

# King's Preaching

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Good preachers and how they approach their preaching often inspire other preachers. What do they consider important to the preaching event, and how do they prepare?

Recently I read *King Came Preaching* by Dr. Mervyn A. Warren, and it inspired me how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. became such an outstanding preacher and speaker.

I. Harold De Wolf, his professor at Boston University, wrote to him, "I expect splendid achievements from you and shall always regard you with high appreciation and pride." King who was born of three generations of preachers did not disappoint him. He was gifted with a brilliant intellect, a broad education, a tremendous capacity for hard work, matched by strong willpower and ambition. Once King decided to become a minister he wrote, "I had doubts that religion was intellectually respectable. I revolted against the emotionalism of Negro religion, the shouting and stamping. I didn't understand it and it embarrassed me."

King held that the pulpit was a place not only for the spiritual but also for the social responsibility he saw in guiding God's flock. He said, "As a minister of the Gospel I have a priestly function and a prophetic function." How many preachers realize that they have a prophetic role to play? He distinguished a sermon for worship and a civil rights talk. His sermons addressed mainly his religious congregations whereas his civil rights talks addressed mass rallies. King spent about 15 hours a week preparing a sermon. No wonder he was so effective.

Some of us might remember our first sermon or homily. King's first sermon was entitled, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," which focused on God's love, love of neighbor and self-love. This sermon became his launching pad for a much wider audience. Since he was only 25 at the time when he gave the sermon, one lady commented that he looked rather lonely in the pulpit without his mother. But his popularity as a preacher grew by leaps and bounds.

Whenever he preached at his father's Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, the crowd increased. His father wrote to him, "As I told you, you must be much in prayer. Persons like yourself are the ones the devil turns all his forces loose to destroy." Good solid advice for any preacher.

## Bible preacher

The centrality of the Bible played an important role in his preaching. The Bible has occupied central stage in African American life. A knowledge and understanding of the Bible was of the utmost importance for a slave preacher. King quoted from the Bible more than any other literary source, at least 12 times in one sermon. He quoted more liberally from the New Testament than from the Hebrew Scriptures. The Scriptures have to become an important part of our preaching as well because they are such an integral part of the literacy as the Word is proclaimed to the people

Using the Biblical text "there was no room for them in the inn," King wrote, "One of the strangest things is that we crowd him more than ever before the Christmas season. We are so busy giving and exchanging gifts. We're so busy getting in the crowded traffic and in the mad rush of the stores that we see Christmas as little more than a commercial holiday rather than a sacred holy day. And

so often in our lives as we come to the Christmas season, we find ourselves saying in substance, 'No room.' We stand before great spiritual opportunities and great spiritual realities, but we're busy.

And the final thing is that while we crowd him out, he takes us in. We crowd him out, he takes us in. Hear him as he cries out, 'In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you.' We crowd him out, he takes us in! 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If you will open the door, I will come in to you and will sup with you and you with me.' We crowd him out, he takes us in."

## Elements of a good sermon

King, as Dr. Mervyn Warren points out, considered a solid sermon to possess 3 p's: 1) "it proves an appeal to the intellect, 2) it paints an appeal to the imagination, 3) it persuades an appeal to the heart." As a religious scholar and thinker King was able to appeal to the intellects of all kinds of audiences. He learned to master his language with ease and dexterity. He admitted that the "eloquent statement of ideas is his greatest talent, strongest tradition, and most constant interest."

King manifested a lot of imagination in the titles he used for his sermons: "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart", "Transformed Conformists",

"A Knock at Midnight", "The Man Who Was a Fool", "Shattered Dreams", "Paul's Letter to American Christians". In traveling by some non-Catholic churches, I have noticed how the title of their Sunday sermon is broadcasted. I often wondered if we could not do the same, or at least announce a catchy title of a homily before we begin like "Living on the Razor's Edge," "A Mystery to be Lived" "Feast Without a Fast?"

In his sermon on "The Ultimate Doom of Evil" he used the image of a bee. He wrote, "There is a further truth that history teaches. It is found in the proverb:

'The bee always fertilizes the flower that it robs.' Think about that... (he repeated the proverb) ...The

bee goes to the flower to get what is called nectar. It robs the flower of nectar. It's robbing the flower of nectar in order to make honey. But in the process of robbing the flower of nectar, the bee gives off a substance called pollen; and it is that substance which fertilizes the flower and causes it to bud and come forth in all its fragrance and beauty. 'The bee always fertilizes the flower it robs.' It's taking something from the flower; it robs something from that flower; but in the process, it fertilizes the flower. Yes. It causes it to bud. And

so from our evil, good emerges... The bee of war robbed the flower of our civilization, those who had the bloom of youth on their faces, but the bee also fertilized the flower. We have a United Nations today, and it was because of the darkness of war, the darkness of the inhumanity of man to man, that we were able to fertilize the idea of a United Nations."

## Emotion

King probably persuaded and appealed to the heart through emotion, which played an important role in his preaching. A

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preacher needs to feel and respond to the message one is preaching. Too many preachers, however, are afraid to enote in the pulpit. Too often we come across as casual chatter preachers or like laid-back talk-show hosts as David Buttrick observed. Listen to animated people in ordinary conversation and we will hear a variety of emotions expressed. "Ministers who subdue emotion in the name of naturalness are emphatically unnatural; they border on the bizarre," Buttrick maintains.

King knew the value of emotion as a motivating force for his audience. He tried to balance reason and emotion realizing that two blades of

a scissor are needed to cut cloth. Robert Oliver maintains "A purely intellectual argument may make the audience say 'yes, that is true'; but the addition of an emotional plea is needed to make the listeners add, and let's do something about it." King wanted his audience not only to feel the scriptural message but also to be moved by it. He never approached his task, however, to "kill 'em dead," or "turn it on and off" like we do a faucet. King tried to avoid, "a church that burns up with emotionalism and the other is a church that freezes up with classism." He appealed mainly to three emotions: love, happiness and holiness which enabled him to address such issues as freedom, power and influence, helpfulness, reputation, security and self preservation.

### **Preacher as person**

Considering the bad press given TV evangelists as well as the sexual clergy scandal, the preacher as a wholesome person is most vital to the preaching event. The challenge for any preacher is to walk the walk, before one can talk the talk. Otherwise, our preaching will be like a tinkling cymbal. King was highly esteemed as a minister of the Gospel and had, according to *Time*, "an indescribable capacity for empathy that is the touchstone of leadership. He has stirred in his people a Christian forbearance that nourishes hope

and smothers injustice." King believed that, "One must not preach a sermon with his voice, he (sic) must preach it with his life." He did that!

Despite his many beatings, jailings, death threats, bombings of his home, and stabbings, he was willing to "turn the other cheek." King was convinced that every person should have something to die for; otherwise there was nothing for which to live. He was a man of deep convictions, which became very evident in his preaching.

Like Jesus who was accused of being a wine bibber, a cohort of the devil, and a blasphemer, King was accused of being a communist, a liar, and a user of too many non Christian sources. After his assassination he was also accused of plagiarism and adultery. Does this sound familiar particularly when we consider those who have been unjustly accused of sexual impropriety?

### **Dominant theme**

King's dominant theme in his sermons was to urge people to live together as brothers and sisters and thereby build up the reign of God. [This is] certainly a theme that needs to be preached on often today. He said, "The real tragedy...is that we see people as entities or merely as things. Too seldom do we see people in their true humanness. A spiritual myopia limits our vision to external

accidents. We see men (sic) as Jews or Gentiles, Catholics or Protestants, Chinese or American, Negroes or Whites. We fail to think of them as fellow human beings made from the same basic stuff as we are, molded in the same divine image. The Priest and the Levite saw only a bleeding body, not a human being like themselves. But the Good Samaritan will always remind us to remove the catafacts or provincialism from our spiritual eyes and see men as men."

Other themes King preached on were: God, Jesus Christ, the church, prayer, faith, the preacher, human-kind, good and evil. His dominant theme, however, was love because he maintained: "Hate multiplies hate; the endless cycle must be discontinued. Hate leaves only the hatred but the hater scarred and distorted. Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. Loving one's enemies is not only a commandment from God but also a prerequisite to knowing God."

King would repeat his theme or main idea many times throughout the sermon. For example, his sermon on "No Room at the Inn", he repeats "No room" at least a dozen times, so the audience knows what his central or main idea is. One of the problems with a number of preachers is that they have many excellent ideas, but they are not connected with a central or main idea.

King was able to polarize an audience or make them think as one

instead of being separated from each other. This indeed is a marvelous quality for a preacher to possess because it makes the preaching task much easier. To identify their common problems, sufferings, injustices, enables the preacher to make the audience feel as one.

### Language style

In examining his sermons it becomes evident that they are rather easy to read even though he addressed various kinds of congregations. Most 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders would be able to understand them. His word choice was simple, one or two syllables at the most. King was also able to preach on difficult topics so that common people would understand him. He was a master at adapting his sermons according to the audience and the particular occasion. His ability, according to Walter Mueelder, was "His command of vocabulary ranges all the way from what can be understood by the most ignorant man on the street to the most sophisticated audience." His sentence structure was comprised mainly of simple sentences. Most were declarative sentences, which helped him to be more direct.

His imagery and use of figures of speech were very evident. He wrote concerning the Good Samaritan, "With his own hands he bound the wounds of the man and then set him

on his own beast. It would have been easier to pay an ambulance to take the unfortunate man to the hospital, rather than risk his neatly trimmed suit stained with blood." Other examples: "Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. There was no one there." "Even...preachers have joined the enticing cult of conformity...(and) preach soothing sermons that bypass the weightier matters of Christianity...If you want to get ahead in the ministry, conform! Stay within the walls of Christianity. Play it safe." Do we?

His sermons were spiced with many quotations from Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Plato and Aristotle as well as Handel, Beethoven and Bach. He also referred to Booker T. Washington, Marian Anderson, George Washington Carver and Ralph Bunche. He told how Jesus transformed many individuals: Simon of Sand into a Peter of Rock, Saul into a Paul, and a lusty Augustine into St. Augustine.

King used examples to help clarify his thoughts. He made an assertion in his sermon on "Antidotes for Fear" like "Abnormal fears are emotionally ruinous and psychologically destructive. He then went on stating the difference between abnormal and normal fears, "Sigmund Freud spoke of a person who was quite properly afraid of snakes in the heart of an African jungle and of another person who neurotically feared that snakes were under the carpet in his city apartment.

Stories, especially personal ones, were part of his preaching which helped sustain interest as well as enhance a point. A convincing statement of his theme usually followed his stories. One of his famous stories was when he had to appear in court because of organizing a car pool to oppose segregated busing in Montgomery, Alabama. The situation looked very bleak and he knew what the decision would be ahead of time. But during the court session the United States Supreme Court ruled unanimously that bus segregation was unconstitutional. As he told this story he dramatically said, "Yes, the dawn will come. Disappointment, sorrow and despair are all born in Midnight, but we may be consoled by the fact that morning will come."

### Delivery

King said, "I never read a sermon. Without a manuscript, I can communicate better with an audience. Furthermore, I have greater rapport and power when I am able to look the audience in the eye." We might ask, why then bother writing out the sermon? He felt that it helped him organize the sermon better; he could better select the precise language, and gave him a feel for the movement of his ideas. If he delivered the

sermon twice, there were marked differences in his delivery.

Although only five and a half feet tall (those of small stature, take note) he displayed much confidence and ease while he spoke. His elegant black robe also contributed to his pulpit appearance. His gestures and facial expressions were appropriate to his message. Eye contact was his strongest feature enabling him to have feedback from the audience.

A special *Life* issue, *2000 Years of Christianity, the Meaning of the Millennium*, singled out King and his contribution to Christian history. When L. Harold De Wolf was asked if the Nobel Peace Prize winner had contributed to his profession, he answered, "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has disclosed to great numbers of people the meaning and power of the cross as a contemporary reality. Many under his leadership have come to the point where they, in love, would be willing to engage in activities that risk their lives. They are convinced that this is an avenue to take up their cross and follow Christ." Has our preaching had a similar impact on our listeners?

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