J–Glenn Murray, S.J.

Let Talents and Tongues Employ:
The Gift of Black African American Preaching

Come Sunday, the people of God, in accordance with Christ’s command, are gathered in solemn assembly to be saved and set free in God, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. At the Sunday Eucharist the triune God makes something happen that all things may be made new. This we know and remember.

Having been assembled, the word of God is proclaimed that the congregation may experience God’s wonders working in creation, the incessant involvement with a people freed from the mud pits of Pharaoh, their land flowing with milk and honey, and their being sent prophets time and time again so that they then and those assembled now may know who and whose they are (Old Testament Reading—First Reading). The Word of God is proclaimed that those keeping memory may know in their sanctified bones the saving words and salvific deeds of Christ Jesus (Gospel) and ponder through the reflection of apostolic writers the implications of those prescribed musings for their living in justice, love, and peace here and now—a living sacrifice of praise (New Testament Reading—Second Reading).

Such past proclamations and the experiencing of them in the present leads to thanks, praise, and salvation; shepherds to communion with Christ on and at the altar-table; and sends the community of faith back into the world for their and creation’s continual and future transformation in this same Christ Jesus. This, too, we remember and know.

This active and saving remembrance that finds its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus (Paschal Mystery) unfolds over the course of a year: from the preeminent Easter Triduum through the weekly, festal celebration of the Lord’s resurrection on Sunday; the rhythm of the liturgical seasons; and the cycle of celebrations that mark the veneration and memory of Mary, the martyrs, and the saints (General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar, 4–44). This we do well to remember, even if we do not know it all that well.

Task of Liturgical Preaching

In the midst of these events there is the proclamation of God’s wonderful works drawn from the Scriptures and liturgical resources wherein the mysteries of faith are expounded and applied (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 35, 52, 53). In short, there is preaching, and specifically, liturgical preaching.

J–Glenn Murray, S.J., holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Catholic Theological Union at Chicago and is parochial vicar of St. Aloysius Gonzaga Church, Washington, D.C.
Liturgical preaching, though it may contain elements of evangelization, catechesis, didascalia, theological argument, exegesis, announcement, and personal testimony, is something different. It has a purpose, namely, to deepen and inspire the faith of the hearers. It has a subject, that is, one aspect of the Christian life. It is as long as it needs to be, wholly dependent on the listening habits of the liturgical assembly. It gains and maintains interest by some compelling image. It is strategic. Not everything need be said in one act of preaching. Like the Paschal Mystery, it unfolds intentionally over time. It is credible because the one who preaches is a person of deep faith committed to communicating the wondrous works of God, not a personal agenda—committed to preaching out of personal experience, not about it (Baldovin, 93–101).

Come Sunday, we baptized folk celebrate the Eucharist. It is a liturgical event. Within this liturgical event, there is preaching. Like the liturgy itself, this preaching is liturgy (Foley, 6). They are both events—one event in fact (CSL 56).

Of preaching within the Eucharist we would do well to remember that it is “a language event, contextualized by worship, inspired by the ritual texts proclaimed and enacted, addressed to believers, mediated by preachers, by which God encounters and transforms God’s people” (Joncas, 2). Happily, this we have been told. Unhappily, this we rarely remember and even more rarely practice.

Soon and very soon, we are to celebrate the culmination of the liturgical year wherein we remember that “dying he destroyed our death and rising he restored our life” (GNLY 18). We will celebrate those great Three Days with their forty-day preparation and fifty-day exultation. We will celebrate with particular depth and solemnity Christ Jesus’ passover from death to life and our being saved and set free by him and this mystery. Here is a time when our preaching might be at its best. Here is a time when with renewed vigor that language event called preaching might be a time of encounter with the living God leading to transformation in new and profound ways. Might there be a way to accomplish this?

**Wisdom from the Black Preaching Tradition**

The preaching found within Black African American worship—which transcends denominations, which has been passed down through the ages, pondered, reflected and commented on—may be a way.

Not unlike the African American religious experience, preaching in the ways of “black folk” is not monolithic. Nevertheless, according to scholars, there are characteristics that might prove helpful to our preaching at these great seasons.

First and foremost, traditional black preaching is biblical. It is fundamentally concerned with the community’s need to have the question answered: “Is there a word from the Lord?” The community of faith is not interested in the preacher’s will and way; aims, agenda, or agenda. They are engaged in God’s plan, because it is one that is concrete and practical and works on behalf of the marginalized and powerless (La Rue, 20). They want to hear and experience survival both personal and communal, societal justice, deliverance, advancement, prosperity, and well-being in Christ’s saving activity. William McClain puts it poetically:

Black preaching is rich with passionate words and vivid imagery for a disillusioned and disinherited people. It tells the “old, old story” which sets hearts afame and spirits right. The stories help solidify a faith that God is more than a match for evil structures of oppression, and God supremely illustrates that power to overcome at
Calvary. We are reminded over and over again that in spite of what happens on Capitol Hill there is a higher hill—Calvary. (63)

Would this approach to preaching not benefit us in the socioeconomic, political times in which we are all living in these supposedly “united” states? Perhaps! Would not this approach speak well to what happens in our Lectionary during these seasons with its harmony, thematic groupings, and correspondence containing “such an interweaving of threads and an interplay of images that in effect they form one thematically unified tapestry” around the dying and rising of Christ—God’s working on behalf of our salvation, redemption, and well-being—the ultimate word from the Lord? (Bonneau, 64). Indeed!

Second, customary African American preaching is experiential and emotive. Having stated this, it must be remembered, first, that historical black preaching in no way eschews the rational. Every act of preaching must make sense. This is what Catholic homileticians are speaking of when they urge for a central message, one clear point, one aspect of Christian life. How rewarding it would be both for our preachers and assemblies if we were to take a cue from black preachers’ penchant and skill at being able to encapsulate the preaching message in one declarative sentence, e.g., “I have a dream,” “Jesus is the reason for the season,” “God does extraordinary things in the lives of ordinary people.” The assembled people of God might not only experience what God is doing, they might even be able to articulate it. This posited, we need still keep in mind that the liturgical assembly “will never remember nor practice what they have not celebrated” (Mitchell 1990b, 30).

Of the many ways to enable the congregation to celebrate the wonderful works of God—to have an experiential and emotive encounter with the triune God—“telling the old, old story” is an affective methodology to employ. Mitchell, arguably the dean of Black African American homiletics, attests that “telling the story” may be accomplished in seven distinct ways.

There is “narrative” that like all good storytelling requires a setting, cast, plot, conflict, and resolution. What makes it distinct for black preaching is the focus that “requires that the issue in the text and purpose be the same issue as that of the conflict in the narrative. . . . Thus, when the hearer naturally identifies with the story’s main character, he or she vicariously participates in the same conflict, gains the same wisdom, and celebrates the same victory or resolution” (Mitchell 1990b, 41). “Character sketch” entails a focus on a biblical personality and how that personality exemplifies a particular principle, virtue, or challenge of the gathered community. “Group study,” like character sketch, uses a biblical group, for example, Israel or the Corinthians, with which the congregation may identify, recognizing themselves and the issues of the biblical group as their own cares, concerns, and questions. “Dialogue” is an expansion of a conversation between two biblical characters. “Monologue or testimony” is the preacher’s personal testimony or a monologue in which the preacher impersonates a biblical character. “Metaphors, similes and analogs” are figures of speech employed to clarify, illuminate or motivate the liturgical assembly, e.g., patience and longsuffering as examined in Galatians 5:22 likened to an automobile’s cooling system. “Stream of consciousness” amounts to getting inside the flow of thought of a person and identifying with her or his struggle for insight or peace or whatever. Mitchell sees preaching on the Psalms as a good example. Common to all these genres, individually or in combination—common to the experiential encounter—is their aim to preach to the whole person in the manner of...
Christ Jesus, who used the “stuff” of ordinary life in extraordinary ways leading his hearers from death into life (Mitchell 1990b, 25, 41, 42–47, 125–136, 137).

This attention to the experiential and emotive will go a long way in moving our liturgical assemblies from the notion that the Sacred Scriptures proclaimed are some sort of history lesson garnered from the past to an understanding that in the Liturgy of the Word something happens to us here and now. We are caught up in God’s unfolding plan of redemption, then and there, here and now. This is what is meant by “inspiring and deepening our faith,” an act of worship within worship, a transformative encounter with the triune God.

Underscoring the storytelling—the warp and woof of it—is attention to language, a language that employs the tools of “antiphonality, repetition, alliteration, syncopation, oral formulas, thematic imagery, voice merging and sacred time” (La Rue, 10). Needless to say, this storytelling with its pictorial and heightened speech comes to fruition in its delivery. This delivery involves the musicality of timing, pause, inflection, pace, rhythm, cadence, etc. In the saying of the old adage: “Start slow, rise high, strike fire. Sit down in a storm.”

This delivery necessitates dialogue as well. Black preaching would not be black preaching with out the punctuations of preacher and pew: “Help ’em Lord!” “Well?” “That’s all right!” “Amen!” “Glory Hallelujah!” “Praise the Lord!” “Well?” “Have mercy!” “Sho’nough!” “Can I get a witness?” Facial expressions, swaying bodies, nodding heads, raised hands, foot patting, shouting, tears, and (in recent years) hand clapping are crucial. The delivery necessitates these acclamations and gestures because this dialogue “strengthens and motivates the labors of those who engage in unashamed response to a powerful Word from the Lord” (Mitchell 1990a, 108).

Utilizing these characteristics of black preaching serves to remind us that our liturgical preaching is “contextualized.” Our context is the Sunday Eucharist. The words and delivery, therefore, must ultimately be good news for this particular people with their joys and hope, fears and anxiety, their cultural milieu, and spiritual development. The words and delivery must give concrete reasons for and lead the people to give thanks to the God of power and might. The words and the delivery must get and keep interest. The words and the delivery keep the assembly central while keeping the preacher as the mediator in the encounter of God and the assembled (see Foley, 1, 2, 8).

Employing specifically the dialogic can aid the preacher in staying on task, that is, the task of breaking open these ritual texts and actions, addressing these believers, speaking from personal experience, determining a suitable length, and breaking any direct barrier between pulpit and pew, for the people’s responses and gestures keep the preacher honest.

Third and last, the ideal preacher in the ideal black faith community must be a person of prayer who preaches from power and passion. Moreover, preaching with power to a people marginalized in situations of “no way out”—mired in enslavement and crushed by racism, economic poverty, and violence—inescapably calls for a preacher urgently prophetic. Joseph Brown, a student of and witness to the African-American religious experience, notes that throughout human history there are periods of upheaval, change, growth, doubt, and renewal. These times and circumstances, all too familiar to Black African Americans, plead for prophets to sound the call to remembrance, repentance, and rebirth (72). Is this not what our Roman Catholic tradition desires when it speaks of the preacher as “filled with faith, redolent of the sacred scriptures, and expressive of pastoral love” (Directory on the
Pastoral Ministry of Bishops as quoted in DeLeers, 24); or in the words of Stephen DeLeers: genuine, sincere, transparent, deeply believing, caring for and respectful and accepting of the assembly (53–64)?

**Enriching the Whole Church**

Within public hearing, the late Walter Burghardt, great and gifted preacher, once said: “All stories are true. Some are based in fact.” Given the narrative nature of Black African American preaching, we end with a story based in fact.

In a spirited meeting with representatives of the Black African American Catholic community in New Orleans during his 1987 pastoral visit to the United States, John Paul II declared unabashedly: “Dear brothers and sisters: your black cultural heritage enriches the Church and makes its witness of universality more complete. In a real way the Church needs you, just as much as you need the Church, for you are a part of the Church and the Church is a part of you” (55).

It has been the hope of this author that one of the gems of the black cultural heritage, namely, preaching, will enrich the church’s preaching here in the United States—for the help of souls and God’s greater glory.

**References**


