'In Honesty of Preaching' 5. The Old Testament Dilemma and Challenge

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The Expository Times 2000 111: 365
DOI: 10.1177/001452460011101102

'In Honesty of Preaching'
5. The Old Testament Dilemma and Challenge

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The extent to which preaching from the Old Testament occurs in the church today is difficult to assess. The extent to which it is honest, when it occurs, is equally unanswerable. We can all recall sermons based on the Old Testament which have stimulated us and appalled us.

The Psalms have long been regarded as a treasury of preaching material, but it is a treasury which normally works on a fairly selective basis. Some of the Psalms are characterized by bitter and revengeful curses on the Psalmist's enemies (e.g., Pss 5:10; 58:6–9; 69:22–28; 109; 137:7–9; 139:19–22), and this poses problems for any Christian proclamation which has at its heart 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Mt 5:44). The temptation is to ignore such sub-Christian outbursts, and we are encouraged so to do by lectionaries and hymn books. Thus in the three yearly cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18 features three times, Psalm 139:1–9, 23–24, three times, and Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24 once. In *Siddur Lev Chadash*, the liturgical prayer book of the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, Psalm 139:1–3, 7–12 features in the context of Omnipresence, while Ian Pitt Watson's memorable hymn 'Thou art before me, Lord, thou art behind' utilizes verses 5–12 and 23–24. Thus verses 19–22, which speak of the Psalmist 'hating' his enemies 'with a perfect hatred' are consigned to oblivion. Yet it is arguable that they have an important role to play in the theology of the Psalm, and they lead naturally into its concluding verses. I have, moreover, yet to hear a sermon which honestly relates the spiritual sensitivity movingly expressed in Psalm 137:1–6 to the savage hatred and the gloating revenge which follow in verses 7–9. Yet has it not been true within Christian circles across the centuries, and is it not still true, that some of the most deeply committed, faith-centred people can be the most harshly judgmental towards those whom they perceive as a threat to their faith?

Selectivity is the name of the game we all play when we seek to handle the Old Testament, and the selectivity we employ tells us something about ourselves, the cultural assumptions we make and the theology we profess. In many respects the Old Testament rings bells for many people in parts of Africa today, sometimes more so than the New Testament, because it is closer to their culture. Yet in this context selectivity is clearly evident. Lecturing on Leviticus to a class of Malawian theological students, I was interested to hear them say, almost unanimously, that on the basis of Lev 15:19 they would have no difficulty in declaring from the pulpit that a woman during her menstrual period should not receive communion. Yet they saw no incongruity in wearing shirts made partly of cotton and partly of polyester, and were puzzled when I quoted to them Lev 19:19, 'you shall not put on a garment made of two different materials'. It is of course easy to see selectivity at work in other people, it is far harder to face honestly the selectivity we use, and the assumptions which lie behind it.

It can hardly be denied that there are elements in the Old Testament which will sit uncomfortably on the lips of the Christian preacher, and they are equally, if not more, perplexing to many thoughtful people who are present at worship. This is no new phenomenon. It was faced in the second century with what can only be described as remarkable honesty, by Marcion. Marcion has had a bad press in theological circles, but it is important to recognize that he was attempting to deal with a real problem. It was because he believed passionately in the gospel of God's love, and in Paul as the sole authentic apostle bearing witness to that gospel, that he was driven to consider the Old Testament as a whole, and much of what is now in the New Testament, as reflecting the character of another god. This was a man driven by belief in the incomprehensible love of God. 'O wonder of wonders, rapture, power and amazement that one can say nothing at all about the gospel, nor even conceive of it, nor compare it with anything.'[1] Marcion is overwhelmed by the mystery of the incomprehensible gospel out of which all true preaching must come, and his preaching was so attractive that he founded a church which for several centuries was a serious rival to the mainstream catholic tradition. If we believe – rightly I think – that his answer to the problems posed by preaching from the Old Testament was wrong, at least he was honest enough in refusing to take what for many of his day was the easy way out, to deal with the Old Testament, and in particular its trivial and offensive sections, by resorting to a form of Christian allegory, which drowned the word from the Old Testament under the waves of what was believed to be acceptable Christian spirituality.

Such an allegorical approach to the Old Testament has had its Christian exponents from Paul through Origin down to the present day, but perhaps a more common way of using the Old Testament in preaching – while virtually ignoring what it has to say – is to take a verse, or an unsuspecting word from a verse, and use it as a convenient peg upon which to hang the sermon. You can, of course, do the same thing with the New Testament, but since the Old Testament is much larger it provides greater

[1] A. von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of an Alien God*, trans. J. E. Seely and L. D. Bierma (The Labyrinth Press, 1990), 59.

scope for this approach. Thus the text for the sermon was intimated as Genesis 45:27, 'when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent, the spirit of Jacob revived'. It was a sermon preached on the Sunday after the local WVS had initiated a meals on wheels service in the community! It was in fact an excellent sermon on the theme of social responsibility, and many other passages from, for example, the prophets would have been appropriate to illustrate and underline the theme. One can only hazard a guess, however, that the search for a suitable text to tag on to an already written sermon had led inevitably to a concordance, and to what seemed the magically appropriate word 'wagons'. Hence Genesis 45:27 was drafted in. I am not quite sure what the 'shut ins' in the community would have thought if they had looked out of their windows and seen standing outside 'ten donkeys loaded with good things of Egypt, and ten female donkeys loaded with grain' (Gen 45:23)!

It has been claimed that, 'The Bible comes alive when authentic religious experience coincides with texts which themselves are testimony to authentic religious experience: the past strikes a spark off the present or the present off the past, and both are illuminated'.[2] But that leaves us asking what constitutes authentic religious experience in the biblical past, and what constitutes authentic religious experience in the present. Certainly all preaching works on the assumption that such a bridge can be built between past and present and present and past. We must, however, be prepared to recognize that the very nature of the Old Testament means that such a bridge building exercise is fraught with difficulties, particularly if the congregation has been taught to accept the Old Testament narratives as unquestioningly authentic in their authority and relevance for faith today.

Working from the Old Testament in preaching can have both negative and positive results, intellectually and spiritually. Let me illustrate what I consider to be some of the possible negative results.

(a) High on my list of the most irreligious films I have seen are Cecil B. de Mille's epic version of *The Ten Commandments*, with Charlton Heston wandering somewhat bemusedly amid the theological debris, and the more recent *Prince of Egypt*. Both locate biblical religion in the unquestioningly spectacular. I came out of viewing *The Ten Commandments* behind two elderly ladies. One of them turned to the other and said almost with a sigh, 'Aye, that's what religion ought to be like'. Is this what preaching is supposed to communicate as authentic religious experience? If so, then self-evidently that was not the experience of these ladies in their daily life. If God is as he was depicted in action *in these films*, in, for example, the crossing of the Red Sea and the drowning of the Egyptian army, then this is not the God whom I see in action in my life or in the world today. He has seemingly laid aside his spectacular magic wand. Is Marcion then right, or can we bring to our exposition of the biblical text another kind of integrity and honesty which will face the difficulties and strangeness in the text and liberate it, through preaching, to speak to people where they are?

(b) According to the narrative in 1 Samuel 10, Saul, when the spirit of God possessed him 'fell into a prophetic frenzy', in the company of a group of prophets; and according to 1 Samuel 19:23, on another such occasion of prophetic frenzy, 'He too stripped off his clothes and he too fell into a frenzy before Samuel. He lay naked all that day and all that night.' If this was one form of authentic religious experience then – and the narrative at no point suggests otherwise – can it be used to justify some of the bizarre phenomena associated with, for example, the Toronto Blessing and other charismatic experiences, even when we try to filter them through the criteria which Paul lays down in 1 Corinthians 12–14? If not, how far does this 'not applicable today' influence our approach to the Old Testament, and how honest are we in dealing with this in sermons? If we don't deal with such issues, are we by our silence encouraging the people in the pew to assume that they must take the whole bible as it lies before them as being directly and literally relevant to their life and religious commitment?

(c) There have been spokesmen from the Serbian Orthodox Church who, believing that they belong to the true and chosen Christian race, think that there is nothing wrong in supporting a policy of ethnic cleansing towards their non-chosen Albanian Muslim neighbours. We may find it difficult to comprehend, far less to justify, this attitude, but why should we? According to Deuteronomy 7 the Hebrews were commanded by God to pursue just such a policy of ethnic cleansing when they occupied their promised land. Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivite and Jebusites – 'when the LORD gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy' (Deut 7:2 cf. Num 21:2–3; Josh 10:40). There is plenty of justification for ethnic cleansing on religious grounds in the Old Testament. It is not surprising that in recent months Palestinians have identified strongly with events in Kosovo, seeing in them a rerun of what happened in 1948 when over four hundred Palestinian villages were wiped off the map, with justification sought by some religious Jews on biblical grounds. It is not surprising that there are many thoughtful people today who cringe at what is presented as authentic religious experience in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, and who are finding for themselves authentic religious experience, not in the churches in which they were nurtured, nor in any religion claiming to be rooted in the bible, but in, for example, Buddhism and various New Age cults. Not only is there, as has been claimed, 'no sound reason why critical study should be

[2] G. Theissen, quoted J. Barton, *People of the Book?* (SPCK, 1993), 66.

deemed damaging to religious perception',[3] but there are many sound reasons why such critical study should be embraced by the preacher to enable certain religious and moral assumptions in the Bible to be subjected to honest analysis. The lack of such critical study can only leave us with a biblicism which is increasingly in danger of becoming both spiritually and morally bankrupt.

There are, however, areas in which the Old Testament, if preached honestly, has much to contribute to the life of the church. Richard Holloway defends his recent radical book, *Godless Morality* (SPCK 1999) by claiming that he is speaking to the church in exile, to those who have given up the established church, because it no longer speaks to the questions they have. He has been criticized on the grounds that it is the bishop's role to nurture the faithful within the tradition of faith for which the church stands and which it celebrates in worship. It is clear, however, that there are many 'in exile' still within the church for whom the tradition of faith presents problems and for whom worship ignores or invites them to stifle their doubts. It is here that honest preaching from the Old Testament may play a helpful role. There are times when listening to a preacher inviting us in a prayer to ask God to forgive us our doubts, the temptation is overwhelming to add 'and forgive us our shallow, ill-considered certainties'. Built into many strands of the Old Testament, and not least in the Psalms which are central to Israel's worship, there is a tradition of questioning, and a willingness to give expression to the doubts that lie behind such questioning.[4] There are many people in the church who may find it easy at times to shout Hallelujah, but at other times find themselves close to saying with Ecclestiastes 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity' (Qoh 1:2), in other words, life just does not add up. It may be a rich tapestry of contrasting experiences, but if we ask what it all means, there seem to be no answers. God may know, but he has not chosen to let us into the secret (Qoh 3:1–15). What we do know is that the pursuit of pleasure, wealth or success does not take us anywhere near the answer. Even worship does not necessarily bring us close to God (Qoh 5:1–2). All we can do is to take life as it comes to us, live it to the full day by day, knowing that in the end we shall cross a frontier into the unknown (Qoh 3:19–22); 'the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God' (Qoh 12:7). Ecclesiastes may not provide easy or reassuring answers, but he gives voice to many of the questions about the meaning of life with which people have wrestled across the centuries, and not least today when many traditional certainties are increasingly being questioned even by those nurtured within the church. It is good that they should know that they have a fellow traveller in scripture. I once heard a minister at a licensing service for those on the threshold of their ministry pleading with them never to preach their doubts, but to focus solely on the certainties of the gospel. Yet a preacher may honestly and helpfully share some of the questions and doubts which he, and the people to whom he is preaching have, because this is part of the Word of which he is the servant.

As we come to the end of a century which has been rightly described as the most bloody century in human history, the problem of human suffering hammers, or ought to hammer, at the door of our spirituality. In addition to the suffering and grief which have always been an inevitable part of human life, into our homes, courtesy of TV, have come the Aids pandemic, the massacres in Rwanda, Kosovo, East Timor, and appalling natural disasters such as the earthquake in Turkey. Here the book of Job can be a resource for honest preaching. While there may be those who respond to all that happens with unquestioning acceptance, as exemplified in Job 1–2: 'Naked came I forth from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there: the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD' (Job 1:21), there are many who will more readily identify with the urgent, pain-filled 'whys' on the lips of Job from chapter 3 onwards. Like Job they will refuse to be satisfied with the simplistic answers of the friends who, in a variety of different ways, press the argument of the inevitable correlation between suffering and sin, and insist that people get what they deserve. For Job there are no answers. The God whom he once believed to be his friend remains distant and elusive, until the theophany when God speaks out of the whirlwind in chapters 38ff. But what kind of answer is this? Louis de Bernières in his introduction to *The Book of Job* asserts that God 'comes out of the story as most morally tarnished. The comforters may emerge looking stupid (which they are) but God does so looking like an unpleasantly sarcastic megalomaniac . . . Job is still winning the argument and *The Book of Job* is still insidiously subversive . . . God has still failed to appear in court and we construe his absence as non existence, hubris, apathy, or an admission of guilt. We miss him, and would dearly like to see him going to and fro on the earth and walking up and down in it, but we admit tyranny no longer, and we demand justice more than we are awed by vainglorious asseverations of magnificence.'[5] It is not necessary to accept this as the definitive verdict on the Book of Job, but 'We miss him' is a cry often heard, and honest preaching should help us to explore the reasons why we miss him, at a level as deep as that which we find in Job, before ever we shall be open to find him in the cross and the resurrection.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the context of Israel's worship the Psalms press again and again the questioning button, notably in the Psalms of Lament

[3] J. Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology* (SCM Press, 1999), 83.

[4] Cf. R. Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt* (SCM Press, 1997).

[5] Louis de Bernières, *The Book of Job* (Canongate, 1998).

which give expression to perplexity, both on a national and a personal level. Let us take a brief look at three examples.

In one of the briefest of such Psalms, Psalm 13, we hear four times within the first two verses the puzzled, pain-filled cry, 'How long?' Although the Psalm ends in verse 6 on the note of trust, there is nothing to suggest that the crisis in the Psalmist's life which prompted this cry has been resolved. God is still hidden. It is to this hidden God that the Psalmist knows that he must and can make his protest. This is characteristic of many such Psalms. Questions and trust, perplexity and continuing belief, pain and joy coexist in the Psalmist's experience, as surely they have coexisted across the centuries and still coexist in many people's experience. Preaching is fundamentally flawed if it encourages people to expect that questioning, perplexity and pain disappear by embracing a religion which promises trust, faith and joy. Here the honesty of such a Psalm is a healthy antidote.

Psalm 44 is a Psalm in which the community recalls the tradition of faith which has nurtured it in the past. It celebrates the God whose mighty acts brought the nation into existence and saw it safely through many a desperate situation (vv. 1–8). But the present tells a different story. Now God's people are like 'sheep for the slaughter' (v. 11); they are 'sold for a trifle' (v. 12), the object of 'derision and scorn' (v. 13). They see no explanation for what has happened, certainly not in a theology of judgment, powerfully expressed in Deuteronomy and in many of the prophets, a theology which insists that what has happened is but the deserved consequence of the nation's sinfulness. They can but protest that they have not forgotten God, that they have remained loyal to their obligations under the covenant (v. 17). In the midst of present darkness the Psalmist holds on to his belief that there is still a God to whom he must appeal, so the Psalm ends with an urgent cry to God to wake up, to step out of his hiddenness to redress the pain and oppression which are the present lot of his people (vv. 23–26). Is it too much to hope that honest preaching will help people to face a God whose ways we do not always understand, a God whom we can question, rather than providing them with a theology which claims to have all the answers?

Psalm 73 takes us one stage further. It demonstrates the positive role of questions, the way in which questioning may lead to a new understanding of the meaning of faith. It is a carefully constructed Psalm. It begins by affirming belief in the goodness of God. 'Truly God is good to Israel (or the upright)' (v. 1). But this is a statement for which the Psalmist can find little supporting evidence. He has a chip on his shoulder. Isn't it true, he says, that it is the wicked who often flourish and wallow in popularity, while calling God's bluff (v. 11)? A prophet may claim that there is no *shalom* (peace) for the wicked (Isa 48:22), but this Psalmist claims to have seen the *shalom* (prosperity) of the wicked (v. 3). He himself, trying to hold on to the life of faith, has had his reward – pain, affliction and suffering. He is living on the edge, driven to the point where he is seriously questioning whether the life of faith is worthwhile. He knows that he is part of a community of faith in which there are other people who have been through the same mill as he is going through, but this does not solve his problem. Earlier in the Psalm he notes that the wicked 'are not in trouble as other people are' (v. 5), but he confesses that he is still in 'trouble' (v. 16, a word which the NRSV translates as 'a wearisome task'), finding it impossible to resolve his doubts. The answer comes to him in an experience of worship (vv. 17ff), which underlines the transitoriness of the apparently prospering wicked, but which more importantly drives him to look again at himself and his own attitudes. He comes to terms with the truth that he has no need to be envious of the wicked – that is stupidity – since he is offered something which by definition they can never have, a sense of the presence of God. He is in God's hands. It is God's sure grasp of him, not his fragile grasp of God which is the bedrock of faith.

> 'Nevertheless I am continually with you, you hold my right hand . . .
> Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you' (vv. 23 and 25).

It is important to see the pilgrimage which this Psalm describes, a pilgrimage through questioning and doubt to a more mature faith, from wrestling with what it means to say 'God is good' to discovering that 'for me it is good to be near God' (v. 28). If he had never doubted he would never have been open to this spiritual transformation. Honest preaching should encourage people to believe that questioning and doubt are not necessarily the enemies of faith, but often steps along the way to a more mature faith.

Nothing has been said in this article about the relationship between preaching from the Old Testament and the gospel of the New Testament. That is quite deliberate. I do not believe that it is helpful to see the Old Testament simply as preparation for the New or even as promise and fulfilment, or whatever other broad contrasting categories we care to use. After all what Christians call the Old Testament had religious and spiritual significance in its own right before ever there was a New Testament, and it still has for the Jewish community. That preaching from the Old Testament can lead forward to the New Testament I do not doubt, but I do doubt whether we shall ever discover what that means until we have explored the riches and faced the challenge of the Old Testament in its own right. That should be the primary task of honest preaching from the Old Testament.[6]

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[6] Cf. G. A. Smith, *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1901). For a helpful modern discussion of this issue see Donald E. Gowan, *Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit* (John Knox Press, 1980).