

# Preaching and Worship

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We can make our preaching and worship more effective if we understand what worship is. It is an awareness of who God is in our lives. Worship puts God in the center and puts us in community. Worship really is loving and adoring God. That often results in awe. "Awe" as Rabbi Heschel states, "is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme. Awe is a sense of the transcendent, for the reference everywhere to mystery beyond all things. It enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine... to sense the ultimate in the common and simple, to feel in the rush of the passing stillness of the eternal. What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe."<sup>1</sup> Matthew Fox puts it in his own words, "Don't tell me what you believe or what your dogmas are. Tell me first what

you praise and how you praise."<sup>2</sup>

Worship unites the future with the present. The present does not have the final word as many think. We do not by-pass the problems of life such as addictions, violence, fears, trials, and setbacks. Instead we put them into proper focus especially through our preaching. We repair the torn fabric of life through good worship and preaching which strengthen our day-to-day actions.

Worship, however, boils down to a tug of war concerning taste and style. In one parish the pastor went along with having the song "America the Beautiful" sung the Sunday after September 11, 2001. He knew it would be controversial. After the service one of his astute parishioners told him, "So, you had to have this song sung." The pastor nodded not knowing what he might say. "It was powerful and moving," said the man, "but now don't ever do it again." Thomas Long in *Beyond the Wor-*

*ship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* tries to explain the recent conflicts that have resulted in various worship practices. The conflict, according to him, is between the "old paradigm" churches and the "new paradigm" ones. He tries to steer a middle course. He thinks the gauge of effective worship is growth in the love of God and one's neighbor. St. Paul says, "If I have the gift of prophecy, and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have faith so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." (1 Cor 13:2)

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### Addressing their needs

The same gauge might be applied to our preaching. Are we more concerned about our effectiveness in delivering our message and about ourselves? Are we concerned with the numbers game - how many are attending the liturgies? Is the singing entertainment or meaningful praise? Are the songs chosen for the occasion appropriate? And, of course, there is always the collection. How much money will be brought in? These "false idols" can prevent us from facing the formidable assembly that needs to be touched in head and heart. We have to know how our

listeners are "wired." To preach and celebrate meaningfully Sunday after Sunday or during the weekday Masses is a difficult but not an insurmountable task. We acquaint ourselves with the people's addictions, fears, trials, setbacks as well as their joys. The losses of a loved one or a job, marital problems, oppressive economic structures, discrimination, violence are interwoven into their lives.

Rampant individualism, consumerism, fragmentation and alienation are the sins of our culture that need to be addressed. According to a

recent Gallup poll 67% who attend church nearly weekly claim that premarital sex is morally okay. Cohabitation has increased eightfold from 1960-2000 - 500,000 to 4.7 million. Another thorny issue is homosexuality that needs to be addressed.

Many are waiting and hungry to hear the Word proclaimed forcefully. They desire the Eucharist to be celebrated meaningfully and to be involved. We preachers and celebrants have to compete with the mass media with their sound bites, talk show banter, headline news, visual stimulation, and comedians. That is rather daunting because our audience is very ready to push the remote control button if our homilies are not stimulating and our celebration is

functionary. How many will believe if we were to say we have a "late breaking news bulletin" from God?

When worship reaches its highest point of God's presence we are no longer in control but the Spirit is. What enables this to happen is good preaching and good worship. Good preaching and celebration has helped people in the past to survive oppression and slavery. Good worship and preaching will promote and deepen listener's faith in God. Are we aware that God is present in our listeners? We say before proclaiming the Gospel, "May the Lord be in my mind, on my lips and in my heart as I proclaim this Good News." Why not say a similar prayer for the assembly? Preaching is an act of worship when we acknowledge God's presence in our listeners. As Isaiah said, "For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, so shall my word be, that goes forth from my mouth." (55:10-11) Our task is to fulfill the words of Isaiah.

### Unity between Word and Sacrament

The unifying role of word and sacrament is becoming more evident. So we do not begin or end our homily with the sign of the cross if we re-

member how it is an intimate part of the liturgy or worship. Does our conclusion to the homily lead into the rest of the liturgy? The two-part structure of word and sacrament can be traced to the ancient Hebrews. In Exodus the Hebrews are depicted as relating to God in word and ritual. Jesus continued this at the Last Supper by means of instruction and then the sharing of the Eucharist. Peter did "the breaking of the bread" at home while worshipping in the temple. (Acts 2:46) Others observed the Eucharist as a Passover Meal. (Mk. 14:12-16) Many other New Testament texts image this: the feeding of the five thousand in the desert and the Emmaus event. Succeeding centuries witnessed the deterioration of word and sacrament. The twentieth century has emphasized the importance of finding a balance between word and sacrament because of biblical scholarship and liturgical studies. Michael Monshau, OP believes that "As the Christian world addresses itself to the achievement of greater balance between the church's ancient ritual heritage and its legacy of the Word, it becomes clear that preaching can create unity among Christians, even between parties that have hitherto felt disunited."<sup>3</sup> People might disagree on the songs chosen, the style of the president, but our preaching can act as a common element, which helps unify the worship service.

If preaching is done well it can

act as a powerful way not only to unite word and sacrament but also promote unity. Jesus prayed at the Last Supper, "I pray not only for them, but also for those who believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." (Jn. 17:20-21) We need to name God's activity present in the lives of the listeners. That will vary depending on their circumstances and situation. This laser beam focus of our preaching can act as a unifying element or key ingredient in the worship. As we prepare our homilies we must ask ourselves what are the current events or happenings in people's lives.

Broadening their outlook to include the universal Church is even more challenging. We cannot ignore our brothers and sisters who are starving, suffering from disease and violence. They can teach us much what it means to face the harsh realities of life. Joan Chittister maintains, "We need a new worldview that puts the old one 'in a new light.'"<sup>4</sup> We might even comment on how these scriptural passages are being heard and celebrated everywhere by countless other Christians. This approach becomes a clear clarion call to deeper sisterhood and brotherhood as we later address God as "Our Father."

Does our preaching and worship get under the skin of our listeners?

If they do then the itching will continue throughout the week, and will remind them of what needs to be done or thought about. What enabled the prophets to stand up against priest and king in the name of God? Abraham Heschel writes that they "must have been shattered by some cataclysmic experience in order to be able to shatter others."<sup>5</sup> How willing are we to take the risks needed to overcome the familiar or comfortable that often anesthetizes our listeners? People surely need to be comforted, especially when they face some crisis in their lives. So we comfort the afflicted but also afflict the comfortable.

Did you ever notice a positive response when we feel our listeners are with us? The people in the pews might show this in a variety of ways (certainly not by looking at their watches or out the window or ceiling). But the occasional nod, smile or rapt attention (when we could hear a pin drop) can spur us on to preach more forcefully. The same principle applies to baseball, football, and basketball players. They will step up their game when they know the crowd is with them. What would happen if someone spoke out during one of our homilies saying, "Is that really true or do we need to examine that more closely?" Would we consider it an intrusion or an improvisation? I recall the time I was preaching and some man standing in the back of the church yelled out, "You

tell 'em, Father!" He kept on repeating this until one of the ushers helped him make his exit. The pastor found out later that he came off the street and was inebriated. It certainly woke up anyone that might have been inattentive!

### Aesthetic preaching

Preaching must touch and move people's lives. It must have aesthetic appeal. It must express passion in a meaningful manner, and call forth action if necessary. If we desire good worship and effective preaching we have to involve images, sounds, light, movement and even dance where appropriate. The more senses involved the more effective the preaching and worship.

Gail Ramshaw in *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* explores forty of the most significant biblical images. They help to evoke meaning, hold the community together and enable the listeners to grow and deepen their faith. She identifies not only the primary image but also secondary ones. The image of family for example can function or be viewed in various ways depending on the scripture texts: it can be a patriarchal family, or the "holy family" in the infancy narratives, or the family ties that need to be severed.

A certain professor of preaching once asked his class (most under the

age of 30) if it was true that words today are dead, and that moving images communicate well with young people. One student replied in the affirmative. He cited the example of a video about the "man-on-the-street" made for a bible lesson. They did not show the entire 15 minutes footage, but only three carefully selected minutes of the main images that fascinated and enthralled them viewers. Imagine what would happen if we did that to our preaching or worship? We might not be video editors, but we certainly know how to edit texts. We are not filmmakers but poets who can take ideas and craft them into an engaging homily. Maybe we have to discipline ourselves to know what to leave out like film editors who know what to cut even though it might be good film.

Jesus was a master at using images that were meaningful and forceful. His language was simple and direct. The birds of the air, the lilies of the field, the sower and the seed, the leaven of the Pharisees, the light under a bushel basket, the salt which loses its flavor, the good and bad tree, the mustard seed, the narrow door, the lost coin, the eye of a needle, are just a few of the many images he used to convey his messages.

A good homily is a work of art. Well-crafted words add depth and color to the canvas of the homily. Good preaching is at times more of an art than modern technology. We can put our thoughts together, but

once God breathes on them new life and zest are added. No matter how chaotic our thoughts might seem they can become a creative breeding ground. All we have to do is remember how the book of Genesis begins: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters." We need to view our task with new eyes and attentively listen as God speaks to us, so we can say with Samuel, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." (1 Sam. 3:9) We might lapse into a spiritual coma at times and need to be stirred from our slumber. Or we can act like mechanical robots going through the necessary motions. What a contrast to homilies which are inspiring, challenging, uplifting and transforming the lives of our listeners. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The Word of Scripture should never stop sounding in your ears and working in you all day long, just like the words of someone you love. And just as you do not analyze the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all."<sup>6</sup>

### Disturbing factors

If worship and preaching are to be effective a very good sound sys-

tem is a prime requisite. In traveling around to various parishes in the United States it is frustrating that some churches are not well equipped with an effective system. And what a joy it is preaching fortified with a good system. Some preachers stand too close or too far away from the microphone. A microphone will amplify what it receives. It does not unscramble run-together words, clarify mumbling, or exaggerate words that rail off at the end of the sentence. Listeners often complain that they cannot hear the preacher. In some instances it is not the preacher's fault. Complaints about preaching, however, have been a long-standing characteristic in the Catholic Church. One priest told the people who complained about not hearing that they heard what God intended them to hear. But does this justify an inadequate sound system or poor delivery? St. Paul wrote, "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the word of Christ." (Rom. 10:17) At times people will comment, "I heard every word you said." Why is it that parishes can spend lavish amounts of money on church architecture and skim on a good sound system? In some parishes a good sound engineer is needed to find the best system for the church. Factual data indicates that Protestant churches invest in better sound systems than Catholic churches.

Nothing can be so disturbing to

worship and preaching as restless youngsters and crying babies. Cell phones that suddenly go off rank up there also. Some parishes even make an announcement before the liturgy begins to turn off all cell phones. I remember an instance where a couple sat alone in the front pew with their three year old son. (The front pews in most churches are usually empty or sparsely filled. There is only one parish that I have come across where the custom is to fill the church from the front.) All the child did during the homily was to run up and down the pew. One priest became so frustrated with a crying baby that he said, "I wish parents would keep their kids at home." Needless to say the couple walked out of church and never came back. Recall what Jesus said when the Apostles were trying to prevent the children from coming to him, "Let the children come to me, do not prevent them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it. (Mk. 10:14-15)

We face exciting times for our preaching and worship, but they need to change and evolve to meet current trends and nourish listener's needs. Has God become more present in our listener's lives as a result of our preaching and worship? The restoration and renewal of the

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*Charity knows no boundaries; if it had boundaries, it is no longer charity.*  
 —F. X. Nguyen Van Thuan, "The Road to Hope."

ancient word-action offer many creative possibilities that need to be untapped. Truly good preaching and worship are art forms that require development. True art is always a gift from God, so we have been blessed in many ways. May these art forms lead to a unifying action that Jesus prayed for at the Last Supper. The unifying element must not be underestimated but stressed. If preachers and those involved in carrying out the worship dedicate themselves to their respective ministries, then the day might come when all will be one as Jesus prayed.

### Endnotes

1. Jeffrey A. Mackey, "The Awesome and Our Awe" *LIVING PULPIT* (July-Sep 2003) 26.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Michael Monshau, O.P. "The Word at Worship," *LIVING PULPIT* (July-Sep 2003) 24.
4. Chilitster, Joen, *WOMAN STRENGTH: MODERN CHURCH, MODERN WOMAN* (Sheed and Ward, Kansas City, MO, 1990) 70.
5. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, *PROPHETS* (Perennial Press, Oct. 2001) 12.
6. *LIVING PULPIT* (July-Sep 2003) 29.

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