

PREACHING AND INCULTURATION

The preaching task always involves a process of the inculturation of the gospel. As Robert Schreiter pointed out in his proposal for "A Framework for a Discussion of Inculturation" in *Mission in Dialogue* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1982), "inculturation is not just a step that might be helpful in a deeper understanding of the gospel; it is imperative in order that the event of the Word might take place at all" (p. 545).

The workshop on preaching and inculturation began with a review by Mary Catherine Hilkert of the highlights of the preparatory readings recommended for the workshop that included, in addition to Schreiter's article, Joseph G. Healey's "Inculturating the Holy Week Liturgy in East Africa," forthcoming in *Worship* (1990), and Justo L. Gonzales and Catherine G. Gonzales, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980, chapters 3-5). Healey's text, primarily a description of contemporary pastoral experience during Holy Week in Kenya and Tanzania, provided concrete examples of new modes of preaching through a resurrection play, an "Outdoor African Way of the Cross," and the use of story and riddles in preaching.

Liberation Preaching proposes a homiletic method that involves a political-liberationist approach both to biblical hermeneutics (analysis of the interplay of power in the text, imagination of different settings for the text, searching for God's subversive action in the passage, addressing the part of text ordinarily avoided) and to the preaching event itself (assessing the dynamic of power between speaker/hearer, attending to the powerless who are absent from as well as the powerless who are present in the community, rethinking the political dimensions of the liturgical context).

The systematic theological framework provided by Schreiter contrasted an earlier way of understanding the dynamics of preaching the gospel in which hearers conform to what speakers perceive as the inner structure of the message with a more contemporary incarnational approach that emphasizes that God's universality is revealed in radical particularity and that hearers enjoy primacy over speakers (p. 546). The paradox which Schreiter highlights is that preaching necessarily must respect cultural patterns (creation/incarnational focus), yet if effectively proclaimed, the gospel will transform the human/social situation toward the reign of God (redemptive/eschatological focus). Thus the preacher must both affirm the identity of a culture and locate the need for social change (recognize both the grace and the sin to be found in a given situation). Schreiter identifies a similar dynamic of respect plus transformation in the paradox of Jesus' approach to preaching through inclusion (that recognizes the fundamental goodness of creation and culture), judgment (that recognizes the power and reality of sin and thus identifies and seeks to change any relationships that cause restrictive bondage or

foster dependence), and service (where again, hearers determine what the needs of their culture are).

As a way of introducing more multicultural voices into the discussion at the workshop, Kathleen Cannon had prepared a videotape of seven students at Catholic Theological Union discussing preaching and the difficulties of biblical interpretation in a cross-cultural context. To focus the CTSA discussion of the readings and videotape on specifically theological issues, the following questions were proposed for consideration by the approximately twenty-five to thirty participants at the workshop prior to viewing the videotape:

- (1) Where is the Word of God/gospel located (theology of revelation)?
- (2) What is your understanding of what is going on in the preaching event (theology of preaching)?
- (3) What are the roles of the community and the role of the preacher/leader in the preaching event?
- (4) How do you understand authority in the preaching event?
- (5) What is your understanding of what conversion is and how it occurs through preaching?
- (6) Can the preacher hold together in creative tension affirmation of the goodness in culture with the recognition of sin and the need for redemption that calls for social change and transformation (Schreiter's proposal)?
- (7) Do you agree with Schreiter that the authentic proclamation of the gospel enables one to live better within one's own culture?
- (8) Can every text in the scriptures be proclaimed as the "Word of God"?

During the videotaped discussion (among a laywoman from Bolivia, a Comboni seminarian from Uganda, a missionary of Italian origin who has ministered in both Columbia and a Spanish-speaking parish in Chicago, an Australian priest who has worked in the Solomon Islands and poor, isolated areas of Australia, an African American laywoman who has ministered in a middle-class black parish in Chicago, a religious sister who is a native of Jamaica, West Indies, and has worked primarily in the Caribbean, and a U.S. sister who currently works with homeless women at a Chicago shelter) the following issues emerged:

(1) *The role of the community.* From participating in the actual proclamation (singing, dramatizing, reciting) to retelling from memory the scriptures of the previous week, to sharing experiences of living the Word, it was clear that there was an understanding of preaching as done by the people gathered for worship. The gospel is preached by the community, never by a solitary preacher.

(2) *The nature of inculturation.* There is grace in the telling of the story, not in telling by rote the story of the scriptures, but in telling it as their own story. The community rejoices in God's grace in the life of another.

(3) *Time.* When people come to hear the Word of God, time is not a factor. Moreover, celebration must include time for gathering, telling stories, preparing food, sharing insights into the scriptures.

(4) *Listening skills.* Beyond being able to preach in the language of the people, the group emphasized sensitivity to and appreciation for the culture. As one participant put it, "Open eyes and ears and heart so that when you preach you love them—not as you imagine them, but as they truly are."

(5) *Women's issues.* These emerged throughout the conversation in several different contexts that ranged from matters of language and the effect of substituting female counterpart for male figures in the scripture passage to the inability of male presiders to accept women, to the use of scripture to reinforce a patriarchal bias. They also noted the necessity for the preacher to address issues of sexuality and sexism, racism and poverty, with honesty and sensitivity, lest the gospel be used as an instrument of oppression.

When offered four scriptural texts (Mt 5:43-48, on love of enemies; Mk 7:24-30, Syro-Phoenician woman; Lk 10:25-37, Good Samaritan; and Jn 8:1-11, woman caught in adultery) and asked if there were any of the texts that they could not, or would not, preach in their own culture, the students were unanimous in their conviction that there was no text that could not be preached in their context. While they noted issues in each text to which the preacher would have to be sensitive, they concluded that each of them offered concrete possibilities for their communities to hear the Word of God.

During the discussion that followed, workshop participants raised and pursued the following further questions/concerns: How can we be critical of our own culture? Specifically, how can the gospel be proclaimed, or what are the possibilities for evangelization, in a culture that promotes consumerism and elitism with its allure of a comfortable life? Where/How do we "name grace" in lives that appear spiritually void? Is there a way to evoke from those whose moral and religious sensibilities are numb precisely what their moral concerns are? The success of the spirituality of the twelve-step programs suggests the possibilities for preaching out of an experience of failure, of giving testimony of transformation precisely through and beyond failure. If our whole ritual is noncommunicative, then how can the preached Word communicate? Observations were made about the contemporary U.S. pastoral experience of a "famine of the Word of God" in contrast to the creative way the gospel was proclaimed in those cultures represented by discussion participants on the video. Regarding the "texts of terror," shouldn't the canonical scriptures of the community be preferred to the "subjective whim" of the individual preacher? That final comment raised a number of responses which could not be pursued due to the limits of time.

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