

Boston College

Touchstones for Preaching Transcript of Basic Touchstone 2: The Preacher as Mediator

presented by
Rev. William T. Kelly, S.T.D.

“Touchstones for Preaching” is a resource of the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry produced in partnership with The Church in the 21st Century Center.

How do we mediate the experience of the Word of God? It’s a pretty humbling task, isn’t it? So that’s the first step. We have to **approach it with humility**. When we prepare for the work of preaching, we stand under the same humility. We stand under the same obedience to the Father as did Jesus. Jesus, the Word himself, stood in surrender to the Father. So, the first step, the first task, is humility.

Also, we should **be persons of prayer**. Paul’s letter to the Colossians in chapter number three says, “Let the Word as rich as it is, dwell in you.” If we are to preach as a person of God and if we are to preach God’s kingdom, then we have to know God personally. We have to live the life of faith in the Church deeply. We have to be shaped by that kind of divine friendship. As those who will speak of God, we first have to be persons who listen to God. We have to be in conversation with God.

And, as a mediator we also have to **know the ones to whom we preach**. I know that I preach differently at a youth Mass than I do at the nursing home than I do at daily Mass than I do at a funeral. Maybe just to draw a little bit on Jesus’ parable of the sower, we have to know the soil in which we are planting the Word of God.

Another thing to keep in mind, and it ties in with this, is why the great theologian Karl Barth said, “A preacher should always **have the sacred Scriptures in one hand and the newspaper [in the other]**”— I suppose we would say the mouse for the Internet —“in the other hand.” Scripture and a newspaper, why is that? We have to come to know the Word so intimately in sacred Scripture so that we may be able to bring that Word to where it is most needed in the world and in the world as the world is. As mediators of the experience of the Word of God, as mediators of the experience of Christ alive, we should know how to articulate the presence of God to his people in their very real, in their very concrete life situations.

Now, let’s look at this same thing through another lens. Bishop John Hedley was an English Benedictine. He was a theologian. He was a seminary rector right at about the turn of the 20th century, and he’s somebody who gave a lot of good attention in his thinking and in his writing to the whole idea of preaching. So I’d just like to give ten quick points that he made about becoming an effective mediator of the experience of the Word of God; **ten points from Bishop Hedley** on how to be a good preacher.

The first thing that he says is we have to **pray**. We have to know Jesus. The more—and we all know this—the more that we know and love a person, then the more fully we want to speak about them, the more fully we can speak about them. To preach we have to know Jesus.

And then he follows that up in his second point by saying we have to **be intimately familiar with the mysteries of the lives of Jesus and Mary**. Mary, his mother, always points to and deepens our knowledge of Jesus. Knowing Mary always helps us to know Christ. And it’s always in that unfolding

Boston College

of the lives of Christ, the life of Mary, and the mysteries of Christ and the Church that really are meant to provide the content of our preaching. A homily's content should center on God and the Church.

The next point that Hedley makes is that we shouldn't be afraid to **preach the deep things of God** even if each point might not be immediately grasped by the congregation. Now we shouldn't intentionally or carelessly aim to preach over people's heads; that's not what we're talking about. But we don't want to dumb things down either, and we don't want to shy away from maybe the more heady things. The truths of Christ need time to resonate. The truths of the Church need time to distill in people's minds and also in their hearts. But they do have to be spoken. We really do owe people the richness of who Christ is and who the Church is, and so we shouldn't be afraid to talk about things like the Trinity, like the mystery of suffering love. We shouldn't hesitate to talk about the depth of the Eucharist or the great mystery of the resurrection. The things we say about these great mysteries aren't immediately going to be grasped by people, but it's important that we talk about them so that these great works of God have a chance to move and shape and find their place in people's lives in God's own time. We do have to show people the power of God's mystery.

A fourth point that Bishop Hedley makes is this: he reminds us that preaching always prepares people for a deeper life of faith, and so because of that, one of the tasks of preaching is to **remove obstacles and stumbling blocks** to that faith. And so he reminds us that one of the things that we might think about doing in our homilies is to help to remove doubt from people's lives, or certainly to address heresies that might have crept into people's thinking, or even anything that might create a certain hardness of heart in people's lives. When we preach, we want to break through any of these kind[s] of barriers so that people's lives can be deepened, so that the Word of God can really be received. If these walls are up, it's going to be harder for people to receive the Word of God, and so part of our task as a preacher is to help to take down these obstacles.

Another point that we can look at is what he called emulating the **three As of Jesus' preaching**. He says that we should make our preaching **authoritative, aggressive, and attractive**. Authoritative, aggressive, and attractive. Maybe we could even just look at Pope John Paul II as a great example of this. He showed us how to let the commanding power of Jesus come through our words with confidence—not hitting people over the head with it, not yelling. That's why we always have to keep in mind the idea of attractiveness. How do we speak with confidence, with the authority of the Word of God? How is it that we do so, not shying away from it, so being aggressive or assertive or strong in it, but always holding those things together by saying, "how do I best show and reveal the attractiveness of who Jesus is, the attractiveness of his Word?" We have to allow for Jesus' message to shine through. People should be hope-filled after we have preached, and these three As will help us to do that.

A sixth point for us to think about: the **preacher should always be prepared** through a real rigorous training of the mind and also a proper moral formation of character. The preacher has to be a good thinker. The preacher has to be a trained thinker but one also whose moral life has to reflect that same kind of honesty, that same kind of training, and that same kind of integrity. Our lives have to reflect what we preach, or else the words become, as St. Paul says, "like a clanging gong." God forbid that we would empty the cross of Christ of its power by either our poor preaching or by a bad example when our words don't match our actions. An important part of preaching is how our lives reflect what it is that we say.

We also have to remember that in order to mediate well the experience of the Word of God, the preacher should also have some **training in basic grammar, in basic rhetoric**. How is it that we put talks and speeches and even sentences together? In many ways in education in these past years, those are skills that have kind of fallen to the side; but happily, we're really starting to see that the art of rhetoric is starting to make a comeback. How is it that we can carefully craft a talk? How is it that

Boston College

we can learn different styles of how to communicate a point? Rhetoric and grammar are important building blocks and context for providing a good homily.

Another thing that Bishop Hedley offers is really two wise, practical kinds of points. He says that we should **be familiar with things as different as farming and the fine arts**. We should be familiar with sports and sacred Scripture. We should be familiar with—he didn't say technology, but to update it—with technology and even with tigers. In other words, we have to have a really broad field from which we can draw so that we can reach out to as wide an audience as possible; and so that we can illustrate our point in a way that is engaging for people so that we can tap into what it is that makes up the interests in different people's lives so we can help the Word of God to be connected to those; so that the power of God's Word might be able to touch people in many different ways.

A ninth point that Bishop Hedley makes is that he says that—and this is an interesting one—he says that the preacher should always take an opportunity at some point in his life to **detach from his family or even from his country**, maybe by going to study, maybe by doing a mission trip of some type. And, I think what Bishop Hedley is intending by this is that it's always helpful for us to step away from the normal place where we do our preaching so that we can see how the Word of God is alive in another context, and then bring our own experience back so that we have fresh eyes. Not that we're importing another culture into our own, but it's always good for us to see how the Word of God is alive in many other places so that we can bring back in a new way, kind of in a refreshed way, when we go to preach in our normal place at home.

And then a final thought. Hedley takes it very seriously. He really takes it very seriously, that Christ is made present when preaching is done well. And so, we should always remember the purpose for our preaching—that **we are there to facilitate an encounter with God**. All of these points that I've mentioned, all of these ideas taken together, help us and help the preacher to mediate well the experience of the Word of God.

Now, spend a few moments reflecting on the questions at the bottom of the page.

[Questions on web page]

- What insights from Father Kelly and Bishop Hedley stand out for you?
- In what ways do these insights challenge you to change elements of your preaching ministry in order to be a more effective mediator of the Word of God?