

# Biblical Interpretation and Homily

## Introduction

A big shift in the concern of the biblical scholars today is the hermeneutical question: How to make the Bible relevant to our times?<sup>1</sup>. The quest is no more for the meaning or the exegesis, namely, what the author meant, but to the meaningfulness or what it means today. How can the Bible really become meaningful to the reader of today, and thus continue to be the Word of God enlivening the present day community, building, admonishing and nourishing it.

And for a busy pastor the concern is even more urgent. How to present the biblical texts to his flock meaningfully on a Sunday morning? He is quite conscious of the persistent complaints aired in every quarter, about the inadequate sermons, which seem to drive people away and make them seek pastures elsewhere in an effort to receive the right Word of God. This article intends to examine historically the methods used in interpreting and communicating the Word, and then suggest a few in-built dynamics of a good homily.

## The Golden Period of the Word

### 1. Time of Jesus

The period of the New Testament has indeed been the golden period of the homily. There is a lot of evidence that the proclamations of the historic Jesus, as well as those of the first disciples are reproduced in the New Testament

1. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, NBCLC, Bangalore, 1994, is a comprehensive guide book on several methods of interpretation relevant to our context.

more or less authentically. Of the three synoptic Gospels, it is the Gospel of Matthew which consciously condenses and edits the sermons of Jesus in five distinct sections. Matthew's preoccupation is quite evident. He is presenting Jesus Christ as a new Moses, with a new Torah, to a newly chosen people of God. In every proclamation Jesus is presented as an authentic teacher; his teaching touches the people deeply and challenges them vehemently because it not only reflects the Old Testament which they already knew, but was also highly innovative, embracing their needs and aspirations. Other evangelists too present the teachings of Jesus, each with his own thrust. But all of them place their emphasis on the three-fold character of Jesus' proclamation: they proceed from a *credible person*, they are *authentic words*, and they do reflect the *day-to-day problems* of people.

The three main pillars then, on which a good homily should be sustained are clearly discerned in the preaching of Jesus. They are *ETHOS, LOGOS, PATHOS*.

1. Jesus spoke with authority, and not like the scribes (cf. Mk 1:28; Mt 7:28). The words of Jesus proceeded from a life that was credible, holy, involved with people, and totally committed to God with the Abba experience at Baptism. Jesus was innovative with regard to his explanation of the Father as kind, merciful, and just; he was a charismatic and prophetic leader like Moses. He could authoritatively override the old law and make it new so that it may be relevant to the living human beings of his day (Mt 5:21-48). Above all, he was totally inspired and guided by the Spirit of the Father in all his endeavours (Lk 3:22; 4:1, 18). The people were spontaneously moved to say of him and his works, "We never saw anything like this" (Mk 2:12). And this was the very character or the *ETHOS* of Jesus. And in contrast, the scribes, who were the official teachers, functioned in a totally different way. They were intellectual and quite knowledgeable but they were rigidly

institutional. Their interpretation was attached to their office, with no relevance to people. They were just preservers of traditions whatever their relevance or irrelevance.

2. Jesus spoke the Word of God. What did it consist of? Basically he made abundant use of the Old Testament which was quite familiar to the Jews, and made it relevant to them.<sup>2</sup> He interpreted himself and his mission to the world in terms of the already existing Scripture, and all his words and deeds were a new and dynamic version of the Word. He had God and his Kingdom as his primary exposition. He was firm in stating that a humble adherence to the rule of God would liberate people, assure them, encourage them and even admonish them if need be. The message was put across with simple stories, based on the day to day life of people. His parables either in the form of terse metaphors and similes, or longer stories adequately reflected the life situation of the people. While he enthused everyone with his teaching on the living providence of God referring to birds and lilies, he was equally forthright in admonishing the privileged and the rich for their extravagances, while gently assuring preferential treatment to the poor and the underprivileged. This then was the element of *LOGOS* in the teaching of Jesus and it did embrace everything that had relevance to the Kingdom of God in the midst of human society.

3. Jesus went around the villages, and spoke to the crowds. This is the constant theme of the synoptic Gospels. Jesus' audience consisted of the poor, the simple, the illiterate, the sick, the sinner the Samaritan and the gentile. He gave them a deep sense of hope in life. He spoke to the rich too, but had a different tone. They needed conversion

2. Grant R. M. and Tracy D., *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1984, p. 8-17, where the authors discuss at length the manner in which Jesus made use of the Old Testament.

like Zacchaeus. The *PATHOS* element namely the reflection of the real needs of his audience in his teachings, often met with admiration and enthusiasm, and sometimes with indignation and bitterness too (Mk 2:12; 3:6; 7:37; 12:12).

## 2. *The Early Church*

Nearly a third of the Acts of the Apostles consists of the sermons preached by the first preachers of the Word in the fast growing Church. There are nineteen such proclamations made by Peter, Paul, Stephen and others. Here again we discover that the three basic characteristics of a good proclamation are found in these sermons, namely the *ETHOS*, the *LOGOS* and the *PATHOS*.<sup>3</sup> The words of the apostles proceeded from their deep commitment to Jesus whom they had fully understood after an outpouring of the Spirit. That was the *ETHOS* driving a Peter on his Pentecostal sermon, urging a Stephen before the persecutors, and continuously convincing Paul to speak and to suffer for Christ.

The content of the *LOGOS* of the first apostles was none other than Jesus Christ himself, and the paschal mystery of his suffering, death and resurrection. They gave expression to the most essential message about Jesus, the values he stood for on behalf of the Kingdom, and the attitudes he manifested in favour of the poor and the downtrodden. Their *LOGOS* was all the more enhanced by their familiarity with what they proclaimed. It is enough to read just the very first sermon of Peter to understand the richness of the *LOGOS* of the early preachers (Acts 2:14-42). It is exceptionally Christ-centred: Jesus' appointment by God, his signs, and wonders; his death and resurrection; the harmony of these details with the scriptures; and the response needed on our part (cf. Acts 2:14-40; 3:12-36; 10:34-43; 13:16-41).

3. These three terms succinctly denote the author-element, the text-element and the reader-element in any interpretation.

The audience response to the first preachers was immediate, for they were touched in their day to day existence: harassed by the narrow Jewish attitudes of rigidity and self-righteousness, and annoyed by the hellenistic spirit of licentiousness, the audience found the new preaching soothing, enlivening, forgiving, and worthy of belief. It created among them a sense of dignity and fellowship (cf. Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37). What they heard was above all the Word of God, which by its very nature was capable of creating good and destroying evil in their lives. The Word made them come together. More and more people joined the community of believers. The number of Christians increased in proportion to the increase of the Word (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:3; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). Thus the *PATHOS* element seems to have been most extraordinary in the early Church, drawing a rich harvest to the infant Church.

### **The Period of the Fathers**

The young Church faced several problems like heresies and persecutions. Establishing the credibility and the authority of the Church was the main concern of the Fathers of the Church in the early centuries. What they stressed was the *ETHOS* element of the Word in as much as it was considered the property of the official Church. An apologetic approach, namely defending the Church and its doctrines was the preoccupation of the Fathers. Most of them turned out to be apologists rather than prophets. Proclamation channeled itself gradually through an allegorical interpretation, a sort of defence tactic in favour of the Church. The content of this method was to present a spirituality that was purely heaven centred. The socio-cultural dimensions of the society, and the day to day needs and sentiments of the people which figured so extensively in the proclamations of Jesus, became a forgotten history. The ordinary folk were to be simply protected and marched up to heaven. Their

real pathos did not find a place in the agenda of the Word of God.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Middle Ages**

Once again it is the *ETHOS* element, namely the Church as an establishment, an unquestionable institution, and a preserver of traditions which dominated this period. The hierarchical Church emerged strongly and gave rise to a spirit of clericalism. The Church determined everything. It laid down detailed laws of discipline for the Church as well as the society. Its temporal power was unquestionable to the extent of making and unmaking the secular rulers. The *LOGOS* element at this time was substantially reduced to doctrines and ideas in defence of the Church and its institutionalism. A dogmatic theology was thus emerging out of an one-sided interpretation of Scripture. The allegorical interpretation continued to dominate right through the middle ages giving four categorical meanings to every text of scripture: the literal (what happened), the allegorical (what is to be believed), the moral (what is to be done), and the anagogical (what is the goal to be achieved). The community was just preached at. Their *PATHOS* did not figure as a concern of the preacher.

### **The Reformation**

The first attack of the reformers was the institutional Church, which subjugated the Word of God to its own authority. Their main contention was to liberate the Word of God from the domain of the Church, and subject it to the Scripture itself. So now the tables were being reversed as a result of a spirit of reaction to the prevailing situation.

4. In the second century, the two dominant schools of interpretation were the Alexandrian school which proposed the allegorical method and the Antiochian school which proposed a literal method. The former was influenced by Greek philosophy, and the latter by the Jewish Rabbis.

The reformers alleged that the very text of the Bible has its own *ETHOS* for interpretation. It does not need an external authority. In fact the reformers apparently revert to the position of the second century Antiochian school which concerned itself with the text and its literal sense. The text gets a maximum importance with no concern for the role of the interpreter or the reader. Such ideas as salvation, love, grace, and the centrality of Jesus Christ are all there as an unquestionable revelation of God, and they should be the guiding factors in the literal interpretation.

### **Modern Period**

This was the beginning of rationalism. Philosophers began to undermine the revelatory character of the Bible. Empiricism went hand in hand with rationalism. The Bible was to be considered only for its historical value. Rules of historic and literary criticism had to be applied to Bible too.

Rationalists like Spinoza and existential philosophers like Heidegger began to influence biblical scholars like Welhausen for the Old Testament and Bultmann for the New Testament. The aim now was to discover the objective truth of the Bible, which contains texts which are abundantly intermingled with ancient myths and other stories, as they existed in the life of the people among whom the biblical traditions developed. Thus was born the historical critical method. Here the author of the text, and his circumstances, and the text with all its various stages of literary growth became important in order to arrive at an objective meaning, intended by the original author. There was hardly any concern about the reader and his needs in this method of interpretation.

### **Developments from the Historical Critical Method**

During the past century the historic critical method has gone through two important stages: first it was an

author centred approach, that is, a search for who wrote the text and in what circumstances, his contemporary literary genres on which he was relying, his original readers, and hence the original meaning he gave to a particular text.

Secondly there was a text centred approach. That is, independent of the author the written text should itself contain a meaning from its own texture, literary composition, the persuasive aspects of its language, the roles played by, the various "actants" in the text, etc.<sup>5</sup> This has been called the semantic autonomy of the text. Independent of the author and the meaning intended by him, the text itself by the natural polysemy of language can have a surplus of meaning according to the new situations in which it is interpreted. Thus the meaning of a particular text need not be restricted to what has been intended by the original author, but should emerge from the interaction between the concerns brought by the reader of the text and the text itself.<sup>6</sup>

If "the surplus of meaning" theory is true of any text, it should be all the more true of the text of the Bible, which has the status of an inspired Word of God, meant for all humanity in all circumstances and times precisely, "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Thus, of late there has been a reader centred approach, namely that the concerns of the present reader should find their echo in the text however ancient it is. The text should be made to dialogue with the living community with all its anxieties and problems. The text of the Bible should become the Word of God to people of today.

5. Pontifical Biblical Commission, cit., p. 41-49.

6. George M. Soares-Prabhu, "Two Mission Commands - An Interpretation of Mt 28:16-20 in the Light of a Buddhist Text", in *Biblical Interpretation*, 2-3, 1994, p. 265.

who live in circumstances far different from the Israelites or the first century Christians. The society of today should be made to feel as much at home with a text of the Gospel as the crowds of Galilee at the time of Jesus. The concern of the interpreter is not only to discover the meaning of the text, but also to show its meaningfulness to the present day community.

### **A Critique**

If we make a honest critique of the various interpretations from the time of Jesus, up to the modern period, we should admit that a honest balance among the *ETHOS*, the *LOGOS* and the *PATHOS* was admirably kept up only in the time of Jesus and the early Church. This was the golden period of interpretation. From the Patristic times it was the *ETHOS* element which dominated, followed by the *LOGOS* aspect in the period of Protestant reformation. The *PATHOS* character of the Word, namely the concerns and needs of the people, their legitimate aspirations and responses have been practically made null and void. It has been a sort of age-long conspiracy that was perpetuated on the common reader of the Bible, who should now get his proper place in the interpretation.

We should be glad that the philosophical hermeneutics have of late begun to speak of a new understanding of the text from the perspective of the reader, and have proposed the surplus of meaning theory. This is certainly a convincing approach. In his own time Jesus gave a surplus of meaning to the Old Testament by including the needs and aspirations of the living humanity of his time. And we call it the *PATHOS* element of the proclamations of Jesus.

### **What makes a good Homily Today?**

We have analysed historically the different aspects of emphasis in the interpretation of the Word of God in the time of Jesus, the early Church and in its subsequent

history. Now a few practical suggestions are offered here as to what a preacher should keep in mind when he prepares himself for his homily.

1. *Audience consciousness* : The preacher has to be conscious of the kind of people he has to face; that is, the moral, the social, the cultural and the economic situation of the congregation which is seated before him. He has to be aware of any glaring social conflicts or existential concerns like poverty, lack of employment, housing or other basic amenities; failure of rains, or crops; some prevailing sickness; anything that immediately worries and occupies the mind of the congregation. Normally a pastor should know the problems of his flock quite well. Thus the *PATHOS* element stakes its claims for a logical priority in the preparation of the homily as well as in its execution.<sup>7</sup>

2. *Text-consciousness* : What is the text of the Bible readings on which the homily is to be based? What is the predominant idea that knits the readings? The preacher has to familiarize himself with the texts quite ahead of time, and find their background and meaning in their own context. Reflection over the texts already begins the process of placing the *LOGOS* in the homily to be preached.

3. *The Word of God* : Out of the above two-fold consciousness will emerge the new Word of God which will complete the *LOGOS*. At the surface the homily will seek to read the concerns of the congregation in the text of the Bible. The meaning of a text which arose in a particular

7. von Juecher A., in Schottroff W. and Stegemann W., *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretation of the Bible*, Orbis Books, NY, 1979, in the introductory article, "What Pastor Expects", p. 11 asserts, "But it would be illogical for a theologian who searches out the 'living context' (Sitz im Leben) of past histories, speeches and narratives, not also to inquire into the place of the community in the contemporary world. For it is the world in its present state that the community must live in and with".

context in the past, is to be made meaningful in the present context. Giving the Word of God means, that the homily preached becomes a message from God to the particular congregation in their particular situation. The Father is once again meeting his children lovingly and talking to them. In such an atmosphere people will experience the force and power of God's Word (DV, 21).

4. *A Prophetic Dimension* : That the Word of God may be effective, the preacher has to assure, encourage, and admonish; he has to destroy as well as build (Is 55:10-11; Ps 119:105; Ez 37; Jer 1:10; Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). The homily attains a prophetic dimension when the preacher announces the message bringing joy and consolation to many; and he should be equally prepared to denounce boldly any existing moral or social evil even if it brings sorrow and desolation to some.

5. *Emphasis of Key Expressions and Ideas* : The LOGOS element of the homily is enhanced by a repeated emphasis on certain key words, expressions or ideas in the biblical texts of the day. Besides what is contained in these texts, the preacher has to take into consideration the totality of the Bible, namely the most important truths in the history of salvation. He should endeavour to include the relevant ones in the homily and give a broad base to the Word of God.

6. *Auxiliary Material* : A discreet use of relevant non-Christian religious scriptures, or classical as well as folk Indian literature is quite desirable, since the congregation is well aware of our pluralistic situation. But all such references should be totally subjected to the main theme of the homily and the reflections of the biblical texts. They can only be an auxiliary materials with the purpose of enhancing the LOGOS element of the homily.

7. *Witness of Life* : The preacher has to be mindful of the ETHOS aspect of his homily, namely the quality of his

own personal life and ministry which does make an inner rapport with the congregation for better or for worse. Two factors gave credibility to Jesus and his words. First of all, Jesus was completely united with the Father with the result that the Spirit of the Father was continuously acting within him. Secondly, he was totally absorbed into the human society of his times, which manifested itself in his love and compassion for the poor as well as his bold stand against the unjust structures. Hence the effectiveness of Jesus' words, in direct proportion to the high credibility he enjoyed. The homily preached is not just a well-prepared and well-delivered elocution, but an oral expression of the preacher's witness of life.

8. *A Sign of the Spirit* : And there is yet another vital dimension which adds to the *ETHOS* of the preacher and makes the homily an effectively powerful Word. And it is none other than the spiritual dynamism within the preacher, namely the extent to which he has been responding to the Spirit in his life. The congregation should be able to recognize the homily itself as a sign of the Spirit.

**S. J. Anthonymsamy**