

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-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 5, 2010

LITURGY

Philemon 9-10, 12-17 is a passage from the shortest of Paul’s extant letters. This Sunday is the only Sunday in the three-year cycle when a passage from Philemon is read.

Luke 14:25-33 speaks of the sacrifice that Jesus’ disciples must make and urges that we think carefully about the consequences of discipleship.

Wisdom 9:13-18b concludes the first part of the Book of Wisdom. Because of Solomon’s reputation as a wise king, the book has traditionally been attributed to the tenth century B.C.E. monarch. Contemporary scholarship places the composition of the book some nine centuries after the king’s death, less than a century before Christ’s birth. It was written in Greek by an Alexandrian Jew.

Today’s reading echoes the neo-Platonic philosophy of the times. It begins with a rhetorical question that underscores the human intelligence’s inability to understand God. The thought is a familiar one, clearly stated in Second Isaiah (Isa 40:13-14; 55:8), and echoed both in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature (Prov 30:2-4; Sir 1:1-10; 18:1-7; 24:28-29) and the literature of intertestamental Judaism (*I Baruch* 3:29-37; *Sib. Or.*, fragment 3:15; *I Enoch* 93:11-14).

Pseudo-Solomon implicitly attributes the human inability to understand God to the fact that we humans are embodied beings. This negative view of the human body, portrayed as dragging down the soul, appears often in the writings of Plato (Phaedo 66B, 81C; Republic 611C; Timaeus 43BC). Later the notion is found in the writings of Stoic philosophers, such as Seneca (*Moral Epistles* 65.16) and Plutarch, (*Isis and Osiris* 353A) as well as in the writings of Hellenistic Jewish writers such as Philo of Alexandria (*Giants* 31) and the historian Flavius Josephus (*Jewish Wars* 7.8.7). The image of the human body as a tent (“shelter,” NAB), commonly used in philosophic writings, recurs in 2 Corinthians 5:2.

Human corporality is such that we can barely understand things around us and the

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realities that we experience. Our knowledge of earthly realities is imperfect. That being so, it is totally impossible for us to understand God except if God himself gives us the gift of wisdom. Without this gift we cannot understand God’s ways or follow his will. With God’s saving gift of Wisdom, says Pseudo-Solomon, our paths are set straight. Similar ideas are expressed in the Dead Sea Scrolls *Thanksgiving Hymns* (1QHodayot). Like Pseudo-Solomon, the author of these hymns speaks of the gift of wisdom as the holy spirit. This “holy spirit” is not to be identified with the third person of the Trinity.

BROKEN FOR US

Rarely during the three-year liturgical cycle is there as little explicit connection between the Sunday liturgy’s first and third readings as there is today. Trying to find a link is all but futile. Thus the homilist might simply want to concentrate on the first reading and preach about the human condition. Because of our human condition and not only corporality our understanding of reality is limited. Recent decades have experienced a knowledge explosion; knowledge continues to “explode.” While we are grateful for all that we humans now know and the human possibilities that this knowledge has created, we must remember that the ability to know and to grow in knowledge is God’s gift to us, an element in the gift of wisdom, for which we ought to pray. Only with this gift will we be able to use our knowledge in such a way that it serves a truly human purpose and allows us to walk in the way of the Lord.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 12, 2010

LITURGY

1 Timothy 1:12-17 is a posthumous reflection on Paul’s “conversion.”

Luke 15:1-32 narrates two of the parables of divine mercy in Luke 15, namely, the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin.

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14 describes Moses’ pleading for the people before God in a way that recalls Abraham’s pleading on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah in a passage from Genesis that was read on July 25 (Gen 18:20-32). Numbers 14:13-19 offers another example of Moses’ intercession for the people. In that prayer, as in Exod 32:7-11, 13-14, Moses appeals to the Lord’s God honor and compassion.

The setting for this story is the incident of the golden calf (Exod 32:1-6). The passage begins with Yahweh curtly telling Moses that he had better get a move on because Israel, his responsibility, had done something wrong. In a commentary on this passage William Propp likens the scene to that of an angry parent telling a spouse, “look what *your* child did. *You* have to do something about it.” See William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40* (Anchor Bible 21. New York: Doubleday, 2006), 553.

Just forty days (“soon” in the reading) after the Israelites heard the Decalogue they had already broken God’s covenant with them. Mocking the preamble to the Decalogue, they violated the first of its precepts (see Exod 20:2-3; Deut 5:6-7). Yahweh’s words, “I see how stiff-necked this people is” recalls his earlier observation of Israel (see Exod 3, 7, 9). At that time he saw how miserable they were and determined to free them. Now he sees how stubbornly recalcitrant they are and determines to wipe them out. Then Yahweh will start again.

Beginning with Moses Yahweh will fashion a new nation for himself (see Gen 12:2).

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Dealing with people, Yahweh had started again with Noah (Gen 6:5-8), then with Abraham, then with Isaac (rejecting Ishmael), and then with Jacob (rejecting Moses). Now he declares his intention to start over once again, rejecting the nation that had rejected him. Moses intervenes and reminds Yahweh that it was not Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt. Manifesting his power and the strength of his hand, Yahweh himself led the people out of Egypt.

(Mention of Egypt provides Moses with an opportunity to appeal to divine vanity. If Yahweh destroyed Israel, the Egyptians would have an opportunity to gloat. Moses begs God not to provide the Egyptians with that opportunity but Exod 32:12, the verse that speaks about this, is omitted from today’s liturgical lection.)

Moses continues his plea by reminding Yahweh of the covenant that he had sworn with the patriarch Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel. These patriarchs were faithful to the covenant, so faithful that Moses could speak of them as Yahweh’s slaves (“your servants,” NAB).

Moses’ strongest argument was that Yahweh had made an oath by his own immortal self (see Gen 22:16-17; 26:3-4; etc.). Were Yahweh to deny his oath, the Lord, Propp notes, would “paradoxically negate his own existence” (*Exodus 19-40*, 556). The comment must be understood in the light of the fact in Judaism, and from biblical times, the typical oath included the expression “as the Lord lives.” See, for example, 2 Kings 5:16, found in the first reading on October 10, the twenty-eighth Sunday in ordinary time. Were God to deny his oath, he would in effect be denying that he is the living God.

In response to Moses’ plea, God changed his mind (see Gen 6:5-6; Amos 7:3, 6). He “repented” of the evil (see Jer 18:7-10; 26:3, 19; Jonah 3:10) that he had intended to inflict on Israel. This does not mean that Israel was let off scot-free. The Israelites would be punished (Exod 32:15-35), but Israel would not be annihilated and Yahweh would not begin again, with Moses alone.

BROKEN FOR US

Using homey images, the parables in the reading from Luke 15 teach a lesson about the lengths to which God will go in an effort to bring about reconciliation between men and women and God himself. The reading from the Book of Exodus adds another dimension to this picture. It emphasizes the importance of prayer, the prayer of the righteous, in bringing about the extension of God’s mercy to sinners.

As often as we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for ourselves as sinners. We often pray for spiritual, physical, and material benefits for ourselves and for others, especially those who are close to us. The example of Moses’ prayer should encourage us to pray that God grant his mercy to those whom we consider to be sinful and who may very well be sinners. They need God’s mercy as much as we do.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 19, 2010

LITURGY

1 Timothy 2:1-8 contains important teaching on prayer as well as the important proclamation of Jesus as the one mediator between God and human beings.

Luke 16:1-13 offers the parable of the dishonest steward.

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Amos 8:4-7 is an oracle that condemns the wickedness of Israel, as this is particularly evident in commercial malpractice.

The oracle begins with the eighth-century prophet, having entered the marketplace, directly confronting the malefactors in general terms. He uses metaphorical language to accuse them of trampling on the needy and wiping out the poor.

Using the effective rhetorical tactic of quoting their very own words, Amos confronts the merchants who cannot wait for the festivals to be over so that they can resume business. From an historical point of view, Amos’ quoting the merchants’ own words is very important since the quotation provides a glimpse into the rhythm of life in the northern kingdom during the eighth century B.C.E. On the feast of the new moon (Isa 1:13-14; Hos 2:13) and on the sabbath, work and commerce actually stopped. Jer 17:21-27 and Neh 13:15-22 prohibited work on the feast of the new moon. Amos’ indictment shows that the ban was observed but that the sellers could hardly wait for the holy days to be over so that they could get back to work and make money. (2 Kings 4:23 provides additional evidence of the religious significance of the new moon and the Sabbath).

Business, however, was not conducted in a just manner. Wheeling and dealing, the sellers tampered with the weights and measures. They “fixed” the scales. They would not give a full ephah (a little more than a bushel) of grain. The weights that they used, a shekel, for example, weighed more than it was supposed to; it was a false weight. Biblical texts frequently demand the use of correct weights and measures (Lev 19:35-36; Deut 25:13-15; Ezek 45:10-11; Prov 16:11) and condemn dishonesty in this regard (Hos 12:8; Prov 11:1; 20:23).

With their craftiness, the businessmen defrauded the poor, who could least afford to suffer in this way. Not only that. They also engaged in human trafficking. They sold the poor into debt slavery for a trifle, a small piece of silver or a pair of sandals.

And they boasted about selling the chaff of the wheat as quality grain. They were basically selling garbage to the poor for food. With this final accusation from the businessmen’s own mouths, Amos brings to a close his indictment of their fraudulent practices.

After the indictment comes the verdict. The Lord will not forget the unjust conduct of those businessmen. He will not overlook what they have done, swears the Lord on himself. A dramatic and ironic oath introduces the declaration of punishment (Amos 8:8). The Lord is described as “the pride of Jacob,” since Jacob can take pride in the Lord God (see Jer 9:23, quoted by Paul in 1 Cor 1:31 and 2 Cor 10:17). The prophet’s description of the Lord as the pride of Jacob stands in sharp contrast with the “pride of Jacob” (Amos 6:8), Israel’s inflated pride in itself.

Fraudulent business practices are roundly condemned in the Bible (see Lev 19:35-36; Deut 25:13-16; Isa 1:13-17). Amos excoriates those who resort to such tactics. The picture that is presented to us in the reading is a condemnation of those who observe religious practices (see Amos 4:4-5 for a reference to the offering of sacrifice) but are dishonest in their daily activity.

BROKEN FOR US

Both today’s first reading and the third reading speak about fraudulent business practices. Investigations of the recent economic recession have brought to light to allegations of fraud in some of the country’s most important businesses. Those under investigation have responded with a simple “business is business;” our business is to make a profit. In May’s congressional hearings on the alleged fraud by Goldman Sachs and its chief executives, one of the executives called to testify essentially told congress “*caveat emptor.*” It’s the buyer’s responsibility to be

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aware of what they buy; our advice has no bearing in the matter.

The “business is business” mentality that leads to suffering on the part of the not-so-well off is compounded by an emerging view, proposed even by some church leaders, that greed is not a serious sin. It is simply a way of life in a capitalistic society whose driving force is self-interest.

Speaking about our current financial situation on May 11, Benedict XVI had a reminder for us. “We must confess,” he said, “that the Catholic faith, the Christian faith is often very individualistic and has left concrete economic things to the world . . . without realizing that there was an implicit global responsibility.” He again noted that he had outlined his vision for a more ethical financial system in the encyclical, “Charity in Truth,” an encyclical which has been all but ignored in the United States.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 26, 2010

LITURGY

1 Timothy 6:11-16 profiles the righteousness that Timothy, Paul’s “true child” (1 Tim 1:2), was to pursue.

Luke 16:19-31 contains the parable of Lazarus and the poor man. In life, Lazarus enjoyed the good life, unconcerned for the poor beggar at his door. God did not look favorably on the behavior of Lazarus.

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 is another passage taken from the work of the eighth-century prophet. Amos 8:4-7 was the first reading in last week’s Sunday liturgy.

Notwithstanding Amos’ strong indictment of the self-serving upper-class in the northern kingdom, whose capital was Samaria (see Amos 3:12; 4:1, 15), and although Amos was a prophet appointed to speak the word of the Lord in the northern kingdom (see Amos 7:15), the oracle cited in today’s reading is also addressed to the southern kingdom whose capital was Zion/Jerusalem.

Almost as if he had been a first-hand witness to those who lived in the lap of luxury, Amos describes their self-indulgence. Rich people loll around on the nicest of furniture, fancy couches whose frames are decorated with inlaid ivory. They eat only the finest of foods, meat cut from the choicest of roasted animals. Their dinners are accompanied by music from the finest musicians. They have their choice of music and fancy themselves to be musicians like the kind of musician that the great king David was reputed to have been. And vintage wine is no problem. They have their choice of the best wines and in great quantity (see the reference to the big bowls, rather than a simple goblet).

Their bodies were pampered. They used the finest of rubbing oils for cosmetic, therapeutic, and hygienic purposes. They lived the good life; nothing impaired their *joie de vivre*. Life with all its pleasures was wonderful.

While the upper classes were indulging themselves and taking care of themselves, they were oblivious to the perilous situation of Israel. The impending “collapse of Joseph,” to take place in 738-733 B.C.E., didn’t bother them one whit. In their enjoyment of the good life, they experienced no need to care for the lower classes.

As was the case with last week’s reading from Amos, the punch line comes at the end. The self-indulgent upper class, unconcerned for the lot of the *hoi polloi*, will be the first to go

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into exile. Amos’ Hebrew text features a play on words that cannot easily be translated into English. In essence it comes down to something like this, they enjoyed the “choicest” things, now they are the “choicest” candidates for exile.

BROKEN FOR US

The “comfortable life” is the goal of North American society. Often this is accompanied with a token expression of concern for the poor and the less well off. Sometimes it is accompanied by a lack of concern for those who are less well off in society. “If we don’t have to deal with them,” there is no problem.

Two experiences in my personal life brought home to me the problem of societal indifference to those in need. Several years ago I spent several days in one of our larger cities while giving a series of lectures. My hosts showed me around. I saw the sights and enjoyed the company but not once did I see any of the majority segment of the city’s population, a population that was suffering from poor job opportunities and all that went with the loss of employment. There was no need for me to venture into that part of the city. It was as if that part of the city didn’t exist.

Just a few months ago, during the health care discussion, I read a letter to the editor in the daily paper. Its last paragraph was this, “What will the waiting lines in this town look like for primary care physicians in the next few years, when all of the uninsured can go to the doctors? Can you imagine?” This seems to illustrate well the attitude that Amos castigated: as long as we are well taken care of, who needs to care about the poor?