

THE PREACHING TASK: PICKING A FIGHT WITH THE TEXT¹

Lance Stone

Our approach to sermon preparation depends largely on what we consider a sermon to be. Years ago, as a teenager and then as a student, I came under two particular influences which profoundly affected the way I construed sermons – one positive and one negative. The first was the Revd George Duncan, minister of St George's Tron, Glasgow, who was famous for sermons that were constructed round points – often three – usually beginning with the same letter. To this day I recall a sermon by Duncan that I must have heard nearly forty years ago. I cannot remember the text, though I think it was from John, but its theme was the Gospel and its three points were 'Fashioned in its Truth, Fragrant in its Touch, and Forgotten in its Telling'. I remember little else about the sermon, but I have never forgotten those points and they suggest very concisely what the sermon was about. The other influence came when I went to university and went through a rather hyper-Calvinistic phase where the emphasis was very much on expository preaching. Here the task was to expound the passage, often going through it not just verse by verse but sometimes word by word, and it became a kind of badge of excellence if you had spent several lengthy sermons on one chapter, one verse, one phrase, or even one word! In contrast to my memory of Duncan, I can recall not a single sermon in all my years of sitting through lengthy expository preaching!

Preaching as an Art Form: Composition

So it was that Duncan's approach, which certainly included elements of exposition, tended to influence my own, and this was partly because I considered – and still consider – preaching to be an art form. Very simply and at a basic level a work of art, in whatever medium, opens our senses and emotions and reorients us so that we perceive and imagine the world differently. We are given new or deeper perspective. And in order to do this composition is crucial. Attention must be paid to structure and this is why I would say that Duncan's sermons were works of art. Not always great works of art, but careful thought had been given to composition, to the incorporating of repetition, tension and contrast and sometimes (not always) to resolution of tension. The

effect was not just that the text was expounded but that it became a kind of lens through which the world was re-envisioned and the listener was reoriented to life. Because of the emphasis on structure, I very much appreciated the classic work of W E Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Construction*,² and in my years of teaching homiletics I drew on Sangster with his different structural strategies for dealing with the text.

From Points to Plot and Moves

Moving on from Sangster however, the other book that I found enormously helpful and stimulating was Eugene Lowry's *The Homiletical Plot: Sermon as Narrative*.³ Lowry's basic point is that a sermon should have a plot. Lowry gives as an illustration the classic Hollywood film, *High Noon*. The basic plot of the film revolves around the marshal of a town, Will Kane, who falls in love with and marries a Quaker pacifist. Under her influence, Kane hands in his badge, renouncing his world of violence, and is preparing to leave town with his wife when he hears that a bloodthirsty gang of killers who bear a grudge against him are coming to get him. Kane is torn between his duty and his wife and the different values that they represent. What makes the film so compelling is the dilemma presented and the question of how it is going to be resolved. Lowry points out that this is basically how plots work – by creating a tension, what he calls a 'felt discrepancy', which needs resolution. The question in the minds of viewers is 'how is this going to be resolved?', and this holds their interest and attention. Lowry goes on to suggest a pattern for sermons which operates on this dynamic.

Lowry's work connects here with another classic book on homiletics, David Buttrick's *Homiletic Moves and Structures*.⁴ Buttrick's is a massive tome but what was significant for me was helping me to go from points to moves. Over against a rather static model based on points, the task here is to consider the flow of the sermon, the moves made and how closure and resolution is achieved. Rather than a story with a plot, another appropriate paradigm is that of the symphony or piece of music where a theme is introduced, but then juxtaposed with other competing themes in such a way that they engage with another and come finally to some sense of resolution.

Picking a Fight with the Text

There are a variety of ways in which this may be done, depending very much on

the texts under consideration, and of course this model is not always appropriate to particular passages or combinations of passages. But one way that can be fruitful is what I call 'picking a fight with the text'. What is looked for here is something in the text that jars and pulls us up short and that demands resolution. It may be the fundamental tension or discrepancy between the Gospel and life, the way of the Kingdom and the ways of the world. Or it may be some other discrepancy between text and life and this dissonance must be exposed and highlighted and the polarities profiled and brought into conflict with each other before being brought to some sense of resolution. This is a version of what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur refers to as 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' and 'the hermeneutics of retrieval'. As the terms suggest, it involves approaching the text with a critical, suspicious eye, picking a fight with it – and then retrieving it. This usually means letting the text win, but hopefully after a 'detour' in which a fuller disclosure takes place. Once again, the aim along the way is to have the congregation asking themselves, 'how is this going to be resolved?'

Perhaps it is best to illustrate with some examples. Take a sermon on Psalm 1, which contains the memorable image of the righteous person as a tree standing by the waterside yielding fruit in due season. This contrasts with the image of the wicked who are like chaff driven by the wind. Just explore the images for a moment: righteousness as something solid, enduring, deeply rooted, immovable; while evil is fleeting, insubstantial, weightless. What a wonderful image – and how totally opposed to human experience. Is this an image that would commend itself to the people of Zimbabwe, stuck under a stubborn and defiant regime? Would this be the testimony of a holocaust survivor – that evil is fleeting and transient? Surely our experience is the very opposite: that evil is deep-rooted and weighty and solid, while it is the Martin Luther Kings and the Ghandis and the Oscar Romeros of this world who are blown away like chaff. Picking a fight with this text would involve showing how reality suggests a complete inversion of the images portrayed by the biblical text. Retrieval is rather harder! It might be a question of juxtaposing the text from Hebrews about faith being the assurance of things hoped for yet not seen (Hebrews 11:1), with creative use perhaps being made of the image in Revelation 22 of the river of the water of life flowing from God's throne, with a tree of life on either side, with its leaves for the healing of the nations. Here is a revelation of the final, deep truth of the world where righteousness is rooted and evil put to

flight. That is the deeper truth which we are called to live by, in the teeth of the apparent resilience of evil.

Another example, from the Epistles, might come from Romans 4, where Paul looks to Abraham as the father of our faith, for he ‘put his faith in God and that was counted to him as righteousness’ (Romans 4:3). This is usually the pretext for a sermon on the priority of faith over works, with Abraham profiled as the paradigm of trusting belief. It might however be an idea to pause here and to look again at Abraham and to pick a fight with this portrayal of Abraham as the exemplar of our faith. Wasn’t this the Abraham who, after stubbornly arguing with God when apprised of God’s intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, later weakly and unquestioningly assented to the sacrifice of his own son? And isn’t this the same Abraham who twice passed off his wife Sarah as his sister in order to save his own bacon, jeopardising her life and safety? So much for Abraham as the paradigm of faith! Yet the truth is of course that Abraham was a curate’s egg. He was capable on the one hand of bravely and trustingly setting off from his home town into an unknown future with nothing but the promise of God to hold on to, while on the other hand placing members of his own family at grave risk. Yet God used him. There’s the sermon! Abraham our exemplar, not as the man of faith but as the mixed bag, capable of great faith and capable of great betrayal – as we know ourselves to be.

Or consider the parable of the prodigal son. Here, of course, the villain of the piece is the older brother who cannot join the party, consumed as he is with resentment at his brother. But how about preaching the passage from the older brother’s point of view and picking a fight with the father? Is it really the case that, in all his years of faithful obedience, his father has never given this older son so much as a kid to celebrate with his friends (Luke 15:29)? What might we learn here about appreciating and affirming people when they are quietly getting on with their responsibilities, and showing that they are valued? What might this say about the importance of celebrating the ordinary and routine, and of discerning gratitude in the taken-for-granted?

A Fight with Common Misunderstandings

Another related strategy is picking a fight not with the text, but with our misreading of the text. This involves expounding a common understanding of a

passage and then, just when the point has been made, pausing and employing the rhetorical device of, 'there's only one problem...'. An obvious example would be Jesus' parable of the house built upon the rock in Matthew 7:24ff. This affords the preacher a golden opportunity to expound the importance of Christ as the strong rock, the sure anchor in an uncertain and threatening world. As financial markets collapse and as the human race with all its power and technology finds itself helpless before the storms of nature abused and ravaged, what is left that is sure and certain and reliable...? And the preacher may be able to tell of incidents where people's lives have been in disarray and turmoil and yet somehow their faith has kept them grounded and centred and anchored on the rock of Christ. There's only one problem. In this parable the rock is not Jesus. It's not even the confession that Jesus is the Christ (as it is in Matthew 16:18). The rock here is obedience to Christ's teachings – or, as we might put it in contemporary jargon, 'the rock is walking the talk'! And the teachings here are the profoundly difficult and searching ones found in the Sermon on the Mount that precedes Jesus' parable of the house built upon the rock. The lectionary here helpfully links this passage with Romans 1:16-17, which extols the virtue of faith. This could be a cue for a sermon based on the tension between obedience to the demanding way of Christ and the free gift of grace apart from obedience, and the danger of 'cheap grace' as described by Bonhoeffer.

Another example might be a sermon on repentance, for example, on Matthew 4:12-23. Here a strategy would be to emphasise the meaning of repentance as change – change of behaviour – and the case for the need for change in our world can be easily made. We have the threat of global warming, we have massive inequality and injustice and it is not surprising that a politician like Barack Obama took up the theme of change in the recent American election. Amidst widespread disillusionment with the policies of the Bush administration, over 70% of Americans believe, apparently, that America is heading in the wrong direction. Likewise, Gordon Brown began his premiership here with a statement emphasising the need for change. When there a deep-rooted sense that things are going wrong, the case for change becomes compelling and all this can be elaborated in the first part of the sermon. There is only one problem... in the Gospel the motive for change is not bad news but good news. Jesus did not preach 'repent for the world is going to hell'. Jesus preached, 'repent for the kingdom of heaven is upon you' (Matthew 4:17). In other words, God is

reasserting God's grip upon the world, the divine rule is breaking in. Jesus' message is not 'you must change' but 'things have changed' and that is the compelling reason to realign and reorient human life. This can lead on to a discussion of how it is the promise and power of something new and good that has real power to motivate and to change us rather than yet more dismal stories and statistics of how awry things have gone.

These are just a few examples of one strategy that might be appropriate in some instances. The aim is to preach a combative sermon where a fight is picked with what a passage says or hearers are wrong-footed into reading a familiar text differently. In each case there is a tension, what Lowry would call a 'felt discrepancy', that needs to be resolved. It is this that gives the sermon a plot with unpredictable moves that may hold the listeners' attention and help disclose the surprising, renewing world of God's Kingdom.

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- 1 [This paper is also to be found through 'Discovering New Worlds' on the URC Windermere Centre website, as are some of the author's sermons. Ed.]
 - 2 W E Sangster, *The Art of Sermon Construction* (Epworth Press 1954; Pickering and Inglis Ltd, 1978).
 - 3 Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: Sermon as Narrative* (Westminster / John Knox Press, 2001).
 - 4 David Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves and Structures* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1959).