

GOD, LANGUAGE AND PREACHING

THE TASK OF PREACHING TODAY

Social theorists and philosophers tell us that we have left behind the strictures of modernity and crossed the threshold into a new era that they prosaically termed as “post-modern”. What this term designates, however, is difficult to articulate with any degree of precision or clarity. For some, “post-modern” refers to the rejection of the meta-narratives of modernity, and the privileging of particulars over universals.¹ These philosophers maintain that the Enlightenment project has failed, and that its downfall has resulted in the demise of Cartesian rationalism and foundationalist epistemologies. This has in turn led to a crisis in prevailing understandings of knowledge and the concept of universal truth. “Postmodern thought”, writes Steiner Kvale, “is characterised by a loss of belief in an objective world and an incredulity towards meta-narratives of legitimation”.² The epistemological crisis has inculcated what Robert Lundin calls the “culture of interpretation”, in which truth is eclipsed, and all truth-claims are but interpretations. Postmodernism therefore depicts a paradigm shift in intellectual and cultural sensibilities. But this new approach must not be seen as totally discontinuous with the order it rejects. Thus Ihab Hassan, one of the most prominent voices of postmodernity, could maintain in his celebrated *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (1971) that “the postmodern spirit lies coiled within the great corpus of modernism ... It is not really a matter of chronology: Sade, Jarry, Breton, Kafka acknowledge that spirit”.³

Two characteristics of postmodernism have significant bearing on the theme of this paper. The first has to do with postmodernity’s rejection of objective truth and the reliability of knowledge because of its opposition to Enlightenment rationality. If preaching is fundamentally concerned with making truth-claims, then the lack of epistemological confidence in postmodernity calls to question the validity of such a discourse. Postmodern thinkers, following Nietzsche, call to question the entire enterprise of rationalistic human knowledge. Kant, writing a century before Nietzsche, had argued that knowledge of “things-in-themselves” is impossible, and that all human knowledge is the construction of the human mind by means of transcendental categories. Kant maintained, however, that human beings, because of their shared nature, enjoy the same rational structure that makes universal human knowledge possible. Nietzsche rejects Kant’s theoretical comprehension of reality and maintains rather that what is viewed as “knowledge” is but pure creation – the fabrication of reality in an arbitrary fashion and at an individualistic level. Nietzsche’s skepticism is articulated forcefully in his essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”. “[T]ruths”, Nietzsche writes, “are illusions of which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins”.⁴ It would, however, be a mistake to think that the postmodern rejection of objective truth implies

¹ For a more detailed discussion see my “Privileging the Particular: Postmodernism and the Eclipse of the Universal” in *Jian Dao* 1999, p., 37-56.

² Steiner Kvale, “Themes of Postmodernity” in *The Truth About Truth*, Edited by Walter Truett Anderson (New York: Putnam Book, 1995), p., 19.

³ Quoted in Hans Bertens, *The Idea of Postmodernism. A History* (London: Routledge, 1995), p., 40.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. And trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 47.

that postmodernism has no epistemic concerns. What has emerged rather is a new Gnosticism in which the mind becomes its own reality and consciousness becomes all. Epistemology is engulfed in an immanence that knows no transcendence in which the perceiver determines the nature of the perceived and in which the signifier has swallowed up that which is signified. In a sense, we may think of this as an epistemological problem. The eclipse of epistemology has resulted in a situation where only interpretations prevail.

But alternatively, and this brings us to the second issue, this epistemological crisis can also be perceived as a crisis of language. Both, to be sure, are the two sides of the same coin. Here, the influence Ludwig Wittgenstein must be given attention. Against the logical positivists Wittgenstein proposes a view of language that tries to overcome the one-dimensionality postulated by his opponents. Language, Wittgenstein maintains, has more than one purpose, and can never be confined merely to the stating of facts. Wittgenstein introduces the theory of “language games” which maintains that language is situated in a context, and is thus determined by the rules that obtain within a self-contained system. Awareness of the rules that govern certain “language games” comes with one’s immersion into the particular context in which that language is used. Furthermore, Wittgenstein maintains that the different “language games” have very little to do with each other.⁵ The Wittgensteinian theory of language distances language from the reality that it appears to be describing and in effect maintains that there is no correspondence between language and reality. This theory is similar to the one proposed by post-structuralist philosophers for whom language is simply a social construct. Lyotard has provided us with a description of this anti-representational view of language:

To speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agnostics. This does not necessarily mean that one plays in order to win. A move can be made for the sheer pleasure of invention ... Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrases, of words and meanings, the process behind the evolution of language on the level of *parole*. But undoubtedly even this pleasure depends on a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary – at least one adversary, and a formidable one: the accepted language or connotation.⁶

These philosophical developments have no doubt changed the way in which the Church’s discourse about God – of which preaching is a species – is understood and perceived. In his much discussed *The Nature of Doctrine*, George Lindbeck develops a theory of doctrine that is sensitive to these postmodern developments. Rejecting both the traditional and liberal views – which Lindbeck styles as the “Cognitive-Propositional Theory” and the “Experiential-Expressive Theory” respectively – Lindbeck proposes a theory of doctrine which he calls the “Cultural-Linguistic Theory”. According to this account, religions are cultural frameworks and their language provide the means by which religious experiences can be correlated and brought to expression in a way that is meaningful to the particular religious community. Lindbeck explains:

A religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought... It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (although it

⁵Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. By G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), p., 32.

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p., 10.

may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible descriptions of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings and sentiments. Like a culture of language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed.⁷

Truth, according to this account, is not characterised by a correspondence between language and reality, but by intrasystemic consistency, that is, the rational coherence which obtains within a system of ideas. Doctrines regulate religion in very much the same way as grammar regulates language. When applied to theology, this account reduces theology to a language game that is “played” by the Church in a way that helps her to meaningfully bring to expression her own inner life with a degree of coherence and systematicity. The distancing of language from ontology is obvious in this approach. When applied to the activity of preaching, this account similarly reduces preaching to the articulation of the internal ordering of the Christian religion which lays no claim to ontological truth. Meaning, accordingly, is subjected to the dictates of the community in question. Thus Lindbeck could say that the “proper way to determine what ‘God’ signifies, for example, is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly”.⁸

WORDS, REALITY AND GOD

The challenges posed by postmodernism warrants a re-examination of the claims that our words can and do refer to God. Such a claim, that our words refer to reality, has been dismissed in recent years because of its affinity to an empiricism that belongs to the legacy of John Locke. Some theologians, to be sure, have forwarded a representationalist view of theological language that is, in some sense at least, influenced by Lockean empiricism. One such example is Janet Martin Soskice who, by suggesting that the unobservable God can be known “via some effect”, has proposed a theological realism along empiricist lines.⁹ It can be argued that such approaches can be traced to the great medieval theologians, chiefly Thomas Aquinas, although in the (post) modern context they have been seriously criticised. It was Karl Barth who saw clearly the dangers of a natural theology which seeks to arrive at some knowledge of God *in abstracto*, that is, on the basis of “some effect”, apart from revelation. The “crisis of representation” in theology is in part the result of our attempt to attain linguistic access to unobservable reality in order to secure the referentiality of theological or religious language. As we reflect on the actuality of the church’s speech about God, we must reject the confidence of natural theology and acknowledge the “impossible possibility” of Christian discourse about God. We must begin with a dilemma which Barth had expressed so eloquently when he addressed fellow ministers in Elgersburg in 1922 at the aftermath of the First World War:

⁷ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: 1984), p., 33.

⁸ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p., 39.

⁹ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Theological Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p., 139.

As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognise both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory. This is our perplexity.¹⁰

We begin therefore with a theological anthropology and a theology of revelation. The possibility of discourse about God must be established on the doctrine of creation, and especially in the concept of the human beings as *imago dei*. To say that the creature is made in the image of its Creator is to suggest that “the Creator created a creature that corresponds to him, to whom he can speak and who can hear him”.¹¹ This implies that through the grace of God, human beings which are created in his image are enabled to both receive God’s self-representation and to represent God linguistically. But this power of disclosure and representation has been distorted to the point of being lost in the Fall when the *imago dei* is marred by rebellion and a perverted quest for autonomy. As Andrew Moore has put it, “It is the condition of fallen humanity to be discontent with being representer and to want to be represented. With the loss of our ability to show God’s reality comes a general dislocation between human cognitive and linguistic powers and reality. This is expressed in epistemic alienation”.¹² According to the New Testament, the redemption of the lost image is achieved by Jesus Christ, the true “image of God” (2 Cor 4:4), whose death for the old, fallen humanity has made possible a reversal of the effects of sin. Furthermore, as Barth has pointed out, Christ is not only Mediator and Reconciler between God and man, he is also “Revealer of both of them”.¹³ Christ is image and Word, very God and very Man. In the person of the incarnate Son there is found the closest ‘correspondence’ between God and Man. Not only is God revealed in Christ, also revealed is *iconic* humanity, the true human being who is bearer of the image of God. The revelation in Christ of the triune God who is the *ens realissimum* is the *conditio sine qua non* for Christians having the ontological commitments they do and the basis for their speech about God.

We may now sharpen our enquiry by reflecting on how revelation makes Christian discourse about God possible. To do this we turn to the contributions of Karl Barth. Drawing from the Reformed tradition, particularly the theology of John Calvin, Barth maintains that the veracity of human speech about God is to be found in the divine condescension, which is the free act of God. The success of our speech about God is therefore due to God having accommodated himself to our language.¹⁴ Analogical relationship between Creator and creature is established in the revelation, and therefore cannot be said to be intrinsic to being itself. Thus the analogy between God and the world, known by revelation only, must itself be understood analogically, not univocally. Not only has God objectified himself in revelation, enabling his creatures to speak about him, he has also bestowed creaturely language the power to do so. “It is in his revelation that he confers on our expressions their true significance, becomes their object and places on them the mark of truth”.¹⁵ We speak about God only by his permission, which is granted us by his revelation. Thus Barth stresses that “it is to be noted that the human word receives content and concrete form from God, and becomes capable of saying something, by the fact, and only by the fact, that it is spoken on the strength of God’s

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), p., 186.

¹¹ Claus Westermann, *Creation* (London: SPCK, 1974), p., 56.

¹² Andrew Moore, *Realism and Christian Faith. God, Grammar and Meaning* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p., 143.

¹³ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), p., 44.

¹⁴ CD II/1:213.

¹⁵ CD II/1: 233.

permission and command, and by God's revelation, and is not arbitrarily discovered and affirmed".¹⁶

Something must be said at this juncture about natural theology, apophatism and anthropomorphism in theological language. Eberhard Jüngel has famously launched a serious and devastating attack on medieval natural theology and the apophatic tradition, both of which emphasise the ineffability of God to the point that makes him incomprehensible. Citing Anselm's formulation, Jüngel maintains that "the 'thing signified' (*res significata*) by 'God' would then also have to be absolutely superior to human *thinking* and *comprehending*. And that is the reason why 'God is not capable of definition'".¹⁷ Such an approach, which works on the philosophical notion of God *supra nos*, has, according to Jüngel, contributed to the disturbing silencing of God in the modern world. Jüngel perceptively argued that there is an analogous relationship between Kantian epistemology and Thomist natural theology. Both attempt to protect the aseity of God by stressing his "otherness". Both consequently reject a "dogmatic anthropomorphism" and sought to make a distinction between God known in language and God *in se*. He therefore draws the conclusion that "the theological critique to be directed against the great accomplishment of this metaphysical tradition focuses on the fact that in its obtrusiveness the unknownness of God has become an unbearably sinister riddle".¹⁸ In contrast, Jüngel argues that there is an anthropomorphism that is theologically justified, responsible and even necessary. Its justification comes from the movement of revelation itself. Thus Jüngel asserts emphatically: "There is a christological reason to ask whether there is not a God-enabled, a God-required, even a God-demanded anthropomorphism which moves far beyond the naiveté of 'dogmatic' anthropomorphism as well as the skepticism of 'symbolic' anthropomorphism. Briefly: is there a theological use of analogy which corresponds to faith in the incarnation of God?"¹⁹

Indeed there is. In becoming flesh the eternal Word of God enters our world, a world of time and space, and therefore also enters our language. The coming of God in the incarnate Word is a lingual event. In the incarnation, God by his grace and in his own prior action, establishes a locus of truth, a place of meaningful correspondence, which can be encountered *ex post facto* within the context of human language. Like Luther, Jüngel maintains that theological language can only be established on the basis of a *theologia crucis*. Using the classical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* to describe the cross, Jüngel argues that just as in creation God goes out of himself into non-being, so at the cross Christ discloses the divine self by going out to the nothingness of death and perishability. Because of the cross, where the divine self is disclosed, theology is emboldened to develop a theological anthropology which can speak of God through a correspondence (*Entsprechung*) of divinity which includes humanity. In the incarnation, theology has learned to speak "a doctrine of analogy which is appropriate to the gospel".²⁰ Thus Jüngel could write:

To think of him as one who speaks, to speak of him as one who speaks, is not a 'dogmatic anthropomorphism' which comes too close to God, but rather the result of that *event* in which God becomes accessible as God in language, which the Bible calls *revelation*.²¹

¹⁶ CD II/1: 232.

¹⁷ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p., 7.

¹⁸ Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, p., 278.

¹⁹ Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, p., 280.

²⁰ Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, p., 261.

²¹ Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, p., 288.

The nature of theological language can be further clarified by pressing into service Augustine's semiotics. Describing language as a system of signs, Augustine argues that a word "is a sign of any kind of thing [*verbum est uniuscujusque rei signum*], which can be understood by a hearer, and is uttered [*prolatum*] by a speaker ... A sign is what shows both itself to the senses and something beyond itself to the mind".²² The word *signum* has two main senses in classical Latin. It could mean "indication", as is the case when Cicero asked if the gods have given signs of the future. And it could mean "representation" as in Lucretius' reference to "brazen signs" – statutes – that are placed by the city gates. Augustine uses *signum* in the former sense and not in the latter sense. This usage is in agreement with the Greek *semeion* which also refers to indicative and not representative signs. For Augustine, words cause something beyond itself to come into thought,²³ and show something beyond itself to the mind. Because of the incarnation, our words have the power to signify – that is, to show something beyond itself to the mind – its true Object: the transcendent God. T. F. Torrance rightly maintains that "theological knowledge and theological statements participate sacramentally in the mystery of Christ as Truth".²⁴ And though "all true concepts and statements inevitably fall short of the God to whom they refer"²⁵, they are nevertheless able to communicate the truth of who God is accurately.

Theological statements can be described as "existence-statements" and "coherence-statements". "Existence-statements" depict or describe reality. Such statements are never complete in themselves because by their very nature they point to a reality beyond themselves. Meaning lie not in the statements themselves as such, but in the reality that they hope to describe. Torrance puts it in this way: "Existence-statements have thus always an indefinite quality for they refer to a reality that cannot by its very nature be reduced to pure thought or be enclosed in brackets of mere ideas and so be made entirely transparent to our reasoning".²⁶ Before we turn to "coherence-statements", one other important characteristic of existence-statements must be pointed out. Although all existence-statements are basic and can be verified empirically by going to their actual and primary cognitions, not all such statements can be tested against knowledge that is based on sense-perception. This is because not all true knowledge can be assimilated to sense-perception. To claim that this is so, as did the empirical philosophers from Hume to Ayer, is to narrow the meaning of meaning by an unjustifiable metaphysical construct. This form of positivism has already been refuted by Karl Popper: "If you admit as meaningful none except problems in natural science, any debate about the concept of 'meaning' will also turn out to be meaningless".²⁷

As we turn now to coherence-statements, our purpose is to examine how existence-statements and coherence-statements function in relation to epistemology and ontology. Existence-statements and coherence-statements are dependent on one another for their significance. As it has been proverbially put, existence statements without coherence-statements are blind; coherence-statements without existence statements are empty.²⁸ Coherence-statements are dependent on existence-statements because it is the latter that provides them with their meaning. Once detached from existence-statements, coherence-

²² *De Dialectica* 5.7.

²³ *De Doctrina Christiana*, 4.1.2.

²⁴ T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p., 150.

²⁵ T. F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1980), p., 167.

²⁶ T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p., 166.

²⁷ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, p., 51.

²⁸ Torrance, *Theological Science*, p., 169.

statements become abstract and self-contained, and, without any ontological reference, they lose their meaning. This is the problem with the approach of postmodern thinkers and of theologians like Lindbeck. Without any ontological reference, the intra-systematicity of Christian doctrine, and by implication, Christian preaching may produce some psychological benefit, but is ultimately devoid of meaning because it is not rooted in any fundamental reality. On the other hand, existence-statements must yield coherence-statements in order for their meaning to emerge. For if existence-statements are unable to do this, they are disconnected from each other and no logical continuity or relationship between them obtains. Existence-statements cannot be made meaningfully except in correspondence, consistency and integration with other similar statements in a web or pattern of meaning. It is only when existence-statements and coherence-statements compliment and support one another that meaning emerges. For it is only when such integration obtains that due respect is accorded to reality and the relationship between ontology, epistemology and language is established with integrity. Torrance has put this well:

...the formal pattern is to be used as a sign which we recognise as standing for the thing signified, and therefore we use it, not in order that through analysis of the sign we can construct knowledge of the thing signified, but that by means of it we may put into such a relation to the thing signified that we may intuit it again through the appropriate sign, and so be thrown back upon the objective reality.²⁹

Theological statements therefore are fundamentally existence-statements. That is, theological statements are theo-nomous, theo-logical statements, made *a posteriori* – on the basis of their proper Object. Theological statements are not just statements about God but *of* God. They have their reference from a centre in God, are derived from God, and have their truth in him and not in themselves. Only when this fundamental premise of theological epistemology is clear can we speak of the intrasystemic nature (i.e., coherence) of our statements about God. Preaching, as a species of Christian discourse about God, comprise both existence- and coherence-statements. It is important to stress that theological statements are *our* statements. Although they are based on the revelation of God, theological statements are statements that we make. As Torrance puts it, “our hearing and knowing and stating are not displaced”.³⁰ It is this duality of our statements about God that brings out its sacramentality that was referred to earlier. Just as the presence of Christ is made real in the elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist, so the Word of God comes to us in our words. It is within the *lalia* that we may hear the *logos*. As Jüngel puts it: “The event of the Word of God within the limits of our language brings with it its own truth”.³¹ But the converse is also true in that the Word of God sets limits to our language and therefore our speech about God. It is within its limits – that is, in the context of obedience – that a God-centred correspondence emerges in which we learn to say yes where, and only where, God has already said Yes.

SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

Christian speech about God is regulated speech, and the question that confronts us at this juncture is what regulates it and how it is regulated. The answer to this question brings us once again to the facticity and necessity of divine revelation: Christian speech

²⁹ Torrance, *Theological Science*, p., 171.

³⁰ *Theological Science*, p., 175.

³¹ Eberhard Jüngel, ‘God – As a Word of Our Language’, *The Liberating Word*, ed., Fredrick Herzog (Nasville: Abingdon Press, 1971), p., 41.

about God is established upon the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ. Early in the first volume of his magisterial *Church Dogmatics* Barth emphasised this point: theology does not control the basis of its knowledge about God. "Only by failing to recognise the actualisation of revelation, the possibility of grace and therefore its own nature, could it possibly make any such claim".³² The Church's speech about God, Barth maintains, must therefore always "be tested by its conformity to Christ", although it must be admitted that this conformity is "never clear and unambiguous".³³ The Church believes that the coming of Jesus Christ is announced by the prophets of Israel and recorded in the Old Testament, and that his history and significance is presented in the New Testament which serves as the "repository of the formative and identity-giving traditions"³⁴ of the community of faith.

The Church therefore holds that it is through the medium of Scripture that God, in his providence and grace, has chosen to reveal himself by the inspiration of the Spirit. Scripture is therefore the source of the Church's theological knowledge, and its language regulates the language of the Church concerning God and the world. The practical implication of this assertion is that the Church's view of her speech about God is profoundly dependent upon her view of Scripture. The revelation at once enables and regulates the Church's talk about God. The self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ has at once given humankind the unheard of freedom to speak of its Creator as well as an immense responsibility to do so in a way that is faithful to the revelation. The implication of this understanding of the primacy of the text for preaching is succinctly articulated by Gerd Theissen: "...in preaching the text is not only a reservoir of images, ideas and narrative structures; it is the reference text for preaching, its object, its theme. A sermon will be good if it speaks from the language world of the text, but always also speaks about the text. It comments on the text".³⁵

There is, however, another, if secondary, authority which regulates the Church's knowledge and speech about God, tradition, and a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between language, meaning and God with regard to the activity of preaching cannot dismiss this as peripheral. The first task is to conceive of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. The view of the relationship between scripture and tradition proposed here seeks surmount the dualism that is prevalent in the Western tradition, especially in Protestantism, where the two are sometimes seen as opposed to one another. Our view approximates more closely to that of the Eastern Tradition where "tradition" is understood in a more comprehensive sense, and comprises all that make up Christian life and thought. This position is given voice in the fifth century by Vincent of Lérins who maintains that although Scripture is materially sufficient (its content does not need to be supplemented by tradition), it is formally insufficient (it needs authoritative interpretation). Authoritative interpretation of Scripture, according to Vincent, is provided by the universal or Catholic Church. It is in this context that the Vincentian dictum, that the Catholic tradition is "what has been believed everywhere, always and by all" (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*), must be understood.

Insofar as this view of the relationship between Scripture and tradition gives the former its rightful place – as that which is normative for faith and conduct – it embraces the insight of the sixteenth century Reformers. The distinction between what Gerald O'Collins has termed as "foundational revelation" (in the biblical period) and

³² CD 1/1: 5.

³³ CD 1/1: 13.

³⁴ McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine*, p., 1.

³⁵ Gerd Theissen, *The Sign Language of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1995), p., 53.

“dependent revelation” (in the history of the Church) must be maintained.³⁶ Furthermore, the latter cannot be seen as merely the repetition of scripture, but the contemporarisation and contextualisation of the foundational revelation. Tradition therefore fundamentally has a hermeneutical function, and the traditioning process comprise the creation of fresh meanings that result from the encounter between Scripture and the new context in which the message is to be heard. Tradition therefore may be seen as the way in which the Gospel takes various forms in the different times and places in the history of the Church.³⁷ Speaking generally about the rationality of traditions, Alasdair MacIntyre points out that traditions do not develop in a vacuum but are organically connected to the way of life of a particular community. Thus the moral judgements and concepts of justice and practical rationality of Aristotle, for instance, presupposes citizenship in a Greek *polis* and are built upon such a society.³⁸ That the Christian tradition takes shape in the community that is identified with the person of Christ is clearly articulated by McGrath:

It is within this community that a tradition is transmitted concerning the significance of the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is affirmed to provide a focus of the identity of the Christian community, in that this community discerns its identity with reference to nothing less and nothing other than Jesus of Nazareth. It is this community which retells the story of the saving acts of God in history, culminating in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. It is this historical community that evokes the memory of the crucified Christ, and responds to it in worship and adoration. It is this community which insists that the paradigmatic shape of the redeemed life is to be discerned only in Jesus of Nazareth. It is this community which recognises the Bible as incorporating the formative and identity-giving traditions of the Christian faith, and insists that such Scriptures be preserved, read and expounded in worship.³⁹

That tradition has an indispensable role to play in the cognitive and linguistic formation of a community has not always been acknowledged in certain branches of Protestant Christianity. The investigations of philosophers have shown that traditions are forms of rational inquiry that is conducted and developed in a given community. Progress in the rationality of that community is achieved when it expands its articulation of the reality that it perceives from its standpoint with greater depth and sophistication. This point is succinctly put forward by MacIntyre:

Progress in rationality is achieved only from a point of view. And it is achieved when the adherents of that point of view succeed to some significant degree in elaborating ever more comprehensive and adequate statements of their positions through the dialectical procedure of advancing objections ... of finding the strongest arguments available for supporting those objections, and then of attempting to restate the position so that it is no longer vulnerable to those specific objections and arguments.⁴⁰

³⁶ Gerard O’Collins, *Foundational Theology* (London, 1981), p., 101-2.

³⁷ Richard Bauckham, ‘Tradition in Relation to Scripture and Reason’, in *Scripture, Tradition and Reason. A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine*, edited by Benjamin Drewery and Richard J. Bauckham (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p., 130.

³⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p., 133.

³⁹ *Genesis of Doctrine*, p., 178.

⁴⁰ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* p., 144.

In other words, deeper insights are achieved when the concepts and language are tested and refined in a dialectical process that takes place within the community. MacIntyre likens traditions to the formulation of scientific theories. Like the latter traditions have to do with the organisation of “raw” data into a rational system which does the greatest justice to the data in question. But it is only within existing theories – that is, within a perspective that has engendered and established a particular understanding of the data – that refinements and expansions can take place. Furthermore, as we have already seen, for MacIntyre, tradition must be inextricably related to the way of life of the community. To point to an analogy in the development of modern science, there is an organic connection between modern scientific tradition to the institutions and practices of the international scientific community. The developments of the scientific traditions therefore are both local and ecumenical. Torrance makes the same point when speaking more specifically of theology:

There is an inescapable need for a social coefficient of knowledge in order to establish and maintain semantic relations with reality, within which man can be at home in the universe, through being rightly related to its essential patterns and intrinsic intelligibilities which are the ground of meaning. It is within this framework that human conceptions are constantly formed, patterns of thought take shape, and the anticipatory grip upon reality which initiates inquiry is gained.⁴¹

Traditions, however, do not develop independently, but take their shape from the reality that they seek to understand, embody and articulate. And this brings us back to the relationship between scripture and tradition. If scripture is *norma normans*, then tradition cannot claim an independence that would eventually result in its distancing and severance from this norm. Thus, though the plenary sense (*sensus plenior*) must include an increment of meaning that is made possible through centuries of study, devotion and experience, it cannot be divorced from, but must be rooted in the primary sense. Yves Congar has brilliantly described tradition as the *thésaurisation* of Scripture, but insists that “scripture has an absolute sovereignty; ... it governs Tradition and the Church, whereas it is not governed by Tradition or by the Church”.⁴² Dorothy Sayers has shed light on this relationship in her account of Virgil and Dante:

A phrase used by Dante not only contains and is illuminated by the meanings derived from Virgil and the Vulgate: it, in its turn, illuminates Virgil and the Vulgate and gives new meaning to them. It not only passes on these meanings, supercharged with Dante’s own meaning, to Tennyson and Landor, to Williams and Eliot and Pound, but it receives back from them the reflected *splendore* of their own imaginative use of it.⁴³

PREACHING AS COMMUNICATIVE EVENT

We can now draw some conclusions regarding the nature and purpose of preaching. Preaching is a communicative event that takes place in the context of the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. As such preaching must always be understood as a liturgical act and as ecclesial service. Because the language of preaching, as we have

⁴¹ *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. ,102.

⁴² Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* (London, 1966), p., 422.

⁴³ D.L. Sayers, *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p., 272.

seen, is continuous with and organically linked to the language of scripture and tradition, preaching should be understood as theological discourse. This means that the language of preaching is founded upon the Bible and the Dogmas of the Church. Preaching is biblical when it is faithful to the witness of the Bible regarding God and his relationship with the world as revealed in Jesus Christ. The language of preaching cannot “escape into generalities about God and the world”. They must be “attentive to the particularities of the texts because God’s universal truth is inscribed in them as a truth that through the Spirit is meant to become alive again in our particular circumstances”.⁴⁴ But as communicative event, preaching must also be doctrinal. Doctrine is the medium through which the Christian community articulates what it believes to be true about God and the world. Preaching must be doctrinal in the sense that it must offer a vision of reality that is shaped by truth concerning God. We shall return to this later in this section.

The relationship between preaching and the Word of God must be clarified. Christian proclamation, like the Bible upon which it is based, has been described as God’s Word. Although we have already met this question in our discussion in previous sections, we must sharpen our understanding of such an assertion at this juncture in order to further clarify the status of Christian proclamation. To do this we must turn to christology and pneumatology. From the standpoint of christology we must say that Christian proclamation is the Word of God when it bears witness to the incarnate Word of God attested to in scripture. There is a mutual relationship between God’s Word incarnate, the Bible and the proclamation of the Church in that the first forms the basis for the other two. Put differently, the Bible is said to be the Word of God because it attests to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Similarly, “to the extent that proclamation really rests on recollection of the revelation attested to the Bible and is thus obedient repetition to the Biblical witness, it is no less the Word of God than the Bible”.⁴⁵

Complementing the objective basis of preaching is the subjective basis, and this brings us to the “sacramental” nature of preaching which can only be correctly understood when it is developed in light of pneumatology. Here we are confronted with the miracle of real proclamation – God, in his sovereign will and through the power of the Holy Spirit actualises Christian preaching, making it true proclamation of the Word. By the power of the Spirit, preaching takes on the character of an event (*eventus*) in which the words of men are taken up and exalted and become the medium in and through which God speaks about himself. Thus the Word of God comes to man through a double mediacy – Scripture and proclamation. To be sure, the humanness of preaching is not in any way negated or simply set aside. There is rather a profound co-operation between God and man in that while the human element in the activity of preaching is not in any way obliterated, it is, through the miraculous empowerment of God, transfigured in a way that enables God himself to speak through human speech. This human-divine duality is analogous to and has its basis in the incarnation of the Word:

As Christ became true man and remains true man to all eternity, real proclamation becomes an event on the level of all other human events ... Without the ambivalence, the liability of misunderstanding and the vulnerability with which this takes place, with which this it is itself one event among others, it could not be real proclamation. But as Christ is not just true man, so it is not just the willing and doing of proclaiming man. It

⁴⁴ Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Introduction: The Preacher’s Art: Preaching Theologically’, in Colin Gunton, *Theology through Preaching* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), pp., 8-9.

⁴⁵ Barth CD I/1:120-1.

is also and indeed it is primarily and decisively the divine willing and doing.⁴⁶

It was Erasmus who emphasised that the Word of God is not *verbum* but *sermo*, not *ratio* but *oratio*, when offering an alternative translation of *logos* of John 1:1ff. to that of the Vulgate.⁴⁷ This means that the Word of God is never a dead letter but a face-to-face, oral-aural situated, and suasive discourse. The emphasis brings us back to the concept of the Word of God as event, or, to put it in more traditional terms, the Word of God as *actio divina*, God's self-performance. As such, the Word of God "deploys language and languages, silence and sound, stillness and gesture, anything – even nothing – to its own ends".⁴⁸ It is not at anyone's disposal. Instead, everything – all persons and cultures, all times and places – is at its disposal, as C. H. Dodd has rightly asserted.⁴⁹ Furthermore as *actio divina* the Word of God possesses a quality which Barth calls "contingent" contemporaneity. That is to say, it has the ability to transcend the particularities of time and culture to speak relevantly and directly to the listener. There is a twofold contingency because in the relation between revelation and Scripture and in the relation between Scripture and proclamation there is always a contingent *illic et tunc* from the standpoint of the God who speaks and a contingent *hic et nunc* from the standpoint of the hearer. "The problem of the Word of God", Barth explains, "is that this specific revelation of God is granted to this specific man to-day through the proclamation of this other specific man by means of this specific text, so that a specific *illic et tunc* becomes a specific *hic et nunc*". The solution to the problem is provided by the Word of God itself "as the Word of God spoken by the mouth of God is contemporaneous *illic et tunc* and also (i.e., as spoken *illic et tunc*) *hic et tunc*".⁵⁰ The contingent contemporaneity of the Word of God makes the I-Thou encounter between man and God possible through the activity of preaching. It is in this sense that preaching may be understood as communicative event.

But besides this existential dimension preaching as communicative event has a doctrinal and therefore regulative character. Preaching is purposed to help members of the community of faith to view reality from the standpoint of the Gospel. Preaching urges a cognitive restructuring which shapes and guides the inner dialogue of men and women of that community with themselves, their lives and the world in which they live. Simply put, preaching is to help the Church to be "monolingual". Here language is used in its broadest sense. Preaching is aimed at helping the Church to "indwell" the language of scripture and tradition and experience the world from the orientation and framework they provide. The concept of "indwelling" is borrowed from Michael Polanyi, the philosopher of science, who uses it to explicate the nature of scientific knowledge. Polanyi maintains that we attend to external objects only by being subsidiarily aware of the functions of the body. This is clearly seen when we reflect upon the most common experience, our reliance of a tool or a probe. The blind man uses a stick to make contact with external objects while the stick itself is not scrutinised or handled as an external object. We are not conscious of the tools that we use; "instead", Polanyi asserts, "we pour ourselves into them and assimilate them as part of ourselves".⁵¹

⁴⁶ Barth, *CD I/1*: 94..

⁴⁷ See Thomas O. Sloane, *Donne, Milton, and the End of Humanist Rhetoric* (Berkeley: CA: University of California Press, 1985), p., 79.

⁴⁸ Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p., 27.

⁴⁹ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936), p., 96.

⁵⁰ *CD I/1*: 149.

⁵¹ Michael Polanyi, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p., 36.

The same can be said about language and culture. When speaking a language we do not attend to the words and phrases we use, but indwell them in the sense that we turn our attention to the object or reality in question. Similarly one does not stand outside of culture and look at it, but one stands within culture and look *from* and *through* it. The Christian community must likewise learn to indwell the Gospel and to look at reality from the standpoint of God's truth. Leslie Newbigin explains:

... for this to happen it is clear that this 'indwelling' must mean being part of the community whose life is shaped by the story which the Bible tells. When we live as part of the story, constantly remembering and re-enacting its crucial events, as we do in the liturgy of the church, it becomes like our language. It provides the models and concepts through which we seek to understand and cope with events of daily life. In a stable Christian community we learn it in the same way as we learn our mother tongue. And since the understanding of the whole human story which permeates the Bible is radically different from that which permeates our contemporary public life, there are clearly preconditions for an encounter with our society.⁵²

Preaching as liturgical act and communicative event helps members of the Christian community to interpret their experiences through the symbols and images, narratives and metaphors of the Bible. It helps the community to make sense of reality on the basis of the truth of the Gospel. But this understanding of the nature and purpose of preaching is possible only when the objective truth about God is taken seriously and when a proper relationship between epistemology, ontology and language obtains.

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⁵² Leslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (London: SCM, 1991), p., 49.