

**PREACHER ON THE EDGE:
EXPOSURE TO VULNERABILITY AS A NEW
OPPORTUNITY IN PREACHING THE
RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE KINGDOM OF
GOD TO VULNERABLE LISTENERS**

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ABSTRACT

In this article we explore the impact that diminishing modes of authority and the accompanying loss of power currently taking place in Western societies may have on the mind of the preacher (especially as it manifests in the South African context). In this problem field the preacher can possibly try to sidestep the painful reality of his exposed vulnerability by creating new ways of preserving the previous, privileged position of authoritarianism. This leads to the question whether there can be a proper authority which flows from the nature of the preaching task and is to be contrasted with mere authoritarianism? In attempting to give first steps in a responsible homiletic theory for this problem field, we reason that this diminishing modes of authority and the vulnerability it causes, may pose a unique opportunity for the preacher to place himself unconditionally under the authority of Christ and to be free to minister the righteousness of the kingdom of God as a vulnerable preacher among (not above) vulnerable listeners.

1 ORIENTATION

While overviewing developments in homiletics over the last 30 years, Day (2005:4) discusses ethical issues raised by the perception of the preacher as a figure of power and authority. He points out that

the pulpit is a place of power and it is not surprising that much writing has concentrated on the role of the preacher, particularly when he is male, white and western, himself a representative of the mighty who are due to be put down from their seats.

In the tradition of the Western Culture the male white was imbedded in a position of authority that lent itself to the possibility of power abuse and manipulation in justifying and preserving a privileged and self-centered life style (Watson 2002:103).

Focusing on trends in the South African society, it becomes clear that white and Western male preachers find themselves on the edge (in a very vulnerable position). Traditional structures that previously gave these preachers a safe launching pad for the possibility of abuse of power and for proclaiming a self-preserving message in authoritarian style are tumbling down. The authority and credibility of preachers from this context are increasingly questioned. Voices that point out a one-sided utilisation of Scripture to sanction a subordinate position for some people in society, can no longer be ignored (Büchner 2007)

Finding himself on the edge, the preacher is confronted by some serious questions:

- Is there a proper authority which flows from the nature of the preaching task and is to be contrasted with mere authoritarianism?
- Can the chain of abusing and manipulating the Gospel in preserving the own life and privileged position truly be broken?
- In what way can getting to grips with the own vulnerability equip the preacher in ministering the righteousness of the kingdom of God to fellow, vulnerable human beings?

Rather than trying to consolidate the privileged position and continuing to justify the status quo, vulnerability may pose a unique opportunity to enter in renewed and true communion with Christ and to truly minister the righteousness of his kingdom to the vulnerable men and women in the South African society.

We think that these questions and opportunities are serious and relevant enough to warrant a practical theological study on the possibilities that the exposed vulnerability of the preacher poses in com-

municating the full extent of the righteousness of the kingdom of God to the vulnerable in the church and society.

In the initial stage of the research project (that is documented in this article) we attempt to get to grips with the problem field and its dynamics. This initial research includes the following elements:

- Researching critique spoken out against power abuse, manipulation and authoritative behaviour by male, white, Western preachers in the South African society and possible patterns in the reaction of these preachers against the critique.
- Researching the implications of the authority with which Jesus Christ proclaimed the full implications of the righteousness of the kingdom of God for the preacher who finds himself in a state of vulnerability.
- Researching theory for a praxis in which the vulnerable preacher can truly proclaim and minister the full righteousness of the kingdom of Christ to vulnerable people through union with Christ.

2 PREACHER ON THE EDGE – VULNERABILITY IN GETTING TO GRIPS WITH THE DIMINISHING MODES OF AUTHORITY FOR PREACHING IMBEDDED IN THE TRADITIONALLY MALE DOMINATED WESTERN SOCIETY

In this initial part of the study we intend to explore the impact that diminishing modes of authority and the accompanying loss of power currently taking place in Western societies (especially as it manifests in the South African context) may have on the mind of the preacher.

We explore this problem field from the following three perspectives by:

- describing the extent of current changes regarding modes of authority in Western societies and trying to understand the impact it has on the mind of the preacher
- anticipating reaction patterns in the minds of vulnerable and displaced preachers that may amount to consolidat-

- ing the privileged position and continuing to justify and maintain the previous status quo
- exploring pointers already indicated by the researchers in addressing the reaction to changes in modes of authority with responsible homiletic theory and explaining our own point of departure in the context of these different approaches

2.1 Changes in modes of authority in Western society at large and the impact it may have on the mind of the preacher

Brueggemann (1997:2) uses the image of exile in describing the sense of loss and vulnerability that accompanies the current far-reaching changes in the Western culture. The “homeland” in which Western people have grown up has been defined and dominated by white, male, Western assumptions which were, at the same time imposed and also willingly embraced. Exile comes as those values and modes of authority are being effectively and progressively diminished. The diminishment is a source of deep displacement for many, even though for others who are not white and male, it is a moment of emancipation. This deep sense of displacement touches all people – liberal and conservative – in personal and public places. For that reason, the preacher must take into account the place where the faithful church must now live.

The trust in the old system took the form of certitude, because the world was reliably and stably ordered. And those in control or authority had great finesse in conducting the kind of “hegemonic theatre” that kept the world closely ordered and coherent (Brueggemann 1997:36).

In the old system operating with certain and absolute truths (embedded in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and positivism) all aspects of life could be neatly categorised and controlled (Dingemans 1996:119). Profound changes however began to take place in Western culture that revealed the shortfalls of an absolutistic system. Old modes of authority were increasingly regarded as patriarchal, hierarchical, authoritarian and monologic. There were growing suspicion about the linkage between knowledge (in the positivistic sense of the word) and power. Absolutism in truth usually has pretensions to “absolute power” and the manipulation and abuse of power that

accompanies this “absolute power” (Brueggemann 1997:24; compare Percy 2005:114).

The implications of these profound changes in the Western culture are far-reaching for the preacher. Previously his words had unchallenged authority. Due to the diminishing modes of authority of the previous order, the preacher will increasingly have to deal with suspicion against the authority with which he speaks and ethical questions regarding possible power abuse and manipulation into looking in an absolutistic way at matters that cannot be oversimplified and one-dimensionally explained (Percy 2005:29). The preacher will seriously have to consider whether what he calls “the truth” might in fact be “his truth” (De Wet 2007a:176). In this context the preacher is seriously confronted with questions whether there is a proper authority which flows from the nature of the preaching task that is to be contrasted with mere authoritarianism (Day 2005:5)?

In the South African context the white, male, Western preacher previously found himself in a position that provided an ideal launching pad for abuse of power in order to secure his own privileged and pre-dominant position (Theron 2007:234).

In a system that inherently categorised white (freeman) to be superior to black (slave), male to be stronger than female and presented Western culture (civilisation) as the saviour of the dark, barbaric, undeveloped world, the preacher had the “liberty” to promote a gospel that had the “good intent” of bringing order and development to people that were in fact abused, exploited and marginalised in their vulnerability (compare Van Niekerk 2002:174).

Changes in this dominant pattern caused deep sense of displacement to preachers.

For the first time they experienced what it was like to be in a position of vulnerability.

It should be noted that the impact of these changes on the male psyche seems to be rather profound. In researching the difference between male and female perceptions of power, Mathews (2003:116–117) noted a seemingly important distinction: When examining men’s and women’s attitudes toward power, some researchers found that men are more likely to view power as a discreet quantity. There is only a certain amount of it: “If I have this much power and I give some of it to you, I will have less power.” According to the same researchers, women, on the other hand, tend to view power as something that increases as it is shared. A woman who gives power to another person does not necessarily feel that her own power

is diminished by sharing it. To most women power expands as others gain it.

In a context where change is associated with loss of power, it can be anticipated that adapting to new circumstances will not be easy. Therefore in the next section we focus on anticipating reaction patterns in the minds of vulnerable and displaced (male) preachers that may amount to consolidating the privileged position and continuing to justify and maintain the previous (powerful) *status quo*.

2.2 Anticipating reaction patterns that resist change and amount to consolidating the previous privileged position

Beck (1999:106) asks the question why Evangelicals in the United States are so deathly afraid of the topic of justice. He identifies four contributing factors:

- The history of fundamentalist battles against theological liberalism earlier in 20th century. Theological liberals were committed to the pursuit of social justice, often as the conservatives alleged, at the expense of evangelism or preaching of the gospel.
- Pursuing justice can be a very unsettling and disruptive process. The pursuit of justice requires change and reform, both of which can be threatening to the comfortable status quo.
- Persons who live in the shadow of justice, who are able to attain their goals, who do not regularly suffer the indignity of injustice can easily insulate themselves from situations where justice is not the common experience of people.
- Evangelicals have consistently spiritualised justice, righteousness and the just to refer only to personal, internal conditions of one's relationship to God.

From these contributing factors explained by Beck it can be anticipated that overreaction against what is deemed as liberalistic (secularising) influences, fear against having to leave the comfort zone, self-isolation from playing a role in a changing society and spiritualising and internalising may be the typical reaction patterns

that will manifest itself in the initial response of preachers to the situation of change in modes of authority.

The same basic concerns become apparent when the situation of church communities in the South African context (where white and Western males previously held a pre-dominant position) is scrutinised. In a 2002 publication Du Toit, Hofmeyer, Strauss and Van der Merwe describe the long and arduous road to renewal the Dutch Reformed Church finds itself on – a road leading from isolation to new relevance. Due to far-reaching change in the South African society the DR Church – according to these authors – currently finds itself in a search for identity. In trying to redefine its identity and finding its role in society the church can encounter various temptations:

- the temptation to sanction the negative, self-isolating attitude of some congregation members in withholding active contribution to the South African society
- the temptation to give itself exclusively to the case of the Afrikaner nation and to the protection of the rights of these particular people
- the temptation to pursue the first alternative that presents itself in trying to meet the own shortfalls – even if these alternatives are superficial (Du Toit, Hofmeyer, Strauss & Van der Merwe 2002:44; compare Theron 2007:239).

In dealing with change and the deeply imbedded fear of losing power, preachers should anticipate and be wary of the following reaction patterns in their sermons:

- language that justifies and rationalises a life-pattern of self-isolation for the church
- indications of being consumed and determined by the negative activity of criticising and demonising new structures of power
- concealed ways of maintaining control and manipulating listeners in a subtle way
- superficial and fake display of concern for the cause of previously disadvantaged and marginalised people while maintaining and cherishing self-interest in a hidden and deceptive way

2.3 Addressing changes in the modes of authority with responsible homiletic theory

In this section we briefly explore the suggestions made by some researchers in addressing changes in the modes of authority with homiletic theory that meets the demand of the situation.

We also briefly explain and contextualise our own point of departure.

In framing his understanding of evangelical preaching in a changing cultural context, Brueggemann (1997:37) emphasises the need for a bold activity of re-imagination in the homiletic approach: “In the context of suspicion against absolute power and control of the previous dispensation, preachers are entrusted with a text, alternative to the failed text of white, male, Western hegemony, which mediates and valorizes a viable world outside that given, privileged advantage of certitude and dominion. In this context, it turns out that the script we have trusted in the Enlightenment is an unreliable script, even though we have been massively committed to it. And now, we are wondering, is there a more adequate script out there of which we may reimagine our lives? It is an awesome risk to see if this text, with all our interpretative inclinations, can voice and offer reality in a redescribed way that is credible and evocative of a new humanness, rooted in holiness and practiced in neighborliness.” In qualifying the adequate script for re-imagining our lives Brueggemann (1997: 43,44) emphasises that the Bible as script should not be subordinated to either (a) Enlightenment rationality (as in historical criticism) or (b) scholastic dogmatic tradition, both of which are attempts to tame and domesticate the irascible reality of Yahweh. Proclamation to exiles should deviate from monolithic language (language that is one-dimensional, flat, too sure, too serious, with too much closure). Whereas “the empire” needs certitude, exiles need space, room to maneuver, breathing opportunities that allow for negotiation, adjudication, ambiguity and playfulness. Such proclamation has no interest in spouting certitudes, for its work is the modest process of creating openings and breathing places for those who do not live at the centre of power, certitude, or privilege. This is indeed hazardous rhetoric for those who live hazardous lives.

The value of Brueggemann’s approach lies in the fact that it shows the preacher an alternative way in his position of vulnerability – a way that leads to credibility. There is an alternative to simply

withdrawing into the old style of monolithic language and in the process simply isolating him more and more from his listeners. But Brueggemann's post-modern approach of reimagining a more open, bold text might also be dangerous in the sense that its ambiguity can lead to a life of uncertainty without any clear direction.

Van der Ven (1996:80) departs from a deeply felt sense that a homiletic epistemology should be imbedded in the ritual-liturgical context – a sermon that is not linked to the reality of daily living and complex moral issues that are at hand in a changing society, will remain sterile. What makes the worshipper return to the worship service is the deeply seated desire that he might find some link to the real issues at play in the intricacies of his existence: “Heimelijk hoopt hij er de lezing van de tragedie van zijn eigen bestaan in terug te vinden.” An important part of the tragedy of human existence consists of moral conflicts. An important liturgical function of the sermon should be to contribute to religious clarification (and not sterilisation or oversimplified categorisation – FW de W) of moral conflicts. Van der Ven uses the eschatological discourse of Jesus as described in the Matthew Gospel (25:31–46) to illustrate the complexities and paradox imbedded in the moral conflict of the Christian between conducting the own life with self-interest as an ever present, intrinsic factor and on the other hand taking care of even “the least of his brothers” in a way that is truthfully not superficial. Life can be torn apart by contrasting tendencies emanating from the paradox at hand: self-preservation apparently being totally incompatible with service to the overwhelming need of the least of the brothers on the one hand and the joyless losing of the own life as the only possibility evident in caring for others properly on the other hand.

According to Van der Ven (1996:96) the implications of the metaphor of the Last Judgment lies in the fact that we cannot – in this life – draw a final conclusion and make a final judgment because we are not in a position to determine the full extent on how and when we reach individual people through our ministry. The eschatological word of the Lord teaches us not to base our actions on the contrasting and apparently irreconcilable tendencies flowing from the paradoxes in our life. This is the only way of not falling into the pitfalls of religious and cultural conventionalism on the one hand and fundamentalist fanaticism and rigid idealism on the other hand. It is the only way of not falling into traps of self-indulgence on the one hand and suffering due to a guilty superego on the other hand (Van der Ven 1996:97).

Van der Ven's approach shows the importance of not over-reacting and not allowing oneself to be drawn into the extremities of polarisation in times of change in a cultural situation. A balanced approach is needed that does not only take the paradoxes and complexities of living in this time frame into account, but also takes notice of the eschatological presence of the One that will have the final word about our lives.

From our vantage point we would like to make a contribution to scientific reflection on creating responsible homiletic theory in this problem field by submitting the homiletic process to the authority of Jesus Christ. We believe that Practical Theology should ultimately concern itself in a theocentric way with the living presence of Jesus Christ and the way in which our actions should be in service of his living actions full of truth and grace. Homiletic theory can only unfold responsibly when it is developed in the living presence of and under the guidance of Jesus Christ, the Head of the church: "Die Mitte, um die es in der Predigt geht, ist nicht ein zu bewältigender Gegenstand oder eine zu klärende Sache, sondern eine lebendige Wirklichkeit, die selbst ein herrisches, souveränes Subjekt ist, das als Antwort Verantwortung fordert, die Hingabe der ganzen Existenz. Nicht "etwas" wird erschlossen, sondern "einer" erschliesst sich in seiner Mächtigkeit, nicht über etwas wird gesprochen, sondern einer fängt selbst an, zu sprechen und zu handeln" (Schütz 1981:55). When the homiletic process is viewed as a pneumatological process in which the preacher willingly (and with no reservedness) submits himself to the guidance of Jesus Christ and the righteousness of his kingdom, new perspectives will be opened on the dilemma of the vulnerability of a preacher in the context of power shifts taking place in Western culture and on the credibility of the preacher and his/her message to people living vulnerable lives in a vulnerable world.

3 PREACHER ON THE EDGE – BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOURCE OF POWER AND AUTHORITY

Under this heading we explain our points of departure regarding a God-centred approach to power categories in preaching the righteousness of the kingdom of God in a vulnerable society. Four perspectives will briefly be discussed:

- Jesus' teaching in contrast with that of the Pharisees
- Jesus and his vulnerable listeners
- Power through weakness – the cross
- The power of the Holy Spirit

3.1 Jesus' teaching in contrast with that of the Pharisees

The Gospel of Matthew gives the key to compare the preaching of Jesus with the other preachers of his time (Mat 7:29). What struck his hearers the most was that he taught them as one who had authority and not at all like the scribes. For the scribes claimed no authority of their own. They conceived their duty in terms of faithfulness to the tradition they had received (see Strack & Billerbeck 1972:153 ev). So they were antiquarians, delving into commentaries, searching for precedents, claiming the support of famous names among the rabbis. In that way they tried to control every part of the peoples lives by determining God's will for every situation (Blomberg 1992:134).

In contrast to the traditionalism of the scribes Jesus demanded unconditional obedience. The casuistry of the scribes lead to anxiety, but the words of Jesus brought liberation. He focused directly on the human heart that longs for inner peace. He was neither tentative nor apologetic. Nor, on the other hand, was he ever bombastic or flamboyant. Instead, with quiet and unassuming assurance he laid down the law for the citizens of God's kingdom (Hagner 1991:193). And the crowds were astonished. Jesus had not received a scribal education, but spoke with a freshness of his own which captivated some and infuriated others (Stott 1992:214).

The scribes insisted that they had inherited the authority of Moses (Mat 23:2) and that they were able to proclaim *ex cathedra* commandments through an uninterrupted tradition. They viewed their teaching as powerful as the Thora itself. Jesus was not contradicting Moses, but rather the scribal corruptions of Moses. Yet in doing this he was challenging the inherit tradition of the centuries and claiming to replace it with his own accurate and authoritative interpretation of God's law. He thus commanded and prohibited, and repealed, and promised, on his own bare word (Stott 1992:215).

In their preaching the Pharisees based their authority on dead traditions and abused their power at the expense of vulnerable people. Jesus proclaimed with his own authority the righteousness of

the Kingdom with quiet and unassuming assurance and brought liberation for his hearers.

3.2 Jesus' preaching and his vulnerable listeners

Where the human expectation is that God will appear with supernatural and miraculous evidence, in Jesus God comes as a child born in lowly manger and nursed at Mary's breast. In the Judean desert the devil offered Jesus power, but he declined it. Instead, he gave himself voluntary to the ultimate weakness and humiliation of the cross. He died the most despicable and humiliating death that the Romans could invent (Hordern 1983:88).

When Jesus with his unique authority spoke of righteousness in Matthew 5:20, he had in mind the Old Testament sense of righteousness as right-relatedness. Jesus continually confounded his critics by his insistence on cultivating right relationships, especially with the vulnerable people of society. In Luke 7, the Pharisees mutter about the women of the streets anointing Jesus' feet with perfume, while Jesus shows his care for her. In Luke 19, Jesus chooses to go home with an outcast tax collector named Zacchaeus, while bystanders question his choice of friends. In John 4, Jesus initiates a conversation with a woman who had more than one strike against her. Again and again he is concerned about relationships, not about legalisms (Mathews 2003:42).

Jesus enabled women to find their voices in his service. This is a different use of power. Jesus set his followers straight about issues of power: followers of Christ are to be marked by service, not by exercise of power. But Jesus also knew the danger of powerlessness. He preached against those who consistently took advantage of the powerless (Matthew 23), and empowered many who were powerless. Nobody should use power if it is not wrapped in love (Mathews 2003:125).

Jesus' preaching brought a message of hope and reconciliation to his vulnerable hearers. The core of his message ("the righteousness of the Kingdom") focused on healing relationships through loving service.

3.3 Power through weakness – the cross

In 1 Corinthians 1:17, 18, 24 and 2:4 and 5, as well as 2 Corinthians 4:7 and 12:9 there are eight references to power: to the power of *Exposure to vulnerability as a new opportunity in preaching*

God, the power of Christ, the power of the cross and the power of the Holy Spirit. But the content of Paul's message was not about power, but "power through weakness". God's power operates best through weakness. Weakness is the arena in which God can most effectively manifest his power (Stott 2004:43).

In place of human philosophy and human rhetoric (1 Cor 1:17) Paul put the cross, for the cross is both the power and the wisdom of God. In 1 Corinthians 1:22–25 Paul elaborates the same thesis of wisdom through the folly of the cross and power through the weakness of the cross. Over against the 'wonder-seeking' Jew and the 'wisdom-seeking' Greek there is a third category, namely Christian believers (Horsley 1998:49). We preach Christ crucified (verse 23).

The cross is still the power of God because through it God saves those who cannot save themselves. It is the wisdom of God because through it God has not only solved our problem (sin and guilt), but has also solved his own. It is not wrong to speak of a divine problem or dilemma solved at the cross. How could God express his love to forgiving sinners without compromising his justice? How could he be at the one and same time 'a righteous God and a Saviour' (Is 45:21)? His answer to these questions was and still is the cross. For on the cross he took our place, bore our sin, died our death, and paid our debt. Thus on the cross God demonstrated both his justice (Rom 3:25) and his love (Rom 5:8). And in this double demonstration the wisdom of God is displayed: his wisdom in the foolishness of the cross, his power in its weakness (Wanamaker 2003:125).

God chose a weak instrument (Paul), to bring a weak message (the cross) to weak people (the Corinthian working class). But through this triple weakness the power of God was – and still is – displayed (Stott 2004:58).

The theologia crucis, as formulated by Luther, gives a key to solve the problem of a preacher with a lust for power and a purposeful manipulation of the Bible to protect self-interest. The choice is between power and the cross. The preacher who chooses the viewpoint of the cross will be filled with admiration towards God and will be convinced that Scripture in the first instance reads us and that it is not us that firstly read Scripture.

3.4 The power of the Holy Spirit

God's wisdom is something no eye has seen (it is invisible), no ear has heard (it is inaudible), and no mind has conceived (it is

inconceivable). It is all together beyond the reach of human eyes, ears and minds. It can be known only if God should choose to make it known – which is exactly what he has done: “but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Cor 2:6-16; esp 2:10a).

The Holy Spirit is presented to us in four stages as “searching”, “revealing”, “inspiring”, and “enlightening”. The Holy Spirit has a unique understanding of God because he himself is God. The same Spirit who searches the depths of God, and who revealed God’s secrets to the apostles, now gave them the words with which to pass on this revelation to others. The Holy Spirit who was active in the apostles who wrote the letters was also active in those who received and read them (Horsley 1998:61). He was working at both ends of the communication process – inspiring the apostles and enlightening their hearers and readers. Preachers must therefore come to the biblical text with a humble, open, receptive spirit, ready for God to break through their cultural defences, and to challenge and to change them (Stott 2004:81).

True preaching of Scripture comprises trust in the Biblical text, contains basic respect for the text, and implicates punctuality with which preachers must listen to the text. It implies agreement that the text is able to change and correct preconceived ideas and that the homilist can be swept away by the Spirit through the Word of God (Barth 1964:89). In light of God’s revelation and veiling, his ungraspable and infinitude character, preachers can only speak in metaphors about God (Pieterse 2007:130).

Preachers need to humble themselves before both the Word and the Spirit. They have to study the Word, to ponder its meaning and application, but they also need to cry to the Holy Spirit for enlightenment. Humble prayer and diligent study need to be combined (see Dan 10:12 and 2 Tim 2:7).

4 PREACHER ON THE EDGE – THE PREACHER’S FIRST STEPS IN DEVELOPING A RESPONSIBLE THEORY THAT SUBMITS THE HOMILETIC PROCESS PNEUMATOLOGICALLY TO THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST AND THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF HIS KINGDOM

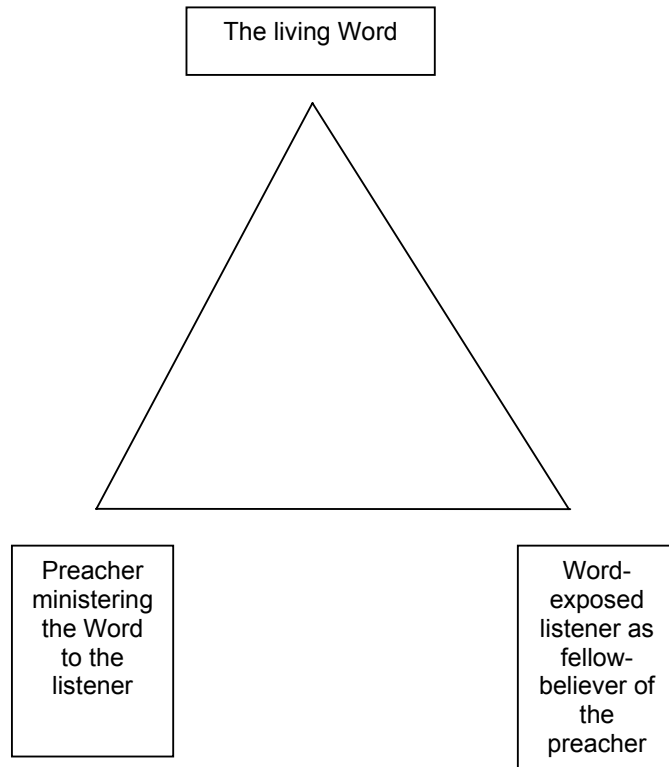
In this section we intend to give first steps in developing a responsible homiletic theory (on practice theoretical level) that

submits the homiletic process pneumatologically to the authority of Jesus Christ and the righteousness of his kingdom. The theoretic process is focused specifically on the problem field of the exposed vulnerability of the white, male preacher in the context of major shifts in power in the Western culture.

The homiletic process entails balancing the dynamics of a triangular communicative relationship consisting of text, preacher and listener:

- In the text of the Bible God reveals Himself with life-changing implications for preacher and listener.
- The preacher should be aware of his own personal predispositions and natural resistance against change while reading the text and should also consciously try to come to terms with the true state of his relationship with the listeners.
- Listeners have a certain history with the text (partially based on previous sermons heard from this text and also partially coloured by their relationship with and perception of the preacher/s involved) (De Wet 2007b:463; Stark 2005:205).

In our view balancing the dynamics involved in this triangular communicative relationship should be primarily determined by willing submission (both by preacher and listener) to the living Christ and the liberating power of the Gospel as revealed in the biblical text. Therefore the dynamics involved in this triangular communicative relationship can be visually expressed as follows:



Working with this vision of the dynamics involved in the triangular communicative process on the problem field at hand in this research, the vulnerable preacher (searching for the true base of authority and credibility) will in faith:

- Step into the tension field involving himself and the Biblical text with the earnest and humble intent to listen in a new way to the One that teaches with authority and whose kingdom opens up a righteousness that far surpasses the righteousness of men.

- Let the tension field between himself and the listeners be transformed by the all revealing Word that exposes the full vulnerability of all men and let them all together (as a new humanity) find fullness of life mutually in a living relationship with God.
- Let the tension field involving his own fears and natural inclination to maintain himself be transcended by the birth of a homiletic image that bears the openness of being crucified with Christ and speaking the language of a man that knows what it means to be strong when he is weak.

4.1 The vulnerable preacher in communicative tension field with the Biblical text

Stepping into the tension field involving himself and the Biblical text with the earnest intent to humbly submit to the authority of Christ, entails a conscious break with the previous “luxurious liberty” in which the message of the text could easily be manipulated or reduced to one-sided and half-developed truths with the hidden intent to maintain self-righteousness and to preserve the own position and privileged life style.

In expressing the earnest intent to humble himself before God, the preacher should rediscover the liberating truth in the Biblical doctrine of righteousness through faith. Luther found the key to a new relationship with God in the faith perception that “all that was required of man was that he humbled himself before God, in order that he might receive the gift of grace which God would then bestow upon him” (Solberg 1997:92).

The preacher is drawn into a pneumatological force field of authority that does not have to obtain its effectiveness by the manipulative force or creativity of our own words, but derives its effectiveness from the Gospel that opens up fullness of life far beyond that which any human being can pray for or imagine.

The preacher finds himself in a tension field in which it is not primarily his own creative power (re-imagining a new ambiguous and playful text that breaks through the old certitude with its rigid and oversimplified view on society (Brueggemann) that has to unfold the religious text in a credible and acceptable way, but the creative power of the Spirit that opens his eyes to the surprising implications of a living text that brings integration where there is only disin-

tegration, life where there is only death, righteousness where there is discrimination, reconciliation where there is only condemnation and consummation where there is only hopelessness. A preacher on the margins comes as one of the many witnesses in a court room of conflicting evidence, testifying under oath to the God who he hears and sees at work in the world through the surprising lens of scripture (Searcy 2003).

4.2 The vulnerable preacher in the communicative tension field with listener

In considering problematic elements in the tension field with the listener, the preacher viewing the homiletic process from a triangular communicative perspective should address some key issues.

All factors that give the impression that the preacher is untouchable and that his office entitles him to address people in an authoritarian style from a distance and without submitting himself to the full implications of the preached word, should immediately be attended to in a responsible way. Although the preacher ministers the authority of Jesus Christ (with the implication that listeners should see him as someone through whom God speaks), he should always point away from himself to the Lamb of God and radiate the humble attitude of Christ in self-sacrificing service. This authority does not elevate the preacher to a withdrawn, “holier than thou-” and “more important than thou-” figure, but breaks open a fountain of blessed life that flows from one broken man to all those who thirst for the water of life. It should be clear to the listeners that he is just as vulnerable to the all-revealing Word of God as all other men and women. His homiletic stance does not place him in an untouchable position but he consciously places himself among (and associate himself) with the humblest of the humble, the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable people in society, because that is the only vantage point from which the true greatness of God’s grace be appreciated and be preached.

True association with the vulnerable can however never be reduced to a mere imagining of what it feels like to be in a most vulnerable position while staying in the own comfort zone. The own exposed vulnerability of the preacher provides a stepping stone for making personal contact with fellow vulnerable people – feeling

their pain, filled with righteous zeal for the unrighteousness of their marginalisation and estrangement.

Being exposed in his vulnerability liberates the preacher from fearing other people and primarily looking at them as a potential threat to his own position, and shifts his basic concern towards caring for people and seeing to it that they reach the fullness of life that there is in Christ for all kinds of people.

4.3 The vulnerable preacher in the communicative tension field of the presence of his own person in the homiletic process

Focusing on the presence of his own person in the homiletic process, the preacher should consciously try to understand the factors in his self-presentation, homiletic image and rhetorical style that can cause serious tension and distortions in the communicative process. He should come to terms with his own fears of failure and rejection and the influence it might have on the communicative process. Percy (2005:31) stresses the importance of the relationship between authority and authenticity: “The tension between the authentic and authority is, in my view, one of the most important (but relatively unexplored) keys to understanding the apparent crisis in contemporary ecclesial identity.” One of the greatest fears any preacher has to deal with is the possibility that his authenticity might be doubted by listeners and that he might – in the process – lose all authority.

The preacher should (in tending to suspicion against his credibility) surely consider the unacceptability of trying to create an illusion of authority and power by using all-knowing, all-assertive and absolutistic language. A rhetorical approach that is built on this style will – in the current climate in Western culture – be like committing homiletic suicide.

He should however also consider the impact that fake humility, pseudo-concern for the vulnerability of listeners and total uncertainty of relativistic language could have on listeners. It is easy to accommodate fake tears in a revamped rhetorical style. It is also easy to hide in the shadows of the complexity and ambiguity of situations that can mean different things to different people. In the short term this homiletic strategy may give some breathing space for a preacher under pressure. But the question remains: what will be the fruit of a rhetorical style built on these points of departure?

Taking the point of departure from the triangular shape of the communicative relationships in the homiletic event, the preacher's eye will remain firmly on Christ. The openness of being crucified with Christ will be the predominant determining factor in self-presentation in the homiletic event of delivering a sermon. (By using the word openness we visualise a homiletic image of a cross-shaped, humble preacher that has been broken open – leaving behind the closedness of a life trapped in self-concern) The rhetoric style of a preacher whose eye remains fixed on Christ takes on the shape of language (including body language) communicating flaming love and righteousness, innermost concern and a sense of wonder (not ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the greatness of God's glory). It is only in the openness of a cross-shaped homiletic style that the preacher can communicate his vulnerability exposed by the all-revealing Word of God to vulnerable listeners who are in desperate need of the healing light that radiates from the Sun of Righteousness. In mutual vulnerability the authenticity and immense power of the Gospel message can no longer be doubted.

5 CONCLUSION

Voices that point out the unacceptability of maintaining a homiletic stance in which the male, white, Western preacher continues to abuse power and manipulate listeners in justifying and preserving a privileged and self-centered life style, can no longer be ignored.

We reasoned in this article that the current crises in getting to terms with far-reaching changes in Western culture and the vulnerability it causes should be viewed as a unique opportunity to enter in renewed and true communion with Christ and to truly minister the righteousness of his kingdom to the vulnerable men and women in the South African society.

We tried to anticipate reaction patterns that resist change and amount to consolidating the previous privileged position. We also discussed suggestions made by some researchers in addressing changes in the modes of authority with homiletic theory that meet the demand of the situation.

From our vantage point (based on the basis point of departure) that Practical Theology should ultimately concern itself in a theocentric way with the living presence of Jesus Christ and the way in which our actions should be in service of his living actions (full of *Exposure to vulnerability as a new opportunity in preaching* 81

truth and grace) we attempted to give first steps in responsible homiletic theory by imposing the dynamics of the triangular communicative relationship (preacher and listeners mutually exposed in vulnerability by the living Word of God) in the homiletic process on the problem field.

Vulnerability grants a unique opportunity for the preacher finding himself in this particular problem field:

- To step into the tension field involving himself and the Biblical text with the earnest and humble intent to listen in a new way to the One that teaches with authority and whose kingdom opens up a righteousness that far surpasses the righteousness of men.
- To communicate on a deep and authentic level with listeners (fellow vulnerable human beings) and finding fullness of life together with them in a living relationship with God.
- To find authenticity and incredible power in the openness of a homiletic image being crucified with Christ.

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