

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 168-186.

On the Sundays of Ordinary Time in this year (Cycle A) we proclaim the Gospel according to Matthew. The liturgy’s focus on the Matthean text continues throughout March and April. Not only is a selection from Matthew read on March 6, the ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time but lections taken from this gospel are also read on the First and Second Sundays of Lent. Palm Sunday’s liturgy features the story of Jesus’ passion according to Matthew and the reading appointed for the Easter Vigil is the story of Jesus’ resurrection as found in Matthew 28:1-10.

A great interruption in the reading of Matthew occurs on March 27, April 3, and April 10, the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent. On these Sundays we read three dramatic stories found in the Fourth Gospel, the stories of the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. Paragraph 97 of the Preamble to the Sunday Lectionary tells us that these readings have been restored in Year A because they are of major importance in regard to Christian initiation. Our homilies on these Sundays should reflect the importance that the church assigns to these gospel passages and to Christian initiation, especially the Christian Initiation of Adults.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

April 3, 2011

LITURGY

1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a tells the story of Samuel’s visit to Jesse and the selection of David to be king of Israel.

Ephesians 5:8-14 concludes with an exhortation to awake from one’s slumber.

John 9:1-41 is one of the passages in the Fourth Gospel in which the Evangelist has added extensive discourse material to a miracle story. The narrative is, as Francis Moloney notes, “widely recognized as one of the masterpieces of Johannine story telling” (*The Gospel of John*. Sacra Pagina 4. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998, 290).

In itself the miracle story is simple enough. It follows the classic three-part schema, with mention of the difficulty of the miracle: the man has been blind from birth, the curative ritual: Jesus prepares clay and smears it on the man’s eyes, and the proof that the miracle took effect: the man returned able to see. The evangelist introduced into the miracle story an important dialogue between Jesus and his disciples (vv. 1-5) which bears upon two important theological notions. The first is that illness is not due to sin, whether that sin be one’s own or one’s forebears. The second is that Jesus is the light of the world (see John 8:12).

The miracle story is followed by six dialogues, arranged in a dramatic sequence in which one of the dialogue partners exits while the other remains. The remaining dialogue partner then engages in dialogue with a new partner. The first dialogue is between the once blind man and his neighbors (vv. 8-12). The neighbors were not convinced that the person with whom they were talking was the same person as the blind beggar whom they had known. The neighbors ask

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how the cure happened. The once blind man can only say that Jesus put clay on his eyes and told him to wash in the pool, but he is otherwise ignorant of what happened. He doesn't even know where Jesus is.

In the second dialogue (vv. 13-17), it is the Pharisees who are the once blind man's interlocutors. The dialogue focuses on sabbath observance. Mention of the sabbath had been “incidentally” introduced into the narrative in verse 14. The dialogue culminates in the once blind man calling the one whom he had previously identified only as a man whose name was Jesus (v. 11) as a prophet (v.17).

The once blind man's parents take his place for the next dialogue (vv. 18-23), one in which the Pharisees, now called “the Jews” and described as not believing what had happened (v. 18) interrogate the parents. Moloney notes that the light of the world is being tried *in absentia* (p. 295). The parents are fearful of the power wielded by the Jews, as were the first readers of the story in the late first century. That the real subject of the dialogue is that of Jesus' identity is confirmed by the evangelist's remark about the confession of Jesus as Messiah.

In the fourth dialogue (vv. 24-34), the Pharisees interrogate the blind man. That the evangelist wants his readers to realize that this and the previous dialogue were formal investigations by the powers that were is indicated by his use of “call” in verses 18 and 24. The Pharisees had called the parents; now they call the blind man. The blind man doesn't flinch. Put on the witness stand, as it were, he testifies that Jesus was from God (v. 33). The dialogue features the contrast between a disciple of Jesus and the so-called disciples of Moses, the Jews and indicates that Jews cast out the disciples of Jesus (v. 34). Many commentators, including J. Louis Martyn and Raymond Brown, suggest that the radical separation between Jesus' disciples and the Jews, leading to the expulsion of Jesus' disciples from Jewish circles, especially the synagogue, portrays circumstances of the late first century rather than the actual circumstances of Jesus' lifetime.

The fifth dialogue is between Jesus and the once blind man (vv. 35-38). In this dialogue Jesus reveals his identity as Son of Man and revealer. In response to Jesus' self-revelation, the once blind man replies, “Lord, I believe.” Touched by Jesus miracle, molded in the crucible of confrontation, and having received Jesus' self-revelation, the once blind man has become a believer.

In many ways, the fifth dialogue is the real climax of the Johannine narrative. The evangelist has, however, added a sixth dialogue (vv. 39-41), almost as an epilogue. The dialogue begins with Jesus' proclamation that he has come into the world to judge (see John 3:17; 5:24; 8:15). The tables are turned on the Pharisees. They consider that Jesus was a sinner (vv. 16, 24) and probably consider the blind man as a sinner (see v. 2). In reality, they are sinners because of their unbelief. They are the ones who are truly blind.

BROKEN FOR US

Today's beautiful story lends itself to any number of homiletic reflections. Ultimately the story focuses on the blind man's growth in faith. His journey in faith began with the blind

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man being ritually touched by the power of Jesus but not knowing who it really was that touched him. His faith has been tempered in the crucible of his confrontation with the Pharisees. It ends with his acceptance of Jesus’ self-revelation and the once blind man’s simple confession of faith, “Lord, I do believe.”

The lesson to be drawn is clear enough. Our faith must grow from our ritual encounters with the power of Jesus, beginning with our being anointed and washed in the sacrament of baptism, until it culminates in a simple “Lord, I do believe,” with all that this simple confession entails.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

April 10, 2011

LITURGY

Ezekiel 37:12-14 introduces the vision of the dry bones.

Romans 8:8-11 speaks of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead and now dwells in us.

John 11:1-45 is another dramatic story from the Fourth Gospel. It describes the raising of Lazarus. Once again it is useful to look at the story as a narrative containing a sequence of narrative scenes. It would serve the gospel reader well were he to read the text with just a brief pause between each the scenes in order to allow the congregation to contemplate the narrative before the next scene is proclaimed to the people.

Scene One (vv. 1-6) introduces the principal characters in the story, Martha, Mary, their seriously ill brother, Lazarus, and Jesus. The presence of a messenger is implied but is not explicitly acknowledged by the evangelist who wants to focus on the four principals. Anticipating a detail in his narrative plot, the evangelist identifies Mary as the one who anointed Jesus (see John 12:1-4). Jesus is said to love the siblings. The sisters’ message acknowledges Jesus as Lord. Jesus says that the story is about the glory of God and the glorification of the Son of God.

Scene Two (vv. 7-16) describes the decisions made, first by Jesus, and then by Thomas to go to Judea. Jesus’ dialogue with his disciples is full of Johannine symbolism and language that functions on two levels, the narrative, and the symbolic/theological level. Jesus’ words about light really suggest that Jesus’ disciples must walk by the light of the world (see John 8:12; 9:5). Johannine “misunderstanding” also comes into play. The disciples do not understand that Lazarus is truly dead. Thomas does not understand that Jesus’ decision to go Judea was a decision to elicit belief (v. 15), not a decision to subject himself to stoning, as Thomas thought.

Scene Three (vv. 17-27) describes Jesus meeting the two sisters, particularly Martha with whom Jesus enters into dialogue. Martha doesn’t understand what Jesus tells her about the resurrection from the dead. To correct her misunderstanding, Jesus utters one of the Fourth Gospel’s great “I am” (*ego eimi*) sayings, “I am the resurrection and the life.” With regard to the “I am” sayings, see John 4:26; 6:35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 14:6; 15:1, 5; 18:5. Martha who had previously acknowledged Jesus as Lord (*kyrie*, vv. 3, 21) and as a miracle-

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worker, makes a profession of faith in response to Jesus’ self-revelation: “Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.” All told Martha’s statements include five christological affirmations, namely, that Jesus is a miracle worker, Lord, the Christ, the Son of God, and the one who is to come.

Scene Four (vv. 28-37) features Mary. She is introduced into the narrative activity by her sister Martha. One of the features of discipleship in the Fourth Gospel is that the disciple introduces others to discipleship (see John 1:41 4:28-29). Martha now identifies Jesus as Teacher (*didaskalos*). Mary responds to her sister’s message with alacrity (vv. 29, 31). On meeting Jesus, she kneels at his feet. Echoing some of Martha’s earlier words (v. 21), Mary acknowledges the power inherent in Jesus’ presence. Thereupon the scene is filled with tears. Martha, the Jews, and Jesus are weeping. The Jews take Jesus’ tears to be a sign of Jesus’ love for Lazarus (see v. 3). With Martha, they acknowledge Jesus to be a miracle-worker (v. 37, see John 9:1-7).

Scene Five (vv. 38-44) describes the miracle of the resuscitation of Lazarus. With Johannine symbolism, the evangelist differentiates the burial cloths in which Jesus was buried (see John 20:6-7) from those in which Lazarus was buried (vv. 44-45) to distinguish between Lazarus’ resuscitation from the dead and Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. The resuscitation dramatizes that Jesus is indeed the resurrection and the life (v. 25). It features Jesus’ prayer of thanksgiving to the Father (vv. 41-42) and his authoritative command (v. 43).

These five scenes are featured in today’s gospel reading but the evangelist’s narrative contains a sixth and a seventh scene. The sixth scene (John 11:45-57) describes the Jews’ reaction to reaction and the authorities’ decision to put Jesus to death. The seventh scene (John 12:1-8), assigned to chapter twelve by the Stephen Langton, the thirteenth century archbishop of Canterbury who divided the Bible into chapters, describes Jesus and other guests having dinner with the three siblings. That Lazarus was able to eat was a sure sign that he had been restored to life (see Mark 5:43; Luke 8:55).

BROKEN FOR US

As was the case with the gospel readings of the previous two weeks, today’s reading provides ample material for a number of homilies. That it was appointed for today’s liturgy because of the Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults just two weeks before the celebration of the Easter Vigil is a sign that our homily should focus on Jesus as the resurrection and the life. Of the many christological confessions and titles featured in the narrative, Jesus’ self-revelation as resurrection and life (v. 25) is the climax of the narrative. Jesus embodies his self-revelation in the raising of Lazarus. His self-revelation leads to Martha’s confession of faith (v. 27); his dramatic action leads Mary and some of the Jews to believe (v. 45).

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD’S PASSION

April 17, 2011

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LITURGY

Isaiah 50:4-7 is taken from the third of Second Isaiah’s Servant Canticles.

Philippians 2: 6-11 contains a great christological hymn.

Matthew 26:14-27:66 is Matthew’s Passion Narrative. Matthew’s narrative closely follows its source, Mark 14:10-15:47, occasionally bringing explicit expression to details that are implied in Mark.

The scene of Jesus’ arrest is set in the garden of Gethsemane, traditionally located in the Kedron valley to the east of Jerusalem, at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Jesus’ prayer (vv. 39, 41, 42) recall the Lord’s prayer, particularly the petition, “thy will be done” (Matt 6:9-13). The incident of the servant’s ear being cut off (Malchus? see John 18:10) allows the evangelist occasion to explain why the Passion happened (Matt 26:61-64).

Deut 17:6 required that there be two witnesses, especially when the accused was accused of a capital crime. In the trial before the high priest, two charges were brought against Jesus, namely, that he threatened to destroy Jerusalem temple and that he claimed to be the Messiah. The chief priest elicited the latter charge with the oath-like words that he used (v. 63) in an attempt to force Jesus to plead guilty to the first charge. Each of the two charges was serious enough to provoke consternation in the powers that were. Jesus’ response to the high priest, about the coming of the Son of Man recalls Dan 7:13-14.

The story of Peter’s three-fold denial of Jesus stands in marked contrast with Jesus’ steadfast hostility in the face of hostile questioning. Peter’s interrogators were a simple maidservant and some bystanders. Jesus’ interrogators were the high priest, the scribes and the elders, the leaders of the people.

The story of Judas’ death (Matt 27:3-10) has no parallel in the other gospel narratives. Matthew uses the occasion to highlight a Scripture from Zech 11:13. The evangelist wrongly attributes the passage to Jeremiah (see Matt 27-9), perhaps under the influence of Jeremiah 18-19 which contains many references to a potter.

Matthew’s account of the trial before Pilate is clearly based on Mark 15:1-5 but Matthew presents the proceedings as being a confirmation of what transpired in the trial before the high priest. Doing so, he appears to downplay Roman responsibility for the death of Jesus. For Matthew, the Jews were clearly culpable for the outrage (see Matt 27:22, 25). His “Pilate” washes his hands of the whole affair.

The account of Jesus’ crucifixion appears in 27:27-44. The crown of thorns is not an instrument of torture. Rather it is part of the mockery of Jesus, king of the Jews. Jesus is clad in royal purple, crowned, and has a fake scepter placed in his hand. With all the evangelists, Matthew agrees that claiming to be “king of the Jews” was the charge on which Jesus was executed. The charge was inscribed on the titulus that Jesus wore around his neck as he was paraded through town. The titulus was then nailed to the cross, as a warning to the people to avoid conduct that would lead to this kind of a charge being leveled against them.

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Matthew adds to his Markan source the account of guards being posted at the tomb. This is part of an apologetic note by the evangelist who wants to counter, in advance, any suggestion that Jesus was not really raised from the dead (see Matt 28:4, 11-15).

BROKEN FOR US

It is difficult, if not impossible, for a homily to top the moving story of the Passion. The drama speaks for itself. The homilist should probably take one of another of the narrative’s many episodes and make that the focus of the homily. Each episode is meaningful, especially when considered in the light of the whole drama.

EASTER SUNDAY: THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

April 24, 2011

LITURGY

Acts 10:34a, 37-43 is an excerpt from Peter’s speech to Cornelius in which he proclaims that God raised Jesus on the third day and chose the apostles to give witness to the resurrection.

Colossians 3:1-4 proclaims that Christ sits at the right hand of God (see Ps 110:1). The alternative reading, **1 Cor 5:6b-8**, describes Christ as the Paschal Lamb (see Exod 12:3-13).

John 20:1-9 is the Gospel reading for the Mass on Easter day but the celebrant has the option of reading the Gospel text appointed for the Easter vigil, Matthew 28:1-10.

The Johannine text is the story of the finding of the empty tomb. In keeping with Johannine style which highlights the role of various individuals in the story of Jesus, the narrative mentions only one of the Galilean women who visited the tomb (cf. Matt 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 23:55-24:1). Mary of Magdala’s appearance at the tomb enables the evangelist to begin to bring his gospel to a close. With his account of Jesus’ glorification by crucifixion, the evangelist had essentially expressed the denouement of his story of Jesus. With this morning’s story of the find of the empty tomb sonship—the accounts of Mary and of the two disciples who figured so prominently in the Passion Narrative, beginning with the supper scene in chapter 13, Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple—the evangelist can move to the completion of his story about Jesus’ disciples.

Moloney (p. 517) notes that there is a development in the objects that are seen. The Magdalene sees a stone that has been rolled away, the Beloved sees the burial cloths, Simon Peter sees not only the burial cloths but also the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head.

The evangelist does not tell his readers why Mary went to the tomb. She simply goes to the tomb. Some would argue that Jesus has already received the burial anointing (see John 12:7). Mary’s role is simply to find the empty tomb. Without being mandated as “the apostle to the apostles” (see John 20:17-18), Mary goes quickly to tell Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple that the Lord—a respectful title—has been moved from the tomb to a place whose location is known neither to her nor to any of her unnamed companions (note the “we” in v. 2).

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The two disciples ran to the tomb, but the Beloved was the faster runner and arrived at the tomb first. At the tomb, the Beloved Disciple deferred to Simon Peter, allowing this authority figure in the early Christian community to enter the tomb first. Simon saw that all the trappings of Jesus’ death were no longer in use. The tomb was empty, the body cloths were all rolled up, and the head shroud was carefully folded. When the Beloved Disciple entered the tomb, he saw all this and *he* believed (*episteusen*, in the singular, v. 8). He, the Johannine hero, is a true believer.

The evangelist’s final observation is that, nonetheless, the two disciples did not yet understand the scriptures. “Not yet” pertains to the time of the events narrated by the evangelist. When he wrote his story about Jesus, Jesus’ disciples had come to understand the Scripture (*graphe*) that Jesus must rise from the dead. Since the Scriptures of the Old Testament did not speak about the resurrection of the Messiah, the evangelist is implying that his story about Jesus, the Fourth Gospel, is to be considered as Scripture.

BROKEN FOR US

The obvious point of the evangelist’s story is that the Beloved Disciple believed in the resurrection of Jesus without being the beneficiary of a vision of the risen Lord. His faith grew from the testimony of another person, namely, Mary Magdalene. Observation of the tokens of Jesus’ resurrection helped his faith to grow. Eventually he embraced the reality that Jesus was no longer dead. Jesus no longer needed the things that were appropriate for a dead person. He was alive; he had been raised from the dead.

The growth of the Beloved Disciple’s Easter faith gives us occasion to reflect on the growth of our own Easter faith. It began with the testimony of others, our parents, siblings, and teachers. We see signs of Jesus’ in the two-millennia long history of the church and the faith of more than a billion Christians today. The witness of the New Testament Scriptures is another sign of the reality of the resurrection. Eventually, however, each one of us—note the evangelist’s word, “*he* believed—makes a personal decision to believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Matthew 28:1-10, the lection from the gospels that is to be read during the Easter Vigil, is Matthew’s expanded and revised version of the story of the empty tomb found in Mark 16:1-8.

The two women, Mary Magdalene and an unnamed other Mary—there are at least five women named Mary mentioned in the New Testament—go to the tomb just before day on the day after the Sabbath. The two provide a continuity of witness between Jesus death (Matt 27:56) and burial (Matt 27:61) and the discovery of the empty tomb (Matt 28:1).

Matthew highlights the apocalyptic nature of Jesus’ resurrection with his reference to an earthquake (cf. Matt 27:52, 54) and the Angel of the Lord who provides an explanation of the empty tomb. The guards are “shaken”—in Greek, a verb related to the noun “earthquake” (*seismos*)—by what was happening. The guards appear in Matthew’s narrative to belie the possibility of any thought that body of Jesus had been ferreted away by his disciples (see Matt

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27:62-66; 28:11-15). In Matthew, unlike Mark (Mark 16:6), the angel announces that the tomb is empty and explains this absence by the announcement of the resurrection. The phrase, “just as he said,” links the angelic proclamation of the resurrection to Jesus’ three passion predictions (see Matt 16:21-23, 17:22-23; 20:18-19). The angel’s final words are a command that the women tell the disciples to go to Galilee in order to see the risen Jesus (cf. Matt 26:32).

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were eager to fulfill the task that had been given to them. Though overwhelmed with joy, they were somewhat apprehensive and fearful. In the course of their running to the disciples, the two women encountered the risen Lord. They paid homage to him, bending the knee as the Magi (Matt 2:11), the leper (Matt 8:2), and others had done during Jesus’ lifetime, and kissing his feet. Jesus confirms what the angel had said. He tells the woman not to be afraid (see v. 5) and orders them to tell the disciples, now called “my brothers,” to go to Galilee where they would be able to see the risen Jesus. The women did as they were told and the disciples went to Galilee where they saw Jesus (Matt 28:16).

This last scene does not appear in any of the other canonical gospels but the tradition on which it is based may appear in a quite different form in John 20:11-18.

BROKEN FOR US

Matthew’s story of the discovery of the empty tomb sets the stage for the angelic proclamation, “He has been raised” (v.6). Circumstances preceding the announcement indicate that the resurrection of Jesus was an event of eschatological importance. The women’s behavior shows that they believed what they had been told. They looked at the place where the body had lain and ran to tell the disciples the good news. Matthew uses the motif of someone carrying out a divine mandate to the letter as a sign of that person’s faith. Like Joseph (see Matt 1:20-21, 24-24), the women put their faith into action.

On this Easter Sunday, we Christians listen once again to the angelic proclamation. We highlight the proclamation with candle, flora, and song. These accompaniments point to the importance of the Easter proclamation. Using the example of the woman as a standard, we acknowledge that it is the quality of our behavior that really expresses our belief in the Easter proclamation.