

Sermon on Sermons

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Exodus 1:8-2:10, Psalm 124, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

Introduction

In my annual All Saints sermon I've used the time to ponder some basic faith and worship topics. Last year was prayer; in 2006, music; 2005 was sacraments and before that, ministry. For each of these I turned to the Book of Common Prayer for guidance. This year's topic is "sermon". What is a sermon? Why do we do a sermon? Who does sermons? When?

One of the realities of being Episcopalians is we are blessed (and maybe cursed) by having the Book of Common Prayer. In the BCP we have a clear, coherent legacy of faith, and guidance for faith practice. But because of the BCP we are "cursed" because we can get lazy. It's all there already so we don't have to work at it.

Well today we really have to work it! Why? Because when I went to the BCP and turned to page 845 — the Catechism — guess what! NOTHING on sermon. Yeesh. What is an Episcopalian to do? Figure it out by ourselves? OK, let's give it a try

What Is A Sermon?

Being a 21st century computer literate person, the first thing one does is *Google*. And what do you get? Tons of stuff. Wikipedia says a sermon is an oration by a prophet or member of the clergy, addressing a Biblical, theological, or religious topic. Good grief, this reminds me of growing up Methodist, and going to Ocean Grove, NJ camp meeting and hearing preachers go on 30, 45 or even 60 minutes. I found another list of definitions, the common theme being *talking*. Then something on types of sermons: topical, biographical, expository, redemptive, historic and, yup, evangelistic. Hello Billy Graham! Then a long piece on *homiletics*, which is the application of the general principles of rhetoric to the specific department of public preaching. Given we're starting the national political conventions I figured rhetoric was their bailiwick.

So *googling* wasn't hugely helpful, at least to me. So I went back to the BCP? We know that a sermon is not a sacrament, by reading pages 857 and 858 about sacraments. That a sermon is not a sacrament is probably a good thing given how many bad sermons are given!

Is there any guidance on sermons anywhere else in the BCP? If you go to the Order for Holy Eucharist you will find in both Rite I and Rite II the heading **The Sermon**. But nothing to explain it, and nothing in the directions that precede each rite. There is no mention of **sermon** in Morning or Evening Prayer, only a note in the additional directions that a sermon may be preached after the Office. The Good Friday service mentions the **Sermon**. Easter Vigil notes a "homily", though the term also shows up at marriage and burial. The directions for Holy Baptism say that "the bishop, when present, is ... expected to preach the Word." Now maybe that is what a **sermon** is. Maybe a sermon is about the Word. Maybe we are supposed to listen to what was just read (and in the case of the Psalm what we said) and understand it and make use of it.

Preach The Word

So again I ask, what is a sermon? Renato Dantas is the sexton for All Saints. At his church each service the pastor comes to the pulpit at the time for the sermon. Sometimes the pastor does the sermon. Sometimes he points to someone in the congregation, and says “You!” And that person comes forward and preaches. Now that doesn’t take any reading of the BCP or *googling*. It is simply a matter of speaking God’s word. That act — *coming forward* — is a simple, absolutely compelling statement of what faith is about. Each of us—you and you and you and me—each of us is called to preach, simply because each of us is a child of God. So if the finger were to be pointed to you right now, what would you say? How would you speak God’s Word?

It is wonderful that the Scripture is so rich, today and indeed for every service. Let’s look at today’s Gospel. It’s not too much of a stretch to say that Jesus pointed a finger and said, “You!” In this case, because it was just a small group, the “sermon” probably occurred while sitting around in a circle, and was interactive. Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” And the disciples answered. And there was a “sermon”.

Now here is what I take out of that “sermon” and setting. It wasn’t formal, it wasn’t in a Sanctuary, and wasn’t on the Sabbath. Every day, in all kinds of places, you and I get asked that question. We get asked it not so that we can “preach” a sermon, or even have a particularly religious conversation. We get asked that as a matter of the basics of our life. “Why do you do what you do?” And how we answer that question is as critical to our lives — and the life of all humans — as it was to the 12 men to whom Jesus posed that question.



What do we learn from the Gospel? First of all, be ready to answer. Here I’d say, Be ready to answer in both words and deeds. Most of the disciples hemmed and hawed. Simon Peter knew, and spoke the truth, without hesitation. He said: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” He “got it” and said it, no hemming-and-hawing. And so Jesus said, “Yup, you got it right. And now here’s your future. You part of bedrock reality, the foundation of existence. Go and **be** that!” I think each of us is asked that question. When we speak our affirmation, each of us is also made part of bedrock reality, a child of God, a foundation of existence.

What is a sermon? It is your answer to question, “Who is this Jesus?” And as I suggested, actions speak louder than words. So the asking and the answering is rarely so explicit. Our lives are lived the bulk of the week away from this Sanctuary. So the sermons you are called to “preach” occur in the everyday places of your life. And you and you and you and each of us is **called to preach**. Not didactically, but in our actions. You are what you do. Your beliefs show in your actions. Preaching is your life. You are called to have, to be, a firm foundation.

Paul wrote the Romans: “Present your bodies...holy and acceptable to God...so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” And then Paul said each of us will have a role, each of us will be a part of the foundation on which God’s kingdom is built. So, when you are asked, suck it up, be a rock, and for God’s sake, Be The Good News! Jesus **is** the Messiah. Jesus **is** the Son of the living God. Hallelujah!

And God’s people all say **AMEN!**