

SERVANTS OF THE WORD

by NICHOLAS LASH

FORMERLY it was the custom to divide the members of the church into two categories: those who taught and those who learnt. This neat distinction can no longer be regarded as wholly satisfactory because, since the whole christian church is concerned to receive in faith God's life-giving Word, all christians are hearers of the Word of God, the only teacher. The whole church is the believing church. Likewise every christian is called upon to bear witness to Christ, the Word of God, in word and work. The whole church is the teaching church.

Neither the whole church nor any member of it can be said to 'possess' the living truth of God; the Word of God remains the Lord of his church. In the reception of that Word in faith, and in that active exercise of belief which is the proclamation of the Word, the *whole* church is the servant of the Word. The Council, speaking of the *magisterium*, says:

This teaching office is not above the Word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully.¹

The function of those called upon to exercise a particular teaching ministry within the church can only be understood against the background of this truth: that the whole church is called continually to hear the Word of God in faith and to declare it in charity. Though it is a fact that most of the day-to-day teaching in the church is carried out by laypeople (including religious), since all who proclaim the Word of God are engaged in a common ministry, the nature of this ministry, and the method by which it is carried out, can best be understood by an examination of its most 'official' form, especially in the celebration of the eucharist. If the celebration of the eucharist is 'the source and summit of the whole work of preaching the gospel',² then it will be from the eucharist that we should draw

¹ *Dei Verbum*, 10.

² *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5; cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

our insights into even the 'foothills' of the ministry of the Word.

In the light of these considerations, I shall try, firstly, to make some general observations on the relationship between the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the sacraments; secondly, to suggest some essential characteristics of a servant of the Word; thirdly to outline a theology of personal relationships as a ministry of the Word; finally to make some brief remarks about liturgical preaching.

The ministry of the Word and the ministry of the sacraments

Is the ordained minister fundamentally a minister of the Word or a minister of the sacraments; is he a preacher or a priest? Until recently, catholic theology has assumed that this is the right sort of question, and that the answer is that the christian minister is, fundamentally, a priest. Protestant tradition has tended to ask the same question, and to come up with the opposite answer. But perhaps it is the wrong question. Every word is a *sign*, and every sign (in so far as it is a sign, and therefore a disclosure of meaning) is a word.¹ When, moreover, the word in question is the effective, life-giving, saving Word of God, then the definition of that word which we proclaim in the church turns out to be remarkably similar to the customary definition of a sacrament.²

The constitution on the liturgy has given us the programme for a fresh realization, in our celebration of the liturgy, that, while on the one hand the Word of God must be proclaimed and heard in the church as God's saving, life-giving, grace-bearing Word, on the other hand the sacraments we celebrate must, if they are to be fruitful, be simple, eloquent, intelligible: they must be words.³ If one goes a step further and says that the signs which we call the 'seven sacraments' are the fullest realization of God's Word in human activity, then it is clear that, as the Council documents insist, christian ministry is fundamentally a ministry of the Word.⁴ For the sake of completeness it must be said (although the development of this point lies outside the scope of this article) that this basic dimension of christian worship as the effective proclamation of God's saving Word to his people is complemented by the response

¹ Cf *Ibid.*, 33.

² Cf Rahner, Karl, 'The Word and the Eucharist', in *Theological investigations*, vol. 4 (London, 1966), pp 253-86.

³ Cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 33, 34.

⁴ Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 25; *Christus Dominus*, 12; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

which the people, in the power of the Word, are enabled to make. And this response, in prayer, praise and self-offering, is the priestly dimension of the church and of her ministry. However strange it may sound to catholic ears, therefore, those protestant theologians are surely correct who see the concept of 'sacrament' as describing the 'downward', God-to-man dimension of our worship, and that of 'sacrifice' as describing the 'upward' response of man to God in the Spirit of the risen Christ.¹

In brief, the christian minister, as servant of the Word, is a communicator of life. God's Word is not a theory, but the life of God, the truth and love of God, communicated into our human condition. Therefore the christian minister is concerned effectively to communicate the life of God to the hearts and minds of the people.

Characteristics of the servant of the Word

In the first section of this article I said that before the church can proclaim the Word of God, in word and work, she must first receive it in faith. If this is true of the church as a whole, it is also true of the church's minister. If he is not, to the very depth of his being, a hearer of the Word, it will not be God's Word that he communicates, but his own opinions and attitudes, masquerading as the Word of God.

In the first place, therefore, he must be a man of prayer.² Not a man who says prayers, but a man slowly, painfully growing to that degree of honesty and self-awareness that can risk silent exposure to the mystery of God. A rediscovery of the meaning and relevance of contemplative prayer is an essential element in christian maturity. If all christians are called to holiness, why is it that, whereas the student priest receives, at least quantitatively, considerable guidance in the business of praying, so little is done to help the layman in this regard? We need to discover a way of talking about prayer which is directly related to our overall understanding of the christian vocation. Within the limits set by the theme of this article, I should like to suggest four factors which would be central to such a discovery. First of all, contemplative or 'mental' prayer is a witness to the priority of the Word of God to man over the human response to that Word in faith. In the second place, if such prayer can be

¹ Cf e.g. von Allmen, J. J., 'Le Saint-Esprit et le Culte', in *Prophétisme Sacramental* (Neuchâtel, 1964), pp. 287-311, esp. p 300.

² Cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 41.

metaphorically described as 'listening to God', the justification for this description is the relationship between prayer in the silence of faith and that attentiveness to people to which I shall return later.¹ The third factor is that prayer is a process, and it is a part of that dark 'journey into faith' which is the progress of the pilgrim christian.² In the fourth place, while it is true that, as a hearer of the Word in faith, the christian needs those concentrated periods of silence which are usually referred to as 'times of prayer', it is nevertheless true that mental prayer is not to be conceived of primarily as a particular form of activity, distinct, for example, from cooking, shopping or talking with people, but rather as that 'atmosphere' of receptivity to the Word which must mark all the activity of a christian man.

Further, he must, as the Council documents also insist, be a man of the scriptures.³ The initial formulation in human words of that one Word of God who is Jesus Christ in his mysteries remains normative for all christian teaching and preaching.

It is undoubtedly true that priests, teachers and parents whose initial doctrinal education was biblically very deficient cannot hope to recast their understanding of christian truth overnight. Fortunately, there is a wealth of good popular material available to assist them increasingly to base their reflection and their teaching on the scriptures.⁴

Thirdly, he must be a man of the church.⁵ The christian teacher does not exercise his ministry in virtue of his talents or his popularity, but solely in virtue of the fact that he is, as a teacher (however he came by his appointment), the representative of the church, of the whole faithful people. This means that one of his primary concerns is to interpret to those he teaches the pronouncements of the *magisterium*, the declarations of the mind of the church. He cannot do this unless he knows how to give due weight (neither too much nor too little) to magisterial pronouncements. This will not always

¹ A recent article in the *Clergy Review* ('Some Reflections on the Spirituality of Secular Priests', March 1967, pp 169-84) develops some of the points I am briefly asserting here. In view of the fact that the article was written for priests, it may be wide of the mark to ask whether the author's treatment does not imply that it is the vocation of the ministerial priest to be the 'man of prayer'; in fact, this is the vocation of every christian, and therefore of the ordained minister, who is also a christian.

² Cf Novak, Michael, *Belief and Unbelief* (London, 1966).

³ Cf *Dei Verbum*, 23-26.

⁴ E.g. the *New and the Old Testament Reading Guides* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville), the periodicals *Scripture* and *The Bible Today*, and, of course, *The Jerusalem Bible*.

⁵ Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 12; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 15.

be easy – how, for example, is the ordinary priest or teacher to decide between the apparently conflicting theological visions that underlie the constitution on the liturgy, on the one hand, and *Mysterium Fidei* on the other? It is also necessary, therefore, that, even if he is no theologian, he have a sense of history and be in touch with the drift of theological opinion on a particular issue. Finally, he must be conversant with the needs and preoccupations of the believing people as a whole. If he neglects any one of these factors he will not, in his ministry, be acting as a faithful servant of God's Word as it lives in his Church.

In the fourth place, he must be a man of the world.¹ Although the believing community of the church may be the fullest sacramental statement in the world of God's Word, it is not the only such statement, for the redeeming Word is the creating Word, and Christ is present in all the events of human history.² The christian teacher must, therefore, know what is going on in the world. If he is, in his teaching ministry, to be the servant of the Word, he must be able to hear that Word speaking in the world; he must know how to read 'signs of the times', and must not be afraid to declare the imperatives of God's Word (which is always a call to present action, to concrete decision, to brotherhood) even if he is accused (as he will be) of 'getting involved in politics'.

It is clear that even so bare a list of the qualities of a servant of the Word raises the whole question of obedience in the church. The christian owes unqualified obedience to the Word of God, proclaimed in history with the power and authority of eternal truth; but he owes obedience only to the Word of God. And yet that one Word is refracted, in different ways, through many words: through the scriptures, the history of the church, the declarations of those bearing office in the church, the *sensus fidelium*, the demands of the concrete situation, the 'signs of the times', and so on. Each of these words speaks, in varying measure, with the authority of God. None of these words can speak with that unqualified absolute authority that belongs to the one Word alone. If there is a biblical fundamentalism that would falsely absolutize (by de-historicizing) the scriptural word, and a magisterial fundamentalism that would similarly absolutize the pronouncements of those who exercise authority in the church in the name of Christ, there is also a 'situational fundamentalism' that would falsely absolutize the authority of the im-

¹ Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 40, 44; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 19.

² Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 10, 11.

mediate, limited situation, and a 'modernist fundamentalism' that would falsely absolutize the 'signs of the times'. This is the problematic of the obedience of a christian man, not a sterile tug-of-war between 'authority' and 'conscience'. There is no honest way of evading the agony of this dilemma, because the church in history is the sinful church, the church in which the Word of God does not yet perfectly dwell, and will only perfectly dwell at the consummation of the kingdom.¹ To postpone belief, or speech, or action, until the coming of the kingdom has eliminated all risk from the human project, is to refuse, here and now, obediently to serve the Word of God. But, equally, to attempt to eliminate the risk by claiming that the kingdom has already come, which is what one is doing by absolutizing any human word, is to serve a word of man which is to be disobedient to the Word of God. To refuse the agony of belief, of service of the Word in the imperfection of our present situation, is to refuse the cross; and to refuse the cross is to deny the resurrection.²

Personal relationships and the ministry of the Word

If the christian minister is, fundamentally, a minister of the Word, then he is not only a minister of the Word when he is formally engaged in teaching or preaching. I said earlier that an examination of the ministry of the Word in its most 'official' form is essential for an understanding of the nature of that ministry wherever it is exercised. But the coin has two faces: it is also true that to see all christian conversation as a ministry of the Word is to gain important insights into the way in which that ministry ought to be exercised in its fuller and more authoritative forms. The brief reflection that follows, therefore, is not a diversion from the theme of this paper; it is an attempt to suggest what it means to say that all human relationships can, from the point of view of christian theology, be studied under the formal aspect of a 'teaching service of the Word'.

It is clear, to begin with, that 'handing on the faith', the *traditio verbi in Spiritu*, cannot be a process of pushing something into somebody else's head; it can only be an exercise in helping the other person to a deeper receptivity to the Word which he has to hear in his situation. 'The only way truth can impose itself is by the force of its own gentle but powerful influence on the mind of man'.³

¹ Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 2-4; *Dei Verbum*, 8.

² Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 8. ³ *Dignitatis Humanae*, 1.

But this presupposes a deep human sensitivity on the part of the teacher. The frightening superficiality of much clerical contact with laypeople and with other priests, for example, frequently precludes the possibility of the relationship being a fruitful service of the Word. If one person thinks that he knows exactly how another person ought to think, to believe, to act, he will never reach that other person in his actual situation, where he uniquely stands before the Word of God.

It does not follow from this that the christian attitude to other people should be one of total permissiveness (as catholics, we know about protesting in the name of the gospel; the tragedy is that we too often protest in the wrong places). It does mean that the christian, in his face-to-face contacts, is primarily concerned with other people as people, as unique individuals, and that he is prepared to share their fears, their doubts, their anxieties, without attempting to impose his solutions on their problems, but rather trying to help them to listen, and so to hear the Word of God, in prayer, in the scriptures, in the church and in the world.

Moreover, attentiveness to people is an essential element in the service of the Word because the encounter with other people is one of the ways in which the christian is confronted with that Word. Thus it becomes immediately apparent that all service of the Word is essentially a process of sharing; it is always a mutual discovery, not one-way traffic. But the heavier responsibility for absolute honesty, for greater receptivity, rests on the shoulders of the man who takes it upon himself to be the 'leading partner' (the teacher) in the dialogue.

Preaching the Word

If it is a general truth that the church is the servant of the Word of God, and of that Word as the very life that constitutes her, shapes her, judges her, forgives her, in the power of his Spirit, then it is clearly true, as has been suggested already, that the celebration of the eucharist is the climactic point of this service of the Word, as of every other aspect of the church's ministry and life.

I said at the beginning that the basic dimensions of christian worship were the hearing of the Word effectively (sacramentally) proclaimed, and the response of love and commitment made by the people in the power of the Word. The general structure of the mass would suggest that these two dimensions, of hearing and response,

are realized consecutively: our eucharist, our joyful response in covenant-sacrifice follows the liturgy of the Word. But although this is valid as a description of the overall architecture of the mass, it is of considerable pastoral importance to bear in mind that every moment of the mass shows up, with shifting emphasis, the twofold, dialogal nature of christian worship. On the one hand, the eucharistic prayer constitutes the high point in the effective proclamation of the Word (to deny this is to deny that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ); and therefore any celebration is seriously defective in which the prayer is not, in fact, audibly and intelligibly proclaimed. On the other hand, the response of the assembly, in faith, love, praise and profession of faith, is integral to the liturgy of the Word, which is, after all, a 'complete' liturgical act even when it is celebrated apart from the eucharist.

These considerations provide the necessary context for any discussion, however brief, of the liturgical homily. There is a tendency in some theological writing to overvalue the preaching ministry, by characterizing the homily as the most complete act of the ministry of the Word, whereas this is rather the eucharistic prayer. There is still, in catholic piety, another and more widespread tendency, in spite of the constitution on the liturgy: to undervalue the homily because of a failure to appreciate that the scriptural word will only become 'living bread' if it is 'broken', declared, related to this group of people.

If the worshipping assembly, and especially the preacher, is not profoundly convinced of the presence of Christ in the proclaimed scriptures, then the homily, though it may have some limited and independent value, cannot make fruitful the proclamation of this scripture; perhaps we can say that the readings will be 'merely valid'. To say that Christ is present is to say that the proclaimed scripture is a living Word; but if I happen to believe that it is dead then I shall treat it, however reverently, as I would a corpse or a relic. It follows that, although the Word is proclaimed to arouse and not merely to deepen the response of faith, the fruitfulness of the proclamation is in direct proportion to the openness, the receptivity of the hearer. The smallest practical details in handling the way in which the scriptures are proclaimed can be of crucial importance in determining the extent of the assembly's 'openness' in faith. Is it surprising that so much liturgical reform in this country is stillborn when most priests, instead of being given all possible practical guidance in how to celebrate mass, have merely been directed to

'say mass in English'? Such practical details include the very careful training of a reader, not simply in audibility and intelligibility, but in what he is doing; the use of a book which is large enough to be carried with reverence, the creation of an atmosphere of prayerful recollection in which each element in the rite is allowed to reach its completion, psychologically as well as physically, before the next is begun. It goes without saying that the cruder manifestations of our tendency to 'do ceremonies' rather than worship God, such as a reader moving to his place during the collect, or the celebrant leafing through the bidding prayers during the creed, are effective barriers to the celebration of the liturgy. One excellent test of the quality of a liturgical celebration is the psychological possibility of one or two minutes silence after the homily has ended. An assembly which can fill such a silence with a deeply personal 'digestion' of the living bread of the Word that has been broken for them has begun to celebrate the liturgy.

Many priests are frightened by the current emphasis on preaching, because they feel that their theological and especially their biblical equipment is inadequate to the task. There is, of course, considerable truth in this. However, in terms of the effective service of the living Word of God, whether by preacher, teacher or parent, technical competence is worse than useless unless it is a tool employed by a person enflamed by, and committed to, the gospel he is called upon to proclaim. It is impossible to love the gospel, the message of God's Word, unless one loves the brothers of the Word. If a preacher genuinely, humanly, loves the people to whom he is preaching, and has a sufficient maturity to declare that love without being 'emotional' or 'sentimental' about it, then his preaching will be effective. It will not, however, be christian preaching unless the personal horizon of the preacher's concern is as wide as the horizon of Christ. But the love of Christ is for all men; it is the constructive dynamism of the universal brotherhood of all men in the kingdom of their Father. There would be no problem of the relevance of sermons if the average preacher had a genuine, human love and concern for humanity; for real people, all people, as they are now, with their actual needs, fears, agonies and hopes. And without such a universal concern for the human community in its present predicament, without a concern as wide as the gospel he proclaims, the preacher is not serving the Word of God, but rather bearing witness to that corruption of the human condition from which the living truth of God has come to set us free.