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A homiletic credo – A firm belief in the preaching event

ABSTRACT

From 1981 to 2002 the author, together with Dirkie Smit and Coenie Burger were responsible for the publication of 22 volumes of Sermon Helps, which embodied a specific theological and homiletical approach to the preaching event. The author finds it remarkable that after 30 years these homiletical premisses are still adhered to in what he describes as his homiletical credo regarding the preaching event (event here as translation of what leading German homileticians describe as a “Wortgeschehen”. He concentrates on this event as an encounter between listening to the living voice of God in the text and its modern context. This is in essence a hermeneutical encounter, striving to incarnate the Living Word in the language of the day, taking the text “into the night” of hard exegetical labour – and all consuming prayer. Thereby the preaching event issues in joyous celebration of the glory of God.

I started my research in homiletics in the late 1950s. This was followed by teaching homiletics since the 1970s, lasting more than thirty years. In the pivotal times after World War II, preaching was in a crisis. No wonder that Karl Barth and many other Reformed theologians with him spoke of the *Not und Verheissung der Predigt*. Wrestling with the actuality, the authority and power of the preaching event, I followed the homiletic discussions of theologians like Barth, Thielicke, Wingren, Berkouwer, and especially Bohren in his epoch making *Predigtlehre* (1974) and Brueggemann in his *Cadences* (1997). Our own Willie Jonker, Cas Vos, Coenie Burger and Johan Cilliers strengthened my homiletic convictions. However, it was in the 1970s that Dirkie Smit, a student in theology, influenced me most of all. I was struck by his passion for preaching the Word of God in a theological sound and responsible way. As part of a special course in preaching, he was the dynamic leader in the discussions. After he became a minister, we discussed how to design a scheme whereby ministers of the Word could be helped in their preaching task. Together with Coenie Burger the well-known and much used series *Woord Teen die Lig* (Word Against the Light) came into being. In the meantime, Dirkie became part of several research projects, initiated by me and funded by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), dealing mostly with the public proclamation of the gospel. Later both of us also became interested in liturgy, especially in its ethical role in transformation processes. In all these activities Dirkie Smit’s thorough theological stance was the inspiration as well as the spearhead that moved the church in many directions. In this article I continue my homiletic dialogue with Dirkie Smit. *As in the 70s, I think that both of us believe that the church has once again reached a critical point with regard to the preaching event.* It once more has become urgent to reflect on the essence of the preaching event as the fountainhead of the church’s ministry. In 2011, in my homiletic credo that follows, I will still adhere to the basic format of all editions of *Woord Teen die Lig*.

The preaching event as encounter between the living god and the living church

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i) When I say that I believe in the preaching event, I am not saying that all sermons are ipso facto the Word of God bringing us to an encounter with God self. The many words uttered on the pulpit cannot automatically be regarded as the Word of God. Too many sermons are full of *human* words, without containing the Word of God! When a sermon is preached in the Name of God without bringing a congregation to an encounter with God, it is a “misuse of the Name of the Lord” (cf. Ex. 20:7). I do not believe in the preaching act in itself, but in a preaching event wherein God reveals God self by the proclamation of his incarnate Word. Focussing on and testifying to the saving act in and through Jesus Christ, the God event comes to its completion and fulfilment every time this good news is proclaimed. Pieterse, in a well argued article on the question of how God speaks his Word in the preaching event, comes to a final conclusion, using Heitink’s concept of bipolarity in the intermediary relationship between Gods Word and the word from the pulpit (see Pieterse 2005:77f.; 2007:118f.; Heitink 1998:69f.). In my homiletic credo I want to postulate that the preaching event, from beginning to end, is an encounter with the living God, in and through his Word. This implies the following:

God comes to us by speaking through his Word. This confession is the foundation and rock on which the church is built (cf. Mt. 16:18). Both Luther and Calvin regarded the preaching event as the arena where the struggle between God’s salvation and human depravity is fought out (cf. Luther WA 34 1,308 on the relationship between preaching and absolution). In one way or another, all the Reformed fathers, even down to Barth, agree with the confession of *praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei* (the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God) (Barth, 1929:158f.). This est. is not based on any epistemological, exegetical or homiletical skills; it is an expression of faith, namely that God speaks in and through his Word in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Calvin *Inst.* III.2.33: *sine Spiritus Sancti illuminatione, verbo nihil agitur* – without the illumination of the Holy Spirit the Word has no effect). Thereby the miracle of his living Word encountering the human context in the preaching event is performed. Preaching as speaking in the Name of God refers to the fact that it is done in the presence of the living God. The preaching event is the most important revelation of the *praesentia Dei realis*. All dynamic and true preaching lives by the grace of this divine presence only. How sad that it is often missed.

ii) I believe with Jonker that the essence of preaching is the proclamation of the good news embodied in the life and work of Christ. Luther formulated this in his well known dictum *nihil nisi Christus praedicandus* (nothing but Christ must be preached) (WA 16, 113; cf. also WA 15, 485: “Das Evangelium ist nichts anderes als Absolution”). This Christocentric focus does not extinguish the Trinitarian character of all preaching, but rests on the work of the triune God. The saving gospel of Jesus Christ is a “thick description”, focussing on the full Word of God. This focus gives the preaching event a significant clairvoyance, a *clara et distincta* (cf. the title of Rossouw’s dissertation (1961); on thick descriptions, see Geertz in Brueggemann, 1995:73 and Ricoeur 1995:230). In the proclamation of this Christocentric epicentre of the whole biblical revelation, all preaching reaches its grand summit and final purpose.

iii) With Barth I also believe that preaching is done at a risk (1991; cf. also Miskotte 1941). So easily the human “product” on the pulpit is tendered as something divine, pretending that this is the voice of God self! In the homiletic ministry the preacher, his sermon; or the listener and his often closed universe; or the biblical text itself can easily be deified. In the preaching event both preacher and listener are captives of the Word (2 Cor. 10.5). It puts both the lives of preacher and listener at stake. Preaching is never a part of a literary pleasure trip, using popular communication techniques to impress. It is a *ministerium*, a service to the Word which

draws blood: in the minister's study, on the pulpit and in the pew (cf. Jer. 20.7 – 9; Jn. 6:60). Bohren puts it well: preachers are not so much fire extinguishers, more firelighters! (1974:73f.). This means that preachers cannot "peddle the Word of God for profit but [have] to speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God" (2 Cor. 2:16, 17). The burning issue in all preaching is not whether the minister puts up a good show, or whether the congregation listens attentively, but whether God is present or absent in the preaching event... Preachers can never abide by listeners saying at the end of the service: "Thank you for the nice sermon." Sermons are never "nice"; sermons speak with passion, liberating people from their captivity from sin and evil. This passion is elemental and instrumental in presenting the good news.

iv) I believe in the authority and power of such preaching, because it rests on the active presence of the living God, wherever his Word is proclaimed. This God is a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29) and his Word is "like fire a hammer" (Jer. 23:29). Preaching the Word is giving voice to the living God *himself* (Calvin witnessed to this fact in his well-known dictum *Deus loquentis persona*). God speaks his own Word in a tongue tied, inarticulate world – and often in an inarticulate church. God *self* has to make the true sermon a *vox clamans in deserto* (voice calling in the desert) (Luther). The living Word is God's *dabar*, a Word that creates and works, always a *verbum efficax* (efficacious word) (cf. Gen. 1:1; Heb. 4:12; also Jn. 1:1). It is a Word that reveals, that speaks, that opens minds and hearts, that creates new life worlds to inhabit. Preaching listens to this voice, following God's "footsteps" in the text (what Luther called the *vestigia Dei*). Therefore, the sermon never ends as a manuscript on the desk or on the pulpit. It is produced and written down *in order* to be heard as God's living and compassionate Word, as the *viva vox evangelii* (the living voice of the gospel – to quote Luther once more). Christ still sends his church with the same authority and power to proclaim the good news in the assurance that He is present in it "to the very end of the age" (Mt. 28:18f.). In his abiding presence, preachers are his servants and instruments, his fellow labourers with a *ministerium* to fulfil (cf. 2 Cor. 6:1; in general also Col. 4:12; 2 Pet. 1:1). In his active presence and through the Holy Spirit, their message comes with the same authority and power as that of Christ. This mandate to the church must protect preachers from false modesty as well as from false pride, remembering that we have the treasure of this living voice of God "in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). All powerful and efficient preaching must remain a miracle – but this miracle needs to be made true in and through hard and skilful theological expertise. Waiting on the Spirit and hard textual and exegetical labour go hand in hand. It is hard work to be blessed from above.

v) In the Reformed tradition the preaching event is regarded as the womb and incubation chamber of Christian faith, nourishing the "optics of faith", defining the identity of the church as living, faithful and obedient body of Christ. Living faith is a question of seeing the face of God, thereby to live *coram Deo*. Johan Cilliers has continually underlined this basic character of preaching (1998). Seeing God breeds the clairvoyance of faith, nurturing faithful obedience and Christian living in practice, following God in all kinds of diverse and alien situations. In this way the preaching event also nurtures wise readings of Holy Scripture whereby congregations become communities of character, communities of interpretation, acting as apostolic "letters of Christ, known and read by everybody" (2 Cor. 3:2b, 3; on communities of character, cf. Hauerwas 1981).

THE PREACHING EVENT AS THE INTERPRETATION OF A SPECIFIC BIBLICAL TEXT

I regard a specific biblical text as the concrete embodiment of a specific Word of God in a

specific and concrete situation. The legitimacy of preaching as a Word from God is built upon this commitment to a specific text. *This* text gives the sermon its defining basis, meaning and relevance. Through the work of the Holy Spirit texts speak in a variety of voices; texts are indeed polyphonic in character! However, in a specific situation the preacher has to look for the one, single voice of the text, its *monotony* on that Sunday. Texts are specific lenses whereby a congregation gets a microscopic and telescopic view of a specific aspect of the great deeds of God (see Acts 2:11). In the specific text that is preached, minister and congregation follow in the footsteps of the living God on that Sunday. Preaching is following the *movement* of the good news of the text; it interprets the word events of the text as “God events” *in* the text (cf. Long 1989:17f.). It is concretely proclaiming the saving activity of God as it is revealed *in* the text, in particular in its Christocentric focus. Preaching is, therefore, not a matter of producing gripping and moving stories *about* some text, discovering interesting dogmatic principles or moral challenges. It is not an occasion for logical argument. It is an act of proclamation whereby the God driven contents of texts come as words from above directed at the varied human situations. Bohren quite rightly warned against the Bible becoming a book to be analysed by exegetical and literary devices (1974:39). Preaching a biblical text means to follow diligently the surprising twists and plots deeply embedded in its Hebrew and Greek and cultural garb.

As the basis of and governing all preaching, texts are narrative in character. They invite and expose us to the meaningful new world of God. Preaching texts does not merely repeat the *bruta facta* of significant events that happened in biblical history; they are not eyewitness reports *about* grace, on which all types of impressive arguments can be based. Texts are indeed reminders of what God has done in salvation history. This often lies hidden in amazing twists, foreign words and expressions, cultural customs, literary genres. It will be the task of *exegesis* to unlock these secrets of how God worked in history. However, the *additional* task of exegesis is to assist texts to be *performed homiletically* in a way that they open a perspective on what God can still be doing today. Texts are indeed the divine raw material of God’s storied revelation, aiming at leading the Church through history on its journey following in the footsteps of God. This raw material must be mined *exegetically* in order to find its meaning and claim (cf. Long 1989:117), which gives the sermon its inherent energy. In the exegesis preachers have to look first at the movement of saving grace in the garb of the text. To do this, they have to look closely at the texts, looking also *behind* the “alien” text with all the theological and exegetical tools and skills at their disposal (on this, cf. fully Ricoeur, 1975:31, 127). Eventually they have to look *through* the lens of the text, asking how the text can be performed in the church once more, with the same power as the original text did in its historical context. In this way the exegetical conclusion forms the firm and necessary basis for the hermeneutical task of interpretation. The voice of the old text must now be “prolonged”, revitalised and energised in the new modern day listening situation.

THE PREACHING EVENT AS HERMENEUTIC ENCOUNTER WITH ITS CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

In the hermeneutic encounter two contexts are brought into *confrontation*: that of the text and that of listeners in their concrete situation. In hermeneutics we move from the narrative structure of texts to their interpretation. Whereas the exegesis emphasises the movement of the good news *in* the text and in the world *behind* the text, in the hermeneutic encounter we are looking *through* the text at the world *in front of* the text (this lies at the heart of Ricoeur’s interpretation theory, cf. Ricoeur 1975). It can be called an “elongation” of the text in the actual

situation. Moltmann said it another way: In the proclamation the preacher should move from the past of the text to its future, to the worlds ahead (1967:113f.). He convincingly argued for the necessity to interpret all theology from the perspective of the future – but then a future built on the past as the “ancient grandmother” of faith!

This hermeneutical (re) interpretation is in essence a necessity for all preaching. In the hermeneutic encounter the text is continually challenged to speak a word relevant in the homiletic situation. Although a bit exaggerated, Lange regarded this homiletic situation as the real “text” of the sermon (1968:45; cf. critique by Bohren 1974:449f.). Hermeneutics designates a move from the question of understanding the text to its *application* in a sermon and its *appropriation* by the congregation. It deals with the *performance* of the text, which is more than an interpretation of present realities. It is a radical, evangelical, “apocalyptic” redescription of total reality. This is what Ricoeur called the “inter-signification of reality” (1975:102f.) or Brueggemann the “counter-world of evangelical imagination” (1993:26f.). This nurtures the “optics” of faith, opening new imaginative visions and possibilities for faithful living in the midst of current realities that are often expressed in the distressing language of insurmountable facts. Preaching deals with more than these so called facts. Preaching deals with the possibilities of texts!

The following are to my mind the most important contexts of the preaching event:

The present day, living and existential context and cultural environment in which the church lives. There is an urgent need to accentuate both the treasured memory contained in the text as well as the demands and claims it makes on the listener. It requires a revisioning of the text, or better: a production of meaning, becoming an impetus to a new way of seeing, a change of heart, and a new way of life. Imaginative faith is, after all, the ability to see, to see better, to see further, to see differently, to see the Invisible (cf. Heb. 11:27). To see in faith needs a creative and imaginative hermeneutic, looking through the multidimensional lenses of the text. Texts, being adventures in wonderland, also require a hermeneutic of *amazement* to reveal the fascinating new possibilities hidden in the text. Interpretation has to be both responsive as well as a challenge to the situation. Referring to the *prophetic critical* task of preaching, Brueggemann remarked that “prophetic theology concerns the unmasking of idols... has exposures to make... false claimants to power and legitimacy must be delegitimated” (1994:238, cf. also 207f.). In the modern day context it also requires a hermeneutic of *suspicion* in order to interpret where the text goes “against” the corrupting power of all different types of human preferences, habits and schemes in the surrounding culture and in the church itself (on this cf. Bonhoeffer 1970:181). According to Luther, preaching is often at war with its context, opening the eyes of the congregation to see more clearly the often hidden evil surrounding it (on Luther cf. Wingren, 1960 and Eph. 6.12f.). As in the Book of Revelation, the eyes are opened for God’s aggressive counter world only then, generating energy and hope in often perplexing situations. *Sermons take their rightful place in a local and ecclesial context.* This requires that interpretation should focus on the identity formation of communities of faith, nurturing both the vision as well as the *mission* of the church. Preaching has to *inform* the congregation of the biblical basis of this identity, in order to *transform* it in the light of changing situations and challenges. It serves the process of revisioning and reorientation, guarding against the temptation to become assimilated and domesticated by and subservient to the powers of the day. In preaching the church often has to be marked as an odd, strange and marginal community. It is at the interface between true identity and the challenges of (an often alien) society that the witness of the church can be reenergised, the focus on marginality becoming

the fountain of a new creativity. Part of the ecclesial hermeneutic is to look at the text in sermon workgroups consisting of members of the congregation. The full and final interpretation of texts is manifested only in the reading and performance of the texts by communities of faith and faithful living (on this see the excellent study of Fowler and Jones 1991). The practice of the *Roundtable Pulpit* (as advocated by McClure 1995) must be incorporated in the production of meaning in the sermon. *Sermons take their rightful place in a local and ecclesial context.* This requires that interpretation should focus on the identity formation of communities of faith, nurturing both the vision as well as the *mission* of the church. Preaching has to *inform* the congregation of the biblical basis of this identity, in order to *transform* it in the light of changing situations and challenges. It serves the process of re-visioning and reorientation, guarding against the temptation to become assimilated and domesticated by and subservient to the powers of the day. In preaching the church often has to be marked as an odd, strange and marginal community. It is at the interface between true identity and the challenges of (an often alien) society that the witness of the church can be reenergised, the focus on marginality becoming the fountain of a new creativity. Part of the ecclesial hermeneutic is to look at the text in sermon workgroups consisting of members of the congregation. The full and final interpretation of texts is manifested only in the reading and performance of the texts by communities of faith and faithful living (on this see the excellent study of Fowler and Jones 1991). The practice of the *Roundtable Pulpit* (as advocated by McClure 1995) must be incorporated in the production of meaning in the sermon.

Interpretation must be done in a pastoral context. Preaching lives in a world and situations that are often without hope, situations of suffering, poverty, hunger, pain, illness, uncertainty of all kinds, situations that give rise to feelings of utter loneliness and despair. Cilliers (2007), Pieterse (2009), and De Klerk (2009) emphasise the pastoral value of sermons in reenergising and revitalising the church by proclaiming the sustaining power of the God of the text in depressing situations. Sermons should generate hope – for the *sinner* as well as the *sufferer*. Of course, sermons rest on the foundation of a *theologia gloriae*, having its firm basis in the victory over sin and death on the cross. Thereby men and women can rejoice in receiving eternal life. But, I believe, there is at the same time a need for a *theologia crucis*, for a hermeneutic in which the Broken One is encountered in the text – *before* he can be lifted up in the sermon, “drawing all men to him” (cf. Jn. 12:32, 33; 3:14, 15). This requires a homiletic of the alienated, of the poor, of the heartbroken, of suffering and pain. This hermeneutic does not only ask what the text says *about* the sinner or the poor. It asks the question how the situation of *being* lost in this life or in the world to come is expressed *in* the text. By being submitted to this broken hermeneutic and broken homiletic believers are helped to learn a new grammar, a new speech in order to communicate as disciples of the Broken One with the broken parts of their own lives and that of others.

I believe that in the full liturgical context the preaching event comes to its clearest expression, its most vivid and final manifestation. Homiletic revisioning, expressing the true identity of the church, is a process of continual and persevering reorientation, helping the church to see more clearly in the encounter with God the meaning of the text – and then to see what must be done in the modern context in faithful obedience to the God of the text. Seeing the God of the text in the text precedes doing the text in faithful obedience. Believing and doing faith rests on this optics of faith. The liturgical context of preaching should help the congregation both in the seeing and doing functions called for in the preaching event. Ricoeur stated that texts “reach their meaningfulness when re-enacted in a cultic situation” (1995:243). A fundamental function of the liturgy is to articulate and

celebrate the core memory referred to in the preached text. Every Sunday the rhythm of the complete liturgy integrates the memories and hopes expressed in the text with the tradition of faith in all ages. In the liturgy the identity of the church is celebrated in accordance with both text and tradition. Furthermore, identity formation and moral transformation are highly dependent on faith communities as safe locations, becoming agents and energy points of faith (on this cf. Wuthnow, 1993 and 1995; Burger 1995).

THE PREACHING EVENT AS A LANGUAGE GAME

Eventually, all the exegetic and hermeneutic work have to come to fruition in words on the pulpit, directed at the congregation. Dead letters have to become life creating and life changing words. Instead of referring to language as an elocutionary act, having an indicative, signifying character, pointing to worlds outside it, I would rather stress the referring function of language, pointing to a revelation, whereby the veil is removed (the meaning of *apokalipsis!*). In Ephesians 6:19 Paul speaks of this "fearlessly making known the mystery of the gospel". Often this mystery is expressed in parables, in metaphorical language of all sorts. Abstract exegetic and dogmatic expressions must be transferred into bearers of the good news of the gospel, bringing the fullness of life eternal; It consists of a language game as an *interlude* between listening to the full meaning of the text and its application in a situation where there is a hunger for the word. It is a game. It follows the trail and trajectory of the text into the present, into the life worlds of real people, into time and space. How can this be done, how can a preacher produce or make a sermon? In general, two things are essential. First, meditation is a genuine play with the words of the text in conjunction with modern day words, ideas, examples and narratives that serve as explanations of the meaning of the text. This remains a dangerous game: the voice of the living God can easily be substituted with the voice of the preacher; the fear of a listening "public" can easily dominate the fear of God. Quiet meditation is important. Make time for it to play and mature into words of wisdom. In meditation we have to allow room and ample time for fantasy and prayer. Bohren emphasised this by saying that we have taken the text "into the night" (1974:382). And, as was argued above, the preacher has to do this in conjunction with the congregation. Second, these words have to become part of a *manuscript*, in a form that serves *proclamation, the communication* and the hearing of the gospel contained in the text. All the preparation that has been done as groundwork in the study must now be delivered using good elocution and communication skills.

This communication has to be effective and persuasive. Unfortunately, many preachers wish to produce sermons that are relevant, interesting and effective. On the correct premise that God's word is powerful and efficient, they often end up in *forcing* this effect at all costs. In desiring to appeal, various techniques are introduced to "make" the sermon relevant. The effect of the sermon becomes the criterion of a "good" sermon, not the activity of the text in its divine context. Where God speaks his Word and acts in Christ through the Holy Spirit, preaching is truly relevant and effective. Effective preaching gives "space" to the work of the triune God, who imparts the relevant dynamic and punching power to the preaching of his Word. This is the wonder and profound secret of preaching. Lately renewed emphasis is placed on the persuasive power of biblical preaching. Resner, after a survey of the classical rhetorical tradition and the history of homiletic theory, comes to his final conclusion: In search of the right rhetoric "the cross event proclaimed is the church's on-going epistemological reorientation. By these standards a community of discernment is formed and grows" (1999:185).

The preaching event begins and ends in prayer and doxology. Preachers must do their work, from beginning to end, “praying without ceasing” (1 Thes. 2:17; cf. Eph. 6:19). Being a deep spiritual confrontation with the living God, preaching requires a hermeneutic of prayer. Preaching should lead to the opening of the inner eye, to see and behold God (cf. Rev. 5:5, 6). With Mozart preaching ends in doxology: *laudate Dominum* (cf. *Vesperae selenne de confessore* KV 339). To reach this sublime end, both preacher and congregation should read the Bible with closed eyes.

Finally, it is a joy to preach. Bohren emphasised this in the opening pages of his *Predigtlehre* (1974:17). Preaching is nothing else than to dance joyfully to the tune of the kingdom coming close, “at hand” in the text (see Mk. 1:15). It is a joy that heralds the gospel of the birth of the Saviour, shared with heavenly hosts, proclaiming the “good news of great joy that will be for all people” (Lk. 2:12, 13). It is the joy of preachers pairing their voices with the Spirit and the bride crying “come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:17). Preaching is not an information session on believing in God, or on theology. It is serving and sustaining a love affair between the Bridegroom and his bride. Preaching should help the bride to wait upon, no, to *await* the Bridegroom. This can only be accomplished with infectious joy. In the time between the first and second coming of Christ, preaching is a joyous act, celebrated in the interlude between two advents. It is a joy experienced in the presence of God and his anointed children. It is done in fear and trembling, but also with joy in the presence of the holy God. In essence, the preacher is *homo ludens* – playing, praying and preaching before God, reaching out to the congregation in joy.

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KEY WORDS

Preaching as encounter
Preaching as an interpretation of a text
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The language of preaching
Preaching as prayer

TREFWOORDE

Prediking as worsteling
Prediking as interpretasie
Prediking as hermeneutiese worsteling
Die taal van prediking
Prediking as gebed

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