

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 offer this portion of his articles online at St. Luke's website.

An excerpt from Fr. Collins' "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," *Emmanuel* 114:6 (2008) 553-571.

In reference to the Hebrew Scriptures, which constitute the first reading of the Sunday liturgy, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council proclaimed, "The Books of the Old Testament . . . reveal to all people the knowledge of God and humans and the ways in which God, just and merciful, deals with us . . . These books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence." (*Dei Verbum* 15).

THE COMMEMORATION OF ALL THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED (All Souls)

November 2, 2008.

LITURGY

Romans 5:5-11 or **Romans 6:3-9** are suggested from among the thirteen choices found in the lectionary. The Romans' readings respectively speak about the death of Christ which effects our reconciliation to God and about the gift of justification that has come through Christ.

John 6:37-40, the suggested reading from among twelve possibilities, says that the purpose of God's having sent his Son is that we not be lost but that we be raised to eternal life.

Wisdom 3:1-9 is the suggested reading from among the other possibilities, **Wisdom 4:7-15** and **Isaiah 25:6-9**.

The suggested reading comes from Wisdom is taken from the first part of a book popularly attributed to Solomon but actually written during the century before the birth of Christ. Scholars generally hold that the book was written by an Alexandrian Jew. Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus and Paul, is probably the best known of the Alexandrian Jews. Philo was strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, as is the passage that is suggested as today's first reading.

The language of the reading might lead the homilist to concentrate on either its Hellenistic anthropology with its mention of souls (*psychai* in Greek) or on the brief chastisement (*oliga paidethentes*, verse 5) which is easily interpreted as a reference to Purgatory. Either of these approaches would miss the principal point of the reading which is to affirm that death is a transition to a better existence, a time of immortality when a person is, as it were, cradled in the arms of God.

The mention of the brief chastisement is contrasted with a great blessing (*megala euergetethesontai*). The structure of the Greek sentence makes it very clear that what the author intends to affirm is that the blessing that God will give to those who remain loyal to him in the trials of their earthly lives, which the author describes as a "brief chastisement," greatly exceeds, in

quality and "quantity," the time of trial. During the period of eternal blessing, the righteous shall suffer no torment.

To make his point, the author confronts those whom he deems "foolish," that is, who have no belief or trust in God. Fools may think that death is a punishment or that death leads to annihilation but that is not the case. The righteous who have died are "in peace." Peace, the reader should remember, is a biblical cipher for the fullness of blessings that God can give to human beings.

The final verses of today's reading employ different images in an effort to help people think about the future, blissful existence of those whose hope in God has led them to lead a righteous life. Jewish apocalyptic literature commonly compared the future life to the brilliance of a star shining in the night.

First Enoch, for example, says, "you shall shine as the lights of heaven; you shall shine and you shall be seen" (*1 Enoch* 104:2).

Sharing in the reign of God is another key image in the author's description of the future life (see also Daniel 7:22). This idea has been taken up by some New Testament texts, including Matthew 19:28, 1 Corinthians 6:2 (cf. 1 Cor 4:8); and Revelation 20:4.

The final image is less pictorial. The author simply states that in the life-to-come the righteous will live with God in love, experiencing his grace and mercy in the company of all the righteous whom God has chosen.

BROKEN FOR US

Rarely, if ever other than on this day of commemoration, does the lectionary offer twenty-eight readings from among which the presider and/or preacher must make a choice. It should go without saying that some serious consideration be given to the choice that is to be made and that the reader be informed in advance about the choice that has been made. Even on the Feast of All Souls, it is important that the homilist preach a homily that is based on the scriptural readings.

The suggested choices for the celebration of today's liturgy should make us realize that the message of this feast is one of future happiness with God. That is why the liturgical ministers wear white, the symbol of the resurrection. The three readings suggested for today offer a number of paradigms which a homilist might usefully employ to bring out the message of hope that we celebrate today.

THE DEDICATION OF THE LATERAN BASILICA

November 9, 2008

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 3:9c-11, 16-17 is a beautiful metaphorical description of a building, built by humans but transformed into a temple of God by the indwelling of the Spirit.

John 2:13-12 is the Fourth Gospel's account of the "cleansing of the temple."

Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12 is an excerpt from the chapter in the Book

of Ezekiel that follows several chapters (Ezekiel 40-46), describing the temple at Jerusalem and the life of the community of Israelites who worshipped in it. The prophet's vision of the river gives a pictorial image of the effects of God's presence among his people.

A sacred river is also mentioned in Joel 3:18 and Zechariah 14:8 (cf. Revelation 20) as well as in other Ancient Near Eastern sources, especially Ugaritic and Mesopotamian sources. Genesis 2:10-14 describes four rivers that watered the land, indicating God's desire that the land should be fertile and perhaps suggesting that the river of the Ezekiel's vision is symbolic of a return to primal happiness.

At first the prophet saw but a trickle of water coming out from under the threshold of the temple. The trickle came out from the east side of the temple mount into the Valley of the Kedron and from the south side of the temple mount into the Valley of Hinnon. The trickle becomes a mighty river (Ezekiel 47:3-5, verses omitted by the lectionary) flowing southward towards the Dead Sea and the Valley of Arabah lying to the south of the Dead Sea.

Remarkably, even the saline waters of the Dead Sea become fresh; the sea now able to sustain aquatic life. There will be an abundance of fish. Verse 10, also omitted in the lectionary reading, describes fishermen standing along the shore of the "Dead Sea" catching many different kinds of fish.

Equally remarkable, the great river will irrigate the land along its banks so that the fruit trees will be ever-bearing, yielding a monthly crop of fruit. The leaves of these trees can serve a medicinal purpose. Thus God provides abundantly for his people, giving them a variety of foods and medicine to ensure their health.

BROKEN FOR US

The cathedral of the bishop of Rome, the Basilica of St. John Lateran is often described as the mother church of Christianity. All three of today's readings describe the temple of God, a symbol and means of God's dwelling among his people. Other than that commonality, an explicit link among the readings is difficult to ascertain. Each of the readings has its own temple-related message.

The reading from the prophet Ezekiel is a striking pictorial portrayal of the presence of God among us. God's presence is architecturally symbolized by the temple in Jerusalem and the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome. The divine presence brings with it remarkable blessings, not the least of which is water, by means of which God provides food and medicine for his people.

While we offer thanks to God for his presence and his gifts, we dare not overlook the importance of God's gift of water to us and our responsibility to so care for that water that it sustains life. Rarely have we in North America been forced to look at the water we drink—a daily concern for one quarter of the world's population—but last spring's floods in Iowa and bans on outside watering throughout the country serve as reminders of how tenuous is our supply of drinking water. Conditions of drought in the

south and southwest have led to battles between states as to who has the right to the water in a river and how that water should be used. Mayoral initiatives with regard to bottled water are yet another indication of our need to think about water.

From another point of view, we must seriously consider our polluted rivers and over-fished oceans. Rivers and oceans are among God's many gifts to us, a token of his caring presence among us. Through human neglect and lack of prudence the God-given waters are not able to provide the food that God intended them to provide for his people.

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

November 16, 2008

LITURGY

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 picks up the semi-continuous reading of Paul's oldest letter, the reading of which had been omitted during the past two Sundays, the feasts of All Souls and the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica.

Matthew 25:14-30 narrates the parable of the talents, of which the person with the least number of talents is chastised for not using them properly.

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31 is a truncated reading of the final chapter of the Book of Proverbs. The reading contains several verses of an ode to a capable wife. The full hymn is anacrostic poem of twenty-two lines, each line beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in proper sequence.

The husband is mentioned in only a few verses of the poem, including two verses included in today's reading. The husband who has found a capable wife is like someone who has found a pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45-46). To find a really valuable pearl is a great discovery; even greater, is the finding of a truly capable wife. Among the valued qualities of a woman in the author's patriarchal and rural culture were her ability to oversee the production of flax and the shearing of sheep. From the flax and the wool she would be able to provide linen and woolen cloth with which to clothe her husband and children.

The hymn describes the woman working with the small hand loom to make the cloth and those same hands working to provide for the poor and needy in her household. Her industry in providing for her loved ones is joined to her generosity in caring for the poor as valuable qualities in a woman who is both capable and worthy of a husband's love.

The final verses of today's reading affirm that a woman's physical beauty is transitory. Her true beauty is to be found in her "fear of the Lord," that is, the awe and reverence that she has for the Lord. Should she possess this quality, her husband and her children will sing of her qualities and praise her in public.

BROKEN FOR US

The reading from the Book of Proverbs gives an example of someone who has used their God-given talents wisely and for the

benefit of others. The liturgy's choice of a "housewife" as an example of a person who has used their talents as God has intended is striking. We might have expected the liturgy to offer the example of someone who has an extraordinary talent, but that is not the case. A woman, living in patriarchal times, whose household abilities are used effectively is cited as an example of a person who wisely uses the talents given by God.

God-given talents can be extraordinary or, as in the example given in the liturgy, quite ordinary and day-to-day; the issue is how well a person uses the talents that God has given.

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST THE KING

November 23, 2008

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28 describes the time of fulfillment when Christ hands over the kingdom to the Father.

Matthew 25:31-46 describes the Son of Man as a king who judges all people.

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17

The opening words of the reading from Ezekiel, "Thus says the Lord God," effectively mean that what follows is a comment upon what has immediately preceded. In this case, the earlier verses (Ezek 34:7-10) were a divine judgment on Israel's leaders (cf. Jer 2:8; Jeremiah may have provided the inspiration for the description of Israel's malevolent rulers as delinquent shepherds).

God now says that he will take over the leadership of Israel, establishing a theocracy (cf. Hos 8:4; 1 Sam 8:7). Using the image of a shepherd, the Lord says that he will reassert his divine kingship over Israel. Verse 15 proclaims that God alone will be the shepherd of Israel (see Psalm 23; Isa 40:11; John 1-18), caring for the flock. Cloudiness and darkness accompany God when he makes a judgment (cf. Ps 97:2).

The image of a shepherd for a ruler, either human or divine, is a common motif in the Ancient Near East. Sumerian and Assyro-Babylonian kings were commonly referred to as shepherds; they referred to themselves as shepherds. Homer describes Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks against the Trojans, as "the shepherd of the people" (*Iliad* 2.243). The Babylonian god, Marduk, was described as a shepherd as were various Egyptian gods, and the God of Israel (Ps 23:1; 80:1; Micah 7:14). The Jewish Scriptures also identify Moses (Isa 63:11) and Cyrus (Isa 44:28) as shepherds of Israel.

The phrase, "says the Lord God," indicates a transition in the prophetic oracle. As the good shepherd, God will extend particular care to the neediest among the flock: the lost, those who have strayed, the injured, and the sick. Metaphorically these describe the disadvantaged in Israel, typically, the widow and orphan, the poor and the alien.

In contrast, bullying animals, "the sleek and the strong," will be destroyed. This penalty goes beyond the dismissal of the shepherds, announced in Ezek 34:10, a verse that immediately

precedes today's reading.

The judgment made between the good and the bad sheep, between rams and goats, refers to the good and bad within Israel. Some commentators find particular reference in this scrutiny to a divine judgment on the oppressive ruling class. Others suggest that the verse may also make a subtle reference to the nations that have oppressed Israel.

BROKEN FOR US

Matthew 25:32's allusion to Ezekiel 34:17 (cf. Ezek 34:20) establishes the link between today's third and first readings. Without explicitly citing the prophetic text, Jesus' parable is a virtual midrash on Ezekiel's judgment motif.

The good sheep (rams) are those who provide food and drink for the hungry and thirsty, who welcome the stranger (alien) and clothed the naked, who visit those who were ill or in prison. The goats (bad sheep) are those who didn't do any of these things.

The parable provides the content for what catechesis has called the corporal works of mercy. It reminds us that love of neighbor must be embodied in practical acts of kindness and help extended to the needy if it is to be considered real in the eyes of God.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

November 30, 2008

With today's liturgy, the church begins Cycle B of its triennial cycle of readings. Throughout the year the third reading will be taken from the Gospel according to Mark, the shortest of the synoptic gospels and the source for the other two, Matthew and Luke.

On the first three Sundays of Advent, the first reading is taken from the Book of Isaiah, the prophet.

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 includes the opening thanksgiving of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The apostle thanks God for the abundance of gifts given to the church at Corinth, particularly the spiritual gifts known as charisms.

Mark 13:33-37 is an exhortation to vigilance taken from the Markan Apocalypse (Mark 13).

Isaiah 63:16-17, 19b; 64:2-7 is taken from a long psalm-like community lament (Isa 63:7-64:11) found in the third part of the Book of Isaiah.

Expressing the sentiments of his people, the prophetic lament begins with an appeal to God as Father and Redeemer. The Hebrew Scriptures, including Isaiah, rarely describe God as Father. More often the epithet is used of Abraham. In their dismay, however, they call upon God as Father, indeed as "our Father."

In the Book of Isaiah, the phrase, "our Father," is found only in the two verses that encompass today's reading. Some scholars think that Matthew was inspired by this passage when he began his version of the Lord's prayer with "Our Father" (Matt

6:9). Found at the beginning and the end of the passage, the entire reading must be seen as a plea addressed to God, as the father of Israel.

Apart from Isaiah 40-66, where the title occurs ten times, "Redeemer" is little used as a designation of God in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Job 19:25; Ps 19:14; 78:35; Jer 50:34). Appealing to God as Redeemer, the lament recognizes Israel's need to be freed from the many hardships that they were suffering as they returned from exile. An initial reaction is to blame God himself for their suffering. God has hardened their hearts just like he hardened the heart of Pharaoh (Exod 4:21) and King Sihon (Deut 2:30), people who did not know the name of the Lord (Isa 63:19a).

It is almost as if God was inciting the Israelites to sin.

Their protestation of innocence as they lay the blame upon God, turns to a plea that God descend from heaven with a display of great power and an acknowledgement of their guilt. They acknowledge the mighty deeds that God had previously done on their behalf. Powerful images, dead leaves blowing in the wind and menstrual rags (Lev 15:19-24), signify the helplessness and ritual impurity of the people. The Israelites can only wallow in their guilt, seemingly abandoned by God. Their deplorable situation is the result of their own infidelity to God.

The passage closes with a final plea to God, the Father. It acknowledges the nation's total dependence on God. Much as a potter shapes the clay (see Isa 29:16; Jer 18:1-11; Wis 15:7; Sir 33:13; Rom 9:20-21), they can be formed only in the way that God wills to form them.

BROKEN FOR US

There is really no connection among the three readings of today's liturgy. Should the homilist try to force some connection, violence would be done to the scriptural texts. Each of them would inevitably be deprived of its true meaning.

Given this situation, it is wise for the homilist to concentrate on only one of the readings. A homily based on the reading from Isaiah would be suitable for the first Sunday of Advent. It might focus on people's tendency to blame others, even God, for their plight. The homily might then turn to the acknowledgement that we have indeed sinned, personally and communally. In that way we are responsible for our own woes.

Finally, it might stress our need to be redeemed by God himself, a need that God has satisfied in the sending of his Son.