

Preaching in a Post-Modern Era

REV. RICHARD HART, OFM, Cap

One of the challenges preachers face in our twenty-first century is how to preach effectively to post modern listeners. Some of our preaching might be “pre-modern” and thus ineffective or irrelevant because we have gone through a dynamic shift in thinking and communicating. Some of the following suggestions might prove helpful to improve our preaching in our modern culture.

Some of the signs of post modern thinking are that knowledge is no longer inherently good, optimism has turned to pessimism, we no longer are able to solve the world problems, especially the economic ones, and that life is as fragile as a spider’s web. Modernity was often cocky, had all the answers, clinging to certitude, but postmodernity is just the opposite, anxious and up tight, asking many questions, considering everything as relative and subjective. Modernity boasted that problems could

be solved by means of technology and human progress. Postmodernity considers all this an illusion and believes this has contributed to human suffering, especially environmental dangers. In the post modern world people who were once voiceless, native Americans, women, children and homeless share an equal footing. The same can be said of other religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, who at one time occupied the back seats of the bus.¹

The post modern listeners are often skeptical of a master plan that will solve all the mysteries of life. Life is truly a mystery to be lived, not solved. We invite our listeners to enter into the mystery and live it. Even the words “missionary” or “evangelist” might connote imposing one’s culture on others. As a result some preachers fall into the trap of being wishy-washy offering a watered down message. The Scriptures, and especially the Gospels, have a pow-

erful punch to them. Like Paul we proclaim, “I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for Jew first, and then Greek.” (Rom. 1:16)

We do not offer quick fixes because they just will not wash. No quick fix even exists for the common cold; it has to run its course. Jesus never offered any quick fixes. He never said that all their problems would disappear if they followed him. He did say, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny oneself, take up one’s cross, and follow me.” (Mt. 16:24) Jesus wanted people to embrace his way of life, not just to avoid judgment or hell.

Preaching fear will often receive a negative response, but preaching love will, as St. John wrote, “Perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with judgment.” (1 Jn. 4:18) Morgan Freeman in *The Shawshank Redemption* after living in prison for 40 years, sums it up well, “It is a terrible thing to live in fear.” Post modern listeners will not embrace God or discipleship through fear tactics but through love. A masterful line in the movie *Hurricane*, a story about Rubin “Hurricane” Carter who spent seventeen years in prison for a crime he didn’t commit, is, “Hate put me in here and love is going to bust me out.” Justice is done in this life as well as the next despite what some maintain. Someone once asked Dr. Schaeffer, a noted scholar, “What will happen to

all those who never heard of Christ?” The doctor did not give a profound and satisfying answer but just cried. Jesus, when looking over Jerusalem lamented, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling.” (Lk. 13:34) God’s love for us can sometimes be expressed in tears. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears...” (2 Cor. 2:4)

The Bible

In the post modern era some do not accept the Bible as God’s authoritative Word. As preachers we certainly do but some of our listeners do not. They are not so concerned about what the original author intended but what is their present day interpretation. We cannot, however, give in to this because as prophets we do speak for God in our modern world. The Bible is not just another book or up for grabs but is truly God’s Word. Some post modern listeners place the Bible on an equal footing with the Koran and the Talmud. Our task is to help our listeners appreciate the

Bible and its value, beauty, truth and goodness. Many do not know the Bible. What post modern listeners object to is preachers demanding that they believe the Bible because "the Bible says so." We invite them on a journey where they might struggle and maybe grope in finding the truth. People are at different stages in their spiritual journeys. We know the way because we have traveled this path before. But for our listeners this might be uncharted waters and they need guidance to their destination. Since a dynamic relationship does exist between the past and the present, we need to show the relevance of the passage to our present circumstances despite the fact they might respond, "That's your interpretation, not mine."

One of the dangers in preaching to post modern listeners is to depict all of life as black or white. Archie Bunker in *All in the Family* is a classic example. Grey areas do exist. We do not have cookie cutter answers for all the problems we face. Not all the answers are found in the Bible. Admit your own struggle. Years ago Walter Cronkite ended his program saying, "And that's the way it is." In contrast, one preacher closed his sermon with "But then again, what do I know?" Preach in a lively and enthusiastic manner so that your listeners will get excited about your scriptural message. Telling them simply this is what the Church teaches -

period - without any explanation is not helpful but confusing.

The post modern generation often gives the impression of being cynical, jaded, hard and indifferent. This appearance, however, often masks their fears, their yearning for meaning and life which the Scriptures can offer. We "hold on to the word of life," so we can preach this to them. (Phil. 2:16) One of the advantages of preaching to them is how disillusioned they are with life. They have been raised with television which offers much information and clever sound bites. Because they are accustomed to remote controls they more easily can tune us out. Some people regret that they can't fast forward our homilies. Their attention deficit is probably much greater than a previous generation because they are connected with high tech communication and are accustomed to a screen in front of them. Their response is often a certain smugness, "I've heard all this before."

Knowing Jesus

Preachers need to, however, ask, "How much do these people really know about the person of Jesus? Even cradle Catholics often do not know much about Jesus. Post mod-

ern listeners have a desire to know more about him so we are challenged to preach extensively from the Gospel accounts. For many Jesus is just another teacher, or, as Matthew Kelly maintains, his relevance is seriously questioned. For us, however, he is the unique Son of God, or Son of Man he often called himself. Jesus dispelled the fear of the Apostles when the storm arose on the lake. "They were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?'" (Mk. 4:41) The Apostles could not find a category or a pigeon hole to put Jesus in. He was unique. Invite the listeners to grapple with this incident also. How would they respond? Who really is Jesus? He truly is a man of compassion, forgiveness, love, mercy and understanding. He could say to the woman caught in adultery, "Has no one condemned you?" She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, (and) from now on do not sin any more." (Jn. 8:10-11)

We offer hope in Christ that shatters their cynicism and a longing for meaning and certainty. Too often the good news Jesus offers is disregarded as too good to be true. It is like the listener telling the preacher, "I really don't believe what you are proclaiming." The preacher replies, "But, wouldn't you like to?" And the listener with bowed head begins to cry. People are searching for firm footing in the anxious and threaten-

ing times in which we live. As St. Paul wrote, "Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Rom. 5:5) We look beyond this life with the hope of reaching heaven. *TIME* (March 24, 1997) had an article entitled "Does Heaven Exist?" In a survey 88 percent of Americans believe there is a heaven where they will meet family members and friends. One recent convert to the Catholic faith complained that he did not hear preachers talk about heaven. Paul insisted that "What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him." (I Cor. 2:9) This has to be an important part of the good news as we live in our troubling and insecure times. Someone has said "Faith is hearing the music, and hope is dancing to it." Simeon Weil put it well when she wrote that if we are going to be relevant we have to say things that are eternal.

Engagement

What post modern listeners hear is often drowned out by what they see. They are weary of a barrage of

words but want concrete examples of people who live their convictions like Mother Teresa, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Gandhi, Pope John Paul II, and Billy Graham. We offer them these examples as a way to involve them in other people's lives. We also need to limit our ideas and not offer a litany of complicated ideas for people to chew on. A number of preachers use the buckshot approach rather than a rifle shot headed for its target. Some truths are not on an equal footing with others. By presenting a plethora of ideas we only confuse our listeners and they end up asking, "Now, what was that homily all about?" Homilies without a central idea or main thrust will ramble on and we become automated robots less lifeless than the ones found in Disney Land. Are we able to state in one brief sentence what our main point or message is?

Our listeners need to be affirmed in their goodness and struggles and then given examples of courageous people like Noah, Abraham, Moses, Esther, Judith, the Mother of the Maccabees, and many others. Maybe we might check to see how many "Do more homilies" we preach which often invite listeners to feel guilty and not to have measured up.

A powerful way to engage listeners is by asking them questions which makes preaching more personal. We might say, "Now, you might be asking yourself..." Or "Does the cross make any sense in your life?" which

will not only involve listeners but will aid them in finding the answer. Questions help listeners to work through the thought process so we don't give the impression of being an authority figure. Challenging them through questions will also help them discover the truth which can be very satisfying. The "aha" response. When working on a homily we can imagine ourselves carrying on a dialogue. This type of involvement will produce better results. Make sure, however, that we are asking pertinent questions, not questions where the response might be "Whatever," or "Who cares?"

We need to preach the here and now or the immediate consequences or effects of our actions. Scare tactics usually don't work especially with young people. Telling teenagers that they will get lung cancer when they get older will not be very effective. But telling them that smoking causes bad breath or yellow fingers is more effective. The same is true concerning drugs. Appeal more to how they want to look good to their peers. Drinking too much can make them throw up right in front of their friends. A life centered in Christ can make them more aware that nothing can separate them from Christ's love as St. Paul assures us. (Rom. 8:35)

Rather than commanding or using a battering ram for our listeners to respond to our message a well chosen story or illustration can often drive home the point more forcefully. The story is told of a man who was

traveling on a subway and everything was peaceful until a man with his three children boarded. He sat down next to him while the children were yelling and throwing objects. Finally the man said to him, "Don't you see how your children are disturbing others?" There was a long pause and he responded, "Yes, I should do something. We just came from the hospital where their mother died an hour ago. Guess they don't know how to handle it either." That changed everything. He responded, "What can I do to help?" Jesus was the master story teller and invites us to do the same. Telling one's own story of being transformed by Christ can be very effective if done well. St. Paul tells his story of conversion at least three times in the Acts of the Apostles.

Inductive vs. Deductive

Since twenty-first century listeners are suspicious and often don't take things at face value, an inductive rather than deductive approach is more effective. Deductive preaching has been used much over the last one hundred years and involves a central or declarative statement followed by proof. It proceeds from a whole to its parts, from the known to the unknown. Inductive is just the opposite, postponing the declarative or central idea until the listeners have a chance to weigh all the evidence

before making a decision. Fred Craddock encourages inductive preaching by stating about the deductive approach, "You leave your listeners in that pitiful box of having only two alternatives of agreeing or disagreeing with you. It's all your work... But in inductive preaching, you unroll your idea in such a way that listeners have to work to get it themselves."³ Inductive preaching stimulates the listeners into a dialogical approach rather than giving the answers. Jesus was a master at this as is brought out with the Samaritan woman at the well, Zaccheus, the tax collector, and the paralytic.

A good inductive homily has the potential of a whodunit novel. Jesus did this in the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee going to the temple to pray. Talk about a mismatch! Jesus, however, pulls the rug out from his listeners by declaring that the tax collector was forgiven not the Pharisee. The listeners are startled because they expected the opposite. He kept their attention riveted to the outcome.

We need to appeal not only to the right side of the brain but especially the left side when preaching to post modern listeners. We might ask ourselves while preparing a homily which side are we addressing. Appropriate stories, illustrations, and vivid imagery can appeal more to the right brain. Mother Teresa tells the story of a man who told her a certain family with eight children had

nothing to eat for days. So she took some food to the starving family. The mother took the rice and gave half to the children and then left with the rest. When she came back, Mother Teresa asked her where she went. She responded, "To my neighbor. They are hungry also!"

Humor

Humor, if appropriate, can act as an ice breaker and allow us to proclaim some difficult truths. It helps listeners to perceive an idea or object from a different viewpoint. Good humor implies a sudden or absurd thrust uncovering for postmodern listeners some hidden truth or insight. But develop your own style and don't try imitating someone else. Maybe the deeper question is "Does God have a sense of humor?" As one comedian stated, "He certainly does because he created me." The story of Balaam's talking donkey is evidence of God's sense of humor, as well as the lengths God will go to get across a message. (Num. 22:1-35) We might use the story of Ananias and Sapphira as told in the Acts of the Apostles who lied to Peter that they sold their property for a certain amount. Both of them died on the spot. There was a Sister who told this story to a group of small children. At the end of the story one of the children got up and said, "If God did that today, there would not be too

many people around." We might even invite people who have never told a lie to stand up, please!

George Burns was once asked by a preacher, "How can I improve my speaking?" He replied, "First you need a brilliant introduction. Second, you should have a dynamite conclusion. Third, be sure that your introduction and conclusion are not that far apart!" Bad movies are too long, and good movies are too short. Can the same be said about homilies? The first minute of our homily will often determine its outcome. Immediacy is important as well as instant gratification for post modern listeners.

Gentleness and humility

As preachers we don't realize how often we are analyzed whether we are considered truthful, honest, and humble. We preach an infallible Word but recognize how fallible we are and that takes humility, especially not forcing listeners to accept what we preach. People are not bullied or intimidated into believing. Make the good news palatable and enticing. No substitute exists for gentleness and humility, the kind Jesus exemplified in his life. Also, ask some in the audience how we come across: distant,

angry, preachy, hesitant, sincere, caring? And it takes humility not to always preach on our favorite topics.

Indeed preaching to post modern listeners is challenging and humbling. How many of us are willing to embrace the challenge? Failure to acknowledge the shifts in our twentieth century can have catastrophic results in our preaching. How we preach and communicate will continue to change. Change is inevitable but adapting to it is optional. Do we close the shutters or open them to see new possibilities on the horizon? Are we willing to change and preach the good news of Jesus Christ and ignite the hearts of our post modern listeners?

ENDNOTES

1. For more information concerning this area *Preaching to a Postmodern World* by Graham Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001) is an excellent source.
2. A condensed story found in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Steven R. Covey (New York: Fireside, 1990) 30-31.
3. "Inductive Preaching: An Interview with Fred Craddock," *Ministry* (July 1998) 16.

Rev. Richard Hart, OFM, Cap, writes from the Capuchin Preacher's Office, Milwaukee, WI. He also conducts parish renewals and retreats. He is available for lectures.