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Tackling Ordinary Time: Divide and Conquer

THE DILEMMA OF ORDINARY TIME

The prospect of preaching through that elongated period aptly christened “ordinary time” can send a shudder through even the most seasoned of homilists. Compared to the lavish fare and relatively short duration of the Advent-Christmas or Lent-Triduum-Easter cycle, the vast stretch of those many “Sundays of the Year” can appear to the weekend homilist as a daunting and virtually undifferentiated terrain.

In part this perception is due to the fact that—in contrast to this ordinary time—the high holiday seasons offer rich variations in music and vesture, rituals and environment, biblical and liturgical texts. Furthermore, the two great axis of the Liturgical Year (Advent-Christmas and Lent-Triduum-Easter) are easily divided into manageable sub-units (e.g., the four weeks of Advent), which certainly makes it easier for developing a seasonal preaching plan. The unhappy alternative to having such a plan is preaching each Sunday separately, without sustained and integrated reflection upon the surrounding Sundays and feasts that together comprise a particular segment of the liturgical calendar. When such reflection does not take place, the result is often disjointed preaching and sometimes a more frantic form of homily preparation, as preachers careen from Sunday to Sunday in search of some fresh homiletic idea.

Ordinary time may seem prone to such fragmentation because of its apparent lack of subdivision into digestible units. Thus it sometimes feels that the period beginning after Pentecost and stretching all the way to Advent looms ahead as one unending stretch of green vesture, with few liturgical markers along the way to aid the weary homilist. Despite this first appearance, however, a little imaginative exploration can reveal a myriad of ways for parsing this lengthy segment of the liturgical calendar. This could aid the homilist in more effectively approaching this long and complex season.

SUBDIVIDING THE SEASON

One might consider, for example, examining the literary structure of the biblical books which provide the lections for a given season. The purpose of this examination would be to discover if there are literary markers in the readings themselves that indicate important subdivi-

sions in the word. Such subdivisions in the word could serve as useful frameworks for the homilist in shaping a series of manageable preaching plans for the many Sundays in ordinary time. Since the second reading and the gospel are proclaimed “semi-continuously” throughout ordinary time, it is especially these that one must examine through this literary lens.

From August until early November of 1999, for example, we continue reading the Gospel of Matthew. From a literary perspective, Matthew can be divided into a series of major sections or “books.” [See for example, the outline provided by Benedict Viviano in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990) 633–4]. It is commonly acknowledged that a new section of Matthew begins at 13:53; this new section is sometimes characterized as one focused on the development or formation of the disciples. The Lectionary begins this new section on the Eighteenth Sunday of the Year (August 1) and—with the exception of the feast of the Assumption which falls on a Sunday in 1999—this subdivision of Matthew will be the source of gospel proclamations until the Twenty-second Sunday of the Year (August 29). A new literary section begins with the Twenty-third Sunday of the Year.

Now that we have identified this subsection of Matthew—with its stories of the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus walking on water, Peter’s profession of faith, and the call to take up the cross—the next task is to employ it as a theological frame for thinking about the community for which you are preaching. Is August a time when schools and parish committees begin to gear up? Is it the period in your parochial calendar when people return from vacations and the parish or campus ministry center begin formation programs? How does this series of gospels set the stage for a community’s self-reflection as it prepares to regroup after the summer hiatus and launch itself into the post-Labor Day “new year”? The goal here is not simply to identify a literary subsection of the gospel, but to juxtapose it against a particular moment in the life of a community.

THE TECHNIQUE OF JUXTAPOSITIONING

Gordon Lathrop, in his work on liturgical theology entitled *Holy Things*, suggests that juxtaposition is a valuable tool for acquiring meaning in and about the liturgy. He posits that the various elements of worship (for example, the readings) take on meaning in action as they are used and especially as they are intentionally juxtaposed. This juxtaposition gives rise to interpretation and reinterpretation: text is re-contextualized, and is thus made to say a new thing.

Another possible juxtaposition of word and community life which operates on a different timetable can be achieved with the second read-

ing. At the onset of August and through the middle of September we continue reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. Then, on the Twenty-fifth Sunday of the Year (September 19), we shift to Paul's letter to the Philippians which will be read through the Twenty-eighth Sunday of the Year (October 10). This is a significant shift in the second reading. Since the Eleventh Sunday of the Year (June 13) we have been reading from Paul's magisterial letter to the Romans which contains his seasoned reflections on the gospel, and particularly on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. While Romans was written to a community he had yet to visit, Philippians was written to a community he had already visited. In gratitude he thanked the Philippians for continuing the work of the gospel, and at the same time exhorted them to remain faithful to what he had preached to them.

Does juxtaposing Paul's letter to the Philippians with the life of your worship community provide some fresh insight for preaching during the four weeks it is proclaimed? Does it prompt a word about faithfulness to new catechumens who in September begin their journey toward Easter sacraments? Does it evoke a word of gratitude and steadfastness for parishioners who return from their summer hiatus from parish life to take up new educational or liturgical ministries, positions on the parish council, or engagement in parish renewal programs?

The natural subdivisions within the readings—be they literary moves from one section of a gospel to another, or a change from one epistle to another—do not dictate any single agenda or provide some all-encompassing theme that should dominate the preaching. Rather, they are subtle shifts within the proclaimed word which, when juxtaposed with the ongoing life of a particular faith community, can provide fresh insights and frameworks for preaching.

JUXTAPOSING WORD AND AUTUMN'S "NEW YEAR"

As implied in many of the previous examples, the various shifts in the word can be juxtaposed with an image of the "new year," which in varying ways occurs sometime between mid-August and mid-September in many faith communities of North America. This is the time when choirs begin rehearsals, schools and religious education programs start up, catechumenal processes resume, and ministry or other training programs commence.

While the Christian community has not traditionally celebrated the period around the autumn equinox as a "new year," mid-September has been a traditional dividing point in our liturgical calendar. Long before a full calendar emerged, it appears that some Christians divided the year into quarters with four great feasts that marked the equinoxes and solstices. These "quarter tense days" were celebrated as mini-

paschas and commemorated in a special way the death and resurrection of the Lord. The autumn "pascha" was marked by the feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross (now September 14).

The new character of this period is paralleled by the Jewish liturgical calendar which celebrates its new year and most solemn holiday in this season. In 1999 Rosh Hashanah (new year) begins at sunset on Friday, September 10, and Yom Kippur commences at sunset on Sunday, September 19. Happily the reading from Isa 55:6-9, with its call to "turn to the Lord for mercy," appointed in the Lectionary for September 19, provides homilists a scriptural cue for inviting Christians to stand in solidarity with the Jewish community on this "Day of Atonement" at the turning of the Jewish year.

SUMMARY

Homiletically emphasizing the "new year" character of mid-August through mid-September is certainly optional. What seems more imperative, however, is the need to discern natural divisions or subdivisions in the lections through the long stretch of ordinary time. Juxtaposing these against the yearly rhythm of your worshiping community can provide fresh insights not only for preaching individual Sundays of the year, but for developing a preaching plan for a series of manageable segments through ordinary time. Divide and conquer. It may stimulate new energy and creativity for this extraordinary season.

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