

## Which Lent to Preach?

Major feasts and liturgical seasons of the church year are moments of remarkable promise and challenge for the liturgical preacher. The recently concluded Advent-Christmas cycle, for example, provided many preachers with unusually rich ritual contexts that unquestionably contribute to the homiletic moment. Treasured musical settings, a heightened visual environment, and even fuller churches on such occasions can energize the preacher in many ways that ordinary Sunday fare simply does not.

At the same time, the great liturgical festivals and seasons can generate their own particular anxiety for the preacher. For example, assemblies often have higher expectations for the homilies of Christmas, Easter, or Pentecost than for the Sundays in Ordinary Time. Furthermore, the increased presence of occasional church-goers during high seasons can put added pressure on the homilist to evangelize effectively. Finally, preachers often have increased expectations of themselves at these times and wonder if they can rise to the occasion or say something fresh about the mysteries at hand.

Lent is a season of similar promise and challenge for the homilist. Yet, apart from the usual energy and angst that mark the preacher of other high seasons, there is a further pastoral and homiletic challenge that arises at this and no other time in the church year. For in Lent, the homilist and other liturgical leaders need to decide not only what to preach, but what readings to proclaim and preach.

In some circumstances worship leaders are allowed to make decisions about omitting one or another reading at Mass (see, for example, the *Directory for Masses with Children*, n. 42). At other times, the liturgical leadership is given the opportunity to choose between alternative readings for various ritual Masses or Masses for various needs and occasions. These options, however, seldom exist on Sundays, solemnities or during the great liturgical seasons. Rather, it is ordinarily presumed that the three readings from the Lectionary appointed for a given Sunday or solemnity be employed. This is so as not to obscure the “proper character of the liturgical season or needlessly interrupt the semicontinuous reading of some biblical book” (*Introduction to the Lectionary*, n. 78).

One of the only stipulated exceptions to this “read what’s appointed” rule for a major liturgical season occurs during Lent. As noted in the *Introduction to the Lectionary*, the gospels of Cycle A have a very important relationship to the rites of Christian initiation. Thus, the Cycle A reading can be employed during every Lent, especially when candidates for baptism are present (*Introduction to the Lectionary*, n. 13). The relationship of these readings for the initiatory process is so strong that the Lectionary further notes that when those key rituals for the elect (the scrutinies) are celebrated outside of Lent, the readings are always taken from the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent, Cycle A (*Lectionary for Mass*, nn. 745–47). This is to underscore the fact that it is not the Lectionary which sets the rites of initiation, but initiation which establishes the Lectionary.

While some preachers may think that is a non-issue, a decision about which readings to preach in Lent is not one to be overlooked: not to choose is, in effect, to choose—but to do so badly. For those concerned about the time needed to make an informed decision about which readings to employ during Lent, early 2000 provides an unusual respite in the liturgical calendar and ample opportunity for this reflection. Ordinarily we only have a few Sundays between the end of the Christmas cycle and the start of Lent. In 2000, however, the Christmas cycle ends on January 19 and the First Sunday of Lent does not occur until March 12. The long stretch from the Second to the Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time—from mid-January to mid-March—provides ample opportunity for planning Lent and its preaching.

It may seem like an extra burden, but the process of selecting readings may actually have a number of beneficial side effects for liturgical planning and preaching. This is true, in part, because responsibly selecting readings for Lent puts the preacher in a necessary dialogue with others in liturgical planning. Although various documents presume that both preaching preparation and liturgical planning are accomplished collaboratively, this does not always happen.

Over the past few issues of *NTR*, I have tried to stress in this column that liturgical preaching is a dialogue. I have emphasized that the assembly is the subject matter rather than the object of preaching. Liturgical preaching—like the very liturgy which serves as its defining context—is not a product the preacher provides for the assembly, but a dialogue which the preacher forges with the assembly.

It is difficult to imagine that the preaching event can be appropriately dialogic if the preparation for that event is not also dialogic. This means the preacher must engage with other central liturgical ministers and planners as well as receive input from the assembly. It is a vision embedded in *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, but one seldom explored. The

need to select the Lenten readings is an opportunity for preachers to change that pattern. It is particularly important to talk with the people who coordinate the RCIA, or those who are doing any other kind of Lectionary-based catechesis in your community. It will also be necessary to speak with the people who select the music for worship which needs to be in harmony with the readings and other texts of the liturgy.

The most appropriate way to carry on this dialogue with the people in your community who work in RCIA, catechesis, music, and liturgy is through a single meeting. The beginning of February is not too early. In that meeting the members of the group need to ponder a few key questions, particularly about the community that will be hearing the readings. Consider, for example, how often elect have been present in the community during Lent over the years, and how often the Cycle A readings have been proclaimed in worship. Also recall the strong correlation between the readings in Cycle A and the scrutiny prayer texts. Together with the proper prefaces that match the gospel readings, they provide an unusual constellation of key images for planning and preaching. Such considerations might lead you to opt for the Cycle A readings this Lent.

At the same time, the group needs to consider the need for opening up for the community which Vatican II called "the treasury of the Bible." The appointed Lenten texts for Cycle B, for example, offer a variety of readings which occur at no other place in the Lectionary. These include powerful texts such as God's covenant with Noah in Genesis 9 (the First Sunday of Lent), the sacrifice of Abraham in Genesis 22 (the Second Sunday of Lent), Jesus cleansing the Temple in John 2 (the Third Sunday of Lent) and the promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31 (the Fifth Sunday of Lent). It may be that the Cycle A readings have been overused in your community, and these Cycle B readings need to be revisited.

Less important than the decision one makes about which readings to proclaim and preach is the process employed in making that decision. Ideally there should be integrity between that process and the preaching it enables. Since the liturgy is a dialogic act, the liturgical preaching and the process which generates it should be as well. Such collaboration is often a boon for the preaching. Those who coordinate the RCIA, for example, often have insights about the various rituals for the elect which could enhance the preaching. The musicians cannot only provide ideas about the music accompanying the rites, but even help the preacher think about weaving music into the homily itself.

Preachers do not have to go it alone. Lent 2000 provides the opportunity to change any lone-ranger patterns that have developed for the homilist over the years. Start by engaging a few key people around the issue of which cycle of readings to proclaim. In the process, get input

on your preaching. It could be the beginning of a whole new style of homily preparation that is both collaborative and life-giving.

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*The next millennium requires a new kind of politics, focused more on moral principles than on the latest polls, more on the needs of the poor and vulnerable than on the contributions of the rich and powerful, more on the pursuit of the common good than on the demands of special interests. As Catholics and as voters, this is not an easy time for faithful citizenship. . . . Sometimes it seems few candidates and no party fully reflect our values. But now is not a time for retreat. The new millennium should be an opportunity for renewed participation. We must challenge all parties and every candidate to defend human life and dignity, to pursue greater justice and peace, to uphold family life and to advance the common good.*

—Administrative Board of U.S. Catholic Conference