

WISDOM'S PASSIONATE, EFFECTIVE CRY: PREACHING IN THE WESLEYAN WAY

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PETER HATTON (FORMER BIBLICAL TUTOR) OUTLINES HOW LIFTING UP CHRIST IN OUR PREACHING IS ESSENTIAL FOR CONVERSION AND TRANSFORMATION. AN ACADEMIC PAPER, COMMISSIONED BY MET IN OUR SERIES TO MARK THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE TURNA-ROUND PLAN OF THE 1820 LIVERPOOL CONFERENCE.

A SURPRISING HARVEST

The most surprising conversion I ever witnessed took place during the harvest festival of Portishead Methodist Church in October 1990. Bob had come to church a hardened atheist who had dissuaded his believing wife from attending worship for many years. However, his business was in a bad way, indeed, it seemed, about to go under. He had a plan to ensure his family would not go without if it did fold; he was to do away with himself so they might benefit from his insurance policies. Thankfully, he talked to his wife and she persuaded him to come with her to church to see if some other solution might be found.

And so it was, for, as he listened to the Word of God preached, something astonishing happened. God spoke in Bob's heart convincing him that he existed and that he loved him. At the door Bob told me that he had come to church an atheist but now he believed; what was he to do next? Surprised, but delighted, I asked if I could visit that evening, and, when I did, found him still in shock from what had happened, but very willing to explore what faith in Jesus might mean. Indeed, that

exploration led to his becoming a disciple and to joining the church in which God had taken away his unbelieving despair.

I am still perplexed about what led to Bob's heart being 'strangely warmed' that morning. I was not 'preaching for conversion' but simply trying to do justice to the rich biblical passages set for a day when many came to give thanks to God. Moreover, I was (and remain!) very far from offering a model of effective preaching style. I had then yet to learn, for instance, that using long words from the Norman French (or Latin, or, God save us, Greek) stock in English, can often baffle rather than shed light. Alas, I may have said things like 'the characteristic stance of a Christian is eucharistic'; rather than 'followers of Jesus should be known for being thankful'!

Yes, there was a power in the Church that morning but it did not come from my eloquence, still less from any intention to manipulate people's emotions. However, for all its limitations, my sermon was, I hope, preached with passion and conviction. More importantly, the expectation that God could move and do things had increased among us. During the devoted pastoral ministry of my predecessor, Tony Daw, and even during my oversight of the church's life, there had been some remarkable answers to prayer. This had encouraged a small group of us to seek God's face in early morning meetings. So the church was waiting more on God and that patient waiting bore fruit.

THE FOLLY OF PREACHING

This was, admittedly, an unusual example of God using the Word preached to transform. That sermons, so often, do not

impact their hearers in anything like this fashion is, of course, not to be disputed—the hungry sheep look up and are not fed', as Milton bitterly comments on the effect of ineffective preaching. However, many times in my following of Jesus—especially during twenty-five years as a circuit minister, but also when I worked in theological education, and, of course, as one who often 'sits under the Word'—I have seen sermons used by God as sparks to light a flame, as 'goads' towards change (Ecclesiastes 12:11), as oracles to 'comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable'.

Such experiences make it hard to affirm some current understandings of preaching. As, for example, the notion that the sermon is a 'pep talk to the team at half time';¹ or even may be seen 'as two anecdotes, a text and a gag!'² Even if these are not, perhaps, considered views, they betray a very common, indeed prevailing, view among us; one which sees the sermon as primarily directed towards the 'training' or 'disciplining' needs of those who listen. This seems common sense. After all, disciples need to be taught about the things of God; to be encouraged to follow Jesus; sometimes even, they need to be persuaded so that they avoid the bad and seek the good. Surely the sermon, given when disciples gather for worship, is the God-given means for such ministry?

We may certainly agree that preaching must include teaching, encouragement and persuasion. However, it is remarkable that when Paul—who is certainly not against teaching and encouraging disciples!—speaks most clearly of what preaching is about, he does so in a way which stresses that it does not save us simply by instructing us. Rather it does something much stranger.

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the Gospel and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power... For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of preaching to save those who believe.
1 Corinthians 1:17, 21

Here, Paul carefully distinguishes his own practice from that eloquent display of wisdom, knowledge and authority which, in his time, was called the *ars rhetorica*. High status males were educated in Rome and Greece with one chief end in view; that they might display that 'eloquent wisdom' which would persuade fellow members of the elite in the law court and the assembly, and even motivate soldiers before a battle. This apparently rational, person-centred eloquence is not, Paul implies, to be confused with preaching; because at the centre of preaching is not human wisdom, but what looks like 'foolishness'; namely, the cross of Jesus. Paul saw himself as a humble messenger, delivering this seemingly foolish, cross-

1. An analogy I have heard employed on more than one occasion. That it can be used sensitively and helpfully, I do not doubt. See www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/half-time-talk-jeff-strite-sermon-on-easter-maundy-thursday-104514. However, it remains a deeply misleading analogy.

2. A description offered, no doubt facetiously, by the minister of a fast-growing church during a talk on 'successful ministry' at Bristol Baptist College.

centred message. He believed it could be obscured by the rhetorical flourishes of a trained orator.

If we put our technique, our skill, our persuasiveness, at the heart of the sermon then we can end up offering people our word, not God's; entertaining, perhaps, but not transformative. If we are so frightened at being thought irrelevant (or even worse, boring!) that we seek to convince people by our rhetoric alone, we run the risk of displacing the message of the cross. People will love, we may think, our well-crafted addresses with their three alliterating points; they will be so pleased that we illustrate our talk with an engaging anecdote or an attractive power-point; they will be impressed by our erudition, by the casual way we bring Greek (and even Hebrew) words into our address; they will warm to our readiness to experiment with new 'genres' of preaching—narrative, pastoral, prophetic—and thrill to our challenge to get involved in the latest petition or letter-writing campaign.

Let me emphasize here that I am not against any of the above techniques per se; indeed I have taught some of them (though not three point alliteration!) to students.³ However, as Paul knew, the saving 'word of the cross' will get lost if preaching is reduced to rhetoric. We will end up pointing people towards our own agenda and our own ministry and not to the Lamb upon the throne.

PREACHING IN SCRIPTURE: WISDOM'S EFFECTIVE CRY

What else does Scripture have to say about preaching? Here (and at the risk of that prideful display of erudition condemned above!) some exploration of the Greek and Hebrew words used in this context might help us.

In English versions of the New Testament two Greek words, *euangelidsein* and *kērūssein*, are often rendered 'to preach'. The first *euangelidsein*—also found in its deponent form *euangelidsesthai*, or as the related noun, *euangellion* (often rendered into English as 'good news')—might have resonated in the early church in ways that were distinctly 'unchurchy'. In common usage it referred to a message brought by the emissary of a ruler and read aloud before a city's citizens before being put up in the agora, the place of assembly. The content of such a message was a *euangellion*—'good news'—because, when it was read aloud (that is 'proclaimed'), the citizens might, for instance, hear that, in gratitude for their loyalty in a revolt, their taxes were to be remitted for a period. However, the significance of such a proclamation was not limited to its content; simply the act of reading the king's message aloud in public made something happen. When the city heard these words, when they were, as we might say 'evangelised' (for, of course, our English words like 'evangelise' and 'evangelical' come from this root), then a new state of affairs came to be; one that, in this example, the tax collectors would have to take note of! These were then, powerful, performative words that made the ruler's intentions real when read.

3. Peter Stevenson's *SCM Study Guide to Preaching* (London: SCM, 2017) is a marvellous guide to preaching technique by someone who would, I think, totally agree with my assertion that the heart of preaching is not to be found in technique alone.

It might be objected that the New Testament authors were not primarily thinking of the 'secular' use of these words, but had in mind how they are employed in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. However, this gives us no reason to change, or even significantly nuance, our understanding. In the Septuagint *euangelidsein* generally translates the Hebrew *bāsar* 'to bring (good) tidings'⁴. If we take Isaiah 40:9 for in-stance:

Go on up to a high mountain
O Zion, herald of good news; (ho euangelidsómenos Ziōn)
Lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news (ho euangelidsómenos Ierousalēm)
say to the cities of Judah,
'Behold your God!'
Isaiah 40:9 ESV

then we see something akin to the previous usage noted. The words not only point to the presence of God doing a great saving work among his people; the words themselves are saving. Simply to proclaim what is happening is to bring about a new state of affairs in which it can be fully realised.

Wisdom's Passionate, Effective Cry: Preaching In The Wesleyan Way

The other word commonly translated 'preaching' or 'proclamation'⁵ *kērrüssein* does something similar. Again, this is language used not of carefully crafted oratory, of an argument aimed at convincing through eloquence alone, but rather of an edict brought by a herald (*kērūx*) who spoke not on their own behalf but on behalf of the one who sent them. The content of that message—the *kērugma*, 'the proclamation'—always involved, in Christian use, the crucified and risen Jesus, proclaimed to be the Christ, the 'anointed one' of God.

If we look again in the Septuagint for a clue to what *kērrüssein* meant, we find it always renders there the common Hebrew word *qārā*; the core meaning of this word is 'to cry out loud', but it has a wide range of meanings depending on the context.⁶ However, when rendered by *kērrüssein*, *qārā* signified that this 'loud cry' is a powerful one that expects to be obeyed. So, for example, in the Greek version of Genesis 41:43, 'they' (presumably the servants of Pharaoh), go before Joseph's chariot 'crying out' (Hebrew *vayiqre'u*; Greek *ekērūksen*) 'Bow the knee!' When used like this *qārā/kērrüssein* causes things to happen; when the heralds of Pharaoh 'cry out' before Joseph's chariot, people fall to their knees.

In Proverbs 1-9, we find a fascinating parallel to the New Testament's understanding of the apostolic preaching. Several times in Proverbs 1-9 (1:24, 8:1, 8:4, 9:13⁷) Wisdom, God's child (Proverbs 8:22, 30), 'cries out' (Hebrew *tiqrā*; Greek *kērussetai*) proclaiming the truth to those who pass by in the

4. e.g. 2 Samuel 4:10, 1 Kings 1:42, Isaiah 40:9.

5. As in the ESV's rendering of Acts 9:20 "...[Paul] immediately proclaimed [*ekērūssen*] Jesus in the synagogues, saying 'he is the Son of God'"

6. So, very often, *qārā* means 'to read' because, in the ancient world, people usually read texts out loud rather than silently.

7. One of a number of possible renderings of the consonantal Hebrew text קרן in Proverbs 8:30, others include 'master workman' or 'sage'.

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”

'Behold your God!'



busy streets, challenging the foolish to turn away from folly. Wisdom's cries are not irrational bleats; they are contained in carefully crafted speeches which Michael Fox goes so far as to call 'lectures'.⁸ However, their setting is not the schoolroom or the lecture hall but the public square, and the response they demand is not simply one of intellectual assent. Wisdom, and those who speak for her, challenge their hearers to turn to her, indeed to 'marry' her (Proverbs 3:13-18; 4:1-9, 13; 8:12-21). Wisdom's passionate, provocative, contested cries are not lectures then, but 'sermons' in the sense in which I understand the word; proclamations of God's good news that demand a response; that challenge us to come into a new transformative relationship, but are also effective even if no response is immediately forthcoming, for they stake Wisdom's claim to be at the heart of the life of humanity and of the cosmos.⁹

'AND LET THE SOUL-CONVERTING POWER, THY MINISTERS ATTEND!'

This understanding sheds light on the New Testament's witness to the Apostolic preaching. When Peter speaks of Jesus to Gentiles in Caesarea, those who hear his word receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:34-48) and extol God in an exalted tongue. When Paul, preaches at Derbe many become disciples (Acts 14:21). Of course, 'success' is not pre-determined. When Paul proclaims Jesus on the steps of the Temple his hearers interrupt with the shout 'Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live' (Acts 22:22). However, even this negative reaction bespeaks the power of such preaching (I cannot but recall the rather less dramatic reaction after some of my preaching—'enjoyed the service, minister; nice hymns').

We may also recall the effect of the preaching of the early Methodists. Of course, John Wesley's sermons contain much in the way of teaching, encouragement, and argument, even polemic, but they always contain a proclamation 'of the incarnate word, from the written word, by the spoken word'.¹⁰ As his journals, and other contemporary accounts,¹¹ make abundantly clear, on many occasions Wesley's preaching, and that of his 'helpers', produced extraordinary effects on hearers, converting and transforming them.

Yes, of course, this was often preaching to the unconverted, in streets and market places not in church buildings. It was often the most spectacular instances that were recorded, and

8. Michael V. Fox *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Commentary The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 92

9. David Ford bases a wonderful biblical theology on Wisdom's cries in his *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

10. Bernard Lord Manning. *A Layman in the Ministry*, (London, Independent Press, 1942) 138.

11. See the many examples of sudden, miraculous conversions in *The Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers; Chiefly Written By Themselves edited*, with an introductory essay, by Thomas Jackson, third edition, with additional lives. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1865-66); accessible at www.methodistheritage.org.uk/research-online-books-collective-biographies.htm and the marvellous account of his own conversion when hearing Wesley preach by the splendid Silas Told in *An Account of the Life, and Dealings of God with Silas Told, Written by Himself 1711-1779*, London, Gilbert and Plummer, 1785 92-4.

these were, perhaps, written up in ways that emphasised the 'drama of conversion'. This may be granted in full without denying that remarkable things happened and, more-over, that this sort of preaching continued to have its effect on those who had become believers. For the ongoing work of conversion and transformation must continue and the sermon remains an instrument to that end. When Christ is raised up in our preaching then those who hear, even if they have been following him for years, will have what my Baptist colleague, Helen Paynter, would call, 'dangerous thoughts'—movements of the heart and mind that prompt deep changes in thought and word and behaviour.

SOME OBJECTIONS AND AN APPEAL

Clearly, my argument here may seem vulnerable to the objection that it belongs in a hierarchical society where elite individuals (indeed, elite men!) lectured passive congregations telling them how to behave. Surely no one voice can dominate worship in our own egalitarian and participative communities?¹² I would agree. However, this is an argument, surely, not for an end to that proclamatory preaching for which I contend, but for such preaching being only part of a time of worship in which many other voices are raised in testimony, teaching, prayer, prophecy, admonition and encouragement. Certainly, this cannot all be fitted in to one hour on a Sunday morning! However, if something has to be left out, let it not be the way in which it has pleased God to save those who believe, foolish though it may seem.

Some might also argue that they have not seen sermons having anything like this effect among us. We may have heard the dismissive remark 'Who remembers the sermon they heard, last week, never mind last month?' Well, maybe so, although I am sure I am not alone in being able to recall several sermons that made me 'think dangerously', including the one in a college chapel in November 1973 that started me on the path to Christian faith. I might further observe that in so much that passes for preaching among us the risen Christ is not lifted up before the people. Why would we expect that our words can convert and transform if he is not so lifted up in them?

That Christ is often not so lifted up among us is the pity of the world. It may explain to no small extent why British Methodism has declined with such astonishing rapidity. Yet, still, if passionate, faithful, preaching—preaching that both provokes a hunger for God in its hearers and is itself provoked by that same hunger—revives among us, so too will the cause of God. Let us then pray, fervently and expectantly, with Charles Wesley:

*Give the pure word of general grace,
And great shall be the preachers' crowd;
Preachers who all the sinful race
Point to the all-atoning blood.*

12. See the balanced and careful discussion of this view in Stuart Murray-Williams and Sian Murray-Williams *Multi-Voiced Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2012).



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