

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).

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

January 1, 2009

LITURGY

Galatians 4:4-7 is a brief reflection on our being sons in the Son, children of God because God's son became one of us.

Luke 2:16-21 describes the visit of the shepherds to Mary, Joseph, and their newly born child.

Numbers 6:22-27 is the final segment in the sixth chapter of the Book of Numbers, primarily devoted to the Nazirite's vow. Its verses contain a three-part blessing that priests were to pronounce verbatim. We can assume that priests used this blessing on any number of occasions.

In the first petition, the priest asks God to bless the Israelite people ["you"]. The blessing that God is asked to give is not merely spiritual; rather God is asked to be generous with his many gifts to the people, health, prosperity, happy families, and so forth. God is also asked to "keep" the Israelites, that is, ensure their safety and security.

In the second petition, God is asked to let his face shine upon the people. Following the tenor of the anthropomorphism with its reference to God's face, we might think of God lovingly smiling at his people, in a way similar to the way in which grandparents often look at their grandchildren. That God be gracious to his people implies that he will give them material well-being.

In the third petition, God is asked to pay attention to his people and their needs. He is asked to give them peace, *shalom*, the fullness of his covenantal benefactions, all that they need

for their well-being.

The final verse is a reminder that the invocation of the name of the Lord is an important feature of the blessing. Invoking the name of the Lord was a priestly function in Israel. With the priest's invocation of the name of the Lord, the generous God is present with his people.

BROKEN FOR US

The civil calendar's beginning the year on January 1 makes it appropriate for this day to be a day of prayer, a day on which we invoke the name of the Lord. In recent decades the Latin church seems to have been at sea in finding a liturgical celebration appropriate to the day. The resolution has been to further unpack the meaning of Christmas, with a Marian celebration in which the mother of Jesus is celebrated as "Mother of God." This is the title, *Theotokos* (see Denziger 252, from the Council of Ephesus), with which Mary has long been revered in the Eastern tradition.

The first reading of the liturgy reminds us that this is the liturgy of New Year's Day, when it is appropriate to call on the name of the Lord, asking the Lord to bless his people abundantly.

We pray that God will take care of his people in every way as we begin this new year.

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

January 4, 2009

LITURGY

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 speaks of the mystery of salvation, emphasizing that Gentiles are now co-partners in the promise that has been realized in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 2:1-12 describes the visit of the magi to Bethlehem.

Isaiah 60:1-6 is the beginning of a poem, Isa 60:1-22, that is at the heart of Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66).

The first stanza of the poem (Isa 60:1-3), which celebrates Israel's glorious restitution, portrays Jerusalem as being at the center; the Gentiles, the nations, form the periphery. The exhortation to rise up, addressed to Jerusalem, echoes a motif often found in the Deutero-Isaiah, especially in chapters 49-54 (cf. Isa 51:17; 52:1). As the glory of the Lord begins to "shine"—a verb that might be translated as "dawn"—the exhortation is a wake up call. "Rise and shine," we might say.

Light is coming. The light, reflected by Jerusalem as by a mirror, will pierce the darkness. "Darkness" is associated with the unbelief of the nations in the Bible (cf. Exod 22-23; Ezek 32:8). Israel, in contrast, is to walk in the light of the Lord (Isa 2:2-5; Mic 4:1-5) and be a light to the nations (Isa 42:6; 49:6).

The coming of the light may symbolize the coming of the Day of the Lord, with which light is associated (cf. Amos 5:18). With the coming of the Day of the Lord, the defeat of Israel's enemies, and the redemption of God's people, the nations will flock to Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God.

The second stanza (Isa 60:4-7, all but the last verse of which is in today's reading) celebrates the return of diaspora Jews to the land of Israel. Earlier parts of the Book of Isaiah had mentioned Jews dwelling in Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, and Mesopotamia. Rejoicing, risen Zion welcomes her children home with her heart throbbing (cf. Isa 49:18, 22). In much of the Bible's poetic literature, Jerusalem is portrayed as a woman. In today's reading, she is portrayed as a woman who is a mother, eager to welcome her children home.

When Jerusalem's children return, Israel's poverty is to be replaced by riches. Some goods will be carried over the sea (cf. Isa 60:8-9); others will be transported by caravans of camels. These beasts of burden, "ships of the desert," were normally employed by commercial travelers. Midian, Ephah, and Sheba are the names of Arab tribes. Isaiah 60:7 adds the names of two other tribes, Kedar and Nebaioth. Mention of these tribes suggests that Arabia's vast wealth will be brought to Jerusalem.

BROKEN FOR US

The church uses the reading of Isaiah 60 because it sees in these verses a symbol of the universality of the church. In Matthew's gospel, the coming of the magi is symbolic of the universal attraction of the gospel, anticipating the Great Commission with which Matthew concludes his narrative (Matt 28:19-20).

The Trito-Isaian poem speaks of the blessings that will accrue to God's people when the Day of the Lord arrives. That day is dawning. What the church is called to do is reflect the glory of the Lord so that people of all nations will be impressed. When all is in readiness, the Day of the Lord will arrive in its full splendor. Then God's people will experience the fullness of God's benefaction.

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

January 11, 2009

LITURGY, whose optional readings for Year B follow:

1 John 5:1-9 speaks of the love of God and the testimony of God and his Spirit.

Mark 1:7-11 describes the preaching of John the Baptizer and the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth by John.

Isaiah 55:1-11, virtually the entire hymn of praise with which Second Isaiah is brought to a close, is a text that may be chosen as a reading during the celebration of the Easter Vigil. This Easter option suggests that Isa 55:1-11 is particularly apropos as a baptismal reading. During 2008 the component parts of Isa 55:1-11 served as the first readings for the eighteenth, twenty-fifth, and fifteenth Sundays in Ordinary Time, respectively.

Apart from verses 6 and 7, the hymn dramatizes the voice of Yahweh inviting his people to come to the water, to come and eat and drink. In Israel water was often used as a symbol for the Torah. Thus it may be that Yahweh is inviting the people to come

and receive in abundance the gifts, both spiritual and physical, that he is ready to bestow. The second verse proclaims that the gifts are freely given by Yahweh and that the meal that he offers is of top quality.

These gifts are signs of a still greater gift, the life-giving covenant that God has made with his people. The mention of David, unique in the Deutero-Isaiah, hearkens back to the ideal time of the monarchy, suggesting that post-restoration Israel, Israel after its return from exile, will enjoy the benefits that it had at the optimum moment in its history.

In verses 6 and 7 an anonymous voice, perhaps that of the prophet himself, calls Israel to worship or, more likely, to repent of its evil ways and turn to the Lord for mercy. The reason is that humans, incapable of fully understanding the will of God, often act in a way that contravenes God's will.

The idea of water with which the hymn begins is reprised in verses 10 and 11. Yahweh reminds his people that the water that comes from rain and melted snow makes the earth fertile, thereby providing people food, especially bread, the staple of life. A final simile compares God's word to this life-serving water, confirming, perhaps, that the initial invitation to come to the water was an invitation to receive the Torah, God's word.

BROKEN FOR US

Several Fathers of the Church exploited the baptismal implications of the first reading. Thus, Theodoret saw in the hymns first two verses an invitation to baptism. Jerome, the great biblical scholar, linked the passage to the ancient baptismal custom of giving wine and milk to the newly baptized.

Read in this light, the first reading is particularly apropos for today's celebration of the Lord's baptism. Mark describes Jesus' baptism in rather simple fashion but Matthew reminds us that Jesus was baptized for our sake. In Matthew's account of the baptism, Jesus responds to the Baptist's hesitancy by saying, "It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15).

Baptized, we participate in the life and ministry of Jesus. The reception of baptism is an invitation to embrace Jesus' ministry as our own, an invitation that God freely offers to each of us. The Deutero-Isaiah reminds us that the invitation to the water is also an invitation to receive the Word of God, especially as that Word is offered in the Scriptures.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 18, 2009

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 6:13c-15a, 17-20 is a particularly important passage for a theology of the body. It reminds us that the bodies of the baptized are destined for the resurrection of the body and that, while we are alive, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. **John 1:35-42** describes the call of Jesus' first disciples, Andrew who proceeds to tell his brother Simon (Peter) about Jesus and an

another individual who remains nameless.

1 Samuel 3:3b-10, 19 describes the call of Samuel, the son of Hannah and Elkanah (see 1 Sam 1:1-2:21). Jewish tradition held that Samuel was about twelve years old when he received the prophetic call during a revelation at night. At the time Samuel was sleeping in the temple of Jerusalem, near the ark of God, the shrine that symbolized the presence of God in the temple.

At the time Eli, the priest, was a very old man (1 Sam 2:22).

That Samuel did not recognize the voice of Yahweh who was calling him underscores how ill-prepared he was to be called to be a prophet. That he failed a second time to recognize the voice of Lord further emphasizes Samuel's unpreparedness. Only at the third attempt—the Lord will not be thwarted in calling those whom he wants for his service—with assistance from the old priest does Samuel recognize the voice of the Lord. He describes himself as a servant of the Lord and professes his willingness to listen to what the Lord will say (see 1 Sam 3:11-14). That the Lord calls Samuel twice by own name is a typical feature of biblical call narratives (see, for example, Acts 9:4).

Although Samuel was called to be a prophet while still a youth, the Lord provided for him as he grew to adulthood (cf. Luke 1:52; 2:40, 52). During his adolescence Samuel was attentive to the word of the Lord, not forgetting anything that the Lord revealed to him.

BROKEN FOR US

Today's first and third readings describe God's call addressed to people who were not prepared for that call. Samuel was a relatively young boy asleep in the temple when the call came. Andrew and the nameless disciple were followers of John, who witnessed to Jesus when the latter happened to pass along nearby.

Though none of the three expected their call, they fulfilled the mission that God entrusted to them. With temerity of heart, the young Samuel told Eli what God had told him about the punishment to be inflicted on Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's scoundrel sons (1 Sam 2:12; 3:16-18). Andrew sought out his brother Simon and told him about the Messiah. We are told nothing more about the anonymous but he, too, was a real disciple. He went, and saw, and stayed. See Raymond F. Collins, *John and His Witness* (Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 33-45.

Like Samuel, Andrew, and the anonymous disciple, we, too, have been called. Responding to the call, we must listen to the word of God.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 25, 2009

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 7:29-31 describes, in very concrete terms, the eschatological reversal of the "already but not yet."

Mark 1:14-20 gives Mark's synopsis of Jesus' preaching as well as

Mark's description of the call of the first disciples.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 is taken from one of the shortest biblical books, that of Jonah the Prophet. Popularly known for the story of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish, a story that appears in less than three verses of the book's four chapters (see Jonah 2:1-3a), the book is a story of a reluctant prophet. Today's reading of Jonah 3:1-5, 10, is the sole use of a lection from Jonah in the Sunday liturgy's three-year cycle of scriptural readings.

With the scene set in pagan territory, the narrative focuses on three conversions. The first conversion is that of the prophet. When first commissioned by the Lord, the prophet attempted to go to Tarshish in order to escape from the presence of the Lord (Jon 1:2-3). When the Lord commissions him a second time, he responds quickly to the Lord's command and goes to the very heart of the city. Archeological evidence indicates that the ancient city was only three miles wide at its widest point. Hence, Sasson observes, "The contrast in number [three days; a single day] means to sharpen our perception of a prophet who is very much in a hurry to do what God asks of him, whether earnestly and enthusiastically or just to get it over with" (Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah* [AB 24B. New York: Doubleday, 1990], 236).

The people of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, were noted for their wickedness (Jon 1:2). Since the Book of Jonah does not specify the nature of that wickedness, it may be that "wickedness" refers to Assyria's oppression of Israel. The people respond to Jonah's short message—just five words in the Hebrew text—with faith and repentance. This is somewhat surprising since the prophet does not tell the Ninivites what they are to do. He simply announces that, like Sodom and Gomorrah, the city is soon to be razed. Hearing the message, the Ninivites turned to God, proclaimed a fast, and clothed themselves in penitential garb. The Assyrian king himself quickly followed suit (Jon 3:6).

The third conversion is that of God himself. The king had considered that God might change his mind (Jon 3:9) but that was not part of Jonah's message nor does the text give any indication that the people thought that God might change his mind if they repented of their wickedness.

Rather than merely noticing the people's penitential practices, God saw that they had turned from their evil ways. Consequently, God repented and spared Nineveh from the destruction that he had previously envisioned.

BROKEN FOR US

The liturgy uses the reading from Jonah to provide perspective for Jesus' call for repentance and reliance on the trustworthiness of his message. "Believe in the gospel" means "trust in my announcement of good news."

Jesus' message was almost as brief as that of Jonah. Jonah did not say what God would do if the people repented of their evil ways. Jesus announces that God will establish his kingdom. What we must do is repent of our sin and trust in Jesus' word.