

Preaching in a Changing Church

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MOST of us will agree while living in the second millennium that our assemblies to whom we preach are different than 20 or 30 years ago. Many denominations complain that their people have little background in their Christian faith. We preach today to a multi-cultural audience living in a pluralistic society which can present a problem to some preachers and a challenge to others. Which do we choose? Maybe the basic problem, according to Peter Ochs, is "that the burden of our age is not too much faith and too much church, but a condition of broken relationships." This leads to individualism which is rather rampant in our society. Faith and reason end up competing rather than complementing each other.

Some listeners don't really know God but desire to meet God. Some do not believe in Jesus Christ, but have heard about him and are curi-

ous. Or if they have heard about him, they want to know more about Jesus. Preachers need to respond to inquisitive and at times suspicious people. One of the big mistakes often made is to take too much for granted thinking that we are preaching to people of strong faith. Years ago people could recite answers from the Baltimore Catechism. For example, a sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. How many today are acquainted with the new catechism unless they have taken a course or attended a RCIA program? If we use terms like the Synoptic Gospels, Pentateuch, Paschal Mystery, Eschatology, or Hypostatic Union, how many will understand us? Loren Mead in his book *The Once And Future Church* maintains that we need to question our assumptions. No longer can we assume that "everybody is a Christian." How many of our listeners, as well as ourselves,

are living the Gospel values? His suggestion is that we return to the Apostolic Age where "the front door of the church is a door into mission territory." We might argue that we have always been a mission church, but how vigorously have we pursued this goal. Our identity as a church is intimately connected with our mission.

The Good News will always be what Jesus has done for us, his willingness to go up to Jerusalem to suffer, die and rise.

Our task is to preach that message in fresh and invigorating ways. We need to offer to our listeners a better way to live which insures a hope-filled future in a world often mired in cynicism. So many of the saints offer concrete examples of courage, generosity and the highest kind of love because they believed in Jesus' death and resurrection. Their belief was so deep and profound that many of them were willing to risk their own lives to demonstrate their convictions. Their mission is as old as the Dead Sea Scrolls and as fresh as a new born day.

According to Franz Cardinal König, "The Church is in many ways for the first time a universal church, a church for everybody and not for certain continents or certain groups of people connected by language, or for those who share a common history." He remembers how at one time in his life the importance to defend one's faith against other religions. Now the question is, "What

does it mean for an African or Italian to live his or her own religion?"

The Church in decline

We often hear of the large number of people no longer attending church. And this is true of other denominations as well. Rabbi Heschel gives some reasons: "Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless."

Bishop Kenneth Untener maintains that membership in the Catholic Church has increased, but participation in Sunday Mass has declined. These people, however, still consider themselves members as is evident at Christmas and Easter. Years ago we had two choices: go to Mass or go to hell. Now people don't believe that.

Crisis in the Church

We are well aware of how the Church is in crisis. The wrangling and debating often reach fever pitch. Archbishop Rembert Weakland,

OSB, once observed that many parishes have become debating societies and gossip mills. Strong opinions do not mean we are a divided church. Most families exemplify this division. The media often gives this impression because of a biased lens in the way they view and present issues. The list of critical issues are well rehearsed: inclusive language, homosexuality, abortion, the ordination of women, closing or uniting parishes, the international debt, global warming, immigration, divorced and remarried. Are these and similar issues symptoms of a deeper issue? Some experts believe it is fear. As preachers we need to address these changes and fears because they have cosmic proportions.

Maybe some of the questions we need to ask are: what does it mean today to be human, a people of faith, a Christian living in a pluralistic society? How do we live amid our differences of opinion, or how do we learn more about the different cultures in our midst as Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio has emphasized? Do we address the changes in the ethnic makeup of parishes? Are we aware or convinced that the shortage of priests has helped the lay ministry to blossom so quickly? With the closing of some parishes the old axiom is still true, "For something to have been good, it doesn't have to continue." Parishes are closing not because of diminishing numbers but population shifts.

We can counteract the crisis by encouraging others to live their faith and celebrating it to the fullest. We need to replace crisis with celebration. The Council Documents insist that the summit and source of our Christian worship is the Mass. We need to probe more deeply the place of art, music, dance, and preaching in the liturgy - what Andrew Greeley calls the "apologetics of beauty." In the Mass we come together to praise and thank God for all we have received and continue to receive. There we are nourished by Word (the importance of a good homily is crucial) and sacrament. Then we are sent forth to live the Good News and bring it to others. Some of the most consoling words of Jesus are found at the very end of Matthew's Gospel, "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (28:20) We need not fear crisis for as the psalmist says, "God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in distress. Thus we do not fear, though the earth be shaken and the mountains quake to the depths of the sea, though its waters rage and foam and mountains totter at its surging. The Lord of hosts is with us, our stronghold is the God of Jacob." (46:1-4)

Matthew's Gospel

It is possible for us to preach Matthew 16:17-19 where Jesus said

to Peter, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." But listeners often do not grasp the fullness of reconciliation which is proclaimed by Jesus in Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother." So it is possible to confess a sin of rudeness but continue to be rude. Definitely something is missing and it is the need to reconcile with the other person. Matthew 18:16 stresses the need to resolve the situation, and to even go further: "If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" If the first encounter fails, we should seek the advice of a wise person to help us. There is strength in numbers. The book of Deuteronomy states, "One witness alone shall not take the stand against a man in regard to any crime or any offense of which he may be guilty; a judicial fact shall be established only on the testimony of two or three witnesses." (19:15)

If this approach fails, according to Matthew's Gospel, we should take the matter to the fellowship of Christians where the case may be judged in a spirit of love and prayer. Should all this not produce any results, then we might regard the stubborn per-

son no better than a tax collector or a Gentile. But even that person can be forgiven as was obvious from the lives of Zachaeus and Matthew. So we don't ever abandon the individual as hopeless but continue to love the person because as St. Paul tells us, "Love never fails." (1 Cor. 13:8)

The problem with some liturgists is that they construct their reconciliation rituals around Matthew 16 rather than Matthew 18. Imagine what would happen if we had rituals designed where husbands and wives could ritualize their forgiveness, or children doing the same, as well as local churches.

Speak out against abuses

Imagine also what would happen if we spoke out more vigorously against our materialistic and consumeristic society, the global injustices and human rights abuses. An example is what has happened to Iraqi children as a consequence of our embargo. What would happen if we took seriously the visiting of the sick, the home bound, prisoners, orphanages? These people are falling into safety nets, which are being dismantled knot by knot. Martin Luther spoke of the church as an infirmary for the sick.

A healing, caring church would help to counteract the anxiety or concern for ourselves and our personal needs. Certainly this entails an up-

hill struggle comparable to salmon swimming upstream. But we need to encourage our listeners to be a welcoming church to the outcasts and those considered impure in our society. Preachers need to challenge listeners to live with the insecurity and ambiguity this entails.

Shifted emphasis

Our previous emphasis was on a hierarchical church but since Vatican II we have shifted the emphasis to a pneumatic and charismatic people of God. We preachers need to heed the words of the Ephesians: "the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love." (4:6) The concept of ministry needs to be broadened so that all are looked upon as channels of God's grace. Karl Rahner in *The Shape of the World to Come* has stated that the gifts of God's presence in the Church can serve to "shock" the institutional life of the church which can act "solely as the doctrinaire guardian and teacher of abstract principles which become ever increasingly abstract and are liable to carry within themselves the danger of a terrifying sterility."

We have to make sure that some gifts are not marginalized, or value one gift over another or believe that

the Spirit is limited in granting gifts. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Donum et vivificantem* insists that whatever is done with Gospel values is an example of the Holy Spirit at work. Preachers should make listeners more aware of their gifts, and that they are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. Experts point out to us that if we are using twenty percent of our potential that is extraordinary. Anthropologists maintain that we use about ten percent of our brain power. That means there is a lot of untapped potential in everyone. By enhancing and encouraging the use of their gifts, they will become more conscious and aware how they are "wounded healers" applying the balm of Gilead to others. (Jer 8:22; 46:11; 51:8)

We also need to motivate our listeners to an active interest in what is happening outside their own church doors. Before Vatican II "outreach and social concerns" were not as evident in most parishes as they are now. These areas might include sponsoring hot meals served to the homeless, a headstart program, visiting a nearby prison, working with Habitat. Too many people are like Dives in the Lazarus story. We dress ourselves in rich purple and by-pass Lazarus who is waiting for the crumbs to fall from our table. It is important to remember that many inner city parishes differ from wealthy suburban parishes. Inner city parishes often offer clothes for

the poor, food pantries, health clinics, and support groups. It is inspiring to see how some suburban parishes help these parishes especially with offering hot meals.

Keeping abreast of topics

Preachers are challenged to keep abreast of current topics such as welfare reform, Roe vs. Wade, the death penalty, racial issues, HIV/AIDS, gay and lesbian people, the international debt, and other thorny issues. How many of us even broach the subject of AIDS, especially when we know that some people think it is God's plague on these people? Cardinal Joseph Bernardin wrote, "The Gospel reveals that while Jesus did not hesitate to proclaim a radical ethic of life grounded in the promise of God's kingdom, he never ceased to reach out to the lowly, to the outcasts, of his time—even if they did not live up to the full demands of his teaching." Maybe cradling an HIV-positive baby in our arms might change our preaching.

Racial issues not only divide our nation but also divide and trouble our church. Is it still true as Liston People said, "the most segregated hour in America is 11 A.M. on Sunday morning?" The Church must not be a bastion of racial exclusivity. Are we carrying on the tradition of the Samaritan woman at the well: "For Jews use nothing in common with the Sa-

maritans?" (Jn. 4:9) We need to alert our listeners to anything that perpetuates exclusivity. We have to equip them as Marvin McMickle writes with how "to live in a multi-cultural society where Ramadan and Passover are as accepted as Christmas and Easter." When we sing God Bless America that means we do not believe that God doesn't bless other countries as well, or prefers our country to some other. The book of Genesis does not state, "In the beginning God created the United States of America." A true missionary thrust spreads the Gospel message of justice, love and equality to all people, no matter where they live. Then these values can be lived more fully in their daily lives.

We also need to ask if we are condemning the refugee crisis in Africa with the same urgency as found in Europe or elsewhere? Are we condemning the genocide of blacks in Liberia as vehemently as the genocide in Kosovo or Serbia? Martin Luther King Jr. expressed it well when speaking about the Viet Nam war, "injustice anywhere is a threat to a justice everywhere."

Evangelization

Walter Burghard, SJ quoted Pope Paul VI's document *Evangelization in the Modern World*: "Evangelization cannot be complete unless account is taken of the links between the gospel and the concrete life of

men and women. The Church considers it highly important to establish structures which are more human, more just, more respectful of the right of the person, less oppressive and coercive." (29 and 36) He believes that a quarter century later, "all too many Christian preachers either do not believe it, or believing it, are reluctant or afraid to preach it. The consequence? Encouragement without challenge; biblical sermons bereft of the prophets; a bloodless Jesus who never said, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice sake' (Mt. 5:10) Ultimately, just a church, a cordial fellowship of believers, not a just church."

He maintains that we have to go beyond ethical justice to biblical justice which implies fidelity to our relationships with God, others and all of creation. Jesus preached right relationships. People like the paralytic, the woman at the well, lepers, Zachaeus and others were restored to the human family. Like Jesus we need to challenge people to love strangers, foreigners, immigrants, people we dislike, enemies and even terrorists.

Are we preaching in Wal-Mart churches where you receive a basket or cart rather than a warm welcome and a bulletin? "Hang out" places today are not churches but

shopping malls, especially for teenagers. Yet churches should be offering warm hospitality where people are not badgered to buy, buy, buy and pay later. Does our preaching help us become a Wal-Mart community or a "cloud of witnesses" as found in the book of Hebrews? (12:1)

Robert Barron who teaches systematic theology at Mundelein Seminary states, "Anchored in Christ and filled with a sense of mission, we can take what we need from any source and get up in any pulpit available to us. We are not tied down into a political framework dictated to us by the culture. Rather, we can range around, creatively, provocatively, unpredictably, borrowing now from Aristotle, now from Einstein, now from Chesterton, now from Cicero."

Augustine's words of sixteen centuries ago still echo across the ages: "People look upon (the church) and say, 'She is about to die. Soon her very name will disappear. There will be no more Christians; they have had their day.' While they are thus speaking, I see these very people die themselves, day by day, but the church lives on." We are challenged to preach in a changing church so that "the church lives on."

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"The Church is not about satisfying expectations, but celebrating the mysteries." —Cardinal Carlo Martini SJ