

The art of preaching: The Folly of Beauty and the Beauty of Reality

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Abstract

“An orator”, Cicero famously said, “is a good man, trained in the art to speak well.” The difference between orators and actors, he continues, is that orators are “players that act real life” whereas, actors are “players who only mimic reality”.

Preaching is not only an oratorical skill but also a theological art. All of this suggests a deep awareness and sensitivity to aesthetics. Both preachers (or orators) and actors usually have, or should have, something of this sensitivity. Both preachers and actors are intent on weaving words into patterns that both make sense and stimulate the senses.

The often-quoted idea that “beauty will save the world” (from Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*) feeds into a perception that somehow aesthetics in itself has some or other redemptive quality. Or translated into the context of preaching: that it will somehow by itself elevate, enhance or redeem the act of preaching. There is no doubt that this idea is a misrepresentation of what Dostoevsky had in mind.

The decisive factor in preaching is not the reality of beauty but the beauty of reality. Both preaching and beauty are deeply grounded in reality. However, preaching as a theological art is not only grounded in the reality as our senses experience it, but more so in the reality of Jesus Christ.

Keywords

Aesthetics; reality; preaching; theological art; awareness

1. Introduction

Preaching is an art. Or at least that seems to be the claim of a countless number of titles pertaining to Homiletics.¹ Whether “art” here always means much more than simply a rhetorical skill, technique² or perhaps the ability to craft an imaginative speech or presentation, is another question. Some³ speak of the “aesthetic of preaching” that includes things like the aspects of architecture, rhetorical form of the sermon and liturgy. Others, and more often, give no indication of exactly what they understand under the “art” of preaching, even if the word “art” occurs in the title of the book.⁴

Whatever the individual understandings of “art” in this context might be, at the very least the use of the word implies that preaching has its own kind of aesthetic. There’s a certain kind of beauty that underpins it, that shapes it, that gives preaching the ability to please, persuade and to move an audience, in more or less the same way as the ancient orators were able to do. From most of the literature one could conclude that this “art” of preaching pertains to either method (rhetoric) or content (theology) or both.

I would like to draw attention to another, perhaps the most important aspect that constitutes preaching *as an art*. This has to do with the nature of art itself, but even more important for my purposes here, something that profoundly informs all preaching. What constitutes preaching as an art

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- 1 A quick search of our local theological library catalogue yielded more than twenty titles of books, articles etc. Some use it in the context of making use of art in and during the liturgy, e.g. Charles L Rice: *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1991); others like the medieval Alan of Lille (*The Art of Preaching*, trans Gillian R Evans, Cisterian Publications Inc: Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1981) specifically reject too much rhetorical beauty but instead wants to restore the world to beauty and peace through the art of creating a more moral humanity.
 - 2 It is fascinating to note that in Richard Viladescau’s book *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (Paulist Press: New York, 2000), in his chapter on “Theology, Aesthetics and the Art of Preaching”, the “art” of preaching seems to be entirely conceived in terms of the aesthetic of rhetorical skills. Even the section on “Theology and the Art of Preaching” begins with the comment: “A significant part of the art of preaching, as of any art, is the mastery of technique.” (197)
 - 3 Virginia Purvis-Smith, “Gender and the Aesthetic of Preaching” in *A Reader on Preaching: making connections*, eds David Day, Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), 224
 - 4 See Thomas H Troeger & Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *A Sermon Workbook: Exercises in the Art and Craft of Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013)

is the nature, the texture, the power – in short, the “aesthetic” of reality. Preaching, just like art, is about what is real, not only in the sense of being grounded in reality but especially in the sense of being able to penetrate, reveal and ultimately transform reality.

2. The Folly of Beauty

In order to understand the value and beauty of reality in preaching, one has to begin by understanding something of the suspicion of aesthetics or the folly of beauty. Viewing the architectural magnificence of the cathedrals that dominates the cityscapes in many European cities and the biblical and theological themes in many of the world’s greatest art works, it is easy to forget that significant elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition has had a tense relationship with aesthetics over the centuries.

Whereas the suspicion towards aesthetics in the Protestant tradition (especially in the wider Reformed tradition⁵) and the Jewish tradition has much in common, especially in reference to their caution or even fear of idolatry, in the Jewish tradition that suspicion also centres on something else, something that is crucial for this conversation.

In almost every one of his five-part series on the Pentateuch, *Covenant and Conversation*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comes back to the theme of why Judaism did not value the visual arts in the same way as ancient Greece did. He points out that in rabbinical literature it is rare to find any positive references to art. It is of course easy to trace that back to the biblical prohibition against idolatry.

However, underpinning this prohibition is not only the caution against worshipping an image of the real thing, an imposter so to speak, but the general unreliability of the eye to see things or people or even events for what they *really* are.

5 There is no doubt that what is considered by many to be the “Reformed view” of aesthetics, is really more caricature than reality. For a more nuanced view, see Christopher R. Joby, *Calvinism and the Arts: A Re-Assessment* (Leuven, MA: Peeters, 2007), Belden C. Lane, *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Paul Corby Finney, ed., *Seeing Beyond the Word: Visual Arts and the Calvinist Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

Taking his cue from five scenes in the Joseph-narratives of Genesis⁶ where clothes play a key role, Sacks shows how all these five stories have one common goal: to show that things are not as they seem. To show that appearances could be deceptive. In fact, nothing articulates this better than the fact that the Hebrew word for “garment” (*beqed*), is the same word for “betrayal”.

This same betrayal in how the eye perceives we also see in the ways the bible uses the *positive* physical descriptions of both Joseph and Saul to make a point about their moral flaws. This is again emphasised in the Joshua narratives in Deuteronomy when the spies are sent out to explore (*latur*) the Promised Land⁷. In these stories the word *latur* appears thirteen times; a repetition that yet again links sight and betrayal. For the word *latur*, means both “to see” and “to be led astray”.⁸ This brings Sacks to the crucial observation: “Appearance and reality were opposites.”⁹

It is this deceptive character of observation and perception that lies at the heart of the Jewish suspicion of aesthetics. The folly of beauty is that it could mask reality, that it distorts reality and hence even that it could fabricate or betray reality.

What this means when it is played out in actual events, is nowhere better illustrated than the testimonies of survivors of the holocaust. Both Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, in their autobiographical accounts, refer to the presence of music in the camps. The concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau had its own orchestra that was stationed at the entrance of the camp, so that prisoners could hear classical music as they were marched into or out of the camp.¹⁰ The main camp of Auschwitz had several

6 Jonathan Sacks: *Essays on Ethics, A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (Maggid Books: Jerusalem, 2016), 59–63.

7 Jonathan Sacks: *Covenant and Conversation. Numbers: the wilderness years* (Maggid Books: Jerusalem, 2017), 162.

8 Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation. Numbers: the wilderness years*, 166

9 Sacks, *Essays on Ethics*, 63.

10 “Auschwitz-Birkenau: History of a man-made Hell.” <https://www.scrapbookpages.com/AuschwitzScrapbook/History/Articles/Birkenau01.html>

orchestras,¹¹ a library, as well as a museum where art works were displayed. Clearly beauty here had no redemptive capacity; it couldn't save the world.¹² But even more pointedly, it shows how beauty could be used to both mask and betray reality.

The question that arises out of this pertains to what is often referred to as “holocaust literature”. Literature is evidently a form of art; how then should the writings of holocaust survivors like Elie Wiesel be understood?

Elie Wiesel addresses this question very pertinently. For him, writing about his experiences is a form of *witness*, not a form of art. He is not trying to create anything, to imagine anything; only to be true to what he saw and experienced. However, it is exactly in this attempt to be true to reality that his writing also becomes a form of art. He clearly understood this very well. Referring to the writing of Yankel Wiernik, a carpenter by trade who took part in the Treblinka uprising and managed to escape, Wiesel writes:

Why is Wiernik's narrative authentic? Because it is meant to be testimony and nothing else. He was neither a professional writer nor a poet—he was not even gifted with words. *Because* he has no imagination, he could tell it as it was. *Because* he had no literary skill, he could remain truthful. In writing of the Holocaust, imagination became an obstacle. The best descriptions were given by simple people, or – as we shall see later – by children. They found the right words, the right tone, the nakedness, the austerity that are the seal of truth and art alike. They were not confronted with artistic problems of technique. Their purpose was one and one was their obsession: to bear witness, to transmit a spark of the flame, a fragment of the tale, a reflection of their truth.¹³

Here we can see something of the ambiguity of art: the ability to both conceal and reveal, to both mask and expose as well as the ability to both betray

11 See also: Guido Fackler: “Official camp orchestras in Auschwitz” <http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/camps/death-camps/auschwitz/camp-orchestras/>

12 It is important to point out that Dostoevsky's famous quote from “The Idiots” that “beauty will save the world” is often misunderstood. In his mind “beauty” was never something isolated from truth or good.

13 Elie Wiesel: “Art and Culture After the Holocaust” *Cross Currents*, Fall 1976, Vol.26(3),264.

reality and to become a witness to it. If art could become an accomplice in the betrayal of truth and reality, it could also be an instrument to penetrate reality and expose its truth, even and especially where it is sought to hide or mask that truth. It is to this that we now turn.

3. Beauty as the unmasking and revelation of reality

The prophets of Israel were those seers that had the ability to see the things that everyone else was *looking at*, but no one else was *seeing*. In this sense they resemble the great artists in society who are not fooled by the appearance of things and people but are able to penetrate reality to see what is real and what pretends to be real. As Johan Cilliers and Charles Campbell¹⁴ point out, poets, prophets and fools are those that offer us a different angle on society, to see the true fate of the unfavoured or in the well-known words of Bonhoeffer, to allow us to share in “the view from below”.

In this discussion of reality, it is becoming clear that even “reality” itself could present itself as “unreal”. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify what “reality” means here. This clarification has become even more urgent in our contemporary setting where many people would associate “reality” and “reality shows”. The latter is a form of entertainment that purports to film ordinary people (not actors) in real life situations.¹⁵ However, increasingly people are beginning to realise that these “real life” situations are often more staged and scripted than the viewer realises. Also, that in some cases at least, aspiring actors or non-professional actors are used. What is presented as reality is in fact nothing but a staged form of reality and hence very much “unreal”.

In this regard Rowan Williams once told of an interview he had with a well-known British actor. The conversation touched on the similarities

14 *Preaching Fools. The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Baylor University Press: Waco, Texas, 2012), 81–82.

15 There are a wide variety of definitions on offer for what “reality TV” is but most of them, include the presence of ordinary people and real-life situations.

See among others: “Macmillan Dictionary” <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/reality-tv> as well as “Cambridge Dictionary” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/reality-tv>

between acting and preaching. To his question why actors on the stage manage to capture peoples' attention while preachers seem to have exactly the opposite effect, this actor answered: It is because actors on the stage turn fiction into real life whereas preachers on the pulpit turn real life into fiction.

Exactly the same thing is true of reality TV: it takes real life and turns it into fiction and in this sense makes it un-real.

In other words, reality is more than simply that which we encounter daily in the ordinary life. It is more than simply what *is*. We know, even from a purely physiological point of view, that our senses can be tricked into accepting as real that which *appears* to be real.

In this quest to come closer to the core of reality or of what is real, it is important not to confuse this quest with any notions of philosophical realism,¹⁶ which is about objective reality. What we're after has more in common with the true nature, the truth of things. It is closer to what the New Zealand born poet and essayist, Katherine Mansfield, expresses in her sigh or cry: "O God, I want to be REAL."¹⁷

If there is one theologian that was consumed with this, who has known this quest as a deep existential cry, who felt this sigh in every aspect of his life, including his theological writings, then it was the Dutch theologian, KH Miskotte. Especially in his diary notes, he comes back to it, again and again. What becomes apparent is that he experiences what is real in an aesthetic moment,¹⁸ in beauty as the foretaste of true reality, the reality of eternity. It is here that the unity of being and the truth of life make its greatest appeal on him. It is in the beauty of reality that what is eternally

16 In short, philosophical realism is the view that things exist in themselves, independent of our perception or consciousness of it.

17 As quoted in Paul Dinkins "Katherine Mansfield: The Ending," Southwest Review, Vol. 38, No. 3, annual literary number (Summer 1953) 203–210. Accessed online on 24.5.2019 at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43463868>. I have been unable to find the original Mansfield publication where this quote comes from. However, I've come across a number of references to it, not always using exactly the same words. I first found it in the diary notes of the Dutch theologian, KH Miskotte (Een keuze uit zijn dagboeken en anderen teksten, (Uitgeverij De Prom: Baarn, 1994), 61. Here he quotes Mansfield as saying: "If I were allowed one single cry to God, that cry would be: I want to be real!"

18 KH Miskotte: Uit de dagboeken 1930–1934. Verzameld Werk 5A (Uitgeversmaatschappij JH Kok: Kampen, 1990), 161.

real and true is revealed. And the ones who have true in-sight into reality, the mediators of this beauty, are the artists.

It is fascinating to note how the English philosopher, Stephen Clark, coming from an entirely different angle, reaches a conclusion that resonates deeply with that of Miskotte. In his book, *God, Religion and Reality*,¹⁹ he sets out to make the case for a Christian theism, arguing that God is the one immaterial and omnipresent principle on which all things depend and hence containing all reality, as well as the field in which this reality takes shape. “The path of true philosophy” he asserts, “is to see as God sees.”²⁰ (Meyer)

For Clark (as for Plotinus whom he refers to often), seeing as God sees, is about discerning the beauty of reality; not only the way reality is expressed in form and shape, but also the moral beauty that somehow permeates (the moral and aesthetic beauty in the “fabric” of)²¹ reality. Clark concludes:

To become aware of beauty, as Plato recognized, to be filled with beauty, a life that is, in itself, eternal. Being and Intellect and Beauty are the same. To be is to be something, and all somethings take their being from the norms or forms contained in an eternal Intellect, which shows itself to us, in us, as Beauty.²²

“Beauty” as it is used here, is expressed in art, but in a greater sense and even more important, gives expression to art. Therefore artists (and prophets) are best placed, not so much to “capture” beauty, but to reflect its rays, to discern its shadows, its traces and its ways in the world. “Hence” in the words of Hans Küng, “many artists today see their work as a critically constructive and wholly meaningful illumination, understanding, interpretation, portrayal and mastering of this reality of ours.”²³ They are the ones with senses trained on catching “traces of transcendence.”²⁴ It is their calling to

19 Stephen, RL Clark: *God, Religion and Reality* (SPCK: London, 1998).

20 Clark, *God, Religion and Reality*, 83.

21 Clark, *God, Religion and Reality*, 94.

22 Clark, *God, Religion and Reality*, 95–96.

23 Hans Küng: *Art and the question of meaning*, (Crossroad: New York, 1981), 34.

24 Hans Küng: *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence*, (William B Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992).

see the true nature of things, to see reality not only in its wholeness, but also in its brokenness, to discern the incompleteness, the “cracks” in the well-known lyrics of Leonard Cohen²⁵, as part of the way that Light “escapes” eternity to penetrate and illuminate every aspect of life as we know it.

Richard Pevear captures this beautifully in his Introduction²⁶ to Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* when he says that the darkness portrayed here is real darkness, but so is the brightness, the lightness is also real. It is rooted in the word, not so much the expression in the freedom of language, perhaps even in the freedom *from* language. This freedom, this art, is best expressed through Alyosha, who has the function of an *angelos*, a messenger in the literal sense of the word. He is the one carrying the letters and requests from one character to another. “He is not so much a speaker, but he is the hearer of words, and he is almost the only one in the novel, who *can* hear. This is his great gift: the word can come to life in him.”²⁷

In other words, he is receptive to what is true, even if it ugly and hidden. Reality speaks through him; he becomes a witness to it in very much the same way as Elie Wiesel speaks about his own writing.

Following from this, it is easy to see why preaching has been described as a kind of witnessing.²⁸ However, witnesses do not simply report what they have experienced or seen; they are not mere imitators or copyists. They carry an event of the past into the future and by doing that, the word of the past becomes alive again as the reality of a new, a transformed future.

In this sense they resemble the work of poets. Michael Fishbane²⁹ shows how poets ground their aesthetic imagery in the figures and forms of the natural world, always in such a way that these forms are recognised

25 “Anthem”, from his album *The Future* (1992).

26 Richard Pevear: “Introduction” to Fyodor Dostoevsky: *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Quartet Books: London/New York, 1990).

27 Ibid, xviii.

28 The most well-known contribution in this regard is Thomas Long’s: *The Witness of Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 2005).

29 Michael Fishbane: *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago & London, 2008), 28–30.

in the words of the poetry. However, the irregular sequence of words, characteristic of poetry, interrupts the expected flow of language. This, not only “rivets us to reality”³⁰ but indeed in and through her words, the poet transforms, “remakes the world.”³¹

4. The art of preaching as the transformation of reality

Perhaps the best theological example of such an interruption of reality that reshaped that reality, are the events of the resurrection. For any discussion about preaching, this is of paramount importance.

In his book *Resurrection, Discipleship, Justice: Affirming the Resurrection of Jesus today*, the Swiss-born Australian theologian, Thorwald Lorenzen³² sets out to show that we can speak about the reality of the resurrection in a way that allows us to avoid the usual binary opposites of “liberal versus evangelical”. What he tries to do is to speak about it in a way that does justice to the liberating and transformational event that the first witnesses testified to. In other words, to speak about it as to, on the one hand avoid a sterile kind of realism, but on the other hand, also avoid relativizing it as a “mere” metaphor.

Affirming that the event of the resurrection is only accessible through the experiences and the words of the first witnesses and acknowledging that the word “resurrection” is a metaphor (but an “irreplaceable metaphor”) for an event that also challenged the understanding of those first witnesses, Lorenzen argues that this metaphor points to a reality that has an *event-character*, but a reality that should be understood in *relational* terms.³³ That means that the reality and significance of the event is not open to scientific analysis (in the same way as God is not), but only accessible through the reality of a faith-relationship.

Lorenzen questions Pannenberg’s assertion that Paul’s listing of the witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8 is a way of providing factual evidence for the resurrection. The role of the witnesses in the bible is not to provide a

30 Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*, 31.

31 Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*, 29.

32 Smith & Helwys Publishing Inc: Macon, Georgia, 2003.

33 *Resurrection, Discipleship, Justice: Affirming the Resurrection of Jesus today*, 2003, 54

historical foundation for the Christian faith, but to “keep the event alive”³⁴ in and through their testimony. Their witness allows them to participate in the event.

This does not diminish the historical reality of the resurrection in any way, for witnesses, by definition, do not “invent” or “create” an event and quoting Ricoeur, Lorenzen reiterates: “it is not possible to testify *for* a meaning without testifying *that* something has happened which signifies this meaning.”³⁵

Proclaiming the reality of the resurrection through preaching, in other words, should not be done in apologetic terms, but rather in solidarity with the first witnesses and faithful immersion in the dynamics and meaning of the event itself. Herein lies the real art of preaching: to proclaim the reality of a past event in such a way that it resonates with and unifies the experiences of the first and subsequent witnesses.

This is only possible, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out, because:

There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is God’s reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world. Partaking in Christ, we stand at the same time in the reality of God and in the reality of the world. The reality of Christ embraces the reality of the world in itself. The world has no reality of its own independent of God’s revelation in Christ ... Rather the whole reality of the world has already been drawn into and is held together in Christ.³⁶

This brings us closer to the heart of the matter: the art of preaching does not begin with a quest for what is real, does not set out to *discover* what is real but in fact takes its *departure* from what is real: the reality of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. That is the beauty of reality from where the transformation of *all* reality begins. It is at the same time the beauty of reality as *the* eschatological reality: ultimate reality.

34 Lorenzen, *Resurrection, Discipleship, Justice*, 146.

35 Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, translated by David Stewart and Charles E Reagan (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1980), 133.

36 Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol 6 (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2005), 58.

Perhaps the one theologian in recent memory, who truly understood this, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is to him that I now turn.

Preaching plays an important part in re-vitalising congregational life. It also plays an important part in helping the church to make sense of the world in which we live, especially to discern what is good, true and hence real. As Hauerwas observes in the Introduction to his *Cross-shattered Church*: “... the gift of preaching, is crucial if we are to recover the ability to live lives, we, as Christians, understand. Accordingly, I try to do the work of theology in sermons by showing how the unintelligibility of our lives can be made intelligible by the gospel.”³⁷

Therefore, it will come as no surprise that the work in which Bonhoeffer’s most penetrating focus seems to be on the realities of the world, the reality of the Christ-event and the role of preaching in all of this, is his *Ethics*. For Bonhoeffer the greatest temptation that the preacher has to overcome is the temptation to view preaching as a utilitarian tool or to trying to provide solutions to the problems of the world.³⁸ In other words, to ground preaching in the realities (problems) of the world, rather than the proclamation of God’s identification with, and acceptance of the world in the reality of Jesus Christ. The Incarnated Word is not much a solution to the problems of the world, but a redemption of reality and being.³⁹

In Bonhoeffer’s thinking the realities of the self and the world are themselves entirely embedded in the reality of God. In this sense God is truly the ground of being, in Bonhoeffer’s words “the ultimate reality”. In saying this it is not Bonhoeffer’s intension to diminish the actual world nor is it his intension to suggest that this actual world is in need of a “religious” perfection. The reality of God is not an idea, but is revealed (one could say,

37 Stanley Hauerwas: *A cross-shattered church: reclaiming the theological heart of Preaching*.) Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2009), 19.

38 Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Ethics*, 352–353. It is interesting to note that he views this temptation as being especially prevalent in the Anglo-Saxon world! One suspects his main aim is here on the USA, but there is no doubt that this criticism has a wider resonance.

39 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 354. The German word-play is very effective here: The Word does not offer a solution (Lösung), but redemption (Erlösung).

could only be revealed ...) in the middle of the real world. “In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world.”⁴⁰

This means that in Christ we participate both in the reality of the world as well as in the reality of God at the same time. It is here that the fracture, the conflict between the sacred and the profane is healed. Therefore, worldliness does not separate us from Christ, nor does faith separate us from the world. Hence the preacher’s concern is not so much with the so-called religious functions of human beings, but with the existence of human beings in the world and the realities of the world. One of Bonhoeffer’s student’s notes makes this particularly clear: “God is not [one] aspect of reality! *All reality, including everyday reality*, must be seen [as God’s reality.] Even Christian religion can be excluded [from daily life] and reality as a whole, but not God.”⁴¹

In this respect it is apparent that Bonhoeffer’s views resonate deeply with those of Karl Barth or might even be shaped by Barth’s understanding. For Barth the reality of God also ontologically precedes the reality of the world. But reality rests in God, not only in the sense that it comes from God, but also that it returns to God; God is the origin of reality as well as its goal.

This allows Barth to make an important distinction that we also find in Bonhoeffer. Ingolf Dalferth summarises this very succinctly:

Barth calls the eschatological reality of God’s saving action in his revelation the “real reality”, the Word of God the “concrete reality” (*concretum*), and Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, the “most concrete reality” (*concretissimum*). This is to be taken literally. Compared to this most concrete reality everything else is at best abstract reality, that is, reality abstracted from this most concrete reality.⁴²

40 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 54.

41 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 97 (footnote).

42 As quoted in Andrew Moore: *Realism and Christian faith: God, grammar and meaning*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2003), 183.

For Bonhoeffer too, God alone is the *concretissimum*.⁴³ God is the most concrete reality in that God's word became a present, earthly reality in Jesus Christ. It is of utmost significance that Bonhoeffer mostly speak about the *reality* of God in Christ in the context of both his ethics and preaching. It is here, from the centre, from God's revelation in Christ, that life is transformed, or conformed to, and shaped in accordance with the reality of the Incarnated Word. Bonhoeffer experienced something of this in his own life and particularly during his first visit to America, of which he later said: "It was then that a turning from the phraseological to the *real* ensued."⁴⁴ (Meyer) It was his concrete experiences in and among members of the African American churches, especially the worshipping community of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, whom he describes as "real"⁴⁵ people, that he experienced the deepening of his own theological understanding as well as the transformative power of preaching that speaks from the reality of people's suffering and the concrete challenges of the world.

In his book on Bonhoeffer's homiletics,⁴⁶ Michael Pasquarello III emphasises that, for Bonhoeffer, creating a "religious" compartment of life, is practically the same as eliminating Christ from the world. Also, speaking about Christ in "aesthetic" categories – religious genius, great ethicist, sacrificial hero or example – have all one thing in common: it does not take Christ seriously. None of these aesthetic categories allow the all-encompassing reality of Christ to re-draw the centres of the lives of those that pretend to hold him in such high esteem.

"God is determined to speak to the world in person" is how Pasquarello⁴⁷ summarises Bonhoeffer's homiletical theology. In many ways this offers an excellent description of preaching in general. It is in and through the immediacy of personal presence, the presence of the Word made flesh, which again speaks through the words of a person of flesh and bone, into

43 Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Worldly Preaching. Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. Clyde E. Fant, trans. Clyde E. Fant (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 140.

44 Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBW vol 8 (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2010), 358.

45 Michael Pasquarello III: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Theology of a Preaching Life*, (Baylor University Press: Waco, Texas, 2017), 54.

46 Pasquarello, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Theology of a Preaching Life*, 52–53.

47 Pasquarello, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Theology of a Preaching Life*, 186.

the realities of the ordinary life, that God's presence is discerned, is heard and embraced as the word of life.

A truly poignant example of this is found in the South African author and anti-apartheid activist, Breyten Breytenbach's memoirs on his prison life. In this book he tells of the fortnightly visits of a Catholic priest, Father Murphy, who came to tend to the needs of his flock. On these occasions, since Breytenbach was held in a relatively spacious cell, the services were held in his cell.

Father Murphy, one sensed immediately, was that rare outsider who was on "our" side and not on "theirs"; he never had to specify this, since it was so clearly implied in every phrase he uttered. I asked officially to be allowed to attend his services, not for any religious reasons but because the ritual attracted me and because of the kind presence emanating for Murphy himself ... he had a way of bringing Jesus into my cell and having him take up a position just behind my little table (used as an altar) where the slanted shaft of sunlight touched and ignited the drabness.⁴⁸

The task of the preacher is to follow God's gaze, to see how God sees, to see where God's eye come to rest or settles in the world. This is not done in an abstract way, exploring things in "principle" or in abstraction, but in accordance with the concrete reality of Christ, in a concrete or practical way, in "a way that brings Jesus into the room".

In other words, the preacher, as PT Forsyth pointed out, acts as a sacrament to the church, conveying the real presence of the crucified Christ who dwells there in both the Word and the breaking of the bread. Therefore "the cure for pulpit dullness is not brilliancy as in literature. It is reality. It is directness and spontaneity of the common life."⁴⁹

By this we don't mean that preaching must become "less theological" and "more practical." Theology grounds preaching in real life, not because

48 Breyten Breytenbach: *The true confessions of an albino terrorist*, (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux: New York, 1984), 194.

49 PT Forsyth: "The One Great Preacher" in Richard Lischer (ed): *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present*, (William B Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2002), 416.

preachers have the ability to somehow make the Gospel relevant or practical to people's lives, but because (in the words of Luther) "the cross is our theology" and it is through this same cross that we view reality. The paucity of reality in preaching is not the result of too much theology; it is much rather the result of a lack of theology.

At the same time the beauty of reality also does not suggest a romanticised view of the world or the common life. It does not mean that "life is beautiful."⁵⁰ In many ways it is exactly a theology of the cross that offers the best antidote to the propensity to romanticise reality.

The beauty of reality could only be perceived when "seeing things as God sees" (Clarke), understanding both the origin and destiny of all things. It has to do with the ultimate reality that permeates the common life. The art of preaching lies in the ability to become a witness to this, to hold it up to the worshipping community in such a way that their lives are drawn into and participate in God's reality and hence are transformed by it. It is about an eschatological beauty that lies at the heart of all life and art; the ultimate beauty that gives expression to all art.

In this sense the beauty of reality in preaching is characterised by at least three things. Speaking about what makes preaching "biblical", John Knox's in his 1956 lectures at Duke University⁵¹ says it is preaching that nourishes the life of the church, because the event it proclaims is more than an ancient happening.

It is issued in, and its true meaning is perpetuated in, the new community of the Spirit. *Here is the reality of the Resurrection.* The preacher is not repeating, over and over again, an ancient chronicle; he is bearing witness to the quality and significance of a *new communal life* ...⁵² (Meyer).

In other words, the reality of the resurrection is found in an *authentic* new reality, one that builds on and continues the event that it refers to and lives by, but that gives it a new expression and vitality. Reality in preaching

50 As in the incorrect way many have interpreted the 1998 film *"Life is Beautiful"* directed by Roberto Benigni and Grigory Chukray.

51 John Knox: *The Integrity of Preaching*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1957)

52 Knox, *The Integrity of Preaching*, 22.

is marked by this authenticity; the authenticity of a new community conformed to the image of Christ, the authenticity of a new word for a new time – more than merely repeating an ancient event.

The second aspect of reality in preaching has to do with *integrity or truth*. As indicated earlier, “reality” in this context has more to do with truth than with realism or verification. In this respect it deeply resonates with the meaning of “beauty”. The folly of beauty lies exactly in judging things, based on their appearance, based on a superficial charm, rather than a deeper, more “real” beauty. Michael Austin, following von Balthasar, says beauty calls us to contemplate the “essential reality”, or meaning of a thing as “it exists in the world and is revealed in its beauty.”⁵³

Preaching that conforms to reality is exactly seeking for an integrity or truth that runs deeper than the popular perceptions of events. It does not bow before a perceived reality or even a false reality but seek to unmask and hence reveal what is good and true. And it does so best when it shows how the reality of God, the ultimate reality, shapes and changes the reality of the common life.

The third marker of reality in preaching, for lack of a better word, is what could be called “contingency”. Biblical truth is not something that could be captured by a norm, law or principle that could simply be applied in a theoretical or abstract way, anywhere and everywhere. In the same way, reality is not something that could be objectified. Reality means that things are viewed as a part of a greater whole, and in the same way as beauty, resonates with words like “harmony”, “unity” and “wholeness”.⁵⁴

Reality issues a call to the preacher to listen to other voices and be perceptive to circumstances that may mask the truth, but perhaps more than anything else, to subject him or herself to the one Presence and Voice that utters all reality. In this sense it is a call to consider again, to look again and finally to obey.

53 Michael Austin: *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination*, (Routledge: London & New York, 2005), 27.

54 Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination*, 49.

5. Conclusion

What is the beauty of reality in the art of preaching? It is firstly the understanding that preaching addresses the tangible, the concrete concerns of life; it has to do with the things we encounter daily in the ordinary life. Preaching is the way we are taught to see these realities in and through the prism of an even greater reality: that of God's care and concern. The reality of God and God's concerns is not a different reality; it is the same reality and it is exactly the proclamation of God's reality that transforms our reality, as it were, in our hearing ... (Lk 4).

The art of preaching lies in the ability, not only to make the Word speak, but in the ability to make words sing, to make words cry and laugh, to make them leap and run and to do so with the vitality that could only come from the deepest source of life itself: the reality of God's word in Jesus Christ.

In response to the question: Is there for you something like a music of words? Elie Wiesel once responded:

Yes, words must sing. Words that sing make literature; words that do not, remain only words. I hear my words before I write them down. I write with my lips. I move them. Sometimes, after a whole day of writing, I have lost my voice. Yet, I did not pronounce one word!⁵⁵

One cannot think of better advice for the preacher in mastering the art of preaching.

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55 Robert Franciosi: *Elie Wiesel Conversations* (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2002), 140.

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