



PREACHING AS INTERPRETING (BUT NOT THE KIND WE ARE USED TO)

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ABSTRACT: This paper revisits Abraham Kuruvilla's characterisation of preaching as translation and argues that instead preaching should be seen as an analogue of a related interlingual activity: interpreting. This move involves accepting the essentially unstable nature of any pericopal theology and the ephemeral and contextualised nature of all preaching. Rather than being regarded as a weakness, this paper views the instability, ephemerality and contextualised nature of preaching and interpreting as a source of power and discusses the practical applications of this view.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article in *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society*,¹ it was suggested that homiletics needs to begin to tackle the question of the status of interpreted sermons. This paper goes further, building on and critiquing Abraham Kuruvilla's argument that preaching is an act of translation, arguing that preaching is not an act of translation but instead an act of interpreting. Here the word "interpreting" is used in the linguistic sense of an operation done on an oral or signed source text to produce an oral or signed target text in a different language, as distinct from, though related to the hermeneutical process of "interpretation." The point of this distinction is that when preaching is conceived of as an act of interpreting, its inherent instability, imperfection and ephemerality come to the fore, aspects that are vital for our understanding of preaching but are rarely discussed in the literature. This understanding in turn leads to a new appreciation of the power of proclaiming the Word of God from the pulpit.

PREACHING AS TRANSLATION

Before going any further, it is necessary to first outline just what Kuruvilla means when he terms preaching an act of translation. He begins his paper by laying out the problem as he sees it: while preaching involves explaining the Word of God and then showing how it applies today, the journey between exegesis and application is not well mapped. For this

reason, he turns to the metaphor of translation, which he sees as “saying the same thing” to the new audience as the source text said to its audience.²

It is crucial to understand exactly what is the object of translation here. Kuruvilla’s thesis is not that preachers should attempt to rewrite the text in language familiar to their congregation but that they use their exegesis to locate the “pericopal theology”³ of the text and translate that. It is the world implied by the pericopal theology that “bids the reader inhabit it.”⁴ Application then becomes the specification of what being faithful to that particular theology would look like in this particular church.

This is by no means a straightforward operation. As Kuruvilla later states, there exists both a temporal and cultural gap between the world of the original authors of the Bible and those of its modern readers. His answer to this is to argue that later readers, especially preachers, must seek out and recognise the “authorial fingerprints”⁵ that indicate the writer’s purpose in creating the text and thus discover its core conceptual meaning or “thrust.”⁶

It almost goes without saying then that this pericopal theology must be stable, free from the vicissitudes of time, since otherwise there would be nothing of substance to translate. His example of Hollywood Westerns, with their “themes of individual rights, responsibilities, and codes of honor in the face of evil”⁷ is key here since it is argued that these themes are presented in such films as relevant to modern day society as they were to the world depicted. With no stable themes, there is simply no message to be passed on from the individual depiction. Hence why he insists that, for those preaching Biblical texts, “the elucidation of the specifics of this “world in front of the text” is therefore an essential transaction in biblical interpretation.”⁸ Preachers quite simply must discover this or they have nothing to preach.

INSTABILITY AND INDETERMINACY IN THEOLOGY AND PREACHING

Recent homiletical research, while not directly undermining the existence of a self-evident pericopal theology, has shown that it cannot be taken for granted that understandings of this theology will be stable over time. In a recent paper on preaching difficult texts, Miller⁹ demonstrated that it simply cannot be taken for granted that the pericopal theology of a passage can always be discovered with certainty. Confessional tradition and pre-existing theological positions undoubtedly affect how Biblical texts are understood and hence produce understandings of the pericopal theology, which would seem to be incompatible.

While I, like many Evangelical scholars, am not convinced by the post-modern suspicion of fixed meaning, especially as it has been applied to Biblical texts,¹⁰ there would seem to be some wisdom in acknowledging the inherent impossibility in reaching a single, true-for-all-time pericopal theology of a given passage. Our understanding of even such a fundamental idea as the “conceptual core thrust of the text”¹¹ will never be complete, based as it is on the best of our knowledge and understanding and the best of our

hearing of the Spirit, whom we only ever hear in part (see 1 Corinthians 13: 8-9, 12).

It is important to reiterate here that approaching the idea of a single pericopal theology with humility by doubting that a single, complete, true-for-all-time position can be reached is not the same as the post-modernist project of viewing all meaning as relative. As will be discussed later in this paper, the instability of our understanding of the pericopal theology of a passage is the result of our own human contextualisation and reflects the need for the Holy Spirit to guide us. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, “we know in part and prophesy in part” (1 Corinthians 13: 9). Our understanding of the pericopal theology therefore must always be a work in progress as the Holy Spirit reveals more of the mind and heart of God to us and to our hearers through the Scriptures and through preaching. We can, and therefore probably should, hold belief in the existence of a core conceptual meaning of any passage in one hand and the knowledge that our necessarily partial and unstable understandings of this meaning are precisely the vehicle that God is choosing to speak *this* word to *this* people at *this* time to reveal Himself in *this* way in the other.

Preaching therefore begins with an unstable object of translation, our current understanding of the pericopal theology, and turns it into an unstable object of performance since sermons exist only as long as the preacher continues to speak¹². Indeed, while the application of performance to preaching remains a matter of debate,¹³ the notion that there is a fundamental difference between sermon as manuscript and sermon as performance would seem to be accepted.

None of these challenges are particularly new and none of them, on their own at least, are sufficient to undermine Kuruvilla’s point that there is complex work to do to understand the Biblical text and discover an application of it for a particular congregation at a particular time. What they do suggest, however, is the need for a shift in emphasis. While Biblical truths are timeless and immovable; *our understandings* of the pericopal theology of any passage will naturally change with each generation. Sermons therefore take an unstable understanding of the pericopal theology of a Biblical text and produce an ephemeral performance, both of which are fundamentally entangled with the social, congregational, theological and confessional context in which the sermon is delivered.

FROM PREACHING AS TRANSLATION TO PREACHING AS INTERPRETING

None of the characteristics assigned to preaching then are particularly reminiscent of translation. While the precise definitions of interpreting and translation are still subject to debate,¹⁴ one difference is almost universally accepted. Translation involves starting with one stable text (the written source text) and moving to another stable text (the written target text).

Interpreters work with fleeting oral or signed texts and turn them into texts that are likewise fleeting.

This leads to interpreters constantly doing their best to make sense of what is being said, using any textual and contextual clues at their disposal.¹⁵ Interpreting can never be perfect. It is always the result of the interpreter's best attempts and these attempts never produce the same text twice.¹⁶

All this may seem to paint interpreting as an inherently flawed activity. Indeed, church interpreting researcher, Jill Karlik has given examples of Bible translators regarding the use of interpreted (rather than translated) Scripture as "this dreadful practice ... the kind of thing we try to avoid"¹⁷ based precisely on the perceived openness to error. Yet, as was briefly argued in this *Journal*,¹⁸ viewing the inherently fleeting or ephemeral nature of interpreting as only a weakness would be a mistake, especially given its Biblical pedigree and its intimate links with preaching itself. Much like the multi-lingual work of the Levites in Nehemiah 8:1-9 and the practice of the Jewish *metourguemanim* who followed them¹⁹, preaching and interpreting may both be said to "translate the language [of the original text] and interpret its meaning, while bringing to life the message of the divine word, which is eternal by its very essence."²⁰

Indeed, this passage represents in microcosm the differences between the translation approach put forward by Kuruvilla and the interpreting-based approach suggested in this paper. In both *Privilege the Text* and an earlier work, *Text to Praxis*, Kuruvilla sees this passage as paralleling the task of the modern day preacher²¹ and on that both his translational approach and an interpreting-based approach care in agreement. The key differences are found in the aspects of the context of this passage that exegetes and preachers need to take into account when attempting to grasp its core conceptual thrust.

Kuruvilla views this passage as essentially a covenant renewal ceremony and thus sees it as reflecting how explaining the text with clarity leads to obedience and joy²². What is elided in the discussion is, however, precisely the interlingual nature of the activity that was discussed in Kaufmann's analysis.²³ According to her analysis of this passage and ancient commentaries, the returning Jews had lost their ability to understand the Hebrew of the Torah. The job of the Levites in this passage was not simply to explain the conceptual thrust of the passage but to both create a version that was linguistically comprehensible for the people and culturally comprehensible given their temporal and cultural distance from those to whom the Torah was originally addressed.

With this in mind, Kuruvilla is indeed right to note the repetition of "the people" and similar terms²⁴ but their significance is surely that, in both hearing the original Hebrew of the Torah and yet being able to understand and apply it due to the dual role of the Levitical preacher/interpreters, the returning Jews are now discovering what it means to be God's people in the new context in which they find themselves. The covenant renewal includes a rediscovery of identity via the dual hearing of the Torah in Hebrew (the

link back to its original hearers and an indication of its timelessness) and in the language they habitually use (indicating its relevance to their new situation). The timeless Torah, given many generations previously to the Jews leaving Egypt now must be understood anew and applied afresh to the Jews returning from the Exile.

Viewing the passage in this light suggests that the pericope should be extended through the rest of the chapter, rather than ending in verse 12, as Kuruvilla's reading does²⁵. If what the author is doing here is recounting how the returning exiles were restored to their identity as God's people then the celebration of the Festival of Booths on the second day of the reading represents the application of this principle to their lives, since it forms a physical link to the Exodus, reminding them of the wanderings in the desert. As the rest of the book Nehemiah unfolds, it becomes clear that the Hebrews will move towards a deepened understanding of the core conceptual thrust of their texts they read and how the Torah should be applied to their daily lives but at the precise moment discussed in this particular pericope, their understanding and application are clear. They are God's people, sharing a common identity with those who left Egypt—an identity represented theologically by their hearing and understanding of the Torah and physically by the celebration of the Festival of Booths. The reading and interpreting of the Torah may have been an ephemeral event but it was nonetheless an identity-forming one.

FROM EPHEMERALITY TO CONTEXTUALISATION

The ephemerality of preaching is therefore key to understanding its power. What is preached is yes, the Word of God but more specifically, the Word of God to *this* people at *this* time. This explains why listening to sermon podcasts, no matter how valuable, is not the same as being present in the congregation as it is preached²⁶ and why homileticians can report that a sermon that works in one setting does not transfer to another.²⁷

Growth in understanding the ephemerality of interpreting has been key to the significant shift in research focus in the field of Interpreting Studies. Where much interpreting research in the 1970s and 1980s was focussed on simultaneous (conference) interpreting and the cognitive skills needed to perform this task, from the mid-1990s, the emphasis moved to interpreting in settings such as medicine, courts, and education, and the personal and social skills this work required.²⁸ This shift led to some of the features that were previously read as errors, such as omissions, additions, and shifts in tone²⁹, being instead understood as evidence of interpreters making deliberate and calculated decisions to promote the success of the events in which they worked.³⁰

Interpreting has thereby moved from being viewed as a text-production activity that involves people, to being the negotiation of meaning between people, with reference to a text.³¹ This does not mean that the

semantic meaning of the source text is illusory or that all meanings are equally valid but simply that the application and understanding of a particular text is always a product of the context in which it is used. The role of interpreters therefore becomes the promotion of mutual understanding with the goal of the situation in mind³².

Since this process goes on throughout the interpreted event, the application of one stretch of text becomes the starting point for the understanding of the next³³. Viewing preaching as interpreting therefore means that Kuruvilla's "translation"³⁴ and "application"³⁵ stages overlap and become indistinguishable. The preaching moment becomes a moment where the preacher and congregation interpret the text together through the power of the Holy Spirit, in both the traditional hermeneutical sense and in the sense given to interpreting in this paper. This does not end at the point of delivery or even the point of reception but finds its purpose in the application of the text to everyday conduct and character, as both Scripture (Matthew 7:24-27) and homiletics attest.³⁶ Thus, a sermon applied (or not applied) from the previous week becomes part of the context in which the next sermon is interpreted and so on.

Preachers would do well to bear in mind this move from context to text to interpreting and interpretation and then to new context in their preaching. As Paul Scott Wilson argues, the "now" of the moment of proclamation—which is inherently ephemeral—is connected to the "now" of preparation and the "now" of the future of the congregation.³⁷ When asking, "what does this text mean for this congregation?" preachers must therefore frame their answer both in terms of what the text is asking the congregation to do or think and in terms of what the application of that text would look like for these people, in this place, at this time and given the texts they have previously experienced.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

To further illustrate the difference in approach between viewing preaching as translation and preaching as interpreting, it is helpful to work through an example. Given the terms used in this paper, it would seem apt to examine how viewing preaching as interpreting may affect the way that we might understand and preach Acts 2: 1-13.

This is a well-known and controversial passage, which brings with it important ecclesial, pneumatological and homiletical discussions. No matter how carefully a preacher attempts to perform an exegesis and how much theological training he or she has received, it is impossible to approach these verses without the events that took place in Azusa Street in 1906 and their purported meaning casting a shadow. The story of the Holy Spirit's arrival in such a dramatic way to both empower the gathered disciples and make the work of Christ known to the gathered Jewish pilgrims, who were for the feast of Pentecost, has been used both as the touchstone for entire Christian

movements and as a point of contention between different denominations. The necessary starting place for the exegesis and preaching of this passage is therefore that no preacher or theologian can possibly approach it as a *carte blanche*. Our own views as to its place in pneumatology and whether it should be seen as a one-off or repeatable event, among other interpretive issues, will colour even our approach to its exegesis.

Yet, whether we view preaching as a form of translation or interpreting, many of the exegetical questions will remain the same. Reading Acts 2:1-13 correctly will, of course, involve placing it in its Lucan context as the fulfilment of Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit and send the disciples out as witnesses (Luke 24:47-49; Acts 1:8). Astute scholars might also pick out the theme of the kingdom of Israel being restored, as Jesus' kingly rule, which was demonstrated in the Resurrection and Ascension (Luke 24: 25-27, 50-53; Acts 1:9), is now proclaimed to Jews from all over the world who had come to celebrate Pentecost—itsself the festival of first-fruits when the first gathering of the harvest was given back to God (Numbers 28:26).

Without delving into the long debates over the precise meanings of the phenomenon of speaking in tongues or of the disciples being mistaken as drunken by some in the crowd, it is clear that the text actually has an excess of both semantic and pragmatic meaning, far more than could be preached in a single sermon. Even attempting to uncover a single core conceptual thrust, or pericopal theology, would seem to be a difficult task, precisely because of the numerous overtones and connotations found in this passage. These seem to only multiply when we read forward towards the conversion of Cornelius' household in Acts 10 and the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1-9. These later passages act as developments of the theme of the Kingdom at work by the power of the Spirit, piercing through what might otherwise seem to be impenetrable cultural and linguistic barriers.

Whereas viewing preaching as translation would be required to nail down a single, unchanging preachable pericopal theology for this passage—perhaps privileging the theme of cross-cultural mission over that of the notion of these new Jewish believers as first-fruits, for example—viewing preaching as interpreting allows us to take the sheer variety of themes and the complexity of this passage as a strength. Indeed, Peter's own exposition of what the events of that day meant is strikingly not in a line-by-line, detailed explanation of each aspect of what had happened and its meaning. Instead, he simply takes a single theme from among the many possible, that of God's Spirit being poured out on all flesh, and moves quickly from there to a brief argument for the Lordship of Jesus and the need for repentance (Acts 2: 14-40). Later, the same apostle would learn more about what "all people" (Acts 2: 17 quoting Joel 2: 28-32) actually meant in this case, with God having to give him a dream and a fuller personal revelation that gentiles too were to be accepted into God's family (Acts 10: 9-20).

The same events of the same day would therefore be a sign to Jews that God was fulfilling his promises to them and the beginning of a

process within Peter's life that these promises extended to the gentiles too. The outpouring of the Spirit would in fact become the undeniable proof that God had accepted Cornelius' household (Acts 10: 44-48) and that this equally applied to all gentiles who would call on the name of Christ (Acts 15: 8). It is not so much that the core meaning of the events of Acts 2: 1-13 somehow changed or shifted but simply that it would take time and a further experience of the grace of God for a fuller, richer meaning of that day to become apparent to both Peter and the wider Church. While it could be argued that preachers should attempt to synthesise all the themes in this passage to find its pericopal theology, it would seem sensible to assume that the same Holy Spirit who led the early Church to greater levels of understanding of the events of Acts 2 may wish to do the same to modern day preachers.

In trying to grapple with how to preach this passage, viewing preaching as interpreting means coming to terms with the view that the Holy Spirit, who would reinterpret and refashion the apostles' understanding of what it meant for God to so visibly pour out the Holy Spirit, may wish to do the same for us. For a charismatic or Pentecostal church, this passage, already pregnant with ecclesiological meaning, may be fruitfully be recast in a missiological light—the same God who created such a powerful experience did so with the express purpose of empowering his disciples to be witnesses, especially across cultural and linguistic barriers. For a church struggling to come to terms with our modern, multi-cultural world, a similar emphasis, alongside the reassurance that it is the power of God that enables us to bring His Word into our complex world could be preached. For other churches, the same passage may function as a reminder that God cannot and will not be enclosed by our human preconceptions or preferences. As we come in prayer and humility, Acts 2: 1-13 also reminds us that sometimes God may wish to do something unheard of and challenge us to a radical openness to renew us as first-fruits of a much greater harvest. And for preachers, this same passage may need to function as a reminder that the God who empowered those believers to “declare the wonders of God” (Acts 2: 11) in words that pierced the hearts of their hearers wishes to do the same with us by the exact same power.

That all these meanings can be justifiably found in one passage is indicative of the difficulty that arises when preachers look to discover the pericopal theology of a passage. While it is indeed possible to approach the pericopal theology as the intention of the author, who has chosen to bring all these elements together, this simply leaves preachers with further interpretation issues. Separating important from incidental details, deciding on the importance of different strands of meaning and moving from there to the construction of a sermon are actions that rely on our own subjectivity and are inherently unfinished. Indeed, it is not impossible that the human author intended to do many things with this passage. While Kuruvilla suggests that Biblical authors always had a single intended pragmatic meaning in mind³⁸ for each passage, the multi-layered nature of passages like this suggest that it

is possible, even probable that they intended to *do* several things with what we perceive as a single pericope.

The main difference between viewing preaching as translation and preaching as interpreting therefore is that, whereas preaching as translation seeks a stable understand of the pericopal theology on the basis of what has been written and then later moves from this to delineate an application, preaching as interpreting acknowledges the elucidation of a pericopal theology as an ongoing process, in which preacher and congregation both play a part. Rather than trying to choose one theme or one thread of the story as the basis of a single, unchanging pericopal theology, the activity of interpreting reminds us that our understandings and proclamations can only ever be partial. Viewing preaching as interpreting foregrounds the idea that what is preached is the current best understanding that an interpreter has of a given passage at a given time.

APPLYING PREACHING AS INTERPRETING TO SERMON PREPARATION

In addition to asking “what is the world in front of this text?”³⁹ preaching as interpreting invites preachers to ask “what is the world inside of me?” and “what is the world in front of this congregation?” The first is not so much an attempt at introverted self-examination but an attempt to remind preachers of the history we bring when studying Scripture and of the need to be open to the Holy Spirit coming to test, challenge and even overturn some of our own preconceptions. The second question is a reminder of hermeneutical conversation that is always involved in interpreting, as mentioned above, where one text received and understood in some way becomes the foundation for interpreting and understanding the next. In practical terms, preaching Acts 2: 1-13 to a congregation that is discouraged by its own lack of growth in spite of hard work may bring out a very different emphasis and understanding of the text than preaching from the same passage to a church that has become homogenous in cultural terms and has lost its missional focus. Our understandings of Biblical texts and our view of their pericopal theologies are inherently context-bound. Indeed, as the discussion of the passage in Nehemiah revealed, even our understandings of where a particular pericope should begin and end is informed by our own subjectivity.

Our attempts to re-perform the Word of God are made in the moment, in context and as an offering of the best we have to God. Yet that is no weakness. Just as interpreting gains its power from the authority of the speaker and its intimate connection with context, so God chooses a specific preacher, to bring a specific understanding of a specific portion of the Scriptures, to work through to bring a specific revelation of Himself to people who are each living through specific circumstances in their own specific lives. In that very specificity, God works powerfully, breathing life to dry bones, promising children to the childless, comforting the broken, healing the sick

and building the Church. Viewing preaching as interpreting foregrounds the work of God as the One who spoke and continues to speak, through the timeless Scriptures and time-bound people to time-bound hearers.

A PRACTICAL CONCLUSION

In aligning the task of preaching with that of an interpreter, I have sought to offer both a practical and theological understanding of ways in which preaching like interpreting paradoxically gains its power from its ephemerality and instability. Preachers, like interpreters, can never claim that this sermon is the final word on any subject nor can they maintain that their understanding of a given pericope or even its dimensions is final and unquestionable. The undoubtable power that comes from holding a position as one who speaks the Word of God is paralleled and given meaning by the humility of realising that the Word we speak is not ours, nor may we claim that our position as interpreters means that we replace the One whose Words and thoughts we are attempting to re-perform to our audience. Preachers would therefore do well to remember the contextualised nature of their task and reflect on their role as one who takes the eternal, unchanging Word of God, interprets it as best they know how by the power of the Spirit and in their particular historical and cultural context and re-performs it so that it can be applied into the specific, continuously changing contexts of their congregants. If preaching really does share some of the same features of interpreting then we may be forced to see it as the re-performance of the Words of God who spoke in Scripture and still speaks now, both through our preparation and through ideas and illustrations that arrive unbidden, as if custom-created for the people who will hear them.

NOTES

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