II. Interpreting The Gospel

1. *Begin by asking yourself what your motive for preaching is and what model of a preacher is in your mind.*

It is much easier to do something if you know in advance what you want to do, if you have some idea of what it looks like when someone does that thing. This applies to preaching as well as to any other activity. One seldom accomplishes great things accidentally. To preach effectively, then, you must begin by asking what effective preaching is, what its objective is, who does it well, and what makes their efforts so successful.

Motives are always mixed, of course. Some of your less noble motives might be that the pastor told you to and you do not want to make him mad, or that you want your parishioners to think you eloquent, holy, witty, or profound. It is unlikely that anyone outgrows such inclinations in this life.

There are other motives that are nobler, but which still miss what preaching is basically about. One such motive is to inform the faithful. Certainly people do acquire information from sermons, but the impartation of it is a by-product of preaching. Another motive might be to encourage members of the congregation to obey the laws of the church. Like Cato the Elder who is supposed to have ended every speech by saying, "Carthage must be destroyed," a priest of whom I have heard closed even his Christmas and Easter sermons by urging parents to have their babies baptized within the canonical time. Canons, rubrics, and other forms of church regulations are important, but they are not properly the subject of the homily. St. Paul, in fact, went to some lengths to distinguish between gospel and law.

And the gospel is what preaching is about. In Greek, the verb we translate "to preach" is *kēryssein*, which is related to the noun *kēryx*, "a herald." Modern New Testament scholars often use the noun for the message of a herald, *kērygma*, as a synonym for gospel. As the popular musical of the same name has made known, the derivation of our English word "gospel" is "god spell," an Old English expression meaning "good tidings" or "good news." Thus it translates exactly the Greek *euangelion* and has been used in that sense from the tenth century. (A popular theory that "god spell" means "a story about a god," however attractive, has been refuted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.) To preach, then, is to proclaim the good news that in Jesus God has acted finally and decisively for the reclamation of a lost world.

The motive for preaching can be expressed in the vocabulary of liturgical theology as assisting the people of God to celebrate the mystery of Christ. Because Jesus died and rose again we can be grafted into his body through baptism and share in the paschal mystery when we gather to make eucharist. Homilies based on the gospel for the day enable the faithful to participate more fully in the aspect of the total mystery of Christ that is being celebrated that day and to live out its implications. But more of that later.

Another way of describing the motive for preaching is in the vocabulary of the sociology of knowledge: preaching is done to help people to construct reality in a Christian way. In our society anyone who believes the Catholic faith is swimming against the current. As Peter Berger has pointed out, the "knowledge industry"—the media and the schools—presents to the nation a view of life in which Christianity is irrelevant. Those who are to be maintained in their faith must have continual reinforcement of it by the support of the persons who are most important in their lives, their "probability structure," as the sociologists call it. Preaching and the liturgy make it possible for people to acquire faith and to hold on to it after they get it. A homily that does not have the inculcation and maintenance of a Christian construction of reality as one of its major purposes is inadequately motivated.

Closely related to your motive for preaching is the model of the ideal preacher that you hold in your mind. There is an old chestnut to the effect that "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." This is to say that our criteria are often unconscious rather than conscious, implicit rather than explicit. Yet it is possible to start with what you like—whether in preaching or another art form—and ask yourself what you like about it. This makes the implicit criteria explicit. Since it is inevitable that we pattern our own participation in an activity on that of those we think do it best, one of the reasons to identify our models is that we may discover we have chosen the wrong ones. What they do when they preach may be something less than proclaiming the gospel. And if we have been imitating them in our preaching, we will have been going about it wrong.

If, however, we discover that our models have been good, we can then ask what makes them good. If we are to do what they do, how do we go about it? What steps will we take? Keeping all of this in mind when we sit down to begin our preparation of a homily will insure that what we end up with really is a homily.

2. *Commence the preparation for next Sunday's homily not later than Monday.*

As a homilist who takes the Word of God seriously and the people of God seriously, you can hardly do less. Think of the number of persons who will hear you preach. In a good sized parish that will be several hundred to a thousand or more. Multiply their number by the time you will preach, say ten to twenty minutes. Then divide that number by sixty and you will have the number of human hours that go into listening to you. Your effort in preparation should be in proportion to theirs in listening. Few will be able to realize the goal of great Protestant preachers of the past who felt that they had to spend an hour in preparation for every minute in the pulpit. Still, no one can preach well without preparing well.

There are those blessed or cursed with a glib tongue who can speak entertainingly with very little advance thought. I say "or cursed" because for them there must be a great temptation to get by with "winging it." Yet their people deserve their best thought, not any old thing they can come up with on the spur of the moment. And certainly those who lack the gift need to do what they can to make up for the lack by the care of their preparation. Often they want to excuse themselves by saying, "There's no point in trying because I'm going to bomb anyway." They have the wrong end of the stick on that argument: to retrieve the situation at all, they must spend more and not less time in getting ready to preach than those who have a natural talent for it.

It takes time to get ready to preach. Anyone using the method of preparation outlined in this book will not be able to think up something for Sunday's homily while sitting in the confessional on Saturday afternoon. There are two things that take time. The first is study: exegesis of the gospel and boning up on the situation to which it is to be applied. The second is thought. There has to be a lot of mulling over the fruits of your exegesis before you know where it should be brought to bear on the lives of your parishioners that Sunday. More will be said of this later. For the moment, though, plan to begin on Monday and put in some time every day until Sunday. (The method of preparation detailed in this book is for homilies for Sundays or major feasts since few priests can spend the time required more than once a week.)

3. Initiate your preparation with prayer and continue to pray at each stage of preparation.

To begin with, there is no point in preaching if you do not believe in praying. Preaching grows out of the conviction that life is about God, the God who was revealed in Jesus Christ and who is worshiped in the church. God's ordained servants who serve him in the church and who lead his people in worship need to be persons of prayer themselves. And one of the things that all Christians should pray about is their work. While all of life should be an offering to God, the work one does is a matter of vocation, a matter of the particular task for which one was created and called.

Furthermore, we should want our preaching to succeed, to be effective in accomplishing its purpose. Undoubtedly God is trying at all times to get through to us and to direct us into the way that we should go, but often our preoccupations act like static "jamming" his message. We need to be in tune with him, then, we need to be open to hearing his voice.

All of this need not be too mystical. The only impression we have may be that our mind seems to be functioning with abnormal efficiency that day. Yet any experienced preacher knows what it is like to get an idea. It usually comes suddenly and unexpectedly, but there is a vivid impression that this is it, that we have struck pay dirt. Poets can talk about inspiration without any particular theology to back it up. Why should the church's presbyters feel embarrassed by the idea that the God to whose service they have devoted their lives may wish to use them occasionally as one of the channels through which he speaks to his people? (There is, however, an equal if not greater danger in the opposite direction of confusing our will and word with the word and will of God.)

Part of the mystery of preaching is that much of what it accomplishes was never envisioned by the preacher. Anyone who has preached often has had experiences of discovering that what was said in a homily had peculiar appropriateness for someone in the congregation whose presence or need had not been anticipated. And the way that people hear things is often not what one intended to convey, but for them it is more important than what was intended. Such "coincidences" happen more often with those who consider prayer to be an important part of their preparation for preaching.

Such prayer should not be confined to the beginning of the process, like the old custom of writing *J.M.J.* at the top of a page. Much of the working out of a sermon is an interior dialogue. In such a dialogue you can address God as easily as yourself. Doing so will change remarkably your attitude toward what you are doing.

Finally, the prayer should continue to the time of delivery. The prophet Isaiah told us:

For as the rain and the snow come
   down from heaven,
and return not thither but water
   the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
   giving seed to the sower and bread
   to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth
   from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I
   purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which
   I sent it (55:10, 11).

Our prayer in the pulpit can be that God's word spoken through us will not return empty, but accomplish its purpose and prosper in doing what God intended it to.

4. *Read the gospel with the expectation that God will speak to you through it and that he will speak to his people through your preaching.*

Preaching presupposes not only a belief in prayer but also a belief in scripture and a belief in the task of preaching itself. The belief in scripture is not just a general intellectual assent to propositions about what the Bible is supposed to do, but is an affective conviction that that actually happens. The Bible tells us not only the basic gospel message of what God has done for us in Christ, it also tells us God's perspective on the events of our lives. This perspective is seldom found by looking up the right prooftext; the process is far more complex than that. Yet it is from the Bible that we come to understand what issues are at stake in the events of our lives. It may be hard for us to believe that until we have had some experience of having our own lives illuminated by a passage we were reading, as a dark path at night is revealed in a sudden flash of lightning. Those under obligation to recite the office have frequently had such experience while reading the Psalms. If it can work for us, it can work for others.

It is this knowledge that contemporary experience can be understood from perspectives acquired in Bible reading that gives integrity to the whole enterprise of preaching. Otherwise we would be in the position of Old Mother Hubbard promising to give her poor dog a bone when she knew perfectly well that her cupboard was bare. The promises of Matthew 7:7, 8 apply to the preacher as well as to anyone else: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." When we sit down to read the lections for the Sunday we are to preach, we should do so with the expectation that they will have something to say that our people need to hear. We should approach this reading with the same sense of anticipation that something is going to happen that the person has who always carries an umbrella when praying for rain.

There is, of course, an alternative approach which is to be avoided. That is to approach the lections with the anticipation that something can be found there that can be bent to one's own purposes.

'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'

When the word at stake is God's Word, let us hope that we will never master it in the sense of overpowering it. In responding to the claim of Rudolf Bultmann that one has to approach the biblical text with a pre-understanding, Ernst Fuchs pointed out that it is not just a matter of our interpreting the text: the text also interprets us. It should therefore be approached with modesty as well as expectation.

5. *Read the gospel very carefully.*

Sometimes the obvious is the easiest thing to overlook. A lot of time can be saved later if you get off on the right foot. It is easy to glance over the lectionary hastily and gain an impression of what is being said, only to discover later that you had missed the point. When you discover that, you have to start all over.

The careful reading is not as easy as it sounds because most clergy try to get by with reading only one translation. When you do that, it is possible to think that an accident of English phrasing represents a significant aspect of the text. The only way to be sure that the text really says what you think it does is to test the translation. It is here that those who have studied Greek are most fortunate. No document in one language is ever translated into another language perfectly so that the exact thought with all its nuances and with no extraneous suggestions appears in the new language. There is a maxim to the effect that every translation is an interpretation. This is to say, among other things, that all translations resolve ambiguities that are left open in the original. Thus they close off possibilities for the reader to consider. The one who knows Greek knows the kinds of thoughts that can be expressed easily in that language and also knows interpretations that would seem unnatural. Another way of saying that is that knowledge of Greek protects you from anachronistic interpretation.

Since, however, most seminary graduates today have not studied the biblical languages, a way must be found to make do. One of these is to read the passage in several translations. Certainly that should be done for the verse on which your sermon idea turns, because it may not mean what you think it means. The Revised Standard Version is the well-known modern English translation which best reflects the structure of the Greek that lies behind it. This is not to say that other translations are less "accurate," but is rather to recognize that there are two schools of translators.

One seeks to give the best word-for-word rendering of the original and the other seeks to give the most adequate expression of the thought of the original in an idiomatic form of the language into which it is translated. The RSV translators and Lattimore in his *The Four Gospels and the Revelation* belong to the first school.

If you know other modern languages or Latin—or indeed any other ancient languages—these can offer fresh insight into the meaning of a passage.

6. *Note any striking, unexpected narrative details, paying special attention to what is most difficult to understand or accept.*

After thirty years of sitting down each week to study the Sunday gospel, I am continually amazed at how I continually see things that I had overlooked before. Such discoveries are often made in this first careful reading that we are talking about. There can be many reasons why the particular point had not been noticed previously. One is our unconscious tendency to harmonize the gospels, to approximate the way that something is said in one gospel to the way that it is said to another. At any rate, these discoveries are serendipitous indeed for the preacher because they often give you a germ of the idea for your sermon.

This point has been made particularly well by William Skudlarek, OSB:

> As you ruminate on these texts, you will very likely find that there is a word or verse or passage that is especially troublesome. The reasons for this may be that you simply do not understand what the author is getting at. On the other hand, you may understand it all too well! Or it may be that the word sounds totally irrelevant or even offensive when placed vis-à-vis the particular people and the specific situations you have to deal with. The temptation, of course, will be to skip over these passages, to look for something that seems more appropriate, more suited to the situation at hand. But don't do it! Stay with the difficult passage. Wrestle with it, not letting it go until it gives you an answer (*The Word in Worship*, p. 54)

This good advice takes us farther along the process of sermon preparation than this stage of first familiarization with the passage to be preached from, but it will be worth remembering.

7. *Observe how God is depicted as moving in the lives of his people.*

We are still at a very early stage of sermon preparation, that of our preliminary reading of Sunday's gospel. The purpose of this step is to make certain that from the beginning we are aware of the crucial issue: the proclamation that is being made in this passage about how God is involved and working in the lives of his people. The question to ask is: what is God accomplishing here? It presupposes that he acts in comparable ways in the lives of people today; indeed, the gospel to be proclaimed is that he does so. Much work will have to be done on this later, but the important thing at this stage is to note it. Doing so will keep you on track.

8. *Examine manuscript variations to see what difference the alternatives make and which is more likely to be original.*

The discipline involved here is textual criticism, the effort to reconstruct exactly what words the sacred author wrote and in what order. This job is made necessary by the fact that for the first 1,400 years that the books of the New Testament existed each new volume had to be laboriously copied by hand. As in all handwork, minute variations were inevitable. Many variant readings were introduced into the text. The question to be asked today is: Which of those readings is what the original author actually wrote?

Textual criticism is a highly technical discipline and the average preacher of Sunday homilies will not be equipped to do it scientifically. There are, however, two reasons for including it as a step in sermon preparation. The first is that proclamation grows out of exegesis and we need to know what is involved in the scholar's interpretation of a passage, even if we cannot replicate all of the steps in that interpretive process. Secondly, and more practically, there are ways in which one who is not a trained scripture scholar can become aware of at least some of the major manuscript variations and involve them in his or her* efforts to understand the Sunday gospel. Most modern translations, for instance, have marginal references to textual variations. I opened my RSV at random to a page on which is printed Luke 5:29-6:13a. There are three footnotes there. The first informs the reader that, while the translation of 5:29 refers to people "sitting" at a table, the Greek actually says "reclining," in accordance with the dining customs of the time. The next says that in some manuscripts 5:39 says that the old wine is "better" rather than "good." The third makes 6:1 date the walk through the grainfields on "the second sabbath after the first" rather than just on "a sabbath." Only the last two of these have to do with manuscript variation, since the first is a matter of translation. These two are fairly easy ones for finding the original reading. A basic principle of textual criticism is: That reading is to be preferred which best accounts for the others. In 5:39 a comparative seems called for and so the likelihood is that the original lacked it and the correction supplied it. In 6:1 it sounds like some copyist was dissatisfied with the vagueness of "a sabbath" and introduced the greater precision of "on the second sabbath after the first." These particular variants make little difference in the meaning of the passage, but enough do to make them always worth checking on. Examples of variants that make a big difference are: (a) Mark ends with 16:8 rather than 16:20 in the oldest manuscripts, (b) the story of the woman taken in adultery does not appear in the oldest manuscripts of John at 7:53-8:11 or anywhere else, and (c) the explicit trinitarian references that appears in the Vulgate of 1 John 5:7-8 appears in only four very late Greek manuscripts.

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*While it is expected that most of the users of this book will be Roman Catholics and the canon law does not at this time permit the ordination of women to the presbyterate or diaconate, it is hoped that it will be used by clergy of other communions in which such ordination is permitted. Besides, the time may come when female Roman Catholics will have a need for such a book. For these reasons there is an effort to make the language referring to preachers sexually inclusive.

Commentaries also discuss the more important textual variations. For those who know Greek an excellent tool is Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, which gives the reasoning behind the readings and estimates of their probability in the *United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*.

9. *Compare today's pericope with its parallels in other gospels.*

A tool that should be in the library of everyone who has the responsibility of preaching is a book in which the gospels are set in parallel columns, such as Burton Throckmorton, *Gospel Parallels*, or Kurt Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*. Such a gospel harmony makes it easy to see how the version of a story or saying appearing in the gospel featured in the lectionary this year compares with the versions that appear in the other gospels. Such a comparison helps you to understand the use that the current version made of its sources and to see the way in which the evangelist used the story to communicate his theological emphases. This is to say that you are to engage in source criticism and redaction criticism.

The basic conclusions of source criticism are simple and questioned by very few scholars. Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source. They also shared another source, consisting largely of the sayings of Jesus, that scholars call "Q." In addition, each of the two has material that is exclusive to it, whether derived from a private source or the product of the evangelist's editorial activity; Matthew's special material is referred to as "M" and Luke's as "L." John belongs to a stream of tradition different from that of the synoptic gospels and has very few duplications of material appearing in them. When the Sunday gospel is from John, then, there is far less comparison to make.

When we see how Matthew or Luke has altered Mark or how they differ in their presentation of Q material, we have important indications of their theological intention in telling the story the way they did. These variations, therefore, are some of the best guides we have to the meaning of a passage. They should be studied carefully. Some people have even found it helpful to use underlining, highlighting, or other, forms of notation on the pages of their gospel harmony.

10. *Note what comes before and after today's pericope in the gospel from which it is taken.*

In addition to the use they make of their sources, one of the main indications of the intention of an evangelist used by redaction critics is the sequence of material. The outline of the whole book can be considered an indication of its argument. Seeing where the Sunday passage fits in can give a good clue to what the evangelist is trying to accomplish by telling this particular story. For example, in Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in chapter 11, he does not have Jesus cleanse the Temple as the climax of the entry the way that Matthew and Luke do. Rather, he saves the cleansing for the next day and sets it between the story of Jesus' cursing the fig tree and that of the discovery that the cursed tree had withered by the end of the day. This "sandwiching" of the cleansing of the Temple between the two parts of the narrative about the fig tree suggests very strongly that Mark intended the cleansing to be interpreted in the light of the fig tree story. By the same token, the fig tree narrative is revealed to be a parable that is treated as an event in the life of Jesus rather than as a tale that he told.

11. *Fit this passage into the sequence of gospels in the current lectionary cycle.*

The evangelist is not the only party with whose intention in telling a gospel story we are concerned. Another is the church. There are reasons why just this story was chosen for this Sunday. (For an excellent discussion of the rationale of the current three-year lectionary cycle, see Skudlarek, *The Word in Worship*, pp. 32-37.) The congregation will hear this Sunday's gospel in the light of last Sunday's and this Sunday's will in turn be part of the context in which next Sunday's gospel is heard. All of this needs to be taken into account by the preacher.

12. *Discover the evangelist's special theological vocabulary.*

There is a strong temptation for contemporary readers of the Bible to assume that the words in its theological vocabulary mean the same thing as the same words mean in our modern theological vocabulary. There are, of course, inevitable overlaps of meaning, but there are not only major differences between the way certain words were used then and now, there are even differences between the way those words were used in different sections of the canon of scriptures. Most persons who have done any critical study of the New Testament know, for instance, that what Paul means by faith differs considerably from what the Epistle of James means by it and that the Epistle to the Hebrews differs from both of them.

There are, however, much subtler differences. The three synoptic gospels, surprisingly, do not use even such key terms as "kingdom of God," "Son of Man," and "Son of God" in the same way. To make sure that you are not importing Mark's understanding to Matthew's use, then, you will need to look up all the terms in the passage that are theologically significant. There is a considerable array of helpful reference books for this task. The nine volumes of Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* form one of the monuments of modern biblical scholarship, although they are getting a bit dated by now as well as too long and technical to use for every term that appears in a passage. Alan Richardson's *Theological*

Word Book of the Bible makes a convenient one-volume substitute. More recent than either of these is *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (four volumes and a supplement) and John McKenzie's one-volume *Dictionary of the Bible*. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Theology of the New Testament*, is more useful for John than the synoptics because of the scholarship in the latter that has been published since he wrote. Redaction critical studies on the individual gospels are other good places to see how technical terms were used by a given evangelist.

13. *Look up the persons, places, objects, and institutions mentioned in the passage.*

This principle is very similar to the previous one and many of the same reference books can be used, especially the dictionaries of the Bible. Just as knowing the meaning of theological terms is necessary for understanding a passage, so is a recognition of the various allusions made in it. If someone greater than Solomon is here (Matthew 12:42/ /Luke 11:31), who was Solomon? Even more interesting, who was the Queen of the South who came to hear him? What is the relation of Galilee to Samaria and Judea? What are the differences between the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Zealots? How much buying power would a talent or a shekel have? How long is a cubit? What are the festivals all about that John says Jesus went to Jerusalem to attend? Most seminary graduates have at least a vague idea about the answers to all these questions, but a clear understanding could cause a particular narrative to snap into focus the way that a projected color slide does a second after it appears on the screen.

14. *Reflect on the affirmation the evangelist makes about Jesus in this pericope.*

One of the most extraordinary things about the way that Christians read scripture is that, although they may spend a certain amount of time asking what a passage means to them, they seldom get around to asking what the author intended to say in it, what point he was trying to make. Yet one of the contributions of form criticism to our understanding of the gospels is the recognition that each story or paragraph of sayings is the entire gospel in a nutshell. The reason that these individual units of tradition could be passed down by word of mouth for some years before any was written down as part of a consecutive account of the life of Jesus is that each contains an affirmation about Jesus that is ultimate in its implications.

Many examples could be cited, but a look at the "Controversy Stories" in Mark 2:1-3:6 should suffice. The story of the healing of the paralytic affirms that Jesus has the power to forgive sins, which his opponents knew was reserved to God. His eating with tax collectors and sinners showed his superiority to the dietary laws that occupied a prominent role in the strategy of the Pharisees for bringing in the kingdom of God. The failure of his disciples to fast was an indication of the uniqueness in history of his time on earth. When the disciples plucked grain on the sabbath and he said that the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath, he was claiming to be superior to one of the holiest of religious institutions and to have authority greater than Moses. His opponents certainly were aware of these implicit claims, as may be seen in the reaction of the Pharisees and Herodians to his healing the man with a withered hand on the sabbath: they left the synagogue and began to plot to kill him because they recognized the threat he posed to the entire religious system that they held to be holy.

If there is such a basic proclamation in each pericope, does that have implications for preaching? In some languages there are grammatical constructions that "expect the answer *yes*." This question is obviously phrased to elicit such a response, yet what those implications are is not so obvious as one might think. A lot could be said for establishing a principle that the proclamation of a homily should always be the proclamation of the pericope on which it is based. At the same time, however, it must be recognized that such a principle would invalidate most of the preaching that has been done in 2,000 years of church history. Futhermore, it is even inconsistent with the use of scripture that is made within the Bible itself. Most of the theology of the New Testament, for instance, is based on a christological interpretation of verses from the Old Testament. No modern scholar would say that the meaning the New Testament writers get out of those verses is precisely what the Old Testament writers intended their first readers to understand. Yet Christians are bound to be convinced that Jesus fulfilled the deepest longings of Israel, that what he was is what they would have hoped for if they had known enough to hope that well.

This is to suggest that appropriate insights may be drawn from scripture that are in addition to the point that a sacred writer was trying to make in that passage. Apt extensions of the meaning of a passage can be made. Needless to say, the criteria for establishing such aptness are numerous and subtle, and applying them calls for delicacy, rigor, and integrity. The only one of these criteria to be mentioned now, though, is that the extension be consistent with the original application.

15. *Distinguish between the use the evangelist makes of the story or saying, the reason that pericope was preserved in oral tradition, and the significance of that event in the life of Jesus.*

This step is closely related to the preceding one. It says, in effect, that even in the story as it appears in the gospel there is not just one meaning but three. Redaction criticism concentrates on the matter discussed in the previous paragraph, the affirmation that the evangelist was making. Form criticism deals with the other two, the reason the story was preserved in oral tradition and the significance of the event in the life of Jesus. Scholars talk about the *Sitzim-Leben*, the life situation, of a pericope. There are three such life situations: in the gospel, in oral tradition, and in the life of Jesus. One could even add a fourth that is the liturgical occasion for the reading of that gospel passage. And the meaning is different in each.

As an example, we may look at the parable of the Sower in Mark 4. In Mark the parable is related to the doctrine of the Messianic Secret and is used to demonstrate the point that parables were not illustrations or arguments Jesus used, but were instead designed to veil his meaning. Joachim Jeremias, whose *The Parables of Jesus* should be consulted before anyone ever dares to preach on a parable, says that the allegorical explanation of the parable was added by the early church during the period of oral transmission to turn the parable into "an exhortation to converts to examine themselves and test the sincerity of their conversion" (p. 79). Jesus, however, told the parable originally to reassure his followers who were discouraged by the poor response to their preaching, that "in spite of every failure and opposition, from hopeless beginnings, God brings forth the triumphant end which he promised" (p. 150).

Each of these three levels of meaning would be appropriate to preach from. (It should be noted that not all pericopes have three levels since some originated in oral tradition and others in the editorial work of the evangelist. Yet those that have parallels in the synoptics have an additional use in the thought of the evangelist for every gospel in which they appear.)

16. *Compare your interpretation with that of a few good commentaries and exegetical aids and revise your interpretations as necessary in the light of that comparison.*

By this time you have performed at your own level all of the activities that a trained biblical scholar would have gone through to interpret your passage. You could, of course, have taken a shortcut and consulted their books at the beginning of your work, but that would have made your own involvement and understanding of the pericope much more superficial than it is after this effort to wrestle with its interpretation yourself.

Something should be said about the commentaries to be consulted. All generalizations have their exceptions, but if one's commentary is over fifteen years old, it is probably not worth bothering with. The knowledge explosion is as characteristic of biblical studies as it is any other academic discipline and fresh scholarship makes for fresh preaching. The Appendix on Resources lists some of the better recent volumes on individual gospels. Some shorter aids can be listed here. Two single-volume works that are usually worth looking at are *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* and *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. Homiletical aids that have good exegetical material include Reginald H. Fuller's *Preaching from the New Lectionary* and Fortress Press's two (soon to be three) *Proclamation* series. There are also good subscription services for homiletical assistance, such as *Celebration—A Creative Worship Service* from Kansas City.

Even if the authorities you consult disagree with your tentative interpretation and convince you that you were off on the wrong track, their exegesis will mean far more to you after you have already explored the issues raised by the text on your own. You will understand better not only what they say but also why they say it. Do not submit immediately to authority, though, like an arithmetic student looking up an answer in the back of the book or a mystery story reader peeking at the last page to find out "who done it." Make them show that their case is stronger than yours. When you become convinced that it is, then their interpretation will have become your own.

17. *Go back and read the story over again in the light of your study, yet listen for a coherent narrative while you do so.*

All of this study has been for the purpose of helping to understand the passage better. If it has not, you have wasted your time. Some clergy seem to act as though the biblical criticism they were taught in seminary has no practical use beyond protecting their gnostic status as professionals. Yet it is intended to be one of the most practical subjects that one studies. It is designed to help you understand what you proclaim so that you can proclaim it more effectively. Failing to use it is like counting on your fingers when you have a computer available.

Many of us have had the assignment of translating something written in a foreign language that we know in a rudimentary way. We start out by looking over the whole thing and seeing what sort of sense we can make of it from a sight reading. Sometimes that gets us pretty far, but we usually have to drag

out at least the lexicon and maybe a grammar as well. We go through and look up every unfamiliar word and construction. Then we go back over the whole thing and discover that it makes much more sense than it did the first time. When we read our pericope straight through after having completed our exegesis, we should have a similar experience of greatly enhanced understanding.

Not only that. There should also be a much livelier appreciation of the story told. A lot of details that were vague before now make their contribution to the total effect. From all this we ought to be able to find something to preach about. If not, there is probably a serious spiritual deficiency in us.

18. *Now study the other lessons for the day to see how they illuminate the gospel.*

Some authorities so define liturgical preaching that a homily must be based on all the lections to qualify. Either liturgical preaching does not have to be that way or I have no particular investment in holding it up as an ideal. The ten to fifteen minutes available for a homily is seldom adequate for the gospel, let alone two additional readings and a psalm as well. Dragging them in can be quite artificial, since course reading is done for the epistle and it was not chosen with the particular gospel in mind.

There are, however, times when a phrase, point, or story from one of the other readings is exactly what is needed to back up the proclamation of the gospel.

The possibility is greater with the Old Testament reading since it was chosen with the gospel in mind. If you find something that really adds, use it. If not, let it go. In any case, you will probably spend a good deal less time in your exegesis of these readings than you did with the gospel, although the effort will be richly repaid in other ways if you can find the time.