

Preachers, Priests and Prophets

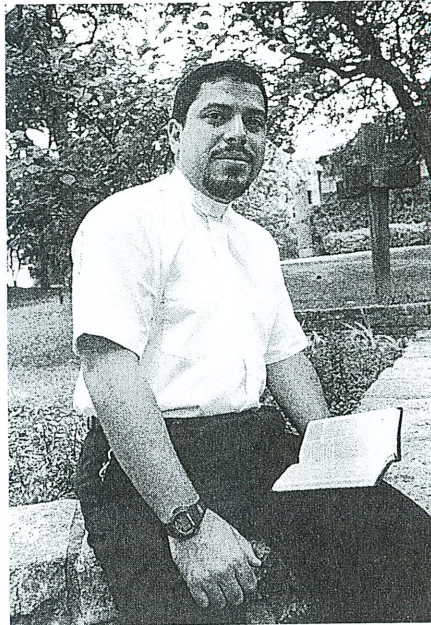
by the Reverend Pablo A. Jiménez

I John 1:1-3 offers a beautiful definition of preaching. The text describes it as the declaration of “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (v. 1). Christian preaching is born, thus, out of a lively experience of faith. Such experience illuminates our life and leads us to share the life-transforming message of the Gospel with others. Preaching derives two important dimensions from this testimonial character: its priestly function and its prophetic thrust.

The priestly dimension of preaching

Preaching is a communal activity, not a private craft. Granted, the research, preparation, and design of the sermon occur in private. However, the sermon is proclaimed in public; in the midst of a community that seeks to be comforted, educated, and challenged by the Gospel. In this sense, the preacher is an intermediary or a “priest.” He or she is a person commissioned by the Church both to proclaim the Gospel and to represent the congregation. Consequently, the preacher represents God in front of the church and the congregation before God. The preacher has the dual responsibility of voicing the biblical teachings and of expressing the wants and needs of God’s people.

In order to fulfill properly these responsibilities, preachers must develop the ability to hear. They must learn how to pay attention to the problems, needs, and cries of the people. Furthermore, those commissioned to occupy the pulpit must learn how to “hear” the implications of the biblical message for today.



Professor Pablo Jiménez

Hearing God’s people

First of all, an effective preacher must develop the necessary sensibility to hear the cries of the people. He or she must have a first-hand knowledge of the history, the values, the situation, and the suffering of the community before stepping into the pulpit. Therefore, the preacher must see him or herself as part of the people. Being “part of the people” goes beyond the demographic fact of living in one part of town or another. It entails living in solidarity with the community, sharing their daily experiences. An effective preacher is fully aware of the reality of those who comprise the congregation. Such first-hand knowledge is what makes sermons credible.

Notice that we are stressing the need to be in solidarity with the community at large. God’s word is addressed to the community as a whole, not only to the members of the congregation and its relatives. The reign of God is a promise of holistic well-being (shalom) for all people. Such promise is good news particularly for the victims of social and personal

sin; the victims of violence, discrimination, oppression, and exclusion. Christ’s authority is not limited to the religious realm. To the contrary, the Christian faith proclaims that God reigns over the whole of creation. That is why the Church expects the full manifestation of Christ’s authority (see Phil. 2:5-11 and Eph. 1:10, 20-23).

Hearing God’s voice

The preacher must also develop the ability to hear and heed God’s voice. We must learn how to discern God’s message for today when we pray at church, when we study the Bible, when we survey the history of the church, and when we reflect on different theological points. Our aim as theologians is to learn how to perceive God’s actions in our midst.

Effective preaching proclaims the message of the Gospel for today in a lively and relevant fashion. The sermon interprets life on the light of faith, suggesting proper ways of contemporary Christian witness. Hence, the sermon is an important component in a process of action/reflection, thus aspiring to lead the believer to a liberating praxis.

The prophetic dimension of preaching

Besides its priestly dimension, Christian preaching also has a prophetic function. The preacher is called by God not only to discern God’s activity in the world but also to unmask the evil forces that kill and destroy humanity. So, Christian preaching is both denunciation and challenge. It denounces sin and oppression in all its manifestations. It challenges the Christian community to develop a liberative praxis. This prophetic function is only effective when it is tempered by two important elements: the preacher’s demeanor and the proclamation of grace.

A humble and sensitive attitude

Prophetic preaching – when performed improperly – can degenerate in a sanctimonious tirade. In order to avoid this pitfall, the preacher should not position him or herself above the congregation. It is relatively easy to condemn the attitude of our fellow brothers and sisters in the faith when we see ourselves as divinely inspired judges. Yet, true prophetic preachers know themselves to be part of the church. Therefore, when they point out the foibles of the congregation they are in effect pointing out their own. That is why an effective prophetic sermon is preached in the first person plural. The prophetic preacher does not condemn “your” faults but reflects on “our” faith and conduct.

By the same token, an effective prophetic preacher knows that, in order to denounce the sins of the larger society, he or she must be involved in the life of the community. False prophetic preaching condemns the “world,” taking an aggressive and isolationist attitude against those who do not share the same beliefs. This fosters a rivalry with society; a rivalry used to justify the congregation’s inaction.

The proclamation of grace

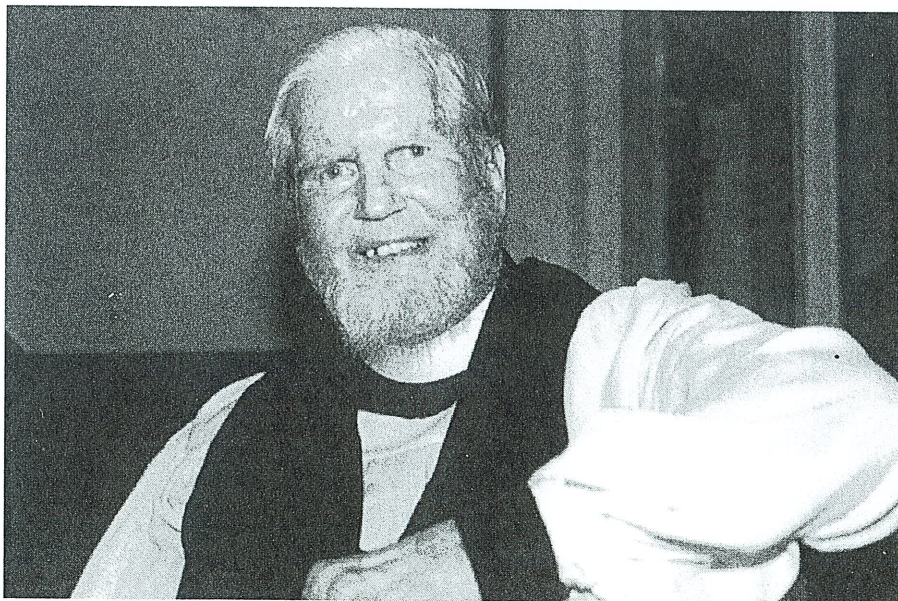
In order to be effective, the denunciation of sin must be paired with the proclamation of grace. The only valid reason for condemning oppressive or sinful conduct is to call sinners to repentance. Prophetic

preaching is motivated by love to both the victims and the victimizers. We denounce oppression hoping that victimizers might no longer be instruments of the powers of evil, sin, and death. Hence, the proclamation of God’s judgment is a call to life. It calls us to affirm the power of God, to address the consequences of sin, and to minister the victims of oppression. The goal of prophetic preaching is to call humanity to live life in all its fullness, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

At its core, Christian preaching gives witness to an experience of faith. This experience leads us to hear God’s voice and to live in solidarity with both the congregation and the community at large. It also invites us to struggle for life, even when we see ourselves surrounded by the forces of death.

The Reverend Dr. Pablo A. Jiménez joined the seminary faculty in the fall as instructor of homiletics. His academic interests are centered on homiletics, New Testament interpretation for preaching, biblical hermeneutics, in general, and latino hermeneutics, in particular. An ordained Disciples of Christ minister, Professor Jiménez was executive director of the Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia and administrator of its Hispanic Summer Program before coming to the Seminary of the Southwest.



Bishop Hines at 1994 Commencement