

An excerpt from Fr. Collins' "Breaking the Word: Homiletics,"
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EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 3, 2008

LITURGY

Romans 8:35, 37-39 uses personification to state that none of seventeen possible obstacles can separate us from God's love for us made present in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 14:13-21 offers Matthew's version of the feeding of the five thousand (cf. Matt 15:32-38).

Isaiah 55:1-3 contains the first three verses of the final chapter of Deutero-Isaiah. This chapter is a joyful hymn of triumph which celebrates the restoration of Israel (Isa 55:1-13). Throughout the hymn apart from verses 6-7, it is Yahweh who speaks.

The first two verses of the hymn are similar to Proverbs 9:3-6, in which personified Wisdom invites people to share in a banquet that issues in life everlasting. In some ways the invitation foreshadows the invitation issued by Jesus during the Festival of Booths, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink" (John 7:37-38).

The hymn's references to money, payment, cost, and wages serve as a reminder that God's gifts cannot be bought. A gracious God liberally invites people to eat and drink at the table that he sets. Acceptance of the invitation implies that a person has faith, a reliance on God to satisfy a human being's basic needs.

In verse 3 it becomes clear that the banquet to which Israel is invited is a symbol of God's covenant with Israel. In the tradition of the Ancient Near East meals were often associated with the celebration of a covenant.

Allusion to the covenant made with David (2 Sam 7:4-17)—the only reference to David in Deutero-Isaiah, written sometime after the destruction of the Jerusalem monarchy—suggests that the benefits promised to David will be realized in an everlasting covenant (see Isa 54:9-10, where the eternal covenant is described as a covenant of peace). Quoting Isaiah 55:3, the Lukan Paul's speech in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia professes that these promises are realized in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

BROKEN FOR US

Both the first and the third feedings describe the feeding of God's people, achieved in marvelous fashion. In the reading of Isaiah, food is portrayed as being provided without having to be paid for. In the reading from Matthew, food is provided when there appears to be no way to obtain it. As often as we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to give us our daily bread.

On a very basic level, the two readings in today's liturgy remind us that food is a gift that God gives us—a gift for which we should be grateful. Our prayer for daily bread should remind us that many people do not receive their daily bread. When Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer and spoke of daily bread, he wanted them to know that they should not expect to receive more

than an appropriate share of food.

Each of today's readings goes beyond the provision of ordinary food to something else. The Isaian text sees in the banquet that God has provided a symbol of his eternal covenant with his people. In its use of the ritual gesture of taking loaves-giving thanks-breaking the loaves-and giving them (Matt 14:9), the Matthean narrative serves as a reminder that the early church rehearsed the memory of Jesus' feeding the multitude in the context of its celebration of eucharist, a covenant meal (see Matt 26:26-28). That God has shared a life-giving covenant with us and that we are able to celebrate this gift when we gather to celebrate the Sunday liturgy gives us another and different reason to be grateful.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 10, 2008

LITURGY

Romans 9:1-5, with which Paul begins to reflect on the role of Israel in salvation history (Romans 9-11), provides a description of the privileges of Israel.

Matthew 14:22-33 is an account of Jesus' walking on water and Peter's reaction to the appearance of the Lord.

1 Kings 19:9a, 11-13a describes the theophany of which Elijah, the great ninth-century prophet, was the beneficiary. Elijah's principal mission was to restore the covenant that God had made with Israel on Mount Sinai, calling the nation to greater fidelity to that covenant.

In the Pentateuch Mount Sinai (Exod 19:11, 20) is also known as Mount Horeb (Exod 3:1; 33:6). Accordingly Elijah went to Horeb, where he would replicate in some ways the experience of Moses (cf. Exod 19:9-23; 33:17-23). The New Testament recalls these events in the Transfiguration narrative when Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are on a mountain while three disciples of Jesus experienced a theophany (Matt 17:1-8; par.).

Fire, heavy winds, and earthquakes typically appear in the biblical accounts of theophanies. Imaginatively they suggest the surprise and startled awe of nature at the presence and manifestation of God (Judg 5:4-5; Hab 3:3-6; Ps 18:7-15; 68:7-8).

The Exodus narratives recount unusual phenomena of nature occurring at the time of God's manifestation to Moses (Exod 19:16, 18-19; 20:18).

In verse 11 God's word to Elijah suggests that the fire, wind, and earthquake function almost as messengers that announce God's approach (cf. Ps 104:4). Elijah's experience of God stands in sharp contrast with this display of the power of nature. His experience of God was something new and different. He heard God's voice in a tiny whispering sound. Although God may reveal himself in natural phenomena and in visions, Elijah's experience indicates that verbal communication is the preferred mode of God's self-revelation to prophetic figures. Subsequently God is revealed through the prophet's words and actions.

In an almost spontaneous reaction to the theophany, Elijah hides himself from the divine presence (cf. Gen 3:9 Judg 13:20-22). Like Moses he covered his face (Exod 3:6), convinced that no one can see God and live (Exod 33:20; Judg 6:22; cf. Gen 32:30; Isa 6:5).

BROKEN FOR US

The first and third readings are similar in their respective descriptions of God's use of nature in a theophany, that is, a theophany in the account from 1 Kings, a christophany in Matthew's narrative. Unusual natural phenomena highlight the presence.

In both accounts, the actual revelation comes from the voice that speaks. God speaks to Elijah in a tiny whispering sound. Jesus speaks to the disciples, identifying himself and urging them not to be afraid.

Each of the narratives describes a spontaneous reaction to the self-revelation. In fear, Elijah hides his face, retreating to the cave. Disregarding his fear, Peter attempts to walk on water and go to Jesus.

These stories should prompt us to reflect on how we experience the presence of God. We sometimes experience the presence of God in natural events, from the beauty of a summer's morning to a natural disaster, from the birth of a baby to the death of a loved one. God's revelation through his word remains, nonetheless, a privileged mode of his communication with us. It is for this reason that we Christians so value the Scriptures which we fittingly describe as "God's Word."

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 17, 2008

LITURGY

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32 affirms that Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles so that Israel will become jealous and turn to the Lord.

Matthew 15:21-28, while affirming that Jesus' primary mission was the lost sheep of the house of Israel, describes Jesus' exorcism of the disturbed daughter of a Canaanite woman, identified in Mark's gospel as a "a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth" (Mark 7:26).

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7 is the beginning of the third part of the Book of Isaiah, the so-called Trito-Isaiah. The first words of verse 1 clearly indicate that the passage is an oracle of Yahweh. Throughout much of Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55) Israel's hopes are pinned on the arrival of Cyrus who would liberate the Israelites from captivity in Babylon and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Cyrus' reign did not bring the salvation for which Israel hoped. In Isaiah 56:1, the first verse of today's reading, God says that he will soon intervene to bring about the salvation of his people (cf. Isa 64:1-12).

The oracle suggests that the realization of this salvation is dependent on the people's doing what is right (*mispat*), what is just. Apropos of doing what is right, Joseph Blenkinsopp observes, "In early prophecy, *mispat* is preeminently a social

concept and has particular reference to the protection of the classes in society that are the least able to look after themselves—widows, fatherless, destitute (Isa 1:17;10:2). Of particular importance is the task of safeguarding the access of the powerless in society to judicial process" (Isaiah 56-66 [Anchor Bible 19B. New York: Doubleday, 2003] 134).

In Trito-Isaiah the temple of Jerusalem is a central focus of interest. The prophet's view of salvation includes the view that some people of non-Israelite descent, foreigners or Gentiles, will accept God's revelation and serve him as do the Israelites. The Gentiles are described as participating in the cult that takes place on God's "holy mountain," that is, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem temple will become a house of prayer for all nations. The verse that proclaims this hope (Isa 56:7) was cited by Jesus when he "cleansed" the temple (Matt 12:31; par.).

BROKEN FOR US

The obvious point of similarity between the first and third readings in today's liturgy is that salvation is extended not only to Jews but to Gentiles as well. In the prophet's vision of salvation, when God intervenes to save his people, the temple at Jerusalem will become a house of prayer for all peoples. Self-consciously Jesus proclaimed that his mission was to the house of Israel (cf. Matt 10:5-6). Nonetheless, he offers a sign of salvation to a woman who came from the area now known as Lebanon. She was a Gentile.

That God's plan of salvation includes Gentiles should prompt the entire church, few of whose members are Jews, to offer thanks.

Had God not been generous in the offer of salvation, most of us would have been excluded. Gratitude that we Gentiles have been chosen might well be the focus of today's Sunday homily.

On the other hand, we should not overlook the condition of salvation stipulated by the divine oracle, namely, that we observe all that is right, *mispat*. Salvation is predicated upon our attention to the needs of the poor.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 24, 2008

LITURGY

Romans 11:33-36 speaks of the mystery of God, the inscrutable one whose ways are not understood by mere mortals.

Matthew 16:13-20 describes the conferral of the power of the keys on Simon Peter.

Isaiah 22:19-23 is the central portion of a titled passage of the Book of Isaiah (Isa 22:15-25).

The title, "About Shebna, master of the palace," has been incorporated into the first verse of today's reading. Shebna was the major-domo, the steward, of King Hezekiah towards the end of the eighth century BCE. Shebna arrogated undue power to himself and was removed from office (Isa 22:15-22).

According to the divine oracle, Eliakim was chosen to take

Shebna's place. Eliakim is known to us from other biblical passages, notably 2 Kings 18:17-37 and Isaiah 36. In the oracle Eliakim is identified as a servant (*ebed*) of the Lord, an honorific epithet that describes him as having a special relationship with God and as receiving from God a particular mission.

Today's reading describes Eliakim, son of Hilkiah, as being summoned by the Lord himself to his investiture into office. During the investiture, Eliakim will put on the robes of office and tie the ceremonial sash around his waist. Sashes are used as a sign of royal or civic authority in many countries of Europe and Asia to this day. Most probably a set formulary was to be used to signify Eliakim's installation in office under the king. The description of him as a father signifies the responsibility that he will have for the people.

As part of the ceremony keys to the palace will be ceremoniously draped around his neck, much in the same way that some university presidents today have as part of their installation ceremony the hanging of the seal of the university around their neck. The large keys to the palace symbolically represented Eliakim's royal authority. The Book of Revelation's letter to the church of Philadelphia makes use of this verse (v. 22) to describe the authority of the One like the Son of Man, the holy one (Rev 3:7), who speaks in all seven letters.

A final image in the portrait of Eliakim's investiture is the tent peg that holds the tent in place. Blenkinsopp suggests that this brings to mind the idea of responsibility for maintaining the tent of Zion (Isa 4:5-6; 33:20) and the booth of David (see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66* [Anchor Bible 19. New York: Doubleday, 2000] 338).

The following verses (Isa 22:24-25) indicate that Eliakim did not fulfill his role very well but these verses have not been incorporated into today's liturgical reading.

BROKEN FOR US

The transfer of power is the obvious link between today's first and third readings. In both passages keys are a symbol of the power that has been entrusted, to Eliakim and to Simon, respectively. Using somewhat different language each of the biblical passages expand on the imagery to say that the keys really work, they lock and unlock.

Equally obvious is the liturgy's implicit suggestion that today's homily should focus on the power of the papacy. Like the power of Eliakim and the power of Peter, that power is supreme but it is not absolute. The verses that follow each of the scriptural readings indicate that neither Eliakim (see Isa 22:24-25) nor Peter (Matt 16:21-23, next Sunday's "gospel") were fully up to the task with which they had been entrusted.

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 31, 2008

LITURGY

Romans 12:1-2 begins the hortatory section of Romans (Romans 12-15) by comparing the moral life to a liturgical sacrifice.

Matthew 16:21-27 describes Peter's misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus' messiahship along with Jesus' rebuke and a lesson that he gave to Peter and the Eleven.

Jeremiah 20:7-9 is the fifth of Jeremiah's laments (see Jer 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:14-18).

Launching a tirade against Yahweh, the prophet complains that God has tricked him and overpowered him. Given the intimacy between God and the prophet (Jer 15:16), many commentators opine that the prophet's language suggests that he had been "seduced" by Yahweh. With or without the possible sexual nuance, Jeremiah's language is very strong. He goes on to suggest that Yahweh himself has prodded those who mocked him and made him a laughingstock. Such strong language indicates that Jeremiah did not choose to be a prophet; it was God who forced him to prophecy.

Jeremiah's real complaint is that he has been forced to prophecy against his own will. The message that he utters is one of destruction and violence. God's word, spoken by Jeremiah, has become an object of scorn to the people. God's word was something that the people did not want to hear (Jer 6:10). Given the ridicule that Jeremiah had experienced, it may be that he had also begun to feel contempt for God's word.

He would rather not prophesy, but the word that he utters, God's word, has its own power. It spreads like wildfire. In Jeremiah 5:14 and 23:29 fire is similarly used as a descriptive metaphor for God's word. Despite Jeremiah's reluctance to speak God's word, the powerful word escapes from his lips.

The discerning reader of this lament will put it into perspective not only by recalling that the lament ends in a paean of praise (Jer 20:11-13) but also that the compulsive power of the word of God is a stock motif in prophetic literature. Amos uses the metaphor of a roaring lion to make a similar point (Amos 3:8) while Paul compares himself to a slave who can only do what he is told (1 Cor 9:16). No prophet aspires to assume the role.

BROKEN FOR US

In some ways the closest connection between today's parallel readings is to be discerned in the instruction that Jesus gives to the disciples (Matt 16:24-27). Jeremiah felt that people had contempt for what he had to say with the result that their opprobrium was directed to him. Jesus speaks to his disciples about self-denial, taking up the cross, and losing oneself. Those who speak his message cannot expect a better reception than he himself received (cf. Matt 5:10-11).

Like Jeremiah and Jesus' disciples those who proclaim the word of God will not always receive fame and applause. Often they will be held in infamy and despised, especially when they have the courage to speak truth to power.