

ON BIBLICAL PREACHING

Bonnie Thurston

IN HIS VERY ENGAGING WORK *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* Peter Gomes, preacher at Memorial Church, Harvard University, writes, 'A sermon that does not attempt to address the Bible is in fact not a sermon'.¹ It is from this simple remark that I began these reflections on the very traditional formula *scriptura sui interpretis*: scripture is its own interpreter. I hope that it will not seem like 'proof texting' to hold up some verses that suggest a path that the biblical preacher might follow. I begin with the nature of biblical language, and then focus on the New Testament, examining its own view of scripture and the pattern of early Christian preaching. I close with an impassioned plea for what Pael Ricoeur has termed a 'second naïveté' in the use of the Bible within the Church.

Since our Bible is primarily a narrative, I begin with a story attributed to the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. Three scholars, a Protestant, a Roman Catholic and a Jew (yes, this is one of *those* stories) were asked how they viewed the Bible and biblical interpretation. The Protestant talked about different forms of criticism: form criticism, redaction criticism, textual criticism. The Roman Catholic talked about papal encyclicals and church councils and their pronouncements. The Jewish rabbi said simply, 'We love this book and the living God Who speaks through it'.

This is my first and most important point: biblical preaching arises from love of God and the record of the outpouring of God's love, the Bible. And my second is: do not preach what you do not believe. Indeed, if you do not believe, do not preach. As the New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders once remarked, 'If there's nobody home, it will

¹ Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: William Morrow, 1996), 19.



The Call of Ezekiel, by Marc Chagall

be apparent no matter how many lights are on'.² All the theological education in the world, all the critical biblical study, will not compensate for not loving the Bible, not believing the story it tells, and not having a passion to share it in love.

A narrative theologian and biblical story-teller, John Shea, believes that the preacher 'is one who has received life and wants to give it away'.³ Biblical preaching begins with having received life from the Book, so much life that one's cup runs over and absolutely requires sharing. Since it originates with

Divine Love, the sermon should overflow from love, be delivered with the lively tenderness of love to those whom we love and whose souls are entrusted to our care. Thus 'preaching from Love' is a serious affair, and its use of scripture 'becomes an act of defiance in the face of our preference for the puerile, for the easily discernable, and the comfort of what is forever agreeably manifest'.⁴

Great biblical preachers are men and women who are hungry for the Word themselves. Like Ezekiel (2:8–3:3) and Jeremiah (15:16), they want to 'eat it'. It is, as Jeremiah says, 'a joy and the delight of my heart' (15:16). St Augustine wrote:

It is a wondrous and beneficial thing that the Holy Spirit organized the Holy scripture so as to satisfy hunger by means of its

² Sandra Schneiders, response to John Shea's talk 'Scripture as a Resource for Pastoral Ministry', St Michael's College, Vermont, 14 July 2002.

³ John Shea, 'Scripture as a Resource for Pastoral Ministry', talk given at St Michael's College, Vermont, 14 July 2002.

⁴ James Cowan, *Desert Father: A Journey in the Wilderness with St Anthony* (Boston: Shambala, 2004), 85.

plainer passages and remove boredom by means of its obscurer ones.⁵

Who knew all those difficult passages were put there by the Holy Spirit to keep us from being bored!

Biblical Language

Biblical preaching requires an understanding of biblical language. Isaiah 55:10–11 offers a starting point for such understanding. The text occurs at the end of Deutero-Isaiah and is basically a message of consolation addressed to Jews living in Babylonian exile (597–539 BC). Chapter 55 calls Israel to the God whose gift of salvation is about to be realised. Having reported God's explanation that 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways' (55:8), the prophet records:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (55:10–11)

God's word is active and generative. It is compared to the water that comes from heaven and gives life to the earth in the natural progression from seed to bread. It is not empty air, passive language, hollow words: it is potent and brings to pass what it declares. It accomplishes what God purposes and succeeds in putting God's plans into effect. This prevents our co-opting God's Word for our own purposes, projects and agendas, but it reminds us that in the Bible people understood language as a source of power.

We are a people who cannot easily tolerate silence; and we have forgotten the power of language. We are so inundated with words that we have devalued them altogether. And this may be the greatest challenge that preachers face. As prisoners of the Enlightenment most of us have also forgotten that the language of religious experience, like

⁵ Quoted in Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Darkness Is My Only Companion* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 164.

this passage from Isaiah, is largely metaphorical and thus multivalent, of many meanings and therefore open to a variety of correct interpretations. As Kathryn Green-McCreight observes, 'Reading scripture on different levels of meaning breaks open the historical-critical stranglehold and allows for creative and faithfully meaningful readings'.⁶ The Church has always understood that biblical texts have more than one meaning, which is why the Greek Fathers (and especially Origen) wrote about the literal, the allegorical and the anagogical meanings of passages.

Biblical truth is frequently not propositional but poetic. Biblical language is allusive and metaphorical. We come to know what we otherwise could not know by means of comparisons with what we do know. In an introduction to the Psalter, Kathleen Norris observes, 'Today's biblical scholars are trained in abstraction, and not in poetry'.⁷ One of the causes of our 'Bible wars' is that the nature of biblical language has been misunderstood. It is not the language of prose, philosophical discourse or science. As Peter Gomes says, 'The Bible represents the longing of the human imagination to find expression for itself in infinity',⁸ and biblical language is the language of poetry that trails off into the silence of a great mystery. This means that preachers must develop a poetic sensibility, like the sensibility of Jesus in the parables, if they are not to make what is 'living and active' (Hebrews 4:12) dead and passive. Biblical preaching is allusive and lively. It realises that things which may not be factual can be profoundly true.

The New Testament View of Scripture

Remembering the principle that scripture is its own best interpreter, let us briefly consider three New Testament texts that suggest some interesting things about scripture, its origin, use and functions. They are 2 Peter 1:20–21, 2 Timothy 3:16–17 and Hebrews 4:12.

2 Peter 1:20–21

There are a great many scholarly conundrums connected with the Second Epistle of Peter. Its author warns recipients of the letter to hold

⁶ Greene-McCreight, *Darkness Is My Only Companion*, 168.

⁷ Kathleen Norris, preface, *The Psalms* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), xviii.

⁸ Gomes, *The Good Book*, 326.



St Peter Preaching in the Presence of St Mark, by Fra Angelico

fast to the traditional teaching they have received, and to be careful about new teachers and novel teachings which he calls 'cleverly devised myths' (1:6). The writer thinks of the Christian message in general as 'prophetic'—metaphorically, as a light in a dark place (1:19). He writes, 'you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God', or, in a variant reading, 'moved by the Holy Spirit the saints of God spoke' (1:20–21).

Like Paul, the writer of 2 Peter has in mind the specific issue of interpreting prophecy, a particular and apparently common *charism* (gift of the Holy Spirit) in the early Church; and, like Paul, he thinks communally. We do well to remember that no interpretation of scripture is 'individual'. Generally speaking, correct interpretations of scriptural texts represent the *consensus fidelium*, the consensus of the faithful. I read recently that the besetting sin of New Testament scholarship is novelty. But the point I want to stress here is that 2 Peter in particular, and the New Testament generally, understand the origin of scripture to be from God, by means of the Holy Spirit with the cooperation of human beings. Scripture is, literally, 'God talk', mediated by the Holy Spirit to a human being. Scripture is 'inspired' (literally

'breathed in'), neither dictated by God (as Islam believes the Holy Qur'an was to the Prophet Muhammad) on the one hand, nor 'made up' by a human being on the other. Scripture's origin is divine. The process by which we received it is both mysterious and messy, since Christians understand that the Bible has a textual history. Despite the claims of some currently popular biblical teachers, and although its 'divinity' is complex, the Bible is not a merely human product.

The New Testament defines scripture from at least two angles: in 2 Timothy 3:16–17 scripture is defined externally (what philosophy calls a 'functional definition'); and in Hebrews 4:12 it is defined internally (what philosophy calls an 'essential definition'). Interestingly, like the two already mentioned, many of the statements about scripture in the New Testament occur in the late books, those written in the late first or early second centuries. Founded religions such as Christianity face two major crises: the death of the founder, which leads to the collection of his or her teachings (scripture) and the deaths of the first followers, which lead to the establishment of orthodoxy (correct beliefs). By the end of the first century, correct belief had become one of the foci of Christianity—hence its interest in a correct understanding of scripture, the origin of that orthodoxy.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

The Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus) are written to be understood as the advice of an older, experienced pastor (Paul) to a young protégé (Timothy). Whether they were actually written by Paul or by one of his disciples is a matter of scholarly debate. That they contain much of the material from which the Church developed its institutional structure is self-evident.

Reminding Timothy of his teaching, life and suffering, the writer warns the younger man against false teachers, 'wicked people and imposters' as he calls them (3:13), and commands him:

... continue in what you have learnt and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learnt it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (3:14–17)

Like the writer of 2 Peter, the writer of 2 Timothy warns against false teaching and enjoins the letter's recipient to hold fast to the 'received tradition' (that is, what he taught) in this case 'the sacred writings' (which, of course, would be what we call the 'Old Testament', probably the Septuagint) which are used for instruction in salvation. He thinks that scripture instructs us for salvation through faith in Jesus. Functionally, then, as we saw in 2 Peter, scripture's origin is God, and it is to be used for instruction, teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness.

This is a functional definition of scripture. It describes what scripture 'does'. Moreover it typifies the way in which the Church has primarily used scripture: to teach doctrine ('instruction and teaching') and morality ('reproof, correction, training'). Arguably modern Protestant Churches in particular have often adopted this cerebral and action-orientated, external understanding of the 'use' of scripture. Here scripture is to equip us for 'good works', making the world a better place. It is applied from the outside, in the hope that it will cause inner transformation to occur.

Hebrews 4:12

The New Testament also contains a more 'essentialist' definition of scripture, however, a glimpse of what it *is* as well as what it does. We find this in the letter to the Hebrews, another work whose authorship is contested, whose structure is debated and whose provenance is unknown:

... the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword,⁹ piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (4:12).

Some scholars have suggested that the 'word of God' here is not scripture, but the 'living voice of God'.¹⁰ But I think it is, indeed, scripture, the Hebrew scriptures or Septuagint, that the writer has in mind. The image is of scripture as a butcher, and a judge! This, once again, describes what it does.

⁹ On the two-edged sword, the short, straight sword which was the great military weapon of the Roman soldiers, see also Ephesians 6:17.

¹⁰ See the note on Hebrews 4:12 in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).



St Peter Preaching, by Masolino da Panicale

But the text also says that scripture is essentially living and active. It has an autonomous, powerful life of its own. Scripture is a living thing. It is a discerner of the heart. Scripture can be applied from the outside, in teaching, reproof, correction. But scripture also works from the inside out: it gets inside us. It can be internalised, to use a modern, psychological term. And when it takes root within, it judges (the Greek word is *kritikos*, and means literally 'able to judge', to look at the evidence and make a good decision) the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Diogenes Allen, who teaches theology at Princeton, says 'Mysteries to

be known must be entered into'.¹¹ And, in the Christian tradition, we must allow mysteries to enter into us. Potentially, at least, scripture is something living and active at the core or centre (the heart) of the human person. The pre-Reformation Christian traditions, and especially the Eastern Churches, have never lost sight of the 'life force' of scripture, and perhaps this is the direction in which post-Reformation Churches must now grow.

In the developmental life of the Christian, biblical preaching is first applied from the outside as it teaches doctrine and morality. Later, when the Christian takes the scripture in as 'living and active', in preaching and in *lectio divina*, it becomes a force within the person. This is the great goal of praying scripture in the monastic tradition. As Gordon Oliver puts it:

¹¹ Quoted in Gomes, *The Good Book*, 328.

This essential liveliness of scripture means that the disruptive givenness of the Bible must be received as the call to explore the mystery of life with God rather than merely as ground-rules for well-behaved believers.¹²

Oliver's terms, 'disruptive' and 'mystery', are those which should apply to good biblical preaching. They call one to preach Christianity as something much more than doctrine and morality. They invite the preacher to invite others into an ongoing relationship with a Living God. And who knows where *that* might lead? But, of course, the preacher can only take the hearer to places where he or she has been.

Early Christian Preaching

The biblical writers understood language itself to be a source of power, and recognised it as poetic and multivalent. In the New Testament God is the origin of scripture, and scripture is the source of both doctrine and morality and of deepening spiritual discernment *from within*. Let us briefly consider the early Church's preaching as it appears in Luke's Acts of the Apostles and in the letters of Paul.

The proclamation of the early Church was of two basic types: *kerygma* (Greek: announcement, message, herald) and *didachē* (Greek: what is taught, teaching, instruction). The first was intended to lead unbelievers to faith in Jesus; the second was to help them understand what that faith required of them, what it meant in practical terms. Biblical preaching brings people to faith and then helps them understand what that faith means and requires. So, once again, we have a two-step process reflecting a movement from the external to the indwelling.

The kerygmatic sermons in the Acts of the Apostles evince the four basic points that characterize all the New Testament sermons of this sort. Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:14–36 provides the paradigm. First, the Old Testament predicts Jesus: Acts 2:16–21 describes how God has fulfilled the Divine Promises to Israel. Second, Jesus *is* the expected Messiah: Acts 2:22–32 shows how Jesus is the agent through whom the fulfilment of those promises comes. God has raised up Jesus, whose resurrection is not so much a demonstration of life after death (although it is that), but a sign of the beginning of a new age. Life itself

¹² Gordon Oliver, *Holy Bible, Human Bible* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), 19.

now exists in a new order. Third, Jesus is exalted and sends the Holy Spirit: Acts 2:33–36 explains how Jesus, who is now *Kurios*,¹³ has received authority to admit others to this new age, this new way of being. Fourth, those who hear this message are called to act. Powerful language demands an active response. Acts 2:37–39 describes the process of repentance, baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit.

It's not too shabby a first sermon for a fisherman. In the sermon Luke gives the main outline of early Christian preaching which is also found in Acts 3:13–26, 10:34–43, 13:17–41, and in the Pauline corpus in Romans 1:1–4, 1 Corinthians 15:3–7, and, I think, is reflected in the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:6–11. Early Christian preaching stresses the continuity of the Jesus story with the story of Israel, whose expected Messiah Jesus is. In early Christian preaching God is the primary actor Who raises up Jesus and sends the Holy Spirit, and expects a demonstrable response to the proclamation of these actions. This is the basic content of most of early Christian preaching as it is reflected in the New Testament.

But the early Christians were wise enough to recognise that preaching should not end with the 'basics'. The unknown writer of the letter to the Hebrews is interested in both the continuity with Israel's story and the new thing that Jesus Christ inaugurates. He says:

... let us go on towards perfection, *leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ*, and not laying again the foundation: repentance for dead works and faith towards God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. (Hebrews 6:1–2, italics mine)

Once the basic message (repentance, faith, baptism, resurrection, judgment) has been communicated, one moves on, leaving the surface of the historical verities and plunging into the depths of the mysteries of Christ. We enter them, and we taken them in, and they live in and empower us.

Many passages in the New Testament encourage biblical preachers to cover the basics, but also to explore the deeper aspects of the story.

¹³ The Greek *kurios* means *lord, master or owner*. In Jesus' day the Roman emperor was *kurios*. Thus to proclaim 'Jesus is Lord' was to make a political (and potentially seditious) as well as a theological assertion.

One example occurs in 2 Corinthians 5, as Paul is continuing his teaching on the nature of Christian ministry, and rather tearing his hair in the process. He introduces the ideas of knowing in a human, bodily way and of knowing in the New Creation way (to which he alludes in 2 Corinthians 12:1–5). Paul writes,

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, *we know him no longer in that way* (2 Corinthians 5:16, italics mine).

Usually this passage is interpreted as an injunction to look at other *people* from a ‘heavenly’ point of view. But it also says, quite clearly, that we are no longer to know *Christ* from a ‘human point of view’. With great subtlety, Paul encourages us to go beyond the ‘historical Jesus’ material that tells the story of the man from Galilee, to what we might call the ‘risen Christ’ story. We are not limited to knowing Christ according to the flesh any more. There are other ways of knowing the cosmic Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:15 unchains us from questions about the historical Jesus. Thus biblical preaching about Jesus Christ (and all Christian biblical preaching is in some way about Jesus Christ) tells the Jesus part of the story and then takes people beyond it to the Christ, the Risen and Living and Present and Active One. As we sang every Easter in the small church in West Virginia where I grew up, ‘I serve a *risen* Saviour. He’s *in the world today*.’ And as Jesus himself says, ‘*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ (Luke 4:21).

In the World Today

Biblical preaching passes from the historical Jesus to the living Lord. The New Testament gives us an outline of the basic Christian message, charges us to proclaim it, and then challenges us to go beyond the basics to a deeper understanding, knowing full well that at some point we will come face to face with unutterable Mystery. Peter Gomes calls this mystery ‘the frontier between what we know and can explain and what we experience and cannot explain’.¹⁴ Biblical preaching at this second, deeper level is not so much a matter of explaining, but of inviting people to an unpredictable future encounter with the great

¹⁴ Gomes, *The Good Book*, 327.

Mystery of God. And that can be profoundly disruptive! But, again, the preacher can only invite others into what is his or her own experience.

An important subtext to what I have been saying here is a reminder that biblical preaching is not necessarily the progeny of critical scholarship. As one of the greatest biblical scholars of the twentieth century, Fr Raymond Brown, so succinctly put it, 'what is grasped through the historical-critical method is not the whole meaning of the Bible'.¹⁵ What I suggest in closing is that historical-critical scholarship of the Bible immeasurably enriches preaching. But preaching is not historical-critical scholarship. In Krister Stendahl's words, 'God is not pedantic when it comes to telling the story'.¹⁶

Gordon Oliver has written:

The purpose ... of historical-critical studies is to rescue the Bible from its ecclesiastical captivity in order to allow the biblical writers to have their own voices and be heard speaking in their own accents.¹⁷

But the Bible must be rescued not only from the Church but also from what Oliver calls 'academic captivity'. As Karl Paul Donfried laments 'most of the church's interpreters of scripture are trained in non-Christian academic settings and continue to engage their colleagues in such locations'. He goes on to note that in recent years there has been 'a shift in the context in which scripture is interpreted, a shift from the church to the academy; and for many of those in the academy ... the Bible is no longer seen as standing in the service of the church'.¹⁸ Brown and Donfried are correct. And this is not good news for preaching.

Critical biblical scholarship is crucial if the biblical writers and texts are to be properly understood and not co-opted by ecclesial and theological fads. But powerful biblical preaching goes beyond critical scholarship. Indeed, it uses scholarship as a springboard into the mysteries of faith. Powerful biblical preaching comes from preachers who believe, and who have glimpsed the One Whose shadow is seen in the text. As Donfried has written:

¹⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 29.

¹⁶ Krister Stendahl, 'Why I Love the Bible', *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 35/1 (Winter 2007), 26.

¹⁷ Oliver, *Holy Bible, Human Bible*, 13.

¹⁸ Karl Paul Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 10–11.

The goal of any preacher ... of Christian scripture is to penetrate the mystery of Christ, and that can take place only when his Spirit opens it as a word from God, illumines the mind of the believer, and allows for an understanding more profound than that available simply through critical biblical study, as indispensable as such study is To have the Risen One open the minds of his followers is ... essential today for a genuinely Christian and canonical interpretation of scripture.¹⁹

It occurs to me that what Donfried calls for is exactly the paradigm of scriptural understanding that Luke presents in the Emmaus Road account. Lest we miss his point, Luke reports three times that the Risen Christ provides the key to understanding scripture (Luke 24: 27, 32, 44ff.).

Biblical preachers do need to know biblical languages, biblical history, and as much about the context of the books, writers and texts as possible. But they also need to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit

in their heads and hearts, and to have allowed themselves to be taken from the surface to the depths. Note the use here of the Divine Passive. This move to the depths is something towards which we can dispose ourselves, but it is 'done to us'. We receive it; we do not initiate or cause it. What I think is needed for biblical preaching in the Western Church today to be really powerful is for preachers to experience a 'second naïveté' with regard to scripture, to read it with the eyes of the children to whom the Lord says the Kingdom belongs. 'Truly



Preaching in the Church, by Lucas van Leyden

¹⁹ Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible?* 23–24.

I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' (Mark 10:15) Marcus Borg uses the expression 'postcritical naivete'. This, he suggests, brings critical thinking and the historical-critical methods with it, but is not trapped by them. 'We need', Borg asserts, 'to be *led* into the state of postcritical naivete. It does not happen automatically.'²⁰

In biblical preaching we begin to throw off the chains that bind us primarily by entering the story ourselves,²¹ by becoming active participants and not observers in God's salvation history, a history which the Bible documents from creation to the early second century. This story continues in us, and in those to whom we proclaim it, or it does not continue at all.

Bonnie Thurston currently lives quietly in West Virginia, having resigned the William F. Orr Professorship in New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 2002. She has written ten theological books, over 100 articles and two volumes of poetry. Her Church affiliations include the Episcopal Church and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She was ordained in 1984, and is a spiritual director and retreat speaker.

²⁰ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 50–51.

²¹ The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola are one effective and prayerful means of beginning that journey.