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Introduction: “Preaching and the Sermon”

Keith A. Francis

“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” Romans 10:14-15 (New International Version)

What is a sermon and why study it? These are two of the fundamental questions a person interested in sermon studies must answer. Without much reflection, the answer to the first question seems obvious. A sermon is “a discourse, usually delivered from a pulpit and based upon a text of Scripture, for the purpose of giving religious instruction or exhortation,” as the *OED* puts it. Thus, *The Mystery of Godliness: A Sermon Preach’d before Her Majesty, at St. James’s Chapel, On Sunday December 9, 1705*¹ is obviously a sermon as is *A Sermon, Preached at St. Bride’s Church, Fleet Street, on Monday evening, April 30, 1827, before the Church Missionary Society*.² The same is true of *The Ideal of a Jewish Minister: Inaugural Sermon...Delivered at the New Synagogue, Great St. Helens, E.C., on Sabbath, 31st August, 5655 - 1895*³ and *Magnificent Services of the Just Imam, the Promised Messiah to Reform the Mutual Controversies and Distorted Beliefs of Muslims: an English Translation of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ḥaḍrat Mirzā Ṭahir Aḥmad, Khalīfatul Masīh IVrta on May 3, 1985 at the Faḍl Mosque, London*.⁴

And yet that simple definition suggested by the *OED* is not enough. Labeling something “a sermon” ought not to qualify it automatically as one; conversely, it is certainly the case that lacking the label “a sermon” does not preclude a religious discourse from being considered a sermon.⁵ And it is the gap between what is *definitely* a sermon and what *may be* a sermon that makes the study of the sermon, and preaching, so interesting.

Examples of sermons in this gap are numerous;⁶ a set of circumstances which occurred at the time of the death of Samuel Wilberforce, bishop of Winchester, is not atypical. Four days before he died in a horse-riding accident, Wilberforce gave an address to his rural deans. While Wilberforce may not have thought of this address as a sermon, he did promise “to write out and print what he had spoken, if while it was still in his memory he could possibly find time for the

¹ The preacher was Lancelot Blackburne, the Dean of Exeter and future Archbishop of York (1724-1753).

² The preacher was Henry Budd, the chaplain at Bridewell Hospital, a hospital and prison in the City of London, and rector of White Roothing in Essex.

³ Solomon Levy, *The Ideal Jewish Minister*, reprinted from *The Jewish Chronicle* (London: Williams, Lea & Co., Ltd., 1920).

⁴ Tahir Ahmad, *Magnificent Services of the Just Imam*, translated by Bashir-ud-Din Shams, revised by Rashida Rana & Naveed Malik (Tilford, Surrey: Published by Nazarat Nashr-o-Isha'at Qadian for Islam International Publications Ltd, 2013).

⁵ See Keith Francis and William Gibson’s comments about the difficulties of categorizing sermons in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689-1901*, ed. Francis and Gibson (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 7-8 & 619-621.

⁶ The sermons of female Muslim preachers in Malaysia is one unusual set of examples. See Norbani Ismail, “Female Muslim Preachers in Malaysia,” YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sK_79BMM-w, accessed September 20, 2019. My thanks to Cipto Wardoyo, doctoral student at Coventry University, UK, for drawing my attention to this.

purpose.”⁷ The promise could not be kept and so the address became a sermon by the clergymen cobbling together “the very words recorded in [their] notes.”⁸ The address could be a sermon and it could be considered Wilberforce’s sermon, but being definitive is problematic: the title of the publication, *He, being dead, yet Speaketh*, is a reference to Wilberforce, not the sermon topic. The content was a review and commentary on “the extreme views and extreme practices which are springing up [in the Church of England]:”⁹ In what sense, then, was this address a sermon and in what sense was it *Wilberforce’s* sermon?

Perhaps it is the nature of religious instruction and exhortation to be somewhat elastic (in terms of being categorized). The aforementioned gap appears in preaching from other traditions as well, not just the Christian and Protestant one. It is worth asking, for example, in what sense is the Buddhist master Venerable Seongcheol’s *Sermon of One Hundred Days* a sermon?¹⁰ It was delivered to an audience in 1967 as a dharma talk;¹¹ it was an exposition and commentary on the religious texts of Indian, Chinese, and Korean Buddhism; and it changed the trajectory of Korean Buddhism by becoming a seminal text in that religion: these characteristics fit the *OED* definition comfortably. On the other hand, to describe the *Sermon of One Hundred Days* as a discourse is stretching the bounds of the word: it was a sermon delivered over many days rather than a specific occasion and the only person who heard the whole talk was the Master who gave it. As can be deduced from this example and the Wilberforce one, scholars of the sermon must approach their subject matter with some flexibility. Not every religious discourse is a sermon, but many discourses may be sermons even though they are not obviously so.

In his classic book on preaching, *The Art of Sermon Construction*, William Sangster argued that “an address is a man talking to men; a sermon is a man speaking *from God*” [Sangster’s italics].¹² Although the authors of the articles in this volume of *Sermon Studies* might question Sangster’s hard distinction between an address and a sermon, they would not quibble with Sangster’s assertion that “searching preaching is either divinely inspired or intolerably insolent.”¹³ Preaching, and the content of a sermon, might not result in the “man from God” having to go into hiding, as one of the ministers mentioned by Barry Levis in his article had to do, but it had the potential, in the right “hands,” to cause a great deal of trouble (for the preacher, the congregation, and those who did not hear the sermon). In the first instance, then, the study of the sermon is an analysis of the ebbs and flows of the social milieu which led to the preaching of said sermon – whether that assessment is from a religious, economic, or psychological perspective.

Despite the importance of the origin of a sermon, those studying sermons, and all the paraphernalia associated with them, do well if they remember that social context is not everything. Sermons, at their most basic, are material that is usually spoken, preached. Sermons and preaching go together like the proverbial horse and carriage. All three articles in this volume are reminders

⁷ Samuel Wilberforce, *He, Being Dead, Yet Speaketh* (London: Simmons & Botten, 1873), 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Sermon of One Hundred Days: Part One*, trans. Hwang Soonil, ed. Linda Covil (London: Equinox, 2010).

¹¹ A dharma talk is an example of a Buddhist sermon. It is a discourse on Buddhism given by a master. The master is expected to do an exposition of at least one Buddhist text, but the main point of the talk is to serve the spiritual needs of the listeners.

¹² William E. Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Construction* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1978), 13. Sangster (1900-1960) was a Methodist minister. He was the senior minister at Central Hall, Westminster between 1939 and 1955 and served as president of the Methodist Conference of Great Britain in 1950.

¹³ Sangster, 25.

that sermons are as much oral communication as they are objects of theological enquiry, for example. A sermon, even if it is one that has to be rescued (as in David Powers's article), has not fulfilled part of the mission of its creator if it is not spoken at some time. The effect of hearing the sermon, its impact on an individual or group, is as much a part of its definitional matrix as its social context. In other words, Sangster was on to something—even if a sermons scholar might challenge the desire to insist that only a thing labeled “sermon” can be a sermon. The imam addressing a congregation at Friday prayers, the master explicating the subtleties of the Buddhist faith, or the Anglican bishop instructing his clergy in Church discipline are all examples of preaching: what they preach can be categorized as a sermon.

In addition, the oral communication is associated with a geographical place. Of course, the preacher/creator intended to preach the sermon in a church, or mosque, or synagogue, or some specially designated building and, furthermore, the “presentation” was supposed to be made in a particular building in a particular village, town, or city. To think of the great or well-renowned preachers is to remember a person and a place. Thomas Secker preaching to a full St. Mary's, Piccadilly in the 1730s and 1740s. John Henry Newman's sermons at St. Mary's, Oxford in the 1830s. Charles Haddon Spurgeon's rousing sermons at the Metropolitan Tabernacle between 1861 and 1891. Hensley Henson's scholarly and polemical sermons at St. Margaret's, Westminster in the 1910s. These are classic examples from the modern Christian tradition; similar lists could be made for the other religious traditions in which preaching plays a prominent role. Sometimes being in the place did not come to pass, as Barry Levis and David Powers note in their articles, and sometimes the place was everything, as in the St. Paul's sermons described by Frances Knight. The key point is that the sermon ought not be dissociated from the specific place where its creator intended to preach it or hoped that it would be heard.¹⁴

Furthermore, the oral communication is associated with time. It is possible to read a Billy Graham sermon, listen to a recording of one, or watch one on YouTube.¹⁵ In other words, to experience the sermon everywhere but the location where it was preached. Despite this geographical oddity, these sermons were preached by Billy Graham in a particular place and at a particular time. They are difficult—impossible?—to understand without considering their place in time, the context.¹⁶ In one important sense “You had to be there,” to quote the commonly used phrase. A sermon can be an object of study many years after it was preached, but there is something significant about that first “sermon event.”¹⁷ That is why David Powers in his article can talk about a sermon being revived or reborn from notes: its first birth was years in the past. The ministers in the American colonies supportive of the British crown during the Revolutionary Era were preaching in hiding because they felt compelled to address the pressing problem of the day, as

¹⁴ The tradition of listening to a sermon outside of a sacred space is now well established: this adds a complication to the notion that the geographical location for the sermon should be a specially designated place. Listening to someone read a sermon at home was popular in late nineteenth-century Britain and the United States. The advent of radio, TV, and the Internet, particularly YouTube, undermines the idea that the sermon is likely to be heard in some type of sacred space. In fact, it is possible to argue that sermons have a far greater influence if they are heard outside of a designated place--and preachers might prefer this.

¹⁵ Some examples: A published book of a sermon preached on May 19, 1966: Billy Graham, *Life's Ultimate Situation* (Cambridge: Great St. Mary's, 1966); a vinyl recording of sermons preached in 1957: Billy Graham, *Problems of the American Home: A Billy Graham Crusade Sermon* (Camden, New Jersey: RCA Victor, 1957); a YouTube video of a sermon preached in 1971: Billy Graham, “Who is Jesus?” YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjZLOY3TBd4>, accessed September 20, 2019.

¹⁶ Cultural references which involve humor, for example, are particularly bound to the times in which they are used.

¹⁷ Francis and Gibson, 7.

Barry Levis notes: the fact that these sermons were never preached from a pulpit is an almost irrelevant detail. And finally, as Frances Knight explains, the life of St. Paul's, the passage of time, can be understood more clearly by an examination of the sermons preached there over the decades and centuries. Sermons and preaching are indeed the lifeblood of those religious traditions which use them.

What, then, is a sermon? As the authors of the articles in the volume suggest, "something preached" is one possible definition. Levis, Powers, and Knight provide different views of the thing preached, making readers think again about the simplicity and complexity of the sermon.