

H J C Pieterse
University of South Africa

Communicative rationality and hermeneutical insights for preaching in a context of poverty

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the quest for a homiletical approach that can enable us to preach a living, topical and liberating biblical word of God in our contemporary South African context. Working within a Reformed liberational approach hermeneutical theories and a communicative rationality are utilised in finding a way forward for preaching in a context of poverty. This way implies a preaching that functions in a diaconal church, which is involved in community development.

INTRODUCTION

I embarked on my academic search some 28 years ago with the question of how to preach a living, topical word of God in the context of the people of South Africa. This quest was sparked off in a situation of that time where social and political upheaval and change in our country were eminent. What I could not understand was the fact that the preaching of that time was in many cases content with the passing on of objective, so-called timeless biblical truths, to the people in the pews. In my search for an approach to relevant preaching I stumbled on the growing theological formulation on contextuality by liberation theologians in South Africa. I became convinced that the concept of contextual preaching was the route I had to follow in order to find an answer to my search for the preaching of a living, topical and liberating word of God in our context (Pieterse 1984).

There was a need in my mind for a relevant theory of bridging the gap between the context, culture and language of the text, and the context and terminology of our own day in which we have to preach a liberating word that will bring hope and inspiration to our people. I found it in hermeneutics (Pieterse 1979; 1987). The hermeneutical philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) and Paul Ricoeur (1976) with the theological reflection on it by theologians such as Gerhard Ebeling (1961; 1963; 1966; 1967; 1973), Dingemans (1991) and Jonker (1998) were good companions in my academic research.

There was also a need for a theory of rationality that could offer the critical-rational framework for my project, but a theory of rationality that could fit the homiletical need for a theory on sensible dialogical communication (Pieterse 1990) and a theory of rationality which have critical potency in the dialogue of the Christian community on the meaning of their faith (Pieterse 1993). I found those theories in Jurgen Habermas' work on communication and his theory of communicative rationality (Habermas 1984; 1987).

My homiletical work also led me to reflect on the dire need for theories on liberating, contextual preaching in our country. I published this research in two books, one on political liberation (Pieterse 1995) and one on liberation from poverty (Pieterse 2001). For my rational and

theological thinking on poverty I designed a model for research within the framework of Reformed liberation theology (Pieterse 2001:2-27; cf also De Gruchy 1991).

First I will discuss the theory of communicative rationality, then I will explain a hermeneutical way that enables us to preach in a context of poverty, and lastly I will indicate the role of the churches' preaching in diaconal development.

2. COMMUNICATIVE RATIONALITY

With its focus on contextuality South African liberation theology taught us that the people in the faith community and their communication as a community are very important. Christians who suffered under the oppression of apartheid started to ask questions about the meaning of their faith in the circumstances (cf Maimela 1989:6). These questions pertain to suffering, poverty, human dignity and the cries for liberation from their oppression (Nolan & Broderick 1987:17). Are all these conditions God's will for them? Can they do something about their destination in life? What is the meaning of salvation by Jesus Christ for them in their situation? Theologians were confronted with the challenge of a fundamental critique of the prevailing theology and body politic. They started to communicate intensely with the people. Therefore *The Kairos Document* (1986) could state that it was conceived in the heart of Soweto. Once theology started its reflection from the context of the oppressed, liberation theology in South Africa was born (cf Mosoma 1991; Tutu 1983; De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1983).

Pastors and preachers must be in solidarity with the people in their existential situation of suffering, joy, despondency, hope, disappointment and success. The community of faith is a communicative community (Pieterse 1987). The preacher/pastor should be part of the discourse, the dialogue of the community of faith in a specific context – the discourse on their existential needs, their hopes and their understanding of their faith, their critical questions and, sometimes, their (blind) faith in God against all odds.

It is for the theological-academic reflection in this kind of life world situation of the community of faith (the church) that I was looking for a suitable rationality that could direct our thinking. Habermas found that an increasingly technical, or instrumental, rationality had come to dominate nature, society and the individual. Habermas' problems with such a narrow concept of rationality amounted to his conclusion that the ideas of the critical theorists of the early *Frankfurter Schule* were no longer effective. If thinking (using one's ratio) becomes an imperialistic, conquering endeavour, then one has parted with the criterion to judge or evaluate a specific practice. Modern society demonstrates a predominant influence of cognitive-instrumental rationality, due to (in Habermas' terminology) the colonisation of the life world. Rationality should not be regarded as a faculty of the supposedly autonomous subject. Habermas therefore developed his communicative rationality with a view to the life world of people where they (in critical communication with each other) have to evaluate and formulate truth (in our case religious truth), rightness (in our case religious rightness) and truthfulness (in our case religious truthfulness) (cf De Roest 1998:299-303).

New perspectives are offered by Van der Ven (1993) when he applies the threefold structure of communicative rationality to the four functions of the church: *kerugma*, *leitourgia*, *koinonia* and *diakonia*. Within each function each one of the three worlds of Habermas, namely the objective, the social and the subjective world, can be brought up. In all these functions of the church the norms of truth, rightness and truthfulness can critically be applied. It was clear that practical theology could use a communicative rationality when people exchange information about religious experiences. The way was clear for applying different social scientific methods of research in our subject in order to study the experiences and the existential situation of members

of a congregation. Theological methodologies were broadened by means of this insight. We are not only applying methods to study the *text*, but also to study the *context* of contemporary communities of faith.

By studying the contextual situation of our people we can become existentially drenched in their situation and in pastoral solidarity with them approach the Bible to seek for a living, topical Word in this specific situation.

3. THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS WITH A VIEW TO PREACHING IN A CONTEXT OF POVERTY

The hermeneutical approach that I follow is based on the hermeneutical insights of Gadamer and Ricoeur. (See for a description of their hermeneutical philosophy Pieterse 2001:74-79). I therefore approach the process of understanding a biblical text for next Sunday's sermon from the existential needs and questions – the context – of the community of faith that I have to preach to. I also approach the Bible with the insight of liberation theology, namely the preferential option for the poor – therefore an approach to the Bible from the perspective of the poor (black *and* white). South Africa is (with the exception of a *very* small minority of its people) a poor country (see Pieterse 2001:28-70). We need to read the Bible through these lenses in order to be surprised by what God has to say to people living in this kind of context (see Pieterse 2001:82-90). I also read the Bible with a view to prophetic preaching that our liberation theology taught us (Pieterse 1995), which means that one has to inspire the faithful with hope, and the courage to tackle the situation of poverty, and work for a better future. During the tug-of-war with the texts' context and scope in seeking *understanding* of its message by means of *scientific exegesis*, there comes a moment when the text starts speaking to you – criticising, consoling, teaching, inspiring – whatever the direction is that the text opens as a new world for the reader (Ricoeur 1976). Because we believe as Reformed preachers that the Holy Spirit accompanies the understanding process of a text, the text touches the preacher existentially during this process of understanding and preparing a sermon. This experience enables us to *translate* the message of the text into a message for today's congregation. In the process our Confessions act as the railings of a bridge that guide us on the route of sound biblical preaching. When you go to preach you become a witness of the experience you had with the text, and you phrase its message in the contextual terminology of the people you preach to.

Prophetic preaching that is contextual requires preachers to be daring in the *translation process*. It requires creativity and trust that the Holy Spirit will accompany them in their imaginative response to the meaning of the text when they proclaim new existential possibilities, as presented by the text, by way of hope and inspiration. This hermeneutic activity in the homiletic process is a matter of interpretation. We must distinguish between *understanding* and *translation*. Understanding is a matter of exegesis, culminating in a *design of the meaning of the text* – which, of course, entails understanding of the present situation. Translation goes further, implying the preacher's bold action in the context of the congregation as a creative response to the meaning of the text – hence an *interpretive design* that we call translation (Jonker 1998:38). To understand we make use of all sorts of exegetical methods in order to discover the world of the Bible. That is the concern and purpose of scientific exegesis. To translate we look for God's words and deeds in the text, for contact with the living Lord who speaks a startling, new, liberating word in the context of the congregation. At bottom it is a matter of a living God speaking through the biblical texts, a God who – in situations of oppression, injustice, anxiety, marginalisation and want – takes on the struggle with evil and brings liberation.

Translation in this sense for the purpose of relevant, contextual prophetic preaching is possible for a number of reasons. The first is that a text has multiple meanings (Gadamer and Ricoeur). In every new, concrete situation the text is capable of constituting meaning. Biblical texts are pre-eminently open in the sense that they permit a relevant message in new situations (Jonker 1998:34). Homiletics proceeds on the assumption that translation of biblical texts for the purpose of preaching has such open access to our own real-life situation (cf Theissen 1990).

The second reason is the theological premiss in homiletics that biblical texts have their own dynamic power, which constantly seeks to speak a new, relevant and liberating word (see Barth 1975; Ebeling 1967). This religious claim is based on the assumption that the Holy Spirit is active in our understanding and interpretation of the Bible.

The third reason is the congregation's expectation that they will hear a relevant word from God in the sermon. The congregation prayerfully comes to the service of worship, expecting to encounter God in the proclamation of his Word and in the work of the Holy Spirit. Within this liturgical sphere of spirituality it becomes possible to speak a bold, imaginative word of inspiration, consolation, liberation, challenge and critique in keeping with the text. The church members are also interpreters of the biblical message. In a dialogical way preacher and pew can listen to God's Word for their situation and move together forward in a bold and imaginative way.

The final reason is the religious commitment to God of both congregation and preacher. In this living commitment congregation and preacher have experience of God that dates back a long time. It is a living commitment entailing communication with God through prayer, religious obedience and experience of God's words and deeds in the lives of church members. Within this sphere of communication and religious commitment to God, and in communication with each other, the texts of the Bible can be preached anew and creatively, offering imaginative new existential possibilities to those in need. These religious relationships create scope for legitimising the contextual and prophetic translation among the listeners to the sermon.

4. ROLE OF THE CHURCH'S PREACHING IN DIACONAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Within this framework of thinking described above I try to theorise on the role of the church's preaching in the South African context of poverty. Of great importance is the need for the South African church (all the denominations) to transform her into a real diaconal church, a serving church that follows in the footsteps of our Lord who came to serve people in need with his words and deeds. We like to call such a church a missionary diaconal church.

A missionary diaconal church is one which joins in the *missio Dei*, God's mission to a world in need: "... the *missio Dei* (God's mission), that is, God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate. *Missio Dei* enunciates the good news that God is a God-for-people" (Bosch 1991:10). This theological tenet struck home in the latter half of the 20th century as a notion of God moving in the world to reach people in distress, and of the church's role in that movement. The church is no longer an organisation that takes the initiative in reaching out to people in spiritual and material need; it is *God's* initiative and movement in the world, which the church is privileged to join. "Since God's concern is for the entire world, this should also be the scope of the *missio Dei*. It affects all people in all aspects of their existence. It takes place in ordinary human history, not exclusively in and through the church" (Bosch 1991:391). The church cannot withdraw itself from God's outreach to the poor in this country. On the contrary, if it wants to be genuine it will have to join in God's work, which is being done anyway in innumerable projects conducted by government and non-

governmental organisations of all kinds, all (we believe) inspired by God's Spirit, which is active all over the world.

The points raised below are meant to serve as **a theory for the praxis of preaching** by the church in a context of poverty. It should be borne in mind that such preaching is part of a process, one that will probably run its course over many years. The aspects of this theory will be presented so as to reflect the various steps in the process.

4.1 A preferential option for the poor

On the basis of our theological interpretation of the biblical message about the poor, the process starts by deciding to *take the side of the poor*. This is a lifelong commitment. It is necessary to make this irrevocable choice, for the journey of the church with the poor is likely to be arduous. We must choose to be faithful disciples of our Lord. We distinguish between the church of the poor, and (the churches who are a bit better off) as the church for the poor.

Prophetic preaching in the church of the poor should tell them that God is on their side and that he will deliver them from the causes of poverty and from the situation of poverty. It must inspire and motivate them to find the vision and hope to ameliorate their own situation and thus to collaborate in God's work of liberation. By the same token preaching in the church *for* the poor will have to be prophetic. Congregations have to be made to realise the distress of the poor all around them. They must hear the biblical message about the poor spoken prophetically. They must be challenged to exercise a preferential option for the poor so as to stand with God – on the side of the poor. They must be motivated to embark with the church of the poor on a missionary diaconate.

4.2 Understanding the context of poverty

We know now that we have to interpret the biblical text in the context of poverty if our sermons are to be relevant to that context. To this end we must go out and *listen* to the poor humbly and with open minds. We must listen to them within the framework of the potency of the Christian church: "The Christian mission must be concerned about spiritual, physical, social and even cultural aspects of life for all people" (Maluleke 1999:2, 4). And we must hear what their needs are and learn from them what plans can be devised. All this must be done under the guidance of leaders in the local congregation. Once we have listened to the poor themselves, under the guidance of local religious leaders and community workers, we will be able to translate the biblical message into relevant sermons for the context where they are to be preached.

In this process of listening to the poor and respecting their human dignity and pride members of the church for the poor who want to become involved in helping the church of the poor will first have to enter into a partnership with the latter. This entails creating a forum in which the congregations wishing to offer assistance reach an agreement of cooperation on an equal footing with churches in local poor communities. The church for the poor, led by the church of the poor, will then listen to the people so as to get to understand them and their needs (Bruwer 1996:43). The poor must state their own needs and be helped to liberate themselves. Ultimately they must come to a decision to join in God's liberating task in their midst as God's co-workers.

4.3 Community development

In liberation theology the word "development" has a nasty ring to it. Here, however, we are not using it in the sense that it is used in the Latin American context. Community development is a process whereby a group of people comes together to exchange ideas and try to jointly answer the following questions:

- (a) What are our problems?
- (b) What is the order of priority among these problems?
- (c) What are the causes of these problems?
- (d) What will be our programme of action?

Development is an experience of freedom as people choose what to do. To decide and do something brings dignity and self-respect (Maluleke 1993:18).

We can summarise the nature of the kind of diaconal community development that we have in mind as follows: "When development embraces the whole of the person, sets him or her free, remains human, and is done by the right person who makes choice possible, it will without a doubt contribute to the work of the Church among the poor" (Bruwer 1996:28).

The aim of development of poor communities where the church engages in a missionary diaconate is, first of all, spiritual. It is a spiritual enterprise in which we motivate our actions to the poor in such a way that they understand why we are doing these things and will come to know Jesus Christ, his grace and his love (Maluleke 1996:6). To this end our community development should benefit the whole people's lives: the social, economic, psychological and spiritual spheres.

Development, then, is meant to trigger a transformation process (Bruwer 1996: 85-97; Maluleke 1999:14; Myers 1999). This transformation is aimed at psychological liberation from the trap of poverty in which people are caught up (Bosch 1991:437). As it proceeds it should help people to discover a goal in life for which they can work and strive (Maluleke 1999:19-20). Naturally it must be geared to economic development, in the sense that poor people must be helped to create employment for themselves in the informal sector. Projects that train people for the formal sector, especially the children of poor families, also need to be launched, for instance computer courses. Obviously church members will be active in these projects. But the sermons in all the congregations involved must always provide information and motivation. Sermons could reflect, in biblical terms, on what is going on as the development projects progress, thus putting them in the perspective of God's mission and work.

4.4 Combination of preaching and community development

Preaching alone is not enough to bring liberation from poverty. Sermons have to be prophetic to instil awareness, inspire congregations and motivate them to engage actively in community development through projects in poor communities. Sermons must always guide the process of diaconal community development in terms of the biblical message. This was what prophetic preachers against apartheid did. Tutu's sermons, for instance, went hand in hand with an economic boycott and civil disobedience to apartheid laws (see Pieterse 1995).

4.4.1 The transformation process

Bruwer (1996:66-74) cites the procedure adopted in Acts 6:1-7 to solve the problem of the poverty of Greek-speaking widows. On this basis he explains the process of transformation through community development. The Greek community spoke out, saying that their widows were being neglected. The apostles listened. Poverty has a culture of silence. So the first step entails speaking out and listening. Via the forum of cooperation between congregations and churches the poor must be heard and listened to as equals.

Then, in Acts 6, the apostles mobilised the body of Christ. They called the believers together and shared the problem with them. "Therefore, the second step in the process we are looking at is to involve the relevant community of believers; it has to become their problem" (Bruwer 1996:70). This is done by discussing the issue. "Community development must be collective action which includes collective decision making. If people are not included in decision making from the start,

there shall be no development” (Maluleke 1993:39; see also Myers 1999). By thus involving the community of believers, diaconate and fellowship (including fellowship in services of worship) are conjoined. To persevere with a missionary diaconate people need constant spiritual inspiration from the liturgy and this applies to both the church for the poor and the church of the poor.

Acts 6:6 tell how the congregation brings the elected people to the apostles, who give their unconditional support to the leaders who will perform the diaconal work. The leaders from the various congregations who extend help to the poor to launch their own projects, who back and guide them in the task, must trust and support the action committee of the poor all the way: “Trust breeds trust and responsibility” (Bruwer 1996:74).

4.4.2 Types of projects

Nowadays there are many projects in every local community. Some are run by churches, such as CAN (Church Aid in Need), which is run jointly by the Uniting Reformed Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Mamelodi, Pretoria (Bruwer 1996:99). This project teaches people sewing, baking and cookery. They can use these skills to produce wares that they can sell to make a living. Courses are also offered in teaching preschool children. These people then return to their own communities. Literacy classes are given and the beneficiaries go back to teach others in their own communities. School children and postmatric youths can take computer courses to prepare themselves for the labour market. CAN is also conducting a home building project. In addition it supplies water for rural people by drilling boreholes and people are taught to grow vegetables and farm with poultry. Another example is Rhema Church’s care centre in Alexandra, Johannesburg. Congregational leaders have to look for such projects within their own church and join them.

There are also ecumenical projects in which different churches collaborate. Examples include the Pretoria Community Ministry and the ecumenical project in Pietermaritzburg, PACSA (Pietermaritzburg Association for Christian Social Action). Congregational leaders have to find such projects in their own environment and decide which ones they want to join.

Churches should also be open to collaborating with non-church organisations if local conditions require this. Local authorities and other agencies often run such projects in their areas. Thus the University of South Africa (Unisa) runs Tiisanang, Unisa’s Community Partnership Project. It provides a network and a forum, which enables government and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), business, donors and the community to engage in the development of poor communities.

Many NGOs operate countrywide doing community work. Information on the various projects running in specific areas is obtainable from the national NGO office. Its address is SANG060, PO Box 31471, Braamfontein 2017 (tel: 011 – 403-7746).

Government also runs projects all over the country. The Department of Welfare, Population and Development is in charge of these. The Department is eager to collaborate with the public – including churches. Information can be obtained from this department at Private Bag X901, Pretoria 0001.

Churches can collaborate with any of the agencies to support projects. The starting point is that congregations should be sensitised and motivated by prophetic preaching to engage in a missionary diaconate. Then they should join in existing projects. A local congregation often lacks the capacity to launching a new project on its own. Preaching should accompany projects of this nature, should inspire them and guide them in terms of the biblical message. Action should be combined with words to liberate people from poverty. In addition we should constantly celebrate successes in this field in the liturgy – the same liturgy that, in communion with God and one another, generates spiritual energy for the calling that we have to fulfil.

5. CONCLUSION

South African Reformed liberation theology is still very relevant in this country. It should direct us in the struggle against poverty. Its focus should be social-economic liberation in the light of our Christian faith and inspired by the biblical message in order for people to experience salvation by Jesus Christ in its complete sense. A communicative rationality with sound hermeneutical and communication theories that is suitable to homiletics could be helpful to our thinking and preaching on the way forward.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barth, K 1975. *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 1/1. 9. Auflage. Zollikon-Zurich: EVZ.
- Bosch, D I 1991. *Transforming mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Bruwer, E 1996. *Beggars can be choosers*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- De Gruchy, J W & Villa-Vicencio, C (eds) 1983. *Apartheid is a heresy*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- De Gruchy, J W 1991. *Liberating Reformed theology*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- De Roest, H 1998. *Communicative identity. Habermas' perspectives of discourse as a support for practical theology*. Kampen: Kok.
- Dingemans, G D J 1991. *Als hoorder onder de hoorders. Een hermeneutische homiletiek*. Kampen: Kok.
- Ebeling, G 1961. *The nature of faith*. London: Collins.
- Ebeling, G 1963. *Word and faith*. London: SCM.
- Ebeling, G 1966. *Theology and proclamation*. London: Collins.
- Ebeling, G 1967. *God and word*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Ebeling, G 1973. *Introduction to a theological theory of language*. London: Collins.
- Gadamer, H-G 1975. *Truth and method*. London: Sheed & Ward.
- Habermas, J 1984. *The theory of communicative action*. Volume I. Boston.
- Habermas, J 1987. *The theory of communicative action*. Volume II. Boston.
- Jonker, E 1998. *Van verstaan naar vertolken*. Meppel: Jonker Creaties.
- Maimela, S S 1989. Faith that does justice. *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 3 (1):1-14.
- Maluleke, S D 1993. *Struggle against poverty*. Pretoria: Dibukeng.
- Maluleke, S D 1999. *Christian community development model*. Pretoria: S D Maluleke.
- Mosoma, D L 1990. *Political struggle and co-operative visions for change: An analysis of the political and theological thought of major black kaders in South Africa*. Princeton: PhD-dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary.
- Myers, B L 1999. *Walking with the poor. Principles and practices of transformational development*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Nolan, A & Broderick, R 1987. *To nourish our faith. Theology of liberation for Southern Africa*. Hilton: Order of Preachers (Southern Africa).
- Pieterse, H J C 1979. *Skrifverstaan en prediking*. Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel.
- Pieterse, H J C 1984. Contextual preaching. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* No 46:4-10.
- Pieterse, H J C 1987. *Communicative preaching*. Pretoria: Unisa Press (Second printing 1991; Third printing 1995).
- Pieterse, H J C 1990. A dialogical theory of communication from a practical theological perspective. *The Evangelical Quarterly* Vol LXII (3):223-240.
- Pieterse, H J C 1993. *Praktiese teologie as kommunikatiewe handelingsteorie*. Pretoria: HIRSC Publishers.
- Pieterse, H J C (ed) 1995. *Desmond Tutu's message. A qualitative analysis*. Kampen/Weinheim: Kok: Deutscher Studien Verlag. (Second edition 2001: Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill).
- Pieterse, H J C 2001. *Preaching in a context of poverty*. Pretoria: Unisa Press. (Afrikaans edition 2001: *Prediking in 'n konteks van armoede*. Pretoria: Unisa-Uitgewers).
- Ricoeur, P 1976. *Interpretation theory. Discourse and the surplus of meaning*. Fort Worth, Texas: The Texas University Press.
- Theissen, G 1990. *Die offene Tür. Biblische Variationen zu Predigttexten*. Munchen: Kaiser.
- The Kairos Document* 1986. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers.
- Van der Ven, I A 1993. *Practical theology: An empirical approach*. Kampen: Kok Pharos.
- Tutu, D 1983. *Hope and suffering*. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers.