

SERMONS AND ETHICS

By LESLIE GRIFFITHS

DOES OUR PUBLIC WORSHIP FOSTER an integration of spirituality and ethics – or is it rather that worshippers experience ethical issues as mere appendages to the ‘holy’ process of public prayer? How can sermons or intercessions, for example, find the balance between ethical challenge and the respect for the plurality of moral views to be found in the typical congregation?

It seemed worth spelling out the questions that have been put to me by the editor since they appear to contain a number of lurking assumptions that need bringing out into the light of day. No one can deny that, within all our traditions, Christian worship can sometimes seem little more than world-denying and counter-cultural. A hyped-up event like the Nine O’Clock Service, anti-intellectual fellowship meetings, the mindless repetition of traditional styles and modes – all these and more are often mere opiates which succeed in doing little other than create a sense of well-being, that elusive ‘feel-good factor’ so often mentioned these days in political discourse. They seem either to ignore the world or even actively to seek disengagement from it. This is the kind of religion which Freud found it easy to dismiss as an ‘infantile illusion’, and which Marx condemned as a consolation serving vested interests. It may have all kinds of therapeutic effects on its adepts, and, indeed, that fact alone may have some contribution to make to ethical norms and behavioural practice, but this will usually be marginal. On the whole, these styles of religious activity tend to be inward-looking: they envisage either the preservation of the *status quo* of the institutional Church or else the cocooning of insecure people within layers of pietism and antinomianism. More could certainly be said about this type of spiritual activity, but not here. I mention them with the main aim of elaborating my understanding of what might constitute ‘the “holy” process of public prayer’ referred to by the editor in her brief to the writer of these lines. But it is the question raised about the role of sermons in stimulating an ethical response which interests me far more and that is what I want to concentrate on for the rest of this piece. Well, *are* they mere appendages to the ‘holy bits’ of the liturgy? Or do they function in a somewhat different way?

How can I explain the nature of sermons to those whose tradition has marginalized or diminished their importance? That seems the important prior question before asking how preaching relates to ethics. A few months ago, Ann Wroe contributed an article to *The Tablet*. She clearly had no understanding of preaching at all. 'Does anyone really enjoy listening to sermons?' she asked, and then persisted with her interrogation: 'Does anyone enjoy writing them?' Her questions culminate with 'Has anyone ever derived any good from them?' She clearly felt she had not benefited personally. She thought sermons were a 'blight on the laity's Sundays and the clergy's Saturdays'. Whilst she conceded that she had heard that people like Mervyn Stockwood, Michael Ramsey and John Wesley must have been good preachers, on the whole, she avowed, sermons preached in the comfortable western world tended to be boring and a waste of time. 'I have never yet heard a priest speak with passion about Bosnia, Northern Ireland, or even the National Health Service,' she fulminated. Instead, she was driven to conclude that, 'just as Western society sinks into its consumerist morass, [preachers] make use of valuable space on Sundays to meander fruitlessly round the murkier byways of biblical exegesis'.

This is lively stuff and clearly aimed at calling a few cherished nostrums into question. But, even when due compensation is made for the writer's relish at her iconoclastic opportunity, the article shows total ignorance of the place of the sermon in traditions like mine. Free Churches have tended to fashion their worship so that it is Word-centred. If, therefore, Ms Wroe's strictures were to be proved accurate, a whole house of cards would collapse. Just look at the typical Free Church interior. A high and central pulpit dominates the scene and it is placed in such a way as to indicate the centrality of the breaking open of God's Word. The preacher helps the congregation to probe the Scriptures in the search for truth to live by and some inspiration for daily life. The hope is always that God's voice (not the preacher's) will be heard. Clearly this statement will confirm the suspicions of some people that preachers, armed with such an understanding of their art, are capable of subverting the deeper possibilities of preaching and end up 'playing God'. But that would be a gross simplification of what normally happens. From the moment the service begins, it is clear that the preacher is under the authority of the Word of God. A simple procession enters the church with the preacher following an elder or a steward whose task it is to carry a Bible with great solemnity to its place on the pulpit or else on the communion table. In fact, the claims made by those who have this high understanding of preaching are

almost identical with those made by others in respect of the eucharist. The breaking open of the Word is like the fracture of the bread; the preaching is akin to the great prayers of institution, the canon of the mass. And the sermon, what Rudolph Bultmann called 'the kerygmatic Word', brings the real presence of Christ to all those who gather for worship. Again and again, the Word is made flesh and comes to dwell with his people. Indeed, the former Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan wrote a little book called *The sacrament of the Word* to underline precisely this point about the place of preaching in worship and its sacramental character.

This is, of course, a very high view of preaching and there has undoubtedly been some divagation from it from time to time. There are after all a fair number of rotten, awful preachers around, some of them charlatans. We need go no further in recognizing this than to utter the word 'televangelist' – a phenomenon that seems to sum up all our fears about preaching and to reinforce our stereotypes. What is more, we know well enough that in these television times people are totally unable to give their undivided attention to anything longer than three nano-seconds. So the medieval discipline, the *ars praedicandi*, needs to be updated in the light of such realities. My advice for anyone wanting to learn how to preach would be twofold. *What* you say must be the result of long familiarity with the Bible and an alert sense of the world you live in. The old dictum still applies: the preacher stands with his Bible in one hand and the newspaper (or a novel, an anthology of poetry, the writings of the latest Nobel prize winner, his or her own experience of life, a mind full of the last episode of *EastEnders* or any deeply felt emotional experience) in the other. It is the relationship between the Scriptures and everyday life that is being explored in good preaching. And it is the light thrown on life and the world by the cross of Christ to which the preacher seeks to draw attention. All that refers to *what* a sermon does, its content. The *how* of preaching is equally important. The advice in medieval times can hardly be bettered: within every sermon there will be a didactic mode which offers teaching, an evangelical note that seeks to persuade those who listen, and an aesthetic element that aims to give pleasure.

The definition of preaching with which most homiletics classes begin is that offered by Philips Brooks (Anglican bishop in Boston, Massachusetts, and author of 'O little town of Bethlehem') over a hundred years ago. Preaching, he said, is 'truth through personality'. This, of course, requires a very delicate balancing act. Populists and bigots alike make confident claims to possess truth. And a right pain in

the backside they are too. But God's truth mediated through a human being who is not afraid of being human and vulnerable in the struggle to handle themes mightier than him- or herself remains an attractive commodity. Brooks is quick to add a word of warning to his pithy definition of preaching. The preacher must beware, he says, of 'belittling God with his own littleness'.

When preaching avoids these pitfalls and is offered in this organic and personal sense, it ceases to be merely a homily. That is, it is no longer a set piece, an essay, written in the proverbial ivory tower. It breathes life and is essentially dynamic. And, a paradox guaranteed to give the likes of Ann Wroe apoplexy, preaching is definitely (wait for it) a *participative* exercise. It is light years from being a monologue delivered by an autocrat standing six feet above contradiction. And in no way does the art of preaching deserve the micro-chip definition I heard somewhere, which labelled it 'downloading onto floppies'! Just go to any service in a black-led church, or sense the atmosphere in any preaching-centred service when the speaker cues in to people's deepest feelings, articulating their inmost thoughts, giving shape to their concerns, recognizing their hurts, or celebrating their joys. Then you will know that a sermon is a living thing and it belongs as much to the listeners as to the preacher him- or herself. It is not at all unusual to hear groans of appreciation, the odd 'hallelujah' or 'praise the Lord', drawn from a congregation. And listen to the final 'Amen' with which worshippers give a sermon their approbation. After that, *pace* Ann Wroe, no one can doubt any more that sermons are pastoral as well as proclamatory, prophetic rather than pontifical, earthed in the daily realities and the thought world of those who come to listen.

It is precisely this mixture of elements (pastoral, prophetic, down-to-earth and everyday) that gives preaching its opportunities and also lays down its limitations. Good preaching is always God-focused, christo-centric, rooted in the Scriptures. Yet there is a genuine open-endedness about it all. It is not at all prescriptive; rather it raises awareness, opens up possibilities, stimulates reflection, stiffens the will, disturbs fond complacencies, shakes the foundations. It challenges, goads, excites. But it never takes away the freedom of members of the congregation to decide for themselves how to apply the truths and insights they have been faced with. The very word 'liturgy' after all means 'the work of the people'. Preaching is not work done *for* congregations by someone set aside for that purpose. It is rather a facilitating exercise which seeks to energize those congregations for the real work of applying the message they have heard in the world where they live their everyday lives.

A year or two ago I had occasion to listen to a preacher of some repute who offered his sermon in a service which I was leading. He spoke with great fluency and power; his sermon was well crafted and illustrated. But it did not work; it failed to stir the people in the pews, indeed it angered them greatly. I could see their faces and feel their discomfiture. And the reason was clear. The preacher used his sermon to deliver a broadside against those who lived together out of wedlock. He blamed cohabitation for a fair number of the social evils of our day and supported his argument cogently with sociological, theological and anecdotal evidence. I cringed before his onslaught. In the congregation that day there were several people whose life-style was precisely that being attacked. Indeed, one couple had been to see me a few days previously to ask what they needed to do to get married. They had been living together for well over ten years and had three children. A major reason which they had put forward as having led them to want to marry now was that they had found it such a joy to attend a church that, by a curious irony, offered them long sermons and yet, in their opinion, still didn't 'preach' at them. They had come to feel rooted in this faith-community and had discovered enough self-confidence to take a radical look at their life-style and to feel their way forward to the commitments and obligations of marriage. I looked out at them that Sunday morning weltering under the strictures of this moralistic and bombastic sermon. Mercifully, they felt able to laugh at its crudity later on.

Similar difficulties could easily have arisen if a preacher had chosen to launch a crusade against homosexuality, booze, abortion, smoking, gambling or any other such matter. There would have been someone, or several people, present who would have felt personally attacked by anyone who launched into such a diatribe. Those of us who exercise a pastoral ministry know exactly what constraints our personal contact with our parishioners puts upon the content and presentation of our sermons.

And yet none of that means that subjects such as those I have mentioned are taboo. It means rather that sermons lose their power when they become moral tirades, when grace is turned into law. Preachers must never allow themselves to forget that the message they proclaim is one of good news. People need to hear it as challenge, affirmation, encouragement and inspiration rather than as condemnation and rejection. I know that this view of preaching opens itself to attack especially from conservative evangelicals who will readily accuse a preacher who offers sermons in the way I am now describing

of avoiding the harder truths of the gospel, of ignoring themes relating to the wrath and the judgement of God, of doing what all 'liberals' do, namely picking and choosing the safe and the soft subjects at the expense of the difficult ones. Others will feel that such preaching will be so concerned with avoiding giving offence that it will have lost its cutting edge altogether. But I do not believe that is the case at all.

A sermon preached from the 28th chapter of Jeremiah raised the question of the need to distinguish between true and false prophets. It was recognized that, in these millenarian days, all kinds of nutters and cranks were appearing to make a number of different claims about the end of the world.

Religious people using religious language, calling themselves prophets or healers or apostles or whatever, naming the name of almighty God, are exploiting people's fear and guilt, their brokenness and vulnerability, to build positions of power, to create sources of wealth, to advance their own cause. 'Beware false prophets,' said Jesus at another time of social upheaval. 'Not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven.'

The preacher then went on to suggest that the way to distinguish true from false prophets was to heed the word of Jesus and to find ways of identifying those who succeeded in 'doing the will of the Father'. These might turn out to be Christians, or believers, or even unbelieving people of goodwill.

On the Sunday when the theme was 'praying for those in authority', the sermon took a passage from Machiavelli's *The prince* where the author was seeking to justify cruelty as a credible tool at the disposal of rulers in their attempts to impose their will.

The short, sharp shock which reins in the small number of unruly elements who roam our streets is far better than the widespread disintegration of traditional morality that would follow too liberal a régime. Machiavelli, you might be living in our own day. For surely this is the very debate on law and order we hear from our contemporary politicians.

This point was the key to that particular sermon, which went on to identify the need for a notion of authority based on the quality of relationships and community life rather than the crude defence of property and vested interests.

A sermon on Jacob's struggle with God showed how a powerful and wealthy man (Jacob) had had to learn how to share his wealth with the

twin brother he had cheated (Esau) before he could think of re-establishing himself in his native land. A continuing legacy of that struggle was a limp, a physical impediment, which would remind Jacob and his successors that you do not take on God and expect to win. The preacher then bemoaned the way the successors of Jacob, Israeli Jews, seemed so unable to share anything with anybody. And it was even more galling that the orthodox religious leaders of Israel could only think of solutions to their country's problems based on unremitting strength. Jacob's limp had been forgotten. Generosity of spirit, the argument continued, needed to be the predominant quality in negotiations for the future of Israel, and Ireland, and indeed our own personal relationships:

a readiness to admit our weakness and fragility, to confess we are not omniscient or gifted with an inerrant ability to solve every problem that comes our way is a necessary attribute as we face our problems. We too must remember Jacob's limp.

The problem of innocent suffering has taxed the minds of the greatest preachers and theologians. Martyn Harris was a remarkable journalist on the *Telegraph* newspaper who died after a long battle against cancer. The paper not only printed an obituary but also reprinted a wonderfully reflective article in which Harris ruminated on the meaning of life in general and his life in particular. A sermon which included a consideration of Martyn Harris soon after his death admitted bewilderment in the presence of such suffering.

No one escapes the suffering or the pain. Beware those false prophets who pretend that your suffering or weakness or failure in life is a consequence of your sin; that if you try harder, pray more, buy their books and attend their churches, you'll find the holy grail of success and health and comfort. *Life ain't like that*. We face pain and suffering as an inevitable part of our lives whether we are rich or poor, black or white, successful or failures, young or old . . . Innocent suffering will go on harrowing our conscience till the last syllable of recorded time. But at the heart of all that pain, the strength we see in those who go on clinging to faith will be an inspiration for us all as we go on living our lives as best we can.

The debate about public morality was at its height when the appointed Scripture readings related to 'the new Jerusalem'. There was no temple in the envisioned city of St John the Divine. And why should there be? In the perfectly ordered state there is no need for churches or

the like. God's love shines like the sun and no one needs the strictures or the cushioning of mediatory bodies like the Church any more. Then the preacher continued.

The debate about public morality will never move forward while we pretend that we can create a new society as a consequence of laws and regulations. We can ban all the guns we want, sentence all the criminals we can, build all the jails we need, expel all the pupils we can't cope with – but we'll not be dealing with the real issues. It's the hearts of people we need to change. Here and now. By our example. No vision of a future perfect state must divert our attention from the need to begin the task of building a better society now, here, starting with you and me.

When Moses was the subject of the day, the sermon looked at the wonderful paradigm of deliverance and liberation offered by the Exodus story, a model adopted by black people, feminists, gay rights activists and many others. But, wonderful as that story undoubtedly is, no one should ever be allowed to forget its point of culmination.

When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are about to enter to occupy it, when he drives out many nations before you – Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and powerful than you – and when the Lord delivers them into your power for you to defeat, *you must exterminate them. You must not make an alliance with them or spare them.* (My italics.)

It is strange how persecuted and oppressed groups seem able to exploit new-found liberty with actions that are so utterly barbarous. Yet, within the covers of the same Old Testament, an alternative voice began to be heard which suggested a less triumphalistic and oppressive way of dealing with the fact of being God's chosen race. The sermon then went on to explore 'servanthood, not mastery; brokenness, not overweening strength; praying for enemies, not crushing them; blessing persecutors, not cursing them; loving the stranger rather than hating him'.

This lucky dip into a handful of the sermons I have preached in my first few weeks in a new appointment might serve to illustrate the general points I have made above, both on the nature of preaching and also on its possible effects. The sermons were all at least twenty minutes long and they needed to change pace, use a variety of colours, amuse as well as teach. They all sought to give people the sense that

faith is relevant and practical and that, at its heart, there is an irreducible message which is good news for all. People must be allowed to make their own judgements and work out their own response but they will often need a framework within which to do their thinking. I honestly believe that preaching of this kind can have profound effects on the way people live their lives.

Archbishop Trevor Huddleston has been as fine a practitioner of the art of preaching as anyone in recent years. His words on the subject are salutary: 'What is [too easily] forgotten', he writes,

is that every sermon, if it is to reach the hearts and minds of its hearers, is itself a *creative* act. That creativity is an agony that requires an intellectual, emotional and spiritual labour if the 'word over all, beautiful as the sky' is to be heard Imagine for a moment what the preacher himself has to imagine: the kind of congregation he is preparing to address; the circumstances in which they will be gathered together in front of him; more especially, the mood that is likely to prevail. A memorial service is distinct from a service for the consecration of a bishop; a congregation of judges from a congregation of students at the beginning of a new academic year; Good Friday from Ascension Day – and so on. [The preacher has to be] always in touch with the challenges and the problems confronting those to whom he preaches . . . a person whose pastoral concern is deep enough to embrace not just the individual and his or her spiritual needs but the individual living in a society that itself has to be understood.

I would want to suggest fiercely that everything I've written above can be illustrated and applied very easily from the weekly sermons of the anonymous multitude of preachers around the world, lay as well as ordained, who labour on at the task of throwing Christian light on the dark and muddled times in which we live. People may listen and heed, or harden their hearts and refuse to be touched – that is their privilege. But the message must out and preachers, those ill-appreciated fools for Christ's sake, will continue to attempt the best things, even in the worst of times, and will continue to hope in them, even in the most calamitous circumstances.