

### Preaching and Liturgy: Word and Sacrament

1. Worship is the first and perhaps most appropriate place to respond to the good news we hear in the sermon because the liturgy both shows us how to give God thanks and praise and gives us the chance to do so.
  - a. Liturgy is a corporate action whereby the assembly gives praise and thanksgiving to God for salvation achieved and offered. Such praise and thanksgiving centers on:
    - i. Remembering (*anamnesis*) God's intervention in human history, especially in that climactic event which created us a Christian people, the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ,
    - ii. Petitioning and invoking (*epiclesis*) God to continue to remember us here and now in this grace-filled moment, and
    - iii. Offering (*oblatio*) of the Church, especially praise, thanksgiving, and service to Christ in the world.<sup>1</sup>
  - b. The three elements of praise/thanksgiving, memorial, and supplication are found in all Christian liturgies, regardless of its style.
    - i. In the Liturgy of the Word, we remember God in the proclamation of our "story" and intercede with that same God for favor here and now.
    - ii. In sacramental action, we also commemorate God's mighty works in our prayer over water, bread and wine, and in our prayers and ritual actions we also beseech God to send the Spirit to transform us.
  - c. In the Liturgy of the Word, the Christian assembly is founded upon the Word of God and transformed by that Word from a gathering of individuals into a worshiping body.
    - i. When the Scriptures are read and when they are preached we remember and celebrate our common story, which is as much present and future as it is past. God speaks to God's people here and now as the preacher, in faithfulness to the readings appointed for the day, proclaims our need of God's grace and freely offers that grace.
    - ii. The Word of God that is preached elicits from those who hear it a response.
      - (1) When the Gospel is preached, that response is one of thanks and praise for God's love in Christ. This simple liturgical structure of Scripture, sermon and prayers reveals the relationship between God

and God's people; God speaks, initiating the offer of grace, and we respond, accepting God's offer in prayer and praise, acknowledging our need for God and our willingness to live out the Gospel in our ordinary life.

- (2) Preaching can be said to constitute the liturgical bridge between God's call and our response.
- d. Liturgical elements--hymns, creed, prayers, peace, offering, and Holy Communion--reinforce the message of the sermon and provide the assembly with the words, actions, and opportunity to respond to that message in faith.
- i. Think of the liturgy as our "dress rehearsal" for life in God's Kingdom. Through preaching, we are taught how to put the Scriptures into effect in our daily lives. In the Liturgy of Holy Communion we do it.
    - (1) "The first (ritual) indication of our intention to 'imitate these good things' is the assembly's corporate intercessions."<sup>2</sup>
    - (2) Preaching also equips the community to respond in thanks and praise by explaining the liturgy. Luther called preaching the exposition of the mass. In the sermon the Word is proclaimed publicly, while in the Lord's Supper the promise is given to each person individually. In this way the Lord's Supper confirms what the sermon proclaims--Christ crucified and risen, his body and blood, given and blood shed, for you--and empowers the assembly to live the new life to which the sermon calls us.
  - ii. Thus, preaching prepares the assembly to celebrate and receive the sacrament by guaranteeing that God's word of promise is proclaimed and heard in such a way that the fixed forms of the liturgy become the expression of the spirit and freedom of a particular people. In this way preaching, as an extension of the Word of God, is the informing spirit of the liturgy.
  - iii. Special care should therefore be taken to coordinate all the elements of worship to insure that they support and reinforce each other.
2. Yet, the relationship of sermon and liturgy is not one-sided. Just as preaching prepares the assembly to celebrate the liturgy, so too the liturgy shapes preaching in several ways.
- a. First, preaching is not independent of either Scripture or liturgy. Effective preaching is the servant of the Church's Scriptures and enables the assembly to worship in a more meaningful and committed manner.

- b. Second, festivals and seasons help us to hear the Gospel from different perspectives and with different emphases. For example, in Advent we celebrate the good news that Christ will come again and on Pentecost we hear of the Spirit of the risen Christ being poured out upon us.
  - c. Third, the language of prayer and Scripture, ritual action, physical environment, and structures of ministry all cooperate to form a specific style that influences the style and content of the sermon.<sup>3</sup>
    - i. The shape of the liturgy suggests constraints on the form of preaching. For example, the sermon cannot be two hours long!
    - ii. The liturgy itself teaches the preacher how to image theological concepts such as praise, salvation, grace, sin, and repentance.
    - iii. Geoffrey Wainwright asserts that the constant features and qualitative wholeness of the liturgy also provide preaching with a certain freedom.<sup>4</sup>
      - (1) Surrounded as it is by the stable elements of Scripture readings, creed, and Eucharistic Prayer, the unrepeatability of the sermon can afford a certain boldness of mind and heart as it seeks to bring home the Christian message imaginatively and penetratingly to a particular group of people at this time and in this place.
      - (2) As long as the traditional actions of the liturgy keep the classical expression of the faith before the people, the preacher may attempt new ways of communicating the Gospel that changes in culture demand. Thus, preaching may occasionally take an alternative form such as music, drama, dialogue, or multimedia.
3. The point of the lecture is that, rather than being either an interruption of the liturgical action or the main event for which everything else in worship is but window dressing, preaching is integral to the liturgy.
- a. The freshness of the sermon and the stability of the liturgy complete each other.
    - i. While preaching speaks through the ears to the mind and heart, the lessons contained in the objects, gestures and outward signs of the liturgy have great power because truths reach us and can fully develop in us only if they touch the body.
    - ii. Gordon Lathrop describes this relationship of Word and Sacrament in another way. Lathrop rightly observes that speaking about God with just one "word"--one connected and logical discourse, for example--almost

inevitably means speaking a distortion because it suggests that God is a consequent idea, not a mysterious presence.<sup>5</sup>

- b. For this reason, in the liturgy, side by side with the “proclaimed word” there is also the “visible word” of the table.
  - i. Without Scripture readings and preaching, the “visible word” of the table may be experienced as a sacred encounter with God in the present time but without any history or any future.
  - ii. Similarly, without the table, the “proclaimed word” may easily become a lecture, a conjecture, a distant history with no “for you” that anchors it in present experience.
  - iii. The table requires the preacher to move toward saying in words what the bread and cup will say. And the sermon calls us to make our celebration around the table larger, “begging God to bring the time of the great universal feast, giving a name and a history and a future to our eating and drinking.”<sup>6</sup>
- c. Thus, *The Use of the Means of Grace* declares, “the two principal parts of the liturgy of Holy Communion, the proclamation of the Word of God and the celebration of the sacramental meal, are so intimately connected as to form one act of worship.”<sup>7</sup>

---

1 Frank C. Quinn, O.P., “Liturgy: Context and Foundation for Preaching,” p. 8.

2 Frank C. Quinn, O.P., “Liturgy: Context and Foundation for Preaching,” p. 7.

3 John Allyn Melloh, “Preaching and Liturgy,” *Worship* 65 (1991): 415f.

4 Geoffrey Wainwright, “The Sermon and the Liturgy,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 28 (Winter 1983): 346.

5 Gordon Lathrop, “At Least Two Words: The Liturgy as Proclamation” in *The Landscape of Praise: Reading in Liturgical Renewal*, ed. Blair Gilmer Meeks (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 183.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

7 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*, 34.