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The Preacher as 'Fool for Christ': a Reflection on Prophetic Preaching in African Contexts

Dr Hassan Musa
Jos ECWA Theological Seminary, Nigeria
hassan.musa@jets.edu.ng

Abstract

What is preaching? How does preaching the gospel relate to risk? And what can we learn from the unconventional image of the pastor or preacher as a risk taker for the sake of the glory of God? This article focuses on the significance of the practice of preaching, especially within a particular unconventional perspective or imagery: that of the preacher as a clown or jester or even as risk taker. The aim of this article is the close reading of Paul's new or strange imagery of the preacher as a 'fool' for Christ (1 Corinthians 4:9–10) and how that continues to generate new ideas and thoughts about preaching in twenty-first-century Africa. On another hand this article is also an attempt to provide a kind of reception study on the preaching legacy and practical passion of one of our scholars at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, namely Professor Johan Cilliers. His preaching life and teaching has been closely examined in this study with the particular aim of raising the question of preaching in a more practical, though unconventional, sense, in an African context: Nigeria, which is structured traditionally within a high culture of honour and shame. The idea of the foolishness of preaching or being clownish for the sake of the gospel remains the actual productive pattern of this article. It is presented as a reminder and in appreciation for the life of one of the unknown heroes of faith in Nigeria, a dedicated and sacrificial pastor,

the late Rev. Ibrahim Garba,¹ whose life and memory will continue to challenge us to be faithful to the Lord in the midst of all risks, even of preaching.

Introduction

It has been a long time now that I have been thinking of writing on the politics of preaching. Preaching is God's calling within ecclesial ministry, a spiritual, ethical, and theological exercise (Copeland 2016; Craddock 1985; Cressman 2020; De Klerk and De Wet 2008; Greidanus 1988; Hussey and Demond 2018;

¹ On 17 November 2023, I received news of the passing away of Rev. Ibrahim Garba. He was a dedicated ECWA pastor whom I was privileged to teach at some point at ECWA Theological Seminary, Kagoro. After a few years his son Solomon Ibrahim also joined us at the seminary as a very humble but dedicated young pastor-in-training. It was a great pleasure to meet and share some good time with Rev. Garba. Through his son Solomon I got to know where they were posted to serve for the sake of preaching the gospel. Metaphorically, we call the area the lion's den of Kaduna State; it was in Birnin Gwari area. For more than two decades the area has been captured by and under the control of brutal bandits. Many pastors who were sent to the place had earlier declined. But Rev. Garba is one of the few who risked their lives and the comfort of their family to go and serve there amidst high banditry for the sake of the gospel. The worship service at his church has been frequently disrupted because of series of attacks from the bandits. Many of his members have been kidnapped, and some even killed. He and his family have put themselves at great risks every day and night to live in that village. One of the high risks was also to go to the farm in search of what to eat. Many farms have been taken over by the bandits. Many young boys have been conscripted into the banditry gang. Weapons were everywhere and life was constantly at risk. In the midst of that, Rev. Ibrahim Garba promised God and his family to still stay there and serve even while many members have left the area because of fear. His stay there yielded a lot of fruit. Many people were blessed by his life and ministry. Close to the end of his life he was kidnapped for some days but later released miraculously unharmed. He was a man of great prayer, simple faith, and sacrifice to the Lord and humanity. He had been battling with some health challenges for years, and this year the Lord decided to call him home and take his glorious rest. His passing was peaceful – that gave me a lot of comfort – even for his immediate family. He risked his life for the sake of the gospel and he was preserved by the Lord until the very end.

Lischer 2001; Long 1989). It is not just about learning how to preach, but actually preaching, and preaching the word of God. Preaching is an act of true responsibility to God and to people regardless of circumstances (Lorenzen 1980; Pieterse and Wepener 2021; Prill 2020; Robinson 2014; Sisk 2007; Travis 2015; Wendland 2000; Wilson 1995). There are so many instances in which the ministry of preaching has been turned into a political act of general public address to the gathered people. Some could not preach because of fear, fear of the congregation about their message, whether it will be accepted or not; some fear the audience more than God; thus they would want to do everything possible to meet with their expectations. Political preaching or political sermons may be differently understood and applied in different places. For example, in South Africa, outstanding church leaders like Desmond Tutu, Beyers Naude, Willie Jonker, and Allan Boesak have been known and celebrated as political preachers with prophetic fervency. Here political preaching is not about politicising the content of the message in order to suit the expectations of the audience. But rather it is a contextually focused preaching that does not spare any section of life of the audience in context (see Stauffer 2015). Political life as key to practical ethics has been the driving force in the history of South Africa and indeed the modern world as a whole. Thus, political preaching as prophetic preaching is necessary and highly expected. On the other hand, in other contexts like Nigeria political preaching is equal to the politicisation of the message. This is the act of pastoral pretences in preaching, done in order to suit the wishes of the audience or the leaders who have invited and appointed the preacher to preach to them. This is more of an ideological sermon, more of those that were preached in South Africa during the apartheid era in order to justify the practices of segregation.² The same ideological sermons were preached in the German Reich church in

² For more on how the Bible has been used by many apartheid preachers in South Africa for its justification see Cilliers (2006). Like the Israel of biblical history, many apartheid ideologues thought and believed that God was with them. They thought and preached that what they practised as separate development is the will of God naturally. They were not able to see the evil of apartheid for what it truly was. They were blinded by their own ideologies that made them keep thinking and moving on the one-sided path of self-dehumanisation and the dehumanisation of others. Thus any form of segregation and the rejection of human beings and the entire creation of God cannot be the will of God for people. Such ideological practices happen only when people are bent on such self-serving ideologies of disobedience that these unchristian practices happen among them.

order to please and justify the actions of the Nazis under Hitler's regime (Bergen 2000; cf. Künneht, Wilm, and Schemm 1931). Such sermons were later countered by more biblically based, evangelical sermons that called for the truth and the justice of God rather than proud, human lies (Stroud 2013). Many ideological-political sermons are still being preached in different places, for example, in Russia to justify the actions of Putin and his soldiers, or in Muslim-dominated contexts to justify Islamic actions according to their convictions, or in the Middle East to either justify racism or antisemitism, etc. Thus sermons or acts of preaching are not always preaching the word of God for the sake of the glory of God. Preaching actual prophetic sermons is what the heart of preaching is when we speak of preaching the word of God for the people of God (Allen 1998; Bartow 1997; Beamish 2019; Berkley 1992; Brueggemann 1995, 1998). This is when the message comes to the preacher from beyond; thus the preacher is found under the effective authority of the word of God.³

There is a lot of concern or worry on the minds of preachers with regard to preaching prophetically from the word of God. Such sermons may be offensive to many people. Thus the fear of such reactions takes hold of the mind and may make them want to leave things as they are. This has been the fear of change; this kind of fear was seen in the apartheid days in South Africa in that older folk of the apartheid era feared the future, so much that they thought of it as a serious sacrilege against that which was their true tradition or what counted for the natural order of things (Cilliers 2015b:383).⁴ Thus to preach against apartheid like Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak did was to play the fool, to be a clown in context (Cilliers 2015a; Drury 1967; Hansen 2005; Hermelink and Deeg 2013), to say the impossible and the undesirable. Such preaching

³ Karl Barth warned against turning the word of God into the word of man (1957). From my understanding of his expositions, the word of God is the actual content of God's true revelation in terms of God's will, self, life, world, and time, while the word of man is the self-made entertaining scheme that is meant to mainly satisfy the wishes of the hearts of the people.

⁴ 'While *fear* formed the heuristic experience in stereotypical apartheid sermons, causing the listeners to cling to the past, and while *anticipation* was the fundamental experience evoked by political and eschatological preachers like Desmond Tutu – opening up hope for the future, already celebrated in the present, it would seem that the current experience evoked by many sermons is that of *uncertainty* on the one hand (not knowing what the future holds) and *introversion* on the other (fleeing from political responsibility in the present).' (Cilliers 2015b:383)

was only considered to be wishful thinking, daydreaming, by those who despised the cause of the black people of South Africa.

The culture of honour and shame makes many preachers careful not to preach sermons that may offend or upset the status quo. In other words, preachers are popularly expected to see and leave things as they are, as can be seen in the modern world's culture of rights. This presents a '*tentative*' kind of preaching rather than the actual exposition of the word of God (Cilliers 2015b:381). Nothing in it is certain; nothing is sure; everything depends on other things or something else.⁵ The preaching in this category cannot afford the risk of an 'innovative theology' (Cilliers 2015b:381). Innovative theological thinking is what is heard from the sermons of Jesus in the gospels and his apostles in Acts. These are sermons that pushed the boundaries of mere traditions and broke the yoke and walls of human ideologies, mainly in order to see what Barth called the 'Strange New World within the Bible' (MacDonald 2002). It is very good news to note that the Bible is given not to serve as a tool of further human subjugation, as so many readers in the history of biblical interpretations have used it when they read and applied the Bible dangerously.⁶ But rather it is meant to be a blessed gift of liberation from all that dehumanises and keeps people from being fully and truly human before God and before one another. The idea of innovative theology is not just to entertain the wishes of the people but rather to help them find an alternate, life-giving way of being that helps them to grow and move forward. Doing this is only risky business. It would require the preacher to learn new vocabularies, by which he may be able to articulate his newfound vision in the presence of God.

⁵ 'One [sic] the one hand, preaching has become *more tentative* than before, no longer emanating from the certainty of a fixed and stable "truth". One [sic] the other hand, preachers tend to be very *pragmatic* in their approach, desperately trying not to rock the (sinking) boat too much. Preaching has to an extent taken on the *mode of maintenance*, rather than being an expression of innovative theology.' (Cilliers 2015b:381)

⁶ To read the Bible dangerously is to read and interpret it in service to one's ideology, as was done in apartheid South Africa, in America during the eras of segregation, in Germany for antisemitism, etc. For many examples of such dangerous readings of the Bible through the ages and in different contexts see Claassens and Viljoen (2012), Smit (2015), and Punt and Nel (2018).

The idea of preaching the gospel is to bring forth God's word to God's people in all its fullness. It is aimed at providing godly wisdom and direction on life in its simplicity and complexity. It is worthy of note that all true preaching must be prophetic in the sense of it being a message specifically from God to God's people in a particular place and situation. 'Prophetic preaching always hinges on the critical event' (Laubscher 2019:264). The critical event here could be the life of people in context, meaning they must be addressed as from the Lord. They need to hear something true, new, and transforming for the growth and progress of their lives and ministries.

There are some 'spaces of tension' in prophetic preaching (Cilliers 2013). These are actual points of contact from one particular group of people to another. The preacher is a risk taker who dares to stand between the people and God always at liminal spaces, the very spaces of tension, disagreement, and to some extent disillusionment among people (Cilliers 2013). The sermons of Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak during the apartheid period and the sermons of Martin Luther King Jr in the days of America's racial segregation and marginalisation of minorities are examples. Preaching the gospel as God's word to all God's people was risky, sounding foolish and somewhat stupid to many. But those preachers were daring, hopeful, and faithful in taking such risks for the sake of the gospel. The words of the preacher to the poor and needy are always a welcome rhetoric of hope in order to lead them to something new and something liberating and assuring; but for the architects of the status quo the word of God is quite irritating, irrational, inadequate, and even foolish. Now I would like to reflect a bit further on some contributions on the nature of biblical and prophetic preaching and how on some ears they have become only a rhetoric of folly.

A Rhetoric of Folly?

In his contribution on 'reforming preaching' for the *Societas Homileca*, Johan Cilliers and his homiletic colleagues discovered that the essence of preaching is the bringing forth of the *viva vox evangelii* (the living voice of the gospel) (in Hermelink and Deeg 2013; see also Laubscher 2019:269). It is the living voice of the gospel that actually brings forth new meaning, new direction, new hope, and the vision of the new world of God to the horizon of reality, to the people of God living mostly in the darkness and hopelessness of this broken world.

The preacher is a daring personality whose efforts and words may sound actually foolish and unbelievable, yet who is called and pushed by the Spirit of God to speak truth that liberates and light that dispels the darkness that holds people captive for so long.

The gospel is seen by many especially in the modern and the postmodern social culture as 'a rhetoric of folly'; the preachers, in the eyes of the world and even to a complacent church, are nothing but 'preaching fools' (Campbell and Cilliers 2012). It is in this so-called foolishness that the true 'witness of preaching' (Long 1989) is found, heard, accepted, and trusted to bring the expected change that is good enough to transform the life and situations of the people of God.

At the heart of Cilliers' discovery of the meaning and practice of preaching is the actual understanding of the new given spaces of grace that God gives to people through the wisdom (and foolishness) of preaching (Cilliers 2012, 2016). True prophetic preaching revives the people of God to the new faith, hope, and joy of being the children of God and being invited into the presence of God with great joy in order to worship and to feast and gaze at the beauty of God in his holy place.

In order for us to explore the wisdom and foolishness of preaching the gospel we shall give attention now to Johan Cilliers' essay 'Clowning on the Pulpit? Contours of a Comic Vision on Preaching' (2009). For us to speak of anything as 'clowning' on the pulpit in an African context is to take risk. The typical African culture is organised based on the cultural parameters of honour and shame. Honour is the general or public craving of many if not all African people. They do not want to be associated with anything shameful or similar to what displays shame. To be clownish in the pulpit is to be irritating (disgusting) to many in an African context. The preacher who speaks unconventionally, and is looked at by his audience as a fool,⁷ is only bearing '[a]n unconventional image of preaching' (Cilliers 2009:189). The foolishness of preaching is not just a deliberate action to entertain or to irritate. It comes from the force of true

⁷ The preaching may appear as foolish when he/she preaches with daring tones, innovative thoughts, or unconventional, subversive ideas or principles of life.

spiritual enlightenment; this is what the apostle Paul speaks of when he says to the Corinthians,

For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21 NIV)

(see Cilliers 2009:189).

Prophetic preaching that is actually biblical and practical is preaching that upsets the settled notions of people's conventional ideologies and pushes them to a new space of self-discovery and a new encounter with God. Cilliers observed that

Most preachers operate from the basis of a certain self-understanding of their identity as preachers; they carry with them a picture of what, according to them, preachers ought to be and do – images that profoundly influence the patterns and practices of their ministry. (2009:189)

Preachers who seek to form and maintain a certain self-image against their given image by the act of preaching cannot be faithful to their calling as preachers of the gospel. They may be trying to protect their own image in a certain form of their own wisdom, but in truth that is only a display of their own foolishness in the process. The true image of the preacher comes from the texture and meaning of the message as assigned by the Holy Spirit, regardless of the conventional experiences and expectations of people.

The presence of emptiness or sterility in church or people leads to the display or the discovery of foolishness instead of godly wisdom.

This image of the church and preaching being a fool or clown seems to come to the fore when the church is vulnerable and without power, when its message seems to have no impact, and its very existence deemed to be ludicrous. (Cilliers 2009:190)

Nevertheless, even in an unconventional imagery of a clown, or a fool, the preacher can still have something new and definite to teach his people.

The clown has the remarkable ability to connect to people in the borderline experiences of their lives. He teaches them to laugh at, and in, their experiences of liminality, even though it may often seem like no laughing matter at all. (Cilliers 2009:191)

The clown or jester in a court before the king in traditional contexts plays so much, not only to entertain but also in order to instruct. The clown who displays wisdom in foolishness is one who portrays himself as embodying '*the frailty and vulnerability of human life*' (Cilliers 2009:191). We live in a broken world of great vulnerability; we ourselves are always vulnerable and it will be good wisdom to always come to terms with this aspect of our lives. According to Nico Koopman, God also recognises our sense of vulnerability and the vulnerability of the world; God participated in it in order to grant us hope, strength, and renewal (Koopman 2004, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Laubscher 2021; Vosloo 2019).

A clown in court is also an expert in 'disrupting the powers' (Cilliers 2009:192). He points to his listeners the limit of their power. He displays the fragility of the king and calls attention not only to joy and laughter but also to death and tears. 'The clown represents an alternative world-view – often unsettling to the dominant or conventional one' (Cilliers 2009:192). For example,

The court jester playing before the King implicitly proclaims a message and extends an invitation: that the King should become more of a jester; that he should relativize himself; that he should not take his own power so seriously that it becomes an eternal state of affairs, or worse, a tool to be misused. *The image of the jester suggests reciprocal transference: the King relinquishes his power to the jester, and the jester his (foolish) wisdom to the King.* (Cilliers 2009:192)

The image of the clown reminds us that we cannot, and indeed dare not, remain silent in the face of the reality and brutality

of the powers of destruction and death that dominate and enslave us. (Cilliers 2009:194)

As in Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1971: 369; Selby 1999: 240, 245) the Christian is one who stands on the borderline of worlds. He lives in this-worldliness and calls attention to otherworldliness. He calls attention and points his listeners not only to the here and now of the penultimate but also to that which is otherworldly, that which is ultimate. This is also the risky business of the preacher. The preacher speaks of new worlds, new life, new hope, and also of judgment, justice as equality, justice as punishment of the rich and arrogant for their mistreatment of the poor and lowly.

Jesters, clowns, and risk takers are important for their own good as well as for our own good. They provide some relief from the high burden of life when many things turn so hard and even unbearable. Cilliers observed that 'In a world full of pain we need the liberation of laughter' (2009:193). Ironically, laughter can be quite liberating because it gives us the freedom to see the other side of life and to judge for ourselves how foolish and ridiculous human pride and arrogance is in the face of life that is meant to be only joy. Juliana Claassens (2015) has explored the wisdom of laughter in biblical interpretation as key to resistance. This is laughter that defies the finality of the wisdom of the arrogant. This reminds us of the actual resilience of some who turned out to be survivors of Auschwitz. Furthermore, Desmond Tutu was known as a man full of life and laughter. At some point he was presented as having the emotions of children as he could easily laugh and at the same time he could easily cry (Allen 2006; Chivers 2011). The juxtaposition of laughter and crying is not a misplacement of emotional balance but rather the actual creativity that keeps life in its balance as we experience it today.

Whenever the preacher preaches the word of God he speaks a new language. This opens the door to 'the strange new world' of the scripture (Barth 1957:28). There are times when the new language on the lips of the pastor becomes uneasy, subversive, and also uplifting. The preacher speaks from a variety of language textures using various linguistic devices in order to convey

the message.⁸ The most amazing thing about preaching is that the preacher in the name and power of God uses ordinary language to communicate the extraordinary and profound things of God. Preaching is not just an ordinary risk taking in life, it is also a self-giving to God in grace. The calling to preach is grace, and the act of preaching itself too is the demonstration of the grace of God, through one's life, to the reality and the world of God.

The act of preaching happens more often than not between power and weakness, even the weakness of God (see 1 Corinthians 1:26–29). Paul spoke of the weakness of God in order to disrupt the strength of the Gentiles; he spoke of the wisdom of God in order to disrupt the wisdom of the Jews. Both Jews and Gentiles needed to hear the new truth of the power of preaching about Jesus the crucified saviour, the saviour who could not save himself but died in weakness so that he could conquer the weakness of life in death, that through it life eternal would be made possible. The preacher of this gospel is only a fool in the eyes of the world that seeks wisdom and power, the world that trades in science and technology, the world that sees only within itself. The preacher may be a fool to those who listen, but also a subversive fool at the same time.

The image of the preacher as fool opens up vistas of a theology that take the *vulnerability and weakness of God* seriously.
(Cilliers 2009:195)⁹

What is the weakness of God? This is no actual weakness as we readily conceive the meaning from the word. The weakness of God is the actual understanding of God from a human point of view. Everything that human beings see and understand from within themselves is nothing but weakness

⁸ 'The language structures (and art forms) that are most fitting for this endeavour would be irony, satire, juxtapositions, paradoxes, metaphor, collage, humour, contradictions, opposites, etc. – modes of language that often dance on the head of so-called logic. Through these language tools new worlds can be created. These language structures are, of course, no strangers to the vocabulary of faith – they can also be found in scripture, where the ultimate paradox of God's story and our story are presented as intrinsically intertwined.' (Cilliers 2009:194)

⁹ 'In this last phrase lies a striking God image: infinitely vulnerable, but never finally defeated. The Word that is preached is vulnerable and fragile, it relies on flawed speech, and is open to misuse and abuse.' (Cilliers 2009:195)

and foolishness compared to the unfathomable wisdom and strength of God. God's wisdom remains foolish and God's strength remains weakness in human eyes. But what makes all the difference is the actual revelation of God.

The most amazing thing about God displayed in weakness is the new turn of God's being and actions towards his people. 'God sides in solidarity with suffering humanity' (Cilliers 2009:196; see also Fretheim 1984; Moltmann 1973; Caputo 2001). God's act of solidarity with human beings in this world in the person of Jesus Christ reveals the humanity of God in a new light (see Barth 1960). This is the new light of God's infinite and unconditional love. 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). Christ did not die for the righteous; he died for the sake of the unrighteous, the weak, the outcast and undesirable, that in his love he might bring them back to himself. This is the good news, the content of the gospel for which the preacher is called and expected to risk everything in order to lose nothing.

But the next question for us to ponder is where the prophetic preachers among us today are.

Johan Cilliers: Asking for the Prophetic Voices

'Where have all the prophets gone?' This is the question posed by the American homiletician Leonora Tubbs Tisdale; Johan Cilliers took that question seriously with regards to his South African context (Cilliers 2015b:379; cf. Tisdale 2010). Today, here and now, we are taking it seriously beyond South Africa, into West Africa (and perhaps even beyond). Following the missionary eras of the advent of Christianity in Africa, we have had series of pastors, preachers among whom were prophetic voices. But the question today still rings, 'where have all the prophets gone?' My answer would be in two phases. Firstly, many of the true prophets of old who were raised from within the church and for the sake of the church and the world have died; thus we are not seeing them or hearing them anymore. Secondly, some of the prophets have gone into the world and become one with it for the sake of the things in it. That is why we do not see them or hear them often. And thirdly, some of the prophets are still among us, yet we are too careless and carried away that we do not see them or listen to them as often as we need.

As already mentioned above, prophetic preaching has been central to what we call biblical preaching. It repeats the revealed word of God in all honesty and earnestness.¹⁰ It seeks to revive the people of God to the love and worship of God. It confronts the powers that be, whether in church or the political society, with the true eschatological vision revealed through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ This leads history to its destination and calls attention to the seriousness of life in the presence of God (*coram Deo*).¹²

The act of prophetic preaching blends the horizons of words, creation, and experiences. Cilliers observed that ‘Words create worlds; voices form spaces of comfort and grace, but also chaos and darkness’ (2015b:368). Cilliers further explains the contextual meaning and power of words with reference to a typical African context, saying

In Africa words are for instance not primarily meant to be put on paper, but to live in the air as voice, in the spaces between

¹⁰ ‘In most of our ecclesiological traditions the notions of “political” and “eschatological” preaching would be combined and described as “prophetical preaching”, unfortunately often in a theological unsophisticated [sic] manner.’ (Cilliers 2015b:373)

¹¹ ‘People like Tutu, Boesak and Naude believed deeply in the transforming power of the Voice of God, as well as in the important role that preaching as an oral event could play in this regard. They used the Bible as their primary source for articulating an alternative society; and, understanding the importance of community and communal experience in the African context, they made an appeal on society (or: separated societies in South Africa during apartheid) to be transformed in the light of this rhetorically portrayed alternative society. This was in stark contrast to many preachers who wanted to maintain and preserve during the apartheid era, often out of *fear for the risk of change*.’ (Cilliers 2015b:374)

¹² Cilliers described what he meant by prophetic preaching in his own time and context in the following words:

This is followed by a description of different ways in which political and eschatological preaching has been understood within recent times, starting with the reverted eschatology of apartheid sermons, linked to the experience of *fear*; then the hopeful eschatology of Desmond Tutu’s sermons, evoking experiences of *anticipation*; and concluding with what could be called the present day vacuum in this regard: preaching that strives to maintain by means of introverted eschatology, contributing to experiences of *uncertainty*. (2015b:367)

people. It in fact creates these spaces, and is intended to bind community together in what could be called a communal experience. (2015b:368)

Central to the prophetic preaching is the communication of God's voice as revelation to people. 'God's voice is simultaneously God's deed of revelation, God's presence, and God's face being turned towards us' (Cilliers 2015b:370). The revelation of God is communicated through the symbolic language of grace.

The anthropomorphous expression *the face (panim)* expresses the modus of God's revelation strikingly: in this God's entire personality becomes clear and God's inner being is represented. (Cilliers 2015b:370)

Preaching is the event of God's voice, but perhaps the latter can also be changed around: preaching is about the voicing of God's event. (Cilliers 2015b:370)

This makes the pastor not just a herald but also a witness: one who bears witness to the actions of God in history and for the sake of his people. The spoken word of God is 'alive and active', so also the living and the written word of God (Hebrews 4:12). The word of God is the act of God in speech form. 'This word-deed shapes experience and calls for transformation' (Cilliers 2015b:370).

Preaching is also seen as a surprising event. Cilliers argues that

Preaching is hard work, but it is also happenstance. This happenstance cannot be controlled or contained; it has its own life, breaking free from constraints. Preaching as an experience of happenstance points towards the unexpected,

the surprising, the grace of God's face being revealed to us.
(2015b:370)¹³

Preaching could also be seen as the risk to hope. The preacher lives by faith and hope and also is pushed to the risk of saying something new or strange, something upsetting, something disturbing to the settled minds of those in power. Yet, the preacher speaks the truth of God in hope that God is glorified and through his (that is, the preacher's) weakness the power of God may be made manifest. Cilliers explains that

prophetic preachers like Desmond Tutu spoke in ways that relativized, and in doing so, opened up experiences of hope, of anticipation of a *novum* that in fact was celebrated as already being present. (2015b:379)¹⁴

What remains a serious and disturbing question for Africa and our world today is what kind of preachers we are. And what kind of message do we love and also love sharing out to the world? If it is one of subservient politics, just to maintain the status quo and enjoy ourselves, then we cannot afford the risk of prophetic preaching. And the moment we lose focus on prophetic, visionary, honest, and Spirit-filled sermons, we leave ourselves and our congregations more vulnerable, malnourished, and lost. Johan Cilliers has led an interesting example in his teachings and sermons that one of his students Martin Laubscher celebrates when he gave attention to the 'strange beauty of the Word' (2019).

¹³ In my view, happenstance in this context is not the product of chance or luck, but rather it is the actualisation of God's given reality without the actual contribution or input of the person as such, that which comes to us without our adequate knowledge. Any effort comes to us from the events that God may use as circumstances to shape and direct our actions to a particular purpose to the glory of God.

¹⁴ To relativise in this context does not mean to lose the grasp on truth as reality, but rather it means to disrupt the absolute version of ideological truth as happened in the apartheid context of South Africa.

Laubscher on Cilliers' Legacy

Martin Laubscher is one of the students of Johan Cilliers who further presents a close reading of his life and prophetic preaching. Cilliers himself became an amazing embodiment of the virtues of preaching. These are the pastoral traits that illumine his life and give force and direction to his witness. Cilliers was one who believed in prophetic action that displays truth in humility.

Not only will it become clear that he is constantly embodying a prophetic presence in South African theology without necessarily using or claiming this label for his work, but also transcending the prophetic by moving beyond the mere concept to point and reveal the actual theological truth which is at stake in a given matter. (Laubscher 2019:261)¹⁵

The African context is always, or often, the context of action and Cilliers is a man of both the word and action. His actions are not less critical than the words of his mouth, there we find and hear good correspondences of true life, true hope, and true calling from the word of God as he shares and lives in and through his simple life. This sacrificial and simple life we also see in the life of the late Rev. Ibrahim Garba who was a preacher willing to risk everything for the sake of the gospel.

Another important contribution from the works of Cilliers on preaching is the idea of the blend of four voices. The preacher in Cilliers' view is not a loner, but rather one who speaks from one end to another, and one through whom God speaks his own voice to his people. This is how we see the four specific voices of 'God, biblical text, congregation, and preacher' (Laubscher 2019:269) blend into one single voice that gives a particular message to a particular people at a

¹⁵ 'Again, the remote use of the prophetic here in the negative assumes and implies a great unsaid homiletical and prophetic insight, namely that true preaching is actually and inevitably supposed to be prophetic speech. He does not coin nor emphasize prophetic preaching per se, because it is not as if he does not mean, assume nor imply this when he sensitises us for what he believes preaching to be in its core. Again, the mere fact that he rarely uses the concept here does not mean it is marginal or somewhere isolated in his thought, but rather so central and integral that it is not even necessary to state the obvious.' (Laubscher 2019:263)

particular time.¹⁶ The sequence of the arrangement of the voiced agents can be reordered as Bible, listeners, preacher, and God. But to me it would be more reasonable to follow the order of revelatory communication in that we start with God, through the Bible and preacher, then to the listeners. This means God always initiates, guides, and gives the word through the Bible and the preacher to the listeners or the congregation. But then the preacher is not away from the listeners but is also an active participant with them. In other words, when the preacher preaches the word he at the same time also listens to the word that he preaches as an instruction also for him coming from God.

It is interesting to take a close look also at ‘the setting of the preacher’s voice’ (Laubscher 2019:269).¹⁷ The idea of ‘setting’ in this context is not just about a certain background, but rather the actual texture, that which makes the voice of the preacher truly a preacher’s voice. It is that which moves the words of the preacher from a distant mundaneness to a status of being sacred and special for the glory of God. This is the extraordinary function of the preacher as the preacher of the word of God. It is important to think of other textures, or settings, beyond just that of the preacher’s voice. A lot about the preacher needs its proper setting for the act of preaching to be something truly new, a sacred and definite service unto God before men and women, and the service of self or of men and women in the name of God. Paul warns that anyone who focuses on listening to mere people rather than listening to God is only seeking for the approval of people; such a person cannot be the servant of God (Galatians 1:10). The apostle himself cautioned not only his hearers but his very self as well against the pitfall of self-service or the service of people in the name of God. The other areas of new orientation or new settings for the preaching of the word of God include the setting for the preacher as a person, to be aware of the seriousness of the task given to him by God and the urgency with which to deliver it to God’s people. There is need also for the setting of life. This is the adjustment and orientation of life to be that which is solely given to God for the sake of God’s own service. This is when God is given the self to use for the glory of God alone. There is also need for the setting of the eyes. Like Job in Job 31:1, the preacher must have pure eyes that see and delight in what is good, true, and holy. The eye is also a means of receiving and

¹⁶See Cilliers (2015b:367), quoted in footnote 12 above.

¹⁷ See Cilliers (2015b:367), quoted in footnote 12 above.

giving information. There are instances when we preach by what we see, and how we see it; this is preaching with the eyes as well as the self. There is also need for the adjustment and setting of the heart. The heart of the preacher is the foundation of the development of life into the mind for the sake of concrete action. The heart can be the metaphor of the mind or desire of the person. This is meant to be set on what is good, true, and godly in order that the preacher may be truly inspired to be the actual mouthpiece of God. Lastly regarding the aspect of the setting of life is the setting of the preacher's mouth. This is a metaphor for speech action. What comes out of the preacher's mouth is deeply important for the sake of the actual delivery of the message of the Lord instead of its counterfeit. The urgent need and call is for the preacher to be actually set or cultured in ways that make him ready and effective for the service of God through the act of preaching the word.

Preaching the word is a risky activity because it does not always meet our human expectations. It always takes us by surprise. It always turns us around and at times even away from that which is truly meant to build the body of Christ. When as preachers we allow personal ideas or practices to take over, we more often than not jeopardise the sanctity of our calling and tasks as preachers of the word. This is the actual crisis of being that erupts from within and disrupts that which is also without.

The real and actual theological secret-or-crisis concerning the preaching event is often related to where this differentiation leads to separation and isolation, and not rather to intrinsic being-in-relatedness. (Laubscher 2019:270)

Nevertheless, the preacher's self-giving to God to be a useful instrument for the sake of building the body of Christ against all odds remains 'the strange beauty of serving the Word' (Laubscher 2019:283).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the act of preaching as risk for the sake of the gospel is urgently needed today. Preaching as risk could be seen from the above discussion as prophetic preaching. It focuses on declaring the word of God against all odds. It calls for true freedom of life and courage; these call for good progress

beyond fear, fear of ridicule, fear of rejection, fear of being seen and classified as fools, etc. This kind of fear has a way of paralysing us and keeping us away from the right advancement for the sake of the kingdom of God. Fear in this context may be manifested in many ways, for example as the fear of death in taking risk for the sake of the kingdom of God, as fear of losing popularity and income (i.e. money) especially in the case of prosperity preachers, and as the fear of cultural or ideological resistance that may even lead to persecution and shame. Fear may be manifested as another kind of love, love for self, tradition, and ideology. This is the fear that hinders changes that are meant to reorganise the context of life towards its freedom and fruitfulness. According to Cilliers this kind of fear was the paralysing issue that resisted the change needed in South Africa from apartheid to a free society. He explains that,

We have, for instance, experienced fear in the past – fear for losing what is known, fear for change. We seem to be experiencing fear again – fear for the future, fear born out of uncertainty. (Cilliers 2015b:383)

Nevertheless, against the odds of fear and uncertainty, there have been voices on the horizon, serious voices for good and for ill. But most definitely the new creative voices of freedom of light are those worth hearing and listening to now more than ever. Pointing to those controversial periods and moments in history, Cilliers (2015b:383) admitted that ‘We have heard voices that created worlds of darkness, and we have heard voices that created worlds of light’.

We need preachers who subvert the status quo, who rock the systemic boat, who rattle the cages in which we have become so comfortable. We need preachers who point towards, and embody, the biblical alternative, that is, who understand something of the subversive character of biblical texts. (Cilliers 2009:193)

This is the strength of the word of God in the midst of human weakness. The coming of Jesus Christ and his demonstration of love on the cross has revolutionised our view and understanding of God. Jürgen Moltmann (1973), in Christ, saw a crucified God. This is not the God of monstrous strength and orders, but rather the new revelation of God who identified with our

weaknesses and brokenness. The new imagery given at the cross is not that of the strength and almightiness of God but rather the self-giving emptiness and weakness of God.

He is a vulnerable, broken God. Preaching about this God might indeed seem foolish to many, might sound like silly stuttering. But this stuttering is all about the wisdom and power of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18-30). (Cilliers 2009:196)

It is in this vocation, for the glory of God, '[w]e have become *fools for the sake of Christ...*' (1 Corinthians 4:9-10, as quoted in Cilliers 2009:190).

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