

PREACH THE WORD

By ALOYSIUS CHURCH

THERE must be something wrong with our preaching at mass. There are too many complaints about it, especially in the press. An ecumenical council has just found it necessary to treat of it, even to impose the obligation of doing it at all. Historical parallels suggest themselves, where the imposition of an obligation, such as going to Sunday mass or going to communion once a year, reflected the state of neglect into which a particular practice had fallen. Do we face the same kind of situation? Fr Danielou, writing as recently as 1963, says:

I believe that this very question of the homily or of preaching is one of the great problems facing us today. We are gradually retrieving the great sections of the word: we began with the *kerygma* and are now dealing with catechesis. I think that the next stage ought to be the homily. It is absolutely necessary that preaching should be the object of reflection so as to give it an organic character. It tends to be too personal: one goes to listen to Father So-and-so. It is too closely linked with elements of secondary importance . . .¹

Another writer who devotes himself to pastoral problems, Fr F. X. Arnold of Tübingen, speaks in even stronger terms: he discusses the institution of deacons where the apostles declared: 'It is too much that we should have to give up preaching God's word to serve tables'² and concludes:

To the extent that we inverse this order, and neglect the word of God and its remote or immediate preparation in favour of secondary matters, we share responsibility for the loss of faith that is becoming more and more marked in town and country. This decline of faith cannot but compromise the liturgical renewal . . . Sacraments and liturgy evidently lose their power in proportion as faith diminishes. And

¹ J. Danielou S.J.: 'Le Kerygme selon le christianisme primitif', in *L'Annonce de l'Evangile Aujourd'hui*, by A. M. Henry.

² Acts 6, 2.

so, since the ministry of the word is at the service of faith, it seems to me that it has become the most urgent pastoral duty of the day.¹

We are all looking forward to the liturgical renewal which the introduction of the vernacular should bring. But warnings have been sounded: 'Do not expect too much of a translation'. If our attitude to preaching does not also undergo a revolution, then the liturgical effort will be paralysed from the start. It is as important as that.

Here we shall confine ourselves to the sermon during mass, or the liturgical homily. But before we treat more positively of its function, there are first some devils to be exorcised.

There is a devil of indifference. At some time or other we all find preaching at mass a burdensome chore. We leave off its preparation to the last minute, or do not prepare it at all. This is bad enough in itself, but what is really significant is the attitude it reveals. There are other things to do, and these take the priority on our time and interest. But what are these priorities? The question is not to be answered by considering a given priest in a given parish, the jobs he has accumulated, the time at his disposal. True, there is no simple answer for all cases. One can think of priests in missionary situations where some work of charity would be decisive to their mission. But if we look at the needs of the Church as a whole, we can surely say that the gospel has to be preached and it is the priest's job to preach it. 'If the salt loses its savour, wherewith shall it be salted'.² These words apply to the mission of the Church in the world, but the life of the Church itself has to be salted with the preaching of the word. If the priests do not do it, who will? Cardinal Bea says of this function of the priest to preach the word:

In the liturgy, the mysterious union between the Word of God and the Bread of Life means that on his part the priest has a double task: he is as much *minister verbi* as *minister sacramenti*. In him, then, the Word of God must become as flesh of his flesh and spirit of his spirit, just as the bread of the eucharist must become flesh of his flesh and spirit of his spirit. In his person the biblical movement and the liturgical movement must meet, dissolve, and fuse with one another.

¹ F. X. Arnold: *Glaubensverkündigung und Glaubensgemeinschaft* Ch. 2.

² Mt 5, 13.

A priest who knew well how to celebrate the holy sacrifice, the *fractio panis*, but who did not know how to break the Word of God for his people, would only be half a priest.¹

There is also a devil of diffidence. We think that we have not the talent. But this is to look at the question from a too human point of view. If preaching were only a question of rhetorical gifts, gifts of language, of imagination, of scholarship, then most of us would have to retire. We could always find someone better qualified than ourselves, particularly among the members of the congregation. Again it is a question of function. When the people of God are assembled for worship, it is the task of the hierarchy to teach and to proclaim the gospel. By our ordination, we have a status in the assembly. Teaching the flock is primarily the responsibility of the bishops, but every priest is given a share in this responsibility. The very physical structure of our assembly illustrates the point. Sanctuary and nave are distinguished. Sometimes they act together, pointing in the same direction, as when common prayer is addressed to God. But at other times the people receive from the sanctuary. The pastor turns to his people and addresses his flock in the place of Christ. It is not a moment for diffidence, nor is it a function to be avoided for trivial reasons. The Council has imposed the obligation of preaching on Sundays and holidays; but it would seem to be in keeping with its thinking that there should be more frequent preaching during mass on other days. If the homily is part of the liturgy² it should surely be given when there is a congregation of any size.

There is perhaps another devil to be exorcised: the devil of irrelevance. There are priests who are naturally good speakers. They have all the talents. But there is a danger that the talent will not be subordinated to the exigencies of preaching. The history of preaching has its decadent periods, when the sermon at mass has been little more than a display of rhetoric, modelled on the contemporary style of public speaking. Our preaching should have a certain objectivity. Its place in the liturgy gives it a context: the context where the people of God are preparing to celebrate the eucharist. We still see sermons advertised: 'Fr X will preach on the subject of contemporary humanism at the 11 o'clock mass'. I would not wish to say that such a subject should never be treated during a sermon, but

¹ A. Bea 'Valeur Pastorale de la Parole de Dieu dans la Liturgie', *La Maison-Dieu* 1956 (47-48), pp 144-145.

² *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 35.

one suspects that something has gone wrong with our concept of the liturgical homily as such.

The Constitution on the Liturgy contains explicit references to the homily at mass. Here we will try to draw together some of its converging themes in order that what is said about the homily may be understood in the light of the document as a whole.

The Constitution divides the christian life into two distinct phases: action and contemplation. There is no intention, of course, to confine the christian life to the actions we perform in Church; but the distinction has a validity. There is a rhythm in our service of God. This rhythm fits with our situation in life, and with the way God has made us and distributes his graces. At a deep level, the world is wholly sacred; but at another level, the level of our explicit conscious attention, we can distinguish profane from sacred activities. Offering the eucharist and sweeping the floor will never be exactly the same kind of activity.

We can explain the distinction in other terms. God is always present in the world, and it is the aim of the christian life to find God present in all things and in all activities. But there are different ways in which we can reach his presence. In this scale of ways our explicit religious acts in Church have a privileged position. In the liturgy we enter the domain of the sacred more intimately, more nearly: 'Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical actions . . . every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title or to the same degree'.¹

But the transition from the world of action to the world of contemplation is not an easy one. The christian needs help, and the liturgical structures are designed to bring him this help. He is helped by symbol, by gesture, by prayer and singing. He is helped by the presence of the community here gathered together, itself a constituent factor in the 'sacred situation'. And finally, he is helped because these bricks and stones of the temple are joined and cemented together by the voice of God himself, the word spoken, not anywhere, but before the assembled Church. 'God speaks in the liturgy'² and this at once places our assembly on a higher plane. Here is the context of our liturgical preaching. Part of its function is to sustain

¹ *Constitution* 7.

² *Ibid.*, 33.

the sacred atmosphere, to communicate the sense of the presence of God, to assist the entry into contemplation.

Within the liturgy itself, God is present in different ways; and before the moment of the homily arrives, there is already a certain progress in our entry into the presence of God. One may think of modern churches whose physical approaches suggest the transition from the day-to-day world as we enter their doors. A church bell has perhaps already summoned the congregation; and inside the church, the entrance rite has already been a first sacred step, for, 'When the Church prays or sings or acts, the faith of those taking part is nourished, and their minds raised to God'.¹ The scripture is then read where 'Christ is present in his word'.² A later stage will be his presence in the sacred species, and in our hearts in communion. The homily, as 'part of the liturgy', is at the service of this developing reality of Christ's presence. We get the impression sometimes at mass that the sermon is a kind of interval in the proceedings; and this impression is enhanced when this moment is used for all kinds of mundane matters that could well be dealt with at another time.³

The homily, then, fits into the developing action of the mass. As with any structure, we cannot fully understand the significance of individual parts without seeing them in reference to the whole. Structure, however, is perhaps too static a term for the mass. It suggests iron bars and concrete and a framework built to resist movement. But the mass is designed for movement. So with the homily: it has a starting-point in the sacred text,⁴ either the readings from scripture or the whole of the missal text, in so far as it expresses the sense of the particular feast which we are celebrating. Its aim is to prepare for and to begin the celebration of the eucharist. This double polarity is peculiar to the homily at mass. Preaching at street corners, or at an evening service, may have elements in common with the sermon at mass, but the whole context of the mass is unique. By its insertion into the mass liturgy, the homily becomes part of the movement whereby the people of God come forward to meet and receive their Lord.

We read in the Constitution: 'The two parts which in a certain sense make up the mass – namely the liturgy of the word and the

¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ It is interesting to note that in the new rubrics for the liturgy of the Word in Belgium, not only are the notices cut out at this point, but, to show that the homily is integral to the action of the mass, the priest is even forbidden to make a sign of the cross before and after his homily.

⁴ *Constitution* 35.

eucharistic liturgy – are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship'.¹ The homily is primarily a part of the liturgy of the word, and in this sense belongs to the first part of the mass; but it would be robbed of part of its function if it were not closely related to what is to follow.

The liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the eucharist are two parts of an organic whole, 'one single act of worship'. In practice we tend to overstress their distinction, which has an unfortunate effect on the style of our homilies. Perhaps the reason has been our emphasis on the sacrifice and the sacraments as something efficacious of themselves; whereas the reading of scripture and the homily based on it are considered as wholly dependent on individual dispositions. The result is that they are often conceived as outside the objective action of the mass. Catechism instruction on 'the three parts of the mass', offertory, consecration, communion, has probably assisted the dichotomy. What in fact we have done is to separate word and sacrament, with the added effect that we also tend to think of sacraments in mechanical terms, terms which favour, in extreme cases, a magical attitude. The Constitution recognises the distinction of word and sacrament, but it also insists that they are organically united as one act of worship. The sacraments are called sacraments of faith,² and pastors are urged to ensure that the faithful are assisted to approach them with right dispositions.³

In the mass we have the liturgy of the word, with its homily, with which to achieve this end; and it is not simply a question of a psychological preparation. If the liturgy of word and eucharist form 'one act of worship' and if interior dispositions are so vital to the efficacy of the sacraments, then we must consider the liturgy of the word as in some sense already sharing the sacramental efficacy of the eucharist. Word and sacrament are not so far apart as we might imagine. In the first place, the Constitution indicates their close connection when it describes the readings at mass as 'the table of the word of God'.⁴ We break the bread of the scriptures before we break the bread of the eucharist. And just as the bread of the eucharist is broken at a given time for a given congregation, so also the bread of the word is broken for this particular congregation at this particular time. It is part of the function of the homily to make the bread of the word more available for the assembled christians of a given congregation.

¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

² *Ibid.*, 59.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

The close relationship of word and sacrament is perhaps even more clearly seen if we consider the whole of the mass as a proclamation of the gospel, as itself a word of God:

Just as Jesus Christ was sent by the Father, so also he sent his apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit. This he did that, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, they might proclaim that the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, had freed us from the power of Satan and from death, and brought us into the kingdom of his Father. His purpose also was that they might accomplish (*exercerent*) the work of salvation which they had proclaimed by means of sacrifice and sacraments, around which the entire liturgical life revolves.¹

The message our Lord himself preached was a revelation of himself and of his own life with the Father. It was an invitation to man to share his own life with the Father. 'This is eternal life, to know thee the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent'.² Jesus Christ is the true word of God, the true expression of the Father, and his actions are also revelations of himself and of his mission. St Luke describes his own account of the gospel as concerned with 'all that Jesus set out to do and teach'.³ When the apostles set out to preach, they preached Jesus Christ: 'This was the secret that had been hidden from all the ages and generations of the past; now he has revealed it to his saints, wishing to make known the manifold splendour of this secret among the Gentiles – Christ among you, your hope of glory. Him, then, we proclaim'.⁴ The person of Jesus Christ and the work he did is never separated from his preaching.

The First Epistle to the Corinthians relates this preaching explicitly to the eucharist. St Paul speaks of a tradition he has received from the Lord, not in the limited sense of a verbal message only, nor of a wholly external rite. When the community is assembled to perform the rite, the tradition is proclaimed in their midst:

¹ *Ibid.*, 6. It is difficult to find an exact translation of the word *exercerent* which is here rendered as accomplish. The idea is that the gospel they announced was brought into action, exercised, made present and active in sacrifice and sacraments. However we translate it, the Council clearly states a close relationship between the message the apostles preached and what they did when they baptised and assembled the community for sacrifice.

² Jn 17, 3.

³ Acts 1, 1.

⁴ Col 1, 26; cf Phil 1, 17 ff; Acts 4, 2.

The tradition which I received from the Lord and handed on to you, is that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed took bread and gave thanks, and broke it and said, Take, eat, this is my body, given up to you. Do this for a commemoration of me . . . So it is the Lord's death you are heralding whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup until he comes.¹

The Lord's supper, according to Paul's explanation, is also a 'word', in the form of a tradition received from the Lord. It continues the preaching of the apostles, both in the sign language of the sacrifice and in the sign of our communion in the Lord's body. In both Christ is present and reveals himself, even as he revealed himself in the apostolic preaching. So the Council can write: 'in the liturgy God speaks to his people and Christ is still proclaiming his gospel'; adding that this proclamation is not confined to the scripture readings only.²

The Council directs us to preserve 'the intimate connection between words and rites' and insists that the homily in particular should be orientated towards the sacramental celebration: 'its character should be that of a proclamation of God's wonderful works in the history of salvation or in the mystery of Christ ever made present and active within us especially in the celebration of the liturgy'.³ The whole liturgy of the word is a kind of fore-word to the decisive and definitive word that is uttered by Christ in his Church at the heart of the sacred action.

Our best model is our Lord himself, when he took the reading in the synagogue at Capharnaum: 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me, and sent me out to preach the Gospel to the poor, to restore the broken-hearted . . . Then he shut the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. All those who were in the synagogue fixed their eyes on him, and thus he began speaking to them, This scripture which I have read in your hearing is today fulfilled'.⁴ We can always say in our homilies: 'this scripture is today fulfilled', because the sacrifice of the mass gives us entry into the mystery of Christ who is proclaimed in the scripture we have read. It is the task of the preacher to assist the assembled people to become aware of this 'intimate connection'. Whatever moment of the history

¹ 1 Cor 11, 23-6.

² *Constitution* 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴ Lk 4, 18-21.

of salvation is proclaimed in the reading, it is in continuity with what is done in this eucharist by this congregation. The homily should reveal this to the faith of the congregation, and in revealing it, introduce them to its real and actual accomplishment.

But does this mean that we are always to preach the same sermon? What of the parish priest who has to face the same congregation year after year? Is he not at liberty to vary his style? And how do the various programmes of instruction at mass fit with the concept of the homily as outlined here?

It is much disputed at present whether it is possible to impose a programme of instruction whose starting point and arrangement of ideas is other than the series of bible texts and the movement of the liturgical year. The Constitution does not settle the question entirely, since its directives are too general. In paragraph 52 we read: 'By means of the homily, the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the christian life are expounded, during the course of the liturgical year, from the sacred text'. It is questioned by some whether it is possible to expound all the mysteries of the faith and all moral doctrine sufficiently if we limit ourselves to the text of the missal. Instruction, they say, must also be systematised to a certain extent if the people are to retain its outlines with ease. And so they would adopt the traditional structures of the catechism, the creed, the sacraments, the commandments, for their programme of instructions at mass. It then becomes a practical problem to integrate such a programme with the missal. Some would add that we must distinguish the question of content and the question of function. A homily at mass may use anything for its subject as long as the treatment is geared to helping the congregation celebrate the eucharist. It should be added that the homily at mass is not the only source of religious instruction. There should be other gatherings, conferences, books, radio, television. But in practice, ignorance is widespread and, so it is argued, the time of mass is the only time when the majority of Catholics are ever likely to learn anything about their faith. Though an exhaustive discussion of these problems is not possible here, we can set out some guiding principles from what the Council has said about the homily.

First, the term instruction is ambiguous. When catechetical writers speak technically, they describe instruction as only one element or dimension of an integral educational process. They would call it the 'objective' dimension; and, important as it may be, they would insist that it must be integrated with two other elements:

formation and initiation.¹ It is not enough merely to instruct the mind, especially if the source of our material is old-style theological manual. The function of the professional theologian and that of the pastor of souls are different. The theologian expresses revelation as true and by abstraction tries to arrive at an intellectual synthesis. The pastor on the other hand must present revelation as a value, as good news. The re-adjustment of the individual's values is the second element or dimension in any religious education. His mind is to be 'the mind that was in Christ Jesus';² he must begin to judge his world from the point of view of the sermon on the mount, and this means not only having some ideas in his head, but adopting them for his own and making them his standard of judging and living. Thirdly, all religious education aims at initiating the christian into a personal relationship with God. This personal encounter with God is to be found within the christian community, for it is there that God is specially present, especially in liturgical reunion. The homily at mass must take account of this triple dimension, and especially the last. It is here that the attempt to superimpose a catechetical structure on the liturgical year is liable to go astray. Any teacher of religion knows how difficult it is to get through a set programme, even at the purely academic level. If we are pre-occupied with what we have described as instruction in the objective sense, we are liable to neglect the exigencies of liturgical celebration.

It has often been said in recent years, as a principle of the catechetical renewal, that the essential message of the gospel, the *Kerygma*, must always be clearly enunciated. What is said of religious instruction in general would apply *a fortiori* to the homily at mass. There must be a sense of proportion in what we teach. The essential message is not to be submerged in a sea of less important doctrines and practices. Whatever we say should be seen in organic unity with the essential message; and it should also diffuse its essential spirit of joy. It would be contrary to the kerygmatic principle, for example, if our sermons consisted of a constant harping on moral issues, a gloomy reiteration of duties divorced from their context in the roots in the christian mystery, or if our own vision of the faith had not caught up with the re-discovery of the paschal mystery.

According to the Constitution, the starting point of our homily should be the scripture or the liturgical texts. No doubt the choice of scripture texts used in the liturgy will be extended and improved

¹ Van Caster, *Dieu nous Parle*, p 141.

² Phil 2, 5.

in due course; but when we do come to use them, our commentary should be faithful to the text itself. There is a way of using a phrase from the gospel as a peg on which to hang our own ideas, suppressing its meaning or bending it to suit our own purposes, rather than allowing it to speak for itself. Indeed, it is argued by some that the efficacy of the homily will depend on the extent to which the scripture itself is woven into the exposition. When this is done, the homily comes closest to sharing the innate efficacy of the word of God. Further, if we are rigorously faithful to the scriptures and that implies long-range preparation by making them our constant study, there will be no danger of imbalance in our preaching. A further corrective lies in the use of the other liturgical texts.

We have been speaking of the homily principally from the point of view of the preacher. A fuller treatment would discuss the point of view of the individual christian and the extent to which the homily should be made relevant to daily life and the contemporary social and political situation. Liturgical preaching could easily become short-circuited between pulpit and sanctuary, and fail to make contact with the realities of day-to-day life. St Paul himself was troubled that the prophets of the primitive communities should speak in language the people could not understand.¹ We should remember, however, that the light of the gospel has the power to bring areas of darkness into sharp relief. When our people come to Church, they should be brought to make a judgement on their own situation. When the specially gifted prophets spoke in gatherings of the early Church, St Paul considered their speaking so effective that he could write of the stranger who might come into their midst: 'all that is kept hidden in his heart will be revealed: and so he will fall on his face and worship God, publicly confessing that God is indeed among you'.² The special manifestations of the gift of prophecy may not be with us today, but those who exercise the preaching ministry have inherited their function. 'Apostles and prophets are the foundation on which you were built, and the chief corner stone of it is Jesus Christ himself'.³ The Church continues to be built in the same way: the tradition of the apostles comes alive in the liturgy of the mass. The ministry of the word should reveal what is hidden in our hearts, and that revelation should be a sign that God indeed is among us.

¹ 1 Cor 14.

² 1 Cor 14, 25.

³ Eph 2, 20.