

Edward Foley, Capuchin

Liturgical Preaching at the Turning of the Millennium

It is at least challenging, if not ironic, that a column on liturgical preaching which emphasizes timeliness needs to be completed in such an untimely manner. Because of editorial deadlines and production schedules, the materials in *New Theology Review* need to be completed at least six months in advance of your reading. While such a time lag may not be problematic for a particular article or a book review, it highlights a real challenge in preaching.

As you may remember, this column was originally published under the banner "Scripture for Preaching." In the February 1999 issue, however, it changed to "Liturgical Preaching." This transformation signaled our interest in helping preachers not only plumb the depths of the Scriptures that are so foundational for the homily but also to consider the whole liturgical event in preaching. Thus one basic principle for liturgical preaching emphasized here is the need to preach the scriptures AND what could be called the "liturgical bible," e.g., those other texts and ritual actions which constitute the liturgy for a given day.

Our preaching, however, is not only about texts and ritual actions. It is also and essentially about the intersection of sacred texts and actions with people's lives. Some of us even believe that the true beginning point of homily preparation is not the Scriptures or the liturgical bible, but the present story of a local community (Foley, 1998, 25). The liturgical preacher needs to exegete not only the sacred text but also the sacred life of the local faith community. The last installment of this column explored this point by illustrating how a community's story could be juxtaposed against that vast stretch of the church year called ordinary time.

PREACHING THE LITURGY OF THE WORLD

Besides wrestling with the Lectionary, the whole of the liturgical bible and the faith narrative of the local community, there is a fourth dialogue partner which confronts every homilist. That is the onslaught of world events which blare forth from our televisions, shout from banner headlines, and ambush us every time we log on to the Internet. Sometimes inspiring, often foreboding, this daily outpouring of crises and entertainment from the global media may seem more like a distraction for the homilist or faith community than a source of theologi-

cal reflection. Often the only thing preachers can do when confronted with one more report of ethnic violence, financial scandal, or political insecurity is to demonize the world.

There is, however, a different perspective on world events which the liturgical preacher must consider. Yes, the world can easily be targeted as a place of sin and evil. Conversely, however, preachers need to ask themselves about their ability to view the world as a place of grace. It might seem bold to proclaim the world as a place of grace, given the almost unimaginable stories of cruelty and suffering that confront us daily in the media. Then we recall that confounding revelation from John's Gospel, that God so loved the world that we were sent the Only-Begotten (3:16). Such revelation reminds us that God has had a love affair with the world from its foundations—a divine love affair which continues today. So, what is it about this sin-scarred world which evokes such eternal passion? And how does it inform the ministry of liturgical preaching?

Karl Rahner (d. 1984) was particularly eloquent in acknowledging the unbreakable link between the liturgy and the world. He recognized that God's self-communication is not limited to the confines of certain particular ritual or devotional activities, but occurs throughout the whole of human history. Rahner held the view that the world is permeated by the grace of God and is constantly and ceaselessly possessed by God's self-communication from its innermost roots. This continuous self-communication of God through all of human history is what Rahner calls the *liturgy of the world* (Rahner, 1976).

For many preachers the language about the linkage between "liturgy and life" may be more familiar than Rahner's language of the "liturgy of the world." Whatever the language, our preaching needs to be informed by the reality of the world. Thus the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry in *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* reminds us:

Preachers need to devote some time and energy to understanding the complex social, political and economic forces that are shaping the contemporary world . . . Without this kind of informed understanding of the complex world we live in, preaching too easily degenerates into platitudes of faith, meaningless broadsides against the wickedness of the modern world, or into an uncritical affirmation of the wonderful advances that have taken place in modern times [1982, 34].

CONFRONTING THE MILLENNIUM

This column began with a lament about the six-month time lag which occurs between the writing and reading of this feature. While that half-year lapse may not pose great problems when addressing the

Lectionary texts or examining the liturgical bible, it is quite problematic when it comes to world events. Predicting the future is always risky business. There is no guarantee that the news stories which dominate the headlines in the late Spring will even be remembered when this issue of *New Theology Review* arrives.

Unless the Second Coming should occur within the interim between my writing and your reading, however, there is one world event which can be predicted with some certainty: the turning of the millennium. I raise this topic, however, with some trepidation. In my imagination, I hear an audible groan from some readers at the very mention of the impending millennium. The predictability of this event is probably only matched by its ubiquitous coverage. Millennium is, without question, a leading contender for "buzzword of the year." I hazard consideration of the topic, however, because of its unavailability as well as its inevitability. Thus, to my way of thinking, the issue is not "if" one should address the turning of the millennium in liturgical preaching, but "how" one should.

In early November 1999 we will find ourselves at the end of Cycle A, in the midst of the eschatological discourse from the Gospel of Matthew. We will proclaim familiar texts like the parable of the wise and foolish virgins on the thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (November 7), the parable of the talents on the thirty-third Sunday (November 14) and the last judgment on the Solemnity of Christ the King (November 21). Then the liturgical year turns on November 28 as we make the transition from Matthew to Mark. The eschatological trajectory does not wane in this transition, however, for on the First Sunday of Advent we will proclaim the end of Jesus' final discourse in Mark and hear another exhortation to vigilance. This call to alertness continues through the second and third Sundays of Advent (December 5 and 12) in the Markan accounts of John the Baptizer's call to prepare.

These powerful gospels about the end time and future coming, as well as the parallel readings from 1 Thessalonians and the prophet Isaiah, provide an unusual opportunity for the homilist to preach consciously in the midst of history. True, it is possible to abuse this opportunity by assuming an overly moralizing or even doomsday stance. The opportunity for abuse, however, should not dissuade us from capitalizing on the eschatological moment. The turning of the millennium in the context of a word that calls us to be faithful and alert is a graced occasion for a community to reflect on its mission to such faithfulness in the world.

Eschatology may seem like one of the more abstract parts of theology, focused on the end of time. Many believe that eschatological preaching requires at least a veiled threat to believers about judgment and the final days. The eschaton can be envisioned, however, less as a

“moment” than an “attitude.” This is not our impeding cataclysmic demise but the ripening of our lives; not so much about the future as living as though we *have* a future. Who ever thought that this five-syllable tongue-twister identifies an essential aspect of Christian spirituality? Yet it does, for it means living with an irrevocable commitment to God now *and into the future*, whatever it may hold.

As we approach the end of the church year, Advent and the great manifestation feasts of the Christmas cycle look for ways to help your faith community reflect on their willingness to live in the firm commitment that their future is in God. While others may fret about what the third millennium holds, we believe it holds the divine promise of God’s self-communication to the world: a promise once made incarnate in Jesus Christ. Though revealed definitively only once in history, that divine promise yet remains. Thus we approach the whole of the Christmas cycle not as an announcement of our past, but the mission for our future. In doing so we discover again what prompts the divine love affair with the world announced in the Gospel of John: the possibility of a renewed incarnation in the Church of the third millennium.

REFERENCES

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Edward Foley, Capuchin, is professor of liturgy at Catholic Theological Union and associate editor of New Theology Review.