

SCRIPTURE
FOR
PREACHING

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The Word that Leads to Worship

On the first Sunday of Advent 1971, the Roman Lectionary became mandatory in the United States. Almost twenty-five years later and two weeks before Advent 1996, the Department of Word and Worship at the Washington Theological Union, Washington, D.C., sponsored a symposium to commemorate the anniversary of the lectionary's promulgation. From Friday evening to Saturday afternoon, November 15–16, seventy-five participants focused on the role of the lectionary in preaching.

Rather than initiate the symposium with a formal lecture, James Wallace, C.Ss.R., and Robert Waznak, S.S., of the homiletics faculty at the Union crafted a performance piece of the preached word proclaimed by students and faculty, and sustained by music, dance, and song. Those who gathered in the Connelly Chapel of Holy Wisdom were encouraged to become an assembly, not simply observing the homiletic vignettes at arms' length but imagining themselves as part of the original assemblies who first heard these words. The goal was to invite the assembly into an appreciation of four major images of the preacher from the Roman Catholic tradition: Teacher, Herald, Interpreter, and Witness.

The image of the Teacher, the dominant image prior to Vatican II, was depicted by an Easter homily of Fulton J. Sheen during the Second World War. A born educator and master teacher, he embodied the instruction of the Council of Trent: "Preachers are to provide their people with wholesome words in proportion to their own and their people's capacity, words that teach them the things that are necessary for all to know in order to be saved." Then the teaching words of the bishop Ambrose rang out as they did in Milan a millennium and a half earlier at the Easter Vigil when the elect and all the baptized were called to "cross over" as "the children of Israel crossed over out of Egypt and the Son of God crossed over from this world to the Father."

While the preacher is often teacher, the preaching event is never turned over solely to the task of catechesis. The preacher teaches and also heralds the good news. This second image of

Herald was restored at the time of the council. It set the tone for the purpose and plan of the lectionary. A selection from the renowned homilist, Walter Burghardt, heralded good news on an Easter Sunday at Holy Trinity Church, Georgetown. At the beginning of his homily he toyed with the notion of "Easter love" by setting up three stages to his song of love, enough for us to taste his intent. Then, accompanied by a trumpet flourish, Cynthia Taylor-Ward, president of the Potomac Chapter of the Sacred Dance Guild, entered the worship space with anticipation on her face and urgency in her step. Sounding simultaneously from three voices, John the Baptist's words announced the time fulfilled and the kingdom drawn near. Next, the fourth-century patriarch of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus, exhibited for us the power of his eloquence as he urged his hearers to show no less generosity than God has shown for us. Another herald's voice spoke out, that of Karl Barth in our own century. Often he is quoted for having said, "When preparing your sermon, you should keep one eye on the Bible and the other on the newspaper," but never once did he mention World War I in his sermons during those years. He claimed that preaching must aim "beyond the hill of relevance" because we "must preach the Bible and nothing else." One Ascension Day he admonished his congregation in a recurring refrain to "Look up to Jesus!" In our own day, even in the midst of so much bad news, Dominican Joan Delaplaine spoke out a word of hope when she recalled "eleven burly fishermen . . . [on] a Saturday morning after a Bad Friday. . . . Then seven words, and the eleven and the world will never be the same: 'He is risen; he is not here!'" She urged us to do as they did, to "reach out beyond our limitations in order to find a future in a new beginning."

The third image of the preacher as Interpreter of human existence was introduced by the 1982 NCCB document, *Fulfilled In Your Hearing*. The lens of the Gospel interprets the world. Chris Anderson, a professor at Oregon State University, interpreted an experience of a private picnic lunch with blasts in the distance which only later he discovered were from a shotgun. Since they came from far enough away to be muffled and indistinct, he did not think much of them. Then came the sounds of sirens, so commonplace these days, and he continued to read his book. Later he described himself as "a man walking out into the fields and thinking about theology" while another man just up the road "hunts down his family with a shotgun." In desperation he asked, "What do we do with this? What can this possibly mean?"

The assembly was left in the confusion of the question. Then the prophetic words of a rural Ohio pastor, James Schmitmeyer, interpreted the lives of farmers in light of the story of Jesus feeding the multitude. His bold words confronted injustices: “. . . food belongs to the hungry, not in the hands of profiteers. ‘The people are hungry . . . Make sure they are fed.’” Then the challenging words of Anna Carter Florence, an African-American woman from Minneapolis, who sat “at the river’s edge” and watched all sorts of pieces of life float by, helped us interpret what is of value and what is not.

The fourth image of the preacher as Witness is often absent from normative liturgical documents, yet in our own day we so desperately need to hear from people of faith, hope, and love. Paul VI’s “On Evangelization in the Modern World” testifies to our receptivity to witnesses, yet a danger remains: the *I* of the homily can eclipse the *Thou* of the Paschal Mystery. Two homilies demonstrated the balance. The first was from William Sloane Coffin, Jr., of Riverside Church, New York City, when his twenty-four-year-old son was killed in a car crash. The second was from Archbishop Oscar Romero, his final homiletic words before an assassin’s bullet killed him. After the crack of a drum startled all of us, as did the bullet which abruptly cut off Romero’s words and life, the Holy Wisdom Chapel at the Washington Theological Union fell into silence and darkness out of which emerged a glimmer of light from a candle accompanied by the sung refrain, *Envia tu Espiritu, sea renovada la faz de la tierra*. The assembly stood. Light and song enlivened us as we left the chapel for food, drink, and conversation. This event of word and worship, of preaching and listening, of prayer, song, and dance truly engaged us in the power of the preached word in our Christian tradition.

After Morning Prayer on Saturday, participants gathered in plenary session. Nathan Mitchell, director of the Center for Pastoral Liturgy at the University of Notre Dame, delivered the keynote address entitled “The Arts of Preaching: Rhapsody and Rhetoric—A Return to the Sources of Language.” For an hour his fascinating ideas engaged us, and his lively and impassioned delivery dazzled us. The address was made up of four parts: I. The Broken Covenant between “Word” and “World”; II. Renewing Language; III. Relearning Reading; and IV. Recovering the Arts of Preaching. The density of the text and the depth of its meanings warrant against the possibility of a fair distillation of its content. Only some core items in the address will be set out here.

The first part of Mitchell's keynote contested assumptions that have underwritten western culture for more than two millennia, i.e., that nature, language, and literature conspire to tell us that the world is both "sayable" and "readable," that a meaningful covenant connects Word and World. The praxis of our century has taught us otherwise. Numerous calamitous horrors have not occurred in silence: "Words that should *never* have entered a human mouth, did. Words that should *never* have been set down on paper, *were*." And so the covenant between Word and World appears to be irremediably broken. The unspeakable has been said; the unreadable and the unthinkable have been read and thought, indexed and filed for future reference. We Christians must acknowledge this broken covenant between a collapsed and tortured Word and a radically indecipherable, unsayable and unreadable World if we are to reclaim "the arts of preaching."

Mitchell then turned to the second part and submitted some proposals for renewing language. In spite of language's sham, it still creates; it cannot be constrained. Language is unbounded, and "this unboundedness defines the human, makes us *us*" (George Steiner). We are the only beings who search "for the world that first dreamed us" (William Goyen). An imperative implicit in all language urges us "to defy the space that separates" (Adrienne Rich). Therefore, the primary task of poet and preacher is to "reassemble what has been scattered," to reconnect "the truths of outrage" with "the truths of possibility" (A. Rich). The poet and preacher then are "rhapsodes." The word itself comes from the Greek verb "to stitch, to sew together." Stitching, weaving and rhapsodizing, the poet and preacher seek to reassemble what has been scattered, defying the space that separates. When all of this is applied to liturgical language, Mitchell stressed that metaphor is the method and inclusivity is the goal (Gail Ramshaw).

Still more proposals were set out in part three. The first was put simply: How we preach depends very much on how we read—and how we read depends upon what we read. The preacher's task then is not only to read the Scriptures or to read ritually edited pericopes from it, but to read the world. The second proposal states: How we read the world has something to do with how we imagine books and pages, increasingly becoming electronic screens.

The fourth and final part suggested four tasks of today's preachers to recover "the arts of preaching," both rhapsody and rhetoric. The first is to read the world, to define and defend the

human, not to prop up or defend a God under attack, not to justify the ways of God nor to launder God's reputation. Second, today's preachers have to seek insight in alienation, and revelation in disorder and discontent. Sacred Scripture is not a culture-supporting myth; at times it is in fact culture-subverting and even religion-subverting (Herbert Schneidau). The force of Jesus' message then is that God, precisely as God, is wholly identified with people. God has chosen relatedness to humans as the only definition of the divine. God can be known and named only in and as one's neighbor (Thomas Sheehan). Third, the preacher's task today is to help us grasp "the truth of particulars." If it is true that "the World became flesh," then it is the preacher's task to help us meet a God whose presence is known "only in the fine print, in the gritty, subversive truth of particulars. God is in the details." Fourth and finally, today's preacher must offer resistance to "the tyranny of the normal." The preacher must defy the space that separates, rise to the defense of diversity and difference, and join the truths of outrage to the truths of possibility. In short, the preacher must find a voice in the greater conversation.

Workshops followed throughout the afternoon. Four sessions were scheduled twice so that participants could take part in two workshops. Andrew Ciferni, O.Praem., addressed "The Lectionary and Children's Liturgy." Daniel Grigassy, O.F.M., considered some aspects of "Evaluating the Lectionary." Theresa Koernke, I.H.M., spoke to "Preaching in a Non-Eucharisti Setting." Gaetano Lotrecchiano, O.S.A., looked to concerns surrounding "Music and the Lectionary."

Three aspects of this symposium, "The Word That Leads to Worship," should be highlighted. First, the collaborative effort of both liturgists and homileticians was a healthy and helpful reminder that just as word and sacrament are not two separate entities, any serious reflection on the role of the lectionary in worship needs the wisdom of both disciplines. Second, the performance piece written by Wallace and Waznak preserved the image of Herald that influenced the Roman Lectionary but also suggested that the images of Teacher, Interpreter and Witness deserve our attention. Third, Mitchell's provocative lecture, the workshops and discussions that followed, alerted us to the many gifts that the lectionary has brought to our worship in the last twenty-five years. But they also suggested that the lectionary is not without flaw. The 1994 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,"

hinted at the possibility of a revision of the current Roman Lectionary. Commenting on Vatican II's goal of a lectionary with more abundant, varied and suitable representation of the Bible, the document states that the lectionary "in its present state . . . only partially fulfills this goal." "The Word That Leads to Worship" was a splendid attempt by both liturgists and homileticians at responding to that goal.

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