

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 360-378.

August 8 is the feast of St. Dominic, the founder of the Order of Preachers, popularly known as the Dominicans. The semi-contemplative order that he founded was devoted to study and preaching. Through preaching, he sought to reconcile the Albigensians to the church. According to the acts prepared for his canonization, Dominic “always carried with him the gospel according to Matthew and the epistles of Paul, and so well did he study them that he almost knew them from memory.”

In the thirteenth century readings from the Gospel according to Matthew were most frequently read during the celebration of the eucharist. A similar situation existed in the church for the entire millennium preceding Dominic’s ministry. Matthew’s was the gospel that was read and preached to the people of God. In that situation, it was no wonder that Dominic, the preacher, virtually memorized the gospel that is the first book in the canonical New Testament.

The liturgical preference for the Gospel of Matthew remained in the Western church until the reform of liturgy after Vatican Council II. Now, in Cycle A, we have the opportunity to unfold the riches of that gospel to our congregations, just as Dominic did almost eight hundred years ago.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 7, 2011

LITURGY

1 Kings 19:9a, 11-13a tells the story of Elijah meeting the Lord in a cave. The Lord came to him with a tiny whispering sound.

Romans 9:1-5 is a passage in which Paul rehearses the blessings given to Israel. These verses begin the so-called “Israel section” of the Letter to the Romans (Romans 9-11).

Matthew 14:22-33 has parallels in Mark and John (Mark 6:42-52; John 6:16-21) but not in Luke. The Matthean version of the story, but not its parallels in Mark and John, incorporates a second miracle story, that of Peter walking on the water (Matt 14:28-29).

To be fully understood, the story must be seen within its ancient context. Within Judaism, the psalms proclaim that Yahweh is ruler of the waves and is able to cross the sea (Ps 77:16, 19; cf. Hab 3:15). According to the Greek Bible, the Septuagint, God walks on the waves of the sea (Job 9:8). In the Hellenistic world, tales were told of gods calming the seas and walking on water, for example, Hermes (Homer, *Odyssey* 5.54) or Neptune (Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.147). Sometimes, gods gave their sons the power to walk on water. Poseidon gave such a gift to his son Orion (Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 1.179-184). Occasionally this power was attributed to powerful men. Thus, Iamblichus says that Pythagoras was able to still the sea and walk on water (*Life of Pythagoras* 28). Within the context of the ancient world views of Jews and Gentiles alike, the stories of Jesus and Peter walking on the water established their credentials, as it were.

In Matthew’s gospel, today’s gospel lection follows immediately upon the story of Jesus feeding the crowds. Jesus dismissed the crowds. The twelve disciples left by boat. Finally,

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Jesus was alone, able to pray. The disciples were some distance from shore when suddenly a storm arose. During the fourth watch of the night (3-6 A.M.), Jesus took action.

The story of Jesus’ walking on water has the form of a christophany. At first the disciples do not recognize Jesus. They thought they were seeing a ghost (*phantasma*) but Jesus utters a revelatory “It is I” (*ego eimi*; cf. Isa 41:4; 43:10) and tells the disciples not to be afraid. All three of these traits are characteristic of biblical theophanies/christophanies: non-recognition, the revelatory words, and the reassuring command, “don’t be afraid.”

Then the attention switches to Peter. The narrative is one of several narratives about Peter that do not appear in the other gospels. The giving of the keys to Peter (Matt 16:17-20) and the story of the temple tax (Matt 17:24-27) are other examples of Matthew’s special material about Peter. In the story about Peter walking on water, it is important to note that he is able to do so only when he has faith. When he has faith, Jesus gives him the ability to walk on water.

The last verse in today’s reading features a “choral response,” “Truly, you are the Son of God.” Such choral responses frequently appear in the conclusion of the New Testament’s miracle stories. The disciples’ confession is a sign of their belief that the power of God is at work in Jesus. That Jesus is the Son of God is a feature of Matthean christology (Matt 3:17; 16:16; 17:5; 27:54). That the disciples bent their knee before Jesus, “did him homage” (*prosekynesan*) reprises language that is characteristic of Matthew’s story about Jesus (Matt 2:2, 8, 11; 8:2; 9:18; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17).

BROKEN FOR US

Today’s gospel lection provides material for two different homilies. One homily can focus on Jesus. Walking on water, he has the power that Jews attributed to Yahweh. In a christophany, he appears to the terrified disciples. He enables Peter to walk on water. He is paid homage and acknowledged as “Son of God,” which he truly is.

Another homily might focus on Peter. Within the ancient context of stories about gods enabling their sons to walk on water, Jesus empowers Peter to walk on water. Despite the power that has been attributed to him, Peter has a need for salvation and must live in faith and act with faith. The stories about Peter in Matthew’s gospel provide the warrant for the Petrine ministry within the church.

Today’s story provides the criteria for the exercise of power by Peter’s successor. 1) The power is always power that has been received; it is not inherent in the person. 2) The person who holds that power, like all other believers, stands in need of salvation. 3) Faith is the sine qua non of a legitimate exercise of the Petrine ministry.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 14, 2011

LITURGY

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 360-378.

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7 is a passage of Third Isaiah which describes Gentiles coming to the temple, a house of prayer for all peoples. There is a condition, namely, that they practice justice.

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32, a passage addressed to Gentile Christians, reminds them the gifts that God to Israel and his call of that nation are irrevocable.

Matthew 15:21-28 is based on Mark 7:24-30. The story is without parallel in the Gospel according to Luke.

In Matthew, as in Mark, Jesus is described as going to an area that is part of present-day Lebanon but neither evangelist gave a reason for Jesus’ journey into that area. Given Jesus’ statement that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (v. 24; cf. Matt 9:36; 10:5-6; 18:12), it is possible that the evangelist wants his readers to think of Jesus as journeying toward Tyre and Sidon, rather than as actually being in the area. If that is the scenario that the evangelist is painting, we have to imagine the woman coming from her homeland and meeting Jesus in the land of Israel.

In Matthew, the woman is identified as a Canaanite woman. Mark 7:26 says that she was a Greek woman, a Syrophenician by birth. Matthew’s use of an ancient biblical designation evokes ideas of the Canaanites being pagans and the traditional enemies of Israel. The woman is clearly a Gentile, a non-Israelite.

Matthew does not tell his readers whether or not the woman’s daughter—some feminist readings of the text speak of the woman as a single parent—was with her. He has, however, omitted Mark’s observation that the daughter was at home (Mark 7:30), thereby opening up the possibility, and perhaps the likelihood, that he wants his readers to think of the daughter being with her mother when she met Jesus.

Matthew has reshaped the narrative found in his Markan source, so that the dialogical elements are emphasized. The healing of the woman’s daughter provides the occasion for the dialogue but it is not the focus of Matthew’s narrative.

The story begins with a cry for help from a woman whose daughter is bothered by a demonic spirit. She addresses Jesus as “Lord” and “Son of David,” christological titles that are typical of Matthew’s gospel. That Jesus is the son of David is an important feature of Matthew’s Christology. It is sometimes the title by which he is addressed by those seeking to be healed (see Matt 9:27; 20:30-31).

There follows an exchange between the disciples and Jesus. The disciples try to get Jesus to get rid of the woman. They were apparently annoyed by her cries. It may be that they thought that the woman had no business being in Jesus’ presence (cf. Matt 19:13, where the disciples rebuke people who brought the little children to Jesus). Jesus’ response speaks of his mission to the lost sheep of Israel but does not directly respond to the disciple’s request. The lost sheep of the house of Israel may be a reference to lost Israel or to some Israelites who are lost.

In the conversation between the woman and Jesus, the woman speaks three times and Jesus responds twice. Approaching Jesus, she pays homage to him (*prosekynēi*) and appeals for help. Jesus’ response implicitly identifies Israelites as God’s children and Gentiles as dogs.

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Dogs were not appreciated in the Jewish culture of that time; for the most part they were considered to be wild animals.

The woman’s response suggests that God takes care of even the dogs. In reply, Jesus praises the woman’s great faith—almost in contrast with the disciples who are often described as being of little faith in Matthew’s gospel (Matt 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20)—and tells her that her wish will be granted. Hers was a praying faith; Jesus responds to her prayer.

BROKEN FOR US

The reading from Isaiah suggests that the story of the Canaanite woman be read as a story of a Gentile coming to God as the kingdom of God is being realized. The disciples cannot countenance the extension of the kingdom of God to Gentiles. Even the Jewish Jesus seems to have shared that Jewish prejudice. Nonetheless, God wills that his kingdom extend to non-Jews. Miracles are signs of the coming of the kingdom breaking into human history. Jesus’ cure of the woman’s daughter is a token of the extension of the kingdom to Gentiles.

Matthew’s Jewish Christian community wrestled with the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. For them, the story of the Canaanite woman could serve as a model of why Jews and Gentiles can coexist within the community of believers. Today, many Christians wrestle with the relationship between church-going believers and others, be they the non-observant, those who belong to other Christian confessions, those considered sinners, and those who may be Moslem. Today’s gospel reading should prompt us to reflect on our faith-based prejudices.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 21, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 22:19-23 announces the appointment of Eliakim to the office of royal overseer.

Romans 11:33-36, Isaiah-like and citing Isa 40:13, proclaims, that God’s ways are inscrutable.

Matthew 16:13-20 contains another Petrine passage that is found only in Matthew.

The first part of the reading belongs to the “triple tradition” (see Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21). Jesus and his disciples are on their way to the region of Caesarea Philippi. The Roman Emperor Augustus had given the city to Herod the Great. In return, Herod built a temple there in of Augustus who was proclaimed *divi filius*, “son of god,” after his death in 14 C.E. Herod’s son rebuilt the city, naming it Caesarea Philippi—it had formerly been known as Parnion—in honor of the emperor and himself.

Jesus asks the disciples what people thought about him. How did they perceive his identity? In this context “son of man” is a Semitic idiom meaning “this man,” a reference to Jesus himself. The disciples respond with a number of possibilities, John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or another prophet. Speculation about the Baptist’s return from the dead is mentioned in Matt 14:1. The expected return of Elijah (cf. Mal 3:1, 23), taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kgs 2:11), was legendary in Judaism. Jeremiah is not mentioned in the evangelist’s

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Markan source (Mark 8:28) but Matthew has a particular interest in the prophet (cf. Matt 2:17; 7:15-23; 11:28-30; 16:14; 23:37-39; 27:9). “One of the prophets” may be a general reference to the biblical prophets or a specific reference to the prophet like Moses promised to Israel (Deut 18:15, 18).

Jesus is not interested in the general speculation and asks the disciples what they think. As usual, Peter serves as the spokesperson for the group of twelve. He says that they think that Jesus is the Messiah. This is the first time in the gospel narrative that anyone has identified Jesus as Messiah. “Christ” and “Messiah” are synonymous terms, the first is derived from the Greek word for “anoint,” the second from the Hebrew word meaning “anoint.” Lest there be any confusion as to what the term meant—popular expectation at the time was that the Messiah would be a military and political figure who would rid Israel of the Romans—Matthew adds “the Son of the Living God” to Peter’s confession (cf. Matt 26:63). The “living God” was a common way of speaking about God in the biblical tradition (cf. Ps 42:2; Hos 1:10; etc.), identifying God by God’s primal trait.

In response, Jesus pronounces a blessing upon Peter. The beatitude states that Peter is blessed because he is the beneficiary of a revelation. The Semitic character of Jesus’ words is evident, beginning with his calling Simon, “*bar Jonah*,” son of Jonah. Jesus gives him a nickname, Cephas, the Aramaic word for a rocky crag. The name “Peter” (*petros*), which does not appear to have been used as a proper name in Hellenistic circles, is a play on the Greek word *petra*, rock. The keys symbolize Peter’s teaching authority. Peter is to teach the church (*ekklesia*, one of two times that the word is used by Matthew; cf. Matt 18:17). In context, “church” was most likely a reference to the Jewish Christian community. Jesus assures Peter that powers opposed to God will not destroy the church (cf. Matt 7:25).

Matthew’s Jesus, in a reworking of Mark 8:30, tells the group of disciples to tell no one that he was the Messiah. They had a lot to learn about what “Messiah” really meant. The lesson begins almost immediately, in Matt 16:21-28, next week’s gospel lection.

BROKEN FOR US

The reading of Isa 22:19-23 as the first scriptural lection in today’s liturgy indicates that succession in office should be the theme of today’s homily. Jesus was the one sent by the Father to teach the lost sheep of the house of Israel. “Rocky” was to succeed him by teaching the Jewish Christian community that emerged after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Today the ministry of teaching is continued in the magisterium of the church.

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

August 28, 2011

LITURGY

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 360-378.

Jeremiah 20:7-9 is an excerpt from one of the Book of Jeremiah’s jeremiads, in which the prophet cries out angrily to the Lord.

Romans 12:1-2 uses liturgical language to describe a Christian life, well-lived.

Matthew 16:21-27 contains the first of the three “Passion predictions” in Matthew’s gospel (cf. Matt 20:18-19; 26:2). A slightly different version of the three predictions is found in Matthew’s Markan source.

Talking about the events that were to befall him in Jerusalem, Jesus attempts to clarify for the benefit of his disciples what it means for him to be Messiah. But that was not the kind of Messiah that Peter wanted; he would have none of it. Jesus’ response, which recalls his response to the devil in Matt 4:10, is harsh. He speaks to Peter as if he were an agent of Satan (cf. Job 1-2; Zech 3:1-2), the legendary opponent of God’s plan, especially in the apocalyptic speculation of the times. Peter is not in sync with God’s plans. Then, playing on the idea that Peter is a “rock,” Jesus says that he is an obstacle (*skandalon*) to him, a rock over which a person trips and falls.

At this point in the story line, Mark describes Jesus as deliberately addressing the crowds (Mark 8:34-38). Matthew, however, says that Jesus gives the instruction only to the disciples. The forthcoming sufferings of Jesus are linked with the sufferings of his disciples. Having all sorts of wealth and material advantage is of no value in the long run. It is necessary for a disciple to identify with Jesus and his sufferings.

A final note (cf. Mark 8:38) speaks of a final judgment based on what a person has done (cf. Ps 62:13; Prov 24:5). The idea of a final judgment cannot be eradicated from the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Rom 14:12; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 5:10). Rather than explicitly mentioning the coming of the kingdom, as do Mark and Luke (Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27), Matthew writes about the coming of the Son of Man. In Matt 16:28, “Son of Man,” is titular, identifying an awaited apocalyptic figure.

BROKEN FOR US

Peter, and presumably the disciples with him, do not understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. They have their preconceived notions of messiahship and expect Jesus to measure up to their ideas. But that should not be. The disciples need to be set straight. They need to be confronted by the harsh reality of God’s plan.

We, too, are disciples of Jesus. But many of us—perhaps all of us to some degree—have preconceived notions of who Jesus should be, who the Messiah should be. Jesus, we think, should conform to our ideas, rather than to the plan of God.

Today’s gospel reading challenges each of us to confront our own prejudices about Jesus and about God’s plan of salvation. We should not be obstacles to the plan of God just because we want to hang onto our preconceived notions of how God should act in human history.