

An excerpt from Fr. Collins' "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," *Emmanuel* "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," *Emmanuel* 115:1 (2009)81-95.

Catholic Christians are generally unfamiliar with the Hebrew Scriptures but they surely recognize some stories from Bible history.

Among the best-known stories are those of Creation, Noah and the Flood, Moses and the Ten Commandments.

The tales of Jonah and Job rank along with these other well-known stories. The biblical books summarized in these tales are rarely used in the church's weekday eucharistic liturgy. Their appearance in the Sunday liturgy is rarer still. Only once every three years does the Sunday liturgy include a reading from Jonah. Only once every three years does the average Catholic listen to a reading from Job.

These unique liturgical experiences take place on January 25 and February 8. It is fitting for a pastor who desires to set the Word of God before the people of God to preach on these texts on these Sundays in Ordinary Time in the Year of Our Lord, 2009. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council remind us, "The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for God's people at the table of God's Word" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 51).

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 1, 2009

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 7:32-35 is a passage that speaks about the responsibilities and anxieties of married persons. At a time when Paul assumed that the Parousia was to happen soon, he says that it might be preferable for a person to remain unmarried for the duration. **Mark 1:21-28** describes Jesus expelling an unclean spirit in possession of a man in the synagogue of Capernaum.

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 is a passage that follows immediately upon Moses' exhortation that Israel be faithful to the Lord rather than follow sorcerers and magicians. Instead of having recourse to these kind of seers, Israelites are to rely on the prophets whom the Lord will raise up in their midst.

The text of verse 15 speaks of a prophet in the singular. Thus early Christian tradition alluded to this verse in speaking about Jesus as a prophet (e. g., John 4:19; 6:14). The singular should, however, be taken as generic. The text speaks about the line of prophets whom God would raise up in Israel to encourage and challenge the Israelites to remain loyal to him. The prophet like Moses is one who stands within the Mosaic tradition and does not veer from the teaching of Moses, Israel's great prophet. Moses is the prototype of the true prophet, one who speaks what the Lord has commanded (verse 18).

Prophets like Moses will be given to Israel; the Israelites are expected to listen to them (verses 15b, 19). The average Israelite did not have immediate access to God (verse 16). Instead, God raised up particular individuals, prophets, to mediate between himself and his people as Moses had done.

Prophecy is an invaluable gift that God has given to his people but it raises the possibility that some people might claim to have the gift when, in fact, they do not have it. Consequently, the final

verse in today's reading contains a double caveat.

The first warning is that some would-be prophets speak on behalf of gods other than Yahweh. These are false prophets. The second warning is that prophets are not to arrogate to themselves the authority to say whatever they want. They are authorized only to speak what the Lord has commanded them (verse 19), only the message that stands within the line of teaching that Moses had laid down.

BROKEN FOR US

The reading from the Gospel according to Mark clearly portrays Jesus as an amazing teacher but leaves the reader or listener wondering about the amazing teaching that so astounded those who heard him speak.

Matthew fills in the gap (see Matt 7:28-29; cf. Mark 1:27) with the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3-7:27).

Today's first reading suggests that we consider Jesus as a prophet, one like Moses, who was qualified to teach the word of the Lord in the synagogue of Capernaum. He spoke what the Father, the Lord of Israel, intended him to say.

Today's prophets and those who teach in the name of the church stand within the tradition of Moses and the tradition of Jesus. The caveat of Deut 18:20 remains, however, as valid today as it was when it was first written. There are prophets and teachers who claim to be authentic or teachers but, in fact, are not. Moreover, not everything that prophets and authorized teachers say is authorized.

The oldest text in the New Testament reminds us that it is the responsibility of the entire church to be discriminating in this regard (see 1 Thess 5:20-21; cf. 1 Cor 12:10; 14:29, 32).

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 8, 2009

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23 is a passage in which Paul describes himself as a slave constrained to preach the gospel without any recompense.

Mark 1:29-39 describes the cure of Simon's mother-in-law and provides the reader with Mark's first summary description of Jesus' ministry.

Job 7:1-4, 6-7 is a passage taken from a book that many people consider to be the Bible's finest gem. Although the book is forty-two chapters long, today's reading is the only occasion on which the book is used in the church's Sunday liturgy. In this respect its use today is comparable to the reading from the Book of Jonah on the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Deeply rooted in a Near Eastern culture that produced a variety of books that pondered the deepest issues of life, suffering, divine justice, the meaning of life itself, and so forth, the Book of Job uses the literary device of Job's conversations with his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, to weigh the significance of the suffering of the innocent, the justice and providence of God, and the need for faith and perseverance in the trying circumstances of life.

In today's passage, Job is speaking to God from the depth of his suffering rather than conversing with one of his friends. Confronted with the miserable condition of his life, Job compares his own miserable

existence to life to that of a conscripted soldier, a menial day laborer, and a slave. On "drudgery" as a reference to compulsory military service (cf. Job 14:14), see Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (Anchor Bible 15. Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 57.

Job describes his suffering as lasting months on end and as something that he endures day and night. From Job 7:3's reference to months, Akiva, the great rabbi and Jewish martyr, assumed that Job's suffering lasted a full year. The apocryphal *Testament of Job* assumed that the reference to months signified a plenitude of months, that is, seven years (see *T. Job* 5:9). Job's nights were filled with restlessness; his days came and went without any hope. In the Hebrew text, "hope" is a pun on the word "thread," implied by the reference to the loom.

Today's reading concludes with Job lamenting the transitory nature of his life and the expectation that he would not experience happiness and prosperity.

BROKEN FOR US

It is difficult to see any direct textual link between the first and third readings of today's liturgy, other than the idea that Job's sufferings represent the epitome of human suffering while Simon's mother-in-law is an example of ordinary human suffering.

Through the ministry of Jesus, God responded to the mother-in-law's suffering. Job's plaint was a cry to God, asking God to free him from his suffering. God rewarded Job's steadfast faith and responded to his prayer by blessing him with prosperity and happiness (Job 42:10-16). Rather than having a troubled life as short as the passing wind, Job died at the age of one hundred and forty, "full of years" (Job 42:16-17).

The theme of today's homily might well be the enigma of human suffering, particularly the suffering of the innocent, the necessity of maintaining faith and hope in the face of adversity, and the gratuitous reward that God gives to those who remain faithful to him in the trying circumstances of each person's life.

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 15, 2009

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 reminds us that all we do should be done for the glory of God. During this Year of Paul, it also reminds us that we are to imitate Paul in spreading the gospel and living by it.

Mark 1:40-45 describes Jesus' healing of a leper.

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46 are a few verses taken from a lengthy chapter in the book of Leviticus that deals with the ritual impurity incurred as a result of "leprosy." "Leprosy" is a term that is commonly used today to speak about the medical condition that doctors identify as Hansen's disease but a number of factors indicate that what the biblical authors called *tsara'at*, translated "leprosy" in most versions but sometimes rendered as "scale disease" or "leprous affliction," is not Hansen's disease. The Hebrew term may well be untranslatable. It seems to cover a wide range of skin diseases.

Whatever the Torah had in mind, the Israelites were warned to

be on the lookout for "leprosy" and to report its appearance to a priest, Aaron at the time of the Exodus or one of his descendants in later times. If the priest concurs that the person has the skin disease, that person is declared unclean, ritually impure, and placed in a kind of quarantine. The person must live in solitude, apart from normal society.

In addition, he must follow several practices that are normally those of the mourner. He is to rend his clothes, walking around in tatters. His uncombed hair is to be disheveled. He should use his clothes to partially cover his head, especially his mustache. He must shout "unclean; unclean!" in order to warn people in the vicinity.

The rabbis debated among themselves as to just how far the diseased person was to keep his distance from others.

The ancients obviously thought that "leprosy" was a communicable disease. Prescriptions akin to those prescribed for those in mourning were probably imposed to make the diseased person unrecognizable to the mysterious evil powers that hovered around him in a way that resembled their hovering over those in mourning.

BROKEN FOR US

In Mark's account of Jesus' cure of the leper, the second miracle recorded in the Gospel according to Mark—the first was the cure of Simon's mother-in-law, the narration of which was the focus of the third reading in last Sunday's liturgy—Jesus tells the "leper" to show himself to the priest in accordance with the requirements of Leviticus 13. Mark does not inform his readers that the cured leper did what Jesus told him to do. The evangelist simply recounts that the leper really was cured. Though he remained "outside the camp" (Lev 13:46), he told everyone about what had happened.

Today's homilist might well focus on the miracle that Jesus performed. On the other hand, the homilist might concentrate on the first reading in and of itself. Writ large, the Leviticus reading lays down three important prescriptions with regard to sickness and disease: 1) we are to be on the lookout for sickness and disease, becoming aware of them as soon as possible; 2) if the disease or sickness is serious, its presence should be confirmed by an "expert;" 3) when ill or diseased, we have a responsibility to consider the effect of our sickness or disease on others. These prescriptions are very practical; they are bearers of significant moral responsibility.

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 22, 2009

LITURGY

2 Corinthians 1:18-22 is part of Paul's response to the Corinthians' complaint that he was fickle because he had not immediately gone back to them.

Mark 2:1-12 describes the cure of the paralytic who was lowered through the mud and thatch roof so that he could approach Jesus and be cured.

Isaiah 43:18-19, 21-22, 24b-25, a passage taken from the Deutero-Isaiah (Second Isaiah), was addressed to Israel during the Babylonian Exile.

Its first two verses tell the exiles that they should not simply think

about the past (cf. Isa 42:9), pining for what once was, the Exodus from Egypt. They should think about something new, the future, the equally great but still future return of the Israelites to the Promised Land.

This return is described in terms that recall the Exodus, the journey through the wilderness (cf. Isa 40:3) and God's gift of water to his people. The return from Exile will be a new Exodus. In some ways the new salvific experience will surpass the old. Instead of crying out for water in their thirst, confronting Moses, and quarreling with the Lord (Exod 17:1-7), the returning Israelites will find that God will provide them with rivers from which they might slake their thirst.

God will provide Israel with this New Exodus experience so that his people will praise him, thanking him for the salvation that they will have experienced and for the concomitant blessings that will be theirs.

The final verses of today's reading remind the Israelites that the gift that they will experience is not the result of their fidelity to the Lord. Rather than being faithful, the exiled Israelites did not invoke the name of the Lord in prayer. Instead, they almost despaired of the Lord's help and confounded his will with their evil-doing.

Nonetheless "I am who am" (cf. Isa 43:9-10; Exod 3:14) will forgive the sin of his people, redeeming them from the rigors of the Exile, punishment for their sin (cf. Isa 42:24-25).

BROKEN FOR US

Forgiveness of sin is the common theme of today's first and third readings. The paralytic's inability to be forgiven of his sin and cured of his paralysis is highlighted by the narrative details of his being unable to walk and having to be let down through the roof. On his own, he was unable to approach Jesus to be forgiven and cured.

In the popular mentality, the paralytic's handicap was considered a punishment for his sin. Thus Jesus forgave his sin and enabled him to walk. In the prophet's understanding, the misfortunes of the Exile were a deserved punishment for the sins of the Israelites (Isa 42:24-25). On their own, of their own volition, the Israelites did nothing that warranted forgiveness. Nonetheless a loving God forgave their sin, enabling them to take the journey by foot that would lead them to their homeland.

So it is with us. We no more merit forgiveness than did the paralytic or the exiled Israelites. Nevertheless, a loving God freely offers us the gift of forgiveness.