Wrestling with the Word—I

by Geoffrey Preston, O.P.

The Homily

For the next three weeks, as Lent builds up more intensively towards Easter, the gospel readings at Sunday Mass abandon the ordinary course of readings for the year (Luke this year) and go over to John. And that for a very good reason, which is internal to the gospel according to John. What Lent is all about, as we have been seeing this last couple of weeks, is a longish preparation for Easter—a preparation that once was the final spurt of adults preparing to be baptized during Easter night, and then also of already baptized Christians who had fallen away in some pretty serious regard and were now getting ready to come back to the heart of the Christian community on Maundy Thursday, and then finally a sort of extended retreat for the whole Christian people. Because everybody realized that they all needed to come back closer to the heart of things—every Christian had fallen away to some degree, every Christian was in some way an internal emigré—they realized that they all had to come back closer to the heart of things, and that meant recovering something of their first flush of enthusiasm and their first entry into the Church, their baptism. And baptism from the beginning was an Easter affair, an Easter affair even before there was an Easter kept as an annual feast; already in the New Testament letters, baptism was seen as a sharing in Christ's death and in his being raised again. So Lent then has to do with trying to understand a little more deeply what the dying and the rising of the Lord are all about, the dying and the rising of the Lord which we celebrate, and which stop being just out-there but become part of a man's own experience and of his own life-style when he is baptized.

The readings we have been having so far in Lent have been going at this from different angles. The story of Jesus' being tempted—a hint, this, at the various possibilities open to Jesus for becoming the Christ, and his rejection of the idea of becoming simply an economic saviour, or of bamboozling people into accepting him by a display of wonder-working, or of taking over power for himself by the devil's own means. And that story ends with the words, 'And the devil left him for a while'—words meant to make us think forward to the stories of the death of Jesus, when the same sorts of temptation presented themselves again and were again rejected. So the death of Jesus, we are being told, was not an unfortunate accident, but (as one of the mass prayers says) 'a death he freely accepted', it was the more or less inevitable result of his deliberate rejection of other possible ways of becoming the Christ. Then last week we had the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, and saw how this was meant to prepare the immediate circle of Jesus' followers, and ourselves too, to look for the glory of God, God as revealed, no longer only in power and majesty and in the brightness of Easter morning, but to see it too—the glory of God—in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, the least of men.

Well, what John does in his gospel is point to the way the glory of the resurrected Jesus is there all through. He tells a series of stories, very few of which occur in the other gospels, to draw out the meaning, the significance, the implications, of the dying and rising of Jesus of Nazareth. If you want to think about what the dying and rising of Jesus might mean, he's saying, why not try this way? If you want to get under the surface of what the Good Friday-Easter thing has to do with, how about thinking of it like this? If you want to get some idea of what's behind the business of the crucifixion and resurrection, see whether these stories might not give you a few clues, offer you a way into it all. I mean, why not think of it in terms of water turning into wine, for example: isn't it all a bit like people wanting to celebrate a wedding properly, and then the drink running out and having to be supplied by somebody else? Does that give you a bit more of an idea of the point of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus?

I mean, says John, it's all a bit like water for the thirsty, you might say. Look, let me tell you a story to give you some idea of what I mean. One day Jesus and the others were going through Samaria. It was around noon and very hot, and they came to a well, and Jesus was pretty fagged and sat down and waited for somebody to come along with a bucket so that he could get a drink. And so the story goes on. But John does expect you to be fairly subtle, to realize that his story is subtle too. There's more to this than meets the eye. He's dropping allusions right, left and centre; and he expects people to have the native wit to pick them up.

What are the allusions in this story? Some of them are back to the Old Testament, others to later parts of the same gospel or even to other writings in what is now the New Testament. (Remember that John is probably the last New Testament book to be written, with the exception of that enigmatic second letter of Peter.) The previous chapter of John's gospel was all to do with Jesus and the Jews—the conversation with Nicodemus. Soon the Gentiles will come into the picture—the Greeks coming to the feast. But the world does not divide as easily as that into Jews and Gentiles—there are also those strange, hapless, half-way mortals, the Samaritans. And all through the New Testament the progression is: Jews—Samaritans—Gentiles. And in this morning's story John has got as far as the Samaritans. Samaritans who claim to be Jews, but whose claim is rejected by the rest of the Jews, right from the return of the people from their exile in Babylon through the time of Jesus down to the present day when a tiny Samaritan community goes on living on Mount Gerizim and—uniquely—keeps the passover as the book of Exodus commands it to be kept. To Nicodemus Jesus had had to say that in the last resort the religion of the Old Testament would not suffice for the needs of the world, or even for his own personal needs. Men, including Nicodemus, would have to be born again. Now John poses the question, perhaps for the sake of completeness—would the religion of the Samaritans be any more availing? Jesus goes and asks for water from the Samaritan well. It's all there! The sixth hour—the time of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus says now, 'Give me a drink'—on the cross too he says, 'I thirst'. Would the Samaritan way quench that thirst and that need of Jesus? John is saying that it won't any more than the Jewish way would, or the Gentile way for that matter. Jesus' needs are not met by anything that the cultures, even the best of the religious cultures, of his day had to offer. What is coming to be in Jesus is a gift from outside, gift of God—grace, if you like. It's an offer, and not a natural consequence of what went before. What went before won't meet the needs of Jesus, representative man, won't meet man's needs. They are going to be met only by a gift, a new gift, a fresh gift. 'If you knew the gift of God, and who I am, you would have asked me, and I would have given you living water'—that is, not well water, not something which is there, fixed, but living water, spring water, bubbling up, fresh, spontaneous, creative. The dying and rising of Jesus, John says, are a bit like spring water for people. Why not think a bit around that idea and see what you make of it? he says.

That is, the dying and the rising of Jesus of Nazareth are the source, the spring, of continual renewal in the Christian life, just as they are the water into which we are baptized to start that life. And the Christian life is not just one possibility, always available, of being human; it's not a human construct; it's not a folk religion; it's not essentially a sociological phenomenon. The Christian life is gift of God, and is new in Jesus, given new in Jesus. The hour is coming, says John's Christ, the hour has now come, when people are not going to worship either in Jerusalem or on the Samaritan Mount Gerizim. They are going to worship the Father in spirit and in truth, because God is spirit. The real temple, the place where God's glory dwells, is not going to be a religious shrine but a man, Jesus of Nazareth, the least of men, wearied with his journey, wearied to death. Perhaps you remember the *Dies Irae:*

> Faint and weary you have sought me,
> On your cross of suffering bought me—
> Shall this gift be vainly brought me?

Me—'Faint and weary you have sought *me*—me individually as well as the human race, just as the Samaritan woman is presented very much as herself as well as a representative Samaritan. In Lent we're being invited to recognize how the crucified and risen Jesus might be spring water for the whole Christian community, and for each of us personally, invited to be renewed by the grace of God, invited to learn again the simplest lessons, to accept the gift of God, to worship him in spirit and in truth and in the body of the least of men, Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.

The Preparation

'Like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and ruled by sacred scripture' (*Verbum Dei*, § 21). The sermon has its origin not in some idea of the preacher, not even in some theme of the liturgical year, but in the text of scripture itself. Yet not in just any text, but in some particular text, the text which is laid down to be read on the day in question, and which thus has a twofold priority. That it is this text and not another text which is to become the word of God for these people today is not dependent on the choice of the preacher, is not what the preacher himself wants or would necessarily choose were the choice his. To be given a text rather than being left to decide upon a text is in practice as well as in theory a valuable witness to the otherness of the word of God. The text, moreover, this text, comes to him from far away, from without; it stands over against him, challenging him, judging him, wanting to be set in motion by him, wanting to be turned by him from the words of an ancient document into the lively oracles of God; and yet it stands over against him, and over against the congregation for whom it is to be liberated and put into execution, with its own peculiar reserve, its own opaqueness, resistant and uninviting, seeming at times to mock at the preacher. It is not going to yield to his merest whim, but demands to be wrestled with and struggled for, and even then (if the wrestling and struggling have been properly done) it emerges victorious, for it is the text which is to speak and not the preacher.

Before the general introduction of the reformed lectionary last Advent, a congregation was asked to use an experimental version of it. Year C was read. For the later Sundays of Lent, the *lectio continua* of Luke's gospel was temporarily abandoned and gave place to the ancient readings for that season of the year from the gospel according to John. On the third Sunday of Lent the reading was the *pericope de Samaritana* (John 4, 4-42). This then was the text facing the preacher, over against him, out there, strange and distant, with that distance and reserve peculiar to the fourth gospel; this was the text which had to be liberated, let be, allowed positively to become what it desired to be—the word of God for and to these people, here, now.

It was a text which, like all the Bible or any other historical document, came from a particular background in time very different from the milieu of the preacher and the congregation: from 'John', the unique historical individual, in his own setting of time and place, purporting to write an account of an incident equally definitely and distantly situated in its own, again different, time and place. Some familiarity with the worlds of thought and behaviour of the writer and his characters was required if the text was to be read in context and saved from becoming a pretext for the preacher's favourite ideas. Such familiarity cannot of course be acquired in the course of the few days during which a preacher prepares his sermon, but depends on the more long-term effort to come to know something of the world of Jews and Samaritans and 'John'. It was a familiarity acquired by the reading of such works as John Macdonald's *Theology of the Samaritans* (S.C.M., 1964) and the very useful discussion of the background of the fourth gospel in the first part of C. H. Dodd's *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel.* Strack-Billerbeck's German commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and the Midrash is always helpful in helping one to see something of the Jewish context of any part of the New Testament.

The text comes, too, from a definite linguistic tradition, written in a Greek continuous and discontinuous with the Greek of the LXX, and the preacher has to come to terms with it in its original language. All the commentators on this particular text have drawn attention in particular to the two words used in the original for 'well' or 'spring', though they differ as to the significance of this: *pēgē* and *phrear*; and the preacher must decide for himself whether anything is to be made of the distinction. *Pēgē* is used in the text for Jacob's well when Jesus comes to it, but in the subsequent story it is used not for Jacob's well but for the 'spring of water welling up to eternal life'. In the New Testament in general, everywhere else it always has the meaning of 'spring' or 'fountain' and is the word used in Revelation 7, 17 and 21, 6 in connexion with 'living water'. Its Old Testament usage at first sight seems conclusive: in Jeremiah 2, 13, God calls himself 'the fountain (*pēgē*) of living waters', and in Psalm 35 it is said that 'the fountain (*pēgē*) of life is with him'. So it might be fair to assume that in our text the author was intending to suggest that after the coming of Jesus, Jacob's spring (which until then had 'living water') could now only be termed a well. If Young's *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* alone had been used (and still more so if the preacher had relied simply on a New Testament concordance such as Schmöller's *Handkonkordanz zum griechischen Neues Testament,* the point might seem proved. But a reading of the relevant articles in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* and Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* reveals that *pēgē* and *phrear* are more or less interchangeable in the LXX, and in particular that it uses *phrear* in connexion with 'living water' in Genesis 21, 19 and 26, 19; moreover the Kittel article denies any linguistic significance to the use of the two words in John 4. In fact, in the sermon which was eventually delivered, the preacher did treat the difference between 'well' and 'spring' as significant. The difference between Jacob's well or spring and Christ as the source of living water is crucial to the meaning of the whole passage, even though in the end it has to be admitted that this cannot be conclusively maintained solely on the basis of the linguistic evidence. So the linguistic work done on the text with the aid of the various *instruments de travail* was in the end unavailing—the text mocks!

As well as its historical, geographical and linguistic context, the text is also situated within a context of interpretation, arising from such a context and creating such a context. Arising from such a context, for the text is an interpretation of the significance of Jesus of Nazareth. It is a moot question whether and to what extent John's gospel is an interpretation of previous interpretations or not. With the synoptics the question is simpler, and a good synopsis (such as Aland's *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*) gives one immediate access to the history of interpretation within the New Testament. But Aland has no parallels to John 4. Aileen Guilding in her *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* has suggested that the gospel writer is meditating on the significance of Jesus in the light of the ancient Palestinian lectionary system and that chapter 4 is to be understood as a reflection of the well and water themes of Genesis 24 and Exodus 2 (in the first of which, incidentally, the LXX uses both *pēgē* and *phrear*. Miss Guilding's book, though always illuminating, is problematic, and for this text offers little more than the notes in the Jerusalem Bible supply. (An examination of the cross-references in the various English translations can often be helpful too in situating a text within the scriptures themselves; and in this the Revised Version is probably the best.)

The text also creates a tradition of interpretation which is part of the context in which both preacher and congregation hear and read it. Christians, of any tradition, read the Bible in the Church; they do not come at it alone, or alone with the congregation in which they happen to be, or alone with the rest of the Church of their own time. The possibilities of understanding open to them are determined partly by the way in which the text has been understood through the centuries in the Church. In our own day we are conscious, too, that the Christian tradition is wider than the Roman Catholic tradition; and the tradition of interpretation during the Reform and amongst Anglicans and Protestants of our own day is also not without significance. For the fourth gospel, Augustine's *Homilies* are invaluable and are easily available in the nineteenth-century translation of the Fathers. Augustine sees a distinction in this passage between 'well' and 'spring' but in the end makes little of it. It was Augustine, however, who was responsible for the inclusion of the lines from the *Dies Irae* in the sermon: 'for thee Jesus was wearied from his journey; . . . he sought us by his weakness'. St Thomas' lectures on John are also rewarding. The *Catena Aurea* provides a useful selection of patristic commentaries on any gospel text. The Reformation is probably best represented by the classical commentary on the New Testament, Bengel's *Gnomon*, full of interesting asides and incisive remarks, often on the basis of some linguistic point; for John 4, however, it offered nothing of any particular interest. Amongst modern commentaries which repaid perusal were the major Barthian commentary on John, Hoskyns and Davey's *The Fourth Gospel*, Dodd's commentary referred to earlier, Lightfoot's *St John's Gospel, a Commentary* and Dr Marsh's Penguin commentary. There is an excellent Roman Catholic commentary by Raymond E. Brown on the first twelve chapters of John in the Anchor Bible series. In reading such works as these the preacher is not of course immediately seeking ideas for his sermon, still less anything in the way of a sermon script, but is making himself at home in that hermeneutical milieu that the text has created in the historical and on-going life of the Christian community, a milieu which is the text's, which belongs to the text, and in abstraction from which the text can only be misread.

But for all that, when the text becomes sermon, when it becomes word of God, when it happens in the preaching, it is a once-and-for-all event, occurring between this man and this congregation, here, now. Even so, the preacher and the congregation are also rooted in history, a history which is not simply that of the text or that of the Church, but in world history and in their own particular biographies. It is this man and not another who is letting the text loose; it is these people and not others who are responding to it. So *how* the text becomes proclamation is unique, and that makes the printing and reading of a sermon highly problematic. To print a sermon is to ask it to live and breathe in an atmosphere in which it has not evolved; to read a sermon is altogether different from hearing it, even if it was (as this was) a sermon written out in full before it was delivered. The text becomes word of God in the space between the preacher and the congregation, which is not the same space as that between the printed page and even the interested reader. This particular sermon, for example, was delivered by a man who preached regularly week by week to the same congregation who heard it, a congregation who were accustomed to the opportunity of questioning and criticizing and discussing the sermons they heard, a congregation whose particular problems in giving the obedience of faith to the word of God were known by the preacher, a congregation who knew the particular concerns of the preacher and so could read between the lines of what he said. The congregation and the preacher are rooted in the history of the relationship between them. That relationship includes the past and the future, memories and expectations, in particular the immediate past and the immediate future. So it is that this sermon refers back to the readings and the sermons of the previous two Sundays and forward to the remainder of Lent and to Easter. Part of the space between the preacher and the congregation in which the sermon happens are the previous and subsequent Sundays. It is because the rest of the Sundays of Lent take their gospel readings from John that the preacher has something to say about the overall understanding of the fourth gospel, especially in the light of the liturgical season, which also situates the eucharistic assembly on the third Sunday morning in Lent. And the space includes, too, the secular occupations of the congregation, their level of literacy, their family situation, their leisure interests, their sense of community with the non-Christian world, with other members of the congregation, with the Roman Catholic Church in its ordinary institutional framework, and their familiarity with the scriptures. The present sermon was delivered to a non-parochial congregation in a university city; it was composed of university dons, atomic scientists, farmers, teachers, probation officers, undergraduates, and many 'Catholics in the pew'. What most of them had in common was that they were fairly young married people with families, though by no means all were such. It was a congregation seeking renewal in worship and in understanding of the faith in the light of the gospel and of the Council. It had a strong sense of community within itself, but had yet to rediscover an equally strong sense of fellowship with the everyday structures of the Catholic Church. And like all Christian communities, it was seeking the gospel, seeking to be set free from the law of sin and death, looking for liberation. And from that need the text comes to expression as above all an offer of the free gift of renewal if people will only have it so; the sermon aims at that gospelling of the gospel of God which is the priest's *primum officium* (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* § 4).

And so also it aims to be *verbi revelati accomodata praedicatio* (*Gaudium et Spes* § 44). *Accommodated* not in some mechanical sense, not as though the preacher first engaged in an exegesis of the text, discovered what it meant as it stood, and then 'applied' it to the needs and mentality of the congregation. Rather there is a single process, and the text becomes word of God in that situation which identifies the preacher and the congregation. Like Stephen Spender's plant, which does not 'concentrate on developing mechanically in one direction, but develops in many directions, towards the warmth and light with its leaves, and towards the water with its roots, all at the same time', the question which the preacher brings to the text, and in response to which the text happens as word, is the question which the relationship of the preacher and the congregation *is*.

'If it is to influence the mind of the listener more fruitfully, . . . preaching must not present God's word in a general and abstract fashion only, but it must apply the perennial truth of the gospel to the concrete circumstances of life' (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* § 4). But 'apply' in fact suggests that wooden method which is the death of preaching, and application to 'the concrete circumstances of life' is a difficult notion to come to terms with. It can so easily be taken as an invitation to moralize, to turn the gospel into a new law. There are congregations, too, in which the only way for a preacher to be concrete is for him to be abstract, in which too immediate an application to 'the concrete circumstances of life' would spell the end of his effective ministry. To spell out the implications of a sermon in particular and immediate moral terms could with certain congregations run the risk of the sermon not being the word of God to that congregation, not really happening to them, not being heard. This is not because the congregation is taking offence at the word of the cross (that can always happen and is the evangelical scandal of preaching) but because it is unable to comprehend the over-particular and as a result of its situation in a more or less literary or scientific environment can only work and be changed by the general and the non-directive. This result of the Gutenberg culture may or may not be desirable, but the culture remains one in which very many of us willy-nilly live and move. Preaching is certainly not just instruction; kerygma and didache are not simply interchangeable; the content of the sermon should make contact with the hearer as a moral being, as one who is called on by it to decision. True, and yet this may only be possible if the preaching is cool, in both senses, non-emotive and leaving space for the congregation to find itself. It needs to be offered rather than thrust at people.

This does not mean that a sermon should be some sort of pre-Leavis lit. crit. In the sermon the text comes out from its obscurity into the present as the word of God. The *text* comes out; it is the *text* which must speak, which must be God's word on the congregation and the times. In the craft of the sermon, too, *ars celare artem*. The labour of preparation, the wrestling with the text should not be obvious. People are not concerned to hear of the preacher's intellectual ability, but only to listen for God's word. And so the authorities consulted, the Greek and Hebrew background, the patristic interpretations, the modern commentaries, all fall away and disappear from view. They have had their part in the initial understanding of the text, they have helped the text in its fullness take a grasp on the preacher, and now through him it endeavours to lay hold on the congregation, to challenge them to the decision and the obedience of faith.

I.R.F.E.D.—Struggle for Development[1]

by Vincent Cosmao, O.P.

I.R.F.E.D.—*Institut international de recherche et de formation en vue du développement harmonisé*, the International Institute for Research and Training towards Integrating Development—was founded in 1958

[1] Translated by Erik Pearse, World Poverty Secretary, C.I.I.R.