

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 117:5 (2011) 460-478 by Raymond F. Collins.

A Sunday homily should not be a lesson in exegesis. What I offer in “Breaking the Word” are exegetical comments that hopefully enable the reader to better understand and proclaim the text that serves as the basis for the Sunday homily.

While the homily should not be a lesson in exegesis, it should, nonetheless, respect the nature and purpose of the biblical text. As is to be expected, publication requirements demand that my comments be written months in advance of their appearance in *Emmanuel*. I am writing the current installment of “Breaking the Word” in late May. This past Sunday I attended a retiree’s final liturgy. The retiring celebrant who was also the homilist deftly made use of the idea that the gospel reading, John 14:1-12, belonged to Jesus’ farewell discourse. Jesus was about to depart and so was the celebrant. The homily, the celebrant’s “farewell discourse,” was a good example of fidelity to the biblical text without making an exegesis of it and was particularly appropriate to the day’s circumstances.

The readings from Matthew’s Gospel that appear in the current series of Sundays in Ordinary Time require particular attention. Matthew’s Gospel was written in the 80s, more than a half century after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The readings reflect the circumstances of Matthew’s Jewish-Christian community almost as much as they reflect what Jesus “actually” said and did. In effect, the Matthean readings are almost like a homily on the traditional material that had been handed down for several decades.

The homilist must bear in mind that several of the Matthean texts were directed against the Jewish leaders of his day. They critique Jewish leaders, Sadducees, scribes, and Pharisees, for the way in which they exercised their leadership. The proper application of these texts is to ourselves as homilists and leaders of the church. Preaching them requires tact and sensitivity as well as frankness and honesty, along with a good examination of conscience.

A pitfall to be avoided in preaching several of the Matthean texts is a blanket condemnation of Jews and Judaism. That gospel texts not be used in such a way that they promote anti-Semitism is a particular concern of Pope Benedict XVI. All of us must share that concern. The reading of a gospel passage, such as the reading of Matt 21:33-43 on October 2, whose final verse is “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit” is not a condemnation of Jews nor is it a rejection of Jews. The homilist must take care lest the congregation leave church with a wrong impression.

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 2, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 5:1-7 is the classic *locus* for seeing the New Testament’s use of vineyard imagery as a symbol of Israel and provides the setting for today’s gospel reading.

Philippians 4:6-9 promotes what are generally considered to be virtues of the natural law.

Matthew 21:33-43 is, like last week’s parable of the two sons, a parable of judgment. Unlike last week’s parable, it pronounces judgment on those who reject Jesus. Last week’s parable pronounces judgment on those who reject John the Baptist. This week’s parable is unlike last week’s in another respect, namely, that it has been taken over by Matthew from his Markan source (Mark 12:1-2).

The setting of the story (v. 33) closely resembles Mark 12:1. First century Palestinians

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would recognize the scene that the parable describes. In their social and economic circumstances farms and vineyards owned by rich landowners were often leased to tenant farmers for a percentage of the produce or a set fee. At the appropriate time, the absentee landlord would send his agents to collect what was owed to him.

Matthew’s editorial hand is visible in the narration of the parable (vv. 34-39). The references to the harvest in vv. 34 and 41 may suggest that the story has an eschatological dimension. In Matthew’s version of the story, the landowner sends two sets of servants to collect what is due rather than the three servants mentioned by Mark. These servants symbolize the prophets sent to Israel, including John the Baptist, who were treated badly by the leaders of Israel (cf. Jer 7:25-26; 2 Chron 24:17-19). As a last resort the landowner sends his son. The tenants quickly formulate a plot to do away with the son, presuming that they could claim the son’s inheritance when his father died. That the son was killed outside the vineyard reflects the fact that Jesus was crucified outside the city (cf. Matt 27:33). To put this detail in perspective, the reader must remember that the version of the story that appears in the Gospel of Matthew was written more than fifty years after the death of Jesus.

The dialogue between Jesus and the chief priests and Pharisees (cf. Matt 23:35) begins with Jesus asking a posing question. This feature of the Matthean narrative also appeared in last week’s gospel (Matt 21:31). In fact, the structure of the dialogue that follows each of the parables is similar: Jesus’ question, the response of his interlocutors, and Jesus’ pronouncement of judgment. The response of the chief priests and Pharisees presages their own fate. Their response alludes to the destruction of Jerusalem (70 C. E.), an event that took place some fifteen years before Matthew wrote his Gospel.

Jesus’ response to them begins with a question about a scripture (Ps 118:22-23), presumably one well-known to his interlocutors. Introduced into the gospel at this point, it is a reminder that the scriptures are fully understood only within a Christian context. The rejected stone is, of course, Jesus himself (cf. Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:4-7). Jesus’ pronouncement of judgment echoes the parable’s agricultural imagery. In context, “a people,” the Greek *ethnos* really means “other folks.”

BROKEN FOR US

Although the parable clearly contains some allegorical details, the preacher should not make an allegory out of it, as if every detail could be related to something that is specifically identifiable. The point of the story is to place the death of Jesus in line with the repeated mistreatment of God’s prophets down through the centuries. His death was as it were the final straw.

The parable is addressed to Jewish leaders (Matt 21:45). Their responsibility for tending the vineyard will be handed over to others, presumably the Twelve or the leaders of Matthew’s Jewish-Christian community. The parable does not suggest in any way that the church takes the place of Israel.

Jesus’ pronouncement of judgment is addressed to those who are in charge of God’s people. If they do not faithfully fulfill their responsibility, their role will be entrusted to others. Let the homilist who has ears, hear!

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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October 9, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 25:6-10a describes God providing an eschatological feast for his people.

Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20 is a passage in which Paul describes the range of experiences that were his as he preached the gospel.

Matthew 22:1-14 is the third in Matthew’s series of judgment parables. The first two were read on the two previous Sundays.

The parable is ultimately taken from the Sayings Source, Q (cf. Luke 14:15-24), but the evangelist has modified the story so much that in its Matthean form it is little like Luke’s parable of the great banquet. The heavenly banquet is a traditional Jewish motif, found not only in today’s reading from Isaiah but also in such wisdom passages as Prov 9:2-3. The “king” is a traditional symbol of God. The wedding feast for the son echoes the ecclesial marriage imagery first found explicitly in 2 Cor 11:2.

The parable is readily divided into two scenes, the series of invitations (vv. 1-10) and a judgment (vv. 11-13), to which a final saying (v. 14) has been added. Neither the second scene nor the final saying appears in the Lukan version of the story.

The successive waves of invitations as the mistreatment of the servants recall the sending of the servants and their mistreatment in last week’s gospel. The scene suggests that two sets of guests were expected to come to the feast, those who had been invited beforehand and had to be notified of the event and those who were first invited when the feast was ready. The first group rejected the invitation altogether. The second group made excuses. A version of the story appears in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, saying 64. In this version of the story, each of three invited guests opts out of the feast for the sake of his own financial interest. In Matthew’s version, the second set of guests not only offer excuses, they also mistreat the king’s emissaries, killing some of them. In response, the irate king destroyed the murderers and burned their city—again a trait similar to one found in last week’s gospel reading. The burning of the city recalls the burning of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C. E. (see Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.395-397; 6.249-408). The idea that the enemies of Israel could function as God’s agents in punishing his people is well-attested in the biblical tradition (cf. Isa 10:4-7; 44:28; 45:1-13; Jer 25:1-11).

With none of the invited guests willing to attend, the king sent an invitation to people outside the city. All sorts of people were invited to attend. This parable within a parable has a parallel in Jewish literature (see *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 9.8.1). In Matthew’s allegorizing version of the parable this last group of invitees might represent the marginalized within Israel (cf. Luke 14:21) or Gentiles within the Christian community.

Some of the last-minute invitees came to the feast but were not properly attired. How they could have been prepared is another question! Matthew’s interest in teaching that believers must do what is good is apparent as he describes the punishment meted out to those who were not properly attired. The invitation alone does not guarantee participation in the banquet. The punishment meted out to those who were not prepared is described in typically Matthean language as being cast into darkness (cf. Matt 8:12; 25:30) where there is wailing and the grinding of teeth (cf. Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 24:51; 25:30).

“Many are invited but few are chosen” serves as an illustration of both parts of the parable. The Greek word *kaleo*, generally meaning “call” appears in many old texts that describe an invitation or are actually used in invitations to dinner. Hence, the NAB’s “many are invited.”

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BROKEN FOR US

It could prove useful to consider this parable in two movements of thought. The first movement might focus on those who refuse the king’s invitation, issued by his servants, to participate in the wedding feast. These receive their just due. They represent Israel of old which did not accept the invitation to participate in the nuptials of the Son. In the context of Matthew’s gospel, this part of the parable is directed to Jewish leaders, as were the parables read on the previous two Sundays.

The second movement of thought can focus on those who said yes to the invitation but were not ready to participate properly in the feast. These, too, receive their just due. These represent the circle of Jesus’ disciples, the church of our day. In baptism we have accepted the invitation to participate in the kingdom. Many of us have not, however, lived in keeping with our calling.

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 16, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6 speaks about Cyrus, the Persian king, who ruled over Israel.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b begins the semi-continuous liturgical reading of the oldest book in the New Testament. Readings from the letter will continue from now until November 13.

Matthew 22:15-21 is the first in the series of three Jerusalem controversies described in Matthew (cf. Mark 22:15-22; Luke 20:20-26). The next two controversy stories will be read on the following Sundays in October.

The Pharisees, whose presence in Jerusalem is unusual, set a plan to entrap Jesus. Ever since the Romans gained control of Judea in 63 B. C. E., Jews were required to pay imperial taxes. A poll tax was instituted in 6 C. E., to be paid by every man, woman, and slave between the ages of twelve/fourteen to sixty-five.

This was a problem for Jews, some of whom considered it to be idolatrous. Josephus tells the story of a Judean named Judas who led a revolt against Rome (6-9 C. E.) on the grounds that paying taxes to Rome was an idolatrous action. He was killed and his sons were crucified (see *Jewish War* 2.117-118; *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.102). According to the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud, rabbis encouraged people to entrap people who were enticing others to idolatry (see *m. Sanhedrin* 7.10; *t. Sanhedrin* 11.10). For those found guilty the decreed penalty was death, though it is unlikely that Jews would have been able to inflict the penalty.

That is the setting for today’s story. If Jesus agreed that taxes should be paid to Rome, some would accuse him of idolatry. If Jesus said that it was not lawful to pay taxes to Rome, Roman authorities would consider him to be in revolt against the Empire. Presumably the Herodians, who witnessed the scene, were in favor of paying the tax. Herod, their patron, was a vassal of Rome.

Matthew draws attention to the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees—a feature that appears with special emphasis in the Gospel of Matthew—by speaking of their malice and Jesus’ calling them “hypocrites,” Matthew’s preferred epithet for the Pharisees (cf. Matt 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 23:13, 14, 15; 24:51).

Jesus asks for the coin which was used in paying the tax. Unlike temple taxes, which

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were paid in Jewish coinage, shekels, imperial taxes were to be paid in the currency of the realm. The Pharisees offered him the denarius—called a “Roman coin” in the NAB—the coin typically used in paying taxes to Rome. Not only did it bear the Emperor Tiberius’ image, it also bore the inscription “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest” (*Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus Pontifex Maximus*).

Jesus reply is well known: “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” Jesus basically agrees that the tax should be paid since the coins belong to the Empire. What should not be overlooked is that Matthew’s text employs the verb “give back” (*apodote*). So Jesus’ words mean, give back to the emperor what belongs to him, the coin with his image; give back to God what is his, everything, since God has created all things. The gospel lection omits the following verse, Matt 22:22 which says that Jesus’ interlocutors left in amazement.

BROKEN FOR US

This text is often used as a proof text in discussions about the relationship between church and state but it should not be used in this way. The text is not about a division of loyalty; it is about fulfilling one’s ordinary human responsibilities within a context of full obedience to God.

The reading prompts us to look at the several spheres of human responsibility, of which civic responsibility is just one. These responsibilities, our families, our work, our church, our neighborhood, the different levels of government, and so forth, demand that they be properly fulfilled. To each of these we owe some loyalty. We must divide our loyalties and our energies as best we can. Above all, however, we owe loyalty and obedience to God under whose aegis we fulfill our several human responsibilities.

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 23, 2011

LITURGY

Exodus 22:20-26 provides a good example of the moral obligation of God’s people to care for the poor, widows, and orphans.

1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10 describes the missional nature of the early Christian church in Thessalonica.

Matthew 22:34-40 tells a story that the evangelist has taken over from his Markan source (Mark 12:28-34). A parallel story is found in Luke (10:25-28). Some elements of the Q version of the story have entered into the Matthean narrative.

In Matthew’s narrative this episode follows Jesus’ dispute with the Sadducees about the resurrection from the dead (Matt 22:23-33; cf. Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40), to which the opening verse of today’s gospel reading makes reference. The Lukan version of today’s story appears in the Sunday Lectionary in Year C of the triennial cycle.

The Pharisees were undoubtedly pleased at the way Jesus silenced the Sadducees but their hostility toward Jesus remained nonetheless (cf. Matt 22:15, the first verse of last’s week’s gospel reading). The fact that Matthew’s Jewish-Christian community was vigorously engaged in debate with the Pharisees prompted Matthew to portray the Pharisees in a more negative light

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than that in which they are portrayed in the evangelist’s sources. The destruction of the temple in 70 C. E. marked the demise of the power of the Sadducees in first century Judaism. Concomitant with their loss of power was a rise in the power of the Pharisees.

In the final decades of the first century Matthew’s Jewish-Christian community saw itself in competition with the Pharisees as to who was the legitimate heir to the Jewish tradition. This tension contributed to Matthew describing the Pharisees as hypocrites (cf. Matt 22:18) and his recasting of Mark’s story about the Law as a controversy. The dispute begins when an expert in the law rises up to test Jesus with the question, “which commandment in the law is the greatest? Later rabbis identified 613 commandments in the Torah, 248 of which were positive (“you shall”) while 365 were negative (“you shall not”).

All three versions of the story, Matthew’s, Mark’s, and Luke’s, describe Jesus’ answer as one which associates two commandments in the Torah, the commandment to love God (Deut 6:5) and the commandment to love one’s neighbor (Lev 19:18). The association of the two commandments was in keeping with Jewish interpretations of the law which frequently use catch-words to link one biblical passage with another, the *gezerah shavah* principle of rabbinic exegesis. In this case the catch-word is love (*agape*). The joining of love of God with love of neighbor often appears in the Jewish literature of Matthew’s era (cf. *Testament of Issachar* 5:2; 7:6; *Testament of Dan* 5.3; Philo, *Special Laws* 2.63).

Matthew’s version of the story includes two features that are not found in either Mark or Luke. First, Matthew places the commandment to love one’s neighbor on the same level as the commandment to love God. Second, “The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments” is added by Matthew. A person cannot neglect the other commandments in the law. One who truly loves God and loves his or her neighbor fulfills these other commandments (cf. Rom 13:8, read on October 4, the twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time).

A story related in the Babylonian Talmud is well-known. The great rabbi Hillel, who lived shortly before Jesus did, was once asked if he could recite the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel replied: “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary on it; go and learn it” (*b. Sanhedrin* 31a).

BROKEN FOR US

In many ways the lesson of the story is self-evident. The story is treasured by all the Christian traditions. Nonetheless, it is a story that needs to be retold in such a way that it sinks into the hearts of committed Christians. Many Christians, including many Catholics, consider that this teaching is irrelevant when compared with the great moral discussions of our time, public funding of abortion, gay marriage, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today’s gospel reading provides us with an opportunity to speak about the essentials of our faith. Jesus’ two-fold love command cannot be set aside as being irrelevant to the Christian life.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 30, 2011

LITURGY

Malachi 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10 contains a criticism of the teaching of priests.

1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13 incorporates a maternal image that Paul uses to describe Paul’s love for and nurturing care of the fledgling church in Thessalonica.

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Matthew 23:1-12 begins a chapter composed by Matthew on the basis of bits and pieces found in his sources. Today’s reading is a strong polemic against the Pharisees of Matthew’s day, based on Mark 12:38-40’s short denunciation of the scribes (cf. Luke 20:45-47) and various units of Q material found in Luke 11:37-52. As composed by Matthew, the gospel reading has two parts, a denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees (vv. 1-7) and a series of negative examples that serve to describe Christian leadership (vv. 8-12).

The first part of the reading (vv. 1-7) is directed against scribes and Pharisees. Originally scribes were those who knew how to read and write. They were secretaries whose literacy enabled them to write and transcribe official documents. Their learning allowed them to be associated with the ruling class. They had some natural affinity with the Pharisees because of their love of learning and their ability to read the Torah. The Pharisees—from a Hebrew word meaning “separatists”—had been principally concerned with issues of ritual purity, tithing, and Sabbath observance. After the destruction of the Temple they came “into their own” as interpreters of the Torah which had become increasingly important as the identity marker in Judaism. In addition to the Torah, the Pharisees admitted the authority of other books and acknowledged the existence of an afterlife. Matthew 23 includes a series of woes directed against the scribes and Pharisees (see vv. 13, 15, 23, 27, 29).

The first critique of the scribes and Pharisees (vv. 2-4) is that they do not practice what they preach. This is a common objection directed to teachers and leaders throughout the ages. Hellenistic (Seneca the Younger, *Letters* 20; *De tranquillitate animi* 18.1) and Jewish (cf. Tosefta on Haggai 2.1) literature provides evidence of the use of the objection in antiquity. On the other hand, Jewish texts like *Leviticus Rabbah* 35:7 show the importance of matching one’s conduct with one’s teaching. Matthew’s Jesus describes the scribes and Pharisees as sitting on the chair of Moses. This *sedes magistralis* is an image for the teaching authority that they enjoyed in the first century C. E.

The first critique targets the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders; the second critique (vv. 5-7) is directed against their vainglory. They do things for the wrong motives, wanting to appear in everybody’s eyes as doing the right thing and being religiously observant. The scribes and Pharisees want to be seen. They want places of honor. Their phylacteries are quite visible. The phylacteries (*tefilin*) were small leather boxes containing passages of scripture, generally the Shema and the Decalogue, that were strapped to the arm and forehead during morning prayer (cf. Exod 13:1-16; Deut 6:4-9; 11:12-22). Tassels were fringes attached to the corners of outer garments in accordance with Num 15:38-39; Deut 22:12).

The second part of the reading (vv. 8-12) is an instruction for those who held leadership positions within the church. They are warned against seeking titles like rabbi, father, and master. “Rabbi” (“my great one,” “my Lord”) was just coming into vogue as a title for teachers in this era of Judaism. In Matthew’s Gospel, only Judas calls Jesus rabbi (Matt 26:25, 49), thereby exposing his hypocrisy. “Father” (*abba*) was used for revered elders but Matthew indicates that the title should be used only of God, whom the disciples of Jesus acknowledged to be their Father (cf. Matt 6:9). “Master” (*kathegetes*, found in the New Testament only in this verse), meaning “leader” or “teacher,” is a title that should be reserved to Christ. Christian leaders must remember the primordial place of the Father and his Christ in the church. Their own role is to be brothers and sisters to one another and servants of one another.

Today’s reading ends with a proverbial saying that appears in Hellenistic (cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 1.69) and biblical literature (Ezek 21:31; Prov 29:23;

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Job 22:29; Isa 3:17; 10:33).

BROKEN FOR US

It might be easier to preach from today’s reading during a retreat for priests, deacons, and religious educators than it is to preach it to a congregation composed of the young and the old, the well-educated and those without a high school diploma, those who well versed in the faith and those who have but a minimal religious education. The passage in Matthew’s gospel is clearly directed to Christian teachers and leaders. From the scribes and Pharisees, they should learn what they ought not to be.

The passage is not directed to the Christian community at large except to the extent that it encourages Christians not to pay excessive honor to their religious leaders. They deserve the same respect that other Christians deserve. Like other believers, they are expected to serve others in the community and have a fraternal relationship with them.

This being so, the homily might well focus on God and Christ for whom Matthew wants to reserve the titles of Father and Master.