

Choosing the Right Words

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We often search for the right words to proclaim in our preaching. When Moses was told by God, “I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt,” he responded, “Who am I that I should go the Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt? God answered, “I will be with you.” (Ex. 3:10-12) We need the realization also that God is with us as we prepare our homily and then proclaim the Good News. God will give us also what we are to say. When Jeremiah was asked to be a prophet to the nations he said, “Ah, Lord God, I know not how to speak; I am too young.” (1:6) He also was given the assurance that the Lord was with him. We might ask ourselves, what are our excuses? Jeremiah felt duped by the Lord because “Whenever I speak, I must cry out violence and

outrage...I say to myself, I will not mention him, I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in. I cannot endure it.” (19: 7-9) That same fire has to burn within our bellies and then the words will flow. Isaiah protested “For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips.” (6:5) The Lord cleansed him and he spoke most forcefully what God asked him to speak. God will also cleanse our lips, remove our wickedness, and purge our sin as God did for Isaiah.

Maybe the most difficult word to form and then speak is the first one. How do we begin? In the wilderness of silence a word waits and will turn up for us. But for it to become a heated missile we need to embrace the desolate and barren silence and

wait. God offers us the opportunity to co-create which indeed is a gift. But any gift from God is to be shared. What Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah and the Israelites forgot was that God was with them, and that God is the God of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rachel, and the Israelites. As preachers we can suffer from this amnesia also failing to grasp how God is there to help us.

How do we find the right words to proclaim? Moses had to ask God what to say to Pharaoh. And God told him, "I Am sent me to you." (Ex 3:14)

This truly proves God's dynamism. It was a happening of grace, moving from a theology of being to a theology of becoming. We as preachers need to get caught up in the same happening of grace, the ecstasy of appreciating a sunrise, a sunset or just smelling a flower.

Good preaching does not consist in many statements of facts, but rather sharing the explosive power of words, events and stories.

We need to examine the scriptural texts and try to recover the sense of astonishment, or recover the scandal of the texts. This will lead to a happening of grace. Imagine what could happen if we ever had a Mass for the homeless, and then share

what happened at such an event. Like Moses, however, we resist, are doubtful that any good can come. Later Moses could say to the Israelites, "It was with a strong hand that the Lord brought you away." (Ex 13:3) We also might be astonished and surprised at what God can do through our words.

Part of our problem is that we have become too familiar with certain texts. Mark Twain declared that familiarity breeds contempt and children. More inner work of prayer is needed to allow the words to flow naturally. Often these texts contain a secret and our job is to uncover the secret and then share it. What we proclaim is that the scriptures don't promise perfection but struggle. Unless the text has interpreted us as preachers we can't preach it well.

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Finding the right words is usually a painful process. But they need to be words that rip away our breath as well as the assembly; words that have the aroma of newly baked bread. Listening to others, their pains and sorrows as well as their joys is most helpful. Journey into the imagination of others. Feel their feelings. Discover their fears. We don't know or understand others unless we know

their fears. Being aware of their weaknesses and failures as well as our own will help us to find the right words and speak them well. Like Jacob we need to wrestle with the angel and our own demons as Henri Nouwen insisted. The scars of our broken hearts might become the door of light. One of the tests might be when we as preachers say "I", and the assembly can say "me too." The key is when the listeners can forget you as a preacher and exclaim, "Isn't the Gospel wonderful?" We also must guard against seeing our words as our own. We have in our society private property and copyright laws. If we are true prophets we speak for God knowing these are God's words.

We must also accept our vulnerability and powerlessness as Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah and so many of the prophets did. Jesus certainly did this at the Last Supper when he put his body and blood into the hands of his Apostles, and when he was captured in the Garden. Jesus told Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels?" (Mt. 26:52-53) Jesus accepted his powerlessness because the power of darkness had come. We have to preach how this kind of powerlessness will liberate our listeners. It will also liberate us as preachers

from the power we can easily find in the pulpit or in our ministry. We see this power in the United States, which has global hegemony over the world. We are moving into a global culture which needs purification, and which needs to create more wide-open spaces for all to live. Moses finally led the people to the wide-open spaces of the Promised Land.

Prophetic truth

We need to study the prophets to uncover the wisdom they preached and how forcefully they confronted the people. Dealing with the violence of the Bible can be most challenging for any preacher. God smashed their false idols but too often they turned, as we do, to other idols. Someone might quit smoking only to indulge in overeating. These idols for the Israelites had to be shattered before they could enter the Promised Land. How often in our society has money become an idol on the altar of deceit and oppression? The Lynch pin of the Exodus event is freedom, freedom from all forms of oppression. Jesus was totally free and that explains how he ate with sinners and could reach out to prostitutes. Do we act in a similar fashion? Jesus loved the poor. The option for the poor can no longer be preached as optional. It becomes evident how Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah and so many of the prophets were in dia-

logue with God. One wonders if they paused and reflected on the words they spoke. We need to preach an honest dialogue, especially with dissenters, welcoming their dissent, bro-kenness, and making room for their anger and despair. Speaking up for victims of oppression and violence is important rather than crucifying those who don't agree with us. In choosing our words make the sentences short, snappy and pithy. When William Jennings Bryan wrote and delivered his *Cross of Gold* the average sentence was 105 words. When President George W. Bush gave his acceptance speech at the recent convention in New York, the average sentence was 15 words.

Stanley Fish, dean emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago, did an unofficial but formal poll of his freshmen writing class not on Bush's or Kerry's ideas, but in the presentation of the ideas. Their speeches were placed side by side for analysis, and then the students were asked who does a better job articulating his ideas. Bush won 13 to 2 (14 if you include the professor). Bush, they agreed, began with a perfect topic sentence and then explained this topic clearly, precisely and simply. His ideas were brisk and concise. Kerry, however, got lost in his own sentences and had to begin them again. He also asked a question and expected his listeners to know the answer by saying, "don't you?" The class did not know the answer. He

also said that when he is president he is going to ask the Congress to close "a stupid loophole" instead of using "unconscionable" or "unprincipled." What if our homilies were placed along side of someone else on a given Sunday when the topic or theme was the same? Don't presume that our listeners know the answer when they don't. We have to be careful to choose the right words avoiding what truly might offend our listeners, or words that sound hollow and have the backbone of a jelly fish. Jesus never spoke that way.

Daring vision

If we are to find the right words and preach them effectively in our postmodern world we need a dynamic revolutionary and daring vision, seeing things with fresh eyes. Jesus had vision and praised those who were daring. He invited Peter to walk on the water. The men who brought the paralytic to him and dared to lift him to Jesus through the roof undoubtedly surprised him. Daring preachers test the Spirits. St. Paul tells us that we live by the Spirit if the fruits are: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self control." (Gal. 5:22-23) Pope John XXIII was certainly a daring man. One hundred days after his election he called for a Vatican Council. The cardinals and many others were stunned. Mary

Ward in the seventeenth century opened schools for the poor and rich. Dorothy Day along with Peter Maurin started the Catholic Worker movement in 1933. Despite her busy schedule Dorothy spent two hours a day in prayer. Certainly an inspiration for any preacher. There we find the inspiration for our words. Priests and pilgrims were and are daring because they are never sure what lies ahead.

The Gospels make it clear how Jesus continued to invite people to reform their lives. He told the people "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." (Mk. 1:15) That was daring. His invitation has to continue to be preached today. Continual reformation or constant stocktaking is essential in the life of the Church. Self-reform is never finished or completed; it is comparable to an unfinished symphony. Cardinal Neumann advocated that to live is to change and change often. We are never too old to change. We can't turn back the clock. Change is inevitable, but growth is optional.

Besides testing the Spirits we need to clearly preach what are the rock bottom issues of the Church: the Word of God, the sacraments, and the Apostolic Church. Here we need to choose the proper time and words. Pope John XXIII insisted that history is the teacher of life. We need a better understanding of the primacy of the Pope, and how to read the signs of the times: globalization, ter-

rorism, women's movement, increased role of the laity, racism, sexism, the sleepless search for freedom, and many others.

Archbishop John R. Quinn speaks about a fourth Church which includes the Internet, the website and the broad ban of television channels - up to a thousand! When we use the Internet there is no one in charge; it bypasses authority and becomes its own authority. There is no gatekeeper. This is not true of a hot line, like the one between the United States and Russia or other nations.

Many years ago the question was posed, what would happen if everyone had a Bible and could read it? Jesus invites us to put out into the deep and be daring to accept these technological challenges. The Internet has tremendous potential of uniting and connecting Bishops, priests, and laity. Discussion groups through this medium are starting in some areas. But no matter how far technology advances the Church will always be needed, even maybe more necessary than in previous centuries. As preachers we have to proclaim the Christian values needed in our society. We need to rediscover Jesus' original mandate to make disciples of all nations, not just believers. Our task, as we choose our words, is to help people experience God directly as Karl Rahner wrote.

According to Archbishop Quinn the fourth Church will be shaped by focusing on the centrality of the Word,

creating small ecclesial communities or groups, and making sure that the Church will be a church of the Bible. Karl Rahner believed that the church of the future will be built from below. Cyprian, the church father, wrote that we do not savor great things, we live them. As preachers we help in building the church from below, and help our assemblies not just savor great things but live them.

Social justice issues

The question arises: Are we to preach about social or justice issues in the pulpit? And if so, how? What words do we use so as not to "turn off" our listeners? Much debate exists for either side of this issue. Dr. Gloria Duffy, president and C.F.O. of the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, believes we should. She

believes that ethical issues need to be preached because they contain intrinsic values that are not taught elsewhere. Our preaching should not be compromised like TV is for money. Politicians need to raise money. It cost \$750,000 to host a debate plus hotels. Many speakers demand high prices like \$10,000 for a single appearance. But do they tell it straight to the people? We can. Clear and forceful voices are needed to show how unnecessary the money is we spend on bunker buster weapons. Issues like global warming, weapons of mass destruction, the

fact that only 30% actually vote in an election need to be addressed. Our messages must have substance and above all a follow up to some action. When we are hit in the leg with a poisoned arrow, we don't ask where did the feathers come from. We act! This takes courage, and courage is not the absence of fear, but overcomes the fear. We can't let terrorists frighten us to the extent we are paralyzed and can't act. What we believe is more important than how we believe. Carrying out what we believe is most important.

Other issues that need to be addressed are the life and dignity of every human person, family life and community, the right to a livelihood, the dignity of work and the workers, corporations outsourcing work, care of God's creation or ecology, just to mention a few.

But what words do we use or approach to help move an assembly into action? What is the saying, the further we are from the scene the franker we can become? Using stories, personal testimony, raising questions (we can say - this raises a question in my mind, or makes me wonder) are some ways to preach effectively. William Faulkner believed that a great story is about a hero or heroine who struggles against insurmountable odds. These are often portrayed in movies. We cannot afford not to enter this menu, especially a movie like *The Passion of the Christ*. Despite all the criticism lev-

eled against Mel Gibson this movie has opened a window, and given a wake up call to Hollywood executives. Implicit spiritual messages can be found in movies like *The Lord of the Rings*. Key moments and scenes can be found in them that offer a possible connection with our listeners. The mistake I make is that I forget to bring a little notebook along to write down some powerful lines found in the dialogue.

We need to avoid being apodictic or getting up on our soapbox ranting and raving how things are getting worse. This is the not the worst of times, and not the best of times. We need also to avoid sugar coating our message or any of the vital issues. A story like the following can be more effective than telling people what to do. A Rwanda woman saw her husband and children brutally killed before her eyes. When she was about to be killed by a Hutu murderer, she reached for a Bible and said, "Here read this, for you don't know what you are doing." She became a pioneer of a new Rwanda.

Archbishop Oscar Romero (another powerful movie) is an outstanding example of someone who modeled his life after Jesus who proclaimed, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." (Lk 4:18) We need to find words to challenge and comfort our listeners helping them to move forward. The archbishop had a vision of the totality of what was going on in El Salvador, especially the

place of the poor. He achieved the mission to evangelize all his people "salvar a su pueblo." He spent the whole night in prayer when one of his priests died. By allowing himself to carry and face the whole reality of life, he also experienced what it meant to live as someone already risen. He became an icon of hope. What an inspiration for anyone preaching justice and social issues!

If we were to visit the German military hospital where our soldiers are being treated for "amputated limbs, burst eyeballs, shrapnel-torn bodies and shattered lives," we would have the words to describe the horrors of the Iraq war. Lt. Col. Ronald Place, the chief surgeon, cries when he says, "It breaks your heart," to see and minister to them.

Maybe this is the challenge we need as preachers when we are searching for the right words. Be in contact with people who are suffering and in pain, who feel helpless and hopeless, who are angry and resentful, as well as people who are hope-filled, joy-filled, enthusiastic, optimistic, faith-filled for a promising future. Jesus certainly did that. Then the right words will flow.

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