

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [July 13, 2004](#) issue

Bad table manners: When Samuel Wells was the vicar of a small Anglican church in a marginal neighborhood, a gang of surly adolescents burst into the church one Sunday as the Eucharist was being celebrated. While the congregation looked on in horror, the youths stood before the altar and their leader demanded, “Are you going to give us some of that?” Wells responded: “If you look behind you, you will see a small group of people who are here to do the most important thing in their lives. I don’t think this is the most important thing in your life. I hope it may become so one day. But for now, I suggest you wait outside until we’ve finished, and then we’ll have a chat about what things are really important and how we learn how to do them.” Amazingly, the rowdy boys complied, and stayed for the conversation (*The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Wells and Stanley Hauerwas; a review of this book is forthcoming).

Not in our name: In an ad appearing on several Arab television networks, American religious leaders condemned the prisoner abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison and apologized to the Iraqis and Arab peoples for the scandal. Donald Shriver, president emeritus of Union Theological Seminary in New York, was one of the spokespersons, who also included a Catholic, Jew and Muslim (see www.FaithfulAmerica.org). Episcopalians for Global Reconciliation have a Web site where Americans can sign an apology to the Iraqi people for the prisoner abuse scandal. The statement reads in part: “We as Christians and/or Americans want to tell the people of Iraq and others that we are shocked and deeply ashamed to hear of the torture and humiliation inflicted on Iraqi and other prisoners in the custody of our government. . . . We apologize to victims of this abuse and their families, and to all the people of Iraq. . . . This should never have happened in our name. We pledge to work together so this never happens again” (see www.e4gr.org/apology).

Faith, fact and fiction: In *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July-August), Frank Moore Cross and Elie Wiesel discuss the historicity of the Pentateuch. Cross, a Harvard professor with a Christian background, takes a critical approach, believing that the Exodus story has an epic quality to it, not unlike the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; it is part

historical and part mythological, he says, and it is difficult and unnecessary to distinguish the two strains. Wiesel, a Jew who teaches at Boston University, takes a more existential approach. He says that he has no doubts that the Exodus actually happened. For 3,500 years it has left such a strong imprint on people's memories that he just can't imagine its having been invented. Regarding the victorious Song of the Sea (Exod. 15), one of the earliest biblical texts, Wiesel concludes: "Who could have written such a poem except someone who went through [the Exodus]?"

Keep praying: Franz Rosenzweig, who grew up in a largely secular Jewish home, nearly converted to Christianity in his youth. Instead, while exploring Judaism in preparation for his baptism, he was drawn to it as a living faith. Eventually he wrote one of the most important Jewish books of the 20th century, *Star of Redemption*. It was penned while he was serving in the German army on the Balkan front near the end of World War I. Many sections were written on postcards he sent home to his family. The work is often cited as an early articulation of the two-covenant theory—the view that God established one covenant with the Jews and another with gentiles—although he didn't use those terms. Rosenzweig is also often invoked as an ally in Jewish-Christian dialogue, though he believed that the enmity between synagogue and church was intended by God for all time, and that God's work of redemption depends upon an ongoing tension between the two. What the synagogue and the church have in common is that they are liturgical communities which in their separate ways keep praying that "God's kingdom would come." The prayer is not about the end of time, but for eternity to be drawn into time (Jeremy Worthen in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Summer-Fall, 2002).

Paved road to hell: If all the paved surfaces in the 48 contiguous states were pieced together, it would cover a territory roughly the size of Ohio. This is an important finding by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, because impervious surface areas have an adverse affect on the atmosphere. They reduce heat transfer from the earth's surface to the atmosphere. The removal of vegetation also adds to the carbon content in the environment (UPI, June 14).

Work to welfare? With the economy booming and welfare-to-work policies in place, the number of single mothers who were employed increased from 62 percent in 1995 to 73 percent in 2000. In the past three years that rate has fallen to 70 percent, without a comparable increase in the number of single mothers receiving assistance. One study indicates that fewer than one out of every two families eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) actually receives it, compared

to about 80 percent of eligible families who received aid in the mid-1990s (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 22).

Cross to bear: Two students at Augusta State University in Georgia have been carrying ten-pound crosses in order to witness to their classmates about Jesus. Student reactions to this public display of affection for Jesus have been mild, although sometimes freshmen gawk and jeer. Says one of the cross-bearers: "To be mocked for Jesus is great" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 11).

Collateral reading: Here's what college students are reading (compiled by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 25): 1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (Doubleday). 2. Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (Little, Brown). 3. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (Simon & Schuster). 4. Lauren Weisberger, *The Devil Wears Prada* (Broadway). 5. Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (Hyperion). 6. Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (Random House). 7. Dan Brown, *Angels & Demons* (Atria). 8. Amy Sohn and Sarah Jessica Parker, *Sex and the City: Kiss and Tell* (Pocket Books). 9. Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (Gotham). 10. Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (Harvest Books).

What will Ned Flanders think? The producers of the animated Fox series *The Simpsons* are considering asking Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams to make a guest appearance on the show. Williams, an ardent fan of the show, thinks that it is "generally on the side of the angels and on the side of sense. It punctures lots of pompous fictions about how the world works." Since some religious groups have been critical of the show, the producers are gratified to have such a distinguished religious leader defend it (*Washington Post*, June 21).

Looking for love: Every year on the anniversary of Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel's death 2,000 years ago, pilgrims flock to his tomb in Israel in search of love. Although ben Uziel died a bachelor, there is a legend that he is capable of helping people find a spouse. One woman who made the pilgrimage this year admitted, however, that five years ago she had made the same trip. Although she subsequently found a husband, their marriage lasted only a year. This time she prayed that she would find the right husband (*New York Times*, June 22).