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**Homiletics: The Art of preaching  
in a Post-modern, Post-Apartheid,  
Post-colonialism South Africa**

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## **Homiletics: The Art of preaching in a Post-modern, Post-Apartheid, Post-colonialism South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

Today the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa is confronted with many challenges. These challenges include the interpretation (hermeneutics) and preaching (homiletics) the Bible in an ever-changing context. Preaching has become a challenge for every reverend, minister, preacher, pastor etc. A new approach to homiletics and hermeneutics is needed in the DRC. I'm motivating my view by naming three challenges in the DRC.

The first challenge in the DRC includes criticism from ever-changing congregations who want to break away from old, traditional monologue-type preaching. The post-modern Christian prefers dialogue, and ministries are now faced with the responsibility to bring the old message in a new context, in new ways, true to their roots. Technology and new communication devices must be seen as an opportunity in the church.

The scars Apartheid left is the second challenge in the DRC. South Africa is a democratic country, but the wounds of the old regime are still visible in our congregations, communities and cities. The preacher is left with the challenge to use the art of homiletics to initiate reconciliation and change in our society.

Thirdly, the challenge in African churches after Colonialism. Missionaries work in African countries, but the church's integrity is in question. Many Africans suffer because of Colonialism's heritage. Preachers have to use homiletics to transform a context of doubt and mistrust.

*Homiletics* is a noun and can be defined as "the art of preaching". Thus, preaching is an art. Instead of colours or notes, we paint and compose with our words. Just like a symphony or a painting, we can move people, influence them and maybe even change them.

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## Introduction

Since the start of the Christian church, people who came to faith in Jesus Christ came together in churches to hear sermons. People were united despite their different cultures, races, classes, ages and sexes, and being Christian became synonym with going to services on a Sunday. It became a necessity and an essential part of life. Ever since the first century of Christendom, Christians have gathered in churches, even in life-threatening situations (Barnard 1981:3).

When you look at South Africa today, a country originally build on Christian values, a concern arises when you see the low church-involvement and service attendance. The changing environment in South Africa is not only due to the political transformation, but also the influences of globalization and world trends. Congregations in South African churches can not escape from these changes, and suddenly the church has to survive and live forth in contexts much different from 20 years ago (Schoeman 2012:1).

The Afrikaans church-denomination, the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde kerk*, or Dutch Reformed church, is still one of the largest Christian church-denominations in South Africa. They are aware of these new challenges every Sunday when they have to bring the Good News to the pulpit, in the traditional church in the form of a sermon. But what is a sermon?

Cilliers defines a sermon as *'the heart and the hope of the church'* (Cilliers 2004:19). He says that the preaching at a church is the window to what is going on in the congregation. He continues to call preaching *'a concentrated form of the Christian hope'* (Cilliers 2004:19-20). Preaching becomes the instrument that God uses to change people. It isn't just empty words, but words in which God is present and working. Preaching is the revealing of the secrets of Christ and it is a calling for the congregation and the church (Cilliers 2004:20-21).

The academic term used for the study and mastering the art of preaching, is *homiletics*. Bester, Cilliers and Nell asked people active in the ministry how they felt about homiletics and making sermons. Symington quoted Eugene Lowry, who said that the process he experienced in making a sermon, is: "Oops! Oh no! Ahaa! Whe!" You are busy with the Word of God, and sometimes you are stuck in a corner, and have to start all over again (Symington in Bester et al 2010:5). Symington writes that preaching is *'a moment in the wind'*, it is an overwhelming feeling being busy with the Word of God (Symington in Bester et al 2010:3-4). Bester writes that making a sermon is like giving birth every week, accompanied with different processes and feelings. He says this, because *'you aren't busy with any book – you're busy with the Bible: Jesus on paper'* (Bester in Bester et al 2010:143). Joubert writes that a sermon isn't a monologue – it is the preacher involved with the congregation, and then sending the congregation into the world, where they must be involved in a bigger context (Joubert in Bester et al 2010:79-80). Van Zyl says that preaching is a heart-language, always pointing to Jesus Christ (Van Zyl in Bester et al 2010:70-73).

When making a sermon, it is important to realize that there is no such thing as an universal and timeless context (Smit 2008:77). The church will always change and differ from community to community, but the one thing that will not change is the fact that the church will always have a unique calling, identity and role in the community (Smit 2008:77).

In this paper I wish to explore this calling, identity and role in a community, focusing on the art and importance of homiletics (preaching) in a post-modern, post-Apartheid, post-colonial South Africa.

### **Making a sermon**

There are three important parts in writing a good sermon: (i) thorough exegesis of the text, (ii) the hermeneutical task and (iii) the homiletical task or writing the sermon after all the hard background work. We can use the example of a flower plant to explain making a sermon.

#### *(i) Exegesis*

Exegesis can be seen as the roots of the plant. It is the deep parts of the plant you do not usually see, but the roots is where the nutrition for the plant comes from, and it makes the flower grow the right way. Exegesis can be defined as the critical research of the text as a genre, as literature, and being critical on structures, terminology, syntax and language, weighing different approaches to interpret the true meaning of the text. It is searching for the origins and the original meaning of the text. It is researching the world behind the text, its historical significance and the imagination behind it, but also the world of the text – the witness and the language in which it was written (Smit 1987:19-29; Schneider 1999:97-151). Joubert quotes Peterson who defines exegesis as *'loving God enough to stop and listen carefully to what he says'* (Joubert in Bester et al 2010:84). Cilliers writes that the text is multi-dimensional and in it we discover God over and over in new ways. The text can change people's lives and that is why we have to discover the spectrum of colours inside it before you preach a text, and that is why exegesis is so important (Cilliers 2004:90-92, 100-130). Symington calls exegesis *'making war with the text in front of you'* (Symington in Bester et al 2010:3).

#### *(ii) The Hermeneutical Task*

The hermeneutical task of the text can be seen as the stem of the plant. Hermeneutics can be defined as the bridge between the world behind the text and the world in front of the text (Smit 1987:30, Schneider 1999:157). It is the theological interpretation of the text and contemplation of how it can be interpreted in today's terms and contexts (Cilliers 2004:136-183). Karl Barth always said you should make a sermon with the Bible in one hand, and a newspaper in the other (Symington in Bester et al 2010:8). Richard Hays writes that the hermeneutical task of the texts is the bridge between the *'temporal and cultural distance between ourselves and the text'* and that it requires an *'integrative act of imagination'* (Hays 1996:5-6). Thus, it is taking the text with its own context and theological themes, and interpreting it in term of today's contexts (Symington in Bester et al 2010:3).

(iii) *Homiletics – creating a sermon*

Now we have the flower of the plant. After the nutrition from the roots (exegesis) goes through the bridge or the stem of the plant (hermeneutics), the result is a flower or an artwork. It is the creation of something new after you did the exegesis and hermeneutics. The homiletical task is the art to unlock the secrets in the text. It isn't a random, quick project – it is a process that needs a lot of time for preparation, enlightenment, development and giving it structure (Cilliers 2004:187). You have to meditate on the text and listen to the text. Smit calls this the *understanding-spiral* (Smit 1987:38-41). *Homiletics is an art. Instead of colours or notes, preachers paint and compose with our words. Just like a symphony or a painting, they can move people, influence them and maybe even change them.*

Bartow writes that the most important task for homiletics, is the '*Theo-logic*' behind the text (the logic of God inside a text). The sermon is not just a artful use of verbal, vocal and physical gestures or rhetoric. It's '*the preacher's witness to that to which the Bible itself bears witness*' (Bartow in Wilson 2008:154). He also writes that the four tasks of homiletics are: (1) the response to the Holy Scripture to enrich the church's faith, (2) using the content of the gospel to show God's power in spite of the controversies in the world, (3) the affirmation of God's presence and purpose in the here and now, and (4) realizing that we're encountering God through and in the words of the preachers (Bartow in Wilson 2008:156).

**One text, many contexts**

Now that we know what a sermon is and how it is made, we are left with the question: what is the pragmatic task of the sermon in different contexts? Christina Landman asked the question '*What do you look for in a sermon?*' in different Dutch Reformed congregations. The dominantly-Caucasian congregations replied that they want to learn how to reconcile, how to hope, to make and have peace in life. When she asked the same question to neighboring congregations with a diverse ethnic congregation, they replied that they want to learn of the three L's: Losses, Loneliness and Lack of money, and give them a reason to keep faith (Landman in Bester et al 2010:14-16). Each community's context is different and will react differently to the same text. But there are some universal challenges in all South African churches. I'm naming three challenges: the effect of post-modernism, the scars in a post-Apartheid era in South Africa and the wounds left by colonialism in Africa.

**Post-modernism in South Africa**

Modernity started in the began during the Enlightenment in which knowledge became based on objective, rational observation and scientific thinking. Pocock et al defines it as '*a quest for absolute truth using rational logic and scientific methods*' (Pocock et al 2005:106). Post-modernity is the reaction against modernity and is Pocock et al characterizes it as the '*disillusionment*



*with modernity as a system that claims certainty about its scientific conclusions but excludes spiritual realities*' (Pocock et al 2005:106). Post-modern people are individual, intuitive and subjective in judgments and decisions, and they do not trust institutions or systems. It is the acknowledgment of the limitations of modernity, and breaking away from a system that represents its methods and conclusions as irrefutable, but modify their theories and conclusions every few years. *'Post-modernity offers no certainties or solutions but is open to transcendent realities and subjective, intuitive approaches to knowing'* (Pocock et al 2005:107).

In the church and in preaching, pastors have to realize that they can no longer rely on didactic, cognitive approaches to the Bible and Christianity, as if *'Christianity were a case that could be proven in a court of law, or demonstrated by methods suited to the laboratory'* (Pocock 2005:107). Pastors, reverends, ministers and missionaries have to identify with this trend, while still declaring the truth of the Scripture. Post-modern people are pluralistic in decision-making, and they are dialogue oriented. They listen to different sources, opinions and meanings, but there isn't a final truth or grand paradigm – only helpful insights (Pocock et al 2005: 107-112). The downside is that post-modernists would rather be humanitarians than religious. They would rather believe in themselves, than in a deity. They would rather acknowledge all religions and spiritualities, than condemning them as false. It is understandable why this is seen as a challenge in the Christian church.

Post-modernism effects the ministry in the church, including the way Sunday-sermons are done. Technology, communication-devices, multi-media, mass-media, social networking and connectedness is the new order of the day. Barnard acknowledges the use of these devices, but also warns churches that these new tendencies can also be negative for the ministry, because then churches are focusing all their attention on the extras in a service, but not on the core-reason for services: reading and preaching out of the word of God (Barnard 1981:384-385; Cilliers 2004).

Barnard and Cilliers both write on the effects of post-modernity on the church: Everyday, people are flooded with information, facts, advertisements, opinions and images influencing them, and the result is over stimulated congregants, who can not function in the church without images, multi-media and mass-media to stimulate them. Everything has to be faster and easier, everything must be upgraded, updated and improved. When congregants come to church on a Sunday, they expect something new each time (Barnard 1981:4, 9-19; Cilliers 2004:6-9).

A symptom of post-modernism is a consumer-culture in which we find ourselves. Consumerism is present in our lives, and it makes religion just another product or need in life. If I do not like what one place has to offer, I can just go to another place where my needs are fulfilled (Conradie 2009:157-159). Time has become money, and people do not want to spend hours in church. The time we spend in church must be productive and we must learn something new. The consequence is a commercialized church where the

essence of the sermon is to satisfy the needs of people and not the gospel of Jesus Christ (Conradie 2009:169).

Another symptom of post-modernism, is the so-called *emerging church*. The emerging church is not a new church denomination – it is a movement inside our churches. It is people who isn't 'meeting centric', but shape their fellowship around relationships with each other and people they want to reach out to. In their meetings, sermons, songs and hymns won't necessarily feature, their leader isn't called a 'pastor', and they use drama, multi-media presentations and symbols or signs as methods to learn about or experience God. Space and comfort plays an important role in the emerging church – they will rather gather in coffee shops, sitting rooms, in parks or theatres, wearing normal, comfortable clothes, than going to a church-building in formal clothes. They pay a lot of attention to giving personal testimonies and going out to the world to win people outside the Christian community. The problem with this is that they stop going to Sunday services with the congregation, and only attend small groups during the week (Pocock et al 2005:127; Jones 2008:177).

Cilliers writes that these things call out to the church to rethink and evaluate their ministry. In post-modernism, there is place for enrichment in the church, as well as impoverishment. Post-modernism should call the pastor or preacher to be sober and creative in the ever-changing context. They should make the best out of these tendencies, and even use them to their advantage to grow closer as a church and congregation. (Cilliers 2004:6-9).

When doing this, the preacher still has the responsibility to stay true to the principles of the Bible, but he can do it in new exciting ways. Ignoring post-modern movements will only weaken the testimony of the church in the world. Post-modernism gives the opportunity and space where we can embrace diversity in the community, and weep for the broken world. Pocock writes that we need a Christ-centered way of knowing in the post-modern generation (Pocock et al 2005:127-128), because Christ himself promises to let anyone who is thirsty drink from the streams of His living water (John 7:37-38).

### **Post-Apartheid in South Africa**

South Africa has experienced an enormous amount of change the past 20 years. South Africa became a democratic country 1994, and the social order changed radically. *'The entire political order changed from a minority government to an open and democratic society with all its citizens participating'* (Schoeman 2012:1). For many people this is still a sensitive matter, even though 19 years have gone by. Apartheid was the old regime known for placing the white man superior to the other races in South Africa. Not only in politics, but also in churches. Pastors had no problem to preach superiority of the white race, God's intention for segregation of different races and they even said that God is on the side of the Afrikaner (Cilliers 2010:69-70).

After Apartheid, South Africa had to form a new identity, promote unity in diversity, work on race-reconciliation and put a stop to race discrimination and segregation. This also put the Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church in jeopardy, and the church's integrity and trustworthiness was being questioned. The mainstream churches' dogma and theology was questioned and people doubted in the church's reliability. This created homiletical and hermeneutical difficulties for each preacher, pastor, reverend, priest and minister (Cilliers 2010:70-71). Van der Walt writes that the most important themes the church should deal with after Apartheid is forgiveness, making peace with the past and reconciliation (Van der Walt 2003:351).

Many attempts were made in history to promote reconciliation: national reconciliation where atrocities in the past were addressed, enmities were overcome, trust and relationships were built to develop a shared commitment amongst citizens for the greater good in the country (Conradie 2012:7). Conradie feels that this may be misleading, as reconciliation takes place in a wider network of relationships that includes the perpetrators, victims, affected parties, beneficiaries, inheritors, onlookers, spectator, bystanders, sympathizers, mediators, faraway observers, the dead and future generations (Conradie 2012:8-9). Reconciliation can only take place when both parties acknowledge the event and then takes action to make sure it doesn't happen again.

The church also has the new responsibility to be a mediator, a supporter and a implementer of reconciliation and peace after the devastating effects of Apartheid. The shocking irony is that in spite of all the initiatives that the white mainline churches take in the reconciliation process, *'Sunday 10h00 remains the 'most divided hour' of the week in terms of culture and ethnicity'* and that creates a scepticism towards the credibility of the role the Christian church plays for national reconciliation (Conradie 2012:3).

This is where homiletics or preaching becomes the first step in true reconciliation and acceptance in bigger communities. For preaching in South Africa, it is necessary for the preacher to remember and acknowledge the social-political and religious history of South Africa. We can not ignore Apartheid as though it didn't happen! We must remember the devastating effects of this ideology and any other ideology that advocates the same worldview (Cilliers 2010:77-80). But it doesn't end here: We also have to focus on the future of the community of believers as citizens of the country. My faith and Christian values must be a testimony outside the church as well – at work, school and as a citizen of the country – and reconciliation and forgiveness should take place inside and outside churches. We can learn from the African-concept of *Ubuntu* (African worldview that means: "I am because you are"), and pay attention to the importance of fellowship in the church (Cilliers 2010:79-80). In fact that was how the first century Christians practiced their religion – no discrimination between Jew, Greek and heathen, and all races, classes and sexes working together (see Paul's letters and the book of Acts).

Preachers must become *border-crossers* that crosses all boundaries formed by ethnicity, culture or language, and must bring contextual preaching in a post-Apartheid South Africa. They can no longer be *lone-rangers*, but rather people with integrity and unconditional love for their fellow-Christians. An ecumenical understanding of what the church's purpose on earth must be important and influence the hermeneutical task of the text for the community of all believers (Cilliers 2010:82-85).

Barnard said God reveals who He is in each sermon in church. But that is not all – God also reveals who we are and what we must be. We are confronted with ourselves when hearing the Word of God in the sermon, and when we see ourselves as God sees us, that must be the motivation to endure as Christians, repent from wrongdoing or any ideology against His will, and also rejoice in His forgiving grace (Barnard 1981:416-418).

A sermon must therefore emphasize the importance of reconciliation, the importance to focus on the well-being of my neighbour, and the importance to seek God in life, even if there are still scars left by Apartheid (Cilliers 2004:19). The Christian church must be the most representative institution and make the biggest contribution towards the community and its well-being (Schoeman 2012:7). This all starts with the creative use of words in a sermon, or in the art of homiletics.

### **Post-colonial Africa**

Africa is the world's poorest and most-underdeveloped continent. People live to survive each day, and the effect of HIV/Aids is devastating. Some African countries are billions of dollars in debt. Is this really colonialism's fault? (2008: online).

David Livingstone, the great explorer of Southern Africa, published his book *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* in 1857. He was very enthusiastic over his work and summarized his missionary work threefold, later known as the three C's of Colonialism: Christianity, Commerce and Civilization. Other traveller's also traveled and explored Africa, and suddenly it became a race in Europe to see who can claim the most ground for their country. This is known as the *Scramble for Africa*. Although many said that Christianity and development was the reason they claimed countries in Africa, the church was misused as a reason for political tyranny and oppression of the local African tribes (online).

At the Berlin Conference in 1884, the borders of African countries were set according to economic, diplomatic and political needs. The whole of Africa belonged to different European governments. The downside of these new borders were tribal genocide for their own territory, the extinction of some African tribes and cultures and the disappearing of African traditions and methods (2008 : online). The natural resources of the African countries were shipped of to Europe and the slave-trade began to increase dramatically. The African people accepted these changes out of fear and in the hope for a better life, but ironically they never got it (online).

After the First World War, it looked as though the time of colonialism has come to an end. Because of the conflict surrounding ownership of countries in Africa, Africans started uprisings to get ownership and after the Second World War, Europe's power was drained and all the countries in Africa started getting their independence from Europe. The last countries that got their independence were Angola that got its independence 1975 from Portugal and Namibia, a South African colony, originally under the British crown, that got its independence 1990 (online).

What happened? Why did colonialism affect Africa so negative? European entities developed Africa, westernized Africa, farmed and mined in Africa and then exported the minerals and food and got rich. When they left Africa, natural resources were drained, there were not able men or women to manage the import/export programmes and to maintain their infrastructure. They were governed for almost 100 years, and some countries' original tribal politics disappeared. Suddenly they were faced with the challenge to uphold a democratic society what they learned from the Europeans. Africans are tribal people, but the European system focuses on the individual. They were left with a financial backlog, they lacked leadership skills, they were uncertain and they are unschooled in a world where you have to be able to read and write. Some Africans do not trust white people and they do not like the Christian church who stole their countries (online; Powery in Wilson 2008:159). It is understandable why so many African countries became communist countries after colonialism. It was an ideology that made sense to them and they could identify with (Meiring 1979:157-165).

The Dutch Reformed Church believes that they are called to go to these neighbouring countries with the gospel, help churches that already exists and do missionary work amongst our brothers and sisters in Christ. These contexts can be characterized as people with no ambition, with low self-esteem, hopelessness, impoverished and mistrust for the white man. It is in these context where the church must be more relevant, try incorporating an African character in traditional churches, promote unity and exclaim the importance of your spiritual life (Meiring 1979:157-161).

When you are preaching to these people, the content and style of your sermon will differ from a service in a South African Caucasian church. You have to speak their language, respect their way of life, accommodate them in every way possible and speak to them on their level as a caring friend. You must tell stories, sing lots of songs and involve as many people as possible in the service. Then, they feel that they have meaning in life, and that the church is the one place they can feel at home. The most important message to bring them, is hope. Hope for the second coming of Christ. Hope for a better everlasting life with God if they believe. Hope is the one thing that keeps them alive and helps them in their existence (Meiring 1979).

This context creates a different hermeneutical challenge. The same message, the same core and the same God, but a different way of telling it. A different testimony. This is where the art of preaching is challenged to say as much as you can, in as little as possible words. It is using your imagination and your

experiences to explain the true meaning of the gospel, inspiring people and giving them hope.

## Conclusion

When Ronél Meylahn was asked what she thought preaching was, she answered that it is God's way of opening windows in a chaotic world. Preaching brings change. Preaching creates space where we can meet God. Preaching challenges us. Preaching gives us hope and expectations (Meylahn in Bester et al 2010:63).

Homiletics is an art form where you can use artistic ways to bring a message – whether it is through poetry or prose, art or photography, music or dance. It is using images to help us understand, using our language in such a way that it makes a deep impact. Homiletics is the art where you *observe* and have a sensitivity to listen to the text, it is *interpretation* of the text as well as the context behind and before the text, it is the *anticipation* to bring this message and hoping that it will *transform* the listener. Homiletics is using your imagination to create something magnificent. It is a skill that preachers have to learn and practice, like any other art form (Steyn in Bester et al 2010:92).

Ian Nell says that preaching is foolishness. It is foolishness to try and describe God. It is foolish to think that we will ever have enough words to describe what God did and what He is still doing (Nell in Bester et al 2010:123).

Therefore I am a fool. But I am a fool that would never stop practicing this art form, because it is a calling from God and personal testimony to change lives, no matter the context or challenges they face. It is a responsibility and privilege.

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