

POST-MODERN PREACHING?

Michael Taylor

Having, like John White and on many occasions with him, been involved in ordination training, or as Baptists would call it `ministerial training`, and having been a preacher of sorts for much of my working life, the issue is not merely an academic one. For reasons apart from longevity I am wondering whether I should stop!

Preaching is part of ordained ministry in almost all of the Christian churches but in some it plays a larger part than others. That is literally true when it comes to timing: ten minutes as a rule for Anglicans; twenty to twenty-five for Baptists if congregations are not to feel short-changed! The difference is also one of balance: between Word and Sacrament, to such an extent that the leader of worship in a Baptist church is much more likely to be referred to simply as the `preacher` rather than the `president`. And there is certainly a disparity in my experience in the time and energy, not to mention emotional energy, invested in the preparation of sermons, a disparity which appears to have little direct bearing on the quality of the outcome either in terms of its subject matter or the depth of spirituality of its recipients.

In my own training for ministry, which was similar to that of most Free Church ordinands in the 1950`s, preaching loomed large. We read books which helped us to clarify what it was. We listened to what were regarded as the great preachers of the day, appearing at huge rallies, for example in Manchester`s Free Trade Hall. We wrote out several sermons a term for careful assessment of their style and content. We were sent out to practice our arts on small, unsuspecting congregations, whilst

every week came the dreaded `Sermon Class` at which we took turns to lead worship and preach to the college community and have our efforts taken apart, not always gently, at a subsequent post-mortem. Above all we knew that our abilities in the pulpit would be a decisive factor in getting a job, or a `call`, once training was over.

Much water (if a Baptist may be excused the reference) has flowed under the bridge since then. Thinking now only of the liturgy and not, for example, of special occasions with their set pieces, whether prophetic, evangelistic or otherwise, I have come to suspect that we think more highly than we ought to think of what we are doing and can achieve in the fleeting moments of a Sunday service. It is not a good vehicle for teaching as we know and very little of what is said will stay in the mind. The days of discussing the sermon after church over lunch, helped by the alliterative headings of the Puritan preacher, are long gone. What is said should of course come out of careful study and reflection and a commitment to get at the truth, but it may warrant an altogether lighter touch.

Does this kind of questioning amount to anything more than a somewhat ill-considered change of taste and growing dissatisfaction with a lot of the sermons I hear, or does it go deeper? Does the proverbial water under the bridge merely represent the tides of time and changing methods of communication or something more fundamental?

When I trained for ministry and even when I was training others in the 70`s and early 80`s, `post-modernism` was never mentioned. No-one had come to think of `plurality` and `difference` as inescapable facts of life. Multi-faith encounters were

confined to the class room and the study of Comparative Religion. Multiculturalism and its threat to cohesion was not an issue. The `hermeneutics of suspicion` and `deconstruction` were never discussed, certainly not as part of a course on homiletics. Our stock in trade comprised big, confident truths in which the preacher had every confidence. The only unanswered questions (and they often remained unanswered!) had to do with how you applied them or made them relevant to a congregation's everyday life. We had never really confronted the essential humanity of religious beliefs and its implications for our preaching. But what if such ideas, loosely associated with post-modernism, can no longer be avoided unless we are determined to bury our intellectual heads in the sand? What if almost 50 years later the invitations to scepticism seem hard to turn down and even the preacher has accepted them - can there then be any such thing as a post-modern preacher?

I shall not attempt to define post-modernism but the journey I have hinted at takes us into a world where settled truths of the kind that sermons are made of, are hard to find. Gospel truth is fragmented by an awareness of inevitable differences and its certainties are undermined by the characteristics that accompany its humanity.

To take the fragmentation first. The Age of Reason or modernism, which post-modernism superceded, questioned many a certainty and undermined many an authority including the certainties and authorities of religion. It replaced them however with certainties and authorities of its own and ones which were not reserved to faithful believers but available to all on the basis of reason. The ability of reason to observe the facts of life make thoughtful responses to them in a logical, deductive manner was an ability which all could share and which could establish a common

view of reality. In other words it tended towards cohesion rather than fragmentation. It could still create a big, overarching, shared `story` about our lives even if it differed from some of the earlier stories rooted in revelation.

Nowadays however modernism is seen for what it is: as full of assumptions as any religion and incapable of uniting us on some common `reasonable` and non-controversial ground. In many respects it is more like than unlike what it seemed to replace. It is not for example in a strong position to challenge religion about the shaky basis of what it claims to `know` since its own basis may be equally debatable. It cannot claim the high ground and call everything else to account but itself. It cannot offer us the big cohesive story it seemed to promise. It only adds to the sense of fragmentation. Aware of this we become `post-moderns`

Preachers can behave as if they are purveying single truths with great authority. Post-modernism appears to rob them of both. Cohesion gives way to fragmentation: the singular to the plural, and reason and revelation are incapable of putting an end to any argument either separately or together.

These problems for the preacher are only underlined when we take full account of what might be called `the humanity of religion`. Being human, it can claim neither universality nor objectivity.

Religious beliefs, including the truths I was taught to preach, once they are deconstructed, are seen to be man-made (or, to be more correct but less colloquial: `person-made`). This does not mean they are `made-up` as if religious believers are

merely telling pokies or dealing in groundless fabrications. They are certainly not made up out of nothing: created ex nihilo as it were. Initially they are thoughtful responses to concrete experiences. `Events happen` such as a seemingly miraculous escape of a whole tribe from an oppressive regime, or the destruction of a civilisation by natural disaster, or the ransacking of a city by armed forces, or a charismatic life which leaves none of those who witnessed it untouched: and when they happen people ask what exactly did happen and what it means including what it means for them. They don't make it up. They make something of what is already made and given to them so that an escape becomes an Exodus, a catastrophe a divine judgment on disloyalty, a charismatic life a divine visitation, and in all these cases, evidence of the saving hand of a gracious God. Even to get that far may take time and hindsight and it will not stop there. The manufacture and reconstruction of such beliefs seems never ending and, as their origins become obscure and some become well established, they begin to look as if there were never made at all. Sometimes it is specifically stated that they were not. Truths are revealed by God it is claimed, through his prophets or his Son or in the sacred writings he has inspired. We have them on good authority, handed down from on high. They remain man-made nevertheless because every insistence that they are not is as much a human interpretation of what is given as anything else.

If religious truths are man-made (or to put it more formally, if they are human constructs) then they inevitably share our human characteristics. One such characteristic is that human beings have their limitations. They cannot do everything or be everywhere and they certainly cannot know everything. If polymaths ever existed they do so no longer. There is far too much for any one of us to know and it is

impossible to organise and handle the total sum of all our knowledge. Even if we could it is quite obvious, looking within ourselves and beyond our planetary existence, that what we still do not know far outweighs what we do. Our religious beliefs and gospels then, being human, cannot claim to be entirely well informed.

A second characteristic is that human beings are much affected by circumstances: by where they happen to be and what happens to them. Without determining who they are and what they think and how they see things, circumstances play an influential role in their lives. We all carry a certain amount of baggage. We see things from a certain perspective and changed circumstances will often alter our point of view. Religious beliefs then, proclaimed by preachers as truth or `gospel`, cannot be rounded accounts of our lives, only one way of looking at them as seen through the eyes of a liberated nation for example or a prophetic outsider.

Third, human beings are incurably self-interested. It is not just that they see things partially and from a particular point of view, they see things from their point of view and tend to promote ideas and ways of behaving that will benefit them to the detriment of others. Laws which have been promoted as right and proper in themselves and for the good of all have often been made by the powerful rather than the weak or by men rather than women to suite their own purposes. The point is familiar enough. Religions have been modified and re-interpreted in the interests of both the rich and the poor. Being human, what we are called to preach cannot be regarded as immune from this human tendency, born of our insecurities no doubt, to look after number one.

All three characteristics point us in the direction of fragmentation and pluralism. Human beings together with their opinions and beliefs are bound to be highly varied. Some know what others do not; their circumstances vary and what is in the interests of a few is not necessarily in the interests of all. And everything we know about religions, not just the Christian religion, seems to confirm this, with their capacity for endless diversity and division, despite the efforts of religious authorities and genuine seekers after unity and truth to hold things in check.

The same human characteristics also point us in the direction of relativism in the sense that what we believe is intimately related to and conditioned by what we know or don't know, what life has thrown at us, and what we think, rightly or wrongly, is good for us. Had we known differently or been placed differently or had we judged differently where our interests lay, then we might well have believed differently.

Pluralism, fragmentation and relativism need not however spin entirely out of control so that all commonality and cohesion is lost and simply anything goes. The picture can be over painted. There are plenty of grounds on which agreements can be reached and choices can be made. In the case of religious beliefs the criteria for choosing between one and another are well know. One is the events or experiences, historical or contemporary, to which such beliefs claim to be a valid interpretation and response. Were they what they have been made out to be? Does the faith rest on a fair account of what happened? Historical research has an important part of play here and elsewhere. Then comes the importance of a growing and lasting consensus. There is a vast difference between an idiosyncratic point of view held by one or two individuals, and an emerging tradition from say biblical times to the present day which gains

increasing support until it is widely regarded as `orthodox`. A third criterion is closely related to the second. It is one important reason why a tradition survives. It has to do with cogency. Religious beliefs are subject to debate throughout their development. Arguments are put forward in favour and against. Opinions clash and in the intellectual conflict between various schools of thought some gain supremacy over others or some kind of settlement is eventually reached. Religious beliefs have to make sense. In addition they are likely to be put to at least two other tests. One is not at all surprising in a scientific age where knowledge is built on careful observation of the so-called `facts`. If religious beliefs claim amongst other things to tell us the truth about our lives, do they sufficiently correspond to what we know about our lives from what our eyes and ears are constantly telling us? Do they stand up in the light of experience? The second test is a moral one. Whilst some would say that morality is derived from religious beliefs and loses its way once it is cut off from them, others insist on the independence of moral values and their ability to put religious beliefs under scrutiny. Nothing is right simply because God and God`s representatives say it is right. `To do justice` is required of God and what is said and done in God`s name, as much as it is required of us.

We are not then sailing on a sea of faith without any rudder or sense of direction. We are not condemned to a cacophony of voices with no way of silencing some and giving more of a hearing to others. My post-modernist fragmentation is not entirely out of control. But neither can it be completely reined in, first because even where an article of faith has stood up well to all our criteria, it remains human with all the characteristics that that implies; and second because none of the criteria is foolproof. There are, I think, only two ways of reaching some kind of closure. We can choose to

hand things over to some authority which we judge to be far better qualified to deal with these matters than we are, the most obvious being the leadership of the church as it upholds the teachings of Scripture and Tradition. For the `post-modernist` however, whilst respecting such authority and giving it due weight, abdicating personal responsibility in this way would be a step too far and for all the reasons already alluded to in this essay.

The remaining option is to take our courage - or shall we say our humanity - in both hands and decide for ourselves. `Closure` comes because, open as we can be to a myriad outer and inner voices and all the reasons to favour some and not others, we make up our minds about the truth as we see it, and do our best to live by it.

Otherwise we could be paralysed and untrue to ourselves as human beings for whom `to be` is `to decide` and take responsibility. The result is a serious commitment on the one hand which, far from being fragmented, is single-minded and determined and, on the other hand, modesty with regard to the claims we make and an enduring scepticism which never forgets that those claims are by nature human and fallible.

Where then does that leave the preacher: the weekly pedlar of religious beliefs, not to mention the good news of the Gospel, in my `post-modern` world? I have a number of tentative suggestions to make.

The first has to do with the extent of the preacher's authority. It is important to get it right since preachers can still have a measure of authority thrust upon them, six feet or even only one foot (now preaching from a lectern) above contradiction.

When I trained for ministry, I was considerably impressed by a linguistic philosopher who taught us among other things that preaching is about an `is` and not an `ought`. He wanted to discourage us from haranguing congregations about what they had failed to do and now `ought` to do to make up for their sins of omission. Preaching for him too often sounded like scolding churchgoers about their duties when it should have had far more to say about the gracious reality of God`s love and acceptance which alone made the fulfilling of any such duties remotely possible. The philosopher was also a bit of a psychologist and wise enough to know that people are more likely to change their ways if they perceive that the reality of their lives is different from what they thought than as a result of constantly being told what to do.

The philosopher seemed to me to be right to say that preaching should be in the indicative rather than the imperative mood, dealing with an `is` rather than an `ought`, but would be wrong to take the idea much further. To announce what is the case, about God, Christ, salvation, the future or whatever, would sound far too categorical in a post-modern world.

The preacher, on my understanding, ought to be something of an authority on what the Christian tradition, nurtured for centuries in the Christian community, has to offer by way of insights into the truth about God and Christ and our human existence. These insights can be very diverse (and not necessarily wrong) or steady and enduring (and not necessarily right) and the preacher, properly trained, should know the difference. This is surely a sine quo non of what it means to be ordained and to `represent` the church, on this occasion as preacher to itself. Others have their own areas of expertise. It is familiarity with this tradition, from which can be brought out

things old and new, which is the expertise belonging especially to the ordained. But to imply that the preacher's authority goes beyond such expertise and that what is preached is actually the definitive truth is to take a step too far.

Preachers may also sound far too authoritative when they begin to pronounce on contemporary matters: `what God is doing in the world today` for example, easily confused of course with what the preacher tends to approve of in the world today.

The `authority` of the post-modern preacher is strictly limited and he will make disclaimers accordingly. Where he becomes forthright, passionate and persuasive, as he often should, he will make clear that he is communicating his own convictions and strength of feeling as much as anything else, convictions which are as human as everybody else's. All of which leads to a bias against heavy-handed dogmatic sermons which sound as if their contents are definitive and can bring the need for debate to an end.

A second suggestion, rather more vague, has to do, not with the manner of preaching which may often need to be declaratory and confident, but with the preacher's underlying stance or frame of mind. It will be open rather than conclusive, exploratory rather than definitive, questioning rather than adamant, somewhat rough at the edges rather than all sewn up, presenting truth, as I believe F.W. Robertson (in `The Loneliness of Christ`) said rather presciently over a hundred years ago, `suggestively` rather than `dogmatically`.

I used to admire a common strain of Anglicanism that could be decisive but was never keen to be over-precise about what was to be believed or tie people down as they lived under its big umbrella. I hope in the midst of sharp and uncomfortable controversies its preachers will not be tempted to abandon it.

One of the most acceptable and attractive preachers I know seems to adopt much the same approach for every sermon though not in a formulaic way. First he digs about in the Christian tradition, guided by the lectionary passages for the day, to see what insights it has to offer as to what might be the case. Second he reminds us, selectively of course, of the secular reality of which we are a part, guided in this case quite often by the events of the week whether distant or close to home. Third he seems to search for connections between the two which might illuminate the possible ways of a just and gracious God in a very perplexing and ambiguous world. Fourth he ventures an opinion, but also makes disclaimers, as he suggests another side to the story. Finally he leaves it to us, which brings me to a third suggestion.

As we have said, we can choose to hand over responsibility for what we believe to those who in our view will always be wiser than ourselves or, whilst respecting that wisdom, accept that at the end of the day the responsibility lies with us. The post-modern preacher will probably want to encourage the latter. He or she will not hand us the truth on a plate but encourage us to reflect on what has been said and what of course we can add to what has been said, and make up a little of the truth for ourselves: a little bit of what seems to be the case, of what `is` true about our lives for the time being, within which we will make as faithful a pilgrimage as we can.

Fourth, the post-modern preacher will be even clearer than he might have been before that preaching has to be a collaborative enterprise rather than the lonely activity it so often becomes, and not just because it implies a shared responsibility for truth. The only way the preacher can alleviate (not eliminate) the limited, self-interested and circumstantial nature of the man-made faith he offers to the congregation is by being in conversation with others whose faith is also limited, self-interested and circumstantial but in different and complementary ways. One way of doing so is obviously by studying the tradition and by reading widely. Another is through personal encounters even to the extent of preparing sermons in a collaborative way and working on the material with people from different walks of life before anything is preached. Too many conversations about sermons come after the event asking: 'what did you make of that', whereas they would far better come beforehand when sermons are still in the making.

Fifth, the post-modern preacher might well communicate a heightened awareness of how much we do not know. There is a long and honourable tradition of negative theology which is acutely aware of our ignorance of the things of God. It is easy to forget that however when listening to some of the over-confident pronouncements of preachers and worship leaders which give the impression that we know it all through the Word made flesh, or when confronted with the breezy familiarity with things divine which goes with more informal styles of worship. Post-modernism, which can easily provide a basis for disbelief, may ironically offer us a chance to recover some of those deep religious sentiments which respect and revere the mystery which surrounds our lives.

All that having been said, the question remains as to whether someone who finds it difficult to hold on to religious faith with any degree of certainty, even when it comes to core-beliefs about God's existence, Christ's divinity, salvation and eternal life, and who is acutely aware of the humanity of it all, should continue to preach? Is a post-modern preacher a contradiction in terms? Integrity would certainly be lost if such a preacher no longer valued the Christian tradition, in all its humanity, as a source of profound, life-enhancing and credible insights into the possibility of God and the nature of human life. That said, maybe for the time being at least, and until our thinking moves on again, it might be quite healthy to have a few more sceptical preachers around helping people to be open, modest yet confident in a post-modern world.

Michael Taylor is an ordained Christian minister in the Free Church tradition in England. He was Principal of a theological college in Manchester and taught theology and ethics in the University there for 15 years until 1985 before becoming Director of Christian Aid, the ecumenical aid and development charity of most of the British churches. In 1998 he became President of the Selly Oak Colleges and in 2000 Professor of Social Theology (now Emeritus) in the University of Birmingham. For 3 years from 2002-5 he was seconded to be Director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue set up by the then President of the World Bank and world faith leaders to encourage inter-faith co-operation on development. He was President of the Jubilee Debt Campaign in the UK. He chairs a number of development-related charities, and has published books on theology and social ethics including: *Not Angels but Agencies – the Ecumenical Response to Poverty* (1995) and *Poverty and Christianity* (2000).