

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-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 2, 2012

LITURGY

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 is a solemn exhortation to heed the commandments of the Lord.

James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27 is the first reading in the five-week series of lections from the Letter of James that constitute the Sunday liturgy’s semi-continuous reading of this text.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 tells the story of one of Jesus’ Galilean conflicts with the Pharisees (vv. 1-8). Mark tells his readers that the Pharisees in this episode have come from Jerusalem, obviously to pick a fight. The conflict bears upon the traditional interpretation of rules of Jewish ritual purity. Lest his largely Gentile readership not know what the dispute is all about—Mark is generally considered to have been written in Rome—Mark explains the Pharisaic practice of ritual purity. The Pharisees confront Jesus about his disciples’ failure to follow the rules and thereby ran the risk of contaminating the Jewish community with ritual impurity.

In response, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of being hypocrites. They follow the largely cultural rules—which are, nonetheless, based on a common-sense concern for health—but are

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not as concerned about following the commandments that come from God. At bottom, the conflict is about the authority that a person adopts. Is God the primary authority for the way in which one lives? Or are human traditions and common-sense rules the ultimate authority? To make his point, Jesus cites Isa 29:13-14 to the effect that some people pay only lip-service to God, raising merely human precepts to the status of law that comes from God. Mark's Jesus gives an example, namely, that of people who neglect the fourth commandment by failing to provide for their aging parents all the while making monetary offerings to God (Corban). The example (vv. 9-13) is omitted from today's reading.

The conflict seems to have been more or less a private conflict between Jesus and the Jerusalem Pharisees. Verse 14 mentions that Jesus summoned the crowd and made a pronouncement as to what really defiles a person. It is not what a person eats, not what a person ingests from the outside that defiles a person. Defilement lies within and is expressed in external behavior.

In the gospel story Mark's narrative continues with a reflection that Jesus's disciples did not get it. They did not understand the meaning of what Jesus had said. So, once Jesus and the disciples had left the crowd and entered the house, the disciples asked Jesus about the meaning of what he had said. This section of the Markan narrative (vv. 16-20) is also omitted from today's Gospel reading.

Today's lection continues with verse 21, making it appear that the final words of Jesus in today's Gospel reading were addressed to the crowds whereas, in fact, they were addressed only to Jesus' disciples. Jesus' words include a thirteen-item list of vices, one of the longest such lists in the New Testament. Jesus says that vices such as these—vice lists are not intended to be exhaustive; they are illustrative rather than comprehensive—are the expression of what a person is. They come from deep within “the heart,” Jewish idiom for the entire human person in the depth of his or her being. In Greek, most of the vices are in the plural; accordingly we must think of acts of unchastity, theft, and murder. These are the realities that truly defile a person.

BROKEN FOR US

The narrative describes the classic conflict between following public rules of order, especially rules set down for participation in the cult, and the observance of the moral law. It is easy to observe when a person follows the rules, when, for example, they obey what was once called “the commandments of the church” and the precepts of canon law. It is much more difficult to see what lies within the heart; what lies within the heart is not known to anyone except the person himself or herself.

It is regrettable that verses 16-20 have been omitted from the reading. The omission obscures the fact that Jesus' words are addressed to his disciples, those who profess their loyalty to him, not to the crowd at large.

Disciples of Jesus—preachers especially!--must take his words to heart. This is particularly important in our times. So many of the younger generation, not only teenagers but also young adults with families, are turned off by the rules that they hear proclaimed from the pulpit. In their newspapers and on Twitter they read and hear about various forms of clerical misconduct and society's neglect of the poor and marginalized yet these issues seem not to be an issue for the pulpit. How many times have we not heard people say, “I'm trying to lead a good life” but I can't be bothered by all those rules that seem so unimportant and, at times, seem to be really destructive?

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TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 9, 2012

LITURGY

Isaiah 35:4-7 is an oracle that uses the language of metaphor and poetry to speak of the reign of God.

James 2:1-5 is an exhortation that urges that partiality, particularly toward the rich, must not be in evidence when people enter the church.

Mark 7:31-37 is a story that, within the New Testament, is told only in the Gospel according to Mark. It is one of the few miracle stories in the gospel that is situated beyond the borders of Palestine, in Gentile territory. The location suggests that the power of God that works through Jesus is not confined to the land of Israel, a harbinger of the fact that as the years went on the power of God operative in the presence of Jesus would be increasingly experienced among Gentiles.

For the first time in the Gospel story Jesus heals a deaf man. The story is told according to the typical three-part structure of the typical miracle story. An unnamed group of people bring a deaf man who suffered from a speech impediment to Jesus asking that he “lay hands” on the individual. In the culture of the times, the laying on of hands was a gesture by means of which power, in this instance, curative power, went from one person, Jesus, into another. The man’s malady was serious, particularly in an oral-aural culture where the majority of people were illiterate and texts were not readily available. It is not unlikely that the man’s deafness was at least a partial cause of his inability to speak properly. He could not appropriate the words that others were speaking.

The second part of the story is the miracle itself. The miracle takes place from the crowds. The distance between the crowds and the deaf man betokens the fact that it is impossible to see God’s power at work. The motif of Adam’s sleeping during the creation of Eve (Gen 2:21) serves the same purpose. Jesus works the miracle using gesture and word. The gesture is ritualistic as Jesus touches the man’s ears and “anoints” his tongue with his spittle. The word that Jesus speaks is mysterious; it is spoken in a language that is foreign to the readers of the narrative. The use of mysterious language is often found in ancient miracle stories but Mark wants his readers to avoid the impression that Jesus was uttering some magical incantation and so translates Jesus’ Aramaic word into the Greek language of Mark’s audience. In many ways Jesus’ groaning as he prays recalls similar sounds made by ancient healers.

The third part of the story demonstrates that the miracle really happened. The man, enabled to hear, was able to speak plainly. The results of what happened are obvious. Nonetheless, Jesus tells the onlookers not to tell anyone about it. The detail, incongruous in itself (cf. Mark 5:43), owes to the Markan “Messianic secret.”

Mark adds a second element of proof that the miracle really took place, namely, the choral response of verse 37, “He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.” The words reflect the words of the promise of salvation found in Isa 35:4-6, part of the first reading in today’s liturgy.

BROKEN FOR US

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Today’s gospel reading invites us to share in the choral response of the Galilean on-lookers. We are called to proclaim what Jesus has done. We are called to announce the deeds that he has performed, whether extraordinary feats or things that might appear to be less than truly remarkable.

We must speak about the salvation/healing (*soteria*) that Jesus has accomplished. Once again, we might recall that in Greek words with the *soz/sot* root connote both physical cure and spiritual salvation.

We are invited to join with the Galilean crowds in telling about what Jesus has done. Yet so often our voices are silent. We than being like the crowds, we have become like the man who was deaf and suffered from a speech impediment.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 16, 2012

LITURGY

Isaiah 50:5-9a, a reading that has been edited for liturgical use by omitting the first verse of a canticle in which Yahweh is described as enabling his Servant to be one who teaches and consoles, 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).

James 2:14-18 teaches that real faith is expressed in works (cf. Gal 5:6), such as feeding and clothing those who are without these vital necessities.

Mark 8:27-33 is an episode that constitutes a major turning point in Mark’s narrative. Commentators generally agree that the account of the episode can be broken up into three sub-units: 1) Jesus’ inquiry, Peter’s confession, and Jesus’ command to be silent (vv. 27-30); 2) the first Passion prediction (cf. 9:31; 10:33-34), Peter’s rebuke of Jesus, and Jesus’ rebuke of Peter (vv. 31-33); 3) Jesus instruction addressed to the crowds and the disciples (vv. 34-35).

In the first sub-unit the scene is set in Caesarea Philippi, on Israel’s northern border (cf. last week gospel reading where the scene set over the border). The location is presently called Baniyas after the Greek god Pan, in whose honor a still-extant temple had been erected. “Along the way” to Jerusalem, Jesus raises the issue of his identity. As in Mark 6:14-15, speculation focuses on the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets, perhaps the awaited prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15, 18).

Then Jesus points the question at the disciples whose ever-ready spokesperson confesses Jesus to be the Messiah (cf. Mark 1:1) although, as the subsequent unfolding of the narrative shows, he does not understand the full import of what he is saying. The silence commanded by Jesus is part of Mark’s messianic secret motif, but with an added nuance. Mark describes Jesus’ “warning” the disciples, using the verb *epitameo* that will appear twice in the next sub-unit where it is translated “rebuke.”

In contrast, with the previous sub-unit Jesus speaks openly to the disciples about the impending passion, death, and resurrection to which he is on the way (cf. v. 27). He “teaches” (*didaskain*) his disciples about what will happen to him, at the hands of men and, then, what will happen to him by the power of God. Previously Mark had used the verb “teach” to speak about Jesus’ public teaching whose focus was on the Kingdom of God, now he uses the verb to speak of Jesus’ private teaching relevant to his future fate. Jesus speaks of himself obliquely as “the Son of Man,” an important christological designation in the Markan story.

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Peter takes umbrage at what he has heard Jesus say. He looks Jesus straight in the face and rebukes (*epitimaō*) him. Jesus then turns the tables on Peter and rebukes him. Since the verb *epitimaō*, “rebuke,” was often used with regard to exorcism, it may be that Mark wants his readers to understand that it is really Peter who needs to be exorcized (cf. Mark 1:13).

Commentators generally agree that the language of the third sub-unit is influenced by the language of a later generation of Jesus’ disciples. Verse 34 contains the first mention of the cross in Mark’s gospel—the word is not even used in the immediately preceding passion prediction (v. 31).

Phrased in the way they are, Jesus’ words do not refer to acts of self-denial and putting up with difficulties, rather, Jesus’ words speak about radical discipleship, about following the way of Jesus with all that that entails. To conclude his exhortation, Jesus uses a sentence of holy law, an eschatological law of talion. Those who have put discipleship at the center of their lives will find that their lives will have been saved.

BROKEN FOR US

Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” We might consider that the question is addressed to each of us, not only to the relatively small group that was with Jesus in northern Palestine but to each member of the congregations that gather around North America this weekend.

“Who do I say that Jesus is?” The answer requires not that we reach deep into our memories to find the answer that we learned in catechism class or religious education. Rather, the answer requires that we reach deep into our hearts to discover who we really think that Jesus is.

Having found the answer to Jesus’ question, we must not overlook Jesus’ rejoinder to the disciples, and the crowds: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself [or herself], take up the cross, and follow me.”

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME September 23, 2012

LITURGY

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20 is a passage that speaks about the message and torture of the just one. It is a fitting prelude to today’s gospel reading.

James 3:16-4:3 contrasts the fruits of righteousness with the fruits of passion.

Mark 9:30-37 begins with a short narrative which contains Mark’s second passion prediction. The prediction is comparable with Mark 8:31, the first of the three Markan passion predictions and part of last week’s gospel reading.

The scene is set in Galilee, last mentioned in Mark 8:27, the setting of the first passion prediction. Jesus is on a journey, on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus didn’t want people to know about his trip, apparently because he wanted to use the time to instruct his disciples. To begin, he taught them about his impending, passion, death, and resurrection. The disciples do not get it. They do not understand. Yet, unlike Peter’s in last week’s narrative, the group doesn’t object to what Jesus taught. They simply fell silent, afraid to say anything at all.

Two details of the prediction might be noted. First, Mark speaks of the Son of Man being

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“handed over,” using the verb *paradidomi*, a Markan favorite. The evangelist uses the verb twenty times, most over with the connotation of being handed over to judgment, punishment, or death. In the gospel narrative Judas is mentioned six times as the one who hands Jesus over; three times the chief priests *et al.* do so; once, Pilate does so. Second, Mark speaks of the Son of Man being handed over “to men,” using the noun *anthropos* in the plural. When this noun is used in the Scripture, it contrasts what is human (*anthropos*) with what is divine (*theos*), not what is male (*aner*) with what is female (*gyne*).

When Jesus and the disciples arrived in the house in Capernaum, Jesus sat down and began to teach “The Twelve” (cf. Mark 3:13-19). It is notable that Mark shifts the focus from the disciples to the smaller group of twelve. It is these, the leadership cadre of the early church, who need to be instructed. Jesus assumes the rabbinic posture of sitting while teaching. He will not change his position in the rest of the chapter. In Mark, the house (*oikia*) is a privileged locale for Jesus’ teaching and acting.

Employing a good method of teaching, Jesus picks up on what the group had been talking about on the way. In Judaism, being concerned about one’s status in the Kingdom of God was considered to be a sign of piety, as can be seen in the Qumran literature and rabbinic texts. Nonetheless, the disciples seem to have been too embarrassed to answer Jesus’ question. Ironically their discussion followed upon Jesus’ speaking about self-denial as a condition of discipleship (cf. Mark 8:34, in last week’s gospel reading). Jesus’ words to them, widely circulated in the early church (cf. Matt 10:43-44; 20:26-27), teach that if the disciples are to be leaders, they must be like Jesus (cf. Mark 10:45), a servant of all.

There follows a “dramatic” parable, a little parable in action. Jesus takes a child, places it in the middle of the group, and hugs it. In first-century Judaism, a child was not valued because it was cute and innocent. A child was vulnerable, someone without any rights. Jesus’ embrace of the child expressed his love for and acceptance for the weak and vulnerable. The Twelve are expected to do likewise; the child is “in their midst,” an expression which has congregational connotations, similar to the “come forward” (*egeire eis ton meson*) of Mark 3:3. The Greek words might be translated “get up and join the circle.”

The climactic logion makes it clear that a disciple’s mission is to be like that of Jesus, especially if that disciple aspires to leadership.

BROKEN FOR US

Although today’s gospel lection is constituted of two distinct parts, Mark’s narrative outline requires that we consider Jesus’ words on leadership in the light of his prediction of his passion. What kind of leadership is demanded of church leaders in the light of the fact that their “leader” and example was one who was handed over to death like a throw-away servant?

Reflection on leadership can best take place on two levels. One concerns “official” church leaders, especially, bishops, priests, and deacons. By what criteria do we judge our leadership role within the church? By what criteria do people judge our leadership role? Do they consider fund-raising, organizational skills, and a beautiful physical plant to be more important than being of service.

On another level, similar questions can be asked of lay leaders in the church, from those who hold positions in the diocesan chancery, to those who serve as presidents of parish councils, to those who run various organizations in the parish.

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TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME **September 30, 2012**

LITURGY

Numbers 11:25-29 tells the story of Eldad and Medad who were outside the camp when the spirit of prophecy came to rest on the seventy elders.

James 5:1-6 is a powerful passage that speaks about the wealth of the rich.

Mark 9:39-43, 45, 47-48 contains the story of an anonymous exorcist (vv. 39-41) and a series of sayings with a common them (vv. 42-48; verses 44 and 46 are omitted, as they are in many English-language Bibles, because they are not found in many of the oldest manuscripts, including the Sinaiticus and the Vaticanus codices).

The story of the exorcist is really another story about the nature of true discipleship, made all the more poignant by the fact that the evangelist has just told his readers that the disciples were not able to perform an exorcism when requested to do so (Mark 9:18, 28). The story is not reprised by either Matthew or Luke. Unusually, John, one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem (cf. Gal 2:4), initiates the discussion. This is the first and only time in the gospel stories about Jesus that John takes this kind of initiative.

Responding to John’s query, Jesus commands that the work of others who act in his name not be resisted. The Twelve do not enjoy a monopoly with regard to the power of Jesus’ name. To support his assertion, Jesus makes three additional remarks. The first is that a person who acts in Jesus’ name is unable to curse him. It is an either-or situation. The second is formulated in similar fashion. Reflecting the dualism of then-current apocalyptic thought, Jesus says that a person is for him or against him. The third does not quite fit into the same pattern as the first two. It picks up on the incident of the exorcism and the disciples taking umbrage at it and teaches the disciples that they are not to reject gestures of hospitality coming from believers who do not belong to their circle.

The sayings in the second part of the gospel reading (vv. 42-48), reprised by Matthew (Matt 18:6-9) and, to a lesser degree, by Luke (Luke 17:1-2), clearly belong to the world of first-century Judaism. Their use of oriental hyperbole, the graphic images of Gehenna—the Valley of Hinnon, at the juncture with the Valley of the Kedron, where it served as the dump for the city of Jerusalem, infested with worms and with a constantly burning fire—and the images which were Jewish paraphrase for sexual misconduct are clear signs of their Palestinian setting. The congregation will surely recognize these as the “scandal” sayings even though the NAB translates the verb *scandalize* of verses 42, 43, 45, and 47 as “causes to sin” rather than “causes to stumble.” Originally the four sayings were about pedophilia, masturbation, adultery, and lust. For a detailed explanation, the reader may consult my *Sexual Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief* (Companions to the New Testament. New York: Crossroad, 2000), 62-72.

BROKEN FOR US

Today’s gospel reading addresses two situations that are not normally spoken of in the pulpit. The first is the believer’s tendency to believe that their group, their church, possesses a monopoly on the power of Christ. The Second Vatican Council spoke to this when it taught about ecclesial elements being present in non-Roman Catholic Christian communities. Within the church, there is a similar issue. Does the hierarchy, for example, possess an exclusive

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monopoly on Christ’s power and the meaning of his teaching?

The group of Jesus’ sayings (vv. 42-48) point to another area of pulpit taboo, forms of sexual misconduct. It is remarkable that pedophilia was hardly mentioned at all within the church, let alone from the pulpit, until the widespread reports of the sexual abuse of minors by persons in authority began to be circulated in the past fifteen years. Having kept the topic off the rug, even ecclesiastical authorities swept it under the rug when its existence came to be known.