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Preaching Christ Today

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I take it that those to whom I am speaking today have accepted the call to be – in one way or another – preachers. I take it also that you have accepted this call knowing that the office of a preacher is one that carries little prestige in our society. The days of the great preachers who were, acclaimed and honoured as preachers are over – for the present at least. It will help us to get into the subject if we look at two of the reasons why this is so.

#### DEVALUATION

The first is that words have been devalued. With the multiplication of the means of mass communication in our society, the multitude of words has become a flood. Money is not the only thing that is destroyed by inflation. There is also an inflation of the currency of words. Our Lord himself gave a warning about this which should be in the ears of every preacher: "Yes' or 'No' is all you need to say; anything beyond that comes from the devil." Verbal inflation is the work of the devil. "God is in heaven and thou upon earth, therefore let thy words be few."

But this is not because words are powerless things, insignificant things. It is because words are – potentially – so powerful, Jesus likened his own words to seed; in certain circumstances it could produce enormous multiplication of life. In others, it could become fruitless. He had something of like import to say about his parables: to those whom God calls, they convey the mystery of the kingdom, but to others they are nonsense.

It is a common sight to see beside a country road in South India the ruins of an old shrine or rest house. When it was first built the massive stone slabs and pillars were closely fitted together and it stood strong and beautiful. But at some date a passing bird dropped a seed which chanced to fall into the tiny crevice between two of the stones. It was not noticed. It germinated, began to put down roots and to grow. It was nobody's business to deal with it, and finally it became a tree that wrenched the great slabs apart and reduced the whole splendid building to ruin.

On the day the seed fell it was something so insignificant that a puff of wind would have blown it away. Thousands of seeds fall and disappear into the dust of the roads. This one had the opportunity to prove the power that is hidden in that weakness.

That has always seemed to me a vivid parable of what has been happening in Indian village society. The preaching of the Gospel – just feeble words – has been going on all over the land for three centuries. In most places the result is, apparently, nil. But here and there it has fallen in the right place, put down roots, and proved its power to challenge and overthrow the massive power of the ancient caste system to set in motion the social 'transformation that is going on in rural India today.

Words can be – just words. But it is nevertheless true that words are the bearers of power. The business of the world is carried on by words, and nothing happens in the world without words. In fact, the world itself exists because of a word. God said: Let there be ..... And it was. The centre of our message is that that word is Jesus Christ, and that that word has to be spoken again and again, and that that word is the one word which gives life. Our business as preachers is to speak that word: Jesus Christ.

### *Dialogue*

The second reason for which the calling of a preacher is unpopular today is that we are in revolt against monologue. We are convinced – and this is one of the most powerful currents of feeling which marks our time – that every man and woman without exception has something to contribute to the life of society and of the Church; that the traditional division of the Church into *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens*, into those who teach and those who just learn, is a violation of the truth about man. We feel that the model of the Church in which one man is standing speaking from a high pulpit while the rest are sitting listening down below, is a wrong model. If there is to be a sermon, let it be a dialogue and not a monologue. Preaching, in the traditional sense, is out.

Let it be said at once that there is much truth here. The Church is over and over again in need of recall from the distortion of clericalisation. But the distortion consists not in the recognition of a ministry of preaching, but in the misconceiving of it. The distortion arises from forgetting that it is a ministry, a service, a stewardship.

From St Paul's correspondence, especially his correspondence with the church in Corinth, we can learn how he understood the matter. By some, his right to teach is called in question; by others, he is treated as the leader of a school of thought. He himself insists that he is simply one of Christ's underlings (1 Cor 4:1), one of his 'peons' as we would say in India, but that he has been given a responsibility to his Master which he is bound to discharge. The only mark by which his claim can be authenticated is that the sufferings of Jesus have been reflected in his own life. He has only the authority of a slave who is carrying out his Master's orders. He is simply a 'servant of the word', but as such he is bound to his Master to do the duty for which he is appointed.

### *Servant of the word*

The preacher is a servant of the Word. He is not in the pulpit to put over his own ideas, but to expound the word of God. I very much like the old custom by which the Bible is solemnly carried in and placed on the pulpit board before the minister comes. It is a reminder to preacher and congregation alike that he is there only in a subordinate capacity. The 'honour is for the Word, not for the servant of the Word. I have often been comforted in the pulpit by the thought that, if the worst came to the worst, and I had nothing to say, I could read a passage from the book and by doing so I would not have failed totally in my duty as a servant of the Word.

There is an important practical application of this. I was brought up in a tradition which did not prescribe any plan of lessons for the whole Church, but left it to the preacher to choose his text for each Sunday. The difficulty about this is that it leaves the preacher to decide what he is going to preach about. He then decides what text will best support what he wants to say and proceeds to explore its usefulness for that purpose. After an hour, he probably decides that

another text would suit him better. In the end he may produce a good sermon, but the long-term result is that the congregation is the victim, week after week, of the particular concerns, anxieties, enthusiasms, antipathies of the preacher. The Word becomes the instrument of these, instead of he being the servant of the Word.

For most of the latter part of my life, I have ministered in a Church where there was a given lectionary, normally - though not necessarily - followed by the preacher each Sunday. This means that I have often had to preach on a text which I would never have chosen for myself. Sometimes, as I have started on my preparation, I have felt that I could do nothing at all with the text, that it simply had nothing to say that I could make meaningful to the congregation. But as I have gone on wrestling with the text I have found myself seeing what I had not seen before, compelled to look at things from a new angle, prized loose from my own enthusiasms and aversions, and thereby given something genuinely fresh to say. I am sure that if I have ever been a real servant of the Word for a congregation, it has been on these occasions when the text was one that I would not have chosen.

## II

The business of the servant of the Word is to preach Christ, who is himself the Word made flesh. To preach is to announce, to announce the arrival of someone or something. It is not to give a lecture or to give moral advice, nor is it simply to speak in the manner of an Old Testament prophet. The word 'prophetic' is over-used and misused in the Church at present. It is what we hope someone will say about the sermon when we have used the occasion to give a lambasting to the congregation.

But the work of the prophet in its proper Old Testament sense comes to an end with John the Baptist. Our work is different: it is to continue that which began to be done when Jesus came into Galilee and preached, announced, proclaimed the Kingdom of God. This was something different from the word of a prophet: it was the announcement that that of which prophecy was a sign had dawned, that God's righteous reign was now the reality with which men must come to terms today.

Jesus preached the reign of God. He preached it in parables in which it was both revealed and veiled – revealed to those whom God had chosen as witnesses of the kingdom, and veiled from the rest. He proclaimed it in mighty works of love – works which, again, were to some signs of the kingdom, and to the rest a cause of violent hostility. Finally, he proclaimed it in the Cross – to those who were called, the revelation of God's power and wisdom, to the rest, scandal and folly.

We also preach the reign of God. But to do that now means to preach Christ, for it is in him that the reign of God has become present reality for our world. We preach Christ, incarnate, crucified, regnant, as the power of God and the wisdom of God – as, in fact, the presence of the reign of God in power and wisdom. We preach him as the one in whom men are called to recognise – amid all the darkness and wickedness and futility of the world – the one place where light, love, truth are to be found, light love and truth for the whole of our human experience.

## III

To preach Christ means to preach him both as Saviour and as Lord. I want to dwell on this point, because in fact we suffer from the disastrous separation of these two things which truly belong together.

1. There is the typically evangelical type of preaching which lays the whole stress on the fact that Christ is the Saviour, the one who helps, delivers and comforts us. The refrain throughout is 'for me', 'for me'. It stops there. He died for me and I am saved. I go out of church comforted and at peace, but with no burning zeal to tackle the evils of the world around me. I may even be tempted to scoff at the efforts of those who are so worked up about all the injustices of our world, advising them to stop bothering about social and political issues and to get on with the Church's real business – which is evangelism.

I say with sorrow that I have listened to evangelical preachers whose message is a straight appeal to the lowest of human motives – selfishness and fear; who invite men to come to Jesus for their salvation, but who have absolutely nothing to say about following him, about obeying him, about taking up the cross and being with him in his bearing of the sin of the world.

2. But there is also the other kind of preaching which simply sends people out of church with an unbearable bad conscience. Sometimes, one must sadly admit, preaching is just scolding, and scolding does not even produce a bad conscience; it merely produces a justifiable resentment against the preacher. I am not talking about this. I am talking about the kind of preaching which is really the preaching of the law without the Gospel; which sends me out of church with a suffocating sense of my own guilt, burdened with an unbearable feeling of all the things that are wrong with me and with the world, all the things that I ought to be doing and am not doing; but which does not bring any release from this burden, any new power for action, any new joy in God and his kingdom.

To preach Christ means to preach him both as Saviour and as Lord, both as the one who delivers me totally from guilt, from fear, from anxiety, from all the terror of the future; and as the one who calls me into total obedience, calls me to take up the cross and follow him through the world, calls me to be a partaker in his body broken and his blood shed for the world. Perhaps nothing is more crucial for the faithfulness of our preaching than that we should learn how these two are rightly related to each other.

#### Law And Gospel

When I was at the very beginning of my ministry as a bishop, I happened to spend an evening in the home of a great Lutheran missionary – Bishop Johannes Sandegren of Tranquebar. In the course of a long evening of talk, in which I asked him hundreds of questions, I asked him this: If you have a candidate for ordination and are in serious doubt about whether or not he should be ordained, how do you resolve the doubt? Without a moment's hesitation he replied: I go and listen to him preaching and find out whether or not he is rightly relating the Law and the Gospel.

At the time I thought it was a very strange reply; I see more and more the importance of it. For some years now, when I am preparing to preach, before I actually start to write out the sermon in full, I go through the outline with a single question in mind: does this outline put the Law and the Gospel in the right relation? Does it preach Christ both as Saviour and as Lord?

To preach Christ as Saviour and Lord means that people go out from the church not merely comforted with the assurance that they are saved, that all is well; and not merely crushed by the unbearable burden of their own and the world's wrong, but rather re-enlisted in the company of those who follow Christ as witnesses and signs and agents of the rule of God in the life of the world. It means that they are liberated from concern about their own salvation in order to be totally at Christ's service for his work of salvation for the world. It means that they go out as bearers of an active and patient hope, bearing already in their own hearts the secret of God's kingdom which is for the whole world. And this leads me to my final point.

#### IV

True preaching is a happening – a happening within the life of the congregation. It is part of the on-going action of the reign of God. When Jesus proclaimed (preached) the reign of God, he was interpreting the happening which was his own coming and presence. His own presence, his works and his words were all one reality. He was himself 'the word of God' and in Hebrew the word d'bar means both word and happening. The two are not distinguished. The words of Jesus 'are spirit and are life', as the fourth gospel says. They are the life of God in action. And the works of Jesus are signs, because they are also the life of God in action.

The Church is the continuing of Christ's mission into the world in word and work and life. The preaching of the word cannot be understood in isolation from the life and work of the congregation. They are all part of one reality, namely, the presence of the reign of God in Jesus Christ and therefore in his people. True preaching of Christ springs out of action, and leads into

action - namely, the action of the congregation in following Christ who is the one who bears the sin of the world. If preacher and congregation are on that road, involved together in bearing the sin and sorrow and pain of the world - in the neighbourhood and in the wider world of which the neighbourhood is part - then the words of the sermon will be part of that whole action by which the Church is in the world as a sign and first-fruit and agent of the Kingdom.

The words of the sermon will interpret the works of the congregation, and the works of the congregation will illustrate and validate the words of the sermon. The words spoken in the pulpit will not be empty words, but part of the continuing obedience of the whole congregation. You have to write the sermon yourself, but in a real sense the congregation must be with you as you write it. What you prepare, and what you speak as part of the action of worship, will become part of the whole action of the congregation.

Preaching is part of the mystery of the Gospel. It can be – or seem to be – just foolishness. But it can be the power of God in action. It can really be that. It is seed which may fall on the hard road or into the rocks or thistles. But may also fall into a place where it becomes the source of multiplying life, or the power that disrupts and breaks down things that seem to be indestructible. We should preach Christ, Christ as both Saviour and Lord, in the assurance that such preaching can truly be the power of God at work.

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