

An excerpt from Fr. Collins' "Breaking the Word: Homiletics,"
Emmanuel 114:6 (2008) 553-571.

In reference to the Hebrew Scriptures, which constitute the first reading of the Sunday liturgy, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council proclaimed, "The Books of the Old Testament . . . reveal to all people the knowledge of God and humans and the ways in which God, just and merciful, deals with us . . . These books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence." (*Dei Verbum* 15).

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 7, 2008

LITURGY

2 Peter 3:8-14 describes the suddenness of the advent of the Day of the Lord, here described as a day when the righteous will be rewarded.

Mark 1:1-8, the beginning of the Gospel according to Mark, introduces John the Baptist, one of the great figures of Advent.

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11, the beginning of the second part of the Book of Isaiah, the so-called Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), serves as a prologue to the entire composition. It proclaims the good news, the "glad tidings" (*euangelizomenos*, twice in verse 9) of the coming of the Lord. That the opening verse speaks of comfort has often led to the Deutero-Isaiah being called the Book of the Consolation of Israel, although there is much more in book than consolation.

The deutero-Isaiah often uses the form of a dialogue. In today's reading, which describes a prophet's vocation, the Lord God speaks to an unnamed figure in the heavenly court. The angelic figure is to comfort Israel, now that the exile has come to its end. The exile is described as a "double punishment" for Israel's sins. The expression speaks to the severity of the punishment. In the Law, those guilty of theft or breach of trust received a double punishment (Exod 22:4, 7, 9).

The theme of the road travelled by Yahweh with his people is reprised from Isa 35:8-10. Unlike the road taken by Israel during its forty-year trek through the desert, this road is one from which God will remove the physical obstacles. The allusion to the exodus means that the return from exile should be interpreted as a salvific event.

Jerusalem, Zion, is to proclaim the good news along with the prophet. At this moment in history, it is likely that Jerusalem and the cities of Judah were in shambles, the result of war and neglect. Notwithstanding the situation, the good news is to be proclaimed: the Lord God is coming and he will rule his people (see Isa 52:7-10, the first reading of the Mass on Christmas Day).

The image of the warrior bespeaks punishment of Israel's enemies; that of the shepherd, God's taking care of his people.

BROKEN FOR US

Good news and the road in the desert are the themes that link today's first and third readings. Commentators generally draw attention to the fact that Mark has transposed the desert. In Isaiah, the desert is where the road is to be build; in Mark, the desert is where the voice (of John the Baptist) cries out. Isaiah's reference to the desert led the Essenes to the shores of the Dead Sea; the community rule cites Isa 40:3 (1QS 8:12-14). Many hold that John the Baptist originally belonged to the community; hence, the early Christian application to him of the same passage in the Book of Isaiah.

The message of both readings is the good news that the Lord is coming; he will travel with his people. He will comfort them and shepherd them. How wonderfully that message has been fulfilled in the Incarnation of Jesus and the ministry of the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18)! He walked among us as one of us; he takes care of us as none other can do.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

December 8, 2008

LITURGY

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12 is an excerpt from the benediction (the *berakah*) found in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians.

Luke 1:26-38 describes Gabriel's annunciation of the coming of the Messiah to Mary, a young girl from the town of Nazareth.

Genesis 3:9-15, 20

The first part of today's narrative features the knowledge of the tree of good and evil, whose fruit the primal couple were forbidden to eat (Gen 2:17). When confronted by God—God's question, where are you?, is like our "what have you been up to?"—they pass the buck. The man passes the blame to the woman, ultimately passing the blame to God himself who had given the woman to man. The woman passes the blame to the serpent. Neither the man nor the woman accepts responsibility for their actions.

Adam's responds to God by talking about his being naked. The nakedness is part of the sexual motif of the story of the fall. The presence of sexuality in the story is probably due to the fact that Israelites were sometimes allured by the fertility rites associated with the cult of some deities, the goddess Astarte being prominent among them. Prior to their sin, sexuality was not something of which the primal couple were ashamed (cf. Gen 2:25).

Human sinfulness leads to disordered sexuality.

The curse on the snake alludes to the aversions that humans experience with regard to snakes. Humans try to kill snakes by stamping on their heads while snakes attack humans by going for their heels. Many authors in early Christian tradition, and some Jewish interpreters, considered verse 15 to be a reference to the Messiah's defeat of Satan, symbolized by the serpent.

The final verse has been appended to the liturgical lection from some verses later in the narrative (Gen 3:20). The lectionary's *tour de force* is intended to prepare the way for the

description of Mary as the new Eve, a favorite theme of some of the Fathers of the church.

BROKEN FOR US

Today's first and third readings describe a problem and its solution. The problem is human kind's rejecting God's guidance. That all of human kind is involved in this rejection is symbolized by the primal couple, Adam and Eve, the originary representatives of the two genders. Their rejection of God's guidance is compounded by their finger-pointing; neither wants to take responsibility for their conduct.

The solution is that God takes the initiative in the task of reconciling humanity to himself. An unsuspecting young woman, Mary of Nazareth, is chosen by God to be the mother of his Son, to give him entrance into humanity. She said yes. The rest is history, salvation history.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 14, 2008

LITURGY

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 contains the last exhortations that Paul addresses to the Thessalonians before signing off his letter with a final blessing

John 1:6-8, 18-28 is the Fourth Gospel's version of the ministry of "John," who is not identified as John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel.

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11 is a passage familiar to Christians. Its opening verses are the text sought by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth as he was about to begin his public ministry (Luke 4:18-19).

The full passage (Isa 61:1-11) is a poem that recalls the Deutero-Isaian Suffering Servant canticles, especially the third (Isa 50:4-11). The poem is spoken by the prophet who compares himself to the Suffering Servant and to Zion (verses 10-11, verses which some interpreters think should be attributed to personified Jerusalem).

The prophet claims to have been anointed by the Lord. The only other anointed prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures was Elisha, anointed by his predecessor, the prophet Elijah (1 Kgs 19:16). God's spirit descended upon the prophet to enable him to be God's spokesperson, God's prophet. The Spirit is often emphasized in post-exilic writings, of which the Third Part of Isaiah (Trito-Isaiah, Isaiah 56-60) is one.

The prophet's message is one of good news (*euangelisasthai*) and consolation, addressed especially to the peasant underclass and other disadvantaged persons in Israel. Blenkinsopp notes that whenever the poor are mentioned in religious hymns the context is religious. The poor (*anawim*) are the righteous who seek the Lord.

At the time of Trito-Isaiah, the term had a specifically religious connotation without, however, losing its basic sense of economic deprivation, marginalization, and exploitation (see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66* [AB 19B. New York: Doubleday,

2003], 224).

The prophet's announcement is to include the proclamation of a jubilee year and the assurance that Yahweh will reverse the misfortunes that the Israelites had been suffering. The motif of what has been called the "eschatological reversal" continues in the New Testament, where it is perhaps most evident in the beatitudes (Matt 5:3-11; Luke 6:20-23).

Verse 10 is a hymn of thanksgiving which speaks of the prophet's investiture for his mission and uses bridal imagery to highlight the splendor of his robes. The two metaphors speak to the salvation and righteousness [justice] with which the prophet has been endowed by God.

A switch to an agricultural metaphor in verse 11 leads many commentators to think the verse is an addition to the original poem. Isaiah 61:11 portrays God as a gardener, an image found in Genesis 2 and reprised in several Deutero- and Trito-Isaian texts (cf. 44:3-4; 60:21; 61:3). In today's reading the agricultural image proclaims that the prophet's words will come to pass just as surely as agricultural growth and the regeneration of nature take place. Both are the result of God's dynamic activity.

BROKEN FOR US

As on the First Sunday of Advent, there is no immediate connection among the three readings of today's liturgy, although each in its own way contains an Advent theme.

The first reading echoes in many ways the first reading of the Second Sunday of Advent. God will console his people. He will bring to an end the suffering that Israel endured during the exile. God's consolation of his people is particularly concretized in his care for the disadvantaged, among whom the prophet mentions the poor, the brokenhearted, captives, and prisoners.

The Fourth Eucharistic Prayer, which may not be used in Advent, recalls that Jesus embraced this vision as his mission (Luke 4:18-19). In this prayer, we pray, "To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation, to prisoners, freedom, and to those in sorrow, joy."

As Christmas draws near, we should be thinking about Christ's mission, embracing it as our own. Doing so should mean that we are attentive to the mission as we draw up our Christmas wish and gift lists. Our Christmas generosity should include some outreach to the disadvantaged.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 21, 2008

LITURGY

Romans 16:25-27 is the post-Pauline finale of the Letter to the Romans.

Luke 1:26-38 retells the story of the Annunciation to Mary, a story proclaimed earlier this month on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16 is a passage in which an author, apparently using Psalm 89, describes David's intention to build a temple in Jerusalem. David had been victorious. He had conquered the Philistines (2 Sam 5:17-25). He was king of all Judah and Israel. Now he wanted to build a monument, a temple to Yahweh who had been with him throughout these years. David's was the human plan; God had other ideas.

God spoke to Nathan, a prophet who had not previously been introduced into the narrative. He would, however, play an important role during David's reign, particularly with regard to David's affair with Bathseba (2 Samuel 12) and the dispute regarding the succession to the throne (1 Kings 1).

Most probably Nathan was a court prophet who challenged David about the king's intention to build a temple. In this case, the oracle that Nathan received from God led him, and David, to change their minds. "Should you build me a house?" is a reminder that David was not to build a temple because of the wars that he had waged (see 1 Chr 28:3). Nathan's role in this decision is a token of a change from the importance of the monarchy to the importance of prophecy in the history of Israel.

Today's reading plays upon a triple meaning of the word "house." In verses 1-2, it means palace; in verse 13, temple; in verses 11 and 16, dynasty. In verses 8b-12, the prophet rehearses the history of Yahweh's dealing with David, beginning with the divine choice of a young shepherd to be king of Israel. What Yahweh would give to his people was respite from their enemies. David would be honored as a great king. But the house that he wanted to build had to yield to the "house" that Yahweh wanted to build, namely the Davidic dynasty, sprung from the loins of David.

Within the dynasty, Solomon, David's son will be particularly revered (verses 14, 16). In his regard, Yahweh pronounces a covenant-like utterance, "I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me." Solomon's reign will be secure and he will build the temple to Yahweh (verse 13, omitted from today's reading).

BROKEN FOR US

As was the case on the first and third Sundays of Advent, there is no clear connection among today's readings. As the subject of a homily, the reading from the Second Book of Samuel is a reminder that God's ways are not human ways. David wanted to build a great temple; God wanted to build a dynasty.

Two lessons can be learned from the story. First, it is more important that God's will be done than that temples be built. Second, God's primary option was for the Davidic dynasty. Jesus belonged to the Davidic dynasty. According to several New Testament narratives, especially Matthew 1:2-17 and 1:18-25, he was the "son of David." To God, Jesus' presence in the world was more important than any building.

This second lesson is particularly important when we consider the role of the church in the world. Should it be a church that erects buildings or a church that is more concerned with its mission, the mission of Jesus himself?

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD (Christmas)

December 25, 2008

LITURGY (Mass during the Day)

Titus 2:11-14 is one of the "epiphany" passages (*epiphaneia* = "appearance") of the Pastoral Epistles.

John 1;1-18 serves as the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel.

Isaiah 52:7-10 will be a familiar passage to many in the congregation who recognize it as the basis for a popular aria in Handel's "Messiah," "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace" or as a verse that Paul uses to describe early Christian missionaries (Rom 10:15).

Today's reading is a lyrical composition that follows a long passage in which the voice of Yahweh speaks about Zion. The focus of the poem is on the messenger and his message. The reader can almost visualize a courier running the Judean hillsides. The reference to the mountains evokes the idea of nature itself waiting for the deliverance of God's people.

The author's use of poetic license means that the reader must overlook a pair of inconsistencies in his narrative. First of all, Jerusalem was in ruins during the exile (see verse 9). It is not at all likely that sentinels were posted as watchmen on the walls of the abandoned and ruined city. Second, not all messengers are bearers of good news. Sometimes messengers bring very sad news.

In today's reading, the reader is asked to focus on a messenger whose alacrity indicates that the news that he bears is good news. Twice in verse 7, the messenger is described as one who bears good news, a "gospeler." The Greek participle *euangelizomenos* is translated respectively by the New American Bible as "him who brings glad tidings" and "bearing good news."

The good news is that God reigns as king. His reign brings with it Israel's deliverance from exile and peace for God's people. The manifestation of God's might—we might say "the way that God flexed his muscles," rather than that he bared his arm—is visible for the whole world to see. Comforted (see Isa40:1-2, the reading for the Second Sunday of Advent), the people of Jerusalem sees the drama of their salvation unfold "before their very eyes."

In response, the city can only break into a song of praise and thanksgiving, a song of triumph that celebrates the victory of God.

BROKEN FOR US

As has often been the case in recent weeks, there is no real connection among the liturgy's three readings. The first reading's focus on the messenger and his message suggests, nonetheless, an important theme for a Christmas homily.

What we celebrate on Christmas is really the coming of the Son of God among us, not so much the birth of a baby. Towards the beginning of his narrative, the evangelist Mark, which provides the third readings for the Sunday liturgy during this B Cycle, summarizes the mission of Jesus by saying that Jesus came proclaiming the gospel, "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark

1:14-15). The evangelist has reprised the vocabulary of Isa 52:7, giving us some guidance as to how we might appropriately preach about Jesus on Christmas Day.

THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

December 28, 2008

LITURGY

Although **Colossians 3:12-21** and **Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14** may be used as the first and third readings of today's liturgy, there are optional readings for the celebration of this feast in Cycle B. Given the liturgy's desire to expose the faithful to an abundance of Scripture, it would seem that the options appointed for today should be taken, as follows:

Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19 which describes the faith of Abraham and his wife, Sarah.

Luke 2:22-40 which narrates the "redemption" of the infant Jesus and the circumstances that ensued on the occasion of the family's visit to Jerusalem.

Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3 which is a composite reading, whose first part describes God's promise to Abram (verse 1), Abram's objection (verses 2-3), and God's reassurance (verses 4-6). The homilist and reader should be aware that at this point in the Genesis narrative Abram had not yet received the name Abraham (see Gen 17:4).

As Abram's protector, his "shield" (see Ps 28:7; 33:20), God promises a reward to Abram. Abram protests, noting the futility of such a promise. He had no heirs. True, Ancient Near Eastern custom allowed him to name a servant—in this case, Eliezer—as his heir but this was hardly the same as having a son to carry on one's name and to provide proper internment and the rites of burial. God replies to the objection by promising Abram numerous progeny who will be his very own blood line. Abram recognized that what God said was true and would come to pass. As a result, he is considered to be in a right relationship with God.

After a hiatus of several chapters, the liturgical reading resumes with Genesis 21:1-3. At this moment Sarah, "Abraham's" wife comes into focus. Using three messengers, God promised that Sarah would become pregnant (Gen 18:9-15). She did become pregnant and bore the son for whom Abram had yearned. All this took place in the due course of divine providence.

The narrative concludes by observing that Abraham manifested his righteousness by an act of obedience. Obedient to the Lord's command (Gen 17:19), Abraham named his son Isaac.

BROKEN FOR US

Genesis 15:6 is a text that Paul fully exploited in developing the doctrine of faith and justification (see Rom 4:3, 9; Gal 3:6; cf. James 2:23) but this should not be the focus of a homily on the Feast of the Holy Family.

Rather, the homily might focus on the vocation of every Christian family to be a holy family, not necessarily a particularly pious one but one that is attentive to and grateful

for God's providential care.

Childlessness burdened Abram and Sarah for a good part of their married life. Today's families called to holiness have other burdens, particularly in the difficult economic times of the past year. And there are other burdens: sick children, single parenthood, divorce, the need to care for elderly parents, job mobility that leads to rootlessness, and so forth. No matter the difficulties, all families are called to the kind of holiness that trusts in God's providence.

Perhaps a note in the parish bulletin might draw attention to the giving of Christian names to children. Isaac, meaning "he laughs," had a name that recalled Abram and Sarah's earlier disbelief (Gen 17:7; 18:12, 15). What is the significance of the names that even church-going parents give to their children? In reference to the Hebrew Scriptures, which constitute the first reading of the Sunday liturgy, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council proclaimed, "The Books of the Old Testament . . . reveal to all people the knowledge of God and humans and the ways in which God, just and merciful, deals with us . . . These books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence." (*Dei Verbum* 15).