

Preaching as Theological Reflection

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A Working Assumption...

- Sermonising as an engagement with the religious imagination; the preacher's and listeners. A written? and verbal work of creative imagination for the sake of imaginative, innovative practice. e.g., Jesus and parables. Therefore, the language and 'grammar' of the sermon can ill afford to be heavily prosaic. Rather, this kind of sermonising is a theopoetic or a *poiesis*; a making or an unfolding.

1. Located, Lived Experience as a Point of Beginning

"What I like about experience is that it is such an honest thing." (C.S. Lewis)

*"Experience is more than a source of theological reflection, experience is also the **context** for theological reflection...healthy theological reflection is **locative**..."* (Gordon Wild)

"On the corner of Fourth and Walnut..." (Thomas Merton, 'A Member of the Human Race')

"Here goes, then. This a painful and well-nigh insuperable step for me..." (Etty Hillesum)

"You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised..." (Augustine, *Confessions*)

"I live in Novar Gardens..." (S. Gilbert, 23/7/17)

- **A diving in!** A trusting in lived (faith) experience in order to *connect* with other members of the human race at a potentially affective level. More than just a sermon 'illustration' which can be quite abstract, and far more than banal humour born out of the preacher's own insecurity (a massaging of the crowd). Rather, lived experience is a sounding note of honesty, exploration, transparency, authenticity – the needed virtue of humility. A considered sharing of real, graced experiences that will ultimately point beyond themselves. It need not be manipulative in any shape or form. That is, a seeking for sympathy or legitimation of action or being (wearing feelings on one's sleeves). Potentially it is a deeply human/divine connecting point and is therefore a trustworthy vehicle for witness/testimony/proclamation, **yet in close conversation with...**

2. Scriptures & Tradition

"The whole of the Christian teaching rests upon the 'unbelievable' story of Jesus." (F. Ward)

"Understanding the Gospels presupposes some attempt to live them. Neither goal is realised as quickly as we would like." (Michael Casey)

- **The Bible is not a sermon quarry**, nor can the tradition be treated lightly or dismissively. Firstly, there needs to be an intentional listening for the voice of God in the text and through ecclesial movements and personalities. To be 'read' by the text as a spiritual practice (*Lectio Divina*). The preacher is a pilgrim also – not an expert – therefore the preaching **event** is a mutual listening for the redemptive Word in the midst of the gathered community. Again, a pointing beyond even the text toward the redemptive presence of Christ, **yet in conversation with...**

3. Culture and Environment

“With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the life of the divine Word.” (Gaudium et Spes, post Vatican II, 1966)

“The vocation of the communion of the multitude is to disrupt the culture of Empire. The communion of the multitude is the communion of the marginalised and it embodies the politics of the crucified Christ...” (George Zachariah, General Council of WCRC, Leipzig, 2017)

- **Where we live socially** and what impacts positively, negatively and even in those places between. Where is God and the spirit of the Gospel encountered beyond the church door and where does the Gospel call for resistance to godless powers that be? The preacher as a ‘reader’ of culture and environment. Informed and engaged thus able to converse and **interpret**. An offering of public theology, even an apologetic for the Gospel amongst the faithful, **yet in conversation with lived, located experience and the Scriptures / tradition**.

Summary:

- Preaching as TR has its own integrative dynamic to enter into. The redemptive ‘story’ is continually emerging. It is always an unfinished business. *“We will not cease from exploration and at the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” (Eliot)*
- It encourages a faith development that correlates with renewed, imaginative and daring practices of discipleship.
- It does demand a respectful, conversational approach and a high degree of self-awareness, particularly in the area of lived experience.
- Like humus, repeated practice puts down needed layers of fertile material from which spiritual maturity – both in the preacher and their listeners – can arise. The *paulatim* principle: ‘Little by little’ and if one stumbles or stuffs up completely, there is always next week to practice yet again.

Some Suggested (abbreviated) Texts for your Reflection & Writing

- **Luke 15:17a** – *‘But when he came to himself...’*
- **Psalm 34: 8** – *‘O taste and see that the Lord is good...’*
- **Song of Songs 2:13b** – *‘Arise, my love, my fair one, come away.’*
- **Romans 12:2** – *‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed...’*
- **John 15:4a** – *“Abide in me as I abide in you.”*