

An excerpt from Fr. Collins' "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," *Emmanuel* 114:5 (2008) 462-475.

In a recently published book, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), Brian Brock has made a strong case that theological reflection on the Psalms serves as a strong basis for the formation of a Christian conscience. His work is one more example of the importance of the Jewish in the life of the Christian church.

Our preaching of the gospel from the perspective of the Jewish scriptures will not only help the faithful to appreciate more fully God's gift of the Jewish scriptures to the church, it will also enable the congregation to celebrate the eucharistic liturgy in a holistic manner. All too often the first reading is considered as virtually irrelevant to the celebration of Christian worship.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 7, 2008.

LITURGY

Romans 13:8-10 is a passage in which the apostle explains that those who truly love one another do all that the Ten Commandments require.

Matthew 18:15-20 sets out a disciplinary rule for Matthew's Jewish-Christian church.

Ezekiel 33:7-9 is an oracle in which the Lord God speaks to Ezekiel, addressing the prophet as a human being. "Son of man" in the Book of Ezekiel is not a title. Still less is it a christological title. "Son of man" is a turn of phrase that describes Ezekiel as a male descendent of a human. Hence the NRSV translates the expression "mortal." God has chosen a mere human being, Ezekiel, to do a job for him.

The task for which Ezekiel is appointed is to act as a "watchman," a kind or sentinel or police officer (cf. Isa 21:6; Jer 6:17). A previous oracle in the Book of Ezekiel, Ezek 3:16-21, is roughly parallel to the oracle in today's reading. The earlier oracle includes the possibility of the righteous heeding the prophet's warning, avoiding sin, and being rewarded with life.

The oracle in today's liturgy focuses only on the prophet warning the wicked.

As the earlier oracle, the oracle of Ezekiel 33:7-9, presupposes the prophet's teaching on individual responsibility (Ezek 18:5-32). Strikingly, that teaching is in the first instance applied to the prophet himself. If he fails to challenge the wicked to turn from their evil ways he is considered responsible for the mortal punishment that they will receive (cf. Ezek 3:18, 20). If the prophet fulfills his task responsibly, even if those who hear the message that he proclaims are not responsive, the prophet's life will be spared (cf. Ezek 3:19, 21).

Of course, those to whom the prophet is missioned to speak also have an individual responsibility. Today's oracle threatens

the prophet's audience with death if they do not turn from their evil ways. The death of which the prophet is to speak is probably a premature death, rather than the long life which is one of God's gifts to the righteous.

BROKEN FOR US

The first and the third readings of today's liturgy speak about a person's responsibility for the sins of others. The first reading clearly sets out the prophet's responsibility to speak God's word in an attempt to turn people from their evil ways. The second reading looks at a particular case and describes the discipline in force in Matthew's Jewish-Community. Together with 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, Matthew 18:15-20 represents the New Testament antecedent of the later church's practice of excommunication.

The Matthean discipline proceeds in three steps. The first is that the person who has been wronged should first speak to the wrong-doer. If that approach is not effective, the aggrieved person should enlist the help of one or two others (cf. Deut 19:15) in attempt to bring the sinner around. If that too fails, appeal should be made to the community which should try to lead the sinner to turn from his evil ways. Should the assembly's warning not be heeded, its members should shun the evil-doer.

On hearing these readings, many in the congregation might immediately make a connection with church leaders who tolerated and sometimes covered up instances of clerical abuse of minors. The scandal provided startling evidence that the message of today's readings is often not heard.

The Matthean passage reminds us, however, that responsibility for confronting evil-doers does not fall to church leaders alone.

It is a responsibility that falls to parents, to teachers, and to those in corporate structures who find themselves in a position to be a "whistle-blower."

THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

September 14, 2008.

LITURGY

Philippians 2:6-11 contains the great christological hymn of Paul's letter to the Philippians. The passage serves as the second reading of the eucharistic liturgy on Palm Sunday.

John 3:13-17 is part of Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. The Johannine Jesus uses a passage of the Jewish scriptures to speak about the exaltation of Jesus.

Numbers 21:4b-9 describes part of the interaction between God and the Israelites at the time of the Exodus. At this point in the Exodus story, the Israelites had left Mount Sinai/Horeb and were on their way south toward the Red Sea, the present-day Gulf of Aqaba. Their grumbling about the lack of food (Exod 16:3, 8, 12) and water (Exod 17:7; Num 22:2-13; Deut 33:8; Ps 95:8; 106:32-33) during the long trek was legendary in Israelite lore. They were apparently not even satisfied with the gift of manna, which they found to be "wretched food."

In punishment for the trekking Israelites' complaints against the Lord, they were subject to a plague of poisonous snakes. The snakes were called seraphs, "fiery ones," because of the burning sensation experienced by those bitten by the snakes. Many Israelite died as a result of the venomous bites. The lethal bites were seen as a form of divine judgment on the people's rebellion against the Lord who was bringing them out of "the house of Egypt."

The punishment brought the Israelites to their senses. They repented of their infidelity to the Lord and asked Moses to intercede for them. Moses did so. The Lord responded to Moses' prayer on behalf of the people, directing him to erect a symbol of salvation. The symbol was a bronze snake attached to a pole. Those who looked at the symbol with faith in the Lord who would protect them from succumbing to the poisonous snake bites survived.

Lying in the background of this story is the practice of serpent magic, with which the Israelites were familiar. Serpent magic was practiced by the Egyptians (cf. Exod 7:8-13).

In Hebrew "serpent of bronze" is a pun, *nehash nekhushtan*. At the time of King Hezekiah a bronze serpent called Nekhushtan, purportedly the one made by Moses, was preserved as a kind of relic in the temple of Jerusalem. During the reform of Hezekiah the relic was destroyed since people had begun to venerate it as an idol (2 Kgs 18:4).

BROKEN FOR US

The obvious connection between the third reading and the first reading in today's liturgy is that the Johannine Jesus makes clear reference to Numbers 21:8-9 in his response to Nicodemus. Jesus' being "lifted up" is Johannine language for his exaltation/glorification on the cross.

Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus is intended for a wider audience than Nicodemus alone. He teaches that faith is necessary in order that people receive eternal life. In the biblical story a mere glance at the raised seraph was not enough to ensure that a person survive a noxious snake bite. The symbol of salvation erected by Moses was intended to evoke faith in the Lord God who would protect and save his people.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 21, 2008.

LITURGY

Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a is a passage in which Paul tells about his personal dilemma: although he would like to die and be with the Lord, he realizes that the Lord might choose to keep him alive so that he could continue his ministry of preaching the gospel.

Matthew 20:1-16a narrates the well-known parable about the owner of a vineyard who went out at different times of the day to hire workers for the vineyard.

Isaiah 55:6-9 is an excerpt from the final chapter of the Deutero-Isaiah. It consists of a call (verses 6-7) and a set of reasons

why one should heed the call.

The call takes the form of a prophetic summons to worship. Its language echoes traditional formula urging people to visit a shrine or seek an oracular utterance. Although some commentators think that the prophet's invitation is a call to visit the Jerusalem temple, most consider that the circumstances of the 540s, with some of the population in Babylon and some in Jerusalem, suggest that the summons to seek the Lord is an invitation to seek forgiveness and to follow the ways of the Lord—a major motif in the Jewish Bible—rather than a call to visit the Jerusalem sanctuary.

Verse 7's call to repentance (cf. Jer 29:12-14) is something of a rarity in Deutero-Isaiah. The second part of the prophetic book rarely admits in any explicit fashion the presence of unrighteous persons within God's people. Isaiah 50:6, 10-11 are virtually the only deutero-Isaian passages to come to grips with the existence of the unrighteous within Israel.

The reason why Israelites should heed the prophet's call are that humans are incapable of totally understanding God's will. They do not understand the abundance and gratuity of God's forgiving grace. Humans may complain about not fully comprehending God (cf. Ezek 18:25-30; 33:17-20) but it is beyond their capacity to do so. Hence they must "keep in touch," as it were, with the Lord.

"Isaiah" (that is, the author of Deutero-Isaiah) may have had some specific situation in mind, such as the one that prompted Isaiah 45:9-13, his words have a greater import. The transcendent Lord is always a God of surprises; humans can never fully comprehend the marvelous way that God has chosen to save his people.

BROKEN FOR US

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is a wonderful story about God's superabundant mercy. A similar story was told by ancient Jewish rabbis but in their version of the story economic justice was maintained. Those who came later to the vineyard worked harder or more efficiently, so that all the workers did the same amount of work no matter the different number of hours that they spent in the vineyard. Since all had accomplished the same amount of work, all received the same pay.

The popularity of the rabbinic story makes Jesus' version of the parable all the more striking. In Jesus' teaching God's righteousness follows a standard other than that of economic justice. The standard is divine justice, God's generous and superabundant mercy.

This is something that Israelites in the mid-sixth century BCE did not understand. It is something that Jesus' hearers did not readily accept. This is something that Paul repeatedly emphasized, particularly in the Letter to the Romans, with a message that sometimes fell on deaf ears. This is something we and our contemporaries do not understand. We want God to follow the ways that we set out for him.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 28, 2008.

LITURGY

Philippians 2:1-11 includes the christological hymn which served as the second reading on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

Matthew 21:28-32 contains the story of two sons, the one who said "no" but did his father's will and the one who said "yes" but did not do what the father wanted.

Ezekiel 18:25-28, belonging to the first part of the Book of Ezekiel (chapters 1-24), is an oracle directed to Israelites. In many ways it is parallel to Isaiah 55:6-9, the first reading of last Sunday's liturgy.

The passage is framed by the contention that the Lord's ways are not fair (verses 25 and 29, the latter not being included in the liturgical lection). The Lord is accused of acting in an arbitrary fashion.

The Lord's rebuttal (verses 26-28) is that he is not acting unfairly; each person is responsible for his or her own fate. Ezekiel's doctrine of individual responsibility once again comes to the fore. When a righteous person abandons the ways of righteousness and commits sin, that person will be punished. This is a serious matter. The punishment is death. Again, this probably implies that the person will not enjoy the benefits of a long life but one should not forget that a straight-forward violation of the precepts of the Decalogue were generally considered capital crimes in ancient Israel.

On the other hand, when a wicked person repents of his or sin, changing his or her ways, and beginning to lead a righteous life, that person will be rewarded with God's gift of life.

BROKEN FOR US

Human responsibility is the focus of both the first and third readings. The first reading takes issue with those who attribute the different fates of the righteous and the unrighteous to the whim of a capricious God. The prophetic oracle's response is simply that evil-doers will be punished for their misdeeds while evil-doers who repent of their sin, forsaking a life of iniquity for one of virtue and goodness will be rewarded by God. Implied by the words of the oracle is the belief that a sinner can always repent. Should a sinner do so, that person will be judged according to the good that they do following their conversion.

The Matthean passage points to another aspect of human responsibility, namely, that an initial reaction does not always reflect what moralists have sometimes called a person's fundamental option, the basic orientation of their lives. Thus it can happen that a person can refuse to do some good, take stock of what he or she has said, change one's mind, and accomplish the good that was originally denied. On the other hand, it can happen that a person can unthinkingly—or perhaps with some calculation—agree to accomplish some good but their words belie their fundamental option and the good is not realized. A person shows

who he or she is by acting responsibly, even if, on reflection, an initial reaction proves to be self-satisfying or short-sighted.