

PENTECOST IS FOR PREACHING

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Lectionary Limits: Pro and Con

The lectionary, I am sure, can be a tremendous help in answering the age old question of preachers, "What shall I preach?"

The minister who is convinced that preaching should be Biblically based, theologically balanced and mature, an effective means of communicating the gospel, and a genuine expression of concern for persons, needs all the help he or she can get in making sermons meet these criteria. The lectionary can be one source of that help.

It narrows down the choice of a Biblical passage for exegetical study and sermon preparation for a particular Lord's Day. It gives the preacher for every Sunday of the year a choice of three passages of Scripture upon which a sermon may be based. Being allowed to choose from three is better than being handed one with the injunction, "Preach this or else." It is better than turning through the pages of the Bible from Genesis through Revelation hoping that a ready made sermon will fly out from between the pages like a butterfly suddenly released from its cocoon.

It disciplines one to wrestle with passages which that particular preacher would rather avoid. For it is inevitable that on more than one occasion the preacher in search of a sermon will find that none of the three choices of passage either strikes fire or arouses interest on a first reading. Rather they may raise frustrating questions as to what the lectionary makers could possibly have had in mind when these three passages were joined together for this particular Lord's Day. But if the preacher does not immediately abandon the three puzzling passages and go in search of homiletical butterflies he or she may discover that rarest of homiletical treasures--a new idea freshly expressed.

The lectionary, however, is no cure all. To follow it slavishly, to consider for preaching no passages but those which have been canonized by the lectionary makers, can be almost as limiting as following one's own private lectionary selected at random and traditionalized by repeated use. Furthermore, the lectionary does not live up entirely to its own billing. The Worshipbook says of the lectionary: "A lectionary not only aids worshippers in the remembering of the events of God but also assures the reading and the hearing of the Old Testament and the New Testament in their fullness" (p. 166). Well, not quite! Of course, "in their fullness" is not intended to mean that every jot and tittle of the entire Scriptures--including I Chronicles 1-8--should be read from the pulpit at least once every three years. We must leave that task to the marathon non-stop relay reading of the Bible from cover to cover which is done by certain enthusiastic groups from time to time.

Even so, if one never ventures beyond the canon of the lectionary there are invaluable passages of Scripture which will never be introduced in a service of worship with the words, "Let us hear the Word of God," and which will never

become flesh and dwell among us through the incarnational event of preaching.

The Lectionary and Acts

A prime example is the lectionary's treatment of the Acts of the Apostles. This book is unique in the canon of the New Testament. It is the only systematic account we have of the life of the church in the apostolic age. However we assess its complete historical accuracy, one can appreciate the reaction of J. B. Phillips:

No one can read this book without being convinced that there is Someone here at work besides mere human beings. Perhaps because of their very simplicity, perhaps because of their readiness to believe, to obey, to give, to suffer, and if need be to die, the Spirit of God found what surely He must always be seeking--a fellowship of men and women so united in love and faith that he can work in them and through them with the minimum of let or hindrance.(1)

The action of the Holy Spirit is so prominent in this book that it has often been suggested that a more accurate title would be "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." Therefore, one might well expect that especially during the extended period of Pentecost many passages from the Acts would be suggested by the lectionary, for Pentecost is defined as "The festival commemorating the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church, and an extended season for reflecting on how God's people live under the guidance of the Spirit" (*The Worshipbook*, p. 172).

But such an expectation is far from justified. On the first day of Pentecost, Whitsunday, the Second Lesson for all three years is Acts 2:1-13--a rather obvious choice. But in a church which strictly follows the lectionary, the every-Sunday churchgoer would not hear another reading from Acts during the whole half-year of the Pentecost season. In fact, the faithful would not be assured of hearing of Acts again until Eastertide of the next year.

There is one chance in three that Acts 2:42-47 would be read on World Communion Sunday, and two chances in three that snatches of Acts 10 and 11 would be read on the first Sunday after Epiphany. These odds depend upon whether it happens to be Year A, B, or C.

There is a concentration of readings from Acts on the seven Sundays of Eastertide. Acts replaces the Old Testament as the source of the First Lesson during Eastertide. (2) In most of these readings some connection can be seen between the passage and the proclamation of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ.

The lectionary suggests no readings at all from Acts beyond Chapter 15. Could it be that this is because most of the direct references to the action of the Holy Spirit come in the first fifteen chapters? And yet the lectionary does not use Acts as the source of readings "for reflecting on how God's people live under the guidance of the Spirit."

Pentecost Preaching

The Acts account of the Day of Pentecost is a well constructed composition which progresses from Event to Interpretation to Response to Result. But the lectionary makers have taken these component parts and juggled them about.

Snippets of Result (2:42-47), Interpretation (2:22-28) and Response (2:26-41) appear in that order on successive Sundays of Year A during Eastertide. The Event (2:1-13) from which the other parts proceed is postponed until the Sunday after Eastertide.

So the minister who wishes to deal from the pulpit with the entire account of the Day of Pentecost and still be guided by the lectionary must exercise some flexibility. His or her homiletical base must go beyond the suggested lectionary passages. These still may be used in the liturgy as the Lesson of the day, but the preaching passage will need to be expanded.

But who wants to deal with the whole of Acts 2 from the pulpit? Nobody, it is hoped, if that is taken to mean trying to squeeze or expand every thought, theme, challenge or insight which may arise out of a study of that chapter into one sermon. In such an attempt all circuits would be overloaded, and the result would be more like Babel than Pentecost.

But it is possible to take into account as framework, background, and base the whole of Acts 2 for one sermon. And Acts 2 can serve as the foundation for many sermons, either in series or strategically planned and placed during the preaching year. It seems to me that Acts 2 deserves to be considered homiletically more often than three Sundays in Eastertide every three years and once every year on Whitsunday. For surely Pentecost is for preaching, and not just for changing the colors of the paraments.

What follows is not intended to be an exegetical study of Acts 2 nor a series of sermon outlines. I trust the readers of this journal to do their own exegetical work. What follows is intended, however, to provide a few sticks of kindling for fires for which practicing preachers themselves will gather the wood, lay it in order, and strike the match. I take no responsibility for the resulting conflagration-whether it sputters out, produces more smoke than heat, roars into an exciting flame, or causes an explosion.

Expectancy

While Acts 2 is a unified composition in itself with a definite beginning and a rounded off conclusion, it does not exist in splendid isolation. It is part of a larger whole, placed and arranged by a master of literary structure so as to make the most appropriate impact.

While the rush of the mighty wind came upon the gathered company suddenly and without warning (2:2), careful preparation had been made. This careful preparation is indicated in literary fashion by the arrangement and the language of the pericopes of Acts 1. Theologically, preparation is made by the deeds and words of the Risen Christ and by the response of the disciples under the leadership of Peter.

The Risen Christ has convinced those whom he has chosen of the reality of his resurrection (1:2, 3).

He has given them instruction about the Kingdom of God (1:3).

He has promised that the age old promises of the Father which he had proclaimed will be fulfilled in his disciples (1:4).

He has commissioned them as his witnesses to the ends of the earth (1:8b).

He has promised them the power of the Holy Spirit to carry out that commission (1:8a).

He has reminded them of the limits of their knowledge and the limitlessness of

the mysterious power of God (1:7).

He himself has been exalted to the position of lordship, sovereignty and authority which he shares with God the Father (1:9-11).

They restore the number of the Twelve, reflecting their continuity with the people of God in history (1:15-26).

Every pericope of Acts 1 demands a sequel. Each leaves us on tip toe, searching the horizon with our eyes and ears, convinced that in the distance we see the dust and hear the rumblings of some mysterious procession which soon will top the hill.

And top the hill it does in Acts 2:1-4. We are enveloped by sound. We are dazzled by sight. There is the rushing movement of the wind, the dancing color of the dividing flames. The silence of the gathered company is overcome by an outburst of strangely articulate speech.

Is there any place in all this where the 20th century congregation can find itself? What about "they were all together in one place" (2:1b), and "the house where they were sitting" (2:2c)? What is more characteristic of the modern church than "a house" where the congregation "sits" "all together in one place"? As a church we do that much, if nothing else.

Such a picture of "the sitting church" can have the most deadly connotation of stagnation. But can it be that such a picture has the potential of being stirred by the mighty wind, enlivened by the dancing flames, and set vibrating by language let loose to range the world?

Have not the gathered Sunday-Morning-Worship-People had something of the same preparation as had those who were there when the Day of Pentecost arrived according to God's schedule?

The reality of the resurrection--the first day of the week is reminder of that.

The phrase "Kingdom of God" is at least familiar.

Surely God's promises are not entirely forgotten.

Witnesses. We might prefer to pay somebody else to do it, but we know it needs doing.

Holy Spirit. After all, we are Trinitarians.

"And sitteth on the right hand of God." We say that every Sunday in the Creed.

Prayer. No proper order of worship would dare leave this out.

The pulpit Bible has the Old Testament in it, too: the account of God's dealing with his people in history.

Can these be made to live again? Can they rise from the page, break the bonds of printed word, shake off the cloak of nostalgia, become "lived" rather than "repeated" Creed, and take on that tip toe tension of searching the horizon?

Perhaps from these musings a sermon could take shape which would help a 20th century congregation at least to hope--or even to expect--that something strange, mysterious and powerful can happen among us.

A sermon which proclaims this hope can help a congregation be open to the possibility that "the house where they were sitting" is subject to invasion by the wind and fire of the Spirit. It can help them sense a kinship with those who first were "all together in one place" waiting for God to act.

Identity and Mission

For preacher and congregation alike, it may be tempting to go no further. For expectant waiting can set up a pleasant tingling in the soul which of itself gives a certain sense of satisfaction. The Waiting Place can become comfortable, safe and

silent. But according to the Acts account of Pentecost, not for long.

The silence is broken not only by the sound "like the rush of a mighty wind," but also by the exuberant words of the gathered company. A sound which had come from heaven finds expression through human voices on earth. Sound which "filled all the house" and enveloped the whole waiting assembly is given symbolic focus by the sight of "tongues of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them" (2:3).

The mysterious power which is characteristic of the wind is given to the corporate body. They are a company of the Spirit, not a conglomeration of competing champions. And yet they are not fused into an indistinguishable mass where each loses individuality and none has personal integrity and responsibility. The tongues of fire are distributed to the individuals who make up the group. Corporateness and individuality--these are marks of the Christian fellowship then and now. The 20th century congregation which has been led to claim a kinship with those who first waited for Pentecost can through that kinship recapture a sense of their identity and mission.

That identity and mission is summarized in Acts 2:4: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance." The whole account and event of Pentecost is expansion, explanation, and implication of that one sentence.

"They were all filled with the Holy Spirit." Promise (1:4), power (1:8), "poured out" (2:17, 32)--all these are related to the Spirit and the church. The identity of the Pentecost people comes not from their natural congeniality nor their individual piety. It is given by the God who is true to his promise by rousing the wind which cannot be summoned, captured, nor regulated by human schedules, and who distributes to whom he will the mysterious flames of purifying fire.

The Spirit is God's power at work in those whom he thus chooses to be the voices for his Word and channels of his works. The power is promised for witness (1:8) and for proclamation (2:17, 18). Since it is for witness to God's mighty acts in Christ (2:22, 32) and proclamation of the good news of God's salvation (2:38), then the power is not for self aggrandizement nor for boasting. "Poured out" brings to mind a generous flood freely flowing from a source that is itself filled to overflowing. And so it is. It is Jesus Christ who is filled with the Spirit (Luke 3:21, 22; 4:1, 18-19; Acts 2:33) and who pours out the Spirit upon his own from his own fullness.

"Began to speak in other tongues." To speak is to communicate--or at least to initiate communication--and the event of Pentecost is about communication. The mission of the church is communication. "In other tongues" implies that the communication is not confined to the narrow limits of easily accepted, familiar categories nor bounded by the accents of one culture nor conveyed by only one unchanging arrangement of words. The Spirit makes it possible for the Word to be understood in a tumbling multiplicity of words. The church which is open to the invasion of the Spirit will be given the power to discover and to speak new words which can proclaim clearly to strange ears the mighty acts of God.

"As the Spirit gave them utterance." But the words, new and startling as they may be to those who speak them and to those who hear, must be consistent with the Spirit's message. The "other tongues" are not accolades to be displayed as trophies, nor puzzles to be fashioned into complex curiosities comprehensible only to an esoteric few. The Spirit is interested not only in the act and method of communication but also in the substance of that which is communicated.

Pentecost preaching can lead a congregation of the people of God beyond

expectant waiting to a fresh consideration of identity and mission. To grasp the incredible truth that we are part of the people whom God has empowered by his promised Spirit from the overflowing fullness of Jesus Christ can be exhilarating, humbling, frightening, innervating, life giving. To open ourselves to the discovery of "other tongues" by which the gospel can be communicated to those who respond to something besides our usual dialect may well call for re-examination of how we express our faith. It may demand serious study of what the old familiar terms really mean in a changing world. It may involve seeking ourselves to understand the categories of another culture in order that we may translate the good news into other cadences than that of King James English or of Deep South American.

But if communication is our mission, it is not for us to decide what to communicate. The message is "given"--given by the Spirit, acted out in history by him upon whom the Spirit rests in fullness. We are witnesses to God's acts, not the inventors of them. We measure the validity of the message by what God does, not by what we would like him to do, nor by what we want to do ourselves. To be Pentecost people, we speak "as the Spirit gives us utterance."

Communication for Conversion

If Pentecost is about communication, it is communication for conversion. For the end of the story is that the Word was not only heard but received (2:41), and receiving completes communication. The receiving leads to action. Those who received the Word were baptized; they committed themselves to a new community by the outward sign of repentance, cleansing, and acceptance. They submitted to the rite of entry. They became growing, learning, worshipping, dynamic, generous, joyful members of the apostles' koinonia (2:42-47). Can today's Pentecost preaching lead to such a result?

There is no sure fire formula nor set of rules. The result is still dependent upon the action of the Spirit. But the movement of the Pentecost account from Event to Result may give some clues as to how the Spirit can work in communication for conversion.

It is obvious that those who were filled with the Spirit and spoke in other tongues did not spend their time talking to each other. "Other tongues" would not have been needed for that. The very gift implied going beyond the walls of the house where they were sitting. There must be other ears than their own to receive the sounds which wind and fire had fused into spoken words.

The picture of Pentecost seems to combine a going out and a coming together: "At this sound the multitude came together" (v. 6). Whether the beckoning sound was that of the wind that filled the house or of the excited speech of the gathered disciples is not made clear. What is clear is that something was happening in and through that company that drew people to them. There were signs of life, of change, of intensity which made people on the outside wonder what was going on.

One prerequisite for communication for conversion is a sincere enthusiasm, a deep running intensity which arouses the interest, if not the immediate understanding, of those who are to hear. But the enthusiasm must be genuine. The sound of the wind cannot be reproduced by the gimmick of stereo tape players nor tongues of fire simulated by synchronized slide projectors. Christian fervor may have to take the risk of being misunderstood--they were filled with new wine" (v. 1)--but it cannot take the risk of being false.

The account of the gathering together of the multitude which included persons

"from every nation under heaven" (v. 5) is characterized by such words as "bewildered," "amazed," "wondered," "perplexed." And why not? Look at the tumbling list of places from which the hearers came (vv. 9-11). Are we to picture a hubbub of dialects and accents, of tones and cadences, all orchestrated into symphonic disharmony? Such a picture is hardly the proper atmosphere for communication.

The basis for the bewilderment of the hearers was not that they could not understand what was being said; rather they were amazed because they could understand: "we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God" (v. 11). The question, "What does this mean?" can be seen to refer not only to the mysterious event they were witnessing, but also to say, "What do these mighty works of God have to do with us? What difference do they make in our world?"

If the facts of the gospel are communicated in lively, understandable language, many who hear will inevitably ask "What does this mean for my life?" And thus a door is opened for communication for conversion.

According to Acts, Peter responded to that question at the Jerusalem Pentecost. It is, of course, too simplistic to suggest that an exact reproduction of Peter's sermon is always the most appropriate answer to the question in every age and circumstance. But the characteristics, emphases, and themes of Peter's response can be seen as powerful channels of communication for conversion.

Peter's sermon was Biblically based. He did not rely on psychological explanations of what was happening, nor did he regale his hearers with stories of his own spectacular sins in his unrepentant days as a rough and tumble fisherman before he was born again.

He used Scripture for what it is--the Word of God which speaks of who God is and what he does. Peter interpreted Scripture to reveal that God is no remote monarch or absentee landlord of the universe. He is involved in history and concerned for humankind. For Peter what was happening was God's doing, for it was consistent with his Word: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (v. 17). God is aware of "your sons and your daughters," "your young men and your old men," "his menservants and his maidservants" (vv. 17-18). He does wonders in heaven (that might be expected of God) but he also shows signs on the earth and reveals himself "in your midst" (v. 22) through a life so human that it knows the sting of murderous death (v. 23).

Peter could see in the Biblical record that God acts faithfully. What he promises he fulfills: the Spirit upon all flesh (vv. 17-18), a living king upon the throne of David (v. 30). This is not an unrealistic view of history. It does not ignore the long dry spells of the human pilgrimage nor the ages when there was no throne, much less a king. Nor does it limit the pouring out of the Spirit to excited speech nor interpret throne and king as chair of gold and crown of jewels. It views history with the eyes of faith, faith that God himself is faithful.

The Scriptures show that God acts purposefully. God may be always present (v. 25), but his actions are not static. He moves things toward consummation. Why else speak of "the last days" (v. 17), or "the day of the Lord" (v. 22), or overcoming enemies (v. 35)? What are those visions the young men see or the dreams the old men dream unless they have to do with what God is bringing to pass?

God acts redemptively. One does not need to pick scattered proof texts to support that. The Old Testament passages in Peter's sermon are consistent with the whole Biblical message on that score:

"Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 21).

"For thou wilt not abandon my soul in Hades, nor let thy Holy One see corruption" (v. 27).

For Peter, God's mightiest redemptive act is Resurrection, bringing life out of death. To that Peter and the others were witnesses (v. 32).

Peter's sermon was Biblically based in that it was founded upon the revelation of God's faithful, purposeful, redemptive acts in history. Therefore, it was focused on Jesus Christ.

Peter's sermon does not say all there is to be said about Jesus Christ. Many times preaching for conversion will need to go beyond the limits of what Acts sets down as the essentials of Peter's Pentecost sermon. But Peter's sermon reminds us of basic elements which dare not be neglected in convincing proclamation of the gospel.

Peter was preaching to Jewish hearers. He knew their history and their hopes, for he, too, was a Jew. Their history he called to mind with the name "David" (vv. 25, 29); their hopes he held before them in the title "Christ" (vv. 31, 36).

Their history had given them glimpses of greatness. It had shown them that for God's people there is something more than the present. There is promised fulfillment and completeness. But David was long since dead: "He both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (v. 29).

If history is not to prove meaningless, then hope must march forth from among the weathered monuments of the past. "The Christ" epitomized that hope. God's Anointed One would come bringing restoration, salvation, fulfillment. But when? Was this not such a long standing, distant hope that one could hardly lay hands upon it as attainable reality?

Peter's proclamation was that their history and their hope had now at last converged into a new age, a new opportunity, a new life. The hope foreshadowed by all that "David" symbolized had come to reality in a human life lived among them: Jesus of Nazareth, a man with a good Jewish name and a home town ordinary enough to underscore his essential humanity. This man is the Christ, the one who gathers up into himself the fulfillment of the promises of God.

His life, human though it was, demonstrated among men and women the works of God in the world (v. 22).

His death, however violent and untimely, was not outside the purview and the purposes of God (v. 23).

His resurrection was not automatic, but it was inevitable because in God's ordering of things life ultimately conquers death, good finally triumphs over evil, and light overcomes the darkness. Or perhaps it is better said the other way 'round: because God raised from the dead him who is incarnate life, goodness and light, we can believe in the ultimate victory of God's purposes.

But the converging of the history and the hopes of the hearers was not without the laying bare of their own agony of blindness. Not only had they failed to recognize the one who was the climax of their history and the fulfillment of their hopes, they had crucified him (vv. 23, 36)! Surely such a sin would seal their fate into hopelessness forever. How can one revive a murdered hope?

Out of this hopelessness comes the good news. "God raised him up . . . God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (vv. 24, 36). In spite of the active failure of those whom the hearers represent, God has acted to overcome the intention, the effect, the ignorance of their sin. Resurrection life is a reality not only for the crucified Christ, but also for those who crucified him.

For after Peter proclaimed the crucified Jesus as the Risen Christ and the

Exalted Lord, he offered the hearers both an invitation and a promise.

The invitation is summed up in "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (v. 38). The specific sin, the memory of which cut them to the heart, was their murderous rejection of the Christ. This one sin gathered up the rebellious alienation of the human condition. It was a misinterpretation of their history; it was a blocking of their own promised fulfillment; it shattered the expectancy of their hopes; it limited life to inevitable decline toward death. To repent, for them, must mean to change from rejection of their Messiah to acceptance; to be baptized was to enter into the Messianic community; to receive forgiveness was to open themselves to the renewing grace of God who by raising Christ from the dead had overcome the consequences of their sin.

The promise was the gift of the Spirit. God through Christ had not only dealt with their past sin; he also offered to include them in the company of those to whom his presence is ever real and through whom he does his work in the world.

This invitation and promise were given concreteness and substance through an accepting community in which those who responded could find koinonia, mutual concern, generosity, and joy in the Lord (vv. 42-47).

Those who have plowed through these last paragraphs hoping to find a "how to" manual for communication for conversion have been disappointed. But practicing preachers who are concerned so to proclaim the gospel that the way is opened for transforming response may do well to ponder these questions:

Is my preaching Biblically based?

Does my preaching focus on Jesus Christ?

Is there implicit in my proclamation both challenging invitation and positive promise?

Is my communication in, from, and toward the context of an accepting, serving, worshipping community?

As we have seen, Peter could have given an affirmative answer to all these questions. And he preached his sermon after the company for whom he was representative communicator "were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (v. 4).

(1) Phillips, J. B., The Young Church in Action, p. vii.

(2) There are two exceptions: On Easter Day of Years B and C, readings from Isaiah and from Exodus are suggested for the First Lesson.