

THIRD THINGS FIRST

Preaching and Ignatian Contemplation

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AS HE DREW NEAR to the latter part of his life and ministry, the prominent US preacher and writer Warren Wiersbe made a remark which embedded itself in my mind. It intrigued me for years, and I sensed the growing burden of responding to it. Thinking about preaching, he said that, if he had his time again, he would attend more to the imagination:

Imagination penetrates reality. Imagination is not escape, imagination is the entrance into reality where you put yourself in the place of Amos, or Paul; you put yourself in the place of that new widow in your congregation Imagination is one of the greatest allies the preacher can have. And not enough has been said about it.¹

This reflection had the sense of lament about it—a lament which has been long-standing and widespread in the Church for centuries. For instance, in the first of a series of lectures at Yale University in 1871–1874, Henry Ward Beecher said,

The first element on which your preaching will largely depend for power and success, you will perhaps be surprised to learn is *Imagination*, which I regard as the most important of all the elements that go to make the preacher.²

G. Campbell Morgan complements this with his contention that ‘imagination is the supreme work of [sermon] preparation’.³ And Walter Burghardt contributes an incisive note:

¹ This comment was made in an interview in 1988 conducted by the then principal of Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr Haddon Robinson. See ‘My Pilgrimage in Expository Preaching’, *Expositapes*, set 7 (Denver: Denver Seminary, 1988) (audiobook).

² Henry Ward Beecher, quoted in Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Power of the Imagination: Developing a Christian Imagination: An Interpretative Anthology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1995), 216. Emphasis in the original.

³ Quoted in David L. Larsen, *Telling the Old Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1995), 241.

In recent years I have argued that four problems prevent today's homily from being any better than yesterday's sermon: fear of Sacred Scripture, ignorance of contemporary theology, unawareness of liturgical prayer, and lack of proper preparation. The list has a lamentable lacuna. I have left out the most serious lack of all: imagination. Without imagination the preacher limps along on one leg.⁴

Eugene Peterson labelled such a lack of imagination as an evil:

A major and too-little-remarked evil in our time is the systematic degradation of the imagination. The imagination is among the chief glories of the human Right now, one of the essential Christian ministries in and to our ruined world is the recovery and exercise of the imagination.⁵

The imagination, energised by the scriptures and animated by the Spirit, will have the people of God living with a prophetic edge, seeing visions and dreaming dreams (Acts 2:17). Preachers with an imagination formed by the scriptures will be able to convey what it means to live according to the scriptures with authenticity. In arriving at a working definition of the imagination for the purposes of preaching, it is helpful to consider the contribution of two nineteenth-century figures: George MacDonald and Cardinal John Henry Newman.

The insights of MacDonald and Newman are helpful because in the second millennium, up until the nineteenth century, 'imagination was treated as a dim-witted Cinderella to be kept in the poverty of her kitchen'.⁶ MacDonald suggests that the imagination is the way in which humanity can know God.⁷ In his understanding, the imagination is not so much a human faculty with the power to create as a divine gift by which to discover God. In essence, there is nothing that humanity can claim as being of purely human origin; there is only the unearthing and discovering of that which God has created and put in place. To exercise the imagination is to become more human by becoming attuned to the purpose and presence of God.

⁴ Walter J. Burghardt, *Preaching: The Art and the Craft* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 19.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 171.

⁶ Michael Paul Gallagher, 'Theology and Imagination: From Theory to Practice', *Christian Higher Education*, 5/1 (2006), 83–96, here 84. Available at http://www.plaything.co.uk/gallagher/academic/theol_imag.html.

⁷ See 'The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture', in George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and on Shakespeare* (London: Sampson Low Marston, 1895).

In his *Grammar of Assent*, Newman affirms that the imagination has a place alongside reason in comprehending and embracing the reality of God. While he expresses some concern about involving the imagination, he does not preclude its use, as he states that reason alone cannot always be relied upon to advance good.⁸ Newman subsequently suggests that both reason and imagination are necessary for certitude of faith.

Today, and in so far as the gospel is concerned, the situation is the same as that which Newman described: explanation of the gospel has overshadowed experience of the gospel.⁹ The essence of Macdonald's and Newman's thesis is that the imagination attunes people to God and to the presence and activity of the divine in the world. With preaching in mind, my working account of imagination is that a biblically nourished imagination discerns the legacy of the incarnation and the presence of the Kingdom. However, the problem is to find means by which the individual imagination can be formed in this way.

Having made the Spiritual Exercises at a Franciscan friary in 2003, I could not think of a more effective way to nurture and form a biblical and Christ-centred imagination than by drawing on the legacy of Ignatius Loyola. I considered the prayer disciplines of the Spiritual Exercises and that of *lectio divina* as two ways of lingering in the text for the glory of God. My doctoral research explored what might happen if preachers were to utilise *lectio divina* and Ignatian gospel contemplation as part of the normal preparation for their sermons. What would happen if, alongside their usual exegesis and study of the text at hand, preachers were to make use of this kind of prayer?



⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1870), 86.

⁹ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 171–172.

The Experiment

So, over a four-month period in 2010, eight ministers—four Presbyterians (including myself),¹⁰ two Baptists, one Anglican and one Methodist—did just that. Each week we began our engagement with the scripture from which we were preaching by using *lectio divina* or Ignatian gospel contemplation. We met once a month to report, discuss our experience and observe any changes taking place.

I was aware that Ignatian gospel contemplation was just one part of a greater whole—the Spiritual Exercises—and my research endeavoured to proceed paying attention to that fact. David Lonsdale writes, with reference to taking one aspect of the Spiritual Exercises apart from the whole: ‘One pitfall is a kind of free-for-all in which a person interpreting a tradition pays little attention to its original context and history but focuses entirely on what it might mean “for us” today’.¹¹ He uses the analogy of a theatre director or actor taking a few scenes from *Hamlet* for his or her own reasons: ‘the result may or may not be a creative experience, but it is hardly *Hamlet*’.¹² In his book *Ignatius the Theologian*, Hugo Rahner focuses on a single form of prayer from the Spiritual Exercises: the application of the senses. He concedes that this means deliberately bypassing the instructions of the Exercises themselves, and that

... this, of course, is just as bad as the anatomical preparation of an organ which can only be fully meaningful in terms of its vital functions within the living entity from which it is taken—but it is a necessary evil at times.¹³

Such an exercise can, Rahner argues, however, bring the whole ‘into clearer focus’. My study endeavoured to proceed with both Lonsdale’s and Rahner’s observations in mind.

As our group of ministers engaged in this process, a number of benefits were experienced, and yet these were threatened by particular challenges. One challenge was the relentless demands of pastoral ministry and the assault on time set aside for sermon preparation. One of the participants conceded that not one uninterrupted hour could be found

¹⁰ My research method was such that I was an active participant.

¹¹ David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*, edited by Philip Sheldrake (New York: Orbis, 2000), 22–23.

¹² Lonsdale, *Eyes to See*, 23.

¹³ Hugo Rahner, *Ignatius the Theologian*, translated by Michael Barry (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 182.

to focus on prayer and study. Another observed that the administration of the sacraments and the preaching of the scriptures were the reason why he had been ordained by his denomination, yet they were the last things for which he had time. The commitment of introducing a particular approach to prayer, such as Ignatian gospel contemplation, into our preaching exposed this pressure to a marked degree. The fact that pastoral demands were eroding one of the most crucial aspects of pastoral care—feeding the people from the scriptures—was tragic and scandalous.

Private Prayer and Public Preaching

Another challenge centred on the tension between the fruit of private prayer and formal sermon preparation. To the extent that participants encountered God in the time of prayer, they experienced a subsequent tension as to what parts of that encounter were appropriate to include in their sermon. Most participants discovered that the prayer bore fruit, but felt reticence about translating their experience into the sermon.

As the author of the research I did not go through the same level of struggle as the other participants. I was more attuned to the purpose of the exercise, and I had also been dealing with the dynamics of Ignatian contemplation for much longer. That is not to say that I always included in a sermon everything I experienced in prayer; discretion and wisdom were still exercised. However I was less disturbed by bringing in an intense struggle, perplexity or personal revelation experienced in prayer if it helped to illuminate the text for the sermon's listeners.

When the other preachers agreed to be a part of this exercise, one reason expressed for getting involved was to recover a perceived loss of devotion to Christ and loss of passion in preaching. These deficits had emerged during their time in vocational pastoral ministry. As the research exercise gained momentum, they spoke of significant gains. These included growth in confidence as a preacher, honesty before God and the text, and sermon content which, while making for vulnerability in the preacher, proved powerful for the congregation. Yet it was as if our stated hope—to reconnect with God devotionally—had been fulfilled, only for it to clash with the accompanying hope of reviving our first love for preaching.

Initially this struggle was puzzling in the extreme. We had committed ourselves to a time of conscious prayer for the purpose of sermon preparation. Why, then, was it proving so difficult for some to integrate the fruit of their prayer into the sermon? The reticence appeared to be based on several common themes. These included a powerful convention



that there must be a dichotomy between personal devotions and sermon preparation; a concern that the preacher's encounter with God was too personal to share; and a lack of confidence that such fruit would be of any value to the congregation.¹⁴

Throughout the research the encouragement was frequently given that we were above all seeking God. This spiritual pursuit overshadowed all that we did and defined our sermon preparation; we were never just writing a sermon. We talked extensively about the traditional view, advocated during formal theological training, that sermon preparation

ought never to double as a time of personal devotion. The discussion was revelatory for some group members, as others in the group spoke of how they derived spiritual nourishment from their sermon preparation. A consensus was reached that this research exercise would facilitate the kind of prayer experience that nourishes both preacher and congregation.

However, the dichotomy between devotions and formal sermon preparation proved as strong as ever in practice. It re-emerged owing to the nature of revelation received during prayer and led on to another pervasive problem which stalled some group members. The insights received from praying the scriptures were variously described as too personal or too tough to transmit directly through preaching. Some insights were very specific, and therefore seemed peripheral to a more traditional reading of the text and were suppressed when the content of the sermon was prepared. The kind of difficulty that was encountered is summed up in these comments made by participants:

I just found myself getting into [the scripture] and quite enjoying it and thinking 'Oh bother. I actually have to write a sermon. This is fun.'

It [the scripture] was speaking more to me about things I did not want to speak to the congregation about.

¹⁴ This lack of confidence may be an expression of a reserve typical of New Zealand culture.

I got to this extreme high where I was really talking to Jesus like I never have before. It was just amazing. But it was so amazingly high ... in this personal time that when it came to prepare the sermon it was the worst low. Like, is this bi-polar preaching? The heights of high and then converting the peace and what I found through the Ignatian contemplation into the sermon was the pits. It was the worst.

We were constantly reminded that the fruit of prayer was for the purpose of feeding the people of God.

There is an active life which proceeds from the fullness of contemplation, such as teaching and preaching And this work is more excellent than simple contemplation. For even as it is better to enlighten than merely shine, so it is better to give to others the fruits of one's contemplation than merely to contemplate.¹⁵

Admittedly, not everything produced by contemplation necessarily warrants inclusion in a sermon, but the intensity of struggle that threatened to prevent the production of any sermon at all seemed quite contrary to the spirit of the prayer discipline being utilised. The *raison d'être* of a preacher is to bring the scriptures to bear upon the Church of Christ as it worships and obeys Christ in the time and culture in which its members live. The Church sets aside those whom it recognises as gifted and called to study, pray and present the scriptures to the people of God. The members of the Church therefore have the reasonable expectation that when their minister or pastor stands before them to preach, he or she does so as a result of prayerfully studying the scriptures. While every group member involved in the research agreed with this, it seemed contradictory that, in preparing a sermon, the preacher would conceal the fruit gained through praying for the sermon.

The struggle involved in deciding if insights gained during the prayer should be preached was intense, but it was pleasing that at least some of them were eventually aired. The easing of the difficulty in moving from prayer to sermon came from an unexpected quarter: the Third Prelude.

The Third Prelude

From the beginning, our group of preachers was orientated to the Third Prelude by engaging directly with the counsel of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.2, q.188 art.6, quoted in Alexandre Brou, *Ignatian Methods of Prayer*, translated by William J. Young (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1949), 28.

We recalled that this is the point in the prayer where a person entrusts himself or herself to the grace of God and, in the words of Ignatius, asks ‘for the grace that all my intentions, actions, and operations may be ordered purely to the service and praise of His Divine Majesty’ (Exx 46). We saw that during the Spiritual Exercises the desired grace ranged from ‘an intimate knowledge of our Lord’ (Exx 104) to ‘sorrow, compassion, and shame because the Lord is going to His suffering for my sins’ (Exx 193). We saw that the specific grace requested would vary from person to person, depending on the material being contemplated and the current circumstances that person was experiencing. We recognised that it was one thing to request a particular grace but quite another to understand how the Holy Spirit might answer that request. For Ignatius, to ask for grace in the first place was already a response to the influence of God:

What I so much desire I shall not labour to obtain through my own effort, but I shall ask for it, because I know I can do nothing. Under the impulse of grace which makes me feel my need, I ask God to give me that which I cannot help desiring.¹⁶

Hence, the presence and guidance of God was assumed and depended upon constantly and at every stage of the prayer.

Initially group members struggled with comprehending and practising the Third Prelude of Ignatian gospel contemplation. In my experience, whenever I have been exposed to Ignatian gospel contemplation outside a Roman Catholic context, the Third Prelude is almost never mentioned.¹⁷ But where it is omitted, there is a danger that people will engage in little more than a game of ‘let’s pretend’ rather than a rigorous engagement with Spirit and Word.

While this aspect of Ignatian gospel contemplation initially caused some consternation among our group, it eventually proved to be the most fruitful part of their prayer. It took two to four experiences of Ignatian gospel contemplation before the Third Prelude seemed to resonate with participants. They presented themselves before Christ and the scriptures

¹⁶ Quoted in Brou, *Ignatian Methods of Prayer*, 104.

¹⁷ An exception is Lynne Baab, *Joy Together: Spiritual Practices for Your Congregation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012). Lynne Baab was my doctoral supervisor and is a widely published author in the area of spiritual formation. She discusses the Third Prelude in this recent publication in the light of the findings of my research. It is also noteworthy that Brou found elements of the *Spiritual Exercises* were being omitted at the time of his own writing. ‘Even among the authors who claim to give the teaching of St Ignatius, more than one simplifies details, merging one with the other or even passing them over in silence.’ (Brou, *Ignatian Methods of Prayer*, 94)

and prayed, 'I ask and I desire ...', and the Spirit moved. One participant had initially struggled to connect with Ignatian prayer at all, and the difficulty was exacerbated by time pressures. Within this context, the Third Prelude emerged as the redeeming and defining feature. He said,

But I must say ... that even with the struggling with the Ignatian [prayer] and the time, the great thing about it was I found the grace in it. When you're asking for the graces

Another one of the preachers also initially failed to grasp the concept of the Third Prelude but before long found that it was:

One of the most significant parts of [the Ignatian prayer] now that I understand it.

Once the group settled into the rhythm of the Third Prelude, its effect became evident as the unifying factor between the time of prayer and the subsequent sermon content.

It appears that the praying and outworking of the Third Prelude transcended the participants' evaluation of the success or failure of their prayer time. Even when the overall sermon preparation had not gone well, praying for the desired grace brought clarity, unity and illumination. In so far as participants received an answer to their prayer for the desired grace, they subsequently felt compelled and inspired to make that the major unifying theme and call in their sermon. The sense of God's response to the grace asked for and desired was discerned as the very centre, the heartbeat of the sermon. During one of the meetings in which we discussed our experiences, one of the ministers described how the use of the Third Prelude had evolved in her sermon preparation and made the transition to the congregation:

Praying for the desired grace brought clarity, unity and illumination

I found the grace the most powerful thing ... in terms of the sermon as well that seems to be what I am asking for in response to this passage. When you preach a sermon you want people to respond in some way and it is the grace where it is at for me. What are you asking of me in this passage? What are you asking of me when I read this text? How can I interact with it personally? And that's how I use the grace.

To extend the analogy, the grace experienced became the heartbeat of the sermon, and so provided life-blood to the preacher and hearers. Every sermon needs a crisp and faithful précis, in no more than one sentence, of what the text is saying and how the preacher will convey

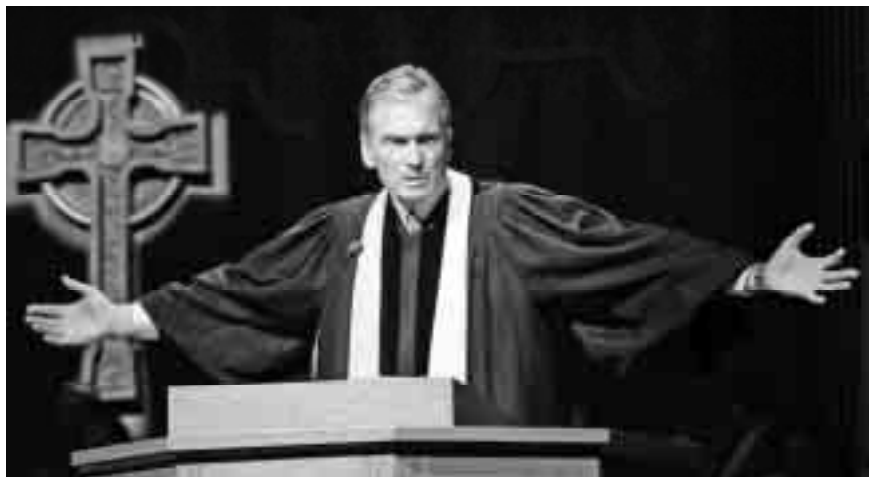
it. The completion of the prayer 'I ask and I desire ...' proved to be the genesis of such a succinct statement. This part of sermon preparation—being able to state the sermon in a sentence—has been variously called the sermon proposition or 'big idea'. It is often the part of sermon preparation that is most taxing. However, the Third Prelude plumbed the message and spirit of the text and animated its preparation and delivery.¹⁸

It was our experience that the divine response to the prayer prayed in the Third Prelude was when the movement of the Spirit was clearly evident. As we contemplated the passage of scripture and then talked with Jesus 'as one friend to another', the fruit of the Third Prelude nurtured and formed our imagination. And the perceived presence and work of the Spirit provided the confidence, courage and conviction to make the prayer-content into sermon-content. At the end of the research period, at our last group meeting, participants were invited to complete the sentence, 'In the light of this experience, it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us'¹⁹ One of the preachers spoke for the majority, saying that, while it can initially seem difficult to comprehend and utilise, it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us that 'the graces' are at play in the Third Prelude.

'It seems good to the Holy Spirit and us' because this research exercise exposed us as preachers; we discovered a constellation of issues hampering our service of Christ. 'It seems good to the Holy Spirit and us' because we found a means by which to experience grace in it all. We were a sample group of preachers, in New Zealand specifically and the Western world generally; and this constellation of issues revealed the pathology of the preacher in the Western Church, as a person overwhelmed by the assault of relentless pastoral demands which, ironically, work against the best panacea for the sickness endemic in our communities. That panacea is preaching the Christ of the scriptures. The pathology of the preacher is that preachers are losing their first love of Christ and of his bride (Revelation 2:4–5).

¹⁸ Interestingly, if there is a corresponding stage in praying *lectio divina*, it is the third movement: *oratio*. Having read (*lectio*) the text and meditated on it (*meditatio*), the prayer of response (*oratio*) serves as that timely or *kairos* moment, deemed opportune by the Spirit to speak to through the scriptures, calling attention to the work of the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Spirit. I identify *oratio* as the nearest element to the Third Prelude. It is the effect of *oratio* which generates fire in the belly and provides a surge of energy to begin to formulate the sermon.

¹⁹ This phrase is adopted from Acts 15:28 (the Council of Jerusalem). The sense of divine and human collaboration captured the experimental form of this research and facilitated good reflection on the process.



With this loss of devotion to God and the call to preach ‘Christ and him crucified’ (1 Corinthians 2:2), comes a loss of imagination. Hindering the recovery of the imagination is the strange dichotomy by which private devotions are not perceived as complementary to public ministry. Thus, the potential of the preacher possessing a biblically nourished imagination and discerning the legacy of the incarnation and presence of the Kingdom is threatened. The Third Prelude was found to neutralise this threat. With its call for the preacher to pause and consider the grace that might be discovered in the text under the guidance of the Spirit, there is a meeting of minds. The work of the Spirit shapes the prayer and mind of the preacher (Romans 8:14–17, 26–27) so that the same mind might be in us that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5): a mind and an imagination attuned to the legacy of the incarnation (Philippians 2:6–11) and the presence of the Kingdom.

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