PREACHING PAUL

In his general audience on July 2, 2008, following the opening of the Year of St. Paul, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on the aim of the Pauline year: “to learn about St. Paul, to learn the faith, to learn about Christ, to learn the path of the righteous life.” I see important parallels between this statement and what the U.S. Catholic bishops said about the homily in Fulfilled In Your Hearing (FYH, 1982). The homily, the bishops explained, “presupposes faith,” yet it is not primarily concerned with “a systematic theological understanding of the faith” (FYH, 43). It “is preached in order that a community of believers who have gathered to celebrate the liturgy may do so more deeply and more fully—more faithfully—and thus be formed for Christian witness in the world” (FYH, 43). In other words, by means of the homily the preacher helps the community learn the faith and the path of the righteous life by exploring how faith can impact daily living. By becoming more closely conformed to Christ, which is to say by righteousness, the community learns to live in right relationship with God, with each other, and with all creation.

This connection between what the bishops have to say about the homily and what Pope Benedict challenged us to discover in the Pauline corpus goes even deeper. We discover in Paul’s writings, for example, that the communities to whom Paul wrote struggled with how their newfound faith in Christ would interpret the world in which they lived. Just so, the homily should help our communities sharpen our “seeing or interpreting the world” (FYH, 44). The homily should provide such aid whether it leads those who have not heard the Gospel “to an initial acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior,” or it invites those who have been baptized “to a deeper understanding of the faith or to its ethical implications” (FYH, 41).

The parallels between the aims of the Pauline Year and the purpose of the liturgical homily are strong. Therefore, the letters of Paul provide rich material for our liturgical preaching and can help us deepen our relationship with Christ, grow in faith, and embrace righteous living more fully.

EXPLORING THE SECOND READING

The place where most Catholics encounter Paul’s writings these days is as the semi-continuous second reading at Sunday Mass or on the great festivals. I confess that I do not turn to the second reading as a resource for liturgical preaching as often as I could (or, perhaps, should). My preaching preparation and liturgical planning experience formed me to start with the Gospel of the day, then move to the first reading because of its connection with the Gospel, and finally to see whether or not the second reading has any connection at all with the other readings and the psalm. I must admit that I often find one, but I know that is not often the case for other homilists. And we must not forget the context for any preaching and planning: the liturgical season or feast and the needs of the world and this particular liturgical assembly.

While the approach I have embraced is good, and while the reminder to pay attention to the season, circumstances, and the local assembly is still fine advice, I wonder what we miss if we dismiss the second reading—especially the Pauline texts that are excerpted there—too handily from our homiletic reflection. The second reading can provide some important connections between faith and the rest of life and the liturgy and the world. The Pauline Year offers a valuable opportunity—or at least gives us an excuse—to let the second reading become an important focus for our preaching. I’ll use the upcoming Advent as an example.

PAUL IN ADVENT

On the First Sunday of Advent (November 30, 2008), we turn to Year B in the Sunday cycle of readings. The second reading for that day—1 Corinthians 1:3–9—reminds us that God is faithful and will keep us firm to the end. What a wonderful way to recall God’s first coming among us and our need to stay awake and be ready, for we know not the time nor the hour! Since God is faithful, then if we are faithful, too, at least in our return to God, we have no need to fear. In the face of our current economic realities and the places of strife in our world, these words offer needed hope at the beginning of a new liturgical year.

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The following two Sundays always recall the role of John the Baptist in salvation history, that is, in the history of God’s saving love affair with God’s people. On the Second Sunday of Advent we will not hear from Paul but from a letter attributed to Peter: “The Lord does not delay his promise . . . but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9, 14–15). These words offer important encouragement and can invite us to reflect on how patient we are with one another. Do we believe that God does not desire that we perish but rather that we repent and know divine faithful love? What gets in the way? How can these words help us hear John’s invitation to prepare the way of the Lord?

On the following Sunday we hear again from Paul: “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks. . . . Test everything: retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil. The one who calls you is faithful and he will also accomplish it” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–24). These words can help us find concrete means to be witnesses like John. Prayer, discernment, embracing what is good, releasing what is evil, and living with an attitude of gratitude can help us testify to the light that is Christ, the light we promised to keep burning brightly in our baptism. We can certainly find an example for each of these directives that will help us be the voice of one crying out today.

On Advent’s Fourth Sunday we are reminded that “the mystery kept secret for long ages [is] now manifested . . . made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith” (Romans 16:25-27). Isn’t that what the Annunciation proclaimed in this Sunday’s Gospel asks of us, to be God-bearers, to manifest the presence of God in Christ, that our lives might reveal the child born of Mary? Our preaching can help name the ways in which the mystery of God’s loving presence in Christ is manifest today, locally and globally.

Advent’s reflections find fulfillment at Christmas Midnight Mass, when we are reminded that “the grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age . . . eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:11–14). With the fear that is the fallout of the recent economic crisis and the violence that fills our streets and our world, this excerpt from the Pauline collection of texts offers assurance that God’s incarnate grace is at work now, which is why the letter offers examples of ways in which the grace of God continues to appear as a word of truth and light. In our preaching, we can share experience of how temperate living, right relationship, and doing what is good can be sources of the comfort and hope that so many seek today.

Understood properly and preached carefully, the second reading becomes a way to help the people who walk in darkness today see a great light. A recent letter from the Grand Rapids Dominican leadership team to their community asks some concrete questions that I find helpful for preaching on this Christmas reading: “Recall a time when you experienced a ‘righting’ of a relationship with God or another. Recall a time when you received an insight about what it means to be in right relationship with yourself. In what ways can we each ‘right’ our relationship with the universe? How can a fracture in one of these relationships affect the whole web of life?” [In Word, October 2008]

**Consider the Ways**

Yes, the liturgical day, the season, the signs of the times, and the other readings will be an important context or lens through which to preach on the second reading. However, I hope that these suggestions will serve as an invitation to consider the ways in which the letters of Paul (and the other materials from which the second reading is taken) can become food for our preaching in ways that connect liturgy and all of life, the Word and the world. Pope Benedict’s preaching to open the recent Synod on the Bible reminds us that “only the Word of God can change the depth of the [human] heart.” May our exploration of the Pauline letters serve as a fresh source for inviting this change in ourselves and the people to whom we preach.

**Notes**


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A Membership Service
PRAY FOR ORISSA

Attacks by Hindu radicals on Christians (mostly Catholics) in India’s Orissa state that began in late August are continuing, despite attempts by the Indian government and non-governmental organizations to end the violence and despite appeals for peace by the Vatican, Asian and European church leaders, government of other nations, and Hindu and Muslim groups in India.

The violence began on the night of August 23, after the murder of Swami Laxmananananda Saraswati, leader of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, the “World Hindu Council”). Although the government has arrested several Maoist rebels and charged them with the crime, members of the VHP have blamed Christians for the murder.

With the cooperation of Bajrang Dal (the “Party of the Strong and Determined” Hindu nationalists), Hindu radicals announced their determination to “cleanse” Orissa of all Christians. Some VHP supporters in India’s Parliament attempted to stop government intervention by dismissing the attacks as a dispute between “tribals” and Christian converts in “scheduled castes” (that is, people formerly known as “untouchables”), and they called for a ban on all conversion activities by Christians.

As of mid-October, more than fifty people had been killed in Orissa, and more than 50,000 people were in refugee shelters or had fled to hiding in forests. By the beginning of September, six priests who had been attacked had been hospitalized, two priests had been kidnapped, and two Protestant pastors had been killed. One lay woman was burned to death. More than 4,500 homes and more than 100 churches and prayer halls had been burned. The primary focus of the attacks has been against priests and ministers, religious, and lay leaders in Christian communities.

Anti-Christian violence has begun to spread to other areas as well, particularly those areas governed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, the “Indian People’s Party,” which supports Hindu supremacy and opposes, on political grounds, “Semitic monotheism”). By late September, in addition to the concentrated violence in Orissa, attacks against Christians, churches, and Christian centers had been reported in the Indian states of Chhattisgarh, Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala. In Mangalore (Karnataka state), police attacked Christian protesters, dragging people (including children) from churches and beating them.

CULTURE AND CLERGY DECLINE: A BUDDHIST VIEW

In a column for the online news service UCAN (Union of Catholic Asia News—http://www.ucanews.com), Maryknoll Father William Grimm commented (August 13, 2008) on an article in the Japanese magazine Yomiuri Weekly about the rapid decline in Buddhist priests in Japan. The article said that between 1970 and 2005 the number of priests dropped by about eighty-two percent, from 1.6 million in 1970 to about 300,000 in 2005. Father Grimm, who is the editor-in-chief of Japan’s Catholic weekly, Katorikku Shimbun, noted that, in that same thirty-five year period, the number of Catholic priests in Japan declined by about twenty percent, from 1,926 to 1,542. He suggested that the situation in Japanese Buddhism puts the situation of Catholic clergy and some of the proposed solutions to the clergy shortage in a new perspective.

He writes: “Two solutions offered for the Church’s shortage of priests are a married clergy and better inculturation. The situation of Buddhism indicates that those suggestions, while valid for other reasons, will not solve our problems.” “Powerful trends in society that cannot be countered by having a married clergy are at work,” he continues. And “while there are certainly reasons to de-Westernize Catholicism, it is not so clear that adopting Buddhist styles and practices will achieve much for us.” Observing that “the decline of Buddhism is partly due to its failure to take bold steps to present itself to Japanese society as it actually exists today,” Father Grimm suggests that the Church build on the advice of a friend to “look at Japan as it is today and find ways to proclaim the Gospel in this day and age.” He asks: “Can we find a way to be Church that is not archeology but which actually presents the Gospel in a way that answers the search of men and women in the twenty-first century and which, by doing so, will call forth ministers for that Gospel proclamation?”

He acknowledges that “finding a solution is not easy, but it is impossible if we do not grasp the problem. The way to find it,” he suggests, “is to step away from our institutions, prejudices, and ‘comfort zones’ to immerse ourselves in the hopes, fears, and doubts of people around us. Laity in particular,” he says, “must develop the spiritual and intellectual tools to understand and respond, and the clergy must aid them in that development.”

UP AND DOWN IN LATIN AMERICA

The Zenit news service reported (July 30, 2008) that the news about priestly vocations in twenty-two Latin American countries is mixed. A team from CELAM (the Latin American Bishops’ Conference) analyzed vocational statistics for the five-year period from 2000 to 2005 and reported that there was an overall increase during those years in the number of diocesan priests (up 11.3 percent) and a slight decrease in the number of religious order priests. Nicaragua and Guatemala had the highest rates of in-
crease among diocesan priests, while Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia had the highest number of ordinations. In Cuba, the numbers increased in every category except religious seminarians, while in Argentina the numbers decreased in every category except the number of diocesan priests. During those years, for every ten priests who were ordained, four died or left the priesthood. With the exceptions of Belize and Puerto Rico, every country had priests leave the ministry (a total of 1,080 priests). The full Spanish-language report is available online at www.celam.org/observa/docs/VOCA-CIONES.pdf.

**Year of St. Paul Online Resources**

Here are some resources to enrich your celebration of the Pauline Year. The USCCB offers some homilies and links to other sites at http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/stpaul/index.shtml. The Roman Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls has resources at http://www.annopaolino.org/index.asp?lang=eng. You’ll find some popular guides and references—and a crossword puzzle—at the Our Sunday Visitor site: http://www.osv.com/YearofStPaulNav/YearofStPaul/tabid/6133/Default.aspx. And many dioceses and publishers also offer resources at their websites.