

Preaching, Mystery and Ministry

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To preach is to proclaim the Word of God; to carry the mystery of salvation into the life of contemporary man. The Word of God becomes under the species of human language, to encounter twentieth-century man.

Unfortunately, there is often in our preaching, no real "incarnation" of God's Word, no real "in-fleshing" fostering a real encounter in the event of speech. Too often, the Word becomes word, and the sermon is but an elaboration of some doctrine; too often, also, the Word becomes story, and the sermon, an analogy parallel to Revelation; too often, the Word becomes drama, and the sermon, a rhetorical masterpiece to be contemplated. But the Word does not become flesh.

And so we deliver definitions, parables, monologues, but we do not proclaim the Word of God; consequently, we create analyses, analogies, actions, but no encounter. Furthermore, the hearer of the Word may obtain a lot of information about God, but experiences no participation in God. The hearer might have met the preacher, but he has not met God; the preacher might have shown his talents, but has borne no witness to God present in the Word proclaimed. He has preached himself, not Christ crucified.

To constitute a real encounter with God, preaching must remain faithful to the faith which, in some manner, it generates. "For whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then are they to call upon him in whom they have not believed? But how are they to believe him when they have not heard? And how are they to hear, if no one preaches? Faith then depends on hearing, and hearing on the word of Christ" (Rom 10:13-17).

The nature of faith dictates the structure of preaching. We aim to investigate two questions; What is faith? What is preaching?

Instead of rehashing the well-known definition of faith, I shall describe, substantially in the words of Father Liégé, the psychology of belief. "Until today, my whole life seemed like some work of art, of which I was the sole craftsman. But today, everything changed: God intervened. And he said: your whole life is at stake, your joys and sorrows, your loves and human relationships, your efforts and your realizations, your body and your soul, your death and whatever may bring it about. I, your God and man's Friend, offer you a life which embraces and surpasses death and all the limitations of your human condition. If you accept, it is I who shall shape your destiny and you shall become my faithful and obedient collaborator. And I said: Yes; not out of weakness or fear, but out a deep realization of the greater power and vitality of God."¹

On this dramatic dialogue of faith, three observations should be made: Faith is essentially an "I-Thou relationship," an encounter of two persons. (God said: "I shall offer you a life. . . ." And I said: "Yes.") Faith, an interpersonal relationship, takes place in the framework of history. (Today, God said.)

Faith, a personal encounter with God in history, is motivated by a divine testimony, because of "a deep realization of the greater power and vitality of God."

If, then, preaching is to be faithful to the faith it engenders, it too must have the three aforementioned traits. It must be personal in content, historical in approach, testatory in character.

Preaching is both a ministry and a mystery that occasions an encounter with the saving God, today, in the event of speech. The hearer's commitment remains to be intensified and sealed through the other ministry and mystery,

P.A. Liégé, O.P., "La Foi," in *Initiation Théologique 111* (Paris 1955) p. 470.

that of the sacraments. The ministry of the Word proclaimed (preaching) and that of the Word realized (the sacraments) go hand in hand, each being absolutely necessary in its respective place within the grand design of God. To provoke an encounter, preaching must needs be 1. *personal in content* (the "yes" of the hearer is said to the personal God who saves in Christ); it must also be 2. *historical in approach* (for this "yes" said today); and lastly, such an assent is based on God's own testimony: hence preaching must be 3. *testatory in character*.

1. *Preaching must be personal in content*. Preaching should proclaim the Person who wishes to meet men: the incarnate person of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus. Often our preaching is afflicted with a disease called "thing-ism": it proclaims the things one must believe and do, rather than the person who demands that we believe and do things. In Thomistic terms, it could be said that the tendency in preaching is to speak about details rather than essentials. St. Thomas is clear about what is primary in faith: "Every believer assents to someone's word. Hence, the principal element in the act of faith is the person to whose word one gives assent. The word . . . is the detail, which should be looked upon as secondary" (IIaIIae, 9, 1).

A catechesis on the sacraments should not be made merely in terms of "visible signs instituted by Christ to give grace"; it should also make clear that a sacrament "is Christ, making us a sign, today, through water, bread, wine, oil, in order to reach us and meet us." In this way, a catechesis which would ordinarily equip one merely with the truths of God can be made to introduce one to the God of truths.

Furthermore, it is of grave importance that the person we proclaim (the Lord Jesus) be presented totally. As Christ must be accepted by the entire human person, so must he be presented in his global mystery. Christ must be proclaimed in all his dimensions: as the one who is, who came, who comes, and who will come. If the Jesus we preach is limited to that person who lived 2,000 years ago, in Palestine, we segment his total being, so to speak, and

therefore our preaching proclaims no one: his total reality is distorted. Jesus is no more than a museum piece.

2. *Preaching must be historical in approach.* It is the historical approach to preaching which will assure one that he is proclaiming Christ integrally. Such an approach is realized when preaching is both biblical and liturgical. In the Bible, we find the past dimension of Christ: the Christ prepared and realized; Christ who came. On the other hand, in the liturgy we find the present and future dimensions of Christ: Christ who comes today "as a seed of eternity in the womb of time";² and who will come in the future, "the point at which all history is taken up into the larger whole of God's eternal purpose."³ Bible and liturgy insert in time the encounter through faith: first, the encounter of the Word of God and human nature on the level of universal history; second, the encounter with Christ on the level of personal history.

Historical preaching follows the method of the divine pedagogy, which teaches not by definitions but through events. An example of historical preaching can be found in the teaching on baptism and its effects, not in a long and tedious systematic enumeration, but through the various intervention of a God who uses water as a judgment to destroy or to save: he can destroy evil and save lives (the waters of the Flood); he can cure and give faith (the waters of the Jordan curing the leper Naaman); he can cause rebirth in the Spirit (the waters proclaimed by Christ to Nicodemus); he leads one to eternal life (the waters offered to the Samaritan woman, a "water springing to everlasting life").

In relation to our teaching on baptism, the above events present the past dimension of God's salvific action through water in the universal history of mankind: that is the biblical dimension. Today, in the liturgy, through the waters of baptism, in the personal history of each and every one of us, God in

Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History* (New York 1962) p. 246.

Christ achieves effects which encompass and surpass those mentioned in the Old Testament, while realizing this spiritual re-birth and assuring the corporal resurrection already achieved in Christ's own death and resurrection. These are the present and future dimensions brought about by the liturgy.

However, the great works of God, realized today in the liturgy, are better understood if they are placed within the biblical context. The reason is simple. To understand what God does today, one must understand what he did in the past, for it is always the same God who acts in history, whether in universal or personal history.

At all times, God's actions in history are continuous, homogeneous and unified, whether they be in creation, in the call of Abraham, in the election of Moses, or in the epiphany of the Godhead in Christ; whether in the sacraments or in the preaching of his Word through the Church; or again, whether in the eschatological events of parousia and resurrection. The earlier interventions prepare subsequent ones by sketching and announcing them. However, the later interventions always realize and fulfill the earlier ones. In Father Paul Hitz' book *To Preach the Gospel*⁴, one finds the dimensions that true preaching must have. Preaching must be historical, biblical, Christocentric, paschal, ecclesial, liturgical, eschatological and parousial. I believe that there is a need, for many of us, to consider this existential *kyriel* against the background of the systematic, logical theology of our seminary course.

Logically, every sermon must have a major, a minor and a conclusion: an exposition of some doctrine, the rapport that such a doctrine has with the hearers, and exhortation to live according to the exposed doctrine.

Translated into such systematic language, Father Hitz' *kyriel* means that the major of a sermon should be biblical; the minor, liturgical; and the conclusion, life-conveying. Of course, such a three-point structure is not a fixed one. The structure is merely an effort to translate biblical-liturgical

³ C. H. Dodd, *The Coming of Christ* (London 1954) p. 24.

⁴ Paul Hitz, *To Preach the Gospel* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), *partim*.

patterns into terms of systematic thought. It would not exclude, for example, the necessary introductory apperceptive basis.

A biblical major proclaims Christ who came. Thus the Easter sermon proclaims the resurrection of Christ, the past dimension. In the liturgical minor, Christ's resurrection is set on the actual level of salvation, i.e., that of the individual life of the hearers before me. Resurrection today means life received at baptism, intensified or renewed through penance during the Lenten season, and now sealed in the New Alliance of the Eucharist at Mass, on this particular Easter morning. The conclusion should not be moralizing, but vital: to live in a Christlike way, which life is a foretaste of the future life in the risen Christ. Such biblical and liturgical vision will renew our preaching.

No one claims that the Bible and the liturgy are not used at all in our actual preaching. They are used, but not in the proper perspective. Often Bible and liturgy are used merely as a proof of the truth of our message, which is most often some doctrine. They are rarely used as sources. After listening to some sermons, people observe: "Isn't it a strange coincidence that the Bible proves what the preacher said"; rather than: "That preacher is speaking the Word of God."

3. Preaching must be testatory in character. Christians will believe that the preacher says what God says because it is God who says it, in Christ, through the Church, and through the preacher himself. Every preacher, mandated by his bishop, is sent in the name of Christ and his Church. Therefore, my preaching must be a testimony, and I must behave as a witness.

Obviously, integral motivation to faith stems from a fourfold testimony: that of God, that of Christ, that of the Church and, finally, that of the preacher. Here I restrict myself to the testimony of the preacher.

Our task as preachers must include the official proclamation of our own experience of the resurrection of Christ. If it does not appear that we have been saved in Christ's resurrection, how can our preaching be a personal and

sincere testimony to Christ's resurrection?

Such a task forces the preacher so to live in the risen Christ as to prove that Christ has really risen. It is not sufficient that someone be made a witness of Christ in an ontological manner, through the sacrament of holy orders, in order to preach faithfully and efficaciously. The nature of faith in Christ demands that the preacher be himself totally committed to God and his work. His testimony implies his personal commitment as a minister of God's Word, and the incarnation of his commitment in his life.

Christ is the great Witness of the Father, because he was committed unto death to the work of his Father; and so he is the perfect Revelation of the Father, the perfect Sermon. "He who sees me, sees also the Father" (Jn. 14:9).

Likewise, the preacher who is faithful to Christ unto death will be a more perfect revelation of Christ; his faith will become contagious. And those who *hear* him will vibrate in harmony with such a brother, so totally committed to Christ.

Often, it is through the testimony of the preacher's life that the hearers will be led to believe, and to believe more intensely. A contemplated and experienced commitment often draws the hearer to personal commitment. To realize in oneself the resurrection of Christ, and to shout the joyful experience of one's life in the risen Christ: such is the testimony of the faithful preacher.