had it right in attributing the citation to Wisdom rather than to “the prophet” [Isaiah] Wisdom 2:12 seems to quote the Greek text of Isaiah 3:10. Isaiah 3:9-10 is the biblical text quoted in the *Epistle of Barnabas* and attributed to “the prophet.” The words, “Let us beset the just man, because he is obnoxious to us” (“Let us bind the righteous one, because he is troublesome to us,” in the English translation of *Barn* 6:7) are found in the Greek text of Isaiah 3:10 but they do not belong to the original Hebrew text. Because the sentence is not in the Hebrew text, it does not appear in contemporary English-language bibles. Today’s bibles are generally based on the Hebrew text, rather than on a Greek or Latin translation (see Vatican Council II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 22).

In the first verse of today’s reading, the ungodly person is describing as plotting against the just man. The wicked person wants revenge since the righteous person has confronted him for transgressing the Law of Moses. The ungodly person has been trained in the Law but he has violated its precepts.

The sage’s purpose in writing these words was apparently to remind his readers that the pursuit of righteousness is not an easy task. Those who try to live righteously should expect repercussions from the ungodly. Sometimes the repercussions are merely verbal; sometimes they go beyond mere words to the infliction of physical harm, torture, and even death. Even as they inflict serious harm upon the righteous, the ungodly mock and taunt the just person. Their barbs make light of the righteous person’s reliance on the help of God.

BROKEN FOR US

Although it is not the focal point of the pronouncement story, the reading from Mark

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incorporates the second of Mark’s three passion predictions (Mark 8:31 [last week’s gospel reading]; 9:31; 10:33). Jesus’ prediction of his passion and death provides the link between the third liturgical reading and the passage from the Book of Wisdom.

The homilist must take care lest he or she repeat the homily delivered the previous week. The themes of the first and third readings of last week and this week are quite similar. On each of the two weeks it is the appearance of one of the passion predictions that has led to the choice of the first reading. If there is a distinction to be made between the principal themes of the two first readings, it might be found in the fact that the reading from the Deutero-Isaiah emphasized that it is one who exercises a prophetic vocation who will suffer because of the exercise of their ministry while the sage emphasizes that the righteous person suffers because he or she tries to live righteously. Note, however, that in the wise man’s portrayal of the wicked man’s plot it is because the righteous person has made the wicked uncomfortable that the wicked attempt to retaliate.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 27, 2009

LITURGY

James 5:1-6 utters a severe warning to the rich, particularly those rich persons who use their wealth to exploit others.

Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48 tells a story about an unnamed exorcist and continues with a series of sayings in which Jesus graphically, and with oriental hyperbole, talks about giving scandal (cf. Matt 18:6-9).

Numbers 11:25-29 describes an incident that took place as the wandering Israelites were on their way to Hazeroth, in the southern Sinai. The incident reflects a change in governance among God’s people: Moses now shares his authority with seventy elders.

In the Book of Numbers the Tent of Meeting is the focus of God’s presence (cf. Exod 33:9-11). It is there that Yahweh communicates with Moses (Cf. Num 11:16-17; 24-40; 12:1-8; Deut 31:14-15). Numbers 11:24 describes Moses exiting the Tent of Meeting, announcing the divine oracle to the people, and then assembling seventy elders. Yahweh took some of the spirit that had been given to Moses and gave it to the elders, thus symbolizing their sharing in Moses’ authority and power. The gift that they received was put to use immediately. They began to speak ecstatically. This kind of ecstatic prophecy seems to have occurred often in early Israel (cf. 1 Sam 10:5, 10-11; 19:20-24; 1 Kgs 22:6, 10-12). The experience can be compared with the speaking in tongues on the first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2:6-11, 17) or the charismatic glossolalia mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, 14. Such ecstatic speech is a sign of the active presence of the Spirit in singularly gifted humans.

Two of the men “on the list,” that is, the list of seventy elders chosen by Moses, failed to appear when the elders assembled around the Tent of Meeting. The no-shows were Eldad and Medad, both of whom had names derived from the Hebrew root *ydd*, meaning “to love” or “be in love.” For reasons unknown to us, these two remained in the camp. They did not go to the Tent of Meeting which had been pitched outside the Israelites’ encampment (see Exod 33:7, although Num 2:2 suggests that sometimes the Tent of Meeting was pitched inside the camp). Notwithstanding their absence from the group of elders assembled around the Tent of Meeting, Eldad and Medad received the spirit. Like the other sixty-eight elders, they too were able to

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speak ecstatically.

Joshua, at this time Moses’ aide (see Exod 33:11), later the one chosen to lead the Chosen People into the Promised Land, implored Moses to restrain Eldad and Medad from prophesying as they did. Moses’ response was to suggest that Joshua was being overly zealous (“jealous” in the NAB translation). As the leader of the entire people of Israel, Moses could only express a hope that the gift of the spirit would be conferred on all the people.

Numbers 11:30 says that Moses reentered the Tent of Meeting. This creates a nice literary inclusion with verse 24, which describes Moses coming out of the Tent of Meeting. The literary inclusion circumscribes Numbers 11:24-30 as a discrete literary unit within the Book of Numbers. Unfortunately the Roman liturgy’s liturgical text has omitted the compassing verses, Numbers 11:24 and 30.

BROKEN FOR US

In the New Testament the story of the unnamed exorcist appears only in the Gospel according to Mark. It may have been an embarrassment to Matthew and Luke who omitted it when they expanded on the Gospel according to Mark. It is, however, this very story which provides the parallel to the incident described in the Book of Numbers. In both cases someone “outside the loop” receives the gift of the spirit and acts accordingly. In both cases, a loyal disciple takes umbrage at the situation and implores the leader to restrain the activity that is taking place. In both cases, the leader refuses to accede to the loyal disciple’s request.

These parallel incidents provide a powerful lesson for the church today. All too many people think that God acts only through “authorized channels,” that is, the hierarchy and those recognized by the hierarchy. As a matter of course God does act through authorized channels but the Spirit of God is not constrained by authorized channels. When the Spirit acts outside of the authorized channels, the person who is faithful to God should respond as Moses and Jesus did, recognizing God’s Spirit at work. A person of faith should recognize that God acts in ways that are neither circumscribed by institutional structures nor limited by human expectations.