

Preaching Lenten Discipline at the Beginning of the New Millennium

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It has been my experience that topics to be explored in written form can only benefit from a long period of gestation before any attempt is made actually to fashion them in words. One needs to ruminate on a subject in as unhurried a manner as possible if one is going to put oneself in the way of being edified by it. Coming cold to any matter worth discussing is like walking through an art gallery with no previous knowledge of either history or art. My practice therefore has been to register a topic mentally, once I have taken it on, and then let it simmer for as many days, weeks, or months as are available (short of catastrophe!) before settling down to write about it.

That was my approach to the present piece, too. Only, my method misfired this time. After having lived for several weeks with the topic my mind had registered at the time I accepted the invitation to do this, and having during that period been visited by many little flashes of insight on the matter, I discovered, upon re-reading the initial correspondence, that I had got the topic wrong. Throughout that period of untrammelled meditation, my errant memory had believed I was to address the subject, “Preaching *as* Lenten Discipline at the Beginning of the New Millennium.” By the time I discovered the mistake, however, I was so immersed in my misconstrued version of the assignment that I found I could not in all conscience give it up. I have contrived, therefore, to incorporate it into the theme originally assigned (or perhaps vice versa). The connection, in case the reader has any difficulty in that regard, could be stated: Those who would “preach lenten discipline at the beginning of the new millennium” (the topic as assigned) would be well advised to exercise some lenten discipline themselves—as *preachers*!

Surely I am not alone in thinking that preaching has fallen upon evil days. I do not mean ‘fallen’ from the heights of some imagined golden age. Apart from a few memorable examples of “great preaching” at various moments in the history of the Christian Movement (Ambrose of Milan, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Phillips Brooks, George Buttrick and a few others come to mind), most preaching, I suspect, has usually fallen short of *its potential*. Certainly the greater share of the sermons that I heard in my childhood and youth, the period some would call the golden age of preaching, were more leaden than golden. When they were not just plodding or pompous, they were predictably and even famously boring. Still, the fact remains (and I announce it with an abiding sense of awe) that I am a Christian because, at a crucial period in my life, I was profoundly and permanently changed by about a year’s worth of evocative sermons.

It will help to establish what I mean by the potential of preaching if I reflect for a moment on those life-altering sermons. What gave them their power? I am so classical a Protestant that I would have to answer: the Holy Spirit! The best and most brilliant preaching in the world cannot achieve the biblically desired effect—namely, that *gospel* would be heard. Something like a ‘transubstantiation’ has to occur if the mere words of a human being are to become vehicles for the conveyance of *God’s*

Word. Protestantism rightly challenged the eucharistic notion of transubstantiation where bread and wine are concerned; but it understood, being taught by Scripture, that “words” are in another category. Being themselves so insubstantial, they can be less resistant to the transforming that the divine Spirit needs to exercise upon them if “hearing” is to occur. Hence Paul’s astonishing affirmation of human language in general and preaching in particular, “How shall they *hear* without a preacher?” (Rom. 10:14)

However, preaching cannot, I think, serve the purpose of such hearing unless the preacher manifests some lived awareness of the insubstantiality of his or her words. Weighty, self-important, ostentatious oratory draws too much attention to *itself* to become a medium for the transcendent. As a young man trying to discover what meaning his life and all life might have, I was struck again and again by the genuine humility of the preacher whom I was privileged to hear. On more than one occasion, I remember, he actually said in a sermon that he felt entirely inadequate to the task of interpreting the text before us—and this without a hint of guile. Often he aired his intellectual doubts; moreover, what Tillich called “existential doubt” was never far beneath the surface of his preaching. One knew that he had to *struggle* to grasp the little he felt he could comprehend of the mystery of God and of life. His preaching was never slick, or merely “impressive.” So one knew all the while that, singled out as his office made him, he was nevertheless one of *us*—a human being trying to discern the purpose of being human.

Still, he did not wallow in his limitations—for him that would have been as manipulative as playing on the emotions. This was a learned person. He knew history, literature, art, music—the best of the civilization. His use of language was marvelous, moving. He didn’t rely on catch phrases or trendy, “in” terminology. There were no one-liners, no clever puns, no silly jokes. One felt one had been taken seriously—not just for twenty-five minutes of the sermon, but all the previous week when it was being prepared. One was being *addressed*. The sermons spoke to the heart, certainly; but always through the mind, the only trustworthy guide to that more susceptible organ. They were biblical sermons in origin and theme—exegetical, based on a nearly-uninterrupted dialogue with the text; but they were also (no, *therefore*!) designed to engage the context, that is, the life and times of those who listened.

Of course they didn’t engage everybody. Maybe I was even an exception—I don’t know. Many thought him too serious. They wanted something lighter, more entertaining. Most of them would not have thought of themselves in John Milton’s terms – “blind mouths,” looking up, waiting to be fed. I was. So it is true: preaching has as much to do with those who hear as those who speak. Like everything else in the tradition of Jerusalem, it is a relational idea, preaching. Still I think that I glimpsed in that year (it was my twenty-first) something of the *potential* Christian preaching really has, and that must shape the life and labors of preachers if they are to approximate it.

Fortunately, I have witnessed the near actualization of that potential now and then during the fifty years since, too. But in the meantime a number of things have happened to diminish the office of preaching, and the results (with exceptions) are pretty obvious. What happened?

First, television happened. Tele-vision! We became, in a way that we simply were not fifty years ago, a visually-fixated people. Hearing, biblically the most important sense, was subordinated to seeing. Sometimes I think that after half a century of

viewing we have become a hearing-impaired people. Of course, we were already prime candidates for something like that to occur. A people as obsessed by the immediate and the alleged 'practical' as North Americans always were, were unlikely to resist the allures of television and the whole bag of electronic tricks that has followed hard upon its heels. Seeing demands so little of us, and it offers instant (if not very durable) gratification.

So it is no mystery why televangelism has achieved such a hold on the American public. Spectacle and religious simplism require nothing of us but "viewing." Those who considered our preacher back then "too serious" were registering a universal (but particularly a North American) bias against listening to sustained and nuanced speech.

But "How shall they *hear* without a preacher?" Biblical and Reformation theology gives prominence to speaking and hearing, not because it enjoys complexity but because life under the conditions of history *is* complex, and God is a complex reality (for sinners!), and we ourselves are complex. When all that complexity is exchanged for a mess of televisable pottage, something drastic happens to the Christian faith. As Neil Postman has written, "I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is *another kind of religion altogether*."¹

The trouble is, our public at large, not just the consumers of televangelism, after fifty years of visual conditioning has become habitually and notoriously impatient with any kind of speech that requires sustained attention. It is not accidental that 'Attention Deficit Disorder' is the childhood problem of the age. Most of the children's parents also suffer from this 'disorder.' Middle-class restlessness is rampant, and nowhere is it more in evidence than in the average mainline Protestant congregation assembled for (yes!) *worship*! An immediate consequence of this: sermons have had to become desperately short. Nobody can attain profundity in a ten-minute sermon, and the preacher who settles for seven minutes (which I am told is now the accepted norm in some seminaries) has discounted "seriousness" apriori. As Paul Scherer, perhaps the greatest preacher of twentieth century America, used to tell his classes at Union Theological Seminary in New York: "Sermonettes make Christianettes."

Preaching Lenten discipline to congregations of once-mainline Protestants must mean, to begin with, recovering the discipline of listening. Any congregation that wants to make it into the new millennium by more than two or three decades has got to become serious about this faith—knowledgeable, thoughtful, engaged. For this to occur, however, preachers themselves are going to have to work harder than they are at theology, biblical exegesis, history, literature, and all the other beneath-the-surface struggle that is requisite to real preaching. Such ministerial discipline is the condition without which congregations will never acquire the "lenten discipline" necessary to Christian witness in a post-Christendom world.

Second, what happened to preaching is the denigration of all authority that took hold of our society in the 1960s and is now one of the shibboleths of postmodernity. Do not mistake me: I am not about to defend authority wherever it rears its ugly head—and authority that 'rears its head' is nearly always ugly. All the same, a good deal of sheer nonsense was let in through the back door of the counterculture in this connection, and one of its first victims was preaching. Preaching went beyond even the offense of lecturing. In the face of the colossal put-down of personal authority, the

absurd elevation of ‘the Group,’ and the apotheosis of *la technique* characterizing the second half of the twentieth century, persons whose calling has thrust them into homiletical prominence have often experienced a deep sense of embarrassment as they ascended the pulpit. Indeed, many churches have abandoned pulpits one must ascend in favor of the less elevated lecterns—if not the middle of the aisle.

The New Testament affirms that Jesus “taught with authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). Today we seem to prefer the approach of the scribes. But doesn’t the preaching of gospel (gospel!) challenge our pseudo-democratic deference to consensus? Neither Jesus nor the prophets expected—or got—consensus. Does not “the foolishness of preaching” demand of us that we take courage, venture out of the shell of our real or assumed modesty, and “speak with authority?” Not an authority that expects to be heard because it is part of the authority structure of the Establishment (it isn’t, any more!); and not one’s own authority as the possessor of degrees and diplomas (for all their necessity they count for little in the scheme of things); but an authority being bestowed upon us for the express purpose of this ministry, and confirmed as such by the church.

Standing at the portal of the third millennium, the Christian Movement as a whole, and mainstream Protestantism especially, cries out for leadership. Never in its history has Christianity been so confused about itself, its message, its mission. When clerical authority is genuine, it is nothing more nor less than a humble response to this need—not, therefore, to the need of clergy to achieve status. If anyone is called to ministry in this age when Christian ministry is one of the last places where social status can be found, it is for a purpose strictly distinguishable from personal gains: to be an interpreter of the gospel of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” in our secular, multicultural, and religiously pluralistic world may involve more pain than gain. But among those who remain in and around these old ecclesiastical structures, one’s authority as interpreter will not be resented if it is truly a *teaching* (rabbinic) authority and is not trivialized and made ludicrous by extending itself in every which direction. Even Jesus only “taught with authority”; he didn’t set himself up as an organizational expert, a conflict manager, a psychological counselor, a sexologist. It is chiefly through the “lenten discipline” of preaching and teaching that confused congregations may recognize echoes of the voice of the Good Shepherd, and be helped to find their way into the uncertain future.

Third, a still more complicated societal and ecclesiastical change has occurred in the past half century that has profoundly altered the vocation of preaching. This change cannot be described adequately in a short article, but for the present purposes we may state it in this way: After centuries of homiletics taught and practiced under the assumptions of Christian Establishment, there has been little recognition within the churches representative of the remnants of classical Protestantism that *what* we preach must now become in the most original and radical sense *gospel*. I do not even allow myself to say “*the* gospel,” because this is too easily reducible to convention and formula. Gospel is not the church’s possession, it is what the church must always rediscover. For it is ‘good news’ only as it meets and engages the ‘bad news’ that endangers human existence, in ever novel and changing forms.

Preaching in the Christendom context normally and with only rare exceptions has meant—at best—the edification of the faithful. It could assume that those addressed were already committed and sincere Christians—members, indeed, of a whole

Christian society! What they needed was encouragement, training in sanctity, moral instruction, doctrinal sophistication, spiritual comfort, and the like. At its best, such preaching could be moving and vital to both church and society. At its worst, it devolved into homily, humdrum, and harangue. But the pattern is there, reinforced by centuries; and few among contemporary preachers seem to me to have grasped that the ecclesiastical and sociological circumstances in which this kind of preaching was perpetuated have given way to something entirely different. In a word, Christian Establishment has given way to a post-Constantinian diaspora situation. Automatic Christianity is finished, the trappings of Christendom notwithstanding. Our context now is one in which faith really does come only by hearing, not by heredity. And faith must come, if it is to remain, not just once, but again and again, and in the face of much evidence to the contrary.

This means that preaching, while one hopes it is also sometimes edifying, must now always be aimed at *metanoia*—"conversion." Mainstream Protestants wonder why evangelicalism on this continent seems so alive, so full of confidence. The reasons are many; but among them one should not discount the fact that evangelicalism has a message. I do not like this message, for the most part; but that it *is* a message is beyond dispute. Evangelicalism had to develop a clearcut message because, not being part of the Establishment (in the past), its existence depended upon what it proclaimed in a way that the existence of old, established denominations did not.

But now it is we, the formerly taken-for-granted churches, who must become clear about what it is we are called to proclaim in this time and place about *gospel*! The usual edifying discourses or moral pep-talks will no longer suffice. The people before us in the pews—at least many of them—are not there just to be amused, or to honor some family ritual, or mindlessly enact a religious habit. Not all of them, but many more of them than used to be the case, if they are there at all, are there in the frame of mind that drove the twenty-one year old I used to be to church. They are thirsting for living water, hungering for solid food. They are "blind mouths," looking up, waiting to be fed. They will not be satisfied with stained glass sociology or moral tidbits. Nor will the church as a whole, as it looks over into the third millennium of Christianity and knows in its heart that the third millennium will be far from Christian.

Lent, as everyone knows, is a time of fasting. The body tries to imitate the soul in getting down to basics. The inessential, the frivolous, the accidental are discarded. Only what is needful for life, for the journey, is retained. Preaching lenten discipline in churches that still carry about with them a great deal of excess baggage, will not be easy. Preachers will be asking their parishioners, most of whom certainly do not live this way, to enter the wilderness of the post-Christendom era—in New Testament terms, to take up their crosses. They can expect to be resisted. But some will hear, and believe. First, however, the preachers themselves will have to demonstrate their readiness to follow that Way. And for them the discipline begins, if it is to begin at all, in their studies and their pulpits.

Note

¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 121.