

COMMUNICATING THE WORD

By PETER PURDUE

RECENT YEARS have seen great advances in our appreciation of the role of preaching. It has taken on new emphasis through the discussions of the theologians on the quasi-sacramental nature of the word of God as proclaimed in the Church. At the same time, however, new problems have emerged. On the practical side, the reformed lectionary has caused difficulties. Even if every word spoken is actually heard, and every phrase understood, much remains obscure, even to the scholar. Further, homilies drawn from the scripture readings are frequently forced and contrived. Both preacher and teacher are at a loss with many of the texts they are supposed to expound. How could these things be if the word of God is clear cut and decisive, like the two-edged sword?

On the theoretical level, we must ask whether it is ever possible to draw from the written word a way of life. Do we follow the bible to seek out a recipe which will automatically produce a holy life? Can it be used in this way? If not, why is it called the word of God? If it is his word, it ought to supply us with this sort of answer. Perhaps, the difficulty with such questions is the reason why the bible has not always had the best press in the catholic Church. Here the appeal has tended to be: follow God's way as enshrined in his Church; the bible will give you enlightening phrases to show that this is the case. God has spoken to his Church and it is her task to see that his word is kept intact.

These problems, no matter how naively expressed, do point to a crucial theological debate which has raged for so long. Where can we find what God has spoken? What is the Church to preserve intact? Is it all in the bible, or, better, in the New Testament? Or are some things not found there, but kept in the treasury of the Church and passed from generation to generation? On another note, it is remarked that the bible clearly cannot 'contain' the word of God, any more than the Church can fence it round. Human reader, preacher or teacher cannot exhaust it with brilliant accent or catechetical scheme.

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Perhaps questions and solutions on these lines have up to the present time been too narrowly based or polemically intended. We need an answer which accounts for all that we know of the word of God and of the presence of God within his creation. On the main issue of the communication and understanding of God's word, his presence, the following citation from the *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery* seems splendidly relevant:

In order that they might achieve a deeper understanding of the mystery of the eucharist, the faithful should be instructed in the principal ways in which the Lord is present to his Church in liturgical celebrations. He is always present in a body of the faithful gathered in his name. He is present too in his word, for it is he who speaks when the scriptures are read in the Church. In the sacrifice of the eucharist he is present both in the person of the minister, 'the same now offering through the ministry of the priest who formerly offered himself on the cross', and above all under the species of the eucharist. For in this sacrament Christ is present in a unique way, whole and entire, God and man, substantially and permanently. This presence of Christ under the species 'is called "real" not in an exclusive sense, as if the other kinds of presence were not real, but *par excellence*'.¹

We might at first be surprised at the number of ways the paragraph sees Christ as really present. The explicit statement that the real presence of Christ is not just confined to the eucharistic species is a crucially important one, in that it enriches our appreciation of the degrees of presence among priest, preacher, congregation, minister, scriptures, and of the Christ-centredness of the whole eucharistic assembly.

Taking my cue from this paragraph, I would like to elucidate here how God's presence in his word must be a presence communicated through his Son, or more explicitly, a presence through his incarnate Word. Moreover, the reality of this presence is achieved by the Spirit both of Father and of Son, in a mysterious unity and diversity evoked by St Paul:

To some, his gift was that they should be apostles; to some, prophets; to some, evangelists; to some, pastors and teachers; so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ. In this way we are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect man, fully mature with the fulness of Christ himself.²

¹ 25 May, 1967 - paragraph 9.

² Eph 4, 11-13.

The holy Spirit strives to form Christ in us as a community, just as he formed Christ in his mother's womb and anointed him for his mission. But the Spirit diversifies his essentially single task of forming Christ in us. Not all are brought to Christ in the same way, though the Spirit's unifying achievement will find its highpoint in the re-presentation of the paschal mysteries (from Christ's passion to his gift of the Spirit) at each eucharistic celebration. It follows, then, that in considering the communication and presence of the word, we have a twin focal point: Christ and the holy Spirit. From these radiate the Church's mission, the gifts of the Spirit, the scriptures, the prayerful holiness of the people of God.

Just as the focal point of the real presence of Christ is in the eucharistic species, so the focal point of the word of God is in the scriptures. From each of these, differences of aspect and emphasis in the christian faith are communicated. But their one meeting point is Christ himself, who continues to celebrate what he has achieved, in the Mass, the sacramental sacrifice which is itself a hope and a pledge of Christ's complete victory until he comes.

The word, once communicated, abides. So the second Isaiah writes of his inaugural prophetic experience:

All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord
blows upon it;
surely the people is grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but *the word of our God will stand for ever.*³

The word of God which is communicated through the prophet will remain for ever, not because of his poetic prowess but because of what God's word does through him. Flesh is like grass, and second Isaiah is flesh, but the word he speaks is one of continuing divine presence. This same prophet will conclude his Book of Consolation with a similar appeal to the power of God's word:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and return not thither but water 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;

³ Isai 40, 6.

it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.⁴

Such lyrical poetry made second Isaiah the prophet of God's word in a way which overshadows even the other great prophets. His texts are used in the Christmas liturgy, a centuries old practice which suits him superbly. Second Isaiah is the prophet of the Creator: the Word, through whom God created all things, becomes man. Second Isaiah compares himself to flesh: the Word becomes flesh – he dwells amongst us, as the word of God abiding forever.

The prophet does not merely refer to Christ; he prefigures Christ in his own person. Second Isaiah is the prophet who embodies Israel's consolation, and at the same time is very likely the first suffering servant, who anticipates the suffering Son of God. The Christmas liturgy more than inculcates a prophetic statement; it envisages prophetic life as 'pre-preaching' the person of Christ. This is vitally important for the presence of God in his word; it must be understood at an intensely personal level. God's word in the prophets and in Christ cannot be adequately expressed in sounds or by written signs, or in the intellectual faculties elevated to a divine level. A prophet speaks God's word in so far as this personal life approximates to the word which God entrusts to him; or better, he resembles *the* Word, God's only begotten Son. The prophet is a pre-incarnation, the divine presence which changes the substance of flesh from being like grass to being able to stand forever.

The same phrase, 'the word of the Lord abides for ever' is taken up in the New Testament, in the first epistle of Peter: 'That word is the good news which was preached to you'.⁵ The whole of the first chapter of this epistle (after its introduction) is a fine example of the influence of second Isaiah's text upon the apostle, and how he adapted it to his purpose. The prophets were inspired by the Spirit of Christ. 'It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look'. The good news is salvation through the precious blood of Christ raised by God from the dead. The good news is the manifestation of Christ for our sake, God consecrating us to himself through Christ. Almost as eloquently as St John, Peter tells us that God's word is

⁴ Isai 55, 10-11.

⁵ 1 Pet 1, 24-25.

Christ; through the glorification of Christ our faith and hope are now in God. The prophetic promise is fulfilled, not simply because the Word has become flesh, but because the Word made flesh has been glorified through the resurrection.

After Easter, the Word that abides is communicated at various times and in a variety of ways no longer. It has been addressed once and for all; God has spoken to us through his Son. It is the Son who remains because death has no longer any claim over him. His word is now life-giving Spirit.

To ask how the Word of God is present in the Church is to ask the same question concerning the risen Christ's presence among his disciples. Though the different authors of the New Testament express themselves in various ways, they all link Christ's continued presence to the commission he gives his apostles and to the gift of the holy Spirit. Later thinking in the Church developed along similar lines. On the one side, the apostles saw to it that their own followers would re-enact their divine commission in a relationship with the successor of the chief apostle. The teaching office of the Church – that of handing down, interpreting and faithfully guarding the gospel – would depend on this apostolic succession. Equally, the holy Spirit would prompt and inspire men to follow Christ, consecrating them with the divine gifts of faith, hope and charity. Any exaggeration of emphasis here causes confrontation between institution and charism, with its consequent misunderstandings. The apostles and their successors have been anointed by the same holy Spirit who prompts the heart of man to listen to them. The apostolic men are formed by the same process of faith inspired by the Spirit of God.

Paul emphasized the diverse gifts of the holy Spirit, or the diverse aspects of his work of directing the commissioned disciples of Christ. Vatican II also speaks of this diversity of communication:

This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by ordinances, handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with him, and from what he did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, too, by those apostles and apostolic men who, under the inspiration of the same holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing.⁶

Scripture and tradition form a unity because they give the

⁶ *Dei Verbum* 7.

pilgrim Church the single picture of Christ, cast into colour by the holy Spirit. The same holy Spirit renews the colours more and more effectively, as he guides the teaching office in the Church more closely to the Lord who is the goal of the pilgrimage.

The mission of the holy Spirit is not seen as confined to the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God's Spirit was given to the prophets to enable them to speak his enduring word. They thus prepared for God's personal Word who was conceived by the power of the Spirit and anointed for his divine mission. The Spirit similarly prepares the new prophets. The apostles are given a spiritual rebirth. From his earliest missions, St Paul is convinced of his Spirit-directed preaching: 'We know, brothers, that God loves you and that you have been chosen, because when we brought the good news to you, it came to you not only as words, but as power and as the holy Spirit and as utter conviction'.⁷ The apostles' commission from Christ was endowed with the holy Spirit to enable them to preach the word of God. Their followers and co-operators needed this same Spirit-endowed commission.

By the work of the holy Spirit, apostolic tradition is configured with the person of Christ. The substance of what the apostles hand on is Jesus crucified and risen. Their task is to articulate in preaching, example, ordinance and writing the special grace 'not only of proclaiming to the pagans the infinite treasure of Christ, but also of explaining how the mystery is to be dispensed'.⁸

This stress on the apostles' office is not intended to be the limit of the holy Spirit's direction. All who have been gifted by the Spirit (in their baptism) may discover Christ 'through contemplation and study', when they 'treasure these things in their hearts, through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth'.⁹ Apostolic tradition is thus intended as something spiritual and interior rather than external and monolithic. To see it as the configuration of Christ allows us to view it as forward looking. The People of God are striding forward to meet Christ. He has shown the face of his love and kept it bright with his Spirit. If apostolic tradition is compared to the memory of a Christ we know still lives, the memory alone cannot be sufficient. It is destined to become a real, immediate and unending communion. The holy Spirit is the pledge of our future destiny.

⁷ 1 Thes 1, 4-5.

⁸ Eph 3, 8-9.

⁹ *Dei Verbum*, 8.

Finally, we return to the eucharist, in whose species Christ is present *par excellence*. As the doctrine of such a presence is catholic and apostolic faith, it means that christian living, teaching, praying, worshipping find their high point in the mass. Christ is closest to us here. The Word is communicated and abides most especially around the altar.

As the early Church seems to have been as vividly aware of this as we are today, perhaps some practical conclusion could be reached concerning the setting of scripture within the early communities. Preaching, teaching and liturgy have long been recognized as the activities from which the scriptures took origin. From early times these three general activities, in imitation of the jewish synagogue, found a balanced place within the celebration of the Lord's table. God's new people were to be fed with his word as well as with the heavenly bread. The evangelist John gives testimony to this when he omits the institution narrative at the last supper, yet alludes to it in his discourse on the Bread of Life, where for many years scholars have haggled over the disengagement of Word and Sacrament, Faith and Eucharist.

Perhaps we can conclude our considerations by a closer look at a phrase quoted from the *Instruction on the Eucharistic Mystery*: 'Christ speaks when the scriptures are read in Church'.

Firstly, what is the proper place for the reading of scripture? Are the scriptures only to be read in church? Are they public proclamation rather than private meditation? The answer is that we must come to terms with the scriptures in our own time and at our own pace, as we must with the faith we profess and which they crystallize. They must enter our private meditation and prayer. As such, however, their place is where Christ is, in the eucharist; our personal meditation is but a preparation for the highpoint, the eucharist, the sacramental reality of our heavenly glory. As all christian life leads to the eucharist and draws sustenance from it, the scriptures too participate in the same movement. Only in the closest meeting with Christ do the scriptures achieve full significance and value, since they too draw their origin from the same mysteries of redemption. And in a parallel way, as Christ is present in the eucharistic species 'outside' of mass, so he is in the scriptures, though in a different way.

Secondly, Christ speaks when the scriptures are read. The scriptures are God's word only in so far as they express who Christ is and what he requires of us. By this I mean that Christ is pre-

incarnate in God's chosen people; God's Spirit is in Moses and in Israel – in its kings, priests and prophets; the same Spirit overshadowed Jesus, and was given to Peter, Paul, John, Luke and the rest. Christ forever speaks in them because the Spirit of God inspires. The message of the scriptures is intrinsically a word of life and message of salvation in all its pages.

Thirdly, the practical and awesome responsibility of all who read these scriptures is to *re-present* Christ as the prophets and apostles did. The flesh must no longer be weak, but the Spirit super-willing. No written word can stand baldly on high; to the listener to day, as was always the case, it is a skeleton which needs to be filled out, completed, explained. Neither the scriptures nor the eucharist are cerebral experiences for the intellectual élite. Christ must not only be present, but be seen to be present in the people, ministers, readers and priest. God promises his Word will abide, but neither in church nor parish did he assure us that his Spirit would compel. Therefore, in the perennial christian tension, christians must be what they are, the tradition of the apostles bringing us Christ must achieve what it proclaims; the scriptures must be read for what they are, to give the abiding Spirit scope for bringing Christ effectively to his own.