

For the past four years Fr. Raymond Collins has been writing for [Emmanuel magazine](#), a journal of priestly spirituality. Fr. Collins received approval from the publisher to offer this portion of his articles online at St. Luke's website. Father Collins' complete commentary on the Sunday readings can be found in 114 (2008) 72-88 February, 2008.

#### **FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

February 3, 2008

#### LITURGY

**1 Corinthians 1:26-31** describes the diverse nature of the church of God at Corinth, highlighting how relatively few of its members were well-established.

**Matthew 5:1-12a** gives Matthew's version of the Beatitudes.

#### **Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13**

The prophet Zephaniah claims to be of royal pedigree, a descendant of King Hezekiah (Zeph 1:1), whose reign was lauded by Isaiah of Jerusalem. Zephaniah 1:1 dates the prophet's ministry to the time of King Josiah. This dating places his preaching about seventy-years after the preaching of Isaiah.

Today's first reading is a composite of two texts that have been linked together because each of them speaks about people who are humble. The church's linking of the two texts on the basis of an analogy of words recalls the early rabbis' employ of the *gezerah shavah* principle of biblical interpretation. According to this principle of hermeneutics, an inference from the analogy of words allowed the interpreter to use one scriptural passage to explain another in cases where the two passages had identical words or phrases.

Against the horizon the coming of the fateful Day of the Lord (Zeph 2:1-2), the first passage proclaims that the humble of the land will be saved from the Lord's wrath provided that they seek the Lord and his righteousness. The "humble" may be the indigent, those without social and economic power. Alternatively, the "humble" may be those who willingly humble themselves before the Lord.

The second passage announces that the humble who seek the Lord will be a relatively small number, a remnant of Israel. This small number is characterized by its singleness of purpose in avoiding evil and its fidelity in calling upon the name of the Lord. Because of its single-mindedness, this faithful remnant will be rewarded. The prophet portrays the reward in idyllic terms. He pictures the remnant blissfully taking care of their flocks oblivious to the turmoil and destruction around them. With the coming of the Day of the Lord, the Lord will take care of those who remain loyal to him.

#### BROKEN FOR US

Matthew's version of the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12) represents an expansion of the Q version of the beatitudes, whose text is more faithfully preserved by Luke (Luke 6:20-23). One of the key elements in Matthew's expanded version is the emphasis on righteousness, a right relationship with God and with other human beings (cf. Matt 3:15). For the evangelist, seeking after

righteousness (Matt 5:6, 10) sums up the qualities praised in the other beatitudes.

The texts from Zephaniah have been chosen for today's reading because of their focus on seeking for righteousness (Zeph 2:3). That the text of Zephaniah speaks about humility (Zeph 2:3; 3:12; cf. Matt 5:5) and that it mentions a reward for those who seek for righteousness add to its appropriateness as a biblical companion to the reading of the Beatitudes.

Seeking after righteousness is an awesome task. It is a matter of striving for a right relationship with God which bears with it a right relationship with all God's people. The task is unending. As long as our relationship with any of God's people, any of those nearby or any of those in other parts of the world, is somewhat lacking, our relationship with God is somewhat lacking.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT  
February 10, 2008

#### LITURGY

**Romans 5:12-19** contrasts the origin and consequences of sin with the origin and consequences of God's gift of justification.

**Matthew 4:1-11** preserves the Q tradition's description of the triple temptation of Jesus.

**Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7**

To provide the congregation for a mise-en-scene for today's account of the first sin, the church has chosen a small snippet of the Yahwist's narration of creation. Highlighting the importance of the human being, the narration describes God creating the human being before anything else. God is pictured as a potter shaping the human out of the soil. The human is called *adam*, a generic term for humanity which the Yahwist uses in the narrower sense of adult male, to underscore humanity's relationship with *adamah*, the soil from which come the crops that sustain human life. God gives the breath of life to all animate creatures so that they might live. The gift is given and sustained by God but it may be withdrawn (Gen 7:22).

God placed the human being in a fertile garden, notable for its tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. After God created a companion for the primal man (Gen 2:18-24), the Genesis narrative focuses on the divine prohibition to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The image of the wily snake, representing evil power and hostility to Yahweh, comes from some Ancient Near Eastern mythology.

The narrative proceeds with increasing intensity as the snake suggests some doubt and then questions Yahweh's motives. Eventually the woman becomes fixated on the possibilities of unlimited freedom. She and the man eat of the fruit of the tree in violation of God's prohibition. Their trusting relationship with God gives way to a shame symbolized by their being ill-at-ease with their physical nudity.

BROKEN FOR US

The relationship between Genesis' account of the first sin and Matthew's account of the triple temptation of Jesus is much more tenuous than the relationship between other first and third readings in the Sunday liturgy. With the first reading and the reading from Romans, the church invites us to contemplate the all pervasiveness of sin as Lent begins. The story of sin is virtually coterminous with the story of humanity. The reality of sin extends to all human beings.

The Matthean narrative describes Jesus as tempted to be what he is not: a miracle worker, a political power, or cultic figure.

His messianic identity corresponds to none of these profiles. Rather, his identity is realized in his serving the Lord alone (Deut 6:13), something that the primal couple refused to do.

Taken together today's readings remind us of the universality of sin. The Genesis story reminds us that the reality of sin lies in the abuse of human freedom, a desire to experience no matter what without any constraint or boundaries. Matthew's story teaches us many things, not the least of which is that temptation comes in many different forms, urging us to be something other than what we are called to be.

## **SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT**

February 17, 2008

### LITURGY

**2 Timothy 1:8b-10** speaks of salvation made present in the appearance of Christ Jesus as Savior.

**Matthew 17:1-9** describes the transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of the inner circle of disciples.

**Genesis 12:1-4a** is the first of the biblical narratives about Abraham. Abram was the son of Terah (Gen 11:26-30) who took his son and daughter-in-law, Sarah, from Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 11:31-12) to Haran, a northwest Mesopotamian city near the border between modern Turkey and Syria.

After Terah died (cf. Acts 7:4) God addresses Abram, whose name means "the father of a people," ordering him to leave Haran and go to a land that Yahweh will show him. Abram's name had not yet been changed (see Gen 17:1-8), but the change is anticipated since Yahweh promises Abram that he will be the father of a great nation.

Yahweh's promise, the first of the promises made to Abram/Abraham, includes land, nationhood, reputation/fame, and blessing. Abram will be a blessing insofar as all that contributes to his well-being, including the well-being of his progeny, will be realized. Moreover, Yahweh promises to ratify the blessings that Abram will pronounce as well as the curses that fall from Abram's lips.

The Hebrew text of verse 3b, "All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you," is ambiguous. Some translators take the Hebrew verb to be a reflexive; in which case the text means that all will bless themselves through Abram, using a formula something like "may we/you be as blessed as Abram was." Other translators understand the verb as a genuine passive; in

which case the text means that God's blessing is given to everyone through Abram. This reading of the text seems to be supported by Gen 18:18. In any event, the New Testament understands the Genesis text in the latter way (see Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8): all nations are blessed through Abraham.

The narrative concludes with Abram doing as he was told. Accompanied by his brother Lot Abram left the ancestral territories and the city of Haran (Gen 12:4b).

#### BROKEN FOR US

The link between this Sunday's first reading and the lection from Matthew is not readily apparent. Only a close reading of both texts reveals the similarities. In both cases God speaks to men who will become heroes of their respective traditions, Abram in the first reading, Peter, James, and John in the third reading.

In both cases the future heroes must move from the relative comfort of the situation in which God's word is addressed to them.

In both cases the heroes, challenged to trust God's word, are portrayed as men of faith and hope.

Abram is a person whose life was transformed by the promise that God made to him. He is celebrated in the New Testament, especially in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, as a man of faith. The first eucharistic prayer refers to him as our father in faith.

Hope is the face of faith facing an uncertain future (cf. Heb 12:1). Hebrews says that, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that we was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go" (Heb 11:8). Heeding the Lord's promise, Abraham embraced the uncertainty of the journey that he was to undertake.

Lent is a season in which our lives are transformed and our faith purified. It is a time for us to realize that our journey through life, our journey in faith, is full of uncertainty but is sustained by God's promise of new life.

#### THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

February 24, 2008

#### LITURGY

**Romans 5:1-2, 5-8** speaks about the consequences of justification, notably in the gifts of peace with God, the reception of God's love, and the gift of hope.

**John 4:5-42** tells the story of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman.

#### **Exodus 17:3-7**

With its patriarchal narratives about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob the Book of Genesis sets the stage for the story told in the Book of Exodus (Exod 1:1). With a story about the exodus from Egypt, God's self-revelation at Sinai, and the making of the covenant, Exodus describes in narrative fashion Israel's primal experience of salvation.

Following on the account of the gift of manna to the people (Exodus 16), Exodus 17 describes God's gift of water to his people. An unknown place called Rephidim (Exod 17:2), meaning

"refresh," provides a setting for the account of God's gift of water. Taken together the narratives of Exodus 16-17 show Yahweh using the forces of nature to provide for his people.

The lack of water leads Israel to complain against God and his prophet Moses (Exod 17:2-3; cf. 14:11-12; 16:2-3). The opening verse of today's reading essentially repeats the preceding verse which describes Israel's complaint as a "quarrel," *rib* in Hebrew, indicating a kind of lawsuit. Effectively, the people put God on trial, to find out if Yahweh is "for real," if he is really their God (Exod 17:7).

God demonstrates that he is for real by providing water at a place called Massah and Meribah. Meribah was a spring at Kadesh (Num 20:13; 27:14; Deut 32:51) but the symbolism of the names is more important than the geographic setting of the narrative. Massah is derived from a verb meaning "test;" Meribah from a verb meaning "complain." In effect, "Massah and Meribah" designates a kind of courtroom in which Yahweh is put to the test. The geographic designations that encompass the narrative show that the place of testing has become a place of refreshment.

Water lies below the limestone surface in some areas of the Sinai. Water is provided for the Israelites when in their presence Moses, accompanied by the elders, Moses strikes a rock with his staff. The staff used by Moses is the "staff of God" (Exod 4:20). Yahweh had entrusted the staff to Moses, saying, "Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs" (Exod 4:17). One of the signs (an *oth*) is God's wonderful gift of water to his people.

#### BROKEN FOR US

The obvious link between the reading from John and the reading from Exodus is the gift of water. Through Moses God provided water to his people at the time of the Exodus. Through Jacob God provided water for his people in the area around Samaria. It would seem, though it not explicitly stated, that through the Samaritan woman God gave water to Jesus. Finally, God gives the gift of "living water" to his people through Jesus. This living water is both the gift of the Spirit and the teaching of Jesus that is given through the Spirit.

While it is tempting for the homilist to preach about Jesus' gift of living water, the Christian focus on food and drink during the season of Lent should give us pause to think about God's gift of water. The Israelites were concerned that not only they but also their children and their livestock have water (Exod 17:3).

We should realize that water is one of God's many gifts to us. The gift of water is one of the ways that God demonstrates that he is a provident God. We are called to use that gift responsibly. Pope Benedict XVI and the Patriarch of Constantinople have recently reminded us about our moral responsibility to care for the environment and its resources. And, lest we forget, some of God's children, approximately twenty-five of the world's population, do not have clean water to drink.