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# The FURROW

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*Joe McDonald*

## Do We Dare Preach Jesus?

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## NEITHER SHAKEN, NOR STIRRED, BUT SLEEPY

Recently I have noticed something quite significant when preaching here in St. Matthew's. The fact that I have noticed this, is in some measure due to the time I spent as a teacher. I think most of us know, if we are honest, when a congregation or an audience are listening. It is more obvious when they have stopped listening. It may be that they are tired, or perhaps the truth is more difficult than that: maybe they are just bored. Maybe the truth is they have heard it all before, or something very similar. In fairness, sometimes they simply can not hear us, which may, or may not be, our fault. Many churches have poor sound systems, though a lot have adequate sound systems but have priests who mutter and mumble. Some priests do not know how to use the microphone, sporadically speaking 'off-mic' and of course even today, a considerable number of priests are reading the sermon, often 'pre-cooked' in *Intercom* or elsewhere. Surely the faithful who continue to come to the Eucharist deserve better. It is more pressing than this, because we live in such spiritually impoverished times, they actually need more than that. Sadly the truth is we leave them neither shaken nor stirred but sleepy. However, the belief that our preaching is in need of renewal is not only well argued at this stage, it is actually a key part of the ongoing need for reform and renewal in the wider Church. What happened recently in my own parish was deeper than the acknowledgement of general malaise.

## PEAKED ATTENTION

My consciousness of what happened was sharpened by my classroom experience. As I observed the congregation I noticed that at certain times their attention became more focused. There was a change of body language, people hunched forward in an attentive pose, resolute eye contact and all this against a canvas of silent expectant listening. Needless to say as the one doing the preaching, not only did I notice this, but it quickly became an

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imperative for me to discover why this was the case. I knew it was not about me, nor was it about my personality or style as these had not altered in any obvious way. I also knew it was not about my preparation as this too has remained steady. This usually takes the format of reading the Gospel passage the previous Monday, carrying it in my heart reflectively throughout the week, praying it towards the end of the week and having it ready for the vigil Mass on Saturday evening. I knew it was none of these. It became clear after a little observation that this heightened attention, or raised focus on the part of the congregation, happened during two aspects of the sermon. The first of these was during the telling of a story. The second occurred when I was actually speaking about the person of Jesus.

### EVERYBODY LOVES A STORY

This is not the place to rehash a theology of story, but story as a concept is relevant to the recently observed moments of peaked attention in the congregation. It seems to provide the context for our observations regarding preaching. We are drawn to story because we belong to a family, to parents, and from our earliest days we know that they have their story and that we are now part of that story. We hear our Mums and Dads speak about when they met, about how their parents were about their relationship. We start to soak in information about what we call our family of origin. There has never been such an interest in ancestry. It seems in every family there is at least one person responsible, officially or unofficially, for genealogy. The increase of interest in this is not simply about gathering historical data but seems to have a deeper resonance. We want to know what influences and experiences shaped our family. In our desire to belong we want to know what we belong to. We want to know our family's story, even before we know where we fit into that story. It is only after we become conscious of our family history that we reach new levels of understanding of how we are in the world. I believe that what I have recently become aware of regarding the person of Jesus within the homily, is directly connected to the centrality of story in our lives, and most especially how we use story to make sense of our lives.

### OUR STORY AND THE SACRED STORY

In the Incarnation of Jesus, God becomes one of us. In the Incarnation God inserts himself into our story. Our story dovetails into the sacred story. The old black and white epic calls it The Greatest Story Ever Told. Though we will have different levels of awareness of this, I think we know at our deepest level that the story of Jesus speaks into our story. Any aspect of our story

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that we care to pick is illumined by the story of Jesus. Of course Jesus is the climax of the evolving sacred story, love story that it is, of God for his people. The story of Jesus is sacred in itself and belongs to the larger sacred story of God and people. Central to this sacredness is that it is utterly unique. There has never been a story like it. The sacred story has no beginning and no end, and if it has a middle, then we are it. Not in it, but we are it. This is true of course of Jesus as the pinnacle of the revelation of God's love. Jesus is not bound by his birth in Bethlehem nor by his death on Calvary. Jesus was before, is now, and will be. So the sacred story has neither beginning nor end and we are present in it at this moment. Could this be, at least partly, why we are drawn to the actual story of Jesus as it nudges against, and at times bumps off our own story? It is as if we already know without being told, that when our story is exposed to his, it will make sense of ours in a way that nothing else can. I think it was within this realm that the peaked attention or sharpened focus I noticed recently found its origin. This peaking I think may well be unique to the context of the sermon, and deserves brief comment.

### THE ADVENTURE OF PREACHING

I am sure we are all familiar with the endless notes, advice, indeed books on preaching, and indeed how some of them specialise into the use of story or other methods suggesting, if not promising, effectiveness. I have been a priest for ten years now and I think it's true to say that the homily firmly remains both the most exciting and daunting challenge of my ministry. I love it and yet it irks me so. If I thought too much about it I would never get up to speak again. The ongoing challenge to be open as a vehicle of the Holy Spirit to break God's Word for people will always be too much. Yet that is the challenge. Challenge and privilege. Even after a short time preaching I think many will testify to being very conscious of how the Holy Spirit surprises us in how a sermon may evolve, and indeed how it is received by people. Whatever fist I make of preaching I am passionate about it. I have often given talks, speeches and addresses to various groups, sometimes to impart information, to exhort, hopefully at times to provide food for thought, but the homily remains unique. It is a genre in itself. It has occurred to me recently that it is living, it is active. The homily is pilgrim and pilgrimage. It is witness and prophetic. As time passes I see so much dross, distraction and padding in the homily and yet I remain excited about its potential, its challenge. With each passing attempt I am left with the task of giving it another go. After the preparation, the reading, the prayer, the silence it is left to the Holy Spirit to hone, polish and flavour. So too when it's delivered it is

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left to the Holy Spirit to carry, water, embed or blow gently away. In all this the adventure lives.

### JESUS IN THE HOMILY

Initially I could not quite fathom it. I realise as I write, many more seasoned homilists will hopefully smile at my belated awakening to a truth they have known for years. If not a smile, then at least, a little patience. Once I noticed it, I began to look out for it, and at this stage there is a clear pattern. Each and every time I focused on Jesus in the homily the congregation stirred. The more I tweaked and steadied the focus the more they stretched, blinked, peeked up, or peeked in, on the story. Peaked interest. The intense attention was there when I elaborated on his words or actions or stories, but it reached a remarkable pitch when the homily sought to explore the heart of Jesus. When we journeyed, as the gathered faith community, into the realm of the desire, intention and motivation of Jesus the hunger for more was more obvious. It was almost that people shouted out from their hearts we need this, we want this, we want to see Jesus, we want to know Jesus. It appears that there is a notional knowledge of things Jesus said and some of the things he did. The suggestion that this is superficial is not meant as a judgement but rather a noting of a lack of depth. Put another way it is as if we know the what, the who and the when of Jesus but have little grasp of the why. In addition to this we tend to look at the centre of a particular gospel scene with little regard for what is just to the left or right. We neglect the canvas or the backdrop and even sometimes miss important stuff, that if we simply dropped our chin and kept our eyes open, we would see important clues to what exactly is going on. An illustration of this may be helpful.

### FIVE KINGS

Over the Christmas season I approached the Crib with a number of groups. I suggested we inch slowly towards it, looking carefully, listening, smelling, touching ... When I spoke of the five kings most people quickly recognised Jesus as King. They got to this through King of Kings, though were not familiar with the Servant King. None of them was able to identify the King lurking in the background waiting on news of the baby King, so that he could bring his present, not of gold, frankincense or myrrh but the butcher's knife! All this despite the fact that the three Kings had come from him and were expected back by him. The difference this type of presentation makes is significant. Of course this will not be done without our own preparation of reading, as in study, prayer and silence before the actual preaching. In the case of the five kings it is easy to move to the threat hanging over the life

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of Jesus from birth, or indeed before birth and then to go to ‘no room at the inn’ and ‘homelessness’, the flight into Egypt’ to avoid Herod, and ‘the fearful flight of so many migrants and refugees’. We do not need to have experienced any of these events first hand, to know isolation, powerlessness and the gnawing sense of not belonging. Indeed some of this material may be pertinent to our question, do we dare preach Jesus?

### DO WE DARE?

I think we spend a considerable amount of time, in our preaching, on issues of social justice, the teaching of the Church, and the moral life. To do so is laudable and one might reasonably argue that Jesus is always in the midst of this, or he is at least implied. However, surely Jesus should not simply be implied, surely he is more than a moral compass or a vague motivator for our efforts to make the world a better place? I think at times we are inclined to tidy up the mess of the story and opt for a cosy handle on it that will neither disturb ourselves nor the congregation. We too can be particularly lazy about the context. Of course the mercy of God, the wonder of his love for us, his forgiveness – all need to be preached, but what has happened to the fire that Jesus spoke of, not hell fire, but the fire of the Holy Spirit? Has the salt lost its saltiness? Is not the interaction of Jesus with people, and his world, both radical and revolutionary? When was the last time the congregation was really rattled by a homily? Are we disturbed by our encounter with Jesus? If not, why not? Do we dare? Do we dare to present the Jesus for whom building the wall is anathema and who pro-actively urges the tearing down of walls and persistently advocates the erecting of bridges? Perhaps we ourselves, as preachers do not know the real Jesus. *Nemo dat quod non habet*. Maybe the truth is, that the question, ‘do we dare to preach Jesus?’ is premature. Maybe we first need to ask do we care. Do we care enough to take steps to spend time with a Jesus who, yes, is merciful and loving, but is also disturbing and challenging? This Jesus asks us to leave the secure and the familiar, and confronts us very directly on a range of issues that we would much rather not think about it. When we care enough to do the hard graft of meeting the real Jesus then we will be so changed by the encounter that our preaching will ooze passion. In fact when we care enough to spend time with Jesus who at times gives comfort and at times really disturbs us, then we may well dare. If we dare, the people will continue to look up and strain for more of him who is always fresh, always comforting and always stirring and shaking us, not to sleep through the adventure that is our pilgrim story.