

## 36/88 Role of the Sermon

### Resolution 36/88

1. "In the light of the Report of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission re 8/87 the Ministry of Women' (Standing Committee Report, 1988 pages 86-89), especially sections 3.7, 4.3, 4.5 and 4.6, Synod respectfully requests a committee appointed by the Archbishop to advise the next session of this Synod as to the status, role and function of the sermon where prescribed or permitted in the Book of Common Prayer and in An Australian Prayer Book".

### Members of the Committee Appointed by the Archbishop

2. The Archbishop invited Canons L.F. Bartlett and P.F. Jensen, the Rev Dr W.J. Lawton and Deaconess M.A. Rodgers to form this committee. Canon Bartlett was asked to act a convenor.

### Background

3. The report of the Doctrine Commission re 8/87 (the Ministry of Women) opined *inter alia* "That a woman is not permitted to assume the office of teacher within the congregation" (3.7) but indicated "that a woman may 'speak' in church in a number of ways, e.g. to prophesy, exhort or testify" (4.2). Furthermore, the Report stated that "every Christian has a teaching role within the congregation, according to Colossians 3:16" (3.5). As regards the interpretation of "congregation" in 3.7, the Report suggested that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 applies to "family congregations" (4.6) and in the light of that it would be "appropriate to appoint women as chaplains in Women's institutions, authorised to preach and preside at the Lord's Supper" (4.6).

### Considerations

4. The committee noted the resolution under which it was appointed and decided to seek evidence from references to sermons and homilies in the Book of Common Prayer and An Australian Prayer Book, and to consider examples of sixteenth century sermons and homilies contemporary with the former book. Before doing this, the committee gave further consideration to the interpretation of the words "teach" and "authority" as used in 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

### Teaching and Authority

5. In 1 Timothy 2:12 Paul places a prohibition on women "teaching" and "having authority" over men. Is Paul prohibiting two different activities or one only? Many modern exegetes see here a fusion of two ideas and understand Paul to imply that "to teach" is an exercise of authority. Further exploration of the Pastorals leads to the conclusion that this teaching of authority is the task of a bishop/elder of the congregation who is "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2), a teacher of "sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1), and a ruler who teaches (1 Timothy 5:17). This is the activity of a responsible teaching figure in congregational life.

6. Do we equate this authoritative teaching in the Pauline writing with the activity of "preaching" as we know it in the church today?

7. C.H. Dodd saw a precise difference between "missionary preaching" *kerygma* and "congregational teaching" *didache*. Few theologians today would easily recognise his distinction, for it is now generally accepted that these biblical terms are often interchangeable.

8. Grudem distinguishes between "prophecy" and "teaching". For him, prophecy is the declaration of a revelation imparted by God. Thus the prophet would be able to speak to the immediate needs of the moment when the congregation was assembled. It was something less than authoritative teaching, for the words of prophecy needed to be weighed for truthfulness. The gift of prophecy implied no position of leadership in the congregation.

9. In contrast, Grudem describes teaching as often "simply an explanation or application of Scripture", but also something based on that which was equal to Scripture in authority, that is, "a received body of apostolic instructions". This teaching was the repetition and explanation of authentic apostolic teaching and provided the doctrinal and ethical norms by which the church was regulated. It was to be obeyed without question.

10. The Sunday sermon today may be seen as a word of exhortation, something akin to prophecy, an evangelistic address, a word of testimony, an instruction in doctrine, an exploration of a passage of scripture, or a mixture of these elements.

11. The teacher in the New Testament world was vastly different from our contemporary notion of the role of teacher. Students were expected to follow "the way", and the word of the teacher was handed on as authoritative, and obeyed by the community. In contrast, "modern teaching is usually a process whereby an expert is hired to transmit a skill or information to students who are free to ignore what is taught" (Clark 1980 page 196). Nothing could be further removed from the activity envisaged by St Paul.

### **The Sermon in Protestant England**

12. The sixteenth century was an age that drew a connection between learning and preaching. The Ordinal indicates that candidates for the diaconate were to be "sufficiently instructed in holy scripture". Deacons and priests were to be "apt and meet for their learning". Though most of the clergy were ill trained at the time, the efforts made by Whitgift and Grindal to raise the theological literacy of the clergy testify to their desire to encourage preaching and informed preaching at that.

13. Early writers such as Latimer leave no doubt about the value they placed on preaching as God's instrument in converting, rebuking and strengthening; the business of the preacher was to explain what God had said and to apply it. Archbishop Grindal laboured to produce a preaching ministry that gave a central place to the exposition of Scripture.

14. The works of Latimer, Sandys and others give examples of episcopal preaching. Though they mostly differed from our current style of exposition, the sermons of this period aimed at teaching truth through the explanation and application of Biblical texts.

### **The Sermon and the Homilies**

15. The *Book of Homilies* of 1547 was a further indication of the Protestant expectation that the open Bible would be accompanied by the preaching of the word of God. They were to be read at church each Sunday or holy day if a sermon were not preached. Recognising that not all ministers had "the gift of preaching sufficiently to instruct the people", these homilies ensured that "wholesome and godly exhortations" would be heard in every congregation.

16. They conveyed ideas in a reasoning tone. Phrases such as "no man can deny", "by that reason", "I shall show you", reflected an appeal to reason rather than an appeal to the authority of the preacher. "Let us" and "ought" were more likely to be found than "must", and the tone was hortatory rather than commanding. "Let us thank God", "let us be glad", "let us hear, read and know" were piled up in a strong appeal to conscience. The context of prayer is evident from the customary conclusions in the form of doxological ascriptions.

17. Verses of scripture were quoted and scriptural images used. These were applied to the subject in hand rather than being submitted to exegesis in the modern sense. As with the sermon, the authority of these homilies rested in scripture rather than in the person of any ploughman or prelate.

### **The Sermon and the Prayer Book**

18. Scripture was to be central in Anglican Liturgy. The regular public reading from Lectionary and Psalter was designed to increase the congregation's knowledge of God, stirring them up to godliness and making them "more able to exhort others by wholesome doctrine and to confute them that were adversaries to the truth".

19. With the focus of the public service on the reading and hearing of God's Word, it was inevitable that the sermon would gain new dignity. The Sermon, ceased to be occasional - that is, serving the needs of a particular occasion (as it had been in the Middle Ages) and now became an indispensable part of Sunday morning church.

### **The Liturgical Sermon**

20. The rubric following the Nicene Creed in the 1662 Prayer Book Communion Service made the preaching of a sermon or homily obligatory: "Then shall follow the Sermon, or one of the Homilies already set forth, or hereafter to be set forth by authority". This rubric derived from 1549 where the sermon or homily could, amongst other things, be an exhortation "to the worthy receiving of the Holy Sacrament". It was to be situated with the Creed so as to conclude the Bible reading segment of the service.

21. Though not necessarily a scripture exposition, the sermon emphasised the "Word orientation" of the priest as it had been underscored in the Ordinal. The priest was "to teach, to permonish, to feed, to provide for the Lord's family". "Doctrine and exhortation, taken out of holy scripture" were to be used. The priest was to use the scriptures "to instruct the people". "Both public and private monitions and exhortations" were to be used "to drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's Word". All of these activities would have found their vehicle in sermons or homilies coupled with the exhortations of the Prayer Book. In short, the priest was to "preach the word of God".

22. With the Reformation, a new preaching tradition began to emerge. No-one was born Protestant, they were made so by the Scriptures and some sermons reflected struggles with Rome, with a volatile society and with Truth itself.

### **The Sermon and Canonical Obedience**

23. "Sermon" and "homily" derived their legitimacy from the teaching of the Church rather than from the independent determination of the preacher. The reformers required that the sermon be grounded in God's Word and conform to the teaching of the Articles. The sermon, though given some latitude in expression, must

not contravene authorised doctrine. Whatever else therefore a sermon might achieve, it must be based on acceptable theology.

24. Canons 36, 49, 50, 51, and 52, together with Article 23, insist that only those "lawfully called and sent", "examined and approved" or "licensed" may preach. Though aspects of these Canons are no longer applicable, they indicate the intention of the Prayer Book reformers to confine preaching to those duly authorised by the Church. Preaching was to be limited to those who were licensed in consequence of their having subscribed to a doctrinal and polity test. By this, assent to the Thirty-nine Articles, the Prayer Book and Ordinal were declared. Any preacher who by sermon subsequently disagreed from the word of God or the Articles could expect Episcopal action to be taken. Preaching is therefore within the limits of Canonical obedience.

#### **The Sermon and An Australian Prayer Book**

25. An Australian Prayer Book continues the preaching tradition of the Book of Common Prayer, but in keeping with the general tenor of that Book gives more freedom to the minister. Its desired location after the lections in the Communion Service and its permissible location after any one lection suggests that its purpose is the exposition of the read text of scripture. As well as retaining its traditional place at Communion, the sermon is also a recognised addition to Morning and Evening Prayer. The rubric in "Another Order of Service" facilitates and encourages the exposition of a passage of scripture.

#### **Conclusion**

26. By way of status, the foregoing would suggest that the sermon is an indispensable part of the Divine Service of a congregation. Its role and *function* may be varied but never trivial. Indeed, the ordained preacher is accountable for what is said as a matter of canon law quite apart from conscience.

For and on behalf of the Committee

CANON L.F. BARTLETT  
*Convenor*

20 June 1989