

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

WORDS THAT STAY IN PLACE

The title of this article was suggested by a line in 'Burnt Norton' by T. S. Eliot, where the poet complains of the inadequacy of language to convey meaning. The theme was suggested by my own experience in ministry over the last five years. This preaching experience has been for me largely one of frustration and difficulty, in two ways.

The first is practical, and familiar to all preachers. It has been difficult to arrive at thoughts which are worth passing on to a congregation, or which may be cast in a form accessible to a large number of people. These long and painful hours spent in the study are an occupational hazard. However, it appears to me necessary to construct a framework within which this effort may be understood. Secondly, I have been continually unsure of the response which is to be expected from a sermon. What precisely is it meant to accomplish? Is it supposed to teach doctrine, to give practical advice, to inspire? Again: does it make sense to say that it is part of the worship of the church? If so, in what sense? Having reflected on these questions, it became clear that my difficulty lay in the fact that I was operating with an inadequate model of preaching - or rather, without a model at all. Undoubtedly I profited far less than I should have done from college lectures. However, it is still quite literally true that when I began my preaching ministry I did not know what I was doing.

In my own mind, then, the sermon suffered an identity crisis. For many, however, the crisis begins further back; not with what sort of sermons ought to be preached, but with whether sermons ought to be preached at all:

Neither the preacher's motive nor his competence is necessarily under challenge. It is the sermon itself as a method of communication which is widely discounted either as an old-fashioned or even counter-productive way of confronting people with the Gospel.¹

There are various reasons for this, which ought briefly to be enumerated.

a. *Authority* The growth of education, the spread of democracy and the readjustment of social structures in Western nations during this century has led to a critical attitude to authority. Ministers can no longer assume that whatever they say will be accepted as the truth; we can no longer lay down the law. Communication is by dialogue rather than by proclamation. As one writer puts it, 'The old mystique has gone'.²

b. *The influence of television* There are televisions in 98% of British homes, and they are turned on for between thirty and thirty-five hours every week. John Stott discusses the influence of television under five headings, and claims that it makes people physically lazy, intellectually uncritical, emotionally insensitive, psychologically confused and morally disordered.³ One may disagree with the

details of the analysis, while recognizing the extent not only of television's influence on our willingness to leave the warm living room on a cold Sunday evening, but also its effect on our ability to listen. We have become used to receiving information and evaluating arguments through the eye rather than the ear. So the image, what is shown, rather than the content of what is said, has the greater effect. It is argued that preaching is fundamentally inappropriate to the television age.

c. *New ways of learning* Rarely nowadays does anyone have to listen to one person talking for twenty minutes or longer. Most professional communicators are likely to use visual aids such as overhead projectors and flip charts to explain themselves. A longer presentation might include a video or slides. Students might be expected to listen to a lecturer for an hour, but they would also be expected to take notes on what was said, maintaining their concentration and stimulating their critical sense simultaneously. They would also be encouraged to ask questions and join in discussion. The church is one of the very few places where those present are asked only to listen. Many would argue that, as such, it is dangerously out of touch with contemporary culture.

There are other objections to preaching, most of which may be culled from the standard textbooks. Sermons are often boring. Not only the church but the preacher is seen as irrelevant as church attendance has declined. The sermon is by its nature an interruption of worship, not a part of it, and so forth.

One does not have to agree with these arguments in order to see their force. They are familiar problems, and any responsible preacher will sooner or later have to face them. However, I do not wish to offer yet another defence of preaching along traditional lines. It is more and more clear that such efforts are not what the age requires (while reading books on homiletics for this essay, I was haunted by recollections of the couple from *When the wind blows* awaiting the nuclear holocaust with paper bags over their heads). Rather, I wish to try and explain what preaching is, in such a way as to resolve my own difficulties in producing an acceptable sermon, to answer my questions about its purpose, and to counter modern objections to preaching today.

* * * * *

My quarrel with the writers of books about preaching is that, with one or two notable exceptions, they do not attempt to understand what the sermon actually is. There are theological statements of impressive profundity. We may learn that 'The salvation-occurrence is nowhere present except in the proclaiming, accosting, demanding, and promising word of preaching';⁴ or that preaching is 'a rediscovery of that which is essentially Christian and from the beginning [has] constituted the centre of Christianity, since in the primitive church everything was concentrated in "the Gospel"'.⁵ Or, we may be told how to organize our time, or our devotional lives, or be told what to read: 'You have chosen a vocation - or rather, Christ has chosen you for it - which more than any other calling in the world depends upon the

quality of life and the total witness of character which by the grace of God a man may bring to it'.⁶ Or, we may be given practical guidance on how to prepare and deliver sermons. The woodcuts in Spurgeon's *Lectures* are as painfully apt today as ever they were.

Certainly it is necessary to reflect theologically on preaching. However, all such reflection is rationalization after the fact. It is an attempt to explain something which does already exist. Advice as to one's devotional life or the construction of sermons is all well and good, but it does not go to the roots of the issue, any more than learning to drive a car will teach the principles of the internal combustion engine. The correct approach is to begin not with theology or with practicalities but with an attempt to explain the phenomenon itself.

When we begin with the phenomenon, we realize that the sermon is a form of art. Whatever may be said about the *aim* of the sermon, in its preparation and delivery it exists only for itself. It involves a deeper and more intense creative effort than might be found in almost any other field. Most preachers start with a text or a passage of scripture. When we have worked out what it means with the aid of our accumulated scholarship and Barclay's commentaries, the real work begins. We have to use our imagination. Out of someone else's words, we have to make something which is entirely our own. The finished sermon will contain the preacher's beliefs, doubts perhaps, personality certainly. And just as poets who venture into print are thereby undertaking to make their private perceptions accessible to their readers, so preachers must draw all the strands of their experience, insight and grasp of theological meaning together and present the finished work whole, in a way which will affect not only the mind but the whole personality of those who hear.

It is to be hoped that preachers will recognize themselves in this description. Most of us realize, for example, that the sermon is not a lecture, designed only to inform the mind. Its aim is not solely or even mainly to impart information. If it were, the criticisms of preaching mentioned above would be fully justified, since preaching is the most inefficient method of education imaginable. It is true that we sometimes say that particular preachers have teaching ministries, and we mean, I suppose, that they are able to convey facts and doctrinal and moral principles through the medium of the sermon. If they are successful in this, it is likely to be in spite of the preaching form rather than because of it. The truth is that if we want to teach people - that is, have them remember what has been said after Sunday lunch - we will not lecture them for half an hour. We will use charts and videos; we will have buzz groups and activities, and make them take notes. To reveal my own prejudices: is it likely that such methods would inspire a poem like R. S. Thomas's 'The Chapel'?

. . . But here once on an evening like this,
in the darkness that was about
his hearers, a preacher caught fire

and burned steadily before them
 with a strange light, so that they saw
 the splendour of the barren mountains
 about them and sang their amens
 fiercely, narrow but saved
 in a way that men are not now.

If the strange light is an overhead projector one would not expect quite the same effect. However, most of us resist this way of conducting services. We instinctively realize that there is a quality in preaching which is not present in other modes of communication. The sermon is different from the lecture and akin to the poem both in the way it is created and the way it is received or 'read'. It arises out of a total personal involvement with what is being said. It is the whole of one person speaking to the whole of another person. The sermon should speak to the hearers not only on a rational level - since we are not only rational beings - but also on our imaginative, emotional and spiritual levels. It should be a melding of personalities. As far as I know, the writer who best expresses this is Henry Mitchell. Dr Mitchell is a Black American writing from his own preaching tradition.

. . . The best of Black preaching has communicated not by argument but by art. It has stated that which was logically irrefutable in ways which were artistically and existentially irresistible. Argument and essay deal primarily with the rational conscious. Art and symbol deal with profound truth and logic, while at the same time addressing the totality of transconscious humanity. The art of Black preaching is not *less* than logical; it is logical on *more levels* or wave lengths, addressing both the intellect and the feelings/emotions, the obvious mentality and the subtle mentality called the unconscious by some, but more accurately the intuition and feelings or sensitivities.⁷

This is precisely true, though Mitchell does not develop his insight as he might have done, as we shall see. Let it be confessed at once that we do not always make good art. However, when we preach honest sermons, we are using the same mental faculties as the poet, the artist, and the musician; the same intellectual muscles are being painfully stretched. James Alexander said that 'Nowhere are experienced, more than in the pulpit, the clear, heavenward soaring of the intellect, the daring flights of imagination, or the sweet agitation of holy passion'.⁸ Some of us will no doubt feel that the pulpit is the very last place we would expect to experience this sublimity. The very point I have attempted to make, however, concerns not the quality of the sermon but its essential nature. One might, after all, be a very bad poet - more of a McGonagall than a Matthew Arnold - but still a poet.

Mitchell's approach to preaching represents an attempt to begin in the right place, with the phenomenon itself rather than with preaching technique or theology. We may proceed thus: if preaching is a form of art, it follows that discussions

concerning the characteristics of art in different cultural locations, and the different intellectual and emotional assumptions under which art has been created, will have a bearing on what is said about preaching. We will ask the question, then - what does the critic have to say to the preacher today?

Firstly, however, it ought to be established that this is a valid way of approaching the sermon. This is not the place for a full-scale review of the development of literary theory from Dryden to Derrida. However, we may profitably take one example, and show briefly how the sermon was part of the literary culture of a particular period in history - the so-called 'Age of Reason'. The Civil War and the disturbed Commonwealth period had demonstrated the dangers of enthusiasm in religion; reason, understood as commonsense and a disinclination to extremes, would correct this. Great advances had been made in the natural sciences; reason, understood as the orderly application of the powers of the mind, was diminishing the number of gaps into which God and other mysteries could be fitted. Political and social structures were dissected with great thoroughness. This intellectual activity was underpinned by empiricist philosophers who defined 'knowledge' in ways which meant that anything worth knowing could be known, and that nothing should be believed without adequate proof. So Locke, for example, says:

Whatsoever credit or authority we give to any proposition more than it receives from the principles and proofs it supports itself upon, is owing to our inclinations that way, and is so far a derogation from the love of truth as such: which, as it can receive no evidence from our passions or interests, so it should receive no tincture from them.⁹

God had designed the world to run in a certain way. Nature was fixed and sterile; human responses to nature could be analysed in the same way as their responses to heat and cold.¹⁰ So the task of the philosopher and the theologian was to find out the place of human beings in the world. What were the rules of existence, and how were you to follow them? Hence Pope's famous couplet:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is Man.¹¹

In keeping with this, the poet's job was to reflect nature and the social world accurately. Johnson praised Shakespeare because he is, of all poets, the one who best holds the mirror up to nature. Poems were rigidly structured, as befitted an age of certainty. They had a fixed vocabulary, and 'unpoetic' words were excluded; Johnson would not even allow Shakespeare's use of 'knife' in *Macbeth* on the grounds that it made him think of a kitchen utensil.¹² Emotion was by no means excluded from poetry, as long as it was reasonable emotion. A sense of transcendence, however, is generally absent. Human knowledge, based on experience or reflection, held the field. Another couplet in Pope's *Essay on Man* runs:

And spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
One truth is clear, 'Whatever is, is RIGHT'.¹³

This is interesting in itself, but it is also interesting because it was not the original version. When the *Essay on Man* was first published, Pope had written: 'And spite of Pride, *and in thy Reason's spite* . . .'. This was criticized because while reason might err, correct reasoning was the ultimate guarantor of truth. Nothing could be clear in spite of reason.

Now such a gallop through an entire literature and philosophy will not fail to annoy those who know anything about the period. However, the point is that eighteenth-century sermons were deeply embedded in this culture. There were, of course, honourable exceptions. Generally, though, one comes away from reading a representative sample with the impression that preachers cared about morality, about duty to one's community, and about upholding the established order of things. There is little emotion there, and little sense of transcendence. Methodism was a powerful reaction against this dry formalism, but it is still true that Warburton is more representative of the time than John Wesley.

An example was to be expected. John Gill is describing the Decalogue in this passage:

A very compendious system of morality this, and was peculiarly calculated for that people . . . and was admirably adapted to their tempers, dispositions, and circumstances; and exceedingly well suited to correct their minds and manners; and to guide and direct 'em in matters of religion, and in their duty to God and man . . .¹⁴

He is interested in systems of morality, minds and manners, direction in matters of religion, and duty to God and man. Gill, like most of his contemporaries, was concerned for order. Every idea and every experience should be assigned its due place in the scheme of things; there were no shadows in the eighteenth-century mind. The preaching of the time has been summed up thus:

If morality was the chief theme of the conventional eighteenth-century sermon, this was only because the Age of Reason had all too readily dismissed mystery to the realm of superstition and was inclined to interpret reason, with Locke, as being limited to the organization of observation and introspection.¹⁵

With the Romantic Movement came a gradual change in the understanding of knowledge itself. Knowledge of a kind might well come through the senses or through reflection on sense data: but knowledge which was worth having was personal and felt, arising from an imaginative response to life in its various aspects. Keats said that: 'Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses';¹⁶ and again: 'I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning - and yet it must be'.¹⁷ Again, most importantly, he spoke of: 'Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of

being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.¹⁸

The recovery of mystery and the sense that not everything that is true can necessarily be proved to be true was an underlying assumption of representative nineteenth-century preaching. A slightly anachronistic example comes from a sermon by Alexander Maclaren on I John 3.1:

Do not be content with hearing the truth, or even with assenting to it, and believing it in your understandings. The truth is nothing to you, unless you have made it your very own by faith. Do not be satisfied with the orthodox confession. Unless it has touched your heart and made your whole soul thrill with thankful gladness and quiet triumph, it is nothing to you. The mere belief of thirty-nine or thirty-nine thousand Articles is nothing; but when a man has a true heart-faith in Him, whom all articles are meant to make us know and love, then dogma becomes life, and the doctrine feeds the soul.

There has been a shift in what can be said, and how it can be said; and this shift is part of the whole movement of the intellectual current.

M. H. Abrams, in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, contrasts two theories of poetry. The one which is characteristic of the eighteenth century is the mimetic theory (or variations on the theme). The poet's material was given; all art was an imitation of nature. The part of the artist was that of passive recorder, depicting what he or she actually saw - the 'Mirror' of the book's title. The Romantic consciousness required a new understanding of how poetry was to be judged, and found it in expressive theories. The feelings and operations of the mind of the poet himself, not the natural world, are the sources of poetry. Comparing the two, Abrams says:

The first test any poem must pass is no longer, 'Is it true to nature?' or 'Is it appropriate to the requirements either of the best judges or the generality of mankind?' but a criterion looking in a different direction; namely, 'Is it sincere? Is it genuine? Does it match the actual state of mind of the poet while composing?'¹⁹

This analysis could also express the characteristics of preachers and preaching during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I suppose that most of us would feel that Alexander Maclaren is far closer to what a preacher ought to be than John Gill. Anyone who has had to read quantities of eighteenth-century sermons will not wonder at the parlous condition of the Church at the end of that period. However, Maclaren no longer suffices. Simply to endorse the expressive theory of preaching today is to stand still while the world of ideas has moved on. New thinking is required, and the way forward lies not in abandoning the sermon in favour of the illustrated lecture but in understanding it in terms of how language appears today.

* * * * *

The crucial question concerns knowledge. It is not too much of a simplification to

say that for the eighteenth-century preacher, knowledge was reducible to propositional form. Anything which could not be so reduced was no concern of human beings. In the nineteenth century 'knowledge' became multi-levelled. It could be claimed without rigorous scientific or logical proof; the creative power of the imagination enabled the apprehension of a deeper reality. Preachers shared in this recovery, and their task was to express, in words which reflected these different levels of knowledge, their own experience of God.

In our own time, the idea of 'knowing God' is problematic. Developments in theories of knowledge and language have in a way removed God from immediate experience. Frederick Ferré tells us of the crisis of identity faced by modern philosophy as it was realized that philosophy was not one of the natural sciences. Instead, the philosopher's responsibility:

is the logical task of clarifying and illuminating the ends of language and the ways in which language is able to achieve these ends . . . We may thus distinguish another basic principle of postwar linguistic philosophy. It is: 'linguistic significance is the primary subject matter of philosophy'.²⁰

Without going into tedious detail, when the linguistic significance of 'God' and the attributes traditionally used to define him are brought under this examination, it becomes clear that there are serious problems with them. Anthony Kenny, for instance, considers the omniscience, foreknowledge and omnipotence of God, and concludes: 'There cannot, if our argument has been sound, be a timeless, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent, all-good being'.²¹ Arguments against theism have drawn different responses, tending towards the same type of conclusion. Ferré himself says:

There is no longer any question of literal description, since, as we have seen, terms derived from contexts of limited generality cannot without distortion be applied in contexts of unlimited generality. If words are drawn from human experience and used concerning 'ultimate reality', it will not be appropriate to expect a 'picturing' relationship between language and referent. (p.231)

The point Ferré makes is that we cannot assume that there is a necessary connection between our systems of ideas and beliefs and any ultimate reality. Wittgenstein said that, 'Language is an infinite regression, words being spoken of other words'. When we use words about God, we are using words about other words. The words which we use are drawn wholly from human experience. When we say that God is, for example, infinitely good, we are saying that he is like a very, very good person. But whether our ideas of goodness have any relation to an ultimate reality is anybody's guess. There have, of course, always been people who have sensed this inadequacy of language, and attempted to do without words altogether, relying instead on mystical experience for their understanding of God. It is perhaps unfair to say, as Newman did, that mysticism begins in mist and ends in schism; however, the same stricture applies. The infinite is still being filtered

through human finiteness; what the mystic experiences has no necessary connection with what God is really like. So for those whom the philosophers rather condescendingly call 'the traditional theist', faith starts one step back from what we may have been used to. We do not only have to believe that 'God exists'; we have to believe that the words we use to describe him are not totally incoherent, and do in some sense relate to what is believed to be their object.

This is perhaps an alarming scenario, yet it contains within itself indications of an acceptable resolution. The passage from Ferré quoted above continues thus:

But if language literally based on certain models of great responsive depth found within human experience is capable not only of synthesizing our concepts in a coherent manner but also of illuminating our experience - moral experience, sense experience, aesthetic experience, religious experience - we may ask why this happens to be the case. And if some models are capable of providing greater coherence and adequacy than others, we may begin to suspect that this tells us something not only about the models but also about what reality is like . . .

Whether Ferré is right in his defence of the language of theism on these grounds is not the point at issue - though I would like to think he is. He does, however, point us to where the knowledge of God is to be found, if anywhere - that is, in the human experience which produces models of great responsive depth. James Stewart, in *Heralds of God*, reassures young preachers doubtful of their staying power thus:

Take comfort! Enshrined at the heart of the faith are facts of such perennial vitality and incalculable force that you will never, to your dying day, tell more than a fraction of the truth that God has blazed across your sky.²²

And here we return both to preaching and to poetry.

If modern philosophy is pre-occupied with problems of language, the same may be said of modern literary theory. Indeed, the effect of the whole tide of modern thought has been to make the notion that things are what they seem to be appear naive. Freud taught us that our 'free' actions are affected by experiences in our past to which we have no access, or to which access is difficult. Marx taught us that societies are created and controlled by economics, and that the individual's significance is miniscule compared with that of the large economic unit. Newtonian physics gives way to quantum physics. And as Terry Eagleton says of structuralism,

[It] is a modern inheritor of this belief that reality, and our experience of it, are discontinuous with each other . . . It undermines the empiricism of the literary humanists - the belief that what is most 'real' is what is experienced, and that the home of this rich, subtle, complex experience is literature itself. Like Freud, it exposes the shocking truth that even our most intimate experience is the effect of a structure.²³

The word 'superstructuralism' has been used²⁴ to refer to a family of approaches to language and literature having in common the belief that the assumptions of truth

and falsity, thinkable and unthinkable, which form the matrix of understanding within which human beings function, are variable and conditional, and are not simply rooted within the nature of things. If Newtonian physics gives way to quantum physics, everything gives way to post-modernism. Any first principles can be 'deconstructed', shown to rest on other 'first principles' which can also be deconstructed. There is no transcendent base for language. Rather, language is a kaleidoscope of signifiers and signifieds, constantly changing their relation to each other. All reality is virtual, and ideas and objects relate conventionally, not necessarily. Consider this excerpt from a *Guardian* review by Julian Evans (23 February 1993):

Wrestle with the world, advocated Salman Rushdie in a recent defence of the Best Young British Novelists. 'Very few writers', he added, '[have] the courage or even the energy to bite off a big chunk of the universe and chew it over.' But none of us really lives in a place called "the world" or "the universe", not when I last looked. We live in bits of cities, among friends, in pockets of love, with thoughtless neighbours . . .

What is 'real' ('important') is immediate, experiential, and above all free-standing - not part of an over-arching, unquestionable structure.

* * * * *

This (no doubt unsatisfactory) glimpse of our cultural present and possible future has its own implications for our understanding of the Gospel. Suffice it to say, however, that in our investigation into preaching, we must take account of two facts: firstly, that refinements in the study of linguistic significance have undermined our confidence in our use of the language of theism, and, secondly, that developments in critical theory and practice have drawn attention away from 'meta-narratives' which seek to draw together perceptions and events (as Marxist, liberal, Christian) to the bitterness of the human experiences which were previously their subject - and which may, of course, also be deconstructed. On the one hand, then, if theistic language has any validity, this validity lies in its location within a complex human, rather than supernatural, frame of reference - the setting for models of great responsive depth, which we trust are not wholly misaligned with divine archetypes. On the other hand, without abandoning our belief in the possibility of a Christian meta-narrative, we are perhaps taught to sharpen our focus on the episodes of that narrative.

I want to sum up the approach to preaching which I feel is necessary today under three headings.

1. **MYSTERY** Preaching today must acknowledge that it is attempting to make sense of the deepest mystery. Probably preachers have always paid lip-service to this truth. In our own time, however, the mystery has deepened, partly because of our difficulties with religious language, and partly because of our experience of

suffering. This has been the most terrible century in history. The summer of 1914 stands as a metaphor for the (comparative) innocence of all humanity. Any attempt to skirt these issues - to claim knowledge of God where there is only faith, or to claim assurance of a divine superintendency over evil deeds where there can only be outrage - should be utterly rejected. C. S. Lewis expressed this in a different context in *Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?*:

The critics, or most of them, have at any rate kept constantly before us the knowledge that in this play there is greatness and mystery. They were never entirely wrong. Their error, on my view, was to put the mystery in the wrong place - in Hamlet's motives rather than in that darkness which enwraps Hamlet and the whole Tragedy and all who read or watch it. It is a mysterious play in the sense of being a play about mystery.²⁵

Precisely; and to regard the motives and purposes of God as the mystery is to be open to the same criticism. There is no *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark, and there is no Gospel without the history and tradition which articulate and unify our faith. However, the Gospel itself is a play about mystery, and we are still enwrapped in darkness.

2. **PERSONALITY** Preaching must be based on the fullest engagement with the fullest range of human personality. I mean by this that our tendency to categorize actions and attitudes according to whether they are sinful or virtuous should not limit our empathy with modes of being and behaviour which are foreign to us. If we regard moral codes as simply given, to be accepted or rejected rather than engaged, we deny the depth and truth of the experience of those who do not share our beliefs. In one of Galsworthy's *Forsyte* novels, for example, Fleur resolves to be a perfect wife to one man and a perfect mistress to another. One can say that this is wrong; but if, having said this, we believe that there is no more to be said, we have engaged the question on only one of its many levels. The nature of faith and its expression in preaching today requires a greater commitment to the whole truth.

This is illustrated better in literature, which deals with human relationships, than in theology, which is always likely to disappear down metaphysical blind alleys. Consider *Hamlet* again. The great question of the play is: why does Hamlet not kill his uncle when he is sure that his uncle killed his father? If there is an answer to this, it is that Hamlet wishes to feel and to understand his uncle's evil, and to experience fully the horror of the 'time out of joint' and the diseased nation. Simple revenge is not enough. Hamlet's mirror-image is Fortinbras/Laertes, two characters who are able to act decisively only because they do not understand the nature of evil. Yet Hamlet, in spite of his ineffectiveness, is infinitely their moral superior.

Iris Murdoch expresses the same contrast. A character in *The Bell*, James Tayper Pace, is giving an address:

The study of personality, indeed the whole conception of personality, is, as I see it, dangerous to goodness . . . A belief in Original Sin should not lead

us to probe the filth of our minds or regard ourselves as unique and interesting sinners. As sinners we are much the same and our sin is essentially something tedious, something to be shunned and not something to be investigated . . . We should consider not what delights us or what disgusts us, morally speaking, but what is enjoined and what is forbidden.²⁶

James's mirror-image is Michael Meade, who disagrees and speaks of self-knowledge as the wisdom of the serpent:

This is the struggle, pleasing surely in the sight of God, to become more fully and deeply the person that we are; and by exploring and hallowing every corner of our being, to bring into existence that one and perfect individual which God in creating us entrusted to our care.²⁷

The Christian preacher should be Hamlet rather than Laertes, Michael rather than James.

3. **ARTISTRY** The preacher today must be fully aware of his or her role as an artist. The critic, William Empson, has said that 'The property of poetry to suggest more than it states is what makes it what it is'. In the case of words about God, what is stated is never adequate to express what is meant.

. . . Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.²⁸

In worship we seek to acknowledge this shortfall of meaning while appropriating it as an experience which is the closest we can come to an experience of God.

In this sense the poetical experience is analogous to the religious experience. The poet works by taking the material gathered by observation or reflection and applying symbols to it. So, for instance, in Henry Vaughan's couplet:

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light.

Eternity is the object, the raw material of the image; the great Ring of light is the symbol. The mind has to be active to unify the two as the poet desires, and it is in this activity that the pleasure of the verse resides. The poetry is in the space between the object and the symbol. It is this imaginative activity which the preacher should aim to evoke. The unifying of disparate concepts, the grasping for something slightly out of reach, the recognition of similitude in dissimilitude, and the ordering of shapeless thoughts and feelings, are of the essence of poetry. They are also of the essence of worship, and they must be part of our preaching.

We must learn to use language in ways which allow room for the activity of the imagination. There is a familiar but important distinction to be made between denotative language, a scientific or prosaic use of words where one statement means

one thing, and connotative language, the expanded use where one statement might mean a number of things, and the reader has to identify the overtones for himself. So 'I am twenty years old' might be a bare statement of fact. Housman's lines, 'Now of my threescore years and ten, Twenty will not come again', convey the same information in a way which evokes the value of those years in a life which is rapidly passing. If the sermon is to be worshipful as well as informative, that is how language must be used. Meaning is (to borrow from Eliot again) in 'the stillness between two waves of the sea'.

In conclusion, I find it deeply significant that at the heart of the Christian faith is belief in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The source of our religion is not a book of words which floated down from heaven like the Koran, and this is just as well. Plato says at the end of *Phaedrus* that words themselves do not contain wisdom. Rather, we believe that if God has revealed himself, he has done so in a person. Personality is made up of emotion, character and ideas, body, mind and spirit. Such an active revelation is inexhaustible. Jesus is God's raid on the inarticulate. And so preaching today must embrace the representative humanity of Jesus, for this is all we know of God.

NOTES

- 1 Colin Morris, *The Word and the Words*, 1975, p.10.
- 2 John Stacey, *Preaching Reassessed*, 1980, p.67.
- 3 John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 1982, pp.70-74.
- 4 Bultman, cited Stacey, *op.cit.*, p.29.
- 5 Gustav Aulen, cited Stacey, *op.cit.*, p.34.
- 6 James Stewart, *Heralds of God*, 1946, p.190.
- 7 Henry Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching*, 1977, p.32.
- 8 Cited Stott, *op.cit.*, p.37.
- 9 Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690 [Anchor, 1974], XIX, 1, p.126.
- 10 E. g. Burke's 'On the Sublime and the Beautiful', 1756.
- 11 Pope, *Essay on Man*, II, 11.1-2.
- 12 *Rambler*, no.168.
- 13 Pope, *op.cit.*, II, 11.293-4.
- 14 *Sermons, 1738*; first of 'Two Sermons on Exodus XX 24', 9 October 1757.
- 15 H. Davies, *Worship and Theology in England from Watts and Wesley to Maurice, 1690-1850*, 1961, p.69.
- 16 Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818.
- 17 Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817.
- 18 Letter to G. and T. Keats, 21 December 1817.
- 19 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 1953, p.23.
- 20 Frederick Ferré, *Language, Logic and God*, 1962, (Fontana edn., 1970) p.20.
- 21 A. Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*, 1979, X, p.121.
- 22 Stewart, *op.cit.*, p.68.
- 23 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 1983, p.108.
- 24 By Richard Harland in his book of that name, 1987.
- 25 'Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?', in *Interpretations of Shakespeare*, ed. Kenneth Muir, 1985, p.139.
- 26 Iris Murdoch, *The Bell*, 1965 edition, pp.132-3.
- 27 *ibid.*, pp.205-6.
- 28 T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, V.

MARK WOODS *Minister, Downend Baptist Church, Bristol*