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PREACHING IN AN AUDIO-VISUAL AGE

After thirty years of making religious programmes for the electronic media, I still believe in preaching. It makes second class radio and third class television, but in the context of gathered worship and as a sacramental communication of truth there is nothing like the spoken monologue. Not that every pulpit utterance meets these requirements. Some substitute sentimentality for sacramentalism, entertainment value for demanding truth or the persuasives of the propagandist for those of faith. Mistakes have been made. But when the word is spoken and heard as an audible bridge between heaven and earth, then there is no need to regret the absence of visual aids, musical backing, audience participation, multi-media fireworks or any other such diversion.

As Theodore Roszak has said in a reluctant tribute to the Old Testament rejection of images:

We can only wonder by what secret and ruthless process Judaism purged itself of the primeval power of the eye and hand to give witness to the divine. But so it was. And in return for this rough amputation of visual and tactile witness, the Jews acquired their incomparable ear. Their witness became exclusively, prodigiously auditory: they heard ... they heard as no one else had ever heard. They became history's most alert listeners. Their God was pre-eminently a voice, one who revealed his magisterial presence by speaking into the world from beyond it. Undeniably, in this vocal God we have a mighty realization of the universality of the sacred. Manifested in the image of sound, the divine presence may span all space, be at once in all places, penetrate all barriers. Such a God can hover over the world and send his voice out vastly before him to announce his will.¹

To be the human agent of such a word from such a God is no calling for which to apologize.

All the same, the preacher has to address his own time, as every true prophet of the word does. He not only has to use the language and thought forms of his time, he has to apply the word to the new situations of his time. The culture of any age shapes what needs to be said to that age, as well as the appropriate way in which to say it. A modern congregation must value sacramental preaching, but it is still part of the media age and even sacramental preaching has to take account of that fact.

Marshall McLuhan may have overstated his case in some ways, but he does seem to have established that each new medium of communication actually modifies the way in which human nature operates.² Not even from the pulpit can audio-visual man be addressed as if he were Gutenberg man. That does not mean that he can only be spoken to audio-visually. It does mean that he must be addressed as the tangible-minded man he is, not as the

verbal-minded man his grandfather was. Neither the conceptual language of the philosophic book nor the oratorical language of the public meeting is the appropriate element for sacramental communication in our time.

Yet pulpits are sometimes haunted by the ghosts of such departed cultures. There is the preacher who talks like an essayist, and there is the preacher who declaims like a survivor from the great days of Victorian public speaking. Equally, it must be admitted, there is the preacher who sounds as if he has strayed into the pulpit on his way to the studio and is delivering in a corporate setting the chat he had prepared for the one-to-one relationship of the broadcaster and the listener. Every situation is a special relationship and so requires its own form of communication. All forms of communication, however, now have one thing in common: they are aimed at men and women living in the last quarter of the twentieth century. They must be addressed to the people and the culture of that time.

As always, the culture of the age needs to be both used and challenged. The good preacher both expresses himself in it and at the same time undermines it - by revealing the inadequacy of the assumptions and values by which it is unconsciously shaped. And it is important not to react to it too little and too late. If he is to influence the culture of his time while it is still plastic, the preacher needs to anticipate developments while they are still on the horizon. Some of the developments which have already crossed over into visibility offer him considerable opportunities and considerable challenges.

Take the negative aspects first - that is, the cultural developments which will have to be resisted both in the pulpit and out of it if the transcendent is to be communicated in contemporary terms. One threat in particular needs to be taken with great seriousness.

The current tag for the day now dawning is "the information age". Knowledge is to become data, and data are to be given a hard, definitive edge so that they can be fetched out of a retrieval system and fed to a computer. Yes or no is the only answer clear enough to be acceptable in such transactions, so questions will be reduced to those which are susceptible to such answers. These are the implications not of kind old entertainment electronics as we have known it, but of their extension into human communication generally - man to man, corporation to corporation, state to state. The message of this medium as it affects human nature is plain. Unless other influences are brought to bear the new human is likely to be unfamiliar with metaphor and unskilled with images; he/she will have no taste for nuances and will be deaf to overtones. The new human will view each fact with what Blake called "single vision": it will point to nothing beyond itself. And that spells the death of all significant talk about God.

Professor George Caird has demonstrated that "we have no other language besides metaphor with which to speak about God".³ That must be true. Human language was minted in the course of man's dealings with the environment he can perceive with his senses. It can be made to speak of invisible God only by being held at such an angle that a divine light can be reflected through it indirectly, metaphorically. "Tell it Slant" was the title of an article in *Theology* on the subject of Christian communication.⁴ It was written by the Bishop of Bristol, and he was quoting the poet Emily Dickenson. Telling it slant is indeed the *only* way to tell it, as well as being the way most appropriate to an incarnational faith - and that a faith centred in a parable-teller.

Preachers have more to lose than most by the threatened dominance of univocal communication, but they alone cannot save for humanity the wider dimensions of language. Media men must be alerted. Electronics must be used to undermine some of its own inherent tendencies. Radio, for instance, must help to rescue the metaphor. Preachers and their congregations could usefully combine with others who care about the capacity of language to convey more than it contains, to reflect more than it defines, to connote more than it denotes. Together they could welcome and promote the broadcasting of spoken word programmes whose language was not afraid to transcend the capacity of a computer, and which shone with a light not to be found in the hard data of the information age. Language itself has to be redeemed from univocalism if sacramental preaching is to remain a viable form of communication.

But language will only retain a transcendental quality if life does. The experience of living at all has to be read as a metaphor in which the eternal is reflected. We have to see the world as an image of glory. Just as we dare not limit ourselves to words which merely define, so we dare not content ourselves with pictures which merely illustrate objective fact. The eye must see - and on the television screen as well as elsewhere - pictures which have the power of the image to point beyond itself. Fr. Adrian Nichols has argued convincingly that the iconoclasts misunderstood the Biblical attack on images.⁵ The Bible itself speaks of man as a living image of God (and not only before the fall: see Genesis 9.6) and of Christ as his perfect image (e.g. Colossians 1.15). Naturally it will not tolerate the idol which claims to be God, but a book which can speak of God in terms of light, fire, rock, wind, sky and a hundred other sense-dominated images was never that of a people closed to the transcendent significance of that which is seen and felt.

It may seem paradoxical to assert that the verbal medium of preaching may depend for its survival on the re-birth of visual images, but it could well be true all the same. The data-dominated mind will need to respond to transcendence in *every* aspect of human experience.

So much for the negative. But there is a positive side too. There are some respects in which the new patterns of communication are very apt for the communication of Christian faith. The documentary mind which is already prevalent is not alien to the incarnational mind of the New Testament writers. It is the intervening centuries of generalized, conceptualized thinking which seem outmoded. Perhaps a documentary producer from the medium of television could give valuable advice to a sermon producer in the medium of the pulpit. The people in the pews are, after all, accustomed to receive their impressions of the world in the form of action pictures and interpretive commentary. The documentary producer has already shaped their way of perceiving truth. He is in no position to dictate what truth shall be preached, but he may have something to say to the preacher about the way truth now needs to be expressed in order to be assimilated.

Different documentary producers work in different ways, but a typical producer may think of each programme as the answer to a question. His concern in the first two minutes of that programme will be to persuade his audience that they care about the question and want to know the answer - or better still, *need* to know the answer. Point one for the preacher: begin by getting the congregation to *feel* the question you are answering.

The good producer then goes out (or more likely, in these pampered days, sends researchers out) to look for those who have answers to the question - preferably practical answers which can be seen in action. Not all who respond to the question will give it the same answer, and the producer will welcome that. He is not making propaganda which builds on the assumption that all alternative versions of the truth can safely be ignored - or derided in their absence. He knows that his audience has an ingrained resistance to partisan programming. In countries where television is the unemitting vehicle of state propaganda it seems to lose much of the influence it has where issues are freely discussed. Even in this country there is reason to suspect that Party Political Broadcasts are received (when they are not switched off) with a less open mind than other programmes. The knowledge that the whole thing is designed to suit a partisan point of view engenders audience resistance. Only the hardest facts are likely to get through that resistance and influence the opinions of the viewer.

When that viewer goes to church he accepts that he is going to hear a declaration of one particular faith, but he does not leave behind all his viewing characteristics. He still looks for truth in personal embodiments and concrete situations, and he still expects that the full and true answer to any important question will contain many facets and will be illuminated from many different points of view - even if they all fall within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. He remains more open to hard evidence than to rhetorical exhortation. He still does not take truth generalized as well as he takes it particularized. He needs to *see* it. He needs it incarnated in people, events and actions. Fortunately the Bible he has come to hear inter-

puted contains within itself a whole galaxy of individual points of light shining from particular people in particular situations. The preacher can speak to a documentary-minded congregation in its own language before he even ventures beyond his Book.

The next thing the documentary producer does is to try and make his material not only personal and concrete, but dramatic as well. His many bits of material are all evidence. He will not present them in large, tedious slabs. He will organize them in such a way that each item strikes sparks off the ones next to it. He will arrange them as if they were dialogue. And he will arrange the dialogue so that it has dramatic shape. It will move through tension towards resolution. In the climax of the programme the producer will bring his audience back to the opening question in some way which prompts them to pronounce their own judgement upon it - using the information provided, but not adopting a ready-made solution. The good documentary is open-ended.

The preacher should not find this an alien pattern. It is significant that when Charles Kraft derived four communication principles from an examination of the Gospels, one of them was this: "Something discovered by the receptor of the message has greater impact than something presented in predigested, generalized form by the communicator".⁶ He had of course been studying the parables of Jesus. Clearly they are a form of communication which a modern media man might describe in terms of open-ended documentary-type drama. There is some real harmony between the Gospel method and the modern mind.

So the news is not all bad. The preacher may have to trust incarnation more than argument, concrete example more than decorative illustration, hard evidence more than emotional rhetoric, dramatic tension rather than propagandist assertion - to mention only some of the necessary adjustments to the modern mind. But in all these things he will be true to his sources as well as to his generation. If only the story he has to tell can be seen to reflect more than it contains, and to reveal more than it defines, then preaching could be one of our few growth industries.

NOTES

- 1 *Where the Wasteland Ends*, London, 1973, p.112.
- 2 Especially *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*.
- 3 *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, London, 1980, p.174.
- 4 John Tinsley, article in *Theology*, May, 1980.
- 5 *The Art of God Incarnate*, London, 1980.
- 6 Article in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Summer, 1973.