

Preaching the Gospel in a Hostile Environment

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In the assessment form for Trial Services in the Methodist Church of South Africa the following paragraph is to be found:

The Sermon:

To pass this section, there must be a positive answer to the question “Did the preacher proclaim good news?” If “yes,” one mark may be awarded here and further marks in the following questions. If “no” award zero here and no further marks may be given.

This requirement opens up a plethora of alternatives for any examiner, not only, but especially, in the South African context. It would be quite easy to understand that Good News could be irritating and profoundly disturbing to the listener. In fact the best news that could be preached in this situation would most probably be extremely disruptive and at least sound like bad news to the average person on the street.

There can also be difficulty about speaking of “hostile environments.” The danger is that one lapses into a sentimental messianic complex. Being custodians of the truth, as we understand it, is certainly a high calling but needs to be treated with healthy cynicism if we are to serve our communities with integrity.

A good story is told by Prof. Dawid Bosch of the Department of Missiology, the University of South Africa. He describes four people playing bridge in a smoke-filled room. They are interrupted by an outsider, who comes into the room and comments on the stifling atmosphere. The retort is to question how he could know what it would be like sitting in a room of this nature since he had just entered the door. Living in South Africa is very much like playing cards in an extremely stuffy atmosphere. The focus can become blurred, thinking can become obsessive, attitudes tend to be inflexible and behaviour is often pathological. Our conversations with the international community and the fresh insights that come from outside maintain an essential resource for the effective preaching of the gospel in this context.

The Centre is Christ

Just as all roads led to Rome as the seat of government and source of power, so for the people of The Way all gains its true meaning in Christ. The Gospels illustrate the importance of the centrality of Christ. Moreover, a fundamental precondition to knowing oneself and understanding one’s context is knowing him. For instance the ministry of John the Baptist can only be properly grasped as the reader interprets his (John the Baptist’s) work as “preparing the way.” The discovery of who this Jesus really is, has the power to transform one’s own history. The incarnation begins a process whereby all creation and every aspect of an individual’s world is challenged to submit to Christ’s rule (Rom. 8:19ff). This anticipates the truth that the operation of the Spirit cannot be restricted simply to the well-trodden courts of the church. God’s area of activity is not only to be found in the minds of theologians, but His

dominion is to be discovered even in those who do not know Him. He summons all rulers, whether they would imagine themselves as gods or not, to account to Him for their deeds.

In contexts where violence has been unleashed and where many leaders imagine that their word is tantamount to law, the gentle reminder that those who follow Christ withhold the right to give Him their final obedience, is a sobering concept. Where governments manipulate the all too famous parts of Romans 13 to substantiate their claims to absolute, unquestioning obedience by the populous, protests by people who do not make the equation between state and God equal in all respects, are often met with brutality and victimization. One glaring example in our context of this abuse of power and resources is to be seen in the attack that has been made on Archbishop Desmond Tutu because of his stand against the evils of Apartheid. Certain detention laws which vested unlimited powers in the police were a hideous deterrent to people of conscience. Vindictive punishments have been devised for people who refuse to bow to the gods of war or to indulge in perpetuating the villification of the enemy, or who have dared to raise moral questions concerning the expenditure of state funds to feed the monster of the military forces.

There is also no doubt about the fact that an alliance or encounter with Christ dignifies the status of people. The incarnation is a resounding affirmation of our humanity (John 1:14). Our connection with Christ must enforce a change in our attitudes to each other. Christ's stopping the crowd to call desperate, blind Bartimaeus nearer (Mark 10:46ff), his active intervention on behalf of a woman who had been humiliated by illness for twelve years (Mark 5:25ff), the visit to the wild man across the Sea of Galilee (Mark 5:17f), the gentle conversion of hardened Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1ff) indicate a strong commitment to giving affirmation and dignity to people. If we are prepared to concede that Christ is central to our lives, then we must *de facto* align ourselves with His commitment to giving dignity to people.

Committees, communities and governments, unfortunately lack insight all too often. Their access to power through weapons and even through the courts of law, enable them to walk over people with hobnailed boots. Economic policies and oppressive hierarchies nullify the value of many people. The pragmatic may not always be humane. The commitment to Christ engages one in a commitment to the expression of His passion for the dignity of all. It places the bold protester at variance with the most formidable giants. The authentic preaching of the gospel does not only take place in the pulpit. In July a leading resident of Alexandra's homeless community heard that someone was in trouble outside his home. On inspecting what was happening, he discovered a person who had allegedly been assaulted by police needing urgent medical attention. He tried to help the person to a vehicle to transport him to the hospital and was himself set upon by the police. The last he remembers was being hit over the head by the assailants. His next memory was gaining consciousness in the hospital. He had lost an eye, had four brain operations (or so he was told) and describes himself as "scrap."

Clearly allegiance to Christ is at odds with such blatant disrespect. However, confrontation with this kind of atrocity is met with either the glib bureaucratic retort about due legal process or a deeper cynicism which interprets all criticism of authority as bigoted and ill informed. More sinister is the response which subtly inflicts still more pain on the community to cower it into submission. The equations between God and state, God and ministries of law and order or God and the police are heretical. The insistence that only God can be God and must be respected as the

centre of all being stands as a fundamental challenge to other would-be claimants to the throne.

Protest and Reconstruction (Baptism and Eucharist)

Fundamental to the Christian journey is the right to protest against what we perceive as evil, unjust, and oppressive. Our baptism is essentially a bold statement on the side of good; a specific commitment to pursuing love with discipline for the rest of our lives. As we protest against evil, our anger and outrage has always to be moderated with the solemn recognition that sin rests within ourselves. In the South African context, Apartheid has bedevilled the development of the potential of all the peoples of the country; it has been responsible for perpetuating ignorance and isolation; it has certainly encouraged people to be trapped in the old and outdated, somewhat primitive, philosophy of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. The brutalization that has faced the liberation movements in South Africa has often left them thinking that the only alternative at their disposal in opposing the forces of darkness is to be found in the barrel of a gun in hopes of terrorizing the enemy into surrender and silencing them into submission. During the 1980's particularly, the frantic laws of an embattled state broke and mutilated many thousands of responsible citizens. Much damage was done to family life and indeed to the future of the younger generation in the land. A conspiracy of silence embalmed us and any protest, even in the name of Christ, was met with impetuous and irrational retribution. A carefully engineered series of strategies for intimidation and harassment were sanctioned.

Although protest has become more acceptable to most in this country, the ominous presence of hit squads still gives the impression that subtle and powerful forces are operating. Whether they have their roots in the more formal structures or not, time alone will tell. Protest, however, like confession, must always be constituted with forgiveness and is inseparable from reconstruction. The demoniac who was restored to sanity by Christ (Mark 5:11f) is commissioned to spread the Good News in the place of his insanity and to integrate into that community the most powerful message humankind would encounter. We can speculate that the work he did was in some way responsible for the fertile soil into which the gospel could spread subsequent to the resurrection. Indeed resurrection could not have been so alien a concept to him.

Although the dispensation seems to have begun in South Africa, protest needs to examine more profoundly why our present economic system seems to be plunging more and more people into desperate poverty. A new constitution should not emulate a land flowing with milk and honey for all who have a silver spoon in their mouths. The most unnerving aspect of the newly formed community of the baptized was their meticulous commitment to sharing resources (Acts 4:32ff). Furthermore, the vestiges of Apartheid have so infiltrated our psyches that protest must be vigilant to the besetting nature of this heresy. Racial discrimination still has the power to extinguish the flicker of hope that is burning.

Fundamental to reconstruction must certainly be the enormous challenge to love enemies (Matt. 5:43ff). One of the unique features of Christ's teaching and dramatically illustrated in his trial (John 18:36) and his crucifixion is the commitment to nonviolence and forgiveness. The logical implication of Christ's life in our history is the disarming of the nations and the destruction of all weapons. The age-old arguments of the need for defense or protection of the weak challenges the ingenuity

of our discipline. Furthermore, sophisticated security systems and intricate spying agencies must be fundamentally undermined in the expectation that we trust each other. At the same time the call to the oppressed to forgive and work for the rule of God's love is unpopular to say the least. A theology of retribution makes more sense. Liberation movements are often intolerant of a philosophy which challenges their right to take up the armed struggle. It is easy to understand how church people can justify the use of violence, particularly when they have encountered the criminal psychological assault on children they love so deeply and cherish so profoundly.

An integral part of any eucharist must be a willingness to confront the enemy with forgiveness and in receiving forgiveness for oneself determine to strive for wholeness in broken relationships.

Not only does the ethic then become one of forgiveness and equality, but as in the eucharist it entails the establishing of family, the celebration of our value in our differences, and the constant rediscovery of our unity with God, one another, and creation. In South Africa, the instability which has resulted from forced removals, homelessness, and economic impoverishment, has had two effects on our people. The first is that the traditions of the church have become so rigid - because they offer security in the face of impermanence, that the dynamic message of the gospel becomes mutilated by bad spiritual habits. The second, more serious result, is that the rich culture of the peoples of our land is swallowed up by submission to Western culture. There is the belief that the only route to prosperity is via Europe or America. We need to be enabled to rediscover some of our valued roots to know who we are. As disciples of Christ, the assurance of the value of our ancestry must be graciously understood. To make this journey seems for some like a retrogressive step. However, as with some therapeutic interventions, we can only reconstruct our lives when we have been given a chance to return to those moments along our journey in which our wholeness was clear or where our sanity was disrupted.

A thoroughgoing commitment to the healing ministry of Christ forces those who are committed to that ministry to be particularly critical of the *means* they use to achieve their goals. It has been said many times before that the means which we use to achieve our ends, will ultimately be present in the ends we achieve. If we overcome through the barrel of a gun, we will only be able to sustain that achievement through the barrel of a gun. Christ's cross seems ridiculous and tedious and costly and slow, but its sustained integrity continues to prove its efficiency and permanence.

The Bias for the Poor

In the Gospels, Christ indicates a clear commitment to the hungry, the sick, the poor, the lost, and the broken. A case could be made that the liberation of a nation is directly related to the attention it gives to the marginalized in its community. The marginalized remain the same as they were in the time of Christ - the sick, the psychologically traumatized, the homeless, the poorly educated, the unemployed, the returning exiles, the released prisoners. By and large, our churches are not filled with people from these communities, but we "service" mostly the comfortable, more or less middle class of society. Argument must be made that true conversion to Christ has as a basic part of its outworking a vibrant sensitivity to the lost and a determination to relate to the struggling.

A wonderful story is told of a saint who was a public figure in Port Elizabeth in the late 1980's. Her name was Molly Blackburn and having had an experience of

Jesus Christ, she found her awareness of the marginalized burning like a torch within her mind. Of particular concern to her was the suffering that many people were undergoing at the hands of the state in detention cells. Many of these detentions involved periods of solitary confinement, sensory deprivation, torture, and programmed social and psychological alienation. Communities in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape had come to know and trust Molly, and often the telephone would ring and inform her of a friend or a relative who had recently been taken in by the security forces and who was struggling in some isolated prison cell in a small police station.

Molly came to hear of one such friend, and on her journey in the country one day, decided to try and see if she could gain access to this man. She arrived at the very small police station which in fact had only two cells and used her position to inquire regarding conditions in the cells, cleanliness for the prisoner, food of a good standard, and an ability to exercise on a regular basis. The policeman on duty was respectful and answered all the questions. Then Molly asked if it would be possible for her to see the cells. It was explained to her that regulations forbade her seeing the prisoner, who was held *incommunicado*, but it was possible, if she would be satisfied, to inspect the adjoining cell. She conceded and as she was led through the doors, she began speaking in a raised voice asking more or less the same questions as she had in the charge office. While she was being shown around, suddenly from within the cell, where her friend had been sitting in his isolation and darkness, came the voice calling: "Molly."

He had recognized that he had not been forgotten by his community or by his faithful servant of the people. Suddenly he recognized that someone was prepared to risk comfort to let him know that he was not completely alone. Suddenly the bright light of friendship broke down the walls of his isolation and enabled him to feel his humanity and even his dignity. Once again he could begin to believe that he had value as this prized personality of the community had taken the trouble to find him.

The journey to the prison cell is never a comfortable one. The identification with those who suffer is never a clean experience. Care for the deranged cannot be done from an armchair or a pew. Gospel was not born in a theological faculty, but has its roots in the dusty streets and simple homes of an oppressed people who once again had lost the vision of their personhood. At some point our weaknesses, our failures, our inconsistencies, our ambiguities and our sin have the power to isolate us from ourselves and the people we love - as well as from life. It is Christ who by identifying with that death, expels the darkness of the tomb, breaks the power of our failure over us, and restores us to wholeness by befriending what would have been enemy. Bureaucracies, organizations, states, countries, the wealthy, the powerful, the influential, the intelligent resist this simple message with vigor. The record of the gospel is still being written and ultimately that resistance is meaningless. The victory has already been won.