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Ordinary Professor of Liturgical Studies and Sacramental Theology

Author of *Serving the Body of Christ*

The Catholic University of America

Between the Ambo and the Altar

*Biblical Preaching and The Roman Missal,
Year A*

Guerric DeBona, OSB



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by Ann Blattner. Cover illustration by Martin Erspamer, OSB, a monk of Saint Meinrad Archabbey, Indiana.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

DeBona, Guericc, 1955–

Between the Ambo and the altar : biblical preaching and the Roman missal, year a / Guericc DeBona.

pages cm.

ISBN 978-0-8146-3459-2 (alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8146-3484-4 (e-book)

1. Church year sermons. 2. Lectionary preaching—Catholic Church.
3. Catholic Church—Sermons. 4. Catholic Church. Lectionary for Mass (U.S.). Year A. 5. Catholic Church. Missale Romanum (1970) I. Title.

BX1756.A1D43 2013

251'.6—dc23

2013008345

For the monks, co-workers,
students, alumni,
and benefactors of
Saint Meinrad Archabbey,
Seminary, and School of Theology

“that in all things God may be glorified.”

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Introduction: Biblical Preaching and the New *Roman Missal*

The Geography of the Homily

It is no exaggeration to say that we live in a world choked with words. From texting with smartphones to blogging on the Internet, we face a glut of language day after day. Paradoxically, we strain to establish relationships with one another that really connect. Indeed, this age of global messaging has been far from communicative. Instead, we are a culture of individual selves, more often isolated than not by the very words we form, longing for true community and reconciliation. In the end, no multiplication of words or virtual encounters via the latest technology will satisfy the human yearning for connecting to the deepest center of our being and the lives of others. Only the Word made visible will satiate that terrible hunger.

That is the mission of Christian preaching when the community of faith gathers as the eucharistic assembly: to unearth a liberating Word to the weary, the downtrodden, and the alienated. As Christ tells those gathered to hear the words of Scripture broken open to them in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, God has sent him “to proclaim liberty to captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to let the oppressed go free, / and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19, NAB). The liturgical homily exists, then, for the purpose of deepening the faith of the baptized. In the often quoted words from *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of the Second Vatican Council, “By means of the homily, the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the christian life are expounded from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year” (52). Preaching is meant to guide the Christian community into a deeper celebration of the Eucharist and engage the faith community in the “richer fare”

2 *Between the Ambo and the Altar*

of the Scriptures as they unfold in the Sunday Lectionary and in the experience of the faith community.

This banquet of God's saving word served at the eucharistic celebration emerges from the Scriptures and the church's liturgy itself. As the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says, the homily "is necessary for the nurturing of the Christian life. It should be an explanation of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or the Proper of the Mass of the day and should take into account both the mystery being celebrated and the particular needs of the listeners" (65). The preacher, then, engages the assembly in its particular historical horizon with the language of faith and tradition in order to draw the congregation into the paschal mystery of Christ's sanctification for his church. Preaching is a grace-filled convergence among preacher, text, and God's people. As a constitutive component of the liturgy, the homily "points to the presence of God in people's lives and then leads a congregation into the Eucharist, providing, as it were, the motive for celebrating the Eucharist in this time and place."¹ As the USCCB document *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* enjoins us, "Every homily, because it is an intrinsic part of the Sunday Eucharist, must therefore be about the dying and rising of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial passage through suffering to new and eternal life for us."² The preacher facilitates the congregation's discovery of the Word unfolding in the very midst of sacred space and, in so doing, discloses the mystery of God's faithful love, together with the thanks and praise that is at the heart of the Eucharist, the height and summit of our worship as the people of God. As Pope Benedict XVI writes in *Verbum Domini*, quoting *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,

Here one sees the sage pedagogy of the Church, which proclaims and listens to sacred Scripture following the rhythm of the liturgical year. This expansion of God's word in time takes place above all in the Eucharistic celebration and in the Liturgy of the Hours. At the center of everything the paschal mystery shines forth, and around it radiate all the mysteries of Christ and the history of salvation, which become sacramentally present: "By recalling in this way the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens up to the faithful the riches of the saving actions and the merits of her Lord, and makes them present to all times, allowing the faithful to enter into contact with them and to be filled with the grace of salvation." For this reason I encourage the Church's Pastors and all engaged in pastoral

work to see that all the faithful learn to savor the deep meaning of the word of God which unfolds each year in the liturgy, revealing the fundamental mysteries of our faith. This is in turn the basis for a correct approach to sacred Scripture.³

I have titled this preaching commentary *Between the Ambo and the Altar* in order to locate the liturgical geography of the homily and call attention to the place of preaching as the site for the faithful “to savor the deep meaning of the word of God which unfolds each year in the liturgy, revealing the fundamental mysteries of our faith.” As is well known, for many years the sermon functioned as a kind of misplaced little island at the Roman liturgy; it became a harbor for boatloads of parish announcements or themes that were loosely drifting out to sea. Most of these were well-intentioned sermons but something like castaways unmoored, poorly integrated into the liturgy itself. When the restoration of the ancient *homilia* was promulgated with the Second Vatican Council, the character of preaching the Word shifted from a lone island adrift in a vast ocean to a strategic bridge connecting two vast continents. The purpose of the homily in the age of the new evangelization is to preach the Good News of Christ’s saving work as it is disclosed in the entire Bible, God’s living Word among us, and this disclosure is to lead the baptized assembly to praise, thanksgiving, and mission. “The homily is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives. It should lead to an understanding of the mystery being celebrated, serve as a summons to mission, and prepare the assembly for the profession of faith, the universal prayer and the Eucharistic liturgy. Consequently, those who have been charged with preaching by virtue of a specific ministry ought to take this task to heart” (*Verbum Domini* 59). By accounting for God’s activity in Christ throughout salvation history, the homily deepens the faith of the Christian assembly, instilling in the faithful a heartfelt desire to gather at the eucharistic sacrifice. So by definition, the homily exists for the sake of the hearer of the Good News, to transition this congregation from Word to sacrament, from the ambo to the altar. And from the altar to mission.

The present series, which begins with this volume, is meant to be an application of preaching in the context of the church’s Lectionary inside the language of the Sunday liturgy. From the perspective of

the Sunday homily and the interests of those who preach week after week, I think that there remains a marvelous opportunity to discover a dialogue that exists between the liturgical texts—the presidential prayers and eucharistic prayers, the prefaces for Ordinary Time as well as feasts and solemnities—and the Scriptures themselves. I think we should view our dialogue with the Sunday liturgy as both culturally local and broadly universal. Just as the Scriptures have been passed down to us and are made applicable for our day by exegetical methods such as historical criticism and other ways of study, so too are we able to draw in the church's liturgical tradition for the homily as a constitutive dialogue partner. As of this writing, there have already been some fine introductions to the translation and implementation of the new *Roman Missal* (2011), such as Paul Turner's *Pastoral Companion to the Roman Missal* (WLP, 2010). Indeed, the probing of the vast resources of the liturgy and the Scriptures from which this celebration has emerged allows for what Louis-Marie Chauvet calls "*la Bible liturgique*."⁴ Drawing from Chauvet and echoing the *GIRM*, Edward Foley and Jon Michael Joncas remind us that the preacher may explore further resources for the homily, among them the "liturgical bible," which "may refer to all liturgical texts apart from the lectionary." These include the major and minor euchologies such as the eucharistic prayers, prefaces, collects, the invariable (e.g., the "Holy, Holy"), and optional texts for the day (e.g., prayers for the blessing of an Advent wreath or newly restored Blessing over the People during Lent), "as well as the words of the hymns, songs and acclamations that are sung during worship."⁵ I hasten to add that this liturgical language is not simply a resource for the preacher, but the living text of the faith community that has unfolded over the centuries. Yes, we are a historical, culturally specific faith community but always in dialogue with sacred history and how God has shaped us through the mediation of the church. The liturgy and the Scriptures that are the spine of the Body of Christ, as it were, form a marvelous dialectic for the preacher to witness the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Homiletic Arc

In addition to providing a resource for the preacher by way of commentary, my hope is that the present text will contribute to an understanding of homiletic process as well. After teaching preach-

ing to seminarians for over a dozen years and giving workshops to priests, deacons, and other ministers, I can say that one of the most difficult concepts to grasp—but one of the most essential to learn—is the essential organic unity of the homily. The late Ken Untener and others have stressed the frustration present in hearers in the congregation who complain about the homily having too many ideas and failing to challenge the call to mission in the world on a practical level.⁶ Every preacher should certainly have some kind of method that serves as a kind of armature for the text, moving the homily along and structured around the listener. We cannot rely on our subjective, privatized voice to preach to a community of believers. All of us have been trained as solitary writers from an early age, but those who preach write for a congregation of ears, not a single pair of eyes. In this regard, homiletic strategy is very much in order so that the baptized assembly might listen to the word of God with faith and understanding, unencumbered by the personal eccentricities of the preacher. For those who are interested in developing a method of homiletics more fully, I would recommend the works of David Buttrick, Eugene Lowry, and Paul Scott Wilson, all of whom have written extensively on crafting the homily.⁷

With *Between the Ambo and the Altar*, I have in mind something less like a method and more like process, moving from Scripture to liturgical text to homily. Therefore, I have structured the book around three coordinates that seem to me to be the most productive way of engaging a preaching dialogue between the Sunday Lectionary readings and the liturgical texts that surround them. The first section is meant to be a prayerful reflection on the Lectionary for the day. I have avoided commentaries but used only some (minor) native ability in biblical languages, together with a good study Bible. Over the years, I have found that scholarly biblical commentaries are quite useful but usually only *after* a kind of naïve reading of the text, a precritical reflection, which Paul Ricoeur has called “the first naïveté” or “the spontaneous immediacy of reader to subject matter.”⁸ Such reading of the sacred text allows me to sink deeply into the word of God without a gloss. At the same time, a study Bible with adequate footnotes affords the opportunity to make very general historical and textual connections that aid in the life of prayer and contemplation. I am suggesting, then, that this first section of exploring the biblical text become the initial starting point for the homily, best accessed about

a week before the homily is to be delivered and, ideally, integrated into Morning or Evening Prayer.

The second section is devoted precisely to establishing a substantial connection with the liturgical texts and making some links with the Scripture. "Connecting the Bible and the Liturgy" is rather subjective and personal, and it is my hope that the preacher will bring a wealth of associations to such a process of connections between Scripture and the liturgy, or between the ambo and the altar. These musings on the prayers in the liturgy are meant to be pastoral suggestions for homiletic building blocks rather than formal theoretical arguments. To this end, I have taken each of the Lectionary cycles (A, B, C) and evinced some connection with the liturgical texts for that particular Sunday. My goal here is certainly not exhaustive; in fact, it is far from that. As every seasoned preacher knows, homiletics relies on making associations and connections for an increasingly diverse congregation of listeners. My aim is that preachers, new and experienced alike, will begin to mine the wealth of material already present in the liturgy and the Scriptures for a multicultural and multi-generational assembly. Although there are numerous elements in the "liturgical Bible" to consider, as well as many possible partners for establishing the homiletic text, I have confined myself mostly to the newly revised translation of the presidential prayers and prefaces of *The Roman Missal* in an effort to glean material for preaching. There is a wealth of potential present in these texts for reflection. I have avoided historical explanations of the prayers, but simply recommend what might be considered a point of departure for constructing the liturgical homily. In some rare instances, I have alluded to the previous (revised) *Sacramentary's* (1985) translation or, again, sometimes averted to the original Latin itself as a way of mining the depth of the church's liturgy. So saying, the wise homilist's attention to these prayers demonstrates an attention to what *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (1982) refers to as the preacher's unique role as "mediator of meaning." The preacher stands in the midst of the Christian assembly as an interpreter of the Word within a particular culture articulating a powerful witness, nurtured by the faith of the church. As Daniel McCarthy has demonstrated with his commentaries on selected Collects originally published in *The Tablet*, the liturgy itself is a catalyst to such preaching.⁹ Careful meditation on the liturgical prayers in the manner of *lectio divina*, while reflecting on a given Sunday, solemnity,

or feast that celebrates these days, will undoubtedly assist the preacher not only in the homily itself but also with the entire Eucharistic Liturgy for the various needs of these particular hearers of the gospel.

Finally, I have included a third section on "Strategy for Preaching" as a kind of point of homiletic integration for each Sunday. As with the previous two sections, I hardly expect that each reader will come to the same homiletic text as I did in the course of this process, but I simply recommend one that strikes me as a plausible outcome of my own engagement with the texts. The paradigm remains the same, though, for each of the Sundays, feasts, and solemnities presented in the liturgical year. If we follow the process for preaching in this book, we move from a meditation on Scripture as it is given in the Lectionary then on to a connection of these texts with the liturgical prayers for the given Sunday (or perhaps some other relevant liturgical text) to the emergence of the homily itself. In terms of a watershed moment in preaching preparation, I regard the primary task of this third stage of the homiletic process a narrowing down to a single declarative sentence, which I have called here the homiletic core idea, but which has also been termed by others a "focus sentence."¹⁰ Discovering a homiletic core idea, a foundation for an uncluttered, pristine armature from which to hang eight to ten minutes of words each week, is not easy, but absolutely necessary. It is the sentence that should be in the mind of every congregant after the homily is over in answer to the question, "What did you hear?"

Having come to a core homiletic sentence, the preacher will then need to develop practical tactics as to how this idea will become a reality for the congregation. For most Sundays, feasts, and solemnities, the best guide to understanding tactics is posing the question: What are some concrete images, relevant stories, or illustrations that will make the core homiletic idea a reality in the heart of the hearer? Tactics are culturally specific and will have strong pastoral application. The preacher ought to instinctively know that the day-to-day activity of the parish and the world at large will, by and large, inform tactics. If one is preaching to a youth group, there is no sense using stories, vocabulary, or illustrations that are more appropriate to the retired members of the parish. Then again, parishioners will be directly affected by the economic and political happenings around them, which will inflect the meaning of the homiletic core. If there has been a tragic death in the parish family, the homiletic event for

the next Sunday (let's say, it is the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year A, the gospel for which is the raising of Lazarus) will carry a different freight than if such sadness were not part of the community. Again, these homiletic strategies are only meant to be suggestive and not prescriptive.

As every seasoned preacher knows very well, abstractions are the kiss of death when it comes to homilies, and so the tactics for achieving a core homiletic idea should be as concrete as possible and structured in a way that the congregation may follow it with ease, with a logic that is slow and available. Remember—tactics are practical actions with measured goals; in this case there is a single target: the core homiletic idea. What must be done to achieve that goal? As I have suggested earlier, homiletic methods are designed to organize a structure around the listener. We cannot presume that simply because I am speaking the fruits of my meditation and study that the congregation is unpacking the homily and getting to the depth of the core homiletic idea. The homiletic idea gives something precious to the baptized, enfleshing the word of God; it is a deepening of the reality of faith, a pondering of the mysteries of Christ, an exploration into God's creation. So in order to get to a theological understanding of the word of God, we ought to taste the aroma of fresh bread in that language.

In a word: the people of God don't want our stale crumbs in our preaching. "Homilies are inspirational when they touch the deepest levels of the human heart and address the real questions of human experience."¹⁰ The worst possible response anyone can evince after preaching the word of God is for a faithful member of the congregation to respond, "So what?" Good tactics in homilies, like creative strategic planning, ensure that there is a measurable outcome. "So what?" Homilists should take care that this primary question is the subtext of every preaching event because no congregation should walk away from the Eucharist with that question lingering in their hearts. If we don't have a method or a structure of some kind to achieve the incarnation of our words, then we may have a great private meditation, but not much by way of evangelization. Jesus did not preach in parables for nothing: they are stories designed around the hearer to challenge, affirm, and unfold the kingdom of God.

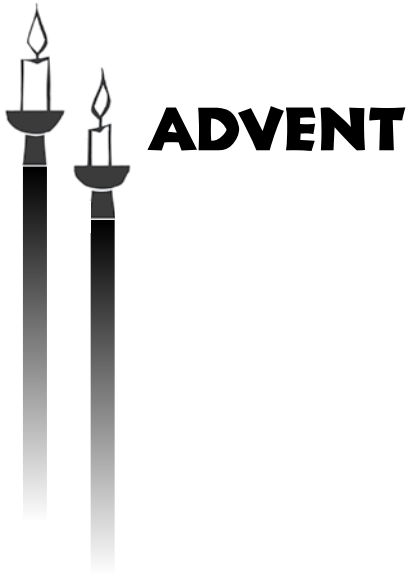
It is a great privilege to stand in the midst of the baptized assembly and mediate meaning for those who have faithfully gathered at

the Eucharist. Our preaching begins long before we come to the ambo and remains in the hearts of the congregation well after we leave the altar. Pray God that our own words become sown in the field of the Lord and reap a bountiful harvest.

Feast of St. Gregory the Great
Saint Meinrad School of Theology and Seminary, 2012

Notes

1. USCCB, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1982), 23.
2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2012), 15.
3. Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *The Word of the Lord (Verbum Domini)* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2010), 52.
4. Louis-Marie Chauvet, "La Dimensions bibliques des texts liturgiques," *La Maison-Dieu* 189 (1992): 131–47. Chauvet demonstrates the foundational influence of the biblical text on the Christian liturgy, citing just some of the more obvious examples.
5. Edward Foley, Capuchin, "The Homily beyond Scripture: *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* Revisited," *Worship* 73, no. 4 (1999): 355.
6. Cf. Kenneth Untener, *Preaching Better* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).
7. Cf. David Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletic Plot* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999 [1980]).
8. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 347–53.
9. Daniel McCarthy, *Listen to the Word: Commentaries on Selected Opening Prayers of Sundays and Feasts with Sample Homilies* (London: Tablet Publishing, 2009).
10. Cf. Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005 [1990]), 99–116.
11. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 15.



First Sunday of Advent

Readings from the Ambo

Isa 2:1-5; Ps 122:1-9; Rom 13:11-14; Matt 24:37-44

The three readings for this First Sunday of Advent disclose a common thread: time. There is a sense of urgency communicated in First Isaiah (his ministry can be dated in the last three decades of the eighth century BC) and his call to Judah to return to God. Since it is the commencement of the church year, Isaiah's oracle forecasting "the days to come" is especially evocative. We might recall that Isaiah of Jerusalem was both informed and commissioned to service by a transcendent vision of God and his eternal dwelling place (cf. Isa 6:1-13), and so what is at stake in the return to the Lord is nothing less than an ascent up the mountain where the Most High will deliver righteous instruction. The prophet envisions an endless procession of God's people streaming into the Lord's house. There we will find peace at last because "the nations will be no more training for war." Isaiah's utopia trumpets a call to Zion in what we might imagine as "the future perfect." God will gather all into the holy mountain where only justice and peace will be spoken.

Jesus alerts his disciples of that future time as well, albeit with more ominous realities than Isaiah. We know that this particular passage in Matthew forms a section of the fifth (and last), eschatological discourse; it seeks to initiate the hearer into a future reality: it is a warning that the Son of Man will come at a time when we least expect him. Indeed, Jesus uses concrete and vivid language to jar the complacent disciples into God's end time, the *parousia*, comparing the in-breaking of God's future to the days of Noah. As illustrations, he points to one man being taken in the field, while another is not; two women are grinding at the millstone, and only one remains.

Such an ending will be like a thief who comes upon a householder unawares. So the conclusion could not be more obvious—stay alert, be faithful, and keep vigil.

Paul is of the same mind as Jesus and turns the preparation for the days to come into practical, moral advice for the Romans. At the same time, Paul uses *kairos* to define the approaching moment as eschatological, a moment of crisis before the end time when God will collapse all things into the day at hand. The imagery Paul uses underlines his point. As we wait for the day, we must “throw off the works of darkness / and put on the armor of light.” We are to clothe ourselves in right conduct, putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Connecting the Bible and the Liturgy

The First Reading positions the listening assembly in precisely the same frame as the opening prayer: both imagine a peaceable kingdom as part of God’s future. As Isaiah recalls God’s promise to gather all nations into a peaceable kingdom, the **Collect** petitions for unity in Christ. Indeed, the voices of these nations that Isaiah imagines (“Come, let us climb the Lord’s mountain . . . that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths.”) give voice to the congregation’s own desire to be gathered at God’s coming into an eschatological moment. The opening prayer is quite visual, even as it encourages the faithful to run forth to Christ at the last, who becomes not the place but the *person* for which the just long. The longing for Zion and the kingdom of justice and peace has been extended to the church that eagerly runs to meet the Just One.

The use of future time as a lens of the present recalls the church’s liturgical posture itself on this Sunday. Our present hope is guaranteed by a faith in God’s future coming. But with the **Collect**’s petition to gather the righteous at Christ’s right hand, there is also something of a cataclysmic warning meant to drive home the importance of keeping vigil, beginning with this first day of the church year. It is worth recalling that on the last day of the church year in Cycle A, we will once again take up the metaphor of those who will be at the right hand of the Son of Man when he comes with his angels in glory and separates the sheep from the goats. This First Sunday of Advent is preparing the congregation for God’s coming not only at the end of Advent, not only at the end of the church year, but at the *parousia*,

at the end of time when the flock gathers to its Shepherd—or rather, is gathered by the Son of Man. Interestingly, the English translation of the third edition of the *Missale Romanum* (2011; hereafter *The Roman Missal*) strengthens the force of the gathering of the faithful considerably to “gathered to his right hand” (*eius dexteræ sociati*) from what the second edition of the *Sacramentary* (1985) translated as “his side.” With a vision of the last days, the church, like Paul, clearly implores the faithful to remain vigilant as in the day “with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly Kingdom.” The **Prayer after Communion** underlines the transitory nature of time and our need to look to the coming of the Lord when that oration reminds the congregation that “we walk amid passing things.” Even these temporal things can become instruments for conversion if we allow the Lord to “teach us by them to love the things of heaven and hold fast to what endures.”

If all the biblical readings remind us of the *kairos* moment at hand, then the **Preface I of Advent** makes it clear that it is God who has both initiated time and will bring it to completion. God is the “almighty and eternal God” whose Christ has “fulfilled the design you formed long ago and opened for us the way to eternal salvation.” All of those gathered at the Eucharistic Liturgy await this same Lord to draw back the curtain of human history, “when he comes again in glory and majesty and all is at last made manifest.” Like Isaiah, the **Preface** imagines a collective gathering of all peoples into the peace of God’s kingdom in and through Christ. Far from an individualized waiting for the coming of Christ, the church’s prayer is centered on the vision of unity, joined in fellowship not only with one another but with angels and archangels. The Eucharist becomes the place of vigil, the watchtower upon which God’s people stretch forth their hands in prayer for which “we now dare hope.”

Strategy for Preaching

The Advent Season then invites the church into silent vigil, urgent longing, and hopeful expectation for the coming of the Redeemer. Unlike preaching during Lent, which has a penitential character in its own right and is imbued with preparation for the baptized for the dawning of Easter, Advent homilies focus on the church that has

assembled in eager anticipation for God's coming. The language of the liturgy for the First Sunday of Advent is particularly useful for preaching, and its exploration begins to surface homiletic strategies. Consider the three images in the **Collect**, for instance, which might be used to underline a homiletic core idea. The first of these implores almighty God to grant the faithful "the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming." The second imagines that the place such a meeting would occur is "gathered at his right hand." The third projects these faithful as potential members or possessors of "the heavenly kingdom." The liturgy and the Scriptures remind us of God's promise for a future when Christ will gather those who wander into the kingdom of justice and peace.

Useful images for constructing the homily are vividly disclosed in the Scriptures and in *The Roman Missal*: running to meet Christ, a holy mountain, leaving a home unguarded. Clearly a dominant preaching thread present this Sunday is, perhaps obviously enough, the advent of God breaking into our historical time and how we prepare ourselves to run and meet him at the last. With that homiletic core idea in mind, the pastorally conscious preacher should, as always, exegete the assembly together with these biblical and liturgical texts. This combination is always nonnegotiable for liturgical preaching but all the more important at the beginning of the church year as we link our preaching to mission. Where do I want my congregation at the end of Advent? What about in a year on the Feast of Christ the King? Will the people of God be in a better place because of my preaching? It seems clear that this First Sunday of Advent is asking the church to lean into the *kairos* moment, the *parousia* held out to us as we await the coming of the Lord, and that raises the question of how we own the present moment. At the beginning of the church year, am I challenged to be present to something other than a secular calendar? Does God's claim on time and the gathering of all peoples on a holy mountain reorient all of us to consider the implications of peace and justice now? How does the vision of Zion inform our present circumstances?

Finally, the preacher's theology of Advent will determine the homiletic text. What is that theology, and how are these ideas shaped by the preacher's identity? In order to ponder this question of identity further, the preacher might examine narratives about exile in the literary canon. Foremost among exiles and return journeys is Homer's

Odyssey in which Odysseus must make his way back to his family and homeland after a period following the Trojan War. The longing for home and return seems to be a dominant theme in a great deal of literature and an appropriate one to investigate when discovering a preaching theology for Advent. The whole book of the prophet Isaiah might prove another text worthy of careful meditation, alongside a good commentary. If Isaiah sets the tone for this Sunday in Year A, he is taking the role of the herald of things to come. I would suggest that this heraldic character marks preaching identity for the Advent season, perhaps most obviously on the first Sunday.