

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118 (2012) 67-86 by Raymond F. Collins.

January 22, the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, begins the reading of the Gospel according to Mark in earnest. Mark is the oldest of the canonical gospels, written if not in 70 C.E., the year of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, in close proximity to that year. This makes Mark almost twenty years older than any of three other gospel stories in the New Testament.

Part of God’s gift of inspiration to the evangelist was the inspiration to proclaim the gospel in the form of a story about Jesus. Prior to Mark, the good news of our salvation had been proclaimed orally not only in short vignettes about Jesus but also in the form of short confessions, acclamations, and hymns. Ten to twenty years before Mark wrote his story the gospel was written in the form of Paul’s letters to Christians in Thessalonica and other places. Mark proclaimed the gospel in the literary form of a story about Jesus of Nazareth.

The story that Mark tells is clearly episodic. Any narrative consists of a series of episodes placed one after another in the development of its “plot.” Mark strung a number of episodes together but each of these episodes existed on its own in Mark’s tradition. It is Mark who has provided an apparently biographical structure in his arrangement of the sequence of episodes. The structure is Mark’s inspired literary achievement; it does not represent the historical sequence in which the events occurred.

2012 gives us an opportunity to appreciate more fully God’s gift of inspiration to the evangelist. An interruption will occur during the summer months when passages from John 6 are added to the sequence of liturgical readings as a complement to Mark’s introduction of the second story about Jesus feeding a large crowd of people (Mark 6:30-34). Apart from this five-week interruption, homilists should take advantage of this year of the Lord to enable their congregations to appreciate Jesus more fully with the help of the inspired mind and pen of the evangelist Mark.

SOLEMNITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

January 1, 2012

LITURGY

Numbers 6:22-27 contains the blessing of Aaron, which Moses’ brother and the priests of Israel, in a later period of time, pronounced over God’s people.

Galatians 4:4-7 speaks of the consequences of our being called children of God.

Luke 2:16-21 is a striking passage in which lowly shepherds provide interpretive responses to the birth of the child.

At the time of Jesus shepherds were not held in very high esteem but Luke portrays them as men who responded in faith to the angel’s message (Luke 2:11). Their haste symbolizes the enthusiasm of their response. Having seen the child, they communicated the good news to others. In the gospels and other early Christian literature, “make known” (*gnorizo*) suggests that a message is conveyed with a certain degree of solemnity. In the New Testament the verb essentially functions as a technical term in reference to the proclamation of the salvation event in Christ. Luke asserts that all who heard the gospel message proclaimed by the shepherds were amazed by it.

In contrast with the role of the shepherds as evangelists, Luke presents Mary as a woman of faith who ponders the meaning of recent events (see Luke 2:51). Throughout the gospels

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Mary is principally portrayed as a woman of faith, as she is in verse 19. For more about Mary in the scriptures, read Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

With regard to people, the shepherds functioned as evangelists. With regard to God, the shepherds imitated the angels in glorifying and praising God (see 2:13). Having fulfilled their evangelical mission, they returned to give thanks and praise to God.

The gospel lection concludes with a short note about Jesus’ circumcision. The parallelism between John the Baptist’s circumcision and naming and Jesus’ circumcision and naming is obvious (see Luke 1:59-60). That Jesus was circumcised as the law required (see Gen 17:10-11; Lev 12:2-30) is one of several narrative features in the first few chapters of Luke’s gospel which presents Joseph, Mary, and Jesus as pious and law-abiding Jews. That Jesus receives the name given by the angel shows that Mary and Joseph were not only obedient to the law but that they faithfully fulfilled the will of God as made known by the angel (Luke 1:31).

BROKEN FOR US

The characters in today’s gospel story have much to teach us about the virtue of faith. The shepherds teach us that faith should lead us to share our faith with others, to be evangelists in the basic sense of the word.

They also teach us that faith should lead to joyful prayer and thanksgiving. Men and women of faith join with the angels in offering thanks and praise to God for God’s gift of salvation brought about in and through Jesus.

Mary teaches us that people of faith reflect upon what they believe. What does it mean to believe that Jesus is the son of the Most High (Luke 1:32)? Have we reflected upon what we believe so that our faith is truly a mature faith, a faith of a mature man or woman?

Mary also teaches us that faith requires that men and women of faith respond to God’s will as that is revealed to us in the scriptures but also as God’s will is made known to us in other ways.

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

January 8, 2012

LITURGY

Isaiah 60:1-6 describes people coming to Jerusalem from different nations. They were guided by the glory of the Lord that has descended upon the holy city.

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 proclaims that Gentiles are co-heirs with Jews in the promise that has been realized in Jesus Christ through the gospel.

Matthew 2:1-11 describes the magi’s search for the newborn king of the Jews.

Apart from Jesus and the magi, an important figure in the story is King Herod. From a literary point of view, he should be seen as the narrative’s third main character. The Roman senate appointed Herod, a powerful Idumean, as king of the Jews in 40 B.C.E. Herod gained control of Jerusalem in 37 B.C.E. and reigned as king until his death in 4 B.C.E. His reign was noted for its important construction projects, especially Caesarea Maritima and the temple at Jerusalem. Paranoid, he built a number of fortresses scattered around Palestine, the most famous of which is the one at Masada. Just four years ago, Israeli archeologists discovered yet another sign of his extravagance: a 400-seat private theater decorated with beautiful Roman paintings in

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the winter palace at Herodion. King Herod’s cruelty was legendary; he put to death even members of his own family. Herod’s story is the background against which Matthew wrote today’s narrative. Matthew’s story of Jesus’ infancy is similar in many respects to the Jewish stories about Moses that feature his escape from the clutches of pharaoh (see especially Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities* (9:9-15).

The narrative does not indicate the number of magi in the caravan. The West’s traditional “three magi” is based on their offering three gifts. In the Christian tradition of the East, there are typically four magi. Four is a symbol of fullness. “Magi” is impossible to translate. Of Persian origin, it would suggest that the magi came from Persia (modern Iran). Their interest in astrology—the “star” was probably a comet—suggests that they came from Babylon (modern Iraq). The gifts, however, suggest that they came from the desert areas of Arabia or Syria. Today we recognize the magi as having from what we call the Near East.

Their announced intention was to “do homage” to the newborn. The verb (*proskyneō*) is one that appears frequently in Matthew’s gospel to describe the reverential posture of those who approach Jesus with due respect. The word is used three times in today’s story (Matt 2:2, 8, 11; see 4:9, 10; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 20:20; 28:9, 17).

Jesus is identified by name only once, namely, at the beginning of the narrative. The magi speak of him as “king of the Jews,” the title that would be affixed to the identification plaque at the crucifixion (see Matt 27:11, 29). Since this was Herod’s official title, the magi’s use of the title would suggest that they were looking for someone who would someday succeed Herod on the throne or perhaps usurp the throne. Herod implicitly speaks of the newborn as the Christ, a designation whose messianic (and political) connotations would be well understood by Jews (see Matt 1:1, 16, 18).

Bethlehem, Jesus’ birthplace (see John 7:42), is the town of David. Matthew uses a fulfillment citation, based on Micah 5:2 to underscore the historico-theological significance of the village. Entering the house where the child and his mother were, the magi accomplished what they set out to do, namely, pay homage and offer their gifts. Christian tradition speaks of the gift of gold as a sign of Jesus’ royalty, the frankincense as a token of his divinity, and the myrrh as a sign of his humanity culminating in his death.

The story of representatives of the Gentile world coming to Jesus at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel anticipates the gospel’s final story, the commissioning of the disciples to preach the gospel to the whole world (Matt 28:16-20).

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 15, 2012

LITURGY

1 Samuel 3:3b-10, 19 describes the call of Samuel, the son of Hannah and Elkanah, a twelve year old boy who received the prophetic while he was asleep in the temple of Jerusalem.

1 Corinthians 6:13c-15a, 17-20, an important passage for the Christian understanding of the human body, reminds us that the bodies of the baptized, destined for the resurrection of the body, are temples of the Holy Spirit.

John 1:35-42 portrays John in his role as a witness to Jesus.

In the language of the Fourth Gospel, the sequence of verbs, see, say, behold introduces a

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formula of revelation. Thus, John is formally portrayed as the one who reveals that Jesus is the Lamb of God (cf. John 1:29; see also 1 Pet 1:19; Rev 5:6). It is difficult to determine precisely the meaning of the enigmatic formula. Most likely it refers to the Paschal Lamb (Exod 12:3-6, 21). The lamb to be slaughtered was to be without blemish. In the Passover narrative of Jesus’ death, the evangelist makes a point of saying that Jesus’ legs were not broken as he hung on the cross (John 13:33, 36). He was an unblemished victim. Thus, the metaphor of John 1:36 anticipates the Fourth Gospel’s Passover narrative.

The pair of disciples who had been with John respond to the revelation made by John. They leave John to follow Jesus. They address Jesus as teacher (cf. John 13: 14) even though, thus far in the narrative, they have not yet heard Jesus say anything, let alone function as their teacher.

The language of the little scene (vv. 37-39) functions on two levels, the narrative level and a symbolic/theological level. Thus “following” means walking behind Jesus but it also means becoming a disciple. “Looking” and “seeing” refer to physical sight but they also refer to the insight of faith. “Staying” suggests that the pair would like to know where Jesus was living at the time; on a deeper level, the word—the Greek word, *meno*, is sometimes translated “stay;” at other times it is translated “abide”—suggests that the disciples will come to understand that Jesus abides with the Father (John 14: 5; cf. John 15:5, etc.).

The evangelist then identifies one of the hitherto anonymous pair as Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. The Fourth Gospel leaves the other disciple in anonymity. As a disciple, Andrew does what the disciples of Jesus are expected to do, namely, bring others to Jesus. The one whom he brings to Jesus is his own brother, a man named Simon.

Telling Simon about Jesus, Andrew identifies Jesus as the Messiah, a royal figure like David whom many Jews expected to be God’s agent in the inauguration of the final times. For the benefit of a Hellenistic readership the evangelist translates Messiah as Christ. The words are synonymous. Both are derived from a verbal adjective which means “anointed,” “Messiah” from the Hebrew form of the verb, “Christ” from the Greek form of the verb.

When Jesus meets Simon, he calls him Cephas, the rock. In the canonical gospels, the enigmatic name appears only in John 1:42, but it is frequently used by Paul in First Corinthians and Galatians. The name symbolizes the role that Simon will assume among Jesus disciples (see Matt 16:17-18). Most often the evangelist will refer to him as Simon Peter, as he does in John 1:41, but occasionally the evangelist uses the name Peter, without Simon, when he writes about him.

BROKEN FOR US

Among all the evangelists, the Fourth Evangelist is the one who most often provides the names of characters other than Jesus. Accordingly one, approach to today’s gospel reading might be to focus on the characters in today’s episode and the role that they played in the history of salvation. John witnesses to Jesus. Andrew, a true disciple, brings another person to Jesus. Simon is the Rock. As these three had a role in the history of salvation, so do we. We are called to witness to Jesus. We are called to lead others to Jesus. We are called to be bed-rock in our faith, so that we can support the faith of others.

On the other hand, it is often observed that the Fourth Gospel has the richest christology of the four canonical gospels. Hence, another approach to today’s reading might be to focus on Jesus as the Paschal Lamb, a reality whose denouement is revealed only in the Passion narrative. Again, we might focus on the idea that the deepest insight of faith is that Jesus abides with the

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Father and that we who are Jesus’ disciples abide in him as he abides in the Father.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 22, 2012

LITURGY

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 speaks of three conversions, the conversion of the prophet Jonah, the conversion of the people of Nineveh, and the conversion of God himself.

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

Mark 1:14-20 follows the episode of Jesus’ temptation by Satan, Mark 1:12-13, which will be read on the First Sunday of Lent, February 26. The passage comprises two short narratives, a summary of Jesus’ preaching (vv. 14-15) and the call of the disciples, Simon and Andrew, James and John (vv. 16-20). Together with the story of Jesus’ temptation, the summary of Jesus’ preaching will be part of the gospel lection on the First Sunday of Lent (Mark 1:12-15)..

The summary of Jesus’ preaching falls into two parts, an announcement and an exhortation. Jesus announces that there is not much time left before something momentous is going to happen. “Time’s up!” he says. The time of preparation is over. The kingdom of God is at hand. The “kingdom of God” is God’s eschatological reign, for which the Jewish people had been awaiting through many years of oppression. God was about to show himself to be their king and king over the whole world. The way that he would initially manifest his kingship was not what nationalistic Jews were expecting. Nevertheless Jesus said that God was about to make himself known as king.

The exhortation likewise has two parts. First of all, Jesus urges the people to change their ways, to repent. “Repent” (*metanoieite*) is much more than a simple change of heart. A response to Jesus’ exhortation entails a complete change in the way that one lives his or her life, beginning with a change in the values that motivate a person’s conduct.

Then, Jesus urges people to “believe in the gospel.” Essentially this means, “trust me!” “take seriously what I have to say.” The gospel (*euangelion*), the good news that Jesus’ audience is urged to believe, is his announcement that things are going to be different because God is about to show himself to be king. Jesus wants the people to accept the coming of the kingdom with utmost seriousness.

The second part of today’s gospel reading describes the call of four disciples, plying their fishermen’s trade on the Sea of Galilee. The “sea,” actually a large lake, is a major topographical feature of the northern tier of Palestine, the Galilee. The “sea” is sometimes called the Lake of Genesaret, from its shape which may be compared to that of a harp.

The first two fishermen called by Jesus are a pair of brothers, Simon and Andrew. They have just begun to fish. Jesus sees them as they were casting their nets into the lake. Jesus orders them to follow him, to become his disciples. This would entail a change in their primary task in life. Instead of catching fish, they would be catching human beings, the generic *anthropon*, rather than the gender-specific *andron*. Jesus’ metaphor is biblical. The metaphor appears in the writings of the prophets (Hab 1:14; cf. Jer 16:16; Ezek 29:4-5; Amos 4:2).

The second pair of brothers consisted of James and John, sons of Zebedee who was with them in the boat. Mending the nets, they were either finishing up the day’s work or preparing for it. The business was a small family business. Zebedee was well-enough off to be able to employ hired hands. Jesus called James and John. They left what they were doing and became Jesus’ disciples.

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The NAB’s translation of Mark’s narrative of the call of the disciples omits the Greek word *euthys*, “immediately.” “at once.” The omitted particle adds a note of eschatological urgency to the Markan story. The call of the disciples is related to the announcement that God is about to manifest himself as king. The disciples are about to involve themselves in the divine project.

The evangelist’s summary description of the way that they abandoned their work as fishermen is a literary device used to portray their total acceptance of Jesus’ call. Occasionally traces in the gospel narratives, for example, in John 21, show that the disciples did not completely give up the fisherman’s trade.

BROKEN FOR US

Reading today’s gospel passage, we should be aware that those who were called to be Jesus’ disciples were men with a job. They were also men who belonged to real human families; they had brothers. James and John had a living father. Peter, we will discover as we read the story, was a married man..

No less than Peter and Andrew, James and John are we called to be disciples of Jesus. We, too, have families and occupations. We are called to “abandon” our families and our jobs for the sake of the kingdom. But the abandonment is only apparent. What we are called to do is to let our following of Jesus really permeate our family relationships and the way that we conduct ourselves in the world of commerce and industry.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 29, 2012

LITURGY

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 says that rather than following sorcerers and magicians, faithful Israelites are to rely on the prophets whom the Lord will raise up in their midst.

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 until the Parousia.

Mark 1:21-28’s opening scene portrays Jesus, together with the brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, visiting the town of Capernaum (village of Nahum). The town, a fishing village located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, was to become the center of Jesus ministry in Galilee.

Pious Jew that he was, Jesus visited the synagogue on his first sabbath in town. Those who visit the Holy Land today can see the ruins of the fourth- or fifth- century synagogue built on the site of the first-century synagogue.

Those who spoke to a synagogue gathering were usually rabbis and scribes but all Jewish men had a right to speak in the gathering. As a first-time visitor to the synagogue, the normal protocol would have been for Jesus to be invited to speak by the leader of the synagogue. Mark does not mention any invitation. It would appear that Mark wants his readers to know that Jesus had authority to teach and so Jesus takes the initiative in availing himself of the opportunity to speak; he does not wait for an invitation. The evangelist does not appear to have any interest in the content of Jesus’ teaching. Rather he focuses on the authority with which Jesus taught.

The evangelist inserts the account of an exorcism between two mentions of Jesus’ authority (*exousia*, vv. 22, 27). This is the first of four Markan accounts in which Jesus performs an exorcism (cf. Mark 4:35-41; 5:1-20; 9:14-29). The story illustrates Jesus’ authority. Jesus has authority over

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demonic powers. That an exorcism occurs at the beginning of Mark’s story about Jesus is important for understanding the entire story. For Mark, Jesus’ appearance is in function of the coming of the kingdom of God, God’s victory over the powers of evil, symbolized by the unclean spirit whom Jesus would expel. Addressing Jesus as “the Holy One of God,” the unclean spirit recognizes Jesus as the one in whom God’s power is at work. God’s holy one is God’s agent in bringing about the kingdom.

From another point of view, the unclean spirit’s calling Jesus the holy one of God is a bit of name-calling. Identifying Jesus, the spirit tries to exercise power over him, to get him under the spirit’s control. Jesus wins the battle. Ultimately, he commands the spirit to be quiet and leave the possessed person. But the spirit does not give up easily. It is a struggle. The spirit succumbs to Jesus’ power, crying out with a loud voice and convulsing the poor man as he does so.

In a choral response, the observers ask “What is this?” “What’s up?” they say. Notwithstanding their uncertainty as to what was going on, they realized that Jesus was a man with authority. He spoke with authority and had authority over unclean spirits. They realized that even though Jesus had performed only a single exorcism, unclean spirits were subject to his authority.

As often in his story, the evangelist notes that the significance of what happens extends beyond the immediate situation and so he adds, that Jesus’ fame “spread everywhere (*pantachou*) throughout the whole (*holen*) region of Galilee.” As was the case in the NAB’s translation of last Sunday’s gospel passage, the NAB translation of v. 28 fails to translate *euthys*, “immediately,” the Greek particle that imparts a sense of eschatological urgency to the narrative.

BROKEN FOR US

The evangelist’s account of Jesus’ exorcism of the man with the unclean spirit is a dramatic account which underscores Jesus’ *exousia*. Depending on the context in which it appears, the Greek word can be translated as “authority” or as “power.” The word appears nine times in Mark’s gospel, always with reference to Jesus who conferred it upon his disciples (Mark 3:15; 6:7).

The society in which we live is one that does not take authority very seriously. The authority of parents, teachers, government, and the church are constantly challenged and called into question. As a society we do not like authority. We do not want to be told anything. We want to consider ourselves absolutely free to do and say anything we want.

Today’s gospel reading is a reminder that, despite our reluctance to accept authority, in God’s plan of salvation the authority of Jesus is a given, that is, Jesus’ authority as a person, his authority in action, and his authority in teaching.