

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 make this portion of his commentary available online through St. Luke's website. These remarks are an excerpt from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," Emmanuel 114:1 (2008) 72-87. Father Collins' complete commentary on the Sunday readings can be found in *Emmanuel*

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

January 1, 2008

Numbers 6:22-27 contains the Aaronic benediction, the blessing that Aaron and the priests of Israel were to pronounce over God's people. Archaeologists digging in Jerusalem have discovered two silver cylinders on which the blessing is inscribed on. The cylinders date to about 600 b.c.e., making Num 6:22-27 the oldest biblical text that we possess.

Since Aaron blessed the people after he had made sacrificial offerings on their behalf (Lev 9:22), it is thought that the Aaronic benediction was invoked over the people at the conclusion of worship.

The three-part blessing moves in a crescendo. It begins with a generic blessing, with a prayer that God take care of his people, protecting them from harm. It moves to an image of God smiling lovingly upon the people (rather than counting their sins), with a prayer that God show his mercy to the people. Finally it mentions God looking kindly upon his people, in Hebrew an idiomatic expression meaning showing divine favor, with a prayer that God grant peace to the people.

Biblical peace, *shalom*, is the fullness of God's covenant blessings. Peace is comprehensive; it is the totality of human well-being, individual and social, material and spiritual, received as a gift from God. Peace includes good health, a happy family, satisfying friendships, a just society, security, material prosperity, and a right relationship with God. Peace in the sense of the absence of war is a condition of biblical peace but is not the essence of focal point of biblical peace.

Verse 27 indicates that the preceding three verses represent the form of the blessing that the priests are to use. The invocation of God's name, LORD, over the Israelites suggest that they belong to him. God's name is to be invoked three times, suggesting that God is present to his people, precisely as their Lord. The verse concludes by stating that a faithful God will fulfill the blessing that is pronounced over the people.

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

January 6, 2008

Isaiah 60:1-6 is an oracle promising redemption that is addressed to Jerusalem. The personified city is spoken to as if it were a woman, the common personification of Zion in all three parts of the Book of Isaiah. The city is invited to wake up, as a person does when the light of dawning day wakes him or her up from sleep. In the light of the day that is dawning, the city is invited to look into the distance where the darkness of night has not yet been dispelled. Turning its eyes from the distant darkness to the light that surrounds it, Jerusalem is invited to celebrate its salvation.

Three images flesh out author's portrayal of salvation. The first is that of Israel/Jerusalem reflecting the Lord's glory to the nations (cf. Isa 6:3; Ezek 1:4-28; 10:4). Israel is called to be a light to the nations (Isa 42:6; 49:6). The nations and their leaders will profit from the light reflected by Israel. Seeking additional light they will stream to Israel (Isa 45:4). Israel will become, in a sense, the center of God's redeemed humanity.

The second image is that of the reunification of the nation. Israel's dispersed sons and daughters, even infants carried in arms, will come home. In its reestablished unity (Isa 49:18, 22), Israel will experience the salvation of God.

The third image portrays the experience of salvation in material terms. Reflecting the

theme of eschatological reversal, the passage pictures the poverty of Israel replaced by the wealth of nations (Isa 61:6; 66:12). These riches will come to Israel from the west, transported by ships crossing the Mediterranean to Israel's shores. These riches will come to Israel from the east, carried across the desert regions by caravans of camels and dromedaries. Opposing east and west and contrasting water-born and desert-traversed gifts, the oracle speaks of the fullness of blessings that will come to Israel.

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

January 13, 2008

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 contains the first of the four canticles of the Servant of the Lord in Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 42:1-4; cf. 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12).

The first of the Servant hymns begins with the formal presentation of the Servant by God. There has been considerable scholarly debate as to the identity of the Servant but given the fact that Israel is identified as God's servant in the immediately preceding chapter (Isa 41:8-9) and will be identified as God's servant in other passages of the Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 44:1-2, 221; 45:4; 48:20) most scholars hold that the servant featured in the hymns is Israel.

The task of the servant appointed and supported by God is to bring to the nations the righteousness ("justice") that had been God's covenant gift to Israel. The task will not be completed until the lands surrounding the Mediterranean (the "coastlands") receive the covenant precepts. Thus the text portrays Israel as having a universal role in the history of salvation. It is to be a light to the nations (see the clarification of Israel's vocation in verse 6 and Isa 49:6 in the second Servant canticle), a notion that emerges from the previous week's reading from Isaiah 60.

Unlike warlike nations who impose their governmental structures on other nations by means of military force, Israel's extension of its "constitution" will be remarkably peaceful. There will be no shouts of victorious armies. No roadside reed will be broken by a conquering army. No smoldering wick will be quenched in a military onslaught.

Verses 6-7 do not belong to the Servant hymn; rather, they portray Israel's vocation to righteousness. Formed by Yahweh, Israel is to model righteousness and in that way be a light to the nations, an enlightening example of what God intends for his people.

Verse 7 should be understood metaphorically rather than physically. By living in righteousness and serving as example to the nations, Israel will open the eyes of the nations, freeing them from the imprisonment and darkness that resulted from their ignorance of Yahweh and his righteous will.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 20, 2008

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6 is taken from the Second Servant Canticle (Isa 49:1-6). In the portion of the canticle that has been excerpted for today's reading Yahweh speaks to Israel, explicitly addressing the nation as "servant." As the Servant of the Lord, Israel, Israel is the means by which God is to be glorified.

The canticle reprises motifs previously used to describe the great prophets of Israel, Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah of Jerusalem. The idea of the prophet being formed and called from the womb by God (Isa 49:1, 5) reflects Jer 1:5 and is echoed by Paul in Gal 1:15. The image of being called from the womb speaks of God's antecedent choice of those whom he calls to a prophetic vocation. Applied to Israel in the Second Servant Canticle, the image portrays the nation's election by God and its prophetic vocation. The prophetic vocation belongs not only to individual prophets; it is the vocation of the entire nation. The nation is to fulfill its vocation through its members.

There is some dispute among scholars as to who is to effect the restoration of Israel.

Some scholars opine that Yahweh is the real subject of the infinitive clauses in verses 5b, 6a,b,c. On this reading of the text, Yahweh will restore Israel so that it can be a light to the nations. Other scholars hold that it is the role of the Servant, thus, of Israel itself, to restore the unity of the nation. On this reading of the text, the prophetic word preached in Israel should lead to a renewal of its faith and thus lead to the reunification of the nation.

In any event, the unity of Israel is subservient to and a means for its real vocation which is to be the light of the nations. Israel's role in the history of salvation is that God uses Israel as a means to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 27, 2008

Isaiah 8:23-9:3 in the Hebrew Bible (and the New American Bible) appears in the Greek Bible, the Septuagint (and the New Revised Standard Version) as Isa 9:1-4. In its origins the text most likely celebrated the accession to the throne of King Hezekiah (715-687 b.c.e.) whose rule was positively regarded by Isaiah of Jerusalem. The prophet placed great hopes in the monarchy, believing that David's lineage would be preserved forever.

The opening verse speaks of areas of northern Palestine conquered by the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser in 733-732 b.c.e. The land along the seacoast south of Mount Carmel, northern Galilee, and the northern Transjordan area, all conquered by Assyria, will be redeemed. This will allow the Northern Kingdom to be reunited to the Southern Kingdom and the unity of Israel to be reestablished.

When this happens, the anguish of those who lived in the conquered and occupied territories will disappear. In place of their darkness and gloom, there will be light and joy. The oracle vividly portrays a happy people, as happy as those who reap a particularly bountiful harvest, as happy as people who divide among themselves the spoils of war. Their happiness will be that of a victory celebration.

To ground Israel's hope that this can happen, the prophet recalls that Midian which had oppressed Israel at the time of the judges was defeated (Judg 6:1-8:28).

BROKEN FOR US

The church has chosen Isa 8:23-9:1 as the first reading of today's liturgy because it is quoted in Matt 4:14-16, today's third reading. The evangelist Luke situates the ministry of Jesus in history, in time (Luke 3:1-2); Matthew situates the ministry of Jesus in geography, in space. This evangelist, ever keen to exploit links between the story of Jesus and his people's biblical story, offers the Isaian text as a kind of explanation why Jesus began his ministry in the Galilee, an area with a fairly large Gentile population. Jesus came for the house of Israel (Matt 15:24; cf. Matt 10:6), but the salvation of Gentiles was never far from God's plan of salvation (Matt 4:14; 28:19-20).

Christian tradition has long considered the Isaian texts that celebrate the ideal king to have been fulfilled in Jesus. These texts are prophetic texts, not in the sense that they speak about the future coming of Jesus, but in the sense that they can be used to speak about Jesus and clarify his mission.

Matthew places "the District of the Gentiles," Galilee of the Gentiles, within the horizon of Jesus' choosing his first disciples. Peter and Andrew, James and John, were fishermen who plied their trade in the Sea of Galilee. They were called by Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Since this is the perspective within which Jesus begins his ministry and chooses his disciples, the church may never become indifferent to what is happening in the nations, in the world. Outreach and concern for the peoples of the world are always part of her mission.