

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 *Emmanuel* 114:3 (2008) 264-281.

NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 1, 2008

LITURGY

Romans 3:21-25, 28 speaks about the righteousness of God, freely shared with those who believe.

Matthew 6:51-58 is the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, reminding those who listen to it that they have a choice to make.

Deuteronomy 11:18, 26-28, 32 is part of a complex homiletic passage in the Book of Deuteronomy. Its opening verse recapitulates Deut 6:6-8's teaching on the importance of keeping God's words. The idea of placing covenantal precepts in the soul and heart is one that is found in Hittite political loyalty oaths, whence it made its way into the tradition of Israel. Placing "these words," generally understood to be a reference to the proclamation of the unity of God and the commandment to love him (Deut 6:4-5), on the wrist and forehead (and on the doorpost) symbolizes that confession and love of God are to find their place within the human heart, there to be remembered and acted upon. To this day, pious Jews have the words of Deut 6:4-9 woven into their tefillin and rolled up in the mezuzah affixed to their doorposts.

The blessing and the curse reflect the ancient covenant renewal ceremony at Mounts Gerizim and Ebal (Deut 11:29). They speak about the two ways, a classic motif in the Book of Deuteronomy which teaches that there are two different ways of reacting to God's directives: to follow them or to reject them. Historically ceremonies such as Israel's covenant renewal ceremony were affiliated with a people's settlement in new lands. Israel's celebration was affiliated with its entrance into the promised land (see Deut 27:3-4; 9-10). Entering into a new situation, Israel had a choice: to follow Yahweh's will and be blessed with life and good or reject Yahweh's will, follow the indigenous gods, and be cursed with death and evil.

Verse 32 concludes Moses' instruction and provides a transition to Chapter 12 which contains a number of statutes and decrees that Israel is to follow.

BROKEN FOR US

It is generally recognized that the Matthean setting of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1; 8:1) recalls Mount Sinai and Moses communicating the Lord's precepts to the people of Israel. The Sermon, particularly Matt 5:1-6:18, teaches how the commandments given to Israel and Israel's customary works of piety are to be followed by Jesus' disciples.

A leitmotif of the Book of Deuteronomy, which takes the form of a long homily by Moses (Deut 1:1; cf. Matt 5:2), are the curses and blessings which separate those who follow God's ways from

those who do not. The Sermon on the Mount uses other literary devices to speak about the discriminating power of God's word. Those who heed Jesus' words are compared to the wise who have built their house on a solid foundation. Those who do not heed Jesus' words are like foolish people who build their homes on shifting sands. The choice is ours.

Matthew's contrasting images make use of a Q saying (see Luke 6:47-49), adding to it the contrast between wise and foolish, traditional Jewish images for those who follow God's ways and those who do not. His image of the house built on rock slightly modifies the Q saying so that, anticipating Matt 16:18, it is a reminder that the teaching of Jesus has been entrusted to and continues in the church, built on the rock which is Peter.

TENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 8, 2008

LITURGY

Romans 4:18-25 speaks of the faith and righteousness of Abraham.

Matthew 9:9-13 describes the call of the tax-collector, most likely a minor customs official in the border town of Capernaum.

Hosea 6:3-6 is a passage in a book attributed to Hosea, son of Beerai, a prophet who lived in the second half of the eighth century BCE. Some of the sayings in the book represent a rephrasing of earlier sayings, adaptive reinterpretations for later times.

Today's passage comes from the central section of the Book of Hosea. These chapters, Hosea 4-11, contain the bulk of Hosea's oracles against Israelite politics and worship. Its final verse epitomizes much of its prophetic message (cf. Hos 2:19-20), a message similar to that of other biblical prophets (cf. Isa 1:10-17; Jer 7:21-23; Amos 5:21-25; Mic 6:6-8). Yahweh affirms what is acceptable to him: covenant loyalty (*hesed*) and life lived in obedience and trust to God (knowledge of God). The prophetic oracle pleads with Israel to be loyal to the covenant rather than simply be faithful to its customary sacrifices and cultic observances.

The series of rhetorical questions that precede this key verse (v. 6) express Yahweh's frustration with Ephraim and Judah, Israel's northern and southern kingdoms. The Lord is reluctant to heed the plea that proceeds from their affliction because their commitment to him is as ephemeral as the morning dew or the wisp of a morning's cloud. The imagery which the oracle uses to reflect the transitory nature of Israel's commitment corresponds to the language of their plea.

Israel had expected that their troubles would come to an end as quickly as the new day dawns (v. 3). Their confidence is expressed in a short penitential hymn (Hos 6:1-3), of which only the final verse has been retained in today's liturgical reading. Commentators note that the meteorological language in which Israel's misplaced confidence is expressed reflects motifs taken over from Canaanite mythology.

BROKEN FOR US

The reading from Hosea has been chosen for today's liturgy because its last verse (Hos 6:6) is cited by Jesus in his response to those who took issue with him since he was assumed to have violated the demands of ritual purity by associating with sinners.

Jesus replies that there is something more important than observance of cultic regulations; what is important is emulating divine *hesed*, God's love and mercy.

An appropriate homily for today would be one that focuses on the relative importance of the moral life and worship (prayer). The prophet's message was addressed to the nation of Israel. Actualized in today's world, it serves to remind us of the nation's responsibility to act morally rather than merely respect the customs of civic religion. Politicians are called to lead the nation on a righteous course of action rather than pay lip service to God, the church, and religion.

Heard by an individual believer, the prophet's words are a challenge that he or she live a life whose loyalty to God reflects God's love and mercy rather than being constituted principally by prayer and acts of religion. The latter are all but meaningless without the former.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 15, 2008

LITURGY

Romans 5:6-11 presents the death of Christ as the instrument of God's reconciling love.

Matthew 9:36-10:8 describes the appointment of the twelve disciples as apostles.

Exodus 19:2-6a describes an important event in Israel's desert experience. The people are encamped around Mount Sinai—the narrative will continue in the following chapter, Exodus 20, with Yahweh giving the Ten Commandments to Moses—which Moses climbs for his meeting with the Lord. The narrative assumes that God dwells in heaven, from which he descends to meet the leader of the people (cf. Exod 24:9-11). Summoned by God, Moses is told to convey a message to the people. In this way Moses is commissioned as the mediator of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel.

Yahweh instructs Moses to remind the people of what had happened to Egypt and of God's providential care for Israel. What happened to Egypt would include the plagues and the destruction of Egypt's army when it attempted to cross the sea in pursuit of Israel. God's providential care for Israel is described by means of the image of an eagle who carries its young on its powerful wings (cf. Deut 32:11-15).

Implicit in the image is the idea of Israel as the child of God. See Exod 4:22-23 where Israel is described as Yahweh's first born son. Israel is also the servant of the Lord. Typically servants were called slaves; a slave with special prerogatives was called a treasure, a special possession. All nations belong to Yahweh, but Israel was God's treasure, his special possession (cf. Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18).

There is, however, one condition, namely, that Israel heed the voice of the Lord and be obedient to the precepts of the covenant. This general descriptive phrase probably refers especially to the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17) and the prescriptions found in the Book of the Covenant (Exod 21:1-23:19).

If Israel satisfies this condition, it will be a priestly kingdom, a holy nation. The implication is that all Israelites are priestly, consecrated for service to God. Their priestly quality is attested in the several biblical narratives that speak of their diet, marriage regulations, and so forth. In earliest times any Israelite could offer sacrifice. Later, and to this day, the principal religious services are family-based, especially the celebration of Passover. Finally, the description of Israel as a kingdom of priests corresponds to its theocratic nature.

That Israel is a holy nation signifies that it has been set apart, that it belongs to the one and holy God. According to Num 16:3, "The whole community, all of them, are holy; the Lord is in their midst." William Propp describes this reality as the "democratization of Israel's holiness" (*Exodus 19-40* [Anchor Bible 2A; New York: Doubleday, 2006] 158).

BROKEN FOR US

The link between today's first and third readings is to be found in the notion of the leadership of God's people. The twelve apostles symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel. Yahweh summoned Moses and gave him instructions to be conveyed to the people. Jesus summoned the twelve and gave them instructions as to where they were to go, what they were to say, and what they were to do.

Moses spoke to the people about the covenant and its demands; the apostles proclaimed the kingdom of heaven.

Today's homily might well focus on the universal call to holiness, explained in some detail in the fifth chapter of Vatican Council II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (pars. 39-42). All the baptized are and are called to be holy.

The members of God's holy people, nonetheless, express their holiness in different ways. Francis de Sales put it beautifully: "Devotion must be practiced in different ways by the nobleman and by the working man, by the servant and by the prince, by the widow, by the unmarried girl and by the married woman ... for the practice of devotion must be adapted to the strength, to the occupation and to the duties of each one in particular" (*Introduction to the Devout Life* 1:3).

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 22, 2008

LITURGY

Romans 5:12-15 contains the New Testament passage typically cited in support of the doctrine of original sin.

Matthew 10:26-22 is an excerpt from the so-called "Missionary Discourse," the set of instructions that Jesus gave to the Twelve when he sent them forth to proclaim the kingdom.

Jeremiah 20:10-13 is a passage in which the prophet proclaims his confidence in God despite the plotting of his enemies against him.

Those who plot against the prophet are the "many," perhaps everyone, but certainly including the prophets of Baal (Jer 11:17-18). Their "whisperings" are malicious gossip, intended to slander and hurt Jeremiah. They turn against him the very words, "Terror on every side," that he had directed against the high priest. Mocking him, they make fun of the oracle of doom that he had pronounced on the people (Jer 20:3).

What makes the taunting even worse is that it comes from those whom Jeremiah had previously considered to be his friends (cf. Ps 41:8-10). They are waiting for his fall. They are waiting for Jeremiah to be trapped. Ironically, this has already happened for Yahweh has enticed and overpowered the prophet (Jer 20:7).

Despite the bad will of those who are plotting against him, Jeremiah steadfastly proclaims his confidence in the Lord. He recalls God's promise to be with him (cf. Jer 1:17-19; 15:20). The prophet proclaims Yahweh's strength. He calls God a "mighty champion" and "Lord of hosts." Yahweh is indeed a mighty champion even if the Israelite nobles considered him to be an impotent warrior (Jer 14:9).

Jeremiah calls for God's just judgment on his enemies. Yahweh is one who tests the mind and heart (cf. Jer 11:20). He will exert vengeance on those whose hearts are not pure. Jeremiah is confident that God will fulfill his prophecy (Jer 1:12), even if that prophecy involves the destruction of the people.

In many ways Jeremiah's lament is similar to the laments found in the Book of Psalms (see Psalms 6, 31, 109, 140), from which excerpts are quoted in verses 11-13. The final verse of the his lament is a paean of praise acknowledging Yahweh's help. Strikingly, Jeremiah refers to himself as "poor," one of the *anawim* whose hope rests on Yahweh alone.

BROKEN FOR US

The lection from the Gospel according to Matthew teaches that those who are disciples of Jesus have nothing to fear, no matter the power of their enemies, because they have the protection of Our Father in Heaven. The prophet Jeremiah can be cited as an example of one who remained steadfast in his confidence in God despite the difficulties and oppression that he suffered (cf. Matt 5:11-12; Luke 6:22-23).

The liturgy presents Jeremiah, a late seventh-century BCE prophet, as an example of one who steadfastly remained loyal to God despite the adversity that he suffered, even at the hands of those who had been his close friends. Jeremiah's steadfastness in the face of difficulties can serve as an inspiration for all of us who face difficulties.

Jeremiah was one of the heroes of the apostle Paul whose letters often make use of the Book of Jeremiah. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians bears witness to his steadfast confidence in God despite the hostility that he encountered from those whom he loved with a father's love (1 Cor 4:14-15).

Jeremiah and Paul can be examples to us when we suffer significant adversity from those who were close to us, when parents are neglected by their children, when husbands or wives are abandoned by their spouses, when any one of us is betrayed by a friend.

THE SOLEMNITY OF STS. PETER AND PAUL, APOSTLES

June 29, 2008

LITURGY

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18 is an extract from 2 Timothy, an epistolary testament written by an anonymous disciple of the apostle Paul.

Matthew 16:13-19 is an account of Peter's profession of faith at Caesarea Philippi to which Jesus replies with a beatitude and the promise of the keys of the kingdom.

Acts 12:1-11 describes Peter's miraculous release from prison by the angel of the Lord.

The focus of both the second and third readings of today's liturgy is obviously Peter, spokesperson for the Twelve and leader of the early church in Jerusalem. On this very day, however, Pope Benedict XVI is appearing at the Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls to inaugurate a special "Pauline Year" in commemoration of the bimillennial anniversary of the apostle's birth.

No more than we are sure of the year of Christ's birth can we be sure of the actual year of Paul's birth. That he was born in the year 8 CE is a scholarly "guesstimate" based on the limited data conveyed in his letters and the Acts of the Apostles.

Given the nature of the year-long celebration that is being kicked off today, it is most appropriate that today's homily be devoted to Paul. The reading from Second Timothy reprises several motifs from the undisputed letters of the apostle to speak about Paul's final moments.

Paul describes the Christian life in liturgical terms (Rom 12:1); in retrospect, the author of 2 Timothy describes Paul's final hours as a liturgical sacrifice that has the character and finality of a libation that is poured out. Paul often used the agon motif—that is, athletic or military imagery—to speak about the Christian life. He used this imagery of himself in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Second Timothy exploits the imagery to speak about Paul having run the race and merited a crown. The athletic metaphor evokes the image of an attending monarch awarding the crown (of righteousness) to the victor in much the same way as a member of the British royalty awards the trophy to the winner at Wimbledon. Interestingly the author observes that Paul is not the only one to receive the victor's crown.

Paul acknowledged that he was sent to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16; 2:8-9; cf. 1 Tim 2:7). The lection takes over this theme recalling that the Lord gave Paul the strength that he needed to accomplish his task. This idea lies at the heart of much of the argumentation of 2 Corinthians, peppered, as it is, with lists of Paul's hardships. The idea is beautifully summed up as the Lord said to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

That same letter mentions that Paul has been rescued from dangers and would be rescued again (2 Cor 1:10). Paul was not disinclined to speak of the perils which he faced as the attack of a vicious animal (1 Cor 15:32). These ideas are evoked by the author of 2 Timothy in verses 17b-18a.

The lection ends with a doxology, a prayer of praise to God. The doxology is an appropriate conclusion to the author's reflection on the end of Paul's life. The doxology is an appropriate conclusion to the end of that life itself.

Finally, the doxology is most apropos for the year the Pauline Year that we are about to celebrate. We of the community of faith have much for which to be thankful to the Lord for we have received much from the Lord through the apostle Paul, not least of which are the letters which bear his name, a legacy to the church of all times.