

Know Yourself Know Your Sermon? - Part 3

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This article continues to address some of the questions that Krish Kandiah was highlighting in his article entitled "Re-imagining Biblical Preaching".

Does preaching still have a role to play in the emerging church? In fact does preaching still have a role to play in all of our churches? While our communication revolution invites us to continue to reflect upon the way we participate and respond to God's Word. I want to suggest that preaching has a unique place in the communication of the gospel. Words and the power of rhetoric still seem to be able to touch a post modern world. Many believe that Obama won the American Presidential Election because of his great skills as an orator. While preaching must not be seen as mere oratory, it demonstrates that people are still engaged by the power of the human voice to communicate an inspirational message. It could be further argued that Jesus instituted the idea of preaching in Matthew 28 when he commissioned the disciples to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel".

Preaching undoubtedly, has a special role to play in the worshipping community and it involves much more than an individual performing from a script. It requires the interaction of congregation and preacher as they engage with the scripture. This interaction is only effective when the Holy Spirit constitutes the words of the preacher. Thus it can be said that Jesus the Son instituted the preacher, and it is the Holy Spirit who constitutes the preacher.

Let's begin to analyse the role that each participant plays in the process of preaching, beginning with the preacher, then the congregation and ending with the scriptures. The order is not important because I believe the process of preaching is a circular one. Regardless where you start the Spirit will lead you to the other. In this post I'm going to concentrate on the role of the preacher.

It is always the role of the Holy Spirit to constitute that which has been instituted in Scripture. In the words of Jesus "The Spirit will take what is mine and make it known to you." (John 16. 5-15) Christ institutes that which is truth and is non negotiable. It is the Spirit that constitutes and contextualises the truth thus bringing together that which has been instituted or given, in order that we might discover a process of revelation. This revelation points always to God's redemptive acts in history enabling us to see that God is seeking to renew his world and he uses people like you and me to make it happen.

The preacher has to come to this process in complete humility, submitting to the Word. The interaction is not that of equals but that of pupil and teacher. The Word and words themselves shape everything around us even the visual revolution of technology. It is important that we do not deface or debase the Word in the light of the power of the visual language.

Listening To Self in the Spirit.

In the Reformed tradition the preacher, has to learn to listen in two distinct ways. Firstly to listen to self in order to understand the human condition and simultaneously to listen for the Word that comes from beyond yet is revealed to us in the words of scripture. It is the listening that is the gift of the Spirit. Indeed this kind of listening is relevant to everyone of us. We need to recognise that the voice of self, is too often the voice of many. In Mark Chapter 5. 9 Jesus is confronted with the man who was "beside himself" Our Lord asks him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." Out of the demon possessed man came a profound truth about all of us. We are all people who have been influenced by many voices throughout history. It is almost as though there is "a legion" within all of us, reflecting the confusion sin has brought into all of our lives. We are constrained as preachers to listen for the one voice of Scripture above the noise of culture.

Of course we also carry the voices of our own personal encounters in our heads from the past and even the present seeking to influence and confuse us. It is as we listen to these voices we become more aware of our need, our longing to hear the one true voice that of the Good Shepherd so clearly explained in John 10. Such a voice comes to us often in the place of silence. It is the voice of God through scripture, that addresses our confusion and shame reducing the other voices to silence asking like it first did to Adam, ? Where are you?

Silence and the Self

Carlo Maria Martini writing about ? Communicating Christ to the World ? says,

?Every authentic communication is born in silence? Every true communication requires silent recollected space. To communicate well does not require many words. A few sincere words born of contemplative detachment are worth more than many words heaped up without reflecting.?

It is essential for the preacher to be in touch with the inner self or else she/he will never truly be able to speak or hear the Word of God. Murray McCheyne, the famous Scottish divine, is accredited with the phrase ? What a man is on his knees that he is and no more.? Prayer brings us to the place where we begin to see ourselves as God sees us.

Listening to the many voices constrains us, makes us strain, to listen for the one true voice. The one we know, the one we have always known. Our listening and our hearing is all part of our reformed spirituality. This in itself could easily be the subject for another discussion.

Listening - God?s Gift!

Summarising this section, what I am saying is listening is not just a discipline it is a gift of the Spirit. When we listen to the self we will be confronted with many voices that seek to rule our hearts. Deep within each of us there is the experience of the tower of Babel.

We are all people locked within ourselves, people who are confused by the noise and anger of non-communication. Paul echoes this idea in Romans 8 when he talks of the Spirit interceding for us because we do not know how to express how we feel. Pentecost further develops this idea and becomes the reversal of Babel.

Martini is also right when he points the confused and silent individual to Jesus the one who opens the ears and the mouth of the deaf mute causing him to decode the confusion and silence of the soul. It seems to me that this type of listening to self is also the work of the Holy Spirit, allowing the preacher to discover his/her poverty, the poverty of a noisy bell and clanging cymbal inviting us to become personal benefactors of the grace of God in order that we might be like a watchman blowing a clear note on the trumpet.

Only When He Speaks your Name

The preacher has to be addressed by the Word of the gospel personally. This experience of the Word of God has been the distinguishing feature of biblical leadership. Throughout the New Testament there are references to Christians as the called ones, or those who are called. When the preacher has heard the gospel and realises that he /she has been addressed not by human words but by God himself, then there is an overwhelming conviction that turns oratory into revelation. It is because the preacher is first and foremost a benefactor that she/he can share the gospel with those who are needy.

It is this type of encounter that permits the preacher to also reveal part of his self and vulnerability before God as he shares his lack of confidence. It is also this encounter that establishes the authority of the preacher. She is no longer speaking of self but sharing an encounter with the living Word. It is this word that first transforms the person of the preacher.

For me the first wonderful example of this is Mary in the Resurrection Garden. She doesn't recognise the risen Christ until he calls her by her name then everything is revealed. Mary becomes the first disciple to communicate the good news. All of this makes it imperative that the preacher recognises their role as the one who bears the message but cannot change or reinterpret the message to his or his hearers liking. This is the great danger that Paul warned Timothy about.

It is the peer pressure that many in our church today find themselves seeking to work through. As we talk of 'Emerging Church' we need to be careful that we do not begin to emerge the Gospel into the culture and political beliefs of our governments and opinion informers.

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