

Christ in the Gospels of the
Liturgical Year

Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year

Raymond E. Brown, S.S. (1928–1998)

Expanded Edition,
with introductory essays by
Ronald D. Witherup, S.S., and John R. Donahue, S.J.

Edited by Ronald D. Witherup, S.S.



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Editor's Preface

Only days after the untimely death of Father Raymond E. Brown, S.S., on August 8, 1998, his final book in the Liturgical Press series on preaching the Scriptures in the liturgical year appeared, *Christ in the Gospels of the Ordinary Sundays*. The arrival of this slim volume brought to completion a project that had begun in the mid-1970s. At that time Father Brown had published in *Worship* several popular essays on the Christmas stories narrated in Matthew and Luke. These essays were a convenient digest of his monumental *The Birth of the Messiah*. The result of this popularization, *An Adult Christ at Christmas*, resonated with many people, especially Catholics who were eager to learn more about the Gospels but who often lacked the inclination or background to plow through the larger, more technical study. Thus began the series of six volumes (published over a span of twenty years, 1978–1998) that are now collected here in one volume to mark the tenth anniversary of Father Brown's death.

This volume began in a conversation with Peter Dwyer of Liturgical Press when I suggested that it might be good to reissue all six volumes in a new and updated format to reach a new audience. As individual volumes, they have continued to attract interest. Yet since more than thirty years have passed since the appearance of the first volume, it seemed opportune to enhance the collection with a few useful additions. First, there are two new essays on preaching the liturgical year and on Father Brown's hermeneutical method, respectively, by John R. Donahue, S.J., and myself. In addition, Father Donahue has provided a bibliography of useful resources for preaching the word of God in the context of the lectionary. There are also useful indexes and a revised chart on the liturgical year. It should also be emphasized that I have used some literary license in merging the six forewords of the original volumes into one introduction that attempts to preserve the tone and content of the originals but in a unified edition. (I trust the author would be indulgent to a Sulpician confrere!)

Also, the order of the volumes has now been adjusted somewhat. The first chapter of the last-published volume on Ordinary Time has been placed at the head of the entire collection because it provides the clearest statement of Brown's intention and method. This essay orients the reader to the whole enterprise. The rest of the essays are arranged to follow the flow of the liturgical year, from Advent through Pentecost and into Ordinary Time. Otherwise, the text and notes have not been revised other than to make changes necessitated by this reorganization. No attempt has been made to update Brown's bibliography in the notes, except in obvious instances of revised works now available.

It is my hope that this commemorative edition will reach a whole new generation of readers and, especially, preachers of the word, for the original essays still contain a lot of wisdom that can inform our understanding of God's word for today. As is well known, Father Brown, a scholar's scholar, had the rare capacity to simplify complex biblical studies in a manner that did not "dumb down" the material but allowed it to be understood by a wide audience devoid of technical expertise in biblical studies. He did this in a fashion that was both inspiring and educational.

I wish to thank sincerely Peter Dwyer and his colleagues at Liturgical Press for supporting this project enthusiastically from the beginning. I am also grateful to John Donahue, S.J., Research Professor in Theology at Loyola College in Maryland, for his willingness to contribute to this volume from his own vast experience of biblical exegesis and preaching the word of God. Father Donahue was the first Raymond E. Brown Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at St. Mary's Seminary & University (2001–2004), and his essay on liturgical preaching and his list of annotated bibliographical resources have greatly enhanced the utility of this book.

R.D.W.

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, 2008

Part I

Ronald D. Witherup, S.S.

John R. Donahue, S.J.

Chapter 1

The Hermeneutical Approach of Raymond E. Brown

Ronald D. Witherup, S.S.

All avid readers probably have certain books they return to time and again, so much so that the binding breaks or the pages get dog-eared. For me, the little books by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., on preaching the Gospels in the liturgical year have become such objects of endearment. Produced and used over the span of some thirty years, I have nonetheless gone back to them with relish each time a new lectionary year begins.

But what makes them so appealing? How do they retain their attractiveness year after year? This essay attempts to answer these questions by an analysis of Father Brown's hermeneutical method, that is, his approach to biblical interpretation.

One biographical note may be pertinent to this discussion. As a Sulpician¹ colleague of Father Brown, I became aware over time that he was almost always at work on a smaller publishing project (or multiple ones!) while he was engaged in the strenuous years of research and writing his monumental works. Several volumes in the original Liturgical Press preaching series provide examples, such as *An Adult Christ at Christmas* and *A Crucified Christ in Holy Week*. The reason for this pattern was simple. Brown was a priest and a man of faith who never lost sight of the pastoral dimension of his ministry, even after he

¹ For those not familiar with the term, the Sulpicians (i.e., the Society of St. Sulpice, hence the "S.S.") are a group of Catholic priests who specialize in initial and on-going formation of priests. Founded in France in 1641, the Sulpicians have operated many seminaries around the world. Father Brown began his teaching career at the Sulpician St. Mary's Seminary & University in Baltimore, the oldest Catholic seminary in the U.S. (1791).

had attained the rare extraordinary heights in scholarship that characterized his career.² This pastoral sensitivity was particularly focused on teachers, catechists, priests, deacons, seminarians, and all who are charged to preach or teach the word of God.

As a homilist himself, Brown was characteristically *biblical*. One did not go to his services to hear cute illustrative stories or to receive lengthy discourses on erudite topics. One went to hear the word of God. And he seldom disappointed. More importantly, he believed that part of his Sulpician ministry, whether educating teachers, seminarians, priests, or permanent deacons, was to help instruct them to become *biblical* preachers. That was the primary purpose of the small books on preaching the Gospels and Acts. Becoming a biblical preacher is not as easy as it would seem. There are pitfalls. Brown knew that a homily was neither a classroom lecture nor a theological or moral discourse. A homily is meant to elucidate the biblical text(s) of the day and to help people make connections between God's word and their contemporary lives, so that they receive a message that is true to the biblical text yet applicable today.

I believe the success of this preaching series demonstrates that Brown's approach was effective. Furthermore, there are characteristics of his method that may help us see why his approach retains its value, even decades after he began publishing these pastoral guides. Three aspects of his hermeneutical method are worth highlighting: context, faith perspective, and the historical-critical method.

SENSITIVITY TO CONTEXT

Context is a word that has multiple meanings with regard to the task of preaching. The next essay in this volume by Jesuit Father John Donahue treats the "liturgical context" very well and need not be considered here. In his six volumes on preaching the Gospels of the liturgical year, Brown occasionally made mention of the liturgical context, but that was not his focus. Indeed, in favor of concentrating on

²I have addressed the pastoral dimension of Brown's writings elsewhere. See my article "The Incarnate Word Revealed: The Pastoral Writings of Raymond E. Brown," in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*, ed. John R. Donahue, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 238–52. A short biography of Brown and a full bibliography of his writings are also available in the same book, 254–89.

only the four canonical Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, he admittedly left out the other readings from the Sunday liturgies (i.e., the OT first reading, the Psalm response, and the second reading from the NT letters [except for Acts, which occurs in the Easter season]). But as he also pointed out, other resources addressed *all* the lectionary readings in the liturgical year, and this was not his intention. His focus was on the *biblical context* of the Gospel readings of the liturgical seasons.

One of the great strengths of Brown's approach to preaching from the Gospels is the insistence to be mindful of context. Each Gospel passage chosen for a Sunday or a feast is excerpted from the larger Gospel. In the liturgy it is consequently cut off from its context. The preacher who ignores this reality risks misinterpreting the passage precisely because it is not viewed within its native context. Thus when Brown wrote, for example, *An Adult Christ at Christmas* and *A Coming Christ in Advent*, which were devoted to the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke—the only Gospels that give this kind of portrayal of the conception and birth of Jesus—he was attempting to highlight why the differences in these accounts reflect the respective theological concerns of each evangelist. Historical questions (such as, what really happened on Christmas night?) took a back seat to theological interests (i.e., why does each evangelist tell his story in a particular fashion?). Only context can help one see how the individual passages of the infancy story fit into the larger picture that each Gospel presents in order to comprehend the meaning of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

Brown made explicit his concern about context in the opening essay of the final book in the series, which appeared posthumously and which addressed the Sundays of Ordinary Time (that essay appears as chapter 4, the introductory chapter to part 2, in this book). He explicitly said that homilists or proclaimers of the Gospel should ask the following question: "[H]ow does this Sunday passage lead us into the Gospel [i.e., Matthew, Mark or Luke], and fit its purposes?"³ The reason for

³ *Christ in the Gospels of the Ordinary Sundays*, 15, below page 349. Although this book was the last to be published in the series, its first chapter is placed first in this collection (chap. 4) because it gives the most explicit statement of Brown's intentions when he was conceiving and writings these books. Anyone wishing to track the development of Brown's thought or presentation in these volumes could examine the order in which they were published: *An Adult Christ at Christmas* (1978),

this orientation is quite clear. Brown understood that many people in the pew, and perhaps not a few homilists, have a tendency to harmonize the Gospels into one continuous story and thus fail to appreciate the distinctive theological outlook of each individual Gospel. In his approach, Brown attempted to correct this tendency by noting the uniqueness of each Gospel in presenting its story of Jesus. Each Gospel passage proclaimed Sunday after Sunday really makes full sense only in this larger context.

Another illustration of Brown's concern for context is his presentation of both the infancy narratives (Matthew and Luke) and the passion narratives (all four Gospels). Although he is attentive to the specific details of each story as narrated, he also regularly makes observations that connect the story to the larger narrative of the respective Gospel. Thus, when speaking of the magi in Matthew, Brown recalls Matthew's interest in the universalism of the gospel and likelihood that the magi represent the future acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah by the Gentiles. This constitutes a major theme in Matthew. Or regarding the passion narrative, when discussing Luke's particular presentation of Jesus' passion, Brown highlights connections with the portrayal of Jesus as a healer throughout Luke. Even in the midst of his own suffering Jesus heals the high priest's slave's ear that is cut off. Again, the larger context can play a role in understanding how a particular passage is interpreted.

One other example is pertinent here, especially because it illustrates the one time that Brown went beyond his concentration on the Gospels to another part of the NT. In *A Once-and-Coming Spirit*⁴ Brown departed from his usual emphasis on the Gospels and shifted to the Acts of the Apostles, which provides the second reading throughout the church's Easter season (from Easter to Pentecost). Yet even here, Brown's attention to context is paramount. Primarily, Brown makes observations about each passage of Acts used in the lectionary in terms of the larger context of the Book of Acts. However, he also rightly makes connections between the Gospel of Luke and the readings from Acts,

A Crucified Christ in Holy Week (1986), *A Coming Christ in Advent* (1988), *A Risen Christ at Eastertime* (1990), *A Once-and-Coming Spirit at Pentecost* (1994), and *Christ in the Gospels of the Ordinary Sundays* (1998). I would like to think Brown would have approved the reorganization for purposes of this book.

⁴ Liturgical Press, 1994; see below, chapters 27–32.

even though the Gospel of John is used as the Gospel for liturgies throughout the Easter season.⁵ Brown's goal, of course, is to make sure that the homilist understands the connection between Luke and Acts. This is the only two-volume work in the NT, written by the same author and intended to be read and understood together. Thus, many themes in Luke recur in Acts, and there are parallels established between the story of Jesus, as Luke tells it, and the story of the church.

In short, Brown's approach, with its sensitivity to context, aids the homilist especially to be sensitive to the unique perspective of each Gospel and to resist the temptation to blend them all together. By paying attention to context, certain themes or emphases can be a guide to the preacher who wants to be faithful to proclaiming God's word.

FAITH PERSPECTIVE AND SERVICE TO THE CHURCH

A second aspect of Brown's method was the faith perspective he brought to his task. He wrote as a man of faith and as a priest in service to the church. This is apparent in several ways, two of which I highlight here.

First, in his interpretations of the readings chosen for the lectionary cycle Brown was mindful of the *religious* message of each text. He did this in a number of ways. One way was his attentiveness to the OT background of the Gospels and Acts. He sometimes commented privately that he felt privileged to have been trained in OT (with a doctorate in Semitic languages from Johns Hopkins University) and to have had to teach it, because nothing could provide a better background for a NT scholar. Thus his familiarity with the entire biblical canon, and the unified biblical message of salvation, enhanced his interpretational acumen. He regularly points out connections between the Gospels and background OT passages that help understand the evangelist's religious message.

Another way he promoted a faith dimension to his interpretations might be said to have a positive and negative aspect. Positively, Brown made connections with everyday life that resonated with people. This did not come in the form of stories so much as observations about Christian life. For instance, he could reference where certain characters

⁵ Brown includes in that set of essays some explanatory comments about the sections of John's Gospel used in the Easter season so that there is attention to the church's use of this Gospel along with Acts.

in the biblical stories could function as “models” of faith (e.g., Mary as a model Christian believer) or the starkness of death that everyone must one day face, seen in John’s story of the “resurrection” of Lazarus from the tomb.⁶ Yet more importantly, what Brown did *not* do is significant. He avoided the frequent homiletic temptation to moralize every passage of the Gospel. His interpretations often centered on the theological, christological, or ecclesiological dimensions of the text in a way that did not trivialize the message in a “do this” or “don’t do that” fashion. All too often homilists turn the biblical message into a moralizing one. Brown emphasized that sometimes the Scriptures are not about *us*, but about the nature of God or the nature of Christ. They provide a window into the divine. They help us keep our eyes focused on the truth, not ourselves. Some homilists, no doubt, find this challenging, but such an approach provides a more authentic religious orientation to the biblical text.

A second religious or faith perspective is found in Brown’s practice of placing his interpretational method in the context of official Catholic Church teachings about the Bible and its interpretation. He accepted and understood that the church has the authority to teach authentically about how to approach the Scriptures and how to interpret them. He understood himself to function as an exegete within the context of the church and at her service. He was also well aware of the controversies over biblical interpretation that are a part of our history as a church. He utilized the best instruction from the church concerning the Scriptures so that people would understand that his approach was indeed Catholic. In particular with regard to the Gospels, Brown drew attention to the Pontifical Biblical Commission document on historical questions related to the Gospels. Titled “The Historical Truth of the Gospels” (1964), this document pointed out that the Gospels as we have them in our NT are not eyewitness accounts per se but are based upon oral and written traditions that went through three stages.⁷ By

⁶ See, respectively, *An Adult Christ at Christmas*, 25, below p. 120, and *Christ in the Gospels of the Ordinary Sundays*, 105, below p. 426.

⁷ See below, chapter 4, footnotes 1 and 2, for bibliographical information on this document. Brown’s book, *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 109–18, contains an appendix with excerpts from official Catholic teachings on biblical interpretation that guided his work, including “The Historical Truth of the Gospels.”

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noting this teaching, which itself was adopted by the Second Vatican Council's "Constitution on Divine Revelation"⁸ and thereby became a hallmark of the Catholic tradition of Gospel interpretation, Brown was emphasizing the priority of theological concerns apparent in the Gospels as they have come down to us. Each evangelist assembled, edited, and presented the traditions about Jesus Christ that came to him and his community in a way that made each Gospel portrait unique. Brown took all pains to show that this Catholic perspective is not detrimental to the faith and in no way compromises the "truth" of the Gospel.

HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD AND ITS APPLICATION

Everyone who has read Brown's works, whether his monumental ones or the short, pastorally oriented ones, knows that he was an expert in the historical-critical (or scientific) method of biblical interpretation.⁹ He acknowledges this several times in his writings but also notes that in his books on preaching the liturgical year, his interest was not primarily in the historical aspects of the biblical readings, though these are not totally ignored, but in the religious meaning of the texts. Yet it is clear that at every step along the way, he remains the historical critic, carefully dissecting every word of the biblical passage and looking more deeply beneath it for the truth that is embedded there. We can actually be more explicit about Brown's method as regards historical criticism. At least with respect to his books on preaching the Gospels and Acts, he showed himself primarily to be a redaction critic.

Redaction criticism came into play in NT biblical scholarship in the 1950s, just at the time when Brown was pursuing his graduate studies. Without going into great detail, redaction criticism of the Gospels is a method whereby the interpreter notices even the most trivial difference in language or structure of the text, in comparison to parallels found in the other Gospels. For the NT this method was primarily applied to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), which are obviously

⁸ For a detailed presentation of this constitution and its use of prior church teachings, see Ronald D. Witherup, *Scripture: Dei Verbum (Rediscovering Vatican II)*; New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

⁹ For more information on this method and the controversy surrounding it, see Witherup, *Scripture*, 100–110.

parallel, but it has also been applied to John and other NT works. The method focuses on changes that the final editor (redactor) of the Gospel may have made from his sources and asks why such changes have been made. Responses to this question could range from the possibility of differing oral or written sources available to the evangelist to an interest in other theological themes or emphases that shaped the final text.

Brown was by any estimation a master redaction critic. Many astute observations that appear in his books reproduced here are the result of a keen application of redaction criticism to the biblical text. More remarkably, Brown for the most part avoided a pitfall that can befall redaction critics. Carried to excess, redaction criticism can lead to an endless set of theories about hypothetical sources and traditions that might lie behind the text. To his credit, Brown concentrated on the biblical text as it exists in the canon (or in some cases, as it has been edited to fit into the lectionary). Although Brown could handily make reference to alternative readings in diverse manuscripts of the Gospels (textual criticism), he concentrated his interpretational interest primarily on the final form of the text as we have it in the Bible. I would suggest, in fact, that this is the only just approach that a homilist can take. Preaching the word of God is not about propounding scholarly theories of origin, hypothetical sources or situations, or imaginary editions of the biblical text. It is about preaching the word of God as it is proclaimed in a certain given form from the canon and assembled in the lectionary.

Although scholarly methods have long since evolved in many other directions, redaction criticism has made a lasting contribution to biblical studies. It has enabled us permanently to see the uniqueness of each Gospel and its way of telling the story of Jesus. That is why Brown's preaching series remains so helpful. In my experience, many homilists (let alone congregations) have yet to grasp the richness of the message of the Gospels sounded in four "keys" at once. Each tells the story of the same Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, yet in such unique ways. Brown's presentation highlights this diversity and still provides a gold mine of preaching perspectives that can be plumbed over time.

I should add that the historical-critical method remains controversial, despite decades of useful experience with it. Some, even in the Catholic Church, have assailed it as a threat to the faith. But I would point out that Pope Benedict XVI, who as Cardinal Prefect of the

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Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith expressed some grave concerns about the excesses of certain applications of the historical-critical method, emphasized in his book on Jesus of Nazareth that this method is “an indispensable tool.”¹⁰ One cannot adequately explore Scripture without it. But neither is this method the final word in biblical interpretation.

If Brown was an expert in applying the historical-critical method to Scripture, he was also sensitive to other issues. For instance, he clearly was open to deeper senses to the Scriptures beyond the literal (e.g., the spiritual sense), and he incorporated the insights of early, precritical, patristic, and medieval interpreters where useful. But one would have to admit that Brown’s true genius was in the application of the historical-critical method that he had honed through a lifetime of research and writing.

CONCLUSION

With these three topics—context, a faith perspective and service to the church, and the historical-critical method and its application—I make no claim to have analyzed Brown’s hermeneutical method in its entirety. But I have tried to explain why reissuing these books in a new format on the tenth anniversary of Raymond Brown’s death can still serve the church. For those interested in familiarizing themselves with the Gospels and Acts as they will be read in the context of a new liturgical year, Brown remains a good place to start, whether you are in the congregation or in the pulpit. Brown would also be the first to advise that while his writings can orient you toward a useful and even deeper reading of Scripture, nothing takes the place of encountering the word of God directly. So my advice would echo that given to Saint Augustine long ago: *Tolle, lege!* Take up the word of God and read it! But have Raymond Brown by your side to help you understand it.

¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xvi. The pope also takes pains to emphasize the limitations of this method and to stress the need for supplementary methods, such as incorporation of patristic insights and openness to the spiritual sense of the Scriptures. The Pontifical Biblical Commission also emphasizes that the historical-critical method is “indispensable” for Bible study (*Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* [1993], §1A). Any reasonable practitioner of this method would acknowledge that it is not the *sole* way to interpret the Bible. Yet those who would banish it altogether are overreacting to the excesses of the method that are relatively scarce today.

Chapter 2

The Marriage of Biblical Scholarship and Liturgical Preaching in Debt to Raymond E. Brown

John R. Donahue, S.J.

Though it is axiomatic that the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) of Vatican II fostered the flowering of Catholic biblical scholarship that was blossoming since *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), engagement with the Bible was not to be limited to the classroom, but was to accompany the celebration of every sacrament. Scripture was to be the soul of theology. The lectionary was revised to include three annual cycles covering the Synoptic Gospels, with John prominent during the paschal season; the Old Testament, rarely heard in churches prior to the council, was to be read at Sunday liturgies. The responsorial psalm unlocked the beauty of Israel's prayer and praise. Preaching and explaining God's word in Scripture was listed by the council as the prime ministry of priest and bishop.

Well before I became aware of the emerging scholarship of Raymond Brown, my family in Baltimore told me how inspired they were by the homilies Brown offered as a young Sulpician at St. Mary's Parish (Govans) in Baltimore. Throughout his years of teaching, lecturing, and monumental scholarship, Brown in practice and publication reflected on how proclamation of the word is shaped by the liturgical context. The various books combined in this volume are the fruit of Brown's sensitivity to the liturgical context. They offer fine descriptions of the major passages appropriate to the various seasons and, as ever, contain gems for fruitful preaching. Since adapting preaching to the liturgical context is a never-ending challenge, in debt to Brown's legacy, I will propose some reflections on the task along with some practical suggestions.

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