

PREACHING: THE POST-CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

The world is changing. Rapidly. For over 1500 years, at least in Western Europe and then the Americas, it could be said that Christianity—at least to some degree—was the cultural air that we breathed. That is no longer the case. So how can we describe this “brave new world” that we are entering? David Lose, a homiletics professor at Luther Seminary in the Twin Cities, offers three descriptors: post-modern, secular, and pluralistic (Lose, 1-6).

Each of these cultural forces confronts us with a defining question (Lose, 7-8, 53):

- How do we know for certain that anything (including Christianity) is true?
- Where do we find hope? Is Christianity *relevant*?
- What does it mean to be Christian?

How do we preach in such a setting? Lose is blunt: we don’t know. We’re figuring this out as we go along. We’ve not been in this situation since before Constantine’s Edict of Milan. And he gives us this warning: “if we continue to embrace patterns of preaching designed and suited for a bygone age, then we probably shouldn’t be surprised if the new age in which we live continues to pass us by” (Lose, 5).

Postmodernity

What do I mean by “post” modern? Postmodernity (as the name implies) is a reaction to a “modern” view of the world. Simply stated, a “modern” view of the world would be characterized by (a) a shift from faith to reason as the ground of reality; (b) the scientific, industrial and technological revolutions; (c) a marked by optimism regarding humanity (humanism); and (d) a view that language is only descriptive, empirical, objective, and propositional. The trenches of World War I, and the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, shattered that kind of naïve optimism—the view that humans would always be rational, always do the right thing, and that technology would save us (Lose, 14-16).

Post-modernity is a rejection, to a greater or lesser degree, of the hallmarks of modernity (especially the privileging of reason, excessive optimism, the myths of neutrality/objectivity, and metanarratives – stories that claim to be ‘self-evident’ and defining for all, such as the superiority of one culture over another). There is a strong reaction against power structures and claims of superiority; or that any one person or group has a monopoly on the truth, especially if it is claimed that such truth is self-evident. Language is seen as “performative” – it defines and creates reality (Lose, 16-19).

Secularism

Our cultural milieu is also increasingly secular: there is a rejection of anything that is not open to the five senses (a philosophical view known as scientific materialism: all that there is is what science can tell us there is). There is no longer any openness to the transcendent, to any sense that there is a “more” to human existence (Lose, 49-53). In other words, the question isn’t so much whether there is “truth” or not – but whether truth is rooted in God (Lose, 7).

Or if there is such an openness, as Timothy O’Malley notes, it takes a watered-down and “parasitic” form of civil religion called “Moral Therapeutic Deism” (O’Malley, 44): God exists only to help me when I am in trouble, to make sure I am happy; the only moral demand is to be good to one another – and that gets you into heaven. Religion is individualized and reduced to what practical benefits it might give.

Pluralism

We are surrounded by competing truth claims. No longer is authority (or obligation) simply taken as a given. More importantly, the sense that we come to be who we are in community—that we *receive* our identity—is rejected. Rather, we *create* our identities: we make ourselves, using whatever we will as our building blocks. We “pick and choose” – including in matters of faith and spirituality. We value “experience” much more than we value “tradition” (Lose, 81-91). As a result, we can no longer name what is distinctive about Christianity; we have lost a sense of Christian identity (Lose, 8).

A Response

There are three kinds of post-modernism, if you will. One I will call a “nostalgic” post-modernism. This approach is characterized by a quest to go back, behind “modernity” to find answers. We see this in various kinds of fundamentalism: whether biblical literalism (a reaction to critical study of the scriptures) or various forms of Catholic fundamentalism (creeping infallibility; returning to liturgical forms of a bygone age). Another type of post-modernism is nihilistic: it takes the three categories above to their extremes. There is no truth; there is only me and what I believe. Nothing and no one else matters. Then there is what I call a “constructive” post-modernism.

I believe this is what Lose is calling us to when he challenges us to develop ways of preaching that are appropriate to this new world and what O’Malley is referring to when he speaks of a renewal of the liturgical homily. What might some qualities of such preaching be?

1. We need to take advantage of the new post-modern openness to the spiritual. While this does not mean that folks will necessarily be flocking back to churches (remember that there are many voices out there competing for people’s attention), it does suggest at least an openness to the transcendent (as opposed to ardent materialists).
2. Postmoderns are suspicious of absolutes, of hypocrisy, of the misuse of power. Therefore, we need to preach the message (truth) of Christ with humility, and, more importantly, we must practice what we preach (remember the words the bishop spoke as he handed you the Book of the Gospels at your ordination). Perhaps truth needs to be presented less as a final answer than as faithful confession (Lose, 19-23); the penultimate that points to the ultimate and therefore calls for our commitment. Preaching, as all liturgy, is to be *beautiful* – it is to attract, not coerce; woo, not force (O’Malley, 115-129). Perhaps we need to be more poets than professors in the pulpit.
3. The liturgical homily is rooted in the scriptural imagination; it helps us see that we are part of a larger story and leads to gratitude (O’Malley, 58-62). We need to present the Scriptures not as static information but as a still-unfolding and dynamic story of what God has been and is still doing in the world, a world of which the listener is a part; we need to tell the biblical story as a story that matters here and now (Lose, 25, 94-95). As Catholics, we tell that story liturgically. Therefore, the liturgical homily is also rooted in the liturgical year, the feasts and seasons. The liturgical texts offer a lens through which we might read the scriptures (O’Malley, 62-65).
4. Nihilistic and purely materialistic worldviews can leave one empty. Christians can offer a message of hope in this context (Lose, 54-64). We must be careful not to present culture as the enemy. Rather, we are called to read the signs of the times, to “name grace”¹—those place and events where people are meeting God day-to-day, but may not know it—as well as to show how what falls short

¹A great resource here is Mary Catherine Hilker’s, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

of the gospel vision in our culture might be transformed through divine love (Lose, 65-78; O’Malley, 69-73).

5. In a pluralistic setting, we need to answer the questions that people are asking, that address their deepest needs (Lose, 91-94). The liturgical homily deals with real life, with those “universal themes that are at the heart of being human” (O’Malley, 65-66). We need to get better at listening before speaking; to let go of our agendas—and the idea that we have an absolute monopoly on the truth. We need to remember that the homily is dialogical; and perhaps be bold in exploring ways to make it more obviously so (Lose, 102-110).
6. There has been a lot of talk lately about “doctrine” in preaching. How do the above concerns and strategies relate to this issue? Doctrine opens up the deepest meaning of the scriptures and reveals the world as it really is; it keeps us grounded (O’Malley, 67-69). Therefore, doctrine also “serves to make sense of the hearer’s experience” –so the preacher is challenged to present the Christian faith as a larger story into which the hearer’s own narrative fits (Lose, 27).

Notice how much this list has in common with what Pope Francis had to say about the homily in *Evangelii gaudium*....

Here’s another way to look at it [from Frank Mercadante, “Engaging a New Generation,” *Lifelong Faith* (Summer 2012): 42-51.]:

Modern Evangelization	Postmodern “Immanuelization”
Individual belief as evangelistic entry point	Community belonging as evangelistic entry point
Emphasis upon rational argument as the primary apologetic	Emphasis upon the life of the church as the primary apologetic
Emphasis upon individual questing (Good News for me)	Emphasis upon service evangelization (Good News for others)
Appeal of “having it all together”	Appeal of being together in our brokenness
The mission and agenda of evangelization	The mission of accompanying people

In this new context, our focus shifts. We move from the head (appeal to truth) to the hands and heart (appeal to the good and the beautiful). We move from proving to witnessing, confessing, giving testimony with our lives. We move from arguing and convincing to attracting and wooing.

This means that our language, our homiletic content, will need to be concrete, imaginal, poetic... again, approaches stressed by Pope Francis. More on that in the next installment.

Resources:

Allen, Ronald J., Barbara Shires Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnston. *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth, and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.

Fretheim, Terrence E. and Karlfried Froehlich. *The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

Lose, David J. *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—and our Preaching—is Changing*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.

O’Malley, Timothy P. *Liturgy and the New Evangelization: Practicing the Art of Self-Giving Love*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2014.

Stiller, Brian C. *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*. Fortress Resources for Preaching. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006.

Wisdom, Andrew Carl. *Preaching to a Multi-generational Assembly*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2004.