

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

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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 (2008) 264-281.

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Thursday, May 1, or Sunday, May 4, 2008.

LITURGY

Ephesians 1:17-23 contains a wish prayer, composed in the manner of Paul's own wish prayers and incorporating a magnificent portrait of the exalted Christ.

Matthew 28:16-20 narrates the great commission.

Acts 1:1-11, the beginning of the Book of Acts, is the introductory section of Luke's two-part work. The opening verses (vv. 1-2) are a literary prologue that recalls the prologue with which the Third Gospel begins (Luke 1:1-4). Both the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are addressed to an anonymous Theophilus, the cultured Hellenistic "God-lover" (Theo-philus). The prologue to Acts tersely recapitulates the Third Gospel, specifically recalling its final pericopes (Luke 24:44-53).

After the prologue Acts describes Jesus giving final instructions to his disciples before commissioning them and being taken up into heaven. The instructions (vv. 3-7), which Joseph Fitzmyer calls Jesus' "last will and testament to his chosen followers" (Acts [Anchor Bible 31; New York: Doubleday, 1999] 199) focus on the kingdom of God (an idea not further exploited in this narrative), a directive that the disciples remain in Jerusalem (for that is the point of departure for the proclamation of the gospel; see Luke 24:47-48), and the gift of the Holy Spirit, promised by the Father. In the ensuing narrative of Acts the Holy Spirit will be mentioned almost sixty times.

The apostles' question about the kingdom not only indicates that they do not yet have sufficient understanding of what the kingdom really is but also that with Jesus departure a new era ("this time") in the history of salvation has begun. This new era is the time of the Church.

The commissioning statement is different from that of the Great Commission at the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel (Matt 28:16-20). Luke's version of the commission (v. 8) is a programmatic statement for the narrative in Acts. Peter will be the principal spokesperson for the gospel in Jerusalem and Judea.

Philip will fulfill that role in Samaria. Paul will carry the gospel message to "the end of the earth" (singular in Greek, not a plural as is suggested by the popular translation "ends of the earth"). The end of the earth denotes Rome, where Paul is under house arrest when Luke brings his narrative to a close (Acts 28).

Having commissioned the apostles to be his witnesses, Jesus departs from them to heaven. The "ascension" is Luke's manner of speaking about the glorification or exaltation of Jesus. To

stress its reality, Luke graphically describes it as a reality to which the apostles are eye-witnesses; five references to the sense of sight are found in vv. 9-11 ("looking on," "from their sight," "looking intently," "looking at," "you have seen").

Two other features of the nature deserve to be noted. The first is the emphasis on the Father. Luke's use of verbs in the passive voice ("was lifted," "has been taken up") continue the emphasis on the activity of God found in the mention of the kingdom of God, the promise of the Father, and the Father having authority over the time of the church).

The second is that the ascension of Jesus looks ahead to the Parousia: the glorified Jesus will return in an apocalyptically described scenario in God's good time.

BROKEN FOR US

The Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord does not so much celebrate the absence of Jesus as it does his glorification and the time of the church. Crucial to the existence of the church is the realization of the Father's promise, the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples of Jesus. Equally important is the role of the disciples as witnesses to Jesus and giving testimony to the kingdom of God. The church's submission to the authority of the Father should make us realize that the church is not an end in itself. The church is a subservient and provisional reality established by the Father until the return of Jesus in glory.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 4, 2008

LITURGY

1 Peter 4:13-16, echoing the long beatitude of the Synoptic tradition (Matt 5:11; Luke 6:22), teaches that Christians might suffer because of their fidelity to Jesus but that punishment for evil deeds should not be the occasion of their suffering.

John 17 1:-11a represents a substantial excerpt from Jesus' high-priestly prayer.

Acts 1:12-14 follows immediately upon the reading from Acts used on the Feast of the Ascension. The short pericope is one of the minor summaries in Acts that describe the idyllic situation of the early Christian community in Jerusalem.

The return of the apostles to Jerusalem implicitly affirms their obedience to Jesus' directives (see Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4). The Mount of Olives, located to the east of Jerusalem, was just a Sabbath day's walk from the city. Jews were not to walk more than 2000 cubits (approximately 1000 yards) on the Sabbath (see Exod 16:29).

The upper room to which the apostles returned has often been identified with the upper room of Luke 22:12, where Jesus celebrated his final Passover with the disciples. Archeological excavations of areas destroyed in the great fire of 70 CE indicate that the second story of buildings near the Temple Mount were not

built squarely over the first story; rather, they were slightly askew (by modern standards). The "upper rooms" were a little higher up the hill than the first stories were.

The list of the eleven apostles, one of four lists of the Twelve in the New Testament, has an order somewhat different from that used by Luke in Luke 6:14-16 (cf. Matt 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19).

Luke often mentions that prayer precedes the important activities of Jesus and his disciples. As the apostles were waiting for the realization of the Father's promise of the Spirit, they are at prayer. The apostles were joined in prayer 1) by some women, presumably Mary Magdalene and the other women who followed Jesus from Galilee (Luke 8:1-3) and witnessed his death and burial as well as the empty tomb (Luke 23:49, 55-56; 24:1:9); 2) by Mary, the mother of Jesus, who had virtually disappeared from the Lukan story since the infancy narratives of Luke 1-2 (cf. Luke 8:19-21); and 3) by his brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*), either a reference to Jesus' relatives or a reference to members of the fledgling community of believers.

BROKEN FOR US

Responding to Jesus' command the apostles returned to Jerusalem. Having learned Jesus' mode of prayer (Luke 11:1), they engaged in prayer while waiting for the great event of Pentecost. Strikingly, Luke notes that the apostles were joined in their prayer by three different "groups." The reader of Acts should avoid making any undue judgments as to the hierarchy of these three groups but it is interesting that the first of the groups consists of "some women." Their presence with the apostles at prayer is cited before mention is made of the mother of Jesus.

The presence of these women confirms the importance of women in the ministry of Jesus and in the activity of the early church. If Luke's vision of the Jerusalem community, the "ideal" of the Christian community in his description of the early church, has any relevance for the church of today, the role of women in the life and ministry of the church must be reaffirmed and intensified.

PENTECOST SUNDAY

May 11, 2008

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 contains both the introduction to Paul's first list of charismatic gifts (1 Cor 12:8-10) and the introduction to the ecclesial metaphor of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-27).

John 20:19-23 describes Jesus' apparition to the disciples on the first day of the week, Thomas being absent from the scene (see John 20:24-29).

Acts 2:1-11 provides a dramatic description of the gift of the Spirit to the members of the Jerusalem community of believers,

approximately 120 people (Luke 1:15).

By the first century CE, Judean Jews celebrated a number of "pentecosts" but tradition has generally identified the Pentecost of Acts 2:1 with the celebration of the Feast of Weeks, a harvest festival occurring fifty days after Passover (see Exod 23:16; 34:22; Deut 16:9-10, 16).

God's presence in the community is to be discerned in Luke's description of the audible and visionary experiences of the group that gathered in one place. Patristic and medieval tradition typically identified the place as the upper room of Luke 22:12, but that would have had to be a very large room if it were to accommodate 120 persons.

Throughout Luke-Acts, the evangelist portrays not only Jesus (Luke 4:1) but also important figures in Jesus' ministry (Zechariah, for example, Luke 1:67) and in the ministry of the early church (Paul, for example, Acts 9:7) as being filled with the Spirit. In today's reading (Acts 2:1-11) Luke gives an impressive description of the early Christian community being gifted with the Spirit.

The auditory phenomena, especially the "noise like a strong driving wind" (v. 2), could be heard by the Jewish pilgrims in town for the celebration of the festival. Luke's description of the event includes a play on words insofar as the Greek *pneuma* as the Hebrew *ruah* means both "wind" and "spirit." The roaring sound of the wind symbolizes the gift of the Spirit to the community.

Empowered by the Spirit, the early Christians "evangelized," that is, they proclaimed the good news of the mighty acts of God (v. 11). Fifteen different groups of people, all Jews, are described as hearing the proclamation of this good news. Luke has arranged the groups in an order that generally goes from east to west.

It is difficult to determine whether Luke's narration of the Pentecost miracle, the first miracle described in the Book of Acts, was intended as a description of an auditory wonder (v. 8) or a verbal wonder (v. 11). In any event the wonder is to be distinguished from the ecstatic speaking in tongues described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, 14. In both instances, however, the wonder is to be understood as a manifestation of the gift of the Spirit.

BROKEN FOR US

Some verses later (Acts 2:14), Peter and the Eleven stand up in the group. Peter serves as the spokesperson of the Twelve in interpreting what has happened to the 120 by means of a passage of Scripture, Joel 3:1-5. Only in verse 14, that is, in a verse that comes after today's reading, are the Twelve distinguished from the others in the Jerusalem community who had received the eschatological gift of God's Spirit.

Luke's description of the Pentecost event shows the entire community as being gifted with the Spirit and involved in the ministry of evangelization. Presented in cameo fashion, that ministry is described in terms that today would be called

inculturation. The gospel is to meet people in their own culture and language.

The cultural imperative of the first Pentecost impinges on the church today not only in its classic missionary outreach to people of different lands, with their various languages and customs, but also in its ministry in the United States and Canada—and some other places as well—where the residential population consists of people with different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural heritage.

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

May 18, 2008

LITURGY

2 Corinthians 13:11-13 is the finale of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians.

John 3:16-18 describes God's tremendous love for us.

Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9 is an extract from Exodus' description of the fourth theophany on Mount Sinai (see Exod 3:1-4:23; 19:16-19; 24:15-18). The theophany is Yahweh's answer to Moses' asking God that he be allowed to see him (Exod 33:12-23).

When the Lord passed before Moses, Yahweh revealed himself to Moses, twice announcing his name (cf. Exod 3:14). The Hebrew Bible's "Yahweh, Yahweh" is rendered "Lord, Lord" in the NAB version used in today's reading. Added to Yahweh's self-disclosure is an old cultic confession (of which only the first verse appears in today's liturgical lection) which proclaims Yahweh to be a God of steadfast love (*hesed*), the loyalty that arises from his covenantal relationship with Israel.

Moses responds with a gesture of adoration and a prayer of petition. Moses' adoration took the form of a genuflection or rapid prostration. His petition is two-fold. As the leader of Israel, Moses asks Yahweh to accompany the people as they continue their exodus journey. Acknowledging the sin of Israel, Moses asks Yahweh to forgive the iniquity of the people and continue to acknowledge Israel as his very own people, implicitly asking that Yahweh demonstrate that he is indeed a God of steadfast love.

The acknowledgment of Israel's sin may be a reference to the worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32), which led to Moses breaking the stone tablets on which the precepts of the Decalogue had been written, and his cutting new tablets of stone which he was carrying at the time of this theophany (v. 4b).

BROKEN FOR US

There are no passages celebrating the Trinity in the Jewish Scriptures. The church has therefore chosen as the first reading for today's feast a passage which speaks of the importance of God's self-revelation. The God who reveals himself to his people is a God of steadfast love whose loyalty to the people transcends the vagaries of their sinfulness.

In the course of time, God's fidelity to his people is

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manifest in the sending of his Son to save a sinful people from their sin (John 3:16-18). In the course of time, the God of steadfast love gives the gift of his Spirit to his people, inviting them into fellowship with the Spirit and with one another.

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

May 25, 2008

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 reminds us that the cup that we drink and the bread that we break are our participation in the body of Christ.

John 6:51-58 is the "eucharistic" section of the Bread of Life Discourse.

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14b-16a is a commentary on God's gift of manna, the bread from heaven, to his people. Moses challenges Israel to remember how God had taken care of them in the midst of the difficulties that they had experienced during their forty years of wandering in the desert. These afflictions are seen as a way in which God tested the people to determine whether they would remain faithful to him despite their hardships. The reference to keeping God's commandments specifically recalls the instructions given by God when he gifted his people with manna (see Exod 16:4, 16:19-20, 26-29).

Allowing deprivation, Yahweh challenges Israel to put its trust in him. The lesson to be learned from the gift of manna is that God takes care of his people even when nature seems not to. The food that was given to the Israelites was a kind of nourishment that they had not previously known (cf. Exod 16:15). The novelty of this gift is mentioned in verse 3 and reiterated in verse 16.

Cited by Jesus in his response to Satan at the bread temptation (Matt 4:4; Luke 4:4), verse 3 teaches that human existence is dependent not only on food; ultimately human existence is dependent on God's providential care for us. Its reference to every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord recalls the covenantal prescriptions, especially the precepts of the Decalogue, that teach God's people how to live and be in harmony with one another.

The preamble to the Decalogue (Deut 5:6; cf. Deut 6:12) is recalled in verse 14. The description of the hardships suffered by Israel during its forty years in the desert reflects a topos of Ancient Near Eastern Literature. Today's reading not only recalls the topos but also teaches about God's protection of his people in the dessert and the gifts that he gave to them. The story of God's protecting his people against poisonous serpents is found in Num 21:6-9; his giving of water to the people in Num 20:2-13.

BROKEN FOR US

The readings for the Feast of Corpus Christi are intended to

make us think about food. The gift of the eucharist is a gift of food to be eaten; the eucharist has not been given primarily as presence to be adored.

The reading from Deuteronomy reminds us of God's marvelous provision of food to his people. The reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is a reminder that the eucharist is a gift for which we should be thankful. The reading from the Fourth Gospel teaches us that the eucharist is a gift that has been given to us so that we might live. The Fathers of the Church and liturgists constantly remind us that the eucharist has been given to us so that, eating and drinking, we might become the Body of Christ.

While the eucharist should certainly be the focus of the homily on this solemnity, the liturgy should not be devoid of reference to God's gift of food, especially when so many millions of people throughout the world, including millions of people in North America, do not have enough food to eat. Exodus 16's narration of God's gift of manna says: "Those who gathered much had nothing left over, and those who gathered little had no shortage. They gathered as much as each of them needed . . . But they did not listen to Moses" (Exod 16:18, 20). In the contemporary circumstance of hunger throughout the world, a person of faith can only wonder whether anyone today really listens to Moses.