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# JOHN WYCLIF AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

*John Stacey*

**J**OHN WYCLIF had strong views about most things, and preaching was not excluded. His convictions on this subject, as on others, he sought to justify by an appeal to primitive Christianity which he regarded as the golden age. 'Christ effected more by the proclamation of the Gospel by means of the Apostles, than by all the miracles that he performed himself in Judea.'<sup>1</sup> The Apostles left the 'bysynesse of worldly occupacion' in order that they could concentrate on the 'trewe techynge of the gospel' and this was the right tradition for the church to follow. 'Crist preched the gospel and charged alle his apostolis and disciplis to goo and preche the gospel to alle men.'<sup>2</sup> It was Christ himself who spoke in and through the preacher both in the first century and the fourteenth and through the sermon brought to birth his spiritual children. More than that, the whole Trinity was at work in the words that were preached (*Tota Trinitas loquitur omnia ista verba*).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the ministry of the Word was something that the church ought never to neglect.

With these convictions Wyclif could not look at the fourteenth-century church with any great enthusiasm. To his mind the centrality of the mass and the proliferation of rites and ceremonies which were characteristic of the Ecclesia Anglicana at that time diverted her from her true business, the preaching of the gospel. He complained of 'matynys and masse and euen song, placebo and dirige and commendacion and matynes of oure lady'<sup>4</sup> and their adverse effect on the duty 'to studie and preche the gospel'.<sup>5</sup> He could even say 'praying is gode, but not so gode as prechyng'.<sup>6</sup>

It is possible that some might be tempted to jump to the conclusion that Wyclif was a Bible Christian born out of due season, emphasizing the evangelical to the exclusion of the sacramental, and anxious to remove all high altars and replace them with high pulpits, but this would be an exaggeration. He held a strong doctrine of the real presence which was not only a generalized presence, but a localized one as well. It was fundamental to his eucharistic theology that 'in the consecrated host there is the body of Christ'.<sup>7</sup> 'God's body in the form of bread'<sup>8</sup> was his English rendering. He was sacramentalist enough to distinguish in one work<sup>9</sup> between mattins and evensong 'that synful men han ordeyned' and the mass 'that God comaundid him self'. It is not without significance that Wyclif was hearing mass at Lutterworth when he received the stroke from which he died. It is true that in seeking to redress the balance he said that 'Crist preiseth more preching of the Gospel . . . than gendring of his oune body', but he was careful to add, 'al zif (although) they both ben gode werkis'.<sup>10</sup> The importance he gave to the eucharist must not be overlooked, otherwise his pleas for a right emphasis

on preaching will cause him to be classified, wrongly, with those latter-day evangelicals who would have preaching at the expense of the sacraments.

Many of Wyclif's assertions about the place of preaching in the life of the church are to be found in his comments on the proper function of a priest. He said in this context that 'the preaching of the Word of God is an act more solemn than the making of the sacrament'<sup>11</sup> and that both priests and deacons ought *praedicare verbum Dei*<sup>12</sup> rather than say the canonical hours. The chief duty of the priest was to preach. Such preaching more effectively destroys *mortalia* than does the eucharist and it produces 'a great closeness to the Son of God'.<sup>13</sup> So all clergy ought to be skilled in *ars ewangelizandi* and take pains to perfect that 'rizt preching of goddis word' which is 'the mooste worthy dede that prestis don heere among men'.<sup>14</sup> This is the true pastoral office, for 'bi this werk a prest getith goddis children and makith hem to come to heuene'.<sup>15</sup> 'More fruyt cometh of good preching than of any other work.'<sup>16</sup> Wyclif poured out invective, at which occupation he was a past master, on the priests who were defaulters in this matter and the prelates who were too fat to preach and 'thus their bisynesse is stoppid to gete hem more of worldly muc'.<sup>17</sup>

Wyclif was by no means enamoured of much that passed for preaching in the fourteenth century. This latter is a subject which G. R. Owst has made his own and he comments that 'on its purely doctrinal side . . . the English pulpit of the waning Middle Ages has little inspiration to offer'.<sup>18</sup> There were learned sermons preached in the schools, but they were as dry as dust. Wyclif, however, could have little quarrel with them for though he might wish to question points of doctrine their general form was one he used extensively himself. His antipathy was to popular preaching; to the sermons which, as Beryl Smalley says, 'graced many social as well as liturgical occasions'.<sup>19</sup> But Wyclif's *bête noire* was the friar—perhaps because he believed in the ideals of the movement and the corruption of them aroused more hostility than movements, like the monastic, which were basically alien to his spirit—and some of his most scornful comments were directed at the friars' preaching. He referred to it as 'cronyclis and fablis to pleese the puple'<sup>20</sup> and in *De Officio Pastoralis* he went further and called the friars 'adulterers of the Word of God in prostitutes' robes and coloured veils'.<sup>21</sup> They 'preach feigned words and poems in rhyme'.<sup>22</sup>

As is usual with Wyclif, he exaggerates a real truth for polemical purposes. The friars took their preaching seriously and it was to them that Dom David Knowles was referring when he wrote, in contradistinction to Owst, that 'the golden age of the popular sermon in medieval England appears to have been the middle and latter half of the fourteenth century'.<sup>23</sup> In the friary schools, to which even monks were sent, the *artes praedicandi* received much attention, but so often when faced with an audience 'critical, eager for novelty and hopeful of entertainment, wanting to be stimulated or amused'<sup>24</sup> the temptation was too much for the friar preachers. They fell to 'ventilating and satirizing public wrongs'<sup>25</sup> which in itself was no bad thing, but they embellished and titivated their sermons with extraneous material. One such embellishment was the tale of the Northumberland woman who was so moved by the preacher's words that she died. On being resuscitated, the

words 'Ave Maria' were found inscribed on her tongue. This can be capped with the story of the lady's pet monkey that strayed into church, swallowed the Host and was burnt by its god-fearing mistress. The Host was rescued from the animal's stomach unchanged. It would not be fair to pretend that the preaching of the friars consisted only in such apocryphal tales, for they were often 'messengers to bid men come to heaven, as doctors and prechers of the word of God',<sup>26</sup> but it was the presence of such material in their sermons that made Wyclif write of the friars, *Sunt enim pleni mendaciis, scandalis atque blasphemis et per ypocrisim suam seducunt ecclesiam.*<sup>27</sup>

Nothing is easier than to condemn, and the friar particularly was fair game, but what positive conception of preaching did Wyclif have? His basic principle was that it must be rooted in the Word of God, in the sacred book, 'Goddis lawe' as he called it. Scripture was to him the *magistrum optimum*, higher than reason or tradition, and doctrines were to be preached only if they agreed with holy scripture. Hence the insistence of Wyclif that not only must all priests have *officium predicandi* but also that this office was quite impossible to fulfil without *sciencia scripture sacre*.<sup>28</sup> In all preaching the biblical truth must shine forth and one of the reasons why Wyclif instigated the famous translations associated with his name was to make this possible. Tradition, scholastic arguments and extraneous stories had to be set aside so that preaching was preaching of the Word and nothing else but that. As Owst says: 'The first point to be noticed in the general contribution of Wycliffe to English medieval preaching is his insistence on "the naked text" or exposition of the Gospel message *per nudum textum*, freed of the accumulation of foreign matter from without.'<sup>29</sup> In his sermon *Circuibat Jesus civitates et castella docens in synagogis* Wyclif made it clear that in his judgement the gospel was the all-sufficient source of sermon material for every kind of sermon. Hence his strong assertion that all sermons except those which treat of the gospel (*illas quas explicat ut plane innuit fides scripture*)<sup>30</sup> ought to be rejected. This is understandable from one who in his *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* referred to 'sacred Scripture which is the Catholic faith'<sup>31</sup> and to the Bible as 'one perfect Word proceeding from the mouth of God'.<sup>32</sup>

To follow the example of Christ seemed to Wyclif to be an important consideration, and in the second volume of *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, after stating yet again that to preach the Word of God was a holier work than to celebrate the eucharist and advocating that not only priests but people as well should do it, for it was *opus dignissimum creature*,<sup>33</sup> he went on to say that 'this is confirmed by the words and actions of Christ and we ought to imitate him as much as possible'. He expressed the same convictions in English. 'And herfore Jesus Crist occupied hym mooste in tho werke of prechyng, and laft other werkes; and this diden his apostils, and herfore God loved hom . . . and herfore Jesus Crist, when he steyghe to heaven, enjoyned specialy to all his apostils to preche tho gospel frely to iche man.'<sup>34</sup> To be a preacher was to follow in the steps of the Master, and to be obedient to his command.

Part of Wyclif's enthusiasm for preaching can be attributed to his concern for the poor peasants of England and his desire that the gospel should be

made both intelligible and relevant to them. That he had this concern is evident from the kindly references he made to them and is substantiated by the wild accusations that his social teaching was a significant factor in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. In fact it was not, because the famous 'doctrine of dominion' was quite incomprehensible to the common people, but it did reveal where the sympathies of Wyclif lay. And behind both the translations of the Bible made by his school and the sending out of the Poor Priests, though more through the latter than the former, was his desire that the poor should have the gospel preached to them. Such preaching had to be in the vernacular (*euangelium in vulgari*), for 'only a sermon in the mother-tongue could be edifying'.<sup>35</sup> The Poor Priests, walking along the roads of England barefooted and dressed in their simple, russet cassocks, preaching as they went, soon became, as Buddensieg puts it, 'the mightiest champions of the new doctrine'.<sup>36</sup> Often using sermon material provided by Wyclif himself, these first Lollards were his answer to the need of the people as he saw it.

Wyclif's own sermons reflect these emphases. As Dr Loserth says: 'It cannot be denied that Wyclif complies in his own sermons with the rather severe demands which he makes upon preachers.'<sup>37</sup> If, as Wyclif said, all sermons other than those that treat of Scripture ought to be rejected, then his own would be retained, for usually the first section of every sermon was concerned with elucidating the meaning of the text. Sometimes, following the accepted procedure in the medieval schools, the literal or historical meaning was treated first, then the mystical, the latter covering what a modern preacher would understand by 'applying the text'. Often before coming to the mystical meaning Wyclif dealt with what he thought might be doubts in the minds of his hearers, and under this heading his views on disendowment, the mendicants, 'Caesarean clergy', the pope of Rome and other controversial themes were bluntly and sometimes violently stated. If it were argued against him that these diatribes could not be considered a reasonable exegesis of the text, doubtless his reply would have been that having expounded the text in the first section, he was furthering biblical religion in a more general sense by denouncing those institutions and people that were plainly contrary to it.

His concern for the people and his desire that they should hear the gospel is shown by the fact that he turned from preaching in Latin to preaching in English. And not only did he change the language; he changed the content and the style. For example, *Sermo XXV* of the Latin sermons has amongst its sub-headings 'Relation of faith to natural reason', 'The errors of philosophers are intellectual', 'All intuitive knowledge comes from God', 'Natural reason does not prevent faith being meritorious but without faith it is not meritorious'. It is true that occasionally in the English sermons one meets with headings like 'Double procession of the Holy Ghost', but most are of the kind 'We are commanded to be hopeful and of good courage', 'The test of the love of Christians is obedience' and 'Repinings, how to be corrected'. Still there is the castigating of the friars, the prelates and the pope—they would not be Wyclif sermons without this—but the themes appeal more to the simple peasant and less to the professional schoolman, and the style is

correspondingly more simple and direct. In this Wyclif would have contended that he was following the example of Christ who spoke plain words in the language of the people.

In his own preaching, in his advocacy of the importance of the ministry of the Word and in the activities of the Poor Priests whom he inspired, Wyclif sought an answer to that neglect and inadequacy of preaching in the fourteenth century against which he protested so strongly. The immediate effects of what he did were limited, for as McFarlane has reminded us, this was 'the Reformation that did not come off'.<sup>36</sup> But nevertheless Wyclif anticipated the time when the ministry of the Word was to come into its own.

<sup>1</sup> *Sermones*, Ed. Dr I. Loserth, p. iv, f.n. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Of Feigned Contemplative Life, The English Works of Wyclif*, Ed. F. D. Matthew, p. 188.

<sup>3</sup> *Sermo*, XXXIV. *Sermones*, II, p. 247.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew, p. 191.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew, p. 191.

<sup>6</sup> *Select English Works*, ed. T. Arnold, III, 144.

<sup>7</sup> *De Blasphemia*, p. 248.

<sup>8</sup> *Select English Works*, ed. T. Arnold, III, 403.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew, pp. 193-4.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew, p. 441.

<sup>11</sup> *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, II, 156.

<sup>12</sup> *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, p. 409.

<sup>13</sup> *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, II, 157.

<sup>14</sup> *De Officio Pastoralis*, Matthew, p. 441.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew, p. 441.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew, p. 441.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew, p. 445.

<sup>18</sup> *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century*, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Select English Works*, ed. T. Arnold, III, 376.

<sup>21</sup> Trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XIV, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> *Opera Minora*, p. 331.

<sup>23</sup> *The Religious Orders in England*, Vol. II: 'The End of the Middle Ages', p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century*, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, p. 220.

<sup>26</sup> John Bromyard, *Summa Predicantium*. Quoted by G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England*, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> *Sermones*, I, 403.

<sup>28</sup> *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, II, 161.

<sup>29</sup> G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England*, p. 132.

<sup>30</sup> *Sermones*, I, 262.

<sup>31</sup> *Idem*, I, 34.

<sup>32</sup> *Idem*, I, 268.

<sup>33</sup> P. 157.

<sup>34</sup> *Select English Works*, ed. T. Arnold, III, 144.

<sup>35</sup> *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, II, 243.

<sup>36</sup> *Johann Wiclif und seine Zeit*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>37</sup> *Sermones*, I, xi.

<sup>38</sup> *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*, K. B. McFarlane, p. 188.