

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 excerpt from Emmanuel *Emmanuel* 114 (2008) 163-181. Father Collins' complete commentary on the Sunday readings can be found in *Emmanuel*

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 7, 2008

LITURGY

1 Peter 1:17-21 speaks of our redemption through the blood of Christ.

Luke 24:13-35 describes Jesus' encounter with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Acts 2:14, 22-33 is a lengthy excerpt from Peter's first kerygmatic speech in Acts. In its present form the speech is clearly a Lukan composition but some of its elements reflect early Christian traditions which may have been proclaimed by Peter.

The speech is addressed to Peter's fellow Jews and has, despite the unusually strong affirmation of verse 23 (this man whom "you killed") an irenic tone. The Jews are addressed as "Israelites," an honorific epithet, and as "brothers."

The first part of the speech speaks about the human Jesus, a man (*aner*) appointed by God and distinguished by his mighty deeds, wonders, and signs.

"Wonders and signs" is a biblical expression used to describe God's mighty deeds on behalf of Israel (see Exod 7:3 and other passages in the Old Testament). The way that Peter addresses the Jews assumes that at least some of them had witnessed some part of Jesus' ministry.

Peter speaks about Jesus' death in paradoxical fashion. It was at one and the same time intended by God as part of the divine plan of salvation and perpetrated by humans who killed Jesus by crucifying him. The "lawless men" may refer to Jewish leaders who did not observe the law or to Roman soldiers who were not bound by Jewish law.

Luke's Peter twice affirms that God raised Jesus from the dead (verses 24, 32). The resurrection is not something that Jesus has accomplished; it is something that God has done. Peter's speech is intended to show how the Scriptures speak about Jesus' resurrection (see Luke 24:25-26, part of today's third reading, and Luke 24:45). The speech features Ps 15:8-11, cited almost verbatim from the Old Testament. In the Bible the psalm is attributed to David. Peter echoes that attribution calling David a patriarch and a prophet, titles that were not given to David in the biblical texts.

The psalm expresses the conviction that God will deliver his holy one from evil. Since, says Peter, David has died and had been buried in Jerusalem, the psalm was not speaking about David himself. It must, therefore, refer to one of David's descendants. Peter identifies that descendent as Jesus whom God raised from the dead, as Peter and the Eleven have testified. The Twelve were not, however, witnesses to the resurrection itself; they were the beneficiaries of appearances of the risen Jesus.

The risen Jesus is described as sitting at the right hand of the Father, a position of honor that suggests Jesus' kinship with the Father

Commentary by Fr. Ray Collins on the Sunday readings, April, 2008

(see Ps 109:1, featured in the continuation of Peter's speech in verses 34-35). "The promise of the Spirit" (see Acts 4:5) is a Greek expression which means "the promised Spirit." It is by the Spirit of God that Jesus has been raised; the risen Jesus pours out the Spirit on his disciples.

BROKEN FOR US

The first and third readings of today's liturgy speak about the Scriptural witness to Jesus' resurrection. Luke 24 speaks about that witness in general terms; Acts 2 gives a specific example.

The Scriptures do not specifically speak about the resurrection of Jesus as if the details of the divine plan of salvation were spelled out in the biblical texts. Rather, the Scriptures speak of the hope of Israel that would eventually be realized in Jesus. As the "Jewish book," the Scriptures provided models and paradigms which early Christians used to speak about Jesus death and resurrection to their fellow Jews.

Psalm 15 bespeaks the psalmist's steadfast hope that God would deliver his hold one from evil and corruption. The early considered that hope to have been realized in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It will continue to be realized in our future resurrection from the dead since the Spirit of God who anointed Jesus as prophet and raised Jesus from the dead has been poured out on us and will raise us who belong to Jesus from the dead.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 14, 2008

LITURGY

1 Peter 2:20b-25 uses the example of Christ's suffering in an exhortation to Christians to bear with suffering inflicted on those who do good.

John 10:1-10 describes Jesus as both the gatekeeper and a gate for the sheep.

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 begins with the climax of Peter's Pentacostal speech (last Sunday's first reading) and the reaction of the people to it.

The peroration of the speech is the solemn proclamation that by raising Jesus from the dead God has constituted him as Lord and Christ (Messiah, the anointed one). The first title suggests that raised from the dead Jesus is the equal of Yahweh, identified in the Greek Bible as "Lord" and often referred to as Lord (*mare'*) by Aramaic-speaking Jews in first century Palestine. The second title suggests that raised from the dead Jesus is the ideal king of Israel, the fulfillment of the hope of those who longed for the coming of a Messiah.

Peter's audience is stunned. The emotional quality of their response is captured by the NAB translation, "they were cut to the heart." Almost immediately they feel an affinity with Peter and the other Eleven apostles, calling them "brothers." Luke shows his concern for the communal leadership of the apostles (see Luke 22:30) not only by indicating that the Eleven were with Peter when he spoke but also by phrasing the audience's question, "what should we do?," in such a way that it is addressed to the entire group of Twelve.

Replying as spokesperson for the Twelve, Peter says that four things needed to be done. Two of these required human activity; two are the consequence of the conversion. What was required of the audience was that they change their lives and receive baptism. Consequently they would receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Commentary by Fr. Ray Collins on the Sunday readings, April, 2008

Conversion (*metanoia*, a verbal form of which is behind the English "repent") is an important theme in Luke-Acts (see Luke 3:3, 8; Acts 3:19; etc.). Conversion is more radical than a mere change of heart; it entails a reform of one's entire way of life. Baptism is identified as a Christian ritual, distinct from the baptism of John (Luke 1:77; 3:33; Acts 19:3-4). Scholars debate among themselves as to whether "in the name of Jesus Christ" was the baptismal formula or whether Luke was merely indicating that he was writing about Christian baptism. Invocation of the "name" would make Jesus present to those baptized.

Another important theme in Luke-Acts is the forgiveness of sins. It is a feature of the ministry of Jesus (Luke 5:20-21, etc.). It is proclaimed by the apostles (Acts 5:31, etc.) in fulfillment of Jesus' mandate (Luke 24:47). The significance of the gift of the Holy Spirit runs throughout Luke-Acts, beginning with the ministry of Jesus (Luke 3:22; 4:1, 14, 22), continuing with the descent of the Spirit on the Apostles (Acts 2:4), and continuing with the gift of the Spirit to those baptized (cf. Acts 8:1-16; 10:47-48). The gift of the Holy Spirit is identified with the promise (Acts 1:4-5; 2:33).

The final three verses of the reading have ecclesiological significance. With "to all those far off whomever the Lord . . . will call," Luke intimates that the gift of the Spirit will be given to Gentiles, a significant part of the reconstituted nation of Israel. Salvation from the corrupt generation indicates that the community of the baptized is a remnant people. The number 3000 speaks of the growth of the church (cf. Acts 1:15; 14:1; etc.).

BROKEN FOR US

Today's first reading offers abundant material for a reflection on the nature of the church. It highlights apostolic preaching that focuses on the resurrection of Jesus and the responsive faith that ensues. This focus should serve as a reminder to all homilists that the resurrection of Jesus, the core of our faith, should be the center and motivation of all our preaching.

The reading highlights the fact that baptism entails a life style, a *metanoia*, that makes the baptized different from "this corrupt generation." Christians must dare to be different.

Finally, the growth of the church is a sign of the power of the Holy Spirit at work. We are witnesses to the power of the Holy Spirit at work when we are cognizant of the growth of the church throughout the world, particularly in the Southern hemisphere where it no longer has the European cast that it once did.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 21, 2008

LITURGY

1 Peter 2:4-9 is a mosaic of scriptural citations, Isa 28:16, Ps 117:22; and Isa 8:14, that portray Christ as the cornerstone of the church and a stumbling block for those who do not believe.

John 14:1-12 is a reading that describes Jesus' preparing his disciples for his return to the Father.

Acts 6:1-7 is considered by many to be an etiological narrative describing the institution of the diaconate. Such an interpretation reads too much

Commentary by Fr. Ray Collins on the Sunday readings, April, 2008

into Luke's narrative and does not take into consideration the absence of the word "deacons" (*diakanoi*) from the text.

What the narrative describes is the expansion of ministry in response to a crisis in the early Christian community. The situation is that the widows of the Hellenists were not getting their fair share of what had been set aside for the indigent (Acts 4:35). This means that the situation of the early Christian community in Jerusalem was not quite as idyllic as Luke describes it in his summaries (see the reading for the second Sunday of Easter).

The biblical tradition, followed by the Mishnah, calls for special attention to be given to widows, as well as to orphans and aliens (Mal 3:5; Isa 1:7; Ps 93:6; Mishnaic Tract *Gittin* ("Bills of Divorce") 5:3, etc. Those who failed to do so were considered to be accursed (Deut 27:19) and have severely violated the demands of biblical justice.

New terminology appears in Luke's narrative suggesting that he used an older account for his own. The words, "Hebrews," "Hellenists," and "disciples," do not previously appear in Acts. The "Hebrews" are probably Aramaic-speaking Jews who may have known some Greek while the "Hellenists" were most likely Jews who spoke only Greek. That the community consists of "disciples" (*mathetai*, a Greek term that means followers, i.e., students of a master) reflects their adherence to the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42).

To assist them in responding properly to the needs of the widows in the community, the Twelve, after consultation with the entire community, choose a team of seven for the task. Three qualifications had to be met: those chosen had to be men of good reputation; they had to be filled with the [Holy] Spirit; they had to be wise and prudent. We do not know why just seven were chosen but they came to be known as "The Seven" (Acts 21:5) in contrast with "The Twelve" in early Christian tradition. All seven have Greek names. They were commissioned for their task through a ritual imposition of hands.

Their task was "serving at table," providing food. This caritative task is symbolic of a broader responsibility within the church. Luke expands on the ministry of the first two that he names, Stephen and Philip.

In Luke's expanded account of their ministry, the ministry of Stephen and Philip is principally a ministry of preaching rather than a ministry of service. Luke's account of Stephen's ministry brings to a close his narrative of the proclamation of the gospel in Jerusalem. Philip's ministry extends the gospel to Samaria (see Acts 1:8).

Today's reading closes with one of the summary verses that Luke characteristically uses to speak about the numerical growth of the believing community (see Acts 2:41 in last Sunday's reading). The evangelist specifically notes that members of priestly families joined the community. There was a considerable "priestly" population in Jerusalem at the time. Hence, there is no need to suggest, as some exegetes have done, that Luke is thinking about members of the Essene community.

BROKEN FOR US

Two foci of the narrative provide ample material for our homilies. The first is the fact that the care of widows, who are representative of the poor and elderly, is part of what it means to be church. As attentive as the Twelve were to the proclamation of the word of God, they could not neglect the physical welfare of the widows in their midst. Had they done

Commentary by Fr. Ray Collins on the Sunday readings, April, 2008

so, they would have been less than righteous. Care of the poor remains to this day not only as social responsibility but also an ecclesiological challenge.

The second focus is that Luke describes a church that responded to a new situation by creating a new form of ministry. Adaptability for the sake of the total ministry was characteristic of the early church. Similar adaptability must remain characteristic of the church as it lives in changing circumstances and meets new crises.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 28, 2008

LITURGY

1 Peter 3:15-18 speaks about suffering, especially the suffering of those who do good.

John 14:15-21 contains the promise of another Advocate.

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17 describes the early church's mission in Samaria, omitting, however, the narrative about Simon the magician.

Philip, who had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9) was one of The Seven (Acts 6:5; 21:8). In Luke's scheme of the spread of the gospel (Acts 1:8), Philip is the character who proclaims the gospel in Samaria.

Samaria is the name of a part of Palestine and the name of a city. While Luke was concerned with situating Philip's activity in Samaria, the precise location of his activity is indicated by an ambiguous Greek phrase that could mean either the town of Samaria [thus, the NAB translation] or a town in Samaria.

Philip's preaching of the gospel is described with a traditional phrase, "proclaiming the Christ." The Samaritans, accepted only the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch does not proclaim any messianic hope; it does not speak about a coming Messiah (Christ). The Samaritans were not awaiting the appearance of a Messiah, the Christ. Given this situation, Luke's phrase, "proclaiming the Christ," must be therefore be understood as traditional code for the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Philip's proclamation of the gospel was accompanied by what Paul calls "the signs of an apostle" (2 Cor 12:12), namely, exorcisms and healings. The exorcisms are most probably a reference to mental illness; while cures would refer to physical illness. With this mention of the exorcisms and cures performed by Philip, Luke places Philip's proclamation of the gospel in continuity with that of Jesus who also performed exorcisms and healings as signs of the coming of the kingdom of God (see Acts 10:38, read on Easter Sunday).

The Samaritans' acceptance of Philip's preaching is indicated by their active attentiveness, their joy, and their reception of Christian baptism. In the Acts of the Apostles Luke describes the relationship between baptism and the reception of the Spirit in different ways. In Acts 2:38 the gift of the Spirit accompanies baptism. In Acts 10:47-48 the gift of the Spirit precedes and motivates baptism. Here and in Acts 19:5-6 the gift of the Spirit seems to follow after baptism. Luke, however, does not want to imply that the baptism of the Samaritans was somehow deficient. The baptism of the Samaritans is baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus; it is Christian baptism (see Acts 2:38 read on the Fourth Sunday of Easter).

Commentary by Fr. Ray Collins on the Sunday readings, April, 2008

The evangelist's concern is that the apostles ratify the Samaritan mission. Peter and John are sent by the apostles; they are the emissaries of The Twelve. As Peter and John were the apostles active in Jerusalem, so they are the delegates who approve the Samaritan mission. Through the imposition of their hands the Samaritans received the gift of the Holy Spirit, a gesture continued in the ritual imposition of hands during the celebration of Christian baptism.

BROKEN FOR US

Philip's evangelization in Samaria is a break-out moment in the proclamation of the gospel. The gospel has moved beyond Jerusalem and Judea and has begun its steady movement towards the end of the earth, Luke's figurative reference to Rome (Acts 1:8). Thus, today's reading can be seen as a description of the real beginning of the church's world-wide mission of evangelization.

Two points underscored by Luke merit particular attention. The first is that the oral proclamation of the gospel is accompanied by a ministry of service, healings and exorcisms, that are both a sign and a means of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God into human history. The ministry of Philip is a ministry in word and in work. The second is that the world-wide mission of evangelization has been ratified by the Jerusalem apostles through the ministry of Peter and John.

At the beginning of the third millennium these characteristics of the proclamation of the gospel continue and must continue to be in evidence. The oral proclamation of the gospel must always be accompanied by a ministry of works which break the power of evil in the world and announce the coming of the Kingdom of God. The oral proclamation of the gospel must always be in union with the Apostolic See.