

An excerpt from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," *Emmanuel* 116:2 (2010) 170-187 by Raymond F. Collins

After the celebration of Easter we in the church turn our attention from preparation for the great celebration to a reflection on its multiple sequels. In this we are guided by a series of readings from Luke's Acts of the Apostles which sketch out for us the history of the early church, that is, they tell us how the first Christians responded to the proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection.

EASTER SUNDAY: THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

April 4, 2010

LITURGY

Colossians 3:14 speaks about our being raised by Christ and the consequences of this resurrection while the alternate reading, **1 Corinthians 5:6b-8**, identifies Christ as the Paschal Lamb.

John 20:1-9 describes "the discovery" of the empty tomb by Peter and the other disciple.

Acts 10:34a, 37-43 is the first of this Easter season's readings from the Acts of the Apostles. This book will continue to provide the Latin church with first readings for the Sunday eucharistic liturgy throughout the Easter season.

Acts 10:34a-37 is a representative excerpt from the last of the three kerygmatic speeches attributed to Peter in Acts (cf. Acts 2:14-36; 3:11-26). The speeches of Peter that appear at earlier points in the narrative are the speech on Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36) and the speech in Solomon's portico (Acts 3:11-26), part of which is read on the Third Sunday of Easter.

In keeping with the practice of writing about speeches in Hellenistic literature, Luke has composed all three speeches of Peter the vocabulary and themes are clearly Lukan and placed them on the lips of Peter as part of his narrative. Luke's narrative strategy included his placing a speech to the Jews, the speech in Solomon's portico (Acts 3:11-26), and a speech to the Gentiles, the speech on Pentecost (Acts 10:34-43), on Peter's lips just as he places a speech to the Jews (Acts 13:16-41) and a speech to the Gentiles (Acts 17:22-31) on Paul's lips.

Peter's speech is theocentric. It focuses on God and what God has done. God is mentioned five times in the relatively short speech, twice in verse 38, once each in verses 40, 41, 42. Addressed specifically to Cornelius, Luke's representative Gentile, the speech is devoid of explicit citations of the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament. The lectionary version of the speech even omits verses 34b-26, verses that speak about the spread of the gospel message throughout Galilee and Judea.

"Peter's" narrative portrays Jesus as a prophetic figure. The characterization of Jesus as a prophet is a major feature of Luke's christology. As a prophet, Jesus is anointed with the Spirit (cf. Luke 4:18) and God is with him. Jesus is the anointed one, the Christ, the Messiah. In today's reading from Acts, the evangelist highlights Jesus' healings and exorcisms as characteristic of his prophetic ministry. They symbolize the inbreaking of the power of the Kingdom and the breaking of the power of the devil. In the first part of his two-part work Luke does not describe those who are possessed as possessed by "the devil" but he does portray the devil as one who opposed both Jesus (Luke 4:5-13) and the reign of God that Jesus inaugurates.

Describing the crucifixion, Luke says that "they," presumably a reference to "the Jews" of the immediately preceding phrase (v. 37), hung him on a tree. "Hang on a tree" was a contemporary and biblical idiom for "crucify," going back to Deut 21:22-23 (see Gal 3:13). The pictorial image is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QpHab 3-4 i.6-8; 11QTemple 64:7-8) and was used earlier in Acts (Acts 5:30). As do the New Testament's early Christian credal formulas, Peter's speech affirms that God raised Jesus from the dead. God is the one who acts by raising Jesus from among the dead.

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God is also the enabling agent of Jesus' resurrection appearances. This early Christian focus on the activity of God in raising Jesus from the dead is not to be overlooked.

In Luke's theology an apostle must be witness to Jesus' public life and to his resurrection from among the dead (Acts 1:21-22). Accordingly, Luke presents Peter, spokesperson for the Twelve, saying that "we" have been witnesses to what he did and we have been witnesses to his appearances (cf. 1 Cor 15:5). The witnesses are a select group, chosen by God and set apart from "all the people" to preach the gospel. Their eating and drinking with Jesus harkens back to the tradition reflected in Luke 24:41-43.

Peter also says that the prophets testify to Jesus. This is one of Luke's favorite themes (see Luke 4:21; 24:26-27; 44-46). The apostles' proclamation of the gospel, encompassing the prophetic witness, testifies both to Jesus' role as judge at the parousia and to the forgiveness of sins that is mediated through Jesus (cf. Luke 24:47).

BROKEN FOR US

Today's celebration of the eucharist on Easter Day prolongs into the early hours of Easter day the solemn celebration of the mysteries celebrated in the Paschal Vigil. The first reading offers, in the form of a speech attributed to Peter, a concise summary of the Gospel according to Luke. The reading offers a sketch of the public ministry of Jesus but concentrates on God's activity in raising Jesus from the dead, the commissioned apostles as witnesses to the resurrection, and the consequences of the resurrection for all who believe.

Contemplating the resurrection of Jesus through the lens of the Lukan narrative, we give thanks to God who raised Jesus from the dead. In his providence, God raised up witnesses who attested to Jesus' resurrection and explained its significance for those who believe. So we also give thanks to God for that apostolic witness, fully conscious of the fact that we who share in the death and resurrection of Jesus through baptism are called to proclaim his resurrection in the world of today.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 11, 2010

LITURGY

Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19 describes the initial auditory and visual experiences of the seer of Patmos.

John 20:19-31 describes Jesus' appearance to his disciples on successive "first days of the week."

Acts 5:12-16 is a short summary narrative that describes the unity and activity of the Jerusalem community. It is the third such summary in Acts (see Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35).

In the narrative of Acts, the five-verse summary found in today's reading comes between the account of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, his wife, (Acts 5:1-11) and an account of the second arrest of the apostles and their subsequent trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:17-42, apropos of which see next week's first reading). Today's account focuses on the powerful deeds of the apostles (cf. Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 2 Cor 12:12) and the reaction of the people to these feats. The signs and wonders done among the people by the apostles are, as it were, a sequel to the signs and wonders done by Jesus (cf. Acts 2:22).

Those who believed gathered together in Solomon's portico (see John 5:12; 10:23) but they were not joined by any non-believers ("none of the others"). The precise location of Solomon's portico is unknown. Most likely the portico was a cloistered area on the east side of

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Temple Mount, facing the Mount of Olives. Among the group who gathered in the portico were a number of people whose spiritual journey to the Lord was occasioned by the miracles worked by the apostles and their witness to Jesus.

The growth of the Jerusalem community is something that Luke emphasizes (see Acts 2:47; 4:4). In an enthusiastic continuation of his narrative about the marvelous deeds that God has done through the ministry of the apostles, Luke tells about people bringing their sick into the streets so that Peter’s shadow might fall on them as he was walking about. At the time popular thought included the idea that, because a person’s shadow outlined their bodily contours, it was somehow a vital part of the person. The idea that a miracle might be worked because of a shadow is not otherwise attested in the scriptures nor does Luke actually attest that any sick person was cured because Peter’s shadow touched him or her. Luke’s principal concern was to portray the enthusiastic response of the people to the miracles which the apostles had done.

Their enthusiasm was so great that word about the marvelous deeds that God had done through the apostles spread to the towns around Jerusalem. As a result, people from those towns brought the ill, both the sick and those possessed by unclean spirits. The expression “troubled by unclean spirits” also occurs in Luke 6:18, in a short passage (Luke 6:17-20) which describes a similarly enthusiastic response to the ministry of Jesus. “Jesus healed them all” (Luke 6:20); “they were all cured” by the apostles (Acts 5:16).

BROKEN FOR US

Today’s reading from Acts focuses on the miracles that God worked through the ministry of Peter and the eleven other apostles in Jerusalem. A prophet is one who serves as God’s spokesperson in what he/she says and does. Last week’s reading from Acts portrayed Peter’s prophetic ministry as he spoke. Today’s reading highlights the prophetic ministry of Peter and the apostles as they acted. Both word and deed are integral to the ministry of Jesus’ and the prophet’s witness.

At the present time, the prophetic ministry of the church continues in word and in action. The ministry of prophetic word occurs in the first part of the celebration of the eucharist and in the church’s catechetical and educational efforts. The ministry of prophetic action occurs in its provision of care for the sick and those who are troubled by their own “demons.”

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 18, 2010

LITURGY

Revelation 5:11-14 is one of many passages in the Book of Revelation that portray an “angelic liturgy.”

John 21:1-19 describes Peter’s rehabilitation in ministry and discipleship after his triple denial of Jesus (John 18:17, 25, 26-27).

Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41 describes a second action taken against the apostles as a result of their preaching about the death and resurrection of Jesus (cf. Acts 4:1-3). This time the action is taken by the Sanhedrin, which accuses the apostles of disobeying the Sanhedrin’s previous order to cease and desist, presumably a reference to what is meant by Acts 4:18, 21.

The Sanhedrin (from the Greek meaning “sit together”) is the word used in the New Testament (eight times in the gospels, three each in Matthew and Mark, once each in Luke and John; fourteen times in Acts) and by the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, to speak about the supreme Jewish council in Jerusalem. The term seems to describe an established institution but

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there is little indication in the extant literature that would enable an exact determination of the group’s membership, status, and authority.

Today’s reading shows the high priest taking charge of the interrogation of the apostles in response to a report that, “The men whom you put in prison are in the temple area and are teaching the people” (Acts 5:25). The high priest mentions the threats that he, in the name of the Sanhedrin, had previously addressed to the apostles (Acts 4:18, 21). The apostles had disregarded these threats. The high priest does not mention Jesus, even though the apostles’ principal accusation against the Jerusalem authorities was that they were responsible for Jesus’ death (see Acts 2:36; 3:14-15; 4:10; 5:30). The high priest seems to acknowledge the appeal that the apostles’ proclamation of Jesus had among the people but accuses them of seeking retribution for the killing of the still-unnamed Jesus.

In response, Peter and the apostles testify that they owe obedience to God rather than to human authorities (cf. Acts 4:19) and state in open court that God had raised up Jesus who the religious authorities had crucified. The apostles use the image of hanging from a tree to speak about the crucifixion. The image of a crucified person as hanging from tree (cf. Acts 10:39; Gal 3:13) comes from Deut 21:22-23 and was also used in reference to crucifixion in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

God has confounded what the authorities had done in crucifying Jesus by raising him from the dead. The resurrection is described as an exaltation to God’s right hand (cf. Ps 118:16; Acts 2:33), an allusion to the royal status of Jesus which is further clarified in the christological titles, “leader” (cf. Acts 3:15) and “savior” (cf. Luke 1:47). What has been accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus gives people the opportunity to repent of their sins and receive pardon for their sinful transgressions.

The apostles conclude their testimony by stating that they are witnesses, thereby fulfilling the mission that Jesus had entrusted to them (Acts 1:8). In witnessing to the saving events that occurred in Jesus’ death and resurrection they act in tandem with the Holy Spirit who also bears witness. Even persecution provides an opportunity for bearing witness to Jesus (cf. Luke 21:13).

Omitting the account of Gamaliel’s intervention before the Sanhedrin (Acts 33-39), the liturgical lection concludes with the Sanhedrin once again warning the disciples (cf. Acts 4:18, 21; 5:28) not to speak in the name of Jesus. Rejoicing in the Spirit, the Apostles were comforted in the knowledge that they had been found worthy to have offered such testimony and received such treatment for the sake of Christ (cf. Luke 6:22-23).

BROKEN FOR US

Today’s reading from Acts provides a model for those who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit to follow. We are called to be witnesses, to proclaim the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This reality is the cornerstone of our Christian faith. It is because Jesus has died and been raised that we repent of our sins and adopt a new life style, that of the “Christian life.”

The apostles’ proclamation that we owe obedience to God rather than to human authorities, no matter how legitimate their authority may be, serves as a constant challenge to all of us. It is so easy “to fall in line,” whenever authority speaks. Yet it is to God that we owe supreme and final obedience.

Finally, we are reminded that the one who faithfully testifies to Jesus will be opposed and maltreated. Hopefully we too will find joy (see Gal 5:22) in our affliction, knowing that we have been faithful to Jesus and that Jesus has said that persecution was to be the lot of his followers, as

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it was of his predecessors, the prophets (Luke 6:22-23).

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 25, 2010

LITURGY

Revelation 7:9, 14b-17 offers the elder’s explanation of those who, in the seer’s vision, wear white robes and carry palm branches.

John 10:27-30 describes the close relationship between Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and his followers.

Acts 13:14, 43-52 represents a shift in the church’s reflection on the early church from the concentration on the witness of Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem, the focus of the first readings on the second and third Sundays of Easter, to a concentration on Paul and Barnabas who carried the gospel message beyond the land of Israel.

The scene described in today’s reading takes place in Antioch in Pisidia, a city, west of the Taurus Mountains, located in the district of Phrygia in the Roman province of Asia. Luke uses the occasion of Paul’s visit to the synagogue in Antioch to provide his readers with a sample of Paul’s preaching the gospel to Jews. That homily, Acts 13:16-41, has been excised from today’s liturgical lection.

Luke’s setting of the scene in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia reflects a “Jews first, then Gentiles” motif that not only provides the narrative structure of the entire Book of Acts but is also played out in Paul’s visits to synagogues in Damascus (Acts 9:20), Iconium (Acts 14:1), Philippi (Acts 16:13), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-2), Berea (Acts 17:10), Athens (Acts 17:17), Corinth (Acts 18:4-6), and Ephesus (Acts 18:19; 19:8). The pattern of mixed responses to the apostolic witness continues in these Diaspora synagogues in a fashion that calls to mind the mixed responses to the ministry of Peter and the other Jerusalem apostles.

After the reading of the Scriptures, Paul and Barnabas were invited to speak. What followed in Luke’s narrative was Paul’s “typical” speech to Jews, after which many people asked Paul and Barnabas to return the following week (Acts 13:42). They wanted to hear more.

The synagogue service having been concluded, a large group of Jews and devout converts continued to carry on a conversation with Paul and Barnabas. The two apostles urged them to be responsive to the gifts of God’s grace, a major theme in Paul’s letters. The following sabbath saw a huge crowd come to the synagogue to listen to Paul and Barnabas. That’s when the trouble began. Traditional Jews were filled with jealousy and, acting with violence, took issue with the apostles’ message.

The two apostles responded boldly (*parresiasamenoi*). Luke highlights the apostles’ boldness by placing the descriptive participle at the beginning of the sentence. For Greeks, “boldness” would have conjured up the boldness with which famous political orators like Demosthenes had spoken. It was a term that pointed to their speaking freely, frankly, and with conviction. Readers familiar with the Greek Bible would recall that “boldness” was a quality of the speech of inspired prophets, underscoring their fidelity to God’s word and the strength that God gives them to speak his word faithfully.

Paul and Barnabas begin their defense with an articulation of the Jew first-then Gentile motif and cite a passage from Second Isaiah’s second Servant Song which speaks about a mission to the Gentiles (Isa 49:6; the homilist might note the appearance of a passage from the third Servant Song as the first reading on Palm Sunday). At first glance, it appears that Paul and Barnabas characterize themselves as “a light to the Gentiles” but it may be, as Joseph Fitzmyer

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observes (*The Acts of the Apostles* [Anchor Bible 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998], 521), that Paul and Barnabas are describing Christ as the light to the Gentiles. The one whom the apostles proclaimed came not only for Jews but also for Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas’ Gentile hearers were delighted by what the apostles had to say. Those to whom the Lord had given the grace became believers and the word of God spread throughout the region. Such was the power of God’s word that it was not constricted to the city of Antioch alone.

Then trouble began. Some Jews riled some wealthy women and key male operatives in town, inciting a kind of persecution of Paul and Barnabas. What had happened to Peter and John in Jerusalem (Acts 4:3-4) was now happening to Paul and Barnabas in Antioch of Pisidia. Their fate was, however, different from that of Peter and John. The Jerusalem apostles were thrown into jail; Paul and Barnabas were exiled from the region. Expelled, they shook the dust off their feet in a gesture of defiance before moving on to Iconium, another city in Phrygia, where a similar fate was to befall them (see Acts 14:1-7). Like Peter and the other apostles before them (Acts 5:41), Paul and Barnabas were nonetheless filled with the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit.

BROKEN FOR US

Today’s reading from Acts offers many things to ponder. First of all, we can consider the role of Paul and Barnabas in bringing the message of the gospel to Gentiles, fulfilling the plan that the ascending Christ announced to his disciples (Acts 8:1; cf. Matt 28:19-20). Secondly, we think of God’s plan of salvation, with the message of salvation being addressed to Jews before it was extended to Gentiles, writ large as the message of the Old Testament preceding the message of the New. Thirdly, we can ponder Christ as the light to the Gentiles and of him as “fulfilling” the promise of Second Isaiah’s Servant songs. Fourthly, we can consider the role of the church as “light to the Gentiles,” the *Lumen Gentium*, the name of the Second Vatican Council’s dogmatic constitution on the church, an important document that describes the nature and mission of the church. Finally, there is the reality check of the opposition and persecution encountered by Paul and Barnabas, a reality check that today awaits those who faithfully their mission of being witness to Christ.