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Speaking truth to power: Challenges and opportunities of the Fourth Industrial Revolution for preachers

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Abstract

Scholars believe that we are amid one of the greatest cultural revolutions since the mass production of books by Johannes Gutenberg around 1450. The art of book printing, which originated in Central Europe, turned the world on its head within 10 years. The mass production of books resulted in most people in Europe learning to read in less than one generation, which has led to major changes in all areas of social life and has affected the lives of millions of people for over a hundred years. According to these same scholars, we currently find ourselves in a similar position through what is known as the AI (artificial intelligence). In this article, the researcher wants to come to a better understanding of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and AI as part of it and the way they challenge preachers. The central research question is: In our pursuit to speak the truth of Jesus Christ to the powerful economic elite, what are the challenges and opportunities that the 4IR is posing to preachers?

Keywords

Fourth Industrial Revolution; preaching competencies; faith communities; prophetic bridge building; communication

Introduction

As early as 1993, Postman (1993:12) wrote:

> New technologies change what we mean by "knowing" and "truth"; they alter those deeply embedded habits of thought which give to a culture its sense of what the world is like – a sense of what is the natural order of things, of what is reasonable, of what is necessary, of what is inevitable, or what is real.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) ushered in a new era of artificial intelligence (AI) and new technologies are challenging our ways of knowing and our understanding of truth. "Speaking truth to power" is the title of this article and the question that the development of the 4IR poses to us as preachers is: How should we respond to the ethical and social challenges and opportunities that this era of transformation in science and technology presents to us in our efforts to speak truth to power? We are deeply aware of the fact that AI presents us with unprecedented new possibilities, while at the same time acknowledging that potential dangers and risks lurk if we deal with them without the necessary care and wisdom. If one further keeps in mind that the 4IR asks the same question as the previous revolutions, namely "What is the value of the human being?", then one realises that AI is posing intricate questions to human dignity on many levels and has a big impact on us as human beings and especially on our human dignity.

The abovementioned brings us to the research question of this contribution, namely: In our pursuit to speak truth to power through preaching, what are the challenges and opportunities that the 4IR is posing to preachers? I will offer a short overview of what the 4IR entails, followed by specific challenges and opportunities that the 4IR is posing to preachers in their pursuit to speak truth to power. I will then proceed to look at the role of faith communities and preachers in the context of the 4IR and will conclude by looking at some competencies that preachers need to address the 4IR.

Before we attempt to develop a better understanding of 4IR, it is important to clarify what is meant by "speaking truth to power" in the title. Seen in the light of the fact that this research takes place within the field of practical theology with a specific focus on homiletics, it is critical to bear in mind that this "truth" is not specifically related to moral or personal truth, nor with cognitive or propositional truth nor with ontic truth, but it is about the truth of the person and work of Jesus Christ – thus a relational truth. Preaching is thus a way of speaking truth to power.

Understanding the 4IR

One thing is for sure and that is that we live in a time when technological shifts are leading to a revolutionary change in the way we work and

live as well as the connection between the two. The digitalisation of the world, which is so characteristic of the 4IR, has led us to find a mixture of technologies that blurs the boundaries between biological, digital, and physical worlds. Some of these worlds or fields include technologies such as 3-D printing, nanotechnology, energy storage, quantum computing, the Internet of Things, robotics, AI and autonomous vehicles. Therefore, the participants in the digital revolution will also be sympathisers with this development until it becomes clear that new monopolies are being advanced (Plutschinski, 2021:10–13).

Klaus Schwab was the one who popularised the 4IR in his 2016 book. In the political and business world, the term is often abbreviated to 4IR, as I am using it in this contribution. Schwab (2016:2) observes as follows:

> We stand on the brink of a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope, and complexity, the transformation will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before. We do not yet know just how it will unfold, but one thing is clear: the response to it must be integrated and comprehensive, involving all stakeholders of the global polity, from the public and private sectors to academia and civil society. It is characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres.

The development of the previous industrial revolutions can be summarised as follows:

1760: The First Industrial Revolution started in Britain with the use of steam in factories and eventually also in the railways, where locomotives were powered by steam. The use of these forms of energy resulted in a major change in manufacturing and led to increased productivity.

1860: The Second Industrial Revolution entailed the development of electricity, which provided easier access to power sources and led to automation.

1960: The Third Industrial Revolution began with the development of computers. This invention led to a whole new industry of information

technology and electronics. The latter has accelerated considerably with the advent of the World Wide Web.

2000: The 4IR has less to do with the invention of new forms of technology, as was the case with steam power and electricity, than it does with the unprecedented speed of a stream of different technologies coming together and disrupting manufacturing and established business practices and opening up to new ways of doing business (Philbeck & Davis, 2018:18–19).

Peckham (2021a:17) explains the 4IR as follows:

> A cluster of technologies, such as AI, sensors, and communications infrastructure like 5G have converged to allow the creation of new ways of doing things. Smart cities are an example of how such technologies can be used to control traffic flow, alert authorities to empty rubbish bins when they are full, and spot potential criminal activity through facial recognition and gait analysis.

See some of the main technologies that are contributing to the 4IR along with example applications in table 1 (Peckham, 2021a:18).

Table 1

Technology	Example applications
3-D printing	Adidas scans your gait and styles a shoe just for you
AI (Artificial Intelligence)	Facial recognition used to open your smart phone or for mass surveillance
Internet of Things	Fridge connected to the internet to reorder contents when used
Robotics	Autonomous vacuum cleaners and stock or fruit pickers
Biotechnology	Growing replacement organs
Materials science	Lighter and stronger materials
Quantum computing	Modelling the human brain
Energy storage	Electric cars
Blockchain	Crypto currency

Critique of the 4IR

The 4IR is not without contestation and some critique has also been offered that requires critical engagement. Nyabola (2018), in her book *Digital democracy, analogue politics: How the Internet era is transforming politics in Kenya*, is of the opinion that the 4IR is used by global elites to divert attention from the real drivers of inequality. In the process, they further enable exclusion, exploitation, and expropriation. In a recent discussion on policy, she made the following statement: "The real seduction of this idea is that it is apolitical. We can talk about development and progress, without having to grapple with power" (2018:31).

It is especially from the Global South that there is increasing critique of the 4IR, and it is even asked whether it should be considered a revolution at all. This criticism is related to the fact that there is ample evidence of the unequal distribution of digital technologies. Along with this, it is also the case that these technologies were driven by an older generation of innovation that maintained the unequal social relations, rather than transforming them. That is why Moll (2021:5) questions whether the myriad of digital innovations can really be responsible for a revolution. He believes that revolutions are not only driven by technological change, but also determined by fundamental changes in the workplace in terms of relationships and processes and the restructuring of global socio-economic structures.

Despite the critique, the African Union regards the 4IR as a watershed moment for the development of Africa. Webster (2020:10) believes that innovation in technology can indeed benefit working classes, as it can reduce monotonous and repetitive work and improve the working conditions of the people, while there will be more free time to engage in other meaningful activities. The problem, he says, is that the benefits of technological innovation are controlled by a global capitalist elite. With this critique in mind, we can now move on to some of the opportunities and challenges that the 4IR poses to us.

Opportunities of the 4IR

I already referred to the fact that scholars believe that we are amid one of the greatest cultural revolutions since the mass production of books in Gutenberg around 1450. The art of book printing, which originated in Central Europe, turned the world on its head within 10 years. The mass production of books resulted in most people in Europe learning to read in less than one generation, which has led to major changes in all areas of social life and has affected the lives of millions of people for over a hundred years. According to these same scholars, we find ourselves currently in a similar position through what is known as the AI Gamechanger.

Henning (2021:29) is of the opinion that AI is a gamechanger of the way in which we live and work. He wrote a chapter in Plutschinski (2021:29–44) to explain in five theses the ways in which AI creates different opportunities for human beings. In an overview, Henning (2021:30) summarises them in the following way:

> 1. Artificial Intelligence is pervading all machines, systems and devices, all offices, and all private lives. The digital companions will be omnipresent and unobtrusive. They are extremely useful and that's why we use them. 2. In a fully connected and digitalized world we need new ways to balance the tensions between people, cultures, technologies, virtual realities, and AI objects with own consciousness. 3. Digital platforms are the key to new value chains as a new global marketplace for goods and services. 4. Many professions will disappear, but completely new ones will also emerge – at all levels of competence. 5. The biggest cultural revolution since Gutenberg is taking place by the AI Gamechanger. We have the chance to use artificial intelligence to drive the digital transformation in a responsible way before others do it irresponsibly.

In Henning's earlier publication, *Gamechanger AI* (2020), he states that the era of hybrid intelligence has arrived and that new partnerships between machines and humans are needed. According to him, where an intelligent machine can do a task better than a human, we should simply allow it. In other fields, which among other things deal with reflections, emotions, creativity and of particular importance to us, our reflection on God and

the world, therefore in the field of faith and spirituality, the human is the machine's superior, and we must take the lead. In other words, it means that people sometimes do better than machines, sometimes it is the other way around, and sometimes it works best to do things together.

The responsibility rests with us to do the necessary reflection, design, construction, and testing work of this hybrid intelligence in the coming decades. Therefore, we must make sure that the developments associated with it do not overwhelm us and steer us in directions that none of us wanted. Finally, he calls for us to become pioneers of digital transformation and in that way also examples of how AI can be used for the benefit of the people, supported by Christian and democratic values. This brings us to the impact of the 4IR on faith communities before we finally move to preachers and their role in this hybrid intelligent world.

Challenges of the 4IR

According to Brynjolfsson, Mitchell & Rock (2018), the 4IR poses several challenges to us. The first challenge relates to *asymmetric power relations*. In previous industrial revolutions, it was trade and industry that were in control of the revolutions. The 4IR, however, is largely driven by a small number of so-called Big Tech companies such as Apple, Google and Amazon in the USA and Alibaba, Baidoo and TenCent in China. These companies often have a budget larger than the gross domestic product of smaller countries, and that gives them extraordinary power and the ability to exercise control. These asymmetric power relations often rob consumers of their privacy and freedom, and it happens that Google often knows more about us than we know of ourselves. Furthermore, this happens without the government being able to interfere in their activities, and very little self-regulation takes place in these companies (Havens 2016).

The second challenge is the problem of *inequality of access* to 4IR technologies. Coming from a country in the Southern Hemisphere, one is very aware of the inability of poorer countries to access 4IR technologies. The disruption in labour markets worldwide, further aided by the Covid-19 pandemic, has brought the latter into sharp focus. Although we were allowed to visit stores for the purchase of essential products during the

lockdown periods, online shopping has increased dramatically worldwide, where robots have taken over many of the human tasks. Many students in South Africa do not have personal computers and data is very expensive, which has had a huge impact on their studies. I concur with Cloete (2017:4) when she writes: "Access to technology and technological literacy are a part of the challenges faced in a developing country like South Africa. These challenges are often described as the digital divide referring to those that have access to technology and technological skills and those that do not".

The third challenge of the 4IR is *what it means to be human*. As various technologies take over more and more human skills, it can happen that we become more and more dependent on them and that they can bring our true humanity into question. As Christians, it can affect the image of God in us, and it can also affect our other relationships with one another. We can easily lose our ability to show empathy, and even our intellectual acumen can be jeopardised if we rely too much on technology. Furthermore, it can result in losing what is making us human, namely that we were created in the image of God and cause us to lose our moral compass (Peckham, 2021b).

A fourth challenge that is directly related to the latter is the danger that *we may lose consciousness*. Conscious self-reflecting is what distinguishes us as humans from the animal world. We often work with the premise that technology is proof of progress and that progress is good. This way of thinking has affected our awareness of what is right and wrong. The rapid pace at which things change often makes us restless for the next new thing, which means we are constantly on the lookout for the latest in terms of our jobs, relationships and so on. We find this quest for continual renewal even among churches to engage younger generations by using social media and the latest digital technology without seriously reflecting on what values underlie it. In this way, digital technology alienates us from some parts of our lives and from the fact that we are made in the image of God. There is even talk of a digital priesthood, where technology becomes the mediator between us and others and between us and the world (Lambert & Cone, 2019). In this regard I concur with Cloete (2019:5) when she writes: "The question begs how we can take co-responsibility for the changes caused by technology. She goes on to quote Schwab and Davis (2018:34) who suggest that we accept the following three responsibilities: "identify the values that

are embedded in certain technologies, determine how technologies impact our choices and decision-making, decide how to influence technological development in collaboration with relevant stakeholders".

The final challenge relates to the previous and it has to do with *the lure of progress*. It has already been mentioned that we generally accept that progress is good per se, and that progress is driven by technology and science. In the 18th century, the so-called Enlightenment spread from Europe around the world and gave rise to the free market economy in the West and to the various industrial revolutions already mentioned. Progress would be made through scientific discoveries and human reason was seen as the source of knowledge, and all this would help us to flourish. These thoughts are unfortunately deeply embedded in our reflections on technology as well – the new is better than the old. The implicit assumption behind this is that the 4IR will make our lives more comfortable and that it will enable us to thrive. However, what is often behind this is what is known as a transhumanist philosophy that amounts to the transformation of the human condition through technology (Shatzer, 2019).

Faith communities and the 4IR

Christian organisations and churches' working ecclesiologies are unfortunately still too much based on models from the business world that are characterised by one-way traffic, analogous communication, the use of printed magazines, committees, titles, and membership registers. Of course, this in itself is not bad or wrong and has indeed worked very well in the pre-digitalised world of analogue communication. However, it certainly calls for new and innovative thinking in the time of the 4IR with the millennials' postmodern approach to life that differs from their ancestors.

This generation focuses more on networks and has a deep desire for participation, talent development, personal contributions and inspiration, and movements that can help them with the practical living of Christian values in the face of the many ethical challenges. Therefore, churches and Christian organisations will do better by equipping people rather than trying to provide them with all kinds of programmes in a top-

down approach. Overall, one realises that AI and the 4IR expand human interaction and duplicate it to a certain extent, which of course includes both the good and the bad (Plutschinski, 2021:10–13).

Faith communities and churches as subcultures always form part of the parent culture within which they occur and cannot exist separately. Therefore, we must pay close attention to the artefacts that have shaped human history, as they are never theologically and philosophically neutral. They always represent the worldview of the culture of which they are a part. The latter means that faith communities must be very careful not to take over these artefacts uncritically as part of their worship and work in the Kingdom of God. Where this happens, it can lead to the calling and life of the church being undermined. However, this does not mean that these artefacts necessarily must be at odds with the church. In short, it means that we must try to determine what kind of artefact is in question and how we want to use it and try to discern the underlying philosophical orientation of the parent culture. That is why theological discernment is so important and why we must be vigilant when we as followers of Christ employ the artefacts from the current culture in service to faith communities, despite the promises and benefits that the new technologies hold for us (Little, 2021:78).

Christians are involved in a battle for the mind (Rom 12:1–2). It is a warfare that involves ideas and their associations. Paul writes in Ephesians 6:12: "wrestle against the rulers, against the authorities, against cosmic powers over the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." If we as Christians do believe that worldviews are important, we also must believe that cultural artefacts are never theologically and philosophically neutral, and this incorporates new technologies. Little (2021:80) explains as follows:

> In addition to the explicit clash of worldviews, there is also concern of whether the new technologies are fitting or appropriate for the work and worship of God. Are the new technologies, in light of a biblical understanding of the nature of man and the Church, fitting for church use? Do new technologies enhance or distract from worshipping God and edifying man? Do new technologies

employed in church worship meetings serve as an aid or hindrance in worshipping God?

In the history of the Church of Christ, there was always a constant struggle to deal with the world in the right way, in other words to be in the world according to John 17:15, but not to belong to the world or to become like the world. This struggle also requires, among other things, a critical assessment of the underlying beliefs and ideas of the various cultural artefacts and digital technologies. In this regard, it is important to understand something of the intellectual context of the West, where most of the 4IR technologies originated, and how this context affects our understanding of the purpose and meaning of human life.

According to Ritchie (2014:3–4), naturalism is a stream of thought that thinks of a human being as a highly developed machine. This line of thought goes directly against a Christian perspective on how we view human beings. What we need to understand is that there is a direct interconnection between the application and development of new technologies and this naturalistic worldview. Along with this new orientation of naturalism also comes the powerful idea for the ultimate destiny of humans, namely the idea of Progress. With the natural sciences as the driving force for Progress and determinant of truth, all reflection on what a good society should look like is reduced to economic and quantitative gradation, with the chief drive of humans' happiness through efficiency and convenience. Again, this is contrary to the Christian premise that finds its orientation for life in a living focused on God and his grace.

Involuntarily one wants to ask how then did the idea of Progress replace God as Saviour of humankind? As mentioned earlier, we find the answer in the Enlightenment processes of the West. In Enlightenment thinking, the idea of Progress is dominating technological development and the intellectual environment. According to May (1976:3), there are two fundamental presuppositions behind the Enlightenment: In the first place, reason was regarded as the only path to truth that gave way to naturalism, and any form of revelation was discarded. In the second place, the new (some even speak of the tyranny of the new) is preferred over the old. From these two presuppositions developed the idea of Progress that forms the principal driving force of Western practices and thinking.

In the light of the latter, faith communities and churches need to ask themselves: What is technology doing *for* us and what is technology doing *to* us? This question is often overlooked, specifically where there is an overemphasis on the benefits of technology in terms of convenience and efficiency. A Christian anthropology asks believers to pay serious attention to the *for* us part of the question, as the uniqueness of humans is shaped by the biblical premise that they were created in the image of God. According to Little (2021:83)

> … new technologies that are constructed on the notion that man is only a machine of sorts, is to offend God's mirrored essence in the human person. This goes directly to the question of what new technologies, which are developed for use on the predicate that man is only a machine, are doing to humanity made in the image of God.

Little (2021:84) further points out several negative consequences that the use of technology may have for the church. Some of these include using Twitter, digital pastors, streaming of services, using television and large-screen data projectors and simulcasting. According to him, the Christian writings are about people who join themselves together, not for economic, political, or social purposes, but to worship God. This brings him to the question: Is technique fitting to sacredness? In his answer he discusses the power of the medium of communication and of symbols. He points out that there was a time when the liturgical spaces of churches had a cross (as a symbol of Christ's suffering), a communion table (as identification with Christ's new covenant) and a pulpit (symbolic of the central importance of the Bible). Little (2021:84) writes:

> Much of that is gone now as worship services tend to focus on the worshipper instead of the One worshipped. Now the worship space is filled with symbols of entertainment and commerce. The flat screen is of this order. It does not point to anything beyond itself because there is nothing higher but is a symbol of entertainment, which worship is not. In which case it actually becomes a distraction in worship and not an aid. It must not be allowed if the only justification is a matter of efficiency and convenience.

Unfortunately, according to Dreher (2017:46), many Western churches have lost the golden thread that binds God, humans, and creation together, and

this loss has deprived humankind of its sense of value and meaning. Sadly, the loss of the sacred is accompanied by the rejection of God, and with it Truth, Beauty and the Good also perish. When people come together to worship God, they should immediately feel something of Truth, Beauty and the Good – which means God. According to Augustine, this is our deepest desire even before we are aware of it, and if we do not find it in churches, we will not find it anywhere else. Where the church needs to be witnesses for Christ, there will have to be discernment on what we bring from the world with us into the worship space, and that includes technology from the 4IR. Everything we accept and do as Christian believers we should do with the following in mind: "So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31).

Developing preaching competencies for the 4IR

When it comes to developing different preaching competencies to address the challenges and opportunities of the 4IR, I cannot help but think and reflect from my own specific southern African context. We find ourselves in a South African community with various and deep wounds and much anger. It has been 28 years after the end of political apartheid, but the reality is that the circumstances in which the majority of especially young black South Africans find themselves are not much different from what they were under colonialism and apartheid. The experiences of poverty, racial hatred, hostility, and spatial separation are still an everyday reality. Our country has a very young population – the average age of all our inhabitants is 27 years, with the shocking figure of 55,5% of the population living below the international poverty line of less than US$2 per day. The unemployment rate stands at 34,5%, with youth unemployment at a staggering 66,5%. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that South Africa is the most economically unequal country in the world, with an average income of a meagre R930 (US$55) per month. White South Africans earn on average three times more than black South Africans (Lephakga, 2107:2).

With this in mind, it is no wonder that Mbembe (2008:6), an African political scientist and philosopher, remarks that young black South Africans express their economic, social and political frustrations and aggression by pitting the races against each other (politics of identity), seeking rapid and

meaningful transformation through revolution rather than through social evolution (politics of impatience) and increasingly distrusting and accusing the older generation of activists and liberation leaders as "sell-outs" (generational politics). Add to this growing frustration and aggression of the young people, the shocking facts raised in Judge Zondo's report on state capture and two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, then one slowly but surely one gets a picture of the challenges standing together with the 4IR at the front door of preachers in South Africa. Considering this scenario, there are from several competencies three that I want to address in this article. I have mentioned the five challenges and now want to connect them with certain competencies that preachers need to respond to these challenges which according to me are now relevant.

Patient and angry listening

In the face of the youth's impatience and impending revolution, patience and listening may not seem like the appropriate competencies for preaching. Yet it is important for me to start with this if we are to understand patient listening correctly. Besides the fact that patience is one of the important virtues of Christian discipleship and is often mentioned in the Bible, we must first question the popular understanding of patience. This popular understanding of patience is often seen as a call to passivity in the face of suffering and injustice, especially in the light of Galatians 5:22, where it is mentioned as one of the "fruits of the Spirit". One often hears how preachers use this text to encourage listeners to remain silent, grateful and passive in the face of inequality and suffering.

However, if we look at the life and preaching of Jesus, we see a different picture. Yes, Jesus knows that God is patient with the sinful and broken reality, but he also knows that God is not passive and simply allows sin and approves injustice. No, we see in the life of Jesus a kind of urgency and a will to correct what is wrong (e.g. Mt 21:12–13 and Lk 4:16–22). Jesus' life illustrates to us the character and qualities associated with deliverance, transformation, and the pursuit of righteousness, but without being guilty of destructive or violent behaviour. It is with this form of patience that we must listen to our people's impatience, anger, and frustrations.

Wepener and Van der Merwe (2021:1) even talk about "angry listening". They take their cue from Wolterstorff (2015:75), who says that just as it

often happens that people are not on speaking terms with each other, it also happens that they are also not on listening terms with each other. Wepener and Van der Merwe (2021:2) argue that "[m]any South Africans are on speaking and even on screaming terms with their fellow citizens, but not necessarily on listening terms and thus the cycle of feelings and expressions of anger is seldom consciously interrupted with angry listening".

They write on angry listening as a liturgical praxis in their article and suggest that preachers create spaces in the liturgy for the possibility of giving expression to anger, and that preachers themselves should develop the competency to listen to these expressions of anger. They judge that in this way the suffering of the world and the suffering of God meet in a mysterious and reciprocal way: "If God's anger is a sign of God's love, and people's expression of their anger are also signs that they care, then active angry listening and hearing are the almond blossoms of a new season of change that is breaking through" (Wepener & Van der Merwe, 2021:14).

In another contribution from Wepener, this time written a few years earlier with co-author Pieterse (2018:415), they argue:

> Angry preaching needs angry listening: Reformed Christians should give such a preacher the chance to deliver her or his passionate sermon and not dismiss such an act as an intellectual failure on the basis of the emotion that is involved. This type of sermon and its way of preaching should not be seen as a sign of weakness and thus an embarrassment that will hopefully be over fairly soon. In much the same way as the preachers should embody this anger, so those who hear should open themselves to be receivers of such angry sermons, even if the anger is not directed at them specifically.

Patient listening and active angry listening goes hand in hand in understanding the exclusion that a big percentage of the youth of South Africa experiences in the development of 4IR technology. As lecturers, we have first-hand experience of the fact that more than 50% of our students cannot afford a personal computer, and those who can afford it are continuously struggling with connectivity and a shortage of data. Preparing these students to become preachers in the world of the 4IR is a real challenge. For this endeavour, we need a great deal of courage and respect, which brings me to the second competency.

Courageous and respectful communication

In his famous work on pastoral theology, Firet (1977:15) gave his definition of practical theology as communicative acts in the service of the gospel, and thereby underlines the importance of communication in any field of practical theology, and even more so in the field of homiletics. One can say in a certain sense the 4IR is all about communication, albeit digital communication. According to Scolari (2009:943), it is a well-known fact that the appearance of digital devices and technology generated a transformation in communication processes and constituted a new scientific field in communication theory. He is one of the scholars who works on a theory of digital communication.

What is important in this article, however, are the two qualifying virtues that I would like to suggest namely courage and respect. Let me start with courage. To meet the challenges of the 4IR, we truly need courage to discern between the inconsistencies and lies of much of the digital communication. Even in the earliest civilisations one finds that courage was considered an important virtue (MacIntyre, 2013:143). According to Forster (2022:24), courage can be described as "the power of the will to strive for what is good and right, even in the face of opposition, and to do so in a manner that achieves both a greater and lasting good". In this regard, it is interesting that courage is not mentioned in the various lists of virtues in the New Testament, although variations of the Greek verb (*euthymeō*), which can be translated as "to be given hope" or "inspired with confidence", occur in many different passages in the New Testament.

Radford Ruether (1983:11) is of the opinion that the virtue of courage was included in the Christian tradition between the second and fourth centuries. According to her, it developed from the theological understanding of the belief of rabbinic Judaism in the prophets who speak God's truth to power and the earliest Christians' experience of martyrdom. According to Migliori (2014:15), human life "ceases to be human not when we do not have all the answers, but when we no longer have the courage to ask the really important questions. By insisting that these questions be raised, theology serves not only the community of faith but also the wider purpose of God". I think it is important for preachers to keep asking the really important questions in the face of the 4IR.

The rise of so-called digital identities in the 4IR carries the danger that we can easily exclude and oppress certain groups of people. Therefore, we as preachers will have to make sure that we will communicate with the necessary respect, especially towards those who are marginalised. If we keep in mind that all forms of leadership (and preaching is a form of leadership) have to do with respect for other people, we will also communicate with our listeners with the necessary respect. In this regard, face-to-face relationships and the physical presence of preachers are two of the most important ways in which we can promote respect, accountability and ethical leadership towards our listeners and counter the challenges of the 4IR (Barentsen, 2021:58).

Imaginative and prophetic bridge building

Meaningful and effective preaching is about building breaches between different people and people of difference. One finds a growing diversity in congregations that do not expect us as preachers to ignore the differences between these believers for the sake of a shared vision, but rather to seek to mobilise this diversity of believers to meet common goals. This is again where the 4IR often stands in the way of imaginative and prophetic bridge building in that social media often forces us into our own bubbles associated with our online surfing and search behaviour (Barentsen, 2022:57). To counter this tendency of the 4IR, we need to develop the ability to cross social boundaries with credibility to accommodate different perspectives and to find common ground. The latter is only possible if we as preachers can achieve it through embodied human presence in a world characterised by fragmentation (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011:20).

To work towards this goal, we need the two adjectives "imaginative" and "prophetic" as important competencies in our bridge-building endeavours. When one listens to friends and family members, but especially to our students and young people, one realises the impact the slow violence of poverty, ongoing spatial injustice and racism has on them, with the result that they lose hope for the future (Swartz, Harding & De Lannoy, 2012:28). It is in this regard that Forster (2022:27) writes:

> I do not find this surprising. However, I am concerned that as Christians and the Church we are losing our capacity to activate a kind of prophetic imagination that can transcend the tragic

> experiences of our daily lives. While our existential realities are important, and central to our experience of life, Christians believe that they do not constitute the end of history. We live with an eschatological hope for a time when all suffering and evil will end, and we understand that our lives are to be directed towards that end.

The importance of imaginative and prophetic preaching has been emphasised in the South African context for some time, but it is as though the challenges of the 4IR emphasise it in new ways. One of the best examples of this form of imaginative and prophetic bridge building can be found in the late Russel Botman. The systematic theologian Dirkie Smit (2016:607) describes Botman's understanding of the prophetic relationship that exists between humanity and God as "hopeful agency", and in this tension between hope and agency certain things will have to change for this hope to become a reality. Smit (2015:625) summarises Botman's understanding of "hopeful agency" in the following words:

> The fact that it was a this-worldly hope meant for him that it should not lead to idle waiting and become a form of escapism, but rather that it should inspire concrete actions, practical engagement in the fullness of life, hopeful agency in the utterly serious realities of the penultimate ... The fact that it was an empowering hope was for him of great importance ... he refused to be held captive by the past – with its legacies, divisions, hurt and bitterness ... The fact that it was a modest and self-critical hope meant for him that these transformation processes – all these attempts to make history for the coming generation – remain provisional and penultimate.

Prophetic imagination is in other words an important competency to cultivate good preaching, which in turn can contribute to transformation, healing and a more just South Africa for all its inhabitants. But equally important is to understand that all the powerful potential that the 4IR and social media technologies have must remain embedded in "human and hopeful agency". Human embodied presence and discernment are therefore much needed in all homiletical activities to protect 4IR technologies from human prejudices and imperfections and to ensure that human flourishing is promised in ways that are loving, just and fair.

Conclusion

You may ask why only patient and angry listening, courageous and respectful communication and imaginative and prophetic bridge building are discussed here. Why not also several other competencies that can help us with the challenges of the 4IR? Well, surely there are many other competencies that we need and that we have to learn and practise to meet the challenges. However, these three resonate with me in my current view of preaching in South Africa and they may also resonate with other fellow preachers who face the same challenges in our unique context. With that, I also tried to respond to the research question I posed at the beginning: In our pursuit to speak truth to power, what are the challenges and opportunities that the 4IR is posing to preachers? May we as preachers continue to hold each other's hands, knowing that God is holding our hands.

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