

PREACHING IN CHURCH

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

I CANNOT talk to you about things that are outside my own experience'. These words of St Bernard of Clairvaux are a golden rule for the homilist. They are an extension of the gospel principle that the mouth speaks from the fulness of the heart. An empty heart will betray itself despite the most eloquent discourse. Where the heart is hollow, words too are hollow.

What demands does the giving of a homily make upon the homilist? First and foremost, he or she has to know the word. Not the word as an abstraction, but the word made flesh in Jesus Christ. 'We preach Christ', said St Paul. We preach a person, not a theological concept. We preach from the heart rather than from the head. The basis of our preaching can only be our lived, personal faith, hope and love of the One to whom our lives are dedicated — this man Jesus. This is the particular characteristic note that distinguishes the homily from a theological lecture or a talk about spirituality. A homily is born of a personal experience of God in the man Jesus, not of ideas about two natures in one person.

This, of course, requires that the homilist read the word in a way that is very different from that of the exegete. Exegesis is of very little help in the preparation of a homily. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* may be a great work of exegesis; but those of us who search its pages for material for a homily find very little. To preach its exegesis would result in a sermon way over the heads of any congregation. Worse still, people would be confused and disturbed.

How, then, are we homilists to read the word? We are to read it with a profound conviction that the Spirit who speaks in its pages is the same Spirit who dwells in us and prays in our hearts. We do not read Scripture as a historical text that poses problems. We read it as a means of coming into contact with the living God. We read it in order to build up our faith and hope and love. The image beloved of the Fathers of the western Church was that of the eating of the scroll by Ezekiel. The word was to be masticated and digested. Only when this process of assimilation had been completed could

the next and final stage take place. This was the *eructatio*, the belch, a word used in the latin version of St Jerome, 'official' in the West for close on fifteen hundred years. This was from the first verse of the forty-fifth psalm, *Eructavit cor meum verbum bonum*, which means literally, 'my heart has belched forth a good word'. Our modern gentility does not allow such a vivid translation and robs that heart-felt belch, redolent of the savoury meal, of its enthusiastic vigour (though the 'french' will use the verb *frémir*). The image illustrates admirably how the homilist must read scripture. It is not a text to be examined but a word to be assimilated. We have to become what we eat, and what we eat must become part of us. We do not stand back as spectators of the mysteries of Scripture. We have to become involved in them. The mysteries of Christ are ours. We are caught up in the reality of his life through his Spirit who lives within our hearts. We must allow our hearts to burn within us as he unfolds to us the word that is himself. We have to pray the word before we speak it. But, and this is crucial, we must not seek in prayer ideas and insights that we can use in a homily. A homily should be born of prayer certainly, but we should not use our prayer to prepare a homily. The purpose of prayer is prayer. In prayer we eat and digest the word for itself, trusting that, given the rumination and healthy digestion, the inevitable eructation will follow.

This reading-in-the-heart of Scripture leads to a spiritual reading and understanding of the word as one unique whole. The Bible is *the* Book, inspired by the unity of the Holy Spirit. But how many homilists are so convinced of this that they can preach as convincingly on the Old Testament as they can on the New? The Old Testament was the only Scripture that Jesus read, revered and loved. Many of us 'study' the Old Testament, but few find in it nourishment for the spirit. We need to go back to the 'men of the Church', like Origen, who saw in the Old Testament the paradigm of our journey towards God. The first chapters of Genesis are fundamental in the whole tradition of christian spirituality; but all we tend to cull from them is the doctrine of the fall and original sin. That is certainly not what the prologue of John's gospel distilled from them. Many of us are practical Marcionists, in that we are not really at home with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: the God whom Jesus addressed as 'Abba'. The unity of Scripture is confirmed by that one word, spoken by the Son. We have to learn to read Scripture with that 'Abba' echoing in our hearts. Then we shall find the unity of the word.

This prayerful search for the spiritual understanding of Scripture is the raw material out of which a homily is formed. It is the essential first step. The second is equally important. Our homily is a service for our hearers. The question confronting the homilist is, 'how do I translate my own heartfelt understanding of the word into terms that will touch the hearts of those who listen to my words?' Here again, the word yields its answer: 'I know mine, and mine know me'. The preaching of Jesus hit home because he understood from the inside the realities of the lives of his listeners. The parables illustrate how he spoke in terms of the daily experiences of his audience: of planting and harvesting, of fishing and shady business deals, of the anxieties and fears of ordinary people, of making bread and patching clothes. His words were such that not only did they touch the lives of his listeners; the early christian communities felt at liberty to adapt them to their own situations. The pentecostal Spirit speaks in such a way that each understands 'in his own native language'. The second demand facing the homilist is that he be immersed, as Jesus was, in the lives of those to whom he speaks. He has to know the concerns and interests of their hearts, and respond to them.

This is not an easy matter. It means that the homilist has to be a continual learner: one humble enough to find and recognize the limits of his own experience. He has also to find and recognize the limitations of those to whom he preaches, and help them to break out of them through their own God-given desires and aspirations. Jesus entered into the world of sinners, and transformed their lives from within by opening their eyes to their own spiritual potential. He did this in such a way that the words, 'go now, and sin no more', really freed the sinner to do exactly that. His enemies, the Pharisees, condemned and excluded sinners, robbing them of all hope. Jesus never stood back, like the 'outsider'. It was his world, he was part of it. Similarly, the homilist has to become part of the world to which he speaks. He has to see its potentiality and its fragility. Jesus angered the Pharisees because they knew he was himself a Pharisee, but one who went beyond the security of man-made laws. He was a Pharisee whose life was centred on God. They were Pharisees whose lives were centred on observance of their own laws and casuistry. Certainly, they steeled their self-righteous hearts against him, precisely because his words cut too near to the bone of their lives. Chesterton says somewhere that Christianity is hopelessly historical. (Some would say that politically Chesterton was hopelessly

unhistorical.) But the point is valid. We are a Church of history: a community which can recognize in itself the best and worst of the age in which it lives; a Church preaching to people who share in the best and the worst; a Church that is a net full of good and bad fish.

This historicity is our cherished heritage from Judaism, God, who knows his people, speaks and works through them. He takes them as they are and where they are and begins from there, not from some point where he thinks they ought to be. Paul sums it up when he says that God loved us whilst we were still sinners, not when we had stopped sinning. Jesus sees himself as the healer of the sick, not of the healthy. He identified himself with the sick and so led them to health. Unless we recognize ourselves in the lives of those to whom we preach, it were better that we say nothing. I ask myself what can I, as a celibate, say about the realities of married life of which I have no experience at all? I can speak of love, but not of married life. What can I, comfortably ensconced in the security of religious life, say to the starving poor who do not know where their next meal is coming from?

The question facing the homilist is, 'do I know mine?' It must be answered with great honesty. The nineteenth-century founder of a missionary congregation fills his letters with heartfelt appeals to the missionaries in Africa to be in no hurry to make converts, but to learn patiently, to get to know the Africans first of all. It was advice that went unheeded. The primary pastoral task is to learn, to get to know people, to love them, otherwise we are 'noisy gongs and clashing cymbals'. Jesus spent more than thirty years learning. How many of us have done that?

But 'knowing mine' is still not enough. Mine have to know me. The contemporaries of Jesus recognized him as one of themselves. That recognition was a source of scandal and of wonder. His friends thought he had gone out of his mind when he began to preach (Mk 3, 21). The question that continually comes to mind is: 'what sort of man is this?' Not what sort of angel or God. Jesus was extraordinary, but he was extraordinary because he was so ordinary. Even risen, he is still 'this same Jesus'. The homilist has to be recognizable as a human being who shares the common humanity of those to whom he preaches. If his listeners are to recognize the word in themselves, they must recognize themselves in him. The homilist is not the one who has the answers, but the one who shares the same questions and the common quest.

One of the finest homilists I ever knew would never allow me to

preach when I went to his parish on Sundays, to help out. He was right. I did not know his people (dock-workers), nor did they know me. When he was there he spoke to his own, who knew him. He preached as one who shared their lives. His community knew that he meant and tried to live by what he said. His sermons were an invitation to a common quest.

What is the purpose of a homily? Surely it can have no other purpose than the purpose of the gospel: 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name' (Jn 20, 31). 'Life in his name'; that means fresh heart, because we belong to Jesus. His destiny is ours. Jesus came to give life, not to condemn. A homily should always open to the people the message of hope, joy and love: in fact, the gospel-message. A homily is meant to put new heart into people. It should make them feel that they and their lives are worth the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus opened the eyes of those who listened to him to the hidden presence of God in their lives. He brought them up against the responsibility of their own freedom of choice. His words were the words of eternal life. Jesus did not tell people what to do. He invited them to follow his way, and showed them that it was possible to follow his way. It is so easy to beat people over the head with their sinfulness. The technique has been used often enough. But it is not the way of Jesus, who teaches free response to a message of love and hope.

If the purpose of the homily is first of all to give the individual new heart, the building up of the community is concomitant with it. Christianity is in its essence about the community of those who recognize each other in their faith in Jesus. This solid, fundamental allegiance to the person of Jesus is the bond of community, which permits of differences. In the Acts of the Apostles, it is plain that the early Church permitted differences, as long as there was a common faith in the simple profession that Jesus in the Lord. A homily should bring people back to this basic faith as the essential bond of their union. In other words, a homily should be able to help people to see that unity is possible with and even demands diversity.

The spirit of the homily should lead naturally into the Prayer of the Faithful. In that prayer, the community seeks to make God's concerns its own. It seeks to accept with freedom and responsibility the desires of God's heart. In short, the homily is meant to build up a community of the concerned.

Admittedly, this is an ideal realized in very few parishes. But the

fact that it is realized in some, is the sign of hope. The whole liturgy of the word is described in terms of a nourishing meal. The homilist is the one who breaks the bread of the word as Jesus broke and distributed the loaves and fishes, for all to eat and have their fill.

Obviously, the homilist faces a group of listeners whose needs differ enormously. Some will be eager to hear the word, others will close their hearts against it. The situation is as old as the Bible itself. Some try to solve the problem by indulging in dramatics, by deliberately playing on people's emotions. The technique is standard practice among the popular preachers on television in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. But the homilist is not a demagogue. His responsibility to the word is a responsibility towards the freedom of each of his hearers. He seeks to elicit a free response: which may be acceptance or rejection. Jesus taught as one who neither sought to curry favour nor feared disapproval. But, at the same time, he was sensitive to the capacity of his audience: 'I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now' (Jn 16, 12). Paul, too, speaks about giving milk and solid food. The true homilist is always a teacher who seeks to lead others gradually into the truth. There is no cut and dried formula for doing this. There is, however, one necessary ingredient — simplicity. A homily should always be simple and direct: as the gospel is simple and direct.

Such simplicity demands that the homilist make the word his own. He should be able to express the essence of his homily in a couple of sentences. The art of the homily consists in saying one thing in several different ways. An exercise in this is to insist on always giving at least a three-minute homily at every week-day liturgy: a simple thought for the day that people can keep in their hearts.

Finally, we should remember that the ability to give a homily is a gift of the Spirit that is not given to all. This means that some people just do not have the gift, and should never be allowed near a pulpit. A candidate for the priesthood who betrays a total incapacity to give a homily or to lead a congregation in prayer should be invited to reconsider seriously his calling, no matter how personally pious he may be. This may seem harsh; but a priest is ordained for the people, not for his personal spiritual benefit. He is a servant, called for the sake of others. If he is incapable of serving the needs of the faithful, what is the point of ordination. Not that the homily is the private field of the clergy. We have to seek out those who have this gift; and we may find them in the most unlikely places. The Spirit breathes where he wills.