

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 Extract from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," *Emmanuel* 114:4 (2008) 368-383.

Origen is generally considered to the first of Christianity's great interpreters of the Scripture. In the preface to his chef d'oeuvre, *First Principles*, Origen wrote: "[all] who know Christ to be the truth . . . derive the knowledge which incites men to a good and happy life from no other source than from the very words and teachings of Christ. And by the words of Christ we do not mean only those which he spoke when he became man and tabernacled in the flesh; for before that time, Christ, the Word of God, was in Moses and the prophets."

Origen teaches that the true meaning of the entire body of Scripture is disclosed in Christ. For Origen both the Old Testament and the New Testament were inspired by God and were intended to nourish the church (see *First Principles* 4:6).

This having been said, it behooves us who preach the gospel to delve into the Old Testament and discover there the Word of God, in Origen's language, the word of Christ himself.

#### **FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

July 6, 2008

#### LITURGY

**Romans 8:9, 11-13** reminds us that the Spirit of God through whose power Jesus was raised from the dead will likewise raise us from the dead on the condition that we live by the Spirit.

**Matthew 11:25-30** contains the remarkable "Johannine" passage in Matthew's gospel (Matt 11:27; cf. John 10:14-15) and reminds us that Jesus calls us to follow him so that we may enjoy heavenly rest as he does.

**Zechariah 9:9-10** is the focal point of Zechariah 9, the beginning of the oracle (cf. Zech 9:1) which opens the second part of the Book of Zechariah (Zechariah 9-14). The second part of Zechariah is sometimes called Second Zechariah. Its chapters appear to be a later addition to Zechariah 1-8, the so-called First Zechariah.

The pair of verses in today's reading are nestled between a part of the oracle that speaks about the restoration of the land of Israel (Zech 9:1-8) and that portion of the oracle that speaks about the restoration of the people of Israel (Zech 9:11-17). Verse 9 describes a peaceful king entering the city of Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, a young donkey as the parallel phrase, "a colt, the foal of an ass" indicates. Both Matthew and the Fourth Gospel appropriated the verse in their descriptions of Jesus' "Palm Sunday" entrance into Jerusalem (Matt 21:5; John 12:15).

In the Ancient Near East donkeys were a common means of transportation. Frequently a king would ride on a donkey during a royal procession. Zechariah's ideal king is portrayed by two characteristic traits. His humility or meekness, always a

significant royal attribute, coheres with the image of his riding on the donkey.

The New American Bible identifies the king's other characteristic with "justice." The Jewish Publication Society's recent translation of the Tanakh renders the term as "victorious, triumphant," as do other modern translations of the text, including the NRSV. In any case, the Hebrew term points to the king as being God's instrument in leading the nation of Israel.

Verse 10 complements the image of verse 9 not only by identifying the mission of the king as the proclamation of peace, but also by describing him banishing the instruments of war, the horse and chariot as well as the soldiers' bow (cf. Ps 37:15; Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-4).

#### BROKEN FOR US

Among the evangelists, Matthew is unique in portraying meekness as a quality of Jesus (Matt 21:5) and his disciples (Matt 5:5). Today's third reading brings together these two features of Matthew's gospel. The disciples are to learn from Jesus who is meek and humble to the core (Matt 11:29).

The liturgy highlights meekness with its choice of Zech 9:9-10 as the first reading, a passage that describes the ideal king of Israel as a decidedly royal figure, one of whose characteristic traits is his meekness.

With rich imagery the prophetic text fleshes out the notion of meekness with a vivid description of the removal of the implements of war. As the United States prepares to elect new leadership, believing Christians might reflect on the contrast between the Scripture's description of God's ideal leader as one who banishes the instruments of war with our own nation's readiness to engage in preemptive warfare.

#### **FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

July 13, 2008

#### LITURGY

**Romans 8:18-23** provides an eschatological reflection on creation.

**Matthew 13:1-23** contains Matthew's version of the parable of the sower, Jesus' reflection, and an "explanation" of the parable which was likely developed in the early tradition by Jesus' disciples.

**Isaiah 55:10-11** comes from the final chapter of the Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55). The pair of verses describe the dynamic and powerful word of God. Two figures of speech enable the author to make his point.

A simile compares God's word to rain which causes growth and provides sustenance for human beings. Chapter 55 begins (vv. 1-3, the reading for August 3) with a description of God inviting people to come to him for their sustenance. Ultimately God's word is comparable to food; both provide nourishment for humans albeit in different ways. A similar point was made by Jesus who quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 and said, "One does not live by bread alone, but

by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).

Personification compares God's word to a messenger or agent sent on a mission. The messenger does not return until the mission is accomplished.

God's word is much more than a collection of words; it is much more than a mere statement. God's word is dynamic, creative, and powerful. God's word represents God in his creative and salvific activity. The creation story in Genesis 1 dramatizes the creative power of God's word. The story of the cure of the paralytic with its emphasis on what Jesus says illustrates the salvific power of the word (Matt 9:2-8, v. 5). The word of God accomplishes what it says. It is the ultimate exercise of what linguists call performative language.

#### BROKEN FOR US

The explanation of the parable of the sower compares the seed to what Matthew calls the word of the kingdom, that is, the word of Jesus, the human expression of the Word of God. Isaiah's simile develops a similar analogy between the fruitful seed and the word of God.

Lest the point of the parable be overlooked in the hortatory explanation, the reader should note that the three fruit-producing handfuls of seed yield a harvest that is respectively one hundred, sixty, and thirty times bountiful. Three handfuls yield a crop of 190. Three handfuls produce nothing. Simple mathematics reveals the point of the parable. God's word is powerful. At the cost of the loss of three handfuls of seed, a crop one hundred and ninety times larger than a single handful of seed has been produced.

Christians have a unique opportunity to grasp something of the power of God's word. When Catholic Christians come together to celebrate the eucharist they have a double experience of God's, the graceful experience of God's word in the liturgy of the word, the graceful experience of the eucharist in the liturgy of the eucharist. Both the table of the word and the table of the sacrament provide God's people with nourishment.

Further reflection might lead us to consider the power of the word spoken in the celebration of the sacraments, "I baptize you" . . . "I absolve you from your sins" . . . "I do." Simple words in which God is active, adopting a human being as his son or daughter, forgiving human fault, or joining a man and woman together in the saving union called marriage. God's word is powerful indeed!

#### **SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

July 20, 2008

#### LITURGY

**Romans 8:26-27** describes the power of the Spirit at work in prayer, particularly at times when we cannot find words with which to pray.

**Matthew 13:24-43** contains two additional seed parables along with the parable of the woman with the yeast. Among the Synoptics the

parable of the wheat and the tares is found only in Matthew.

**Wisdom 12:13, 16-19**

The Book of Wisdom is the most recent book in the Old Testament but it is not included in the so-called Protestant canon which considers the book to be one of the apocrypha.

Written not quite a full century before the birth of Christ, the Book of Wisdom is commonly attributed to Solomon and is often known as "The Wisdom of Solomon." Solomon died several centuries before the book was written. Solomon's name does not appear in the book but it is clear that the author wanted to invoke Solomon's authority (cf. Wis 9:7-8) because of his legendary stature as the wise king of Israel (1 Kgs 3:11-12; 2 Chr 1:11-12).

Today's liturgical lection begins with the proclamation that there is but one God (cf. Deut 6:4) and speaks of the omnipotence of God, manifested in his care for all people and his supreme justice.

Verses 16-18 expand on the theme of divine omnipotence manifested in God's leniency and forbearance. Continuing this tradition the Babylonian Talmud contains a saying attributed to Joshua ben Levi, an early third century C.E. rabbi, which says that God's omnipotence reaches its culmination in the repression of his wrath and his forbearance of the wicked (*b. Yoma* 69b).

Israel could take consolation in the idea that those who doubted the omnipotence of God, Israel's enemies, would feel the effects of God's power. On the other hand, Israel, which has experienced God's power, is challenged to reject its temerity and insolence. God's judgment on the nations should give Israel no cause for complacency.

The final verse of today's reading is manifestly hortatory. Its first exhortation urges Israelites to imitate divine forbearance and forgiveness (cf. Matt 6:12, 14-15; 21:35). The second exhortation challenges Israel to be hopeful because God will be lenient in his judgment and allow them to repent of their sins.

**BROKEN FOR US**

Two similarities link today's first reading with the parable of the wheat and the tares. The first is the coexistence of good and evil in the world. Both readings suggest that such coexistence is part of God's plan of humankind. The Old Testament reading attributes this co-existence to God's forbearance.

A second similarity bears upon the nature of divine forbearance. The parable suggests that God does not will the immediate eradication of evil, the destruction of evil as soon as it becomes evident. Indeed, the explanation of the parable suggests that it is only on the Day of the Lord that evil will be fully destroyed. Wisdom's second exhortation gives a reason why God does not immediately eradicate evil, namely, that sinners might have opportune time to repent of their sins and change their ways.

Each of the exhortations with which today's first reading concludes provide ample material for a homily. The first exhortation calls us to forgive others as we have been forgiven. As often as we pray the "Our Father" we promise to do so. The

second exhortation reminds us that God gives each of us sinners ample time for repentance. As the Romans said, *carpe diem*, for there will come a time when we will no longer have an opportunity to change our ways.

#### **SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

July 27, 2008

#### LITURGY

**Romans 8:28-30** is a passage, exceedingly rich in theological content, which speaks of our call to share in Christ's glorification.

**Matthew 13:44-52** contains the parables of the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl of great price, and the dragnet of fish, the final three parables in Matthew 13, the chapter of parables.

**1 Kings 3:5, 7-12**, containing Solomon's prayer for wisdom and God's response, is an appropriate sequel to last Sunday's first reading.

The narrative portrays God as taking the initiative in his gift of wisdom to Solomon. God's revelation to Solomon occurred during a dream at night. Dreams and night-time visions are one of the typical means of revelation in the Old Testament (Gen 20:3; 40:1-8; Judg 7:13). This mode of revelation continues in the New Testament, where the Gospel according to Matthew speaks about God's revelation in the dreams of Joseph (1:20-21; 2:13, 19-20) and Pilate's wife (Matt 27:19).

To confirm the reality of God's revelation to Solomon the Old Testament specifies that the dream occurred in Gibeon (see the parallel narrative in 2 Chr 1:2-13), the story of whose acquisition by Israel is narrated in Joshua 9. Today's liturgical reading omits, however, the reference to Gibeon with which verse 5 begins in the biblical text.

Verses 7-9 describe Solomon's prayer (par. 2 Chr 1:8-10). The king professes his humility by stating that he was only a youth, even though he was already in his early twenties. Solomon acknowledges the enormity of the task that has become his responsibility as king of Israel in the stead of the great king David, his father. Solomon's claim to be but a young man is a typical motif acknowledging that of himself he is inadequate to the task at hand (cf. Jos 1:6-10). The one gift that he needs from God in order to be a good king over Israel is the ability to judge, to distinguish what is right from what is wrong (cf. Isa 5:20).

Verses 10-12 describe God's conferral of the gift of wisdom and understanding on Solomon. God was pleased that the young king did not ask for such personal gifts as riches or a long life, nor even vindication over his enemies. Given the appropriateness of Solomon's prayer, God answers it. Almost immediately after affirming that God answered Solomon's prayer the First Kings gives an example of Solomon's legendary wisdom, the story of the children of the two mothers (1 Kgs 3:16-28).

## BROKEN FOR US

The link between today's first and third readings is not as easily identifiable as it is on other Sundays in Ordinary Time. The link is to be found in the fact that the disciples whom Matthew describes as having listened to the seven parables told by Jesus were given the gift of understanding the parables. See Matthew 13:11-12a, read on July 13.

Like Solomon, Jesus' disciples had received the gift of understanding. This gift sets them apart from outsiders who do not understand the parables (Matt 13:12b-15). The disciples are considered blessed because they have received and acknowledge the gift that has been given to them (Matt 13:16).

A homily in keeping with today's first reading might well focus on the quality of our prayer. It is so "normal" to pray for things for ourselves or our loved ones or to ask God to "take care" of those with whom we don't get along. Solomon's prayer and God's response to it reminds us that our prayer should be appropriate to the vocation that God has given to each one of us.

While praying for their children, parents should pray for the gifts that they need to be good parents. While praying the prayers of the office, priests, deacons, and religious should also pray for the gifts of wisdom and discernment in the exercise of their ministry.