

Effective Preaching

There is power in God's Word, but some complain of the slim fare they're fed

By Richard Hart, O.F.M. Cap.

How many of our listeners ever respond to our homilies like the disciples on the way to Emmaus who said, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (Lk 24:32)? Maybe not too many because some preachers and listeners don't believe in the power of God's Word. As we read in Hebrews, "Indeed the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow" (4:12).

God's word can bridge the sacred and the profane. God's spirit is as active today as it was in the time of Israel during the lives of Jesus and the saints and holy people. But some listeners complain of the "slim fare" they are fed in their respective parishes or elsewhere. What will wake us from our doldrums or from maybe our sleep-walking?

Words are powerful. Elie Wiesel warned, "Be careful with words, they're dangerous." Thomas More's daughter urged him to sign an oath,

"Say the words of the oath, but in your heart think otherwise." He responded that we lose our very selves when words don't match what is in our hearts. Do our words match what is in our hearts? Words can change a future like spouses saying "I do" at a wedding. "I want a

divorce." "Your cancer is inoperable." "You are sentenced to the death penalty." "You are fired." These words create a new experience and cause deep inner feelings that change one's outlook. Walter Burghardt states how the words *Sieg Heil* changed the lives of millions.

But words can also mend hearts, inspire, soothe, bring comfort to others. Words such as "I love you," "you are precious," "you are a good person," "we have removed all the cancer," or "you will be able to walk again," can be most consoling and uplifting.

God spoke in creation, "Let there be light," and there was light. God spoke often to the Israelites in the desert and brought them out slavery. God spoke through his prophets including Jeremiah, who initially did not want the job and later felt duped. But he described God's word as a "fire burning in his heart that he could not contain" (20:9). Does anything similar happen to us? Augustine maintained that sacraments are visible



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words; but words are audible sacraments. Some experiences are just too deep for words, yet we still attempt to express them.

Jesus was more than a prophet proclaiming Good News and the future reign of God. He embodied all this in his words, works and actions, especially reaching out to sinners, lepers and, by his healings, including the demoniacs. Paul, who was not ashamed of proclaiming the Gospel, stated, "It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). Concerning the Gospel he said, "Woe to me if I do not preach it" (1 Cor 9:16). He also told the Corinthians, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor:1:18).

Yes, the word of God is living, active and sharper than any two-edged sword. But we have to make sure as preachers that we focus on the word and not on ourselves. Jesus is the message, we are the messengers. The words of the past break open the future. Mark Twain once said that the difference between the wrong word and right one is the difference between a lightning bug and lightning. Our task as homilists is not just to explain God's word but to interpret these words in the context of people's lives as "Fulfilled In Your Hearing" states. The people need to know why they should lift up their hearts and mind, as well as give thanks and praise. God's word needs to be unpacked so that connections are made between the Scriptures and people's lives. The world is larger than we realize and smaller than we expect. We are bound together in ways we can't even imagine, something that is brought out through the Internet and cyberspace.

Robert Barron states in *Word on Fire* that he was always fascinated by the power of the spoken word: speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, and Bishop Sheen's sermons. He maintains that God's Word has the power to change people's lives. The power, how-

ever, does not come from the preacher, no matter how eloquent, but from the Holy Spirit. Barron quotes Bishop Sheen with regard to the Magi, "Of course they went back by a different road; no one comes to Christ and ever goes back the same way he came." Sister Sue Mosteller of the Congregation of St. Joseph, was always deeply moved by the way Henri Nouwen explained God's Word. She said that he had a compelling way to touch people's hearts by making the Word come alive.

We need to remember the words of Isaiah, especially, when we think that our homilies are not inspiring. "My word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it" (55:11). When we find people not responding to the power of God's Word, we have to remember Jesus' quoting the prophecy of Isaiah, "Dull is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted, and I heal them" (Mt 13:15).

Purpose of Homily

Our proclamation of the Good News is designed to move our listeners to a deeper sense of prayer, to conversion, to growth in holiness, and to help them reach out to those in greater need. Another way of looking at it is to draw the assembly into the experience of the grace of God and to celebrate this by having them share the Good News with others as they go forth. With all the human suffering going on in the world and in our lives the question arises, can grace abound all the more? Can people be healed or even be raised from the dead? Every assembly has its own share of grief and death which need to be addressed so that new life can come. It is amazing how, despite all odds, people endure trials and cling to God and

their faith. They are rooted in Jesus' death and resurrection and are able to be hopeful rather than despondent. The poor

and hungry demonstrate this reality and often are more open to God's powerful word. As preachers we need to stand in solidarity with them, not just announce the Good News. Frederick Buechner maintains that all human experience contains both tragedy and comedy; the Gospel can speak to both. Appropriate humor can drive home a point. In his book on preaching, Alfred McBride states, "Once in a while a funny story or a joke serves as an ice-breaker for a homily. It will be more effective if it actually relates to the ideas in the homily. A skillful speaker will make connections between humor and substance." Stephen V. DeLeers states in *Written Text Becomes Living Word* that we have to avoid preaching as entertainment. He writes, "Reverencing the Lord in our preaching does not rule out homiletically justified humor."

We need to reflect on the global, national or local experiences happening in people's lives that are conveyed to us through newspapers, magazines, TV and computers. How a loving God can be present in these events is indeed a daunting challenge to any preacher. Can we convey hope where there is despair, discouragement and alienation? As the social fabric of our world unravels in the breakdown of family life, in terrorism, violence, drugs, racism and AIDS, just to mention a few, can we be harbingers of Good News? Now, with our economy in shambles, people losing jobs and homes, and banks in turmoil causing much pain and suffering, how can the cross and resurrection be proclaimed as an answer to suffering, pain and death? That is a daunting question for any preacher. Paul taunts us, "O death, where is your victory?" (1 Cor 15:55). Do we believe and preach that sin and death can never hold any final power? What we celebrate is not just the cross and suffering, but the fidelity and love Jesus showed us to the end. The tri-

umph of the cross is our triumph over sin, suffering and death leading to resurrection. The cross will always remain a sign of contradiction to a materialistic world, but it is the gateway or narrow way that leads us to fuller life and love for others. Love is more powerful than any evil. Evil will have its day, but the final victory is ours because of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Robert Waznak maintains that "proclamation is not about a teaching, but an event . . . not about doctrine defended but saving acts boldly announced." Jesus' death and resurrection need to be boldly proclaimed. What we preachers need to shy away from is offering solutions rather than helping our listeners enter more deeply into the anguish of suffering and pain. God can be absent, elusive or play a hide-and-seek game with us. It takes much faith to realize how God is present even in absence. And all of us are interlaced with these realities.

Wrestling with the Text

Sometimes we need to wrestle with a text the way Jacob wrestled with an angel before receiving a blessing. Wrestling for a blessing can be very challenging. We might have to preach a "hard word" where we know the listeners will resist the Spirit's prompting to a fuller understanding of the Good News. Father Brian Massingale, who teaches at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has become an outspoken advocate for despised and oppressed people. He said, "A priest must be a social critic and advocate if he's going to be faithful to the Gospel. Why me? I don't know. But it's who I am. You speak because the price of silence is betrayal." Amos's words of God's judgment on the Israelites for their failure to reach out to the poor is heard differently in an inner city parish than in a suburban or exurban one. Mary Catherine Hilkert writes in *Naming Grace*, "How can someone who has been raped carry out Jesus' command, 'Love your enemies?' Is anyone capable of forgiving 70 times seven times in a racist society? How do battered women respond to 'wives be submissive to your

husbands'? The poet Rilke suggests we need to allow the listeners to 'live the questions' asked by reflecting on them in a variety of settings as happens in some parishes. But even before we begin the meeting we might ask what the former bishop of Saginaw, Kenneth Untener, requested: that the first item of the agenda was how shall what we say or do involve the poor?"

Our listeners can resist and even reject the Good News, or they can struggle with the word proclaimed as Jesus struggled in the garden. We don't have to be an Oscar Romero, but we need to denounce sins that tear apart hearts, communities, nations and the world. Prophets are not afraid to make their assemblies aware that they are going down a dead-end street of destruction, or how they are oppressing and dehumanizing others. If words are dangerous, prophets can also be dangerous because they speak for God, encouraging us to greater fidelity to a loving God.

We are challenged by our society that tells us it is better to lower our standards than to live in pain and that it is better to indulge in immoral sexuality than to be lonely. As one widow wrote, "Setting one's limits can be mighty lonely." Good looks, glamorous lifestyles, beautiful homes are being promoted. If we suffer from sexual dysfunction, we're told that drugs will help, and we're urged to counteract old age with anti-aging salves and face lifts. Jesus refused to compromise his loneliness in the garden, his pain and humiliation. Joining him is daunting, and many — like the Apostles — would rather sleep. Do we need a wake-up call to how important our ministry is?

In every Eucharistic celebration we remember God's fidelity as described in Mary Hague's hymn, "We remember. We celebrate. We believe." The stories we tell are powerful reminders of how we should live: the prodigal son reminds us to forgive, the multiplication of the loaves to feed the hungry, the curing of the lepers to reach out to society's outcasts, the woman caught in adultery to not judge others, the disciples on the way to Emmaus to not

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become discouraged, the widow's mite to be generous. We invite our listeners to come and see Jesus and hear his words, "Go, and do likewise." Jesus' words were enfolded in him by forgiving and eating with sinners, healing all kinds of sicknesses, actually touching lepers, loving tax collectors and prostitutes. When we relate Jesus' stories, we open ourselves and our listeners to new possibilities and meaning of His passion, death and resurrection. As Isaiah proclaimed, "See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (43:19). Our challenge is to tell the familiar story of what God has done for us through Jesus' death and resurrection, but to tell it with a fresh approach. We unlock the mines of spiritual wealth. Considering characters who are "foreign" to us, such as the Scribes or Pharisees or the woman at the well, can help us approach the story in a different or new way. Another way is to ask questions. How long did the prodigal father wait for his son? Did the elder son ever reconcile with his younger brother? How many men accused the woman of adultery and what were their specific sins? Why did Jesus take only Peter, James and John up the mountain to be transfigured before them, or take them with him into the room when he raised Jairus' daughter from the dead? Using stories, questions, metaphors and images can help our listeners to see reality in a fresher way and lead to changed lives. Henri Nouwen believed in the power of stories that can confront without oppressing, and inspire without manipulating.

We need to delve into our deeper experiences, often the sources of energy and hidden power, then, animated by the Holy Spirit, proclaim the Good News as forcefully as we can. Our assemblies often possess treasures we can help them discover in their archives, especially how God is working in their lives, or as Hopkins wrote about the world "charged with the grandeur of God," and so we sing with Louis Armstrong, "What a Wonderful World." We act as "midwives" helping to give birth to peace and justice in the

world and in our local community. Do I testify to the Good News like a mother testifies to giving birth? Or do I proclaim it like a skilled obstetrician?

As preachers we see things through a prism of God's love, goodness and promises. But we have to remind ourselves that everything is somehow affected by sin, that we are in need of reform and that we have not arrived at the "not yet." How is God present in our wounded world when there is so much evil, violence, hatred, suffering and pain? We need to retrace our steps to the folly of the cross which was looked upon as Jesus' failure. Yet Jesus turned it into His greatest triumph through His resurrection.

How do we make sense out of what seems senseless? How can we speak out when we are at times struck dumb like a Zechariah? How can we better listen the way Elijah listened in the cave as God passed by? How do we become a voice for the voiceless? The power of the Spirit has to fill us as it did Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos and the other prophets. Jesus, who was filled with the Holy Spirit, assures us, "You will be given at that moment what you are to say. For it will not be you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Mt 10:19-20). We challenge our assembly to be doers of the Word as St. James exhorts us.

The Spirit will encourage us to be messengers of Good News as were Mary Magdalen, the woman at the well, and the people cured by Jesus who were even told not to tell anyone. The Spirit will excite us just as the disciples on the way to Emmaus became enthused once they met Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Their eyes were opened. Are our eyes open to the power of God's Word as we break the bread in every liturgy, and do we help our assemblies by our spirited homilies to recognize Jesus in one another? **P**

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