

## Wrestling with the Word—3

### by Andrew Lascaris, O.P.

*Homily for the fifteenth Sunday of the year 1970 (12th July).*

*Readings: Amos 7, 12–15; Eph. 1, 3–14; Mark 6, 7–13.*

There are many things which one can admire in Jesus, whether one is a Christian or not. But in some things Jesus is rather primitive and does not seem to know what he is doing.

I have no doubt Jesus would be turned down if he were to apply for the job of sales manager. At least, if he dared tell how he is accustomed to 'sell' his own message. His method seems entirely wrong.

Of course one can say: 'Jesus is not selling soap or encyclopaedias; he is bringing a religious message.' This may well be so, but does that make any difference? A message is a message. There are lots of people who sell religious and political messages. They want to make us their allies and they do it well.

To send one's disciples away to preach without any material provisions seems rather irresponsible. Jesus' order not to wear two tunics looks fussy. Much planning is not done, either. You just stay where you are received without even wondering whether there are not more strategic points from which to work. When people refuse to listen to you, you simply leave and do not really try to force on them the idea that they would be much happier if they listened to you.

Sending our preachers in rather poor conditions may be a gimmick, but not planning carefully where you stay and for how long, and refusing to put in too much effort, suggest that Jesus' preaching methods could be improved on. His message may be interesting but he does not know how to sell it.

Well, perhaps he does not want to sell it. Perhaps he does not want to sell anything. Would this not be the real background of this rather odd story?

Jesus wants to preach, and more than that: he wants to act accordingly. He preaches that God will heal the world and will set us free from everything which keeps us imprisoned, possesses us and hinders our freedom. Our world is beset by the demons of violence and hate; in ourselves, under the surface, powers are active about which we would prefer to remain silent: aggression, selfishness, competitiveness. We are liable to illness and often live in fear of what the future may bring.

Jesus promises that God wants to set us free, and heal us. Jesus himself makes this promise true by healing and liberating people, and he sends his disciples to do the same.

Is Jesus selling anything? No, he is not. The way Jesus sends his

disciples shows that he does not want to sell anything. His disciples should not try, either. They have the gift of healing and liberating people, but it is a gift. They have received it free, they should give it away free. They do not really possess it, it is something they have received without having asked for it. They cannot boast about it, they cannot use it as if it were something of their own, they cannot make money out of it, they cannot restrict it and adapt it to their own plans. They have received freely, they should give freely. They should not try to sell anything; they just offer it to anybody who wants to receive it. They are not allowed to exclude people because what they have to offer is not something of their own, but a gift from God. It is much greater than they are. Its working goes far beyond their own efforts.

It is the same on the part of the people who listen to the preaching of the disciples of Jesus and accept the gift which is offered. If it is not possible to sell God's gift, it is not possible to buy it either. As soon as we say, 'Well, alright, I take it. How much do you want for it?', we cannot receive it. It is just impossible to possess God's healing power, his love and generosity, as we can possess houses and cars.

We cannot say: 'Alright, if you, God, offer me this, I shall do that.' We are not offered a contract, we are given something free, with no obligations and without secret clauses. This is rather frightening. We are so used to paying for everything that it is frightening to be in a situation in which we are offered something for which we are not allowed to pay. Of course we may refuse but the offer has been made and we have to account for our refusal to accept it. After all, it is an important gift: the gift of being able to heal the world, one another, and so ourselves. We have to make up our mind about accepting or refusing it.

Why can we not buy God's healing power? And when we have received it, why can we not sell it?

The way this healing power is transmitted says something about its contents as well. What we are offered is precisely God's generosity and love. God wants to be generous. We may be annoyed about this, but this is how God is. He wants to be generous and give us a share in his generosity.

With generosity we cannot tamper. If we accept God's generosity, his desire to heal us, we cannot help becoming generous ourselves. When he is liberating us from what possesses us and keeps us imprisoned we cannot do anything but share this gift out and liberate other people: liberate people from their fear of us, from loneliness, even from illness.

God's generosity cannot be sold, it can only be offered. God's generosity cannot be bought, it can only be received.

The generosity of God can only be made known if it is preached. We who have received the promise that God will heal us, we should

offer it to other people. There is no need to preach our faith as if we had to sell something. We have just to offer it by healing divisions wherever we meet with them and in the way we feel we can. Whenever we are asked why we try to be relaxed, protest against any form of discrimination, try to bring people together, we can answer by telling the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

We cannot sell the gospel; we cannot buy it, either. We can only offer it and hope that it will be listened to and understood, first of all by ourselves, and then by other people also.

### *The Preparation*

The fifteenth Sunday of the year will be still to come when this issue of *New Blackfriars* is published. The homily has thus been written for this occasion. It will probably never be given in the present form but it has been written as a homily for a particular Sunday and for a concrete congregation.

The gospel reading itself is not particularly exciting. It is not one of those parts of the New Testament one really likes to preach about. In the new lectionary it just appears on the fifteenth Sunday, and here we are, we have to preach and to show that it is God's word of liberation. It may well be that we feel that it would be much better to preach about something else. The danger of doing this is that we finish up with saying the things we like to say. We have to confront ourselves and the people we preach to with the gospel as it is, in its fulness. There is reason for criticizing the new lectionary but trying to improve on it is out of the question. The readings of the fifteenth Sunday of the year belong to Scripture as much as the readings of Easter, Whitsun or Christmas. The least we can do is bind ourselves to the word of God.

The new lectionary offers three readings. Obviously it is not necessary to preach on them all in one sermon and we have the fullest freedom to preach on the first and second reading. In this case we have chosen the most obvious one: the reading from the gospel of St Mark.

We read the text of the gospel and we read it again. Our first impulse may well be to run to our bookcase or to the library and to take out a commentary on St Mark. Something which could stop us doing this would be that we do not possess a commentary on St Mark at all. After all, books are expensive and it is not easy to find one's way in the sea of biblical publications. Perhaps I may suggest here that it might well be a good idea to share a library with several parishes. A common fund could be started and advice from theologians and scholars sought to set up a small but select library which would really provide us with the tools we need. Preaching is our main form of contact with most of our parishioners. Spending money on books which will really help us to preach the word of God cannot be a waste.

Nevertheless I would oppose the idea of finding a commentary as quickly as possible. Commentaries are useful but they can prevent us from being creative ourselves. Especially, a gospel reading such as Mark 6, 7–13 is almost too simple. We can hardly expect long and profound commentaries on the story of Jesus sending out his disciples. Moreover, a lot of exegesis does not help in preaching because it consists in mere literary and historical criticism. We ourselves are looking for the good news and literary and historical criticism is only useful for us as far as it really helps us discover the way the good news is preached in this or that particular reading. One does not need to be a biblical scholar, a reader of foreign languages or a clever theologian in order to be able to preach a decent sermon.

Only three things are necessary.

First of all one needs to have a good general knowledge of the Bible. It is, for instance, important to know that all the writings of the New Testament have been written in the perspective of the resurrection of Jesus. The gospels especially have to be read backwards in order to be understood. If we are not conscious of this we are in danger of falsifying God's word. We have to know something about historical development, the difference between the eschatology of St Paul and that of St John, the dispute between the Jews and the early Church about the value and place of the law, the situation in which a letter or gospel was written, and similar things.

Real knowledge of the Bible is only acquired by reading it again and again. It is not so much a matter of getting acquainted with chapter and verse as of being permeated by the spirit of the Bible. Reading Holy Scripture means conversing with prophets and apostles, and he who lives in the company of prophets and apostles does not need to be afraid of saying something in the pulpit which would be against the biblical message. He may interpret a text wrongly but here he is in good company with a lot of commentators, at least if we may believe the scholars themselves who spend much time criticizing one another. Seldom will he really miss entirely what is being said because his sensitivity to what is said in the Bible at large will help him to understand the particular reading on which he is supposed to preach.

This brings us to a second point. Preaching is making the story of Jesus of Nazareth alive again in our time. This presupposes a good knowledge of the story of Jesus and its interpretation. Continual demands are being made on us by other people; we may feel it is impossible to do any serious study. No doubt people will understand us when we say that we would like not to be disturbed if possible on certain days or at certain hours. We cannot dispense ourselves from a continuous study of theology.

The best way of developing or keeping interest in theology is to specialize in one subject. Biblical studies are the most obvious field.

Even without a thorough knowledge of Hebrew and Greek we can make a serious study of the Bible. Literature on the Bible is so large that the only difficulty will be to make a choice in what is offered us.

It may well be that exegesis does not appeal to us. The study of the Fathers, medieval theologians and more modern ones will be at least as fruitful. It is probably better to commit ourselves to the study of a theologian who has become something of a classic than to read merely what is poured out by theologians who are fashionable. Cardinal Newman is still not much studied in this country. He is better known abroad than here, and some of his works are more easily available in foreign languages than in English. Some of the contemporary theologians will probably survive the several changes in Church and society to be still valuable reading for a long time to come. The names of K. Rahner, E. Schillebeeckx and H. Küng are the first which flash upon me, but several others could be mentioned. Protestant theologians are not any longer forbidden ground for Catholics and they may help us to get a little away from our usual jargon.

If we are not able to keep our interest in theology, Church history and even more 'practical' studies such as psychology or sociology may be helpful as long as we relate them to our pastoral work. It is of course an illusion to think that our study will suddenly make preaching much easier. What we may have been reading may not have any direct connexion with the Sunday gospel. Nevertheless it will be of influence on our preaching activities. It will come through in our homilies that we have read something more than the morning papers. It is not sufficient to study just the hour before making our Sunday sermon or merely in connexion with our preaching. Study will have an impact on our whole life and in this way on our preaching.

The third thing which forms the basis of our preaching activity is sensitivity to the needs and desires of the people to whom we are preaching. Here the parish priest or curate has a great advantage over the man who spends most of his time in study. He meets people, and listening to people can teach us even more than thick books with hundreds of footnotes. Listening to people, however, presupposes study, because without study of Bible and theology we are not really able to interpret what people are saying.

When we know that we have to preach next Sunday it is worth while looking at the readings of this Sunday as soon as possible. Pondering on them while we are doing our ordinary work, we shall become very sensitive to everything which may have some bearing on our preaching. We shall often be able to refer in our homily to situations we have come across.

The greatest problem we are facing at present is that our religious language is often not, or badly, understood. Words such as grace, temptation, heaven, judgment, sin have become so ecclesiastical

that they seem to lose all their meaning as soon as they are used outside the church and the presbytery. It is a very good exercise to avoid these words in our preaching. This will force us to find a new language and a new theology. At first we may find it almost impossible to preach without these well-known words. After some time we shall find means to overcome our problems. Later we may re-introduce the old words again but meanwhile they have undergone some change themselves.

It is a great advantage to dispose of a rich vocabulary. Being a foreigner myself I always feel it as a strain not to be able to play with the language in which I preach. Admittedly, many people who listen to our sermons have a poor vocabulary too. It is a mistake, however, to think that we have to come down to our knees before we shall be understood. Words such as 'existentialism' or 'symbolic logic' have to be avoided but a good use of language will keep up the attention.

The purpose of sermons is not first of all to instruct or to exhort. We have to proclaim the good news. The gospel should reach not only the minds of people but also their hearts, and the other way round. Sermons are to be enjoyed and have to be a part of a whole liturgy which is enjoyable. Words are soon forgotten but the atmosphere of festival is long remembered. A homily can help considerably in creating communication, a feeling of togetherness, and at the same time room for prayer. A good sermon and a good liturgy have to go together.

We have made all these rather general remarks about preaching because sensitivity to Bible, theology and congregation are an essential presupposition of every preaching activity. We now must return to our text from the gospel of St Mark. We have pointed out that our first move was to stop ourselves running to our bookcase and consulting a commentary. We just read Mark 6, 7–13 and its context.

Mark 6, 7–13 follows on the story of Jesus being rejected in his own country: people just refuse to believe that God offers his friendship through their brethren, they want something more special (14th Sunday). Jesus sends his disciples out in the text we have to preach on and this is followed by the story of the beheading of St John the Baptist: preaching the word of God can be a matter of life and death. In Mark 6, 30 the disciples return to Jesus. A great crowd follows Jesus and his apostles: the word of God will gather all people around Jesus (16th Sunday). The multiplication of bread is the sign that God will bring all people together to eat bread in his kingdom (Mark 6, 35–44). In the new lectionary this is replaced by St John's story of the multiplication of bread and Jesus' sermon at this event. For four Sundays we have to preach on the Eucharist (17th–20th Sunday). This is certainly one of the points where the new lectionary



should be criticized. However, it may give us an opportunity of speaking about several aspects of the Eucharist.

Reading the context of Mark 6, 7–13 makes us understand that we have to say something about Christian preaching itself. Preaching seems to be the subject of this gospel reading. We now look at the parallel places in St Luke and St Matthew. I found St Matthew most helpful. Matthew 10 is entirely devoted to the subject of Christian preaching. The ideas of Mark 6, not being received where you had expected to be welcome, being sent out, the danger of persecution, are all found here too. Especially Matthew 10, 8, ‘You received without pay, give without pay’, seemed to me to shed light on the reasons why Jesus sent out his disciples without money and other provisions.

The Jerusalem Bible gives two important references here. Isaiah 55, 1 says that in the messianic time everybody can buy without money: ‘Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.’ Acts 8, 20 is the story about Simon who wanted to buy the power to give the Holy Spirit. Peter answers: ‘Your silver perishes with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money.’

One cannot buy God’s gift of the Holy Spirit and thus one cannot sell it either. This suddenly gave me the understanding of the text I hoped to find. When the word of God is preached it cannot be done as if one is selling something. Preaching is not the same as setting up a campaign to increase sales. Jesus is not a sales manager. The way the gospel is preached has to be in accordance with its contents. What is offered is God’s love and this cannot be sold or bought.

Obviously the good news in this gospel is not that we are not allowed to have two suits. What Jesus wants to make clear is that the word of God cannot be brought to people by ‘selling’ it or by forcing it upon people. The reason for this is that God wants to bring freedom, liberation, generosity to people. We are justified by faith. Salvation is given by God’s grace, not on ground of our works. We are here at the heart of the gospel, and the particular reading we have to preach on brings this out in its own way.

This is what has to be said to people on the fifteenth Sunday of the year. It can be said in many ways. In fact we do not refer to Isaiah or Acts in our homily, nor to the first reading from Amos which easily could be used. In the process of writing we did not want to be too exegetical this time. Nothing forbids us, however, from doing so another time when we have to preach about the same text.

I myself was rather struck by Acts and the idea of buying and selling. The beginning of the sermon was now easy. Jesus as an inefficient sales manager might evoke interest and make people decide to listen to the rest of the homily as well. After this we had to say that the gospel cannot be sold and that this is reflected in the

way Jesus sends out his disciples. The disciples have only received the gospel, they could not buy it. The third thing which had to be said would be that it is impossible to buy God's word. Here the gospel makes clear that receiving the word or refusing it is not without consequences. So we do the same. Why can the word of God not be sold or bought? Because of its contents: our justification by faith, and not by works. This is thus our next point. We finish the homily by applying this briefly to our own situation.

During the process of typing out the sermon some new ideas came up. It is better not to use them if they distract us from the main theme we have already chosen. I changed the structure of the sermon a little by inserting after the introduction something about the contents of the word of God. People might think that our talking about not selling or buying the word of God was rather abstract if we did not say something first about its contents. The gospel reading itself talks about the good news in terms of driving out unclean spirits, and we tried to do the same. Words such as 'possess' and 'competitiveness' prepare us already for the idea of selling and buying.

Every part of the sermon could easily be said in another and better way. If there are elections in this country in June or the beginning of July it would not be difficult to rephrase the beginning of the sermon. Several words and ideas are repeated several times in the sermon which gives it a greater unity. Sometimes words are combined which seem to contradict one another. 'Being relaxed' and 'protest' is a strange combination. It makes sense, however, and it may help to make the homily more interesting. These things should come spontaneously.

Not everything has to be explained or developed. Other sermons are still to come and we are allowed to place emphasis on one theme rather than trying to say everything. It may well be important to say most things in a rather loose and informal way. We have to know exactly what we want to say, or rather what the gospel requires from us to say. But when we are saying it, it should happen in the spirit of the gospel itself, in the spirit of freedom and spontaneity.

After having thought out the sermon, we looked around in some commentaries to see whether or not our interpretation was entirely wrong. The commentaries which we found did not say much at all about Mark 6, 7–13. It is doubtful whether they would have given the inspiration we needed. Fortunately they often give us real help in interpreting a difficult text. One should, however, not expect everything from them. Some confidence in one's own creativity is not a bad thing.

This sermon was completed within three hours of seeing the text of the gospel. We shall not win the first prize in rhetoric with the result. This sermon will not go down in history as one of the major achievements of twentieth-century homiletics. We have not to be afraid that next Sunday coaches from all over England will come to



listen to our sermon. We shall not leave the pulpit under a load of flowers thrown to us by an enthusiastic public. It would be worrying if this were to happen. Probably we would have sold the word.

It is a very ordinary sermon. People may have forgotten about it by the end of the mass, but there is a fair chance that they will have enjoyed it. We have tried to preach God's word. What the result will be we do not know. Fortunately God's word is more powerful than our words. There is no need to sell God's word and we have to prevent every suggestion that God's word can be bought. We can now begin thinking about next Sunday's sermon.

## **The Eucharist: Development or Deviation—II**

by Geoffrey Preston, O.P.

The present renewal of the eucharistic liturgy can be seen as an attempt to remove some of the long-term effects of the imposition of extrinsic rites and ceremonies on the once-and-for-all given sign which is the means by which believers have access to the mystery of God in Christ. But what is that given sign? Bread and wine, certainly, but bread and wine precisely as bread and wine, in their full reality, bread demanding to be eaten to be bread and wine requiring to be drunk to become what it is. Not two substances which could be any other two substances, which could be say wood and iron, but bread and wine to be eaten and drunk. The sign is not therefore simply the two substances of bread and wine but all that these substances involve in the very understanding of them as bread and wine: people, and people to eat and drink them. The sign is the meal. The sign is the gathering of people eating and drinking the bread and wine, and the present liturgical reforms aim at making that sign as transparent as possible.

Questions can of course be raised as to just how little of such a sign there has to be in order for it still to constitute the authentic sign. What is meant by 'people'? Does there have to be anybody there at all for the sign to be the sign? And if obviously there has to be (since a sign of this sort is a sign only for people), then how many people? Three or two, or one, and any one at all or some special kind of one? And does everybody have to eat *and* drink, or can people just eat *or* drink, and if so, must anybody at all both eat and drink, and may some people neither eat nor drink? And what is meant by 'bread' and 'wine'? Will apple wine count as such, or not, and how strong does the wine have to be? All these questions can indeed be raised, but it would be a mistake to make the answers to