Preaching for Liberation

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Societas Homiletica

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Justo: It is a great honor to be here among you. It is particularly an honor since neither of us consider ourselves homileticians in the technical sense. Preachers, we are. But we are not professors of homiletics, nor is homiletics our particular field of research and teaching.

I suppose that the main reason to which we owe such an honor is a small book we published several years ago under the title, "Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed."

What we sought to do in that book, after a brief introduction trying to explain what liberation theology is all about, was to explore manners in which a preacher might approach a text in order to discover its liberating dimensions. It was addressed primarily at white, male, North American preachers, and therefore we tried to analyze the manner in which we often deal with texts, and the manner in which we have seen others—in the Third World and among traditionally powerless groups in the United States—deal with them and then to explore how those preachers who constituted our main audience might apply similar methods.

Already at that time, however, there were other interests lurking between the lines. These are interests which both of us had been pursuing for some time, and which have profoundly affected our understanding of preaching and of biblical interpretation for preaching, but which are not explicit in that book.

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What we would like to do today is to make those other interests explicit and to make explicit how they might relate to the task of preaching—more specifically, to the task of preaching for liberation.

As you may know, we are both historians of doctrine. My own interests lie in the field of patristic theology, particularly second-century theology. Catherine's are more in the field of liturgics and the theological significance of liturgy.

Catherine: My interest has been particularly in the early liturgy—second through fourth centuries. In these liturgies—and in the sermons that have remained from the period—there is a vision of preaching that I have felt quite strongly we need to recapture. I am interested in particular in the relationship between sermon and liturgy.

The liturgy, well done, brings to our experience the ancient story of God's People by means of the sermon and tells us who we are. It is as God's People that we leave the service. In worship, we are called back and re-enact the central themes of that history, nuanced each time by our historical setting and by different portions of the whole spectrum of the Biblical witness. The task of the sermon is to let the Word speak through the liturgy so that the People of God, the Body of Christ, is nurtured, strengthened, renewed, rehearsed in who they are.

If it is not the People of God who leave the sanctuary there is little hope they will transform the world. The early church knew how to put together as one event the Scripture, the sermon, and the liturgy in order to form such a People. It is a skill and a vision we must relearn.

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Particularly in Protestant worship we have tended to the sermon—and the interpretation of Scripture which it embodies—as an act of the preacher alone. When it is strongly connected to the whole liturgy this perspective changes. In the settings where liberation theology has emerged out of a community the liturgy has been a significant bearer of that theology—the whole liturgy, not only the sermon.

Justo: My own interest in patristic theology has focused on the patristic interpretation of Scripture. I find this significant as a corrective to what has become the normative way of dealing with Scripture.

In the Western church, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, traditionally the most common ways to read Scripture have been as law and as prophecy. As law, Scripture tells us what to do. This is related to an entire theological outlook in which God is seen as legislator and judge, sin as breaking the law, and redemption as paying the penalty for sin. From this perspective, the Bible is read as a rule book to tell us what we ought to do in a given situation.

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A second approach that has become quite common in Western tradition is prophecy. When this word is employed in everyday language, even in the church, what is meant is that the words of Scripture somehow announce something that will happen in the future. From this perspective, the significance of the Old Testament lies mostly in that it includes the writings of prophets who foretold the coming of Jesus, and the significance of at least certain books of the New Testament is that they foretell what will happen in the future or, even more frequently in our day, what is happening right now.

Clearly, these two methods of interpretation existed in the early church and have continued throughout the history of the church. Yet, also clearly, they leave much to be desired.

It is for this reason that at a relatively early date a different approach became popular. This is allegorical interpretation. Throughout history, when Christian exegetes have not liked the limitations of the legal and the prophetic approach, they have often had to resort to allegory. From this perspective, everything in Scripture has a hidden meaning, if only one can find it. This is precisely the value and the attraction of this method. If one does not know what to make of what Scripture says about pigs being unclean, one can always decide that what the text really means is that we are not to be like pigs, that remember their master only when they are hungry.

Obviously, the main shortcoming of this method is that Scripture is ultimately deprived of authority. We find in Scripture what we put into it, like the magician who puts a rabbit in a hat when nobody is looking and then says, “voila!”

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In ancient and medieval times, this sort of interpretation was usually associated with Platonic philosophy, and therefore exegetes found in Scripture the same eternal principles that they could have known by reading Plato and the Neoplatonists.

In more recent times, what has become most common is a sort of interpretation that also believes that the value of Scripture lies in that it points to certain essential principles and then seeks to interpret Scripture so as to find them. A typical case is the famous Liberal theology summary of the message of

the Sermon on the Mount as the "Fatherhood of God, brotherhood of man, and the infinite value of the human soul." In our own day, psychological principles are often used for the same purpose.

Quite clearly, the early church did interpret Scripture in terms of law and prophecy—even on occasion in allegorical terms. But all of this is subsumed under another form of interpretation which places history at its very heart. All of these forms of interpretation, law, prophecy, and allegory, have one thing in common: they focus on words rather than events. What is important is the actual text, almost like a magical book, rather than the history of the community of faith. Over against this, the most common form of interpretation in the early church focuses on events and their patterns and connections–in other words, it focuses on history.

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This kind of interpretation is usually called "typological," for it speaks of events in the past as "types" or "figures" of events to come. We could as well call it "historical" in the strict sense, for what characterizes a historical perspective is precisely the conviction that, while events do not repeat themselves, and while each of them is significant in itself, there are also patterns which make the knowledge of the past worthwhile. Joseph sold by his brothers, Moses rejected by the Israelites, the prophets persecuted, are all "types" or figures of Jesus. And, because he is the culmination of history, because he is both the One to whom all these types pointed and the goal to which all of history moves, he is also the archetype from which the church must draw the pattern of its life.

This is also the manner in which Scripture interprets itself. When the prophet whom we now call Second Isaiah seeks for an interpretation of the exile and the return, he draws on the event of God

opening the Red Sea, so that, just as God made a path in the sea, now God makes a way in the wilderness. And when the earliest gospel writer seeks to interpret the "evangelion," the "good news" of what has happened in Jesus Christ, he draws on the image of the return from exile, quoting the prophet, “a voice cries in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord." The Lord who prepared a way in the Sea and in the desert, once again prepares the way, and the people who were pilgrims across the sea and across the desert will now again be pilgrims.

This typological form of Biblical interpretation is one that we have generally lost in the Western church, though it is beginning to appear again. It takes seriously the history of the People of God within which these types continue to occur, linking together generations centuries apart. It also provides a way for us to see our present experience as a part of this ongoing history. In fact, the beauty of this method is that it allows the parallels of our setting and the Biblical account to come through without an intervening translation into doctrine, inductive and deductive. It does not require academic training. It requires immersion in the Biblical story and an awareness of contemporary structures of power.

At this point, it is clear that the oppressed know best how to see this dimension in Scripture. It has been said that if you wish to know how the welfare system really works, the best way is not to read the laws about it nor to speak with those who administer it, but to speak to those who are on welfare—or who should be. Likewise, the best way to know what the Bible says within this history is not the mediation of some high-sounding hermeneutical principle or methodology. One does not even need to seek to "apply" the text politically. It happens naturally, as the oppressed read in Scripture a story similar to theirs. They know the real structures of power better than the rest of society, just as those on

welfare know that system best.

And it happens even implicitly without the need to spell out what is meant. When the slaves in a plantation sang "Go down Moses," they knew what they were really singing. The master knew only that they were singing about the Bible. But they knew that they were singing about the Bible and about themselves. And they saw a unity between the two that most probably remained hidden to the master.

Catherine: Without understanding typology, the early liturgies seem very strange indeed. Think of the Apostolic Tradition—the Rite of Hippolytus, stemming from the early third century, though purporting to represent an earlier, second century form. There baptism is paralleled with the Exodus. The whole baptismal service—because it is held on Easter Eve—links the baptism of the new candidate with the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is in turn linked to Israel's crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan. In other words, the release from bondage which God had caused for Israel, followed by the entrance into the Promised Land across the Jordan, was re-enacted, re-lived, re-done in an even greater fashion by Jesus, who freed humanity from the greater bondage to sin and death, and all the powers of evil, and delivered us to a greater land, the Kingdom, the Reign of God.

When baptism was performed on Easter Eve, the candidate was not simply reminded of those past events, but the parallel was relived at that moment. If the Cross and Resurrection are a type of the Exodus—in fact, if they are the archetype—then baptism is also a type of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus and of the Exodus. All that was said about typology in terms of Biblical history therefore also relates to this liturgical event.

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It can be stated more clearly: baptism is a type. The liturgical event is the latest in the series of such types. It depends for its power on the archetype—on the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus. It has no independent source or power. But in the same way that the Exodus and the death and resurrection of Jesus were actual events in history, so too this baptism is a specific moment in history—in the chain of events that are linked by their typology.

The Rite of Hippolytus sheds more light on the parallels. After the candidates are baptized and anointed with oil—that is, made Christs, anointed ones, with royal and priestly powers—they are joined to the whole congregation as the Easter eucharist is celebrated. For these candidates, their first communion includes not only the traditional chalice of wine, but also a chalice of milk and honey, to indicate that through baptism, they have been brought into the Promised Land—that the water in which they were baptized was a type not only of the Red Sea but also of the Jordan.

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Other types abound in the ancient liturgies: the manna in the Wilderness and the Bread of communion, which the Gospel of John links together with the words of Jesus: "I am the Bread of Heaven." Those who are baptized may truly have entered the Promised Land, but there is also a sense in which they still are pilgrims through the Wilderness, preparing to enter that land. The image of new birth is also clearly present, along with death and resurrection. Again, the words of the Gospel of John are helpful: even as Jesus was born, not of the will of the flesh but of God, so too in baptism those who once were born of

the flesh are now born of God. And these words from the Prologue of John's Gospel come just before the account of the Baptism of Jesus: "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave

power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

Types are not simple representations of past history, but complex, evocative, symbolic, poetic forms that can be combined in myriad ways within liturgy. Yet they retain the character of a new historical moment in which these types come to life with the power they possess because of those earlier moments. If in the Scripture itself we find frequent use of typology, much of it pointing to the liturgy, then it would appear that the liturgy of the church may be the best setting in which to fully understand the significance of much of Scripture. It is in the liturgy—most specifically in baptism and the eucharist as well as in aspects of the liturgical year—that the types with which Scripture has to do reach us and become events in our time. Baptisms were situated on Easter Eve because in our baptism we died with Christ and rose with him. The Eucharist was on Sunday because it was the day of the Resurrection. The calendar and the sacraments became events, typologically, not simply rituals that were performed for reasons of tradition.

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In the sixteenth century—and beyond—one of the debates among the churches was whether something "happened” in baptism and the Lord's Supper. Were these purely symbolic acts or did something really change? To view the sacraments typologically is to see that question differently. Yes, something happens: at a specific moment in history—in a liturgical setting—a type recurs. What Scripture records as happening in the past now occurs in our presence. It is an event. How we respond to that event may be as ambiguous as is our response to all of history. The possibilities may only be known to faith. But an event is an event—it is not the symbol of an event. An event is a moment in

which something happens. It is a specific moment in history.

Justo: Perhaps what we need is a revival of liturgical preaching. However, before we go much further, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by such "liturgical preaching." It is not simply preaching about the liturgy. Indeed, the very phrase "liturgical preaching" may cause some revulsion among many of us, for we have heard too much liturgical preaching that is little more than ecclesiastical navel-gazing, in which we extol the beauty of the liturgical tradition with little relevance for life in today's world.

Last Christmas Eve, we attended a beautiful service, graced with choral music from different periods in the history of the church, music rejoicing on the presence of God with us. Then came the sermon. It was a well-written piece. It was not particularly profound. But that was not its greatest fault. What I found missing, particularly in a service celebrating the incarnation, was any reference to the world to which God has come. We had invaded Panama, people were killing each other in Rumania, there was talk of a new world being born in Eastern Europe, repression was the order of the day in the Holy Land, and we spoke of the meaning of Christmas with no reference to any of those events.

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That was the first thing wrong with that service. But then, there was something else that was wrong, for after the sermon—and with no other explanation or connecting word, we all opened our books while the minister read: "All ye who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins. . ." And, we had communion. The problem is not that we had communion at a Christmas service. That would have been very good indeed. The problem was that we celebrated communion with no connection to the sermon, to the rest of the liturgy, or to the world around us.

What happened in that service was that it was governed by a non-historical, non-typological perspective. From this perspective, the meaning of Christmas has little or nothing to do with the world to which Jesus has come, and the eucharist is a self-contained reality somehow containing or expressing eternal truths which therefore can be celebrated anywhere and anytime, without necessary reference to the time or place of the celebration.

In contrast to this, true liturgical preaching is grounded in the historical and typological perspective. Jesus Christ is the archetype through which we must read all of Scripture, all the liturgy, and all of history, including our own. Ideally, what occurs in the liturgical celebration is that we are grafted into and nourished by a history whose key and goal is Jesus Christ, so that the liturgical event itself is a type of Christ, and the preaching binds together Scripture, life and liturgical event.

Take for instance the theme of the stone rejected by the master builders. What happens in liturgy is, first, that we celebrate the rejected One who has become the cornerstone. But we not only celebrate Him; by dying and being raised with Him in baptism, we too are made stones of rejection, and by partaking of His body in communion we are nourished in this new life, which, like His, will only be won as it is lost.

Much could be said along these lines. But an example is worth much more than a thousand theories, and therefore I quote a few words from a famous sermon. As you listen to these words, note the connection between the liturgical event, the historical setting, and the life of the congregation and the preacher. The sermon itself was preached on March 24, 1980, in a relatively small hospital chapel in

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San Salvador. The preacher is Msgr. Oscar Arnulfo Romero. The occasion is a memorial eucharist. A month earlier, there had already been an attempt to blow up the cathedral while Romero was celebrating communion. I shall read only a few relevant passages that illustrate the character of true liturgical preaching.

> I believe, my brothers and sisters, that this afternoon you should not only pray for the eternal rest of our beloved who is deceased; but you should also take up this message that must be intensively lived today by every Christian. Many people surprise us by claiming that Christianity has nothing to do with these things. But exactly the opposite is true.
>
> You have just heard the words from the Gospel of Christ, that we must not love ourselves so much that we refrain from taking the risks of life that history today requires of us; and you have heard that those who seek to avoid danger will lose their lives. On the other hand, those who give themselves up in service to others for love of Christ, they will live; just as the grain of wheat that seems to die but does not. If it does not die, it will remain alone. There is a harvest because it dies, because it allows itself to be sacrificed in the soil, to be undone, and by being undone it produces the harvest. . .
>
> I ask all of you, my dear brothers and sisters, that we look upon these things of our historical moment with this same hope, with this same spirit of self-giving, of sacrifice, and that we each do what we can. . .
>
> This Holy Mass, this Eucharist, is precisely that, an act of faith. It is by faith that we know that this host of wheat becomes the body of Christ which was offered for the redemption of the world, and that in that chalice the wine becomes the blood which was the price for our salvation. May this broken body and this blood shed for humankind nourish us, so that we too may give up our bodies and our blood to suffering and to pain, like Christ; not for ourselves, but in order to bring forth visions of justice and of peace for our people. Let us therefore come closely together in faith and in hope as we pray both for Dona Sarita and for ourselves. (At that moment, a shot rang out.)

Catherine: What is called for is a vision of preaching—not as an event in itself—the sermon, but as the midwife of an event—the liturgy. The sermon points to the current historical setting in which the congregation lives its daily life and in which this liturgy is set, with its pain and injustice, with its yearnings and hopes. It points to the ancient word—in which God spoke to the People of God in their

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historical setting. The sermon shows the parallels and the differences, preparing for the word to become present. The liturgy is the vehicle for its presence: in the recognition of our baptism, in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the season of the year, in the prayers of the people, or by other aspects of worship. The sermon is not an end in itself, nor is its effect necessarily directly upon the worshippers. Its power and fruitfulness may only be seen in the whole event of that gathering for worship.

Often, we preach as though the worship was giving directions for what Christians should do when they leave. Obviously, there is a truth in that. But if something does not happen in worship, little will happen beyond it. The sermon has the power to cause worship—the liturgy—to be a new event, a renewal of the Exodus, an occasion of our dying, a moment in which we prodigals are greeted by the Father and given a banquet.