

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 offer this portion of his articles online at St. Luke's website. Father Collins' complete commentary on the Sunday readings can be found in *Emmanuel* (vol. 114 (2008) 163-181:

Augustine wrote that the Old Testament is opened up in the New and that the New Testament lies hidden in the Old. His terse description of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments helps to clarify the relationship between the first and third readings for the remaining Sundays of Lent. What 1 Samuel, Ezekiel, and the deutero-Isaiah describe sheds light on how the two passages from the Fourth Gospel and the reading taken from Matthew 26 should be understood by a Christian congregation during the remaining Sundays of Lent.

For the Sundays after Easter the liturgy suggests that we take a different approach. On these Sundays the first reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. Cumulatively these readings portray the response of those who accepted the Easter proclamation that Jesus had been raised from the dead. The reading for the Second Sunday of Easter provides a cameo of what the church is supposed to be. The reading for the Third and Fourth Sundays give an example of the early Christian proclamation of the gospel and the way that people responded to it. The reading for the Fifth Sunday provides a picture of the church creatively coping with a problematic situation. Finally, the reading for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, the last Sunday of April, shows the proclamation of the gospel beginning to move from its Jerusalem base to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 3, 2008

1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a

The First Book of Samuel is the first-part of a two-part narrative that tells the story of Samuel, Saul, and David. The historical tale is told on the basis of older historical sources.

In its present final form the artistic narrative reflects a number of theological interests not the least of which is the relationship between prophecy and the emerging monarchy in Israel.

As a theological text, 1 Samuel reflects on the relationship between the providence of God and human power in the context of new socio-political circumstances.

Today's reading is the abridged first segment of the long narrative that is sometimes described as the history of David's rise (1 Sam 16:1-2 Sam 5:10). The scene describes God's providential choice of David, the youngest of the eight sons of Jesse, as the future king of Israel. The prophet Samuel initially thought that God's choice for the royal mandate would be Eliab, Jesse's oldest son, a tall man like the reigning King Saul (1 Sam 9:2), and a warrior who would fight with Saul against Goliath and the Philistines (1 Sam 17:28). God, however, confounded both the prophet and Jesse by choosing, against all expectations, the youngest son, David, an adolescent whose household responsibility was to tend the sheep.

When God indicated to the prophet that his choice fell upon David, Samuel anointed the young man and the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, just as it had upon Saul (1 Sam 10:6, 9; 11:6). The gift of the Spirit foreshadows one of the central motifs of 1-2 Samuel, namely, that God was with David (1 Sam 16:18; 18:14, 28; 2 Sam 5:10).

BROKEN FOR US

Anointing is the link between today's third reading and the Old Testament reading. Jesus anoints the eyes of the blind man with a bit of mud and the man is enabled to see. This anointing is a symbol and means of God's healing power. Samuel anoints David by pouring a horn full of oil on him. This anointing is a symbol and means of God's providential choice of David, enabling him to fulfill his role as the leader of Israel. Like Saul (1 Sam 14:6, 10; 26:9-23; 2 Sam 1:14, 16), David is God's anointed one (1 Sam 16:6, 12, 13), a messiah, literally, one who is anointed.

Anointing is a focal point of the Old Testament narrative. The one thing that God tells Samuel to bring with him is a horn of oil (1 Sam 16:1). As he looked at Eliab, Samuel thought that he was to be God's anointed one (1 Sam 16:6). After the prophet had examined the eight brothers, he is ordered to anoint David (1 Sam 16:12). The prophet does as he is told. Samuel anoints David in the presence of his seven siblings with the oil that he had brought with him (1 Sam 16:13).

With the Easter vigil just three weeks away, the story of David's anointing enables us to reflect on the meaning of the anointing received by Christians in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation ("chrismation" in the Eastern tradition). Anointing is a symbol that ratifies and expresses God's choice of an individual for a particular role in the history of salvation. As the youngest of Jesse's sons, David was an unlikely candidate for the role that God had in mind for him. Similarly, we who are anointed in baptism and confirmation are unlikely and unworthy candidates. Nonetheless, we have been chosen by God.

Anointing is a symbol of the gift of God's Spirit enabling and empowering us to live our lives as Christians and fulfill the role that God assigns to us as ministers of his Gospel. Like Saul and David and like Jesus himself (Luke 4:18), each of us is a messiah, an anointed one chosen and empowered by God. We participate in Jesus' messianic anointing and the mission that ensued.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 10, 2008

Ezekiel 37:12-14

Ezekiel, the priest-prophet, was an upper class Judean exiled to Babylon in 597 b.c.e. along with others of the Jerusalem elite.

For the most part the poetic book which bears the prophet's name is his own work. The first twenty-four chapters describe prophetic signs and oracles directed against Jerusalem and Judea whose people considered the covenant, the land of Israel, the Davidic monarchy, and temple as guarantees of God's favor despite

the abominations that they had committed. The second part of the book, chapters 25-32, consists of oracles directed against the nations and their rulers. The oracles of the third section, chapters 33-48, promise the future restoration of Israel.

The book contains four visions, the best known of which is the seer's vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones, celebrated in the moving lyrics of the old spiritual (Ezek 37:1-14; cf. 1:10-3:15; 8:1-11:24; chapters 40-48). The dry bones represent the nation, the whole house of Israel (Ezek 37:11). After his visionary experience, the prophet is commanded to speak to the dry bones. What God directs Ezekiel to say to the dry bones is the content of today's first reading.

The oracle speaks about the restoration of the people to their land. The "death valley" of the prophet's vision is a metaphor for the depths of the people's desperation. Another metaphor speaks of the people's restoration to hope and life: God will take them from their graves and again breathe his spirit on them (cf. Gen 2:7). Resuscitated, they will return to their own land, the land of Israel, where they will experience God as their Lord. The oracle's final words bespeak the inevitable realization of the divine promise.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

March 17, 2008

Isaiah 50:4-7 is taken from the third Servant Song (Isa 50:4-9) of the Deutero-Isaiah. The prophet appears to identify himself with the Servant (cf. Jer 11:18); his audience is the Israelites, particularly those Israelites who were unfaithful to God.

The first two verses describe the prophetic vocation of the Servant. With reference to the tongue and ears, the canticle depicts the Servant as a person who has heard God's word so that he might communicate it (cf. Jer 1:9-10; Ezek 2:8-3:3) to those who are weary. He provides a source of encouragement and hope for discouraged exiles, his fellow Israelites.

The Servant is not rebellious; he remains faithful to the prophetic task of listening to and proclaiming the Word of God. Despite his fidelity to his prophetic mission, the Servant is tormented in various ways by his fellow Israelites. His suffering is described in physical terms. The Servant's suffering at the hands of fellow Israelites is similar to that of the prophet Jeremiah who was rejected by those to whom he was sent (Jer 20:7-13).

The Servant's suffering at the hands of those to whom he was sent is found in all four Servant canticles; hence, these songs are called the Suffering Servant Canticles. See Isa 42:4; 49:7; 52:13-53:12 for the relevant passages in the other Servant songs.

Notwithstanding his suffering, the Servant, like Jeremiah, remains steadfast in his prophetic mission. Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he is confident that Yahweh will vindicate him. Unlike Jeremiah who so rues his sufferings that he bemoans the day of his birth (Jer 20:14-18), the Servant complacently accepts the

suffering that he is forced to undergo. He is steadfast in his confidence that God will vindicate him.

BROKEN FOR US

Some commentators think that the image of the Suffering Servant has inspired the abasement and vindication celebrated in the hymn of Philippians 2. Even more commentators believe that the Suffering Servant canticles provide the paradigm for the "according to the Scriptures formula" of the early Christian (1 Cor 15:3-4) and Nicean creeds.

There is little doubt that the Servant canticles were a principal source of the New Testament authors' apologetic reflection on Jesus' Passion, Death, and Resurrection-his vindication. The canticles are frequently cited in different versions of the Stations of the Cross and in pious Christian reflection on the sufferings of Jesus.

The canticles portray a prophetic figure, faithful to his prophetic vocation notwithstanding the sufferings inflicted on him by his own people, those to whom he was sent. Faithful to his vocation, he remains confident that he will be vindicated by God.

The paradigm aptly fits the Jerusalem ministry of Jesus commemorated during Holy Week.

EASTER SUNDAY: THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

March 24, 2008

Acts 10:34a, 37-43 is the last of Peter's kerygmatic speeches in Acts. In the Lukan narrative it is addressed to Cornelius, Luke's representative Gentile.

The speech summarizes the Lukan gospel, beginning in Galilee and now extended to the Gentiles through Peter. Galilee belonged to the part of the Roman province of Syria which was known as Judea. The narrative summary portrays Jesus as a prophetic figure, one of the chief motifs of the evangelist's christology. As a prophet, Jesus is anointed with the Spirit (Luke 4:18) and God is with him. He is the anointed one, the Christ, the Messiah.

Peter's speech is theocentric; God is mentioned five times in Luke's brief account, twice in verse 38, once each in verses 40, 41, 42.

The evangelist highlights Jesus' healing and exorcism activity as characteristic of his prophetic ministry. In the gospel narrative Luke does not describe those who are possessed as possessed by "the devil" but he characterizes the devil as one who opposed both Jesus (Luke 4:5-13) and the reign of God that Jesus inaugurates.

To speak of Jesus' crucifixion, Luke says that they hung him on a tree. "Hang on a tree" was a contemporary idiom for "crucify," going back to Deut 21:22-23 (see Gal 3:13). The idiom is used in the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QpHab 3-4 i.6-8; 11QTemple 64:7-8) and earlier in Acts (Acts 5:30). "They" can only refer to the Jews mentioned earlier in the verse.

Luke echoes the early Christian kerygma and credal formulas

by saying that God raised Jesus from the dead. God is also the enabling agent of Jesus' resurrection appearances. Since the empty tomb was discovered on the third day, it was customary, then and now, to speak of Jesus' resurrection on the third day.

According to Luke a criterion of the apostolate is that the apostle be witness to both Jesus' public life and his resurrection. Thus Luke presents Peter, spokesperson for the Twelve, saying that "we" have been witnesses to what he did and to his appearances (cf. 1 Cor 15:5). The witnesses are a select group, chosen by God and set apart from "all the people." Their eating and drinking with Jesus hearkens back to a tradition reflected in Luke 24:41-43.

Repeating one of his favorite themes (Luke 4:21; 24:26-27; 44-46), Luke says that the prophets testify to Jesus. The apostles' proclamation of the gospel encompasses the prophetic witness and testifies both to Jesus' role as judge at the parousia and the forgiveness of sins (cf. Luke 24:47).

BROKEN FOR US

The reading from Acts places Jesus' resurrection within the context of the history of salvation accomplished by God. From that perspective the resurrection is the culmination of Jesus' life and ministry. God overcomes the opposition to that ministry which comes from the devil and some Jews. Raising Jesus from the dead, God establishes him as judge of the living and the dead, a role which will be fully manifest at the parousia. Those who believe receive forgiveness of their sins. That is the good news, the Easter gospel.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

March 31, 2008

Acts 2:42-47 is the first of the classic summaries in Acts that describe the early church in idyllic terms to portray an ideal or model church (see Acts 4:23-37; 5:12-16). Luke identifies four traits as characteristic of the early church in Jerusalem: their devotion to the teaching of the apostles, their communal life, the breaking of the bread, and their prayers (Acts 2:42). For the most part the rest of the evangelist's summary fleshes out some of the details of these characteristics.

The Jerusalem believers' devotion to the teaching of the apostles suggests something more than their acceptance of the apostles' missionary preaching (*kerygma*) and the instruction given to those about to be baptized (*katechesis*). The teaching of the apostles included scriptural reflection on the ministry of Jesus.

Since the Jerusalem believers were in awe at the marvelous deeds, the signs and wonders, done by the apostles, it is likely that the teaching of the apostles also included stories about the Spirit working through the apostles' ministry of word and work.

Their communal life (*koinonia*) corresponded to what Hellenists would have seen as the fullest expression of friendship (*philia*). Their communal life was somewhat similar to the life that the Essenes were then leading at Qumran. Not only did the

members of the "community," a term that was probably used to designate the church, live in peace and harmony with one another but they also shared their resources. Luke's Greek text could mean that those early Christians pooled all of their resources, but it is more likely that they took care of one another out of their resources, selling their property and possessions to enable them to provide for one another's needs.

The breaking of the bread was the celebration of the eucharist (cf. Luke 24:35; Acts 2:46; 20:7, 11; 27:35; 1 Cor 10:16). This took place in the course of a communal meal in the home of one or another of their number. Both the meal and the eucharistic ritual of which it was a part had a communal dimension (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-34).

Their prayer was an expression of their communion with God, which Luke considers to be an important feature of discipleship. Their presence in the temple precincts suggests that these early Christian Jews continued to participate in temple worship. It is not unlikely that it was in the temple area that they listened to the teaching of the apostles (cf. Matt 26:55; Mark 14:49; Luke 22:53; John 8:2, 20; 10:23; 18:20).

The way that the early church lived as a community made a favorable impression on those who observed them (cf. Acts 4:21; 5:13). Finally, Luke notes, the power of God's Spirit at work led to an almost daily increase in the size of the community.

BROKEN FOR US

Luke's description of the church at Jerusalem offers an idealized portrayal of the church. It describes a model of what the church is called to be, not a collection of like-minded individuals but a real community, characterized by dedication to the apostolic teaching, prayer, and the celebration of the eucharist.