“A Public Homiletic - Its Biblical Roots and Contemporary Shape

Arthur Van Seters
Knox College

Introductory Comments

I woke up this morning at 3:30 and realized that this little presentation needs an introduction. You are entitled to know that this exercise has been shaped not only by the remarkable books and articles that I have been reading throughout this past summer and into this fall, but also by a growing urgency in me that I must share a fierce conviction about public reality that begs for a courageous Word from the Lord.

We are seeing all around us a rapacious spreading cancer of evil and travail. We have been witnessing two federal elections marked more by hate than by hope, more by slandering the other than by offering truth and reconciliation. The use of astronomical sums to gain political power while the stock-market is crashing and the consequences for countless millions will be severe hardship and inevitable death for large numbers around the world is unconscionable. The ravaging of our planet with the radical extinction of increasing numbers of animal species and the threat to future human generations seems to count for little. The use of military force as the ultimate defence against fear explodes all boundaries - and often with the consent of those who claim the name of God as their inspiration.

Where is the proclamation of the Gospel in the midst of this public reality? How can our preaching nurture the church in its discernment of the disconnection between what it believes and how it is pressured by its surrounding culture? As I attempt to respond to these questions I also need to sound another note, a note of spontaneous joy. When I boarded the bus to come down here, I was enveloped by a primary school class out on a field trip and they filled the air with a cacophony of exuberant vitality that reminded me that life can appear in surprising ways.

The publicness of the Gospel has been enunciated with vigorous clarity recently by N. T. Wright in, "Kingdom Come: The Public Meaning of the Gospels." Wright begins with the observation that the central message in all four Gospels is that the Creator is claiming the whole world as his own. The salvific effects of Jesus ministry and crucifixion are both individual and social - the saving of souls and the saving of the world.

It is already obvious to us that the Gospels see the incarnation as God's entrance into the world as such in a new way. The ministry of Jesus is that of the itinerant preacher proclaiming the Basileia tou Theou, God's new order for this planet. This is re-enforced in Jesus' acts of healing and transcending social and religious boundaries, all of which cause public tremors. But most public of all is the crucifixion and its radical view of exaltation through suffering. God seeks to bring order out of chaos. In Jesus God has arrived on the public stage to defeat the principalities and powers and to establish restorative healing justice.

Wright seeks to draw out public implications from this understanding of the Gospels. Earthly rulers in the interim between the present and the eschaton have a role in providing some measure of order for the common good. Political goods are not just to be recognized by the
church; God calls the church to address and reclaim the world by reminding rulers of their task. In affirming that "Jesus is Lord," the church's collaboration has to be without compromise - which means that the church must be clear about the common good as clarified in Jesus as the Christ. In our time this also means that the church must learn how to critique the workings of democracy itself which has banished God from the public square replacing transcendent accountability with the voice of the people, a public that does not recognize the publicness of the reign of God. The focus of the church is not as much on how people come to power as what they do when they are in power. This means that part of the church's vocation today is calling government to account.

This argument is in line with Chuck Campbell's reflections on the Gospels. Jesus, he says, uses language traditionally associated with hierarchy and domination (basileia) and turns it upside down to undermine its associations with violence while retaining the political character of his Gospel. Campbell goes on to note that Jesus announces the new order that has come near and this has practical implications for the present (peacemaking, poverty of spirit, acts of mercy, response to persecution). The whole system of mastery (so central to our culture) is rejected outright in the cross - including reconciliation over vengeance, not treating women as objects of lust, loving enemies rather than rejecting them and giving good news to the poor. Jesus confronts the spiritual reality behind power with social, political, and economic implications. (Campbell, 48-49)

With Wright the focus is largely on the political dimensions of publicness. In Campbell the political is evident again but other dimensions of publicness also surface. Here I want to reflect on this larger canvas with the help of three recent doctoral dissertations (two at McGill by the Athanasiadis brothers, Harris and Nick) and one at TST by Pam McCarroll who teaches at Knox). These studies draw on the writings of Jacques Ellul, Simone Weil, George Grant and Douglas Hall. I propose to view this public homiletic through four lenses.

A Hermeneutical Lens

I begin with a hermeneutical lens. Homiletics is always time and situation sensitive. The dominant characteristic of our times, these writers contend is the exercise of mastery. With the rise of science the world sought to master nature but, in the process of developing technology, mastering human beings also resulted. While science and technology have made numerous positive contributions to human wellbeing, their destructive power has escalated exponentially enveloping everyone. Almost every day my morning newspaper reveals evidence of this: the macabre snapping of cell phone pictures of a dying woman on Yonge St. on Boxing Day a few years ago, rising Internet addiction among teenagers and the production of toxic toys all appeared on one front page last Friday! Grant believed that technology is not just an option for good or evil but a kind of religion - that which we trust to solve all our problems and realize all our dreams. It is the dominant faith; it shapes and drives us. (H. Athanasiadis, 122) But it is a faith that is seriously flawed.

Back in the late 1940's in the aftermath of the dropping of the atomic bomb, sociologist, Jacque Ellul, wrote about "the power of death that was ruling the world." But he also wrote about the presence and vitality of the Holy Spirit through whom the will to death is transcended with a will to life. (Stringfellow in Ellul, 1-6) The brokenness of our world can be seen particularly in
the destructive power of technology. Christians, he says, are pressured to submit to mechanical
solidarity and interdependence though technological communication systems, economics and
democracy. We are part of a collective entity and implicated through it to collective sin so that
individual virtues, while fine in themselves, do not alter collective sin. In this situation we must
not weaken the opposition between our Christian faith and our life in the world with its demands,
faults and compromises. We have no right to accustom ourselves to this world, nor should we
hide from its realities; we are involved in the sin of humanity. (Ellul, 12-14)

In all honesty, he adds, we have to admit that we are caught between our inability to make
this world less sinful and the impossibility of accepting the world as it is. In this tension we live
in the spirit of repentance and, when we actually live in this tension, we also help the world
socially, economically and politically. The key here is a theologically informed community of
believers which seeks to engage the implicit tension between their faith and the realities of the
world concretely. The church is called to preserve the world but not in the way that the world
thinks best. For example, the world uses military force, develops programs of reconstruction,
chooses to make and market material goods as the answer to human need. But these are technical
solutions and need something more fundamental, namely, an order of life willed by God, a sense
of transcendence that provides ultimate purpose and is grasped (even if only partially) through
prayer and the enabling of the Holy Spirit. (17-27)

Ellul was viewed by many, not only in France but in other parts of the world, as a
pessimistic voice. But his analysis of the human situation was prescient. Canadian philosopher,
George Grant was deeply influenced by Ellul and became a major dissenting voice in Canada in
the '60s and '70's as a critic of what he called “the American Empire.” He believed that the de
facto religion of the U.S. was technological mastery through a homogeneous state and also
believed that as such it was becoming increasingly tyrannical (Christian, 264).

The fundamental critique of Western modernity for Grant was the loss of a sense of
transcendence. When a secular society no longer recognizes accountability to God (regardless of
the motto, "In God we trust," on its coinage), it loses genuine freedom because freedom needs to
be ruled by truth and goodness. Freedom unrestrained by transcendent faith and morality is
bound to be destructive. (H. Athanasiadis, 133)

This hermeneutical lens for homiletics also includes seeing the church as a minority
community in a secular North American society. As such it either seeks to accommodate itself to
the public culture or wrestles seriously with how to witness faithfully to the Gospel. The church
could, of course, also opt for withdrawing from the public arena and become a sectarian
alternative enclave, but that would seem to deny the publicness of the Gospel itself. In seeking to
encourage faithful witness through preaching, then, we need to help the church look as honestly
at itself as it looks at the world. This includes clarifying the difference between how the world
thinks and acts and how the church is called to follow Christ. This requires both clarity and
concreteness. One implication of this hermeneutic is that our preaching has to distinguish
between the optimistic positivism that seduces the church into seeking to create its own future
and a courageous invitation to travel in the present out of God's ultimate future.

A Theological Lens
The hermeneutical lens sends us back to the theological lens of a public homiletic. We will not be able to look at either our contextual or our ecclesial realities without a specific theological perspective. What we find in Ellul and Weil, and also in Grant and Hall, is a central theological orientation, Martin Luther's *theologia crucis*. According to mystic and social activist, Simone Weil, the mystery of God's transcendence is beyond human understanding and is also an expression of God's immanence hidden in the presence of God at the cross. (H. Athanasiadis, 137) Weil revealed through her own personal experience working in factories as a common labourer that relationship based on force results in affliction. (61-63) Weil goes further. It was in the experience of the excruciating affliction of the cross that Christ fully poured out love for the world. (N. Athanasiadis, 72)

Weil was a person of brutal honesty who had about her an authority that was not one of force but a desire to live the truth as completely as possible. Her vocation was really a fevered search for the love of God in the furnace of affliction - which meant being open to the whole of reality in its beauty and its brutality - in the process she saw that affliction has a way of disabusing us of our illusions about our life in the world because affliction shocks us into reality and also brings us to a point of decision between choosing to love or allowing ourselves to despair - at that point we can love our Creator for no reason at all and therefore we discover a love based on pure grace. (250-51)

Canadian theologian, Douglas Hall, links the "theology of the cross" to the marginality of the church in North America. From this perspective the sidelining of the church is not tragedy but opportunity, opportunity for genuine Christian witness. (*Bound and Free*, 85-86) The church is part of God's response to the massive suffering of the world. It is people willing to suffer in order to become more human, more genuinely free and thereby to assume the concerns of their neighbours, their society and their world. (*God and Human Suffering*, 141)

**A Practical Lens**

A public homiletic, as I have already implied, also requires a practical lens. Unless listeners are concretely shown what the Gospel looks like in contrast to the ways of the world, they are unlikely to see the true nature of discipleship or be moved to practice it. For Ellul, one of the primary effects of technological culture is that means are severed from ends and simply justify themselves. Whatever is efficient and effective gives justification to the means used; the result is judged by the simplest criteria so that everything that succeeds is good. Technology is then the instrument of success because it is through technology that technological objectives are achieved. Technical know-how has no limits because it is free from consideration of values; it just needs to function well, like a machine. (Ellul, 69-71) This can be seen clearly during the last election when CTV broke a commitment to Stephan Dion to do a re-take of an interview on the grounds that "its news value justified breaking its agreement." It would have been more honest for the network to state that this was a political decision in which the means of supporting one party over another was at their disposal and they used it. But even then, the raw pragmatism (the dominant philosophy of our age) employed here is another manifestation of Ellul's critique of means. Pointing out specific examples like this one invites listeners to reflect on the analysis of ends and means regardless of their political persuasion.

We are sometimes confronted by a text at a particular moment that we don't want to
preach. Nora Tubbs Tisdale admits in a sermon that loving one's enemies is very difficult for her. She refers specifically to the victims of domestic violence forgiving their oppressors, of Billy Graham publicly offering forgiveness to Bill Clinton before any admission of wrong-doing, of letting bygones be bygones in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge slaughtered a million of their own people. What is particularly moving about this sermon is her admission that she still does not know what such forgiving looks like for her personally even though she had a number of impressive examples like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Specific examples may not always clarify, but they can still encourage reflection on the challenge of faithful discipleship at a given moment in time.

Some years ago the juxtaposition of the lectionary reading on Luke 10:1-20 with the Fourth of July, led Tom Long to contrast "the Lord's Day" with American Independence Day. The sending of seventy missionaries to spread the Gospel implies, he points out, the publicness of the Gospel through its association with the seventy nations in Genesis 10. While Main Street is draped with the Stars and Stripes, the church remembers that Jesus is Lord of every nation. Later in the sermon he recalls seeing a group of Black South Africans worshiping in an open space just off the expressway going into the gleaming city of Pretoria. It was 1993 as Nelson Mandela was being released from prison. The lowly African Christians, he says, had no church building, no status, no hymnbooks, no organ, no clergy; they were more like the seventy pairs of missionaries who went out with no purse, no bag, no sandals. All they had was God. But dancing there on the edge of the proud city in the power of the Spirit, Long said, "one just knew that the future belonged to them." He then repeated the sermon's refrain, "Today is the Fourth of July, and today is the Lord's Day."

The practical lens of a public homiletic calls for this kind of clarity, honesty and specificity that contrasts the fallenness of our lives and our world and the alternative thinking and order of the Gospel. Proclaiming the Word of Christ without imagining how it differs from the world of everyday will not be sufficient to help congregations grasp the public nature of the Basileia tou Theou that Jesus preached. It is a long, and usually gradual, process as the pieces of the Gospel puzzle fall into place. But for that to happen, a fourth lens is required.

A Distinctive Spirituality

A public homiletic also needs the lens of a distinctive spirituality. This may be the most challenging of all. The courage to look honestly at the world through a theology of the cross for a post-Christendom church and do so with vivid and candid concreteness requires awesome spiritual openness and humility. This is the stance that Pam McCarroll invites us to explore with intense attention. Like the Harris brothers she centres attention on the darkness of our fallen world and brings it to the cross of Christ. In the radical weakness of the cross, God's suffering love for the world is both hidden but then (in the resurrection) revealed. The resurrection does not overcome the cross but sends us back to see in it the strange otherness of God who chooses self-giving, suffering love to confront the principalities and powers. In a world of mastery the cross and resurrection expose God's alternative way.

McCarroll uses the image (in Matthew 24 and elsewhere) of God coming like a thief in the night, to remind us that God comes unexpectedly, that God's ways are unpredictable, that God is the ultimate Other. Our waiting for God is a waiting in the dark marked by a sense of God's
absence from our world. Such waiting is a difficult act of trust and is directly counter to notions of human mastery. But to wait for the God who is revealed in the cross, is to wait, not for powerful acts of intervention, but the pouring out of a suffering love in darkness and hiddenness. This calls for persistent trust, an act of love that seeks to be open to God in God's otherness (rather than God as a predictable friend) and implies a God of holiness.

This is an attentive waiting, a watching to see, to discern and also to transcend the fear that comes with wondering about the loss of possessions and personal security until we are clear about how much the meaning of our lives is connected to what we possess or what we can control. Waiting is a sacred disposition seeking to be in harmony with God's ways, God's timing and God's purposes. It is, obviously, subversive in an action-oriented society that tries to find ways to expand, create and make history rather than contemplate the Creator and the 'others' who could be affected by our actions. But it is this spiritual dimension of a public homiletic that is fundamental to discovering and living out the Gospel of Jesus Christ, especially in a society that has lost a sense of transcendence. In opening ourselves to the otherness of God we also become open to the world, to persons and public realities in their manifold otherness.

McCarroll ends her dissertation with a quotation from Christopher Lasch, "Progressive optimism rests at bottom, on a denial of the natural limits of human power and freedom and it cannot last very long in a world in which an awareness of those limits has become inescapable." McCarroll adds that witnessing to the resurrected crucified Christ nourishes love that establishes authentic relationships, trust that does not collapse when God feels absent and hope that is resilient in the night and trustingly yearns in hope for glimpses of the presence of God. (McCarroll, 285-86) This is the telos of a public homiletic.

Selected Bibliography


Tisdale, Nora Tubbs, "The Gospel We Don't Want to Hear (or Preach)" *Journal for Preachers* 23/3 (Easter, 2000), 23-30.