

JOHN GOLDINGAY

# In Preaching be Scriptural

**... and therefore be experiential, be oral, be interesting, and be imaginative**

**Cultural change demands new approaches from preachers. John Goldingay reminds us that a world oriented to orality and televisual communication offers preachers the challenge to rediscover some of Scripture's own methods of communication. The use of story, a rhetoric of artless simplicity and the preacher's own experience allied to a use of visual symbol can create the kind of poetics that can communicate with congregations regular and occasional at the end of the century.**

IN HIS 1877 *Lectures on Preaching*, which remain one of the best books on the subject, Phillips Brooks remarked that 'preaching in every age follows, to a certain extent, the changes which come to all literature and life'. Three more modern writers have recently helped me to reflect on changes which have come about (and need to come about) in my own preaching in recent years, in subconscious conformity to Brooks's dictum:

Walter Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, Fortress, Minneapolis 1989 (especially the Introduction and Chapter 2).

Thomas Troeger, 'Emerging New Standards in the Evaluation of Effective Preaching', in *Worship* 64 (1990), pp 290-307.

Bernard Reymond, 'Preaching and the New Media', in *Modern Churchman* 34/5 (1993), pp 19-29.

## Scriptural preaching methods

I started from the desire to take further the principle which I have sought to expound in *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*,<sup>1</sup> that our methods of communication might be expected to profit from reflecting Scripture's own methods. It is particularly obvious and significant that Scripture communicates by means of story, and specifically of parable, as well as by direct address. But that is not the end of the insight to be gained from a consideration of the methods God has used in communicating with us.

1 J. Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, Eerdmans/Paternoster, Grand Rapids/Carlisle 1995.

The great block of Scripture which differs from either of these is the Psalms. In the address of torah or prophecy or epistle, God and/or God's agents speak to us direct, and they have provided the dominant mode for preaching over the centuries. In contrast, in the story in Scripture, human beings speak to each other, tell each other the gospel story, God's story, and we listen in on their storytelling and storyhearing, which Fred B. Craddock suggestively takes as a model for preaching in his book *Overhearing the Gospel*.<sup>2</sup> In psalmody, human beings speak to God, and with characteristic paradox and self-effacement God lets their speech about themselves, their experience, their needs, their awarenesses, and their blessings, do as a guide to God's nature and God's ways of dealing with us. This feature of Scripture is not quite confined to the Psalms; it appears in prophets such as Hosea and Jeremiah and also in Paul's reflection on his own experience. But the Psalms are the great repository of God's communicating with us by means of having people talk about their own experience of the activity of God and the absence of God. Their implication for the nature of preaching is that it can appropriately take the form of address to God which the congregation again 'overhears'. Having realized this, I have once or twice preached on a Psalm by meditating on it Godward out-loud, offering God the actual prayers and praises, the questions and the confessions, that emerge for me from this Psalm, and inviting the congregation to join me in these prayers – or to substitute the ones they need to utter on the basis of this text. I was preaching, but praying, on the basis of the fact that having people do that within Scripture was a way of communicating with us that God had reckoned appropriate.

It is not only in expounding the Psalms that I find myself talking on the basis of experience in the pulpit (the metaphorical pulpit: the liturgical architecture of St John's College and of All Souls, Radford, where I preach most often, means that I do not very often enter literal ones). Of course we live in an experience-obsessed age and this is naturally as much a characteristic of the church as it is of the world. The downside is that experience can be the criterion for judging everything, but the fact that experience has a prominent place in Scripture suggests that we should therefore not merely dismiss a stress on experience as of the devil. In Scripture God gives it a place alongside God's address of us and our overhearing the gospel story.

Thomas Troeger suggests that there is good precedent in the history of preaching for an emphasis on the importance of the preacher's experience, for homiletics since Augustine has stressed the preacher's personal qualities. Traditionally this has been expressed as a requirement for holiness. In the late twentieth century it is personal authenticity that is the measure of homiletical credibility.<sup>3</sup> Of course person and preaching have always interacted. Troeger quotes a poem by C. H. Sisson expressing appreciation to the preacher John Donne for his human extravagance and passions, and asking him to

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2 F. B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, Abingdon, Nashville 1978.

3 T. Troeger, 'Emerging New Standards in the Evaluation of Effective Preaching', *Worship* 64 (1990), p 299.

Come down and speak to the men of ability  
 On the Sevenoaks platform and tell them  
 That at your Saint Nicholas the faith  
 Is not exclusive in the fools it chooses  
 That the vain, the ambitious and the highly sexed  
 Are the natural prey of the incarnate Christ.<sup>4</sup>

As Brooks again famously put it more than a century ago, preaching is truth through personality. 'A disembodied preacher cannot credibly proclaim the incarnate Christ... No preacher can grab us by the entrails who is not in touch with his or her own fundamental humanity.' That is why Sisson says earlier in his poem: 'Bring out your genitals and your theology... I will awaken deep experiences in others to the extent that I am able to reach myself.' 'An authentic contemporary homiletics... begins at the level of human suffering and the trust and empathy awakened when our pain is recognized by another'<sup>5</sup>, and this capacity to own one's own suffering and recognize someone else's is often what communicates the gospel of 'Emmanuel, God with us, the identification with human suffering, a willingness to lay aside the prerogatives of transcendence to be fully present with a world in pain'.<sup>6</sup>

Troeger suggests that in North America a 'homiletic of personal authenticity for the pulpit' is emerging through the impact of women clergy.<sup>7</sup> In Britain my limited experience suggests that women are as inhibited as are men in being themselves in preaching, as in other contexts they seem as reserved as men in owning their feelings, perhaps because we have required them to behave like honorary men. But perhaps the ordination of women to the priesthood might give new impetus both to women and to men towards such authenticity in life, ministry, and preaching.

Obviously my bringing my experience into the pulpit could be for me and my congregation merely an indulgence in self-display or an ecclesiastical equivalent to the Oprah Winfrey show. Perhaps a criterion for whether it avoids being that is whether it actually facilitates communication between human beings and God via Scripture. The Psalms, the prophets, and Paul are not talking about their experience for its own sake but for the sake of the development of this relationship. And that is presumably in principle what the pulpit is about ('presumably', though a lot of student sermons seem to be preoccupied with telling people that they ought to do this or that – a lot more than is proportionate to God's concern with telling people to do this or that, to judge from the Bible).

As Walter Brueggemann puts it, 'one of the reasons people show up on Sunday morning is [an] inarticulate yearning and wishfulness for a lost communion... The task of the preacher is to bring to speech that deep yearning. In that speech the preacher also dares to respond from the other side; to speak for the God who has authorized and evoked the yearning, who yearns as we do for another beginning.'<sup>8</sup>

4 C. H. Sisson, 'A Letter to John Donne', *New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, ed. D. Davie, OUP, Oxford 1981, p 284.

5 Troeger, 'Effective Preaching', pp 299-300; the second quotation is from research on homiletics by H. van der Geest.

6 Troeger, 'Effective Preaching', pp 305-306.

7 Troeger, 'Effective Preaching', p 302.

8 W. Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, Fortress, Minneapolis 1989, p 43.

In other words, the preacher does what the Psalms do: give voice to the longing plea of people, and also to the loving response of God. For 'speech is the central act of communion... We may be tempted to distorted, safe speech. Or we may settle for silence, because faithful speech is too risky and requires too much'.<sup>9</sup> But if we are reduced to chatter, silence, or platitude in our supposed meeting with God, and say less than we know, hurt, or long for, then (as with human relationships) there is no actual meeting. 'It is speech and only speech that bonds God and human creatures' (you may think that a hyperbole, but it bears thinking about). 'The preaching task is to guide people out of [their] alienated silence... into a serious, dangerous, subversive, covenantal conversation' such as makes communion possible (p. 49).<sup>10</sup> In correspondence to the nature of the Psalms, the preacher begins 'from below' by voicing the worshippers' hurt, rage, hopelessness, guilt, and need, goes on to mediate that powerful, intervening response of God which the plea urges (but whose actual nature remains free and unpredictable and not necessarily comforting in the way we might have hoped), and then brings this conversation to its consummation in doxology, in responsive praise and celebration.<sup>11</sup>

## Recreating rhetoric

The apparent safeness of platitude is the preacher's common alternative to personal authenticity (Did Kierkegaard really say, 'God did not become a man in order to make trivial remarks. He had plenty of followers who would do that?'). Rhetoric, furthermore, is the preacher's alternative to conversation. The impossibility of rhetoric is another feature of the 1990s.

There are no doubt a number of reasons why rhetoric has become impossible. One has been that it is guilty by association, for until recently it was possible to claim that the only context outside the pulpit in which people came across the preacher's rhetoric was the party political speech, and we all know how much notice we take of that. But nowadays even politicians have often abandoned rhetoric. For some years party-political broadcasts have illustrated the point; more recently, even speeches at party conferences are being affected. One of Ronald Reagan's speechwriters explains how he was enabled on television to abandon the elevated station of traditional public speech to become 'more personal, narrative and graphic'.<sup>12</sup> We might be tempted to despise the development as a piece of manipulation, and rejection of authority is a fundamental feature of postmodernity, but for the preacher at least the development may nevertheless restore to communication something of the nature of the gospel rather than taking away from it. The gospel itself, after all, is personal, narrative, and graphic.

The story-shapedness of Scripture and of preaching is a familiar theme; as I noted above, I have discussed it elsewhere. The personal-ness of Scripture and of preaching has been our theme in Section I above. What of the graphic-ness of Scripture and of preaching? Ronald Reagan's speechwriter ghosted for him as what

9 Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, p 44.

10 Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, p 49.

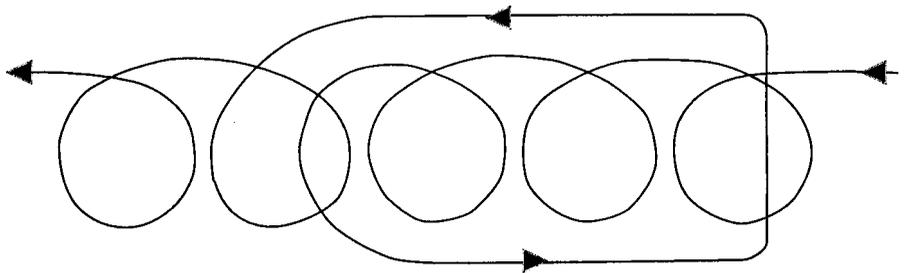
11 Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, pp 51-77.

12 Troeger, 'Effective Preaching', p 290.

he was; she thought cinematically. Of course as a mass medium the cinema itself has given way in Britain and America to television. The preacher has to think televisually. The written word has given way to television, too, and some reflection on that is appropriate. Bernard Reymond points out that traditional western preaching belonged intrinsically to the Gutenberg era. Sermons worked with the strict linear rhetoric of the printed word and presupposed people's ability to follow a developing sequential logical argument from introduction through points to conclusion.

The different sections of a discourse are presented as links in a chain, leading the listener irresistibly to an appreciation of the speaker's main ideas.... These different sections are not repetitive and they are not interchangeable. Their logical sequence, like the words and sentences that comprise them, rely on the reader's capacity to retain the author's argument without oratorical assistance, and to reflect on his ideas as one might re-read certain passages in books or articles that require further study and thought.<sup>13</sup>

The rhetoric of the printed page belongs to the era of Gutenberg which has now yielded to the era of James Logie Baird. Yet in one respect that is a return to something more like the oral culture of biblical times, so that it might facilitate rather than hinder the preaching of Scripture. Oral rhetoric is circular or repetitive or spiral rather than linear. Reymond offers the following diagram of the rhetoric of orality:<sup>14</sup>



I take the implication to be that oral rhetoric often involves making the same sort of point several times, sometimes simply repeating it in different words, sometimes combining repetition with new material and new angles and thus building on the previous exposition, and often offering both trailers of where the argument is leading and summary reminders of where the argument has been. At the same time it is often less calculated than the much-revised written paper; the speaker spontaneously says things that were unplanned and could not have been inferred from earlier announcements of where the argument would lead, or adds 'footnotes' to points made earlier because they did not occur at the time.

It is immediately striking that Reymond's diagram corresponds to the nature of the argument of Romans. Romans was of course a written text from the

13 B. Reymond, 'Preaching and the New Media', in *Modern Churchman* 34/5 (1993), p 21.

14 Reymond, 'New Media', p 20.

beginning, but it was received aurally and was evidently generated by someone who thought orally. Its argument forms a spiral rather than following a neat line. Commentators provide the student with neat accounts of its structure but they oversimplify the nature of the text. In chapters 3-8, for instance, Paul does not deal with a sequence of different topics but several times discusses the nature of the gospel and of Christian experience, from a sequence of perspectives. Oral rhetoric involves constant flashbacks and devices to make it easier for the audience to remember where it has been, and these are characteristic of the Epistle.

The death of the written word encourages the preacher to recover the obvious but neglected oral nature of preaching which corresponds to the oral nature of Scripture. As a preacher I once assumed that the linear rhetoric on which I was brought up had a distinctive link with the nature of the gospel and the nature of Scripture. It is certainly the case that Scripture appeals to reason and loves argument; it is full of 'because' and 'therefore'. But its use of reason and argument are not linked to the form of linear rhetoric which has characterised some of the great twentieth-century evangelical preaching. This may have been appropriate to their period, but faithful following of them will now involve different rhetoric, which will actually be more inherently scriptural.

### **Preaching in a televisual age**

Of course the nature of televisual communication makes more radical demands on us. For many years preachers have sought to use visual aids to gain attention, to help points get home and stay home, but often their relationship to the sermon's subject matter, to the gospel itself, is as shallow as that of most preachers' jokes and illustrations. The burden of the message is not conveyed or carried or even hinted by visual aid, illustration or joke. These are dispensable icing on the cake rather than the meal itself. In reality the visual is rather like the metaphorical, or it can be so. It does more than merely decorate a point made clear enough in words. It makes a point which is unlikely to be made as fully in another way.

Reymond notes that the communication of the Baird era will assume that people are used to pictures, images, and sound effects. They respond to a gestalt, a total experience, an overall ambience, of the kind that is created by an audio-visual montage. They expect communication to come at them in sound bites (sometimes now I make one point after the Old Testament lection, one after the Epistle, and one after the Gospel). They are accustomed to zapping from one channel to another rather than concentrating devotedly on one channel (and they will be doing so as we preach, switching to programmes within their own imagination even though we cannot see them reaching for the remote control; they no longer follow the preacher like sheep following a shepherd). They are used to magazine programmes of the kind that comprise sequences of flashes of news, entertainment and advertisement rather than explore a theme.

Such programmes could seem to be completely heterogeneous montage linked only by empty spiel, though they do have an underlying agenda, which is to keep people watching. The programmers know they will not have people's total or

sustained or unwavering attention; they will be satisfied to keep them switched to this channel.

An implication of the nature of such televisual communication (Reymond suggests) is that the graphicness of our communication needs to take account of the instinct to zap, so that our preaching will include devices to win people's attention back. We need to ask what is the underlying aim of our communication, the equivalent to getting people to keep watching so that the advertisers or the government will continue to support us. There is no reason why our underlying concern should not be fulfilled in the Baird age; we do need to see the criteria that must be met if we are to achieve this.

The instinct to zap brings out a paradoxical side to televisual communication. It was a famous insight of Marshall McLuhan that television was a medium of cool communication; it did not involve its audience, in the manner of radio or the theatre. Preaching is performance in the manner of the theatre rather than that of television. Traditionally it has not much involved the audience, but it has the capacity to do so. When I moved from a suburban church with an elevated pulpit to an urban church with no pulpit, one of the changes it brought to my preaching was to involve the congregation. I asked them non-rhetorical questions, and got interesting answers. They contributed to the sermon. They were more like the studio audience than the people at home only half-watching. In that context and in the televisual age communication need not be confined to words, nor even to words and pictures (I would not now preach on 'You are the salt of the earth' without passing round a bag of crisps). Preaching has the capacity to be more than graphic.

Reymond also notes that television is better at raising questions than closing off answers, that it suggests more than it can establish, that it stimulates more than reinforces existent convictions, that it illustrates more than establishes dogma; it of course engages sense and feeling and not merely logic.<sup>15</sup> This contrasts with the traditional nature of doctrine and preaching, but perhaps not with the nature of Scripture itself.

## Preaching, poetry and hope

Walter Brueggemann begins his book from the problem of the gospel's being old hat in America. In Britain at least, outside the church arguably this is no longer so; we have the possibility of bringing it to the world as something which has the charm of novelty. But within the church, where preaching is actually done and where the gospel first needs to be heard if it is to be taken elsewhere, it is old hat. So 'the task and the possibility of preaching is to open out the good news of the gospel with alternative modes of speech', dramatic, artistic, concrete speech which 'when heard in freedom, assaults imagination and pushes out the presumed world in which most of us are trapped', living reduced lives on the basis of reduced speech. Preachers are 'poets that speak against a prose world', people who propose 'that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age', who offer 'an evangelical world: an existence shaped by

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<sup>15</sup> Reymond, 'New Media', p 28.

the news of the gospel'.<sup>16</sup> They mediate the Bible with its 'generative power to summon and evoke new life', its guarantee that 'prophetic construals of another world are still possible, still worth doing, still longingly received by those who live at the edge of despair, resignation, and conformity'.<sup>17</sup> The gospel is graphic and Scripture is graphic. Our living in the age of Baird rather than Gutenberg is not a reason for being depressed.

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<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, p 3.

<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment*, p 4.

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