

A NEW STORY TO LIVE BY?

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THERE IS A POWERFUL MOMENT IN ORDINATION

SERVICES. A Bible is given to the newly ordained person and words, which have been part of the ordination rite since very ancient times, are spoken. These words, which are ritual confirmation of the preaching office, invariably fill the new presbyter with great satisfaction and joy:

“Receive this book as a sign of the authority which God has given you this day to preach the Gospel.”

At the same time, the weight of these words can cause genuine anxiety. There is no escaping the fact that preaching the Gospel of Christ at the turn of the third millennium is a daunting task. The demands on the preacher's time, energy and creativity are high, as, week after week, we search for ways of offering our congregation a truthful word, a comforting word, a challenging word, a word of life in a chaotic world. As one preacher wrote, “I can tell you that I bear a terrible burden when people listen, really listen, from the depths of their souls”. It is just this sort of feeling which led the pastor and theologian Joseph Sittler to entitle his 1996 book on homiletics *The Anguish of Preaching*.

TRANSFORMING

Preaching can also be a ministry of exceptional joy. It allows us to combine our love of Scripture, our love of people, and our love of God, and to weave them into something which, by the power of the Holy Spirit, becomes a living language event with the power to transform lives. Indeed, spiritual autobiographies are filled with testimonies which say “I heard so-and-so preach and it turned my life around”. Augustine heard Ambrose of Milan and was changed, and the church was changed with him. People heard Wesley, Spurgeon and Sangster preach, and were moved to repentance. A generation of Americans heard Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream” sermon, and it became a turning point in the struggle for universal civil rights. With all this in mind, we begin to understand what John Chrysostom meant when he described preaching as “kindling the Lord's fire”.

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IS ANYONE LISTENING?

Yet it cannot be denied that there is a genuine malaise in preaching today. Evidence for this malaise can be seen all around us: in the limited opportunities for advanced study of homiletics, the tiny number of books on preaching that are published each year, and in the fact that the craft of sermon-making is so rarely on the agenda of denominational governing bodies. Even in the theological colleges the teaching of preaching plays a relatively minor role, reflecting accurately the low status of the preaching office in the church at large. Despite the anguish some preachers may experience when people “really listen from the depths of their souls”, the more immediate anxiety at the turn of the millennium is that no one is actually listening at all.

CULTURE

Many Christian apologists are inclined to offer rather simplistic diagnoses of this problem. Some castigate the schools for no longer teaching the Bible thoroughly; or they berate liberal theology for failing to emphasise the permanent truthfulness of the Gospel message. Others blame the pervasiveness of television, computers and video games for reducing attention span. Whatever the specific villain, their message is clear. If we could simply turn the clock back forty years, the vibrancy of Christian preaching would be restored.

Religious nostalgia is rarely a solution to our present problems. Whilst the lack of biblical teaching, theological change and media saturation all may play a part, the causes of the current crisis in preaching are extraordinarily complex and ambiguous, deeply rooted in the culture of post-modernity. This culture, like any other, involves firmly embedded attitudes about such things as authority structures, human language, and interpersonal relationships. If we are to restore the power of the preaching office, it is imperative that we understand the problems and possibilities of the context within which we preach.

The sermon is a specific way of using language to effect a change in the heart and mind of the hearer, and some of our present difficulty with preaching is bound up with a general scepticism about the power of words. We live in a largely activist world, and in an activist world the use of language becomes a second-order experience. Post-modern people, convinced that verification by direct experience is essential to the interpretation of reality, are deeply suspicious of attempts to proclaim eternal truth “from the outside”.

NARRATIVES

Sociologists tell us that people interpret their lives through basic narratives, which provide a framework within which to understand the world and to establish goals and values. If there is any overarching meta-narrative that purports to explain reality in the late twentieth century, it is surely the narrative of the free market economy. In the beginning of this narrative is the self-made, self-sufficient human being. At the end of this narrative is the big house, the big car, and the expensive clothes. In the middle is the struggle for success, the greed, the getting-and-spending in a world in which there is no such thing as a free lunch. Most of us have made this so thoroughly “our story” that we are hardly aware of its influence.

Christian preaching can be the most potent way of presenting an alternative to this free market world-view: a counter-narrative around which new lives and a new social order can be established. In the beginning of this alternative story is the overwhelming generosity of God, at the end is God’s kingdom, and in between is the human journey, undertaken in the belief that the promises of God are true. But can we find a way of preaching the Christian counter-narrative that is compelling, that allows it to reveal itself as a genuinely better narrative out of which to live one’s life, and to shape public policy in the new century?



CREATIVE TENSION

Such preaching would certainly need to rest on a seriousness about the Bible, which is the soil out of which this counter-narrative grows. In a sense, the Bible is the ultimate post-modern text! As Søren Kierkegaard observed, the Bible makes one point at a time, and has no anxiety about harmony, balance or symmetry; as such it is tailor made for people who are caught up in a pluralist world, with all its uncertainties and asymmetries. But too often in our preaching we have succumbed to the temptation to use the Bible as a cohesive repository of thematic material waiting to be distilled into abstract principles and generalities.

“The Bible is the compost pile that provides material for new life” says Walter Brueggemann. He goes on to say that, in preaching, the Bible confronts us and “invites us to take a role in the drama of faith, to connect with the text in the ‘zone of the imagination’ and to allow it to impinge upon us, enlarge us, jar us, heal, transform and subvert us”. If we can begin to use the sermon to set up a creative tension between our lives and the biblical narrative, with all its awkwardness and sharpness, then we are on our way to giving people a new story out of which to live. The sermon then becomes a bridge, not between abstract spiritual themes and the concrete reality of human life, but between inherent conflict in human existence and the alternative way of reading reality presented by the biblical texts.

RENEWAL

There has never been a renewal of the church without a renewal of preaching. If preaching is to continue to be a vital part of the shared world which God graciously sets up with us, then we must be willing to renew our own belief in the power of words to transform lives, and the power of the Christian narrative to illuminate the workings of God in the world. ■

THIS ARTICLE FIRST APPEARED IN THE SPRING 1998 EDITION OF
THE BIBLE IN TRANSMISSION