

Jacob at Jabbok as homiletic parable

The story of the patriarch Jacob comes to a climax in Genesis 32-33. His anticipation of meeting his brother Esau after decades of separation leads him to a strategy in which he determines his best chance for survival. It is a gut instinct shaped by decades of trying to control his own destiny should his brother reject him. His religious fervour back at Bethel fails to mould his subsequent moral behaviour in exile and, as darkness falls, he is in a quandary about the best way forward as a returning prodigal. Eventually, however, he is transformed, not by his own skills, ingenuity or anything else, but through a struggle in the dead of night at the gurgling Jabbok River. In that intense spiritual onslaught he discovers woundedness, blessing and then a surprising social transformation in the unexpected welcome from Esau. In the otherness of God he suddenly discerns what he calls, “the face of God,” in this new (social) relationship.

On my last day of public school, I had a deep sense that I was being called to be a preacher. That determination, I later believed, came from my father though he never explicitly recommended this direction for my life. His father’s death pre-empted his own passion for preaching though no one I have ever known was more intense as a receiver of the sacred Word. Preaching was something holy and the Scriptures always inspired awe. One had to be sure that above all else the text (read twice every day in our home) was interpreted faithfully, and the most profound sermons, more often than not, were simple in their explanation. He would sometimes say, “Now why didn’t I see that before? It’s right there in the text!” At the time I believe that I gained a subliminal sense that the preacher needed to be led by the text and the listener by the preacher’s faithful exposition of the same. The message was already implicit and the expositor was called to disclose it.

The Reformed tradition that shaped this approach aimed at providing a high level of certitude and made a virtue of being in control. It was assumed, of course, that the text should be the controller but in the scholastic evolution of Reformed thinking, control increasingly shifted to the preacher and an approach to interpretation that would fit logically together. As a result, I chose to attend a seminary that would help me organize my theology cohesively. It was not until my third year that I realized that in this approach to preaching the real authority for preaching was not the text *per se* but in the philosophical framework that shaped theological convictions. Time and again the text seemed to beckon me one way only to be corralled by the system of theology that curbed real openness to what the text was saying. I felt that I was at some kind of an impasse.

That led to my first experience of the Jabbok and the struggle was not over in a night but took many months just to begin. The biblical text became increasingly complex and I longed to be more open to its surprises. I also had an increasing awareness of the reality of ambiguity in human experience as I read Søren Kierkegaard and also a bit of sociology. I wanted a theology that would allow for both a commitment to Christ and a freedom to think more openly about the biblical text. Though it was not clear at the time, I was also starting to be released from the necessity of having a neatly controlled system of theology and, therefore, more willing to allow real human questions to be a partner in my intellectual journey. In the process I gradually had an increasing sense of both God’s grace and the creativity of the Gospel.

In the matter of theology, however, I need to add an essential caveat. One of my earlier homiletics mentors earnestly emphasized that *all* preaching must proclaim Christ. How this fit into my new

approach to theology was not clear but it established a subterranean stream that would both affirm my theological heritage and also emerge as a kind of loadstar for the way ahead.

In the midst of this internal shift I began to experience the social upheaval of the civil rights conflict of the mid 1960s in the deep U.S. south. The full impact of that tumultuous time and place did not hit me until I returned to Canada and began my pastoral ministry. There I was surprised to discover that Canadians could (and often did) behave in very similar ways to the people south of the Mason Dixon Line. Preaching now evolved as both a pastoral and social responsibility so that exposition of a given text began to be shaped both by the life of a congregation and the larger context of the surrounding world. I wanted to provide clear instruction so that the baptised could be helped to live out their baptism and that living out, I believed, needed to intersect with the immediate neighbourhood and also the various political and social factors that filled the news media.

As a pastor for some ten years my preaching was shaped by my background in biblical hermeneutics, colleagues in ministry who shared their insights and encouraged boldness and also interaction from the congregations I served (especially among children and young people). The church, I discovered, was far more open to be challenged, and to be experimental in terms of communication style. After all, Vatican II had profoundly affected Protestants as well as Catholics. The whole life of the church, as well as the upheaval going on in Quebec society in the 1970s, was part of the life of being a preacher.

When I moved from the pastorate into theological education, I soon learned that I was a novice. Teaching preaching was a new journey. One of my first colleagues was a non-theologically trained speech-teacher. Lynne (nick-named “Charlie,” for some reason) lived in the world of theatre. She had a unique way of teaching. She eschewed technique in favour of an internalized sense of the message being read or spoken. Although she had no strong attachment to any church, she had an immense respect for the Bible. She soon discovered to her surprise, that in the reading of Scripture many students had difficulty seeing the creativity of the text or were afraid to convey it. But she had this incredible capacity for encouragement and was totally devoid of conveying negative judgments. She took each student as far as they seemed ready to go thereby leaving proclamation as a shared responsibility. Could this be an essential part of my own homiletical approach? It would take more than a decade and a sharp confrontation by a couple of bold students before I finally integrated this into my own teaching.

Indirectly, however, Lynn seemed to give me permission to experiment with the creativity of the biblical text in my own preaching, especially in chapel with faculty and students. I also discovered the Academy of Homiletics toward the end of the ‘70s and that opened up a whole new set of discoveries, reading and dialogue partners. My academic background was Bible, not formal homiletics. This annual gathering would both broaden my understanding of homiletics and also sensitize me to the homiletical shifts that gradually emerged.

In the early 1980s I was confronted by a second experience of the Jabbok. On sabbatical in Central America I was totally overwhelmed by the stark inhumanity and gross inequalities that confronted me. I suddenly saw that over the decades I had not only emerged as comfortably situated in the Middle Class of my country, I had somehow forgotten that back in the ‘30s and early ‘40s our family was distinctly lower class. I also remember the war years as a time of persistent frugality. Yet we were always given a sense of joyful thankfulness to God for daily grace. So in Nicaragua I wrote a long letter to my parents about these memories and the gratitude I felt for their deep care for our family.

Out of this Central American experience I began to wonder about the shape of faithful preaching in this new part of the world that I had witnessed. One side of me almost despaired of the preacher's ability to convey the Word to the congregation. The *Commuidades Eclesiales de Base* (the Base Christian Communities) of Latin America offered the alternative of deep conversation that began with the lives of the people rather than the Bible. The Bible was always in second place but with the conviction that, once having opened up their personal and social reality, the words of Scripture would truly guide them. As I look back, I now sense that in the campesinos communities, faith and suffering were connected. There was no triumphalism here but a deep awareness that in the crucified Christ the reality of God's grace became sustaining.

In the otherness of the people of Costa Rica and Nicaragua my homiletics had to evolve further. Preaching had to become a causeway in which the island of the sabbath believing community would be helped to cross to the everyday mainland of social interactions, systems and powers. While this eventually led to the development of "preaching as a social act," it was an intensely spiritual and theological move. On my return from Central America one student asked if I knew what the students were saying about me. When I asked for clarification, he said, "They are saying that you have been converted!" That was, in fact, quite accurate.

As I returned to The Academy of Homiletics following my sabbatical I wanted to pursue some of the implications of my Latin American exposure. I soon discovered that only a very small group within the Academy were really prepared to join my emerging social analysis approach to preaching – though, I must add, that variations on this dimension eventually took form. The collegueship I experienced in the Academy was truly marvellous and so many aspects of the homiletical task were nurtured through personal relationships and witnessing the sharing of remarkable gifts. So many people left their mark on me and through their influence also on students who would take my classes. When Tom Troeger, for example, preached at the 1987 meeting, I knew immediately that preaching without referring to a text in front of me could help establish a very different relationship between pulpit and pew.

In the last two decades I have focused major homiletical attention on theology and ethics. The former became a deeper force than even my continuing interest in the societal factor and helped me to discern how the biblical text was always part of a larger theological heritage. In fact I began one paper at the Academy with the words, "Theology makes me preach!" I have come to see that the heart and centre of my theology is in what Luther called *theologia crucis* – hence my deep theological indebtedness to Jurgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf and Douglas Hall.

Paul Wilson's emphasis on the Gospel in the text and for the congregation lifted theology up with a boldness and creativity that I found inspiring. David Jacobsen's focus on the New Creation has been a timely reminder that salvation is much larger than our individual human journeys. Here is a vision for the scope of preaching that is nothing short of staggering! In this connection I should add that the experience of working with TST doctoral students (along with Paul and David and formerly also with Stephen Farris) has been an extraordinary gift. Time and again I have been amazed at what students choose to write on and impressed by the research and argumentation that emerges.

Out of a more intentional theological homiletic, my attempt to discern the ethical framework and moral aspects of Christian discipleship has been an ongoing journey. So my experience as a learner, teacher and preacher continues. The biblical text continues to be more unpredictable and ambiguous when examined carefully and I try to be honest with what I am discovering and modest about what I can claim

about its message. I hope that in the process of receiving the Word, listeners will experience its contemporaneous import, not only in a specifically personal way (which is good, of course) but also with ramifications for discerning the truth about their larger reality (of both church and world) and a possible call to engage that reality. Most of all, I pray that the Spirit will move through (or in spite of) my earnest efforts to create an experience of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to enable the life of Christ to flow in surprising ways to the glory of God.

Let me only add this: the Jabbok River has been winding its way in my life. It's a long tributary of the Jordan, but the homiletical geography outlined above is entirely secondary. What I want to affirm above all else is the grace of a suffering God offered to me so generously and in so many ways.

A few homiletical observations arising from my personal ruminations

From the perspective of preaching my journey beckons me to take seriously the human journey of listeners. How does their particular context shape their lives and how might the Gospel enable them to reflect on that socialization? Further, how can the Gospel centred in the crucified Christ offer God's suffering love as a transcending gift? Such preaching will, of necessity, also invite careful reflection on the social nature of the church and its ongoing need to be shaped and reshaped as a community called together to be faithful to their Lord.

This preaching does not seek simple answers nor offer easy formulas for "successful" living. It urges trust between speaker and listener and an urgent and joyful openness to the Gospel revealed in Jesus as the enabling source for insight and newness. It means as well that all sermons are completed by the congregation as they allow the Spirit to guide and encourage. Then, when discovered newness is shared back, the listeners become, as it were, the proclaimers of the Good News – often in ways that are wonderfully concrete.

From the perspective of teaching preaching my journey beckons me to see every class as unique and filled with potential. I want to invite the class to explore and discover together because we are all capable of giving and receiving. Collectively, we are a community of learners who have been variously shaped by our pasts and also motivated by a desire to offer ourselves to God's service variously understood. A good class session, in my view, is one in which I have been surprised by something shared that has given me some new insight.

While I think that learning requires careful disciplines (in the interpretation of texts, theological reflection, pastoral sensitivity, linguistic artistry, homiletical movement, and the like), I am loath to recommend formulaic devices. I do not want students to become my followers but creative explorers of the preaching gifts most appropriate to their own abilities, inclinations and convictions. At the same time, I want to invite them to be led in their homiletical development by a deep spiritual encounter with one who has called them to discipleship for the sake of the church and the world.