

Preaching in Times of the European 'Refugee Crisis'

A Symposium in Leipzig (October 2016) and the starting point of a European Research Project on the Relevance of 'Pulpit Speech' in Society and Politics

Alexander Deeg

Abstract

In October 2016 homiletics from seven European countries met in Leipzig in order to reflect on political preaching in the context of the so called European 'refugee crisis'. This article shows the background of this conference, gives a very brief overview of the perspectives from different countries, and suggests ways to continue European homiletical research on this theme.

1. Political Preaching in Europe today – questions at the outset of a joint European research project

The so called "European Refugee Crisis" was *the* big European theme in the second half of 2015 and at least in the first months of 2016. Of course it is important to note that it has been *the* theme for the Southern European countries (esp. Greece and Italy) much longer. But it only arrived in the public awareness in North and Central Europe in August/September 2015 – together with thousands of refugees arriving especially in Hungary, Austria, Germany, but also in the Northern European countries.¹

Christian preaching does many things. Among others it always articulates Christian self-understanding in a *local public context*. In this case *every sermon is political* as it is shaped by the political discourse of its time and itself shapes this discourse.

It is evident that Christian self-understanding is challenged as soon as the *public discourse* changes and is affected by one major theme – as was the case in 2015/2016: the "European Refugee Crisis."

¹ It would be worth another study in media analysis and public discourse analysis to find out, *how exactly* the so called "refugee crisis" made its way into the awareness of people in Central and Northern Europe. It is interesting to note that at least in the German discussion *photos* were very important for the public course – esp. the photo of Alan/Aylan Kurdi (2012–2015) showing his dead corpse on the beach near Bodrum/Turkey.

This is why a group of homileticians from seven European countries started a work of homiletical cooperation and homiletical analysis to find out how *public discourse* and *local preaching* (as a part of this discourse on the local level²) are interrelated and how Biblical texts and *Christian* attitudes, world-views, and traditions shape the perception of themes discussed in politics/in the media. The questions we asked during a symposium which took place in Leipzig on October 14th and 15th 2016, focused on this interrelation from two different sides:

(1) *The influence of public discourse on Christian preaching*: The question is, to what extent public discourse, public opinions, and public moods shape the way Christianity expresses itself in its sermons. Very simply put: Are Christian sermons a mirror of public opinions, do they remain in distance or opposition to them, or is there a much more complex relationship between both? It was Karl Barth's critique on the sermons of German pastors he read and heard in World War I that most of them were merely reflecting the general mood of people and politicians in Germany; they were arming the German military with spiritual support.³ And it was Karl Barth who tried to deliver sermons in the time of the Nazi regime opposing the regime's ideology by constantly deconstructing the power of the political leaders and proclaiming the power of God alone.

(2) *The influence of Christian preaching (and Christian discourses) on public discourse*: The question in this direction is, to what extent sermons influence public discourse – e.g. by shaping the language of public discourses in a certain way. Of course, it is quite difficult to find a method to describe these influences. This is also true for the influence of Christian preaching on the church itself. In Protestant churches 'leadership' should be exercised by 'the word alone', and sermons should play an important role for church leadership. But, there is very little research which could prove if this is just a Protestant slogan or if sermons are indeed an effective 'tool' for church leadership.⁴

The European research group focused (in the first period of preliminary research) on the first aspect. The basic question was: Public discourse speaks about a "European refugee crisis" – how do Christian preachers react to this in their sermons?

² Of course preaching in times of the digital revolution reaches far beyond the 'local' level and is distributed in many ways on the internet. And of course as there is local preaching in different congregations, there is always also preaching on TV or on radio as part of mass-media communication. For our project, we mainly concentrated on the local level.

³ Cf. also *Wilhelm Pressel*, *Die Kriegspredigt in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands 1914–1918*, *Arbeiten zur Pastoraltheologie* 5, Göttingen 1967.

⁴ Cf. Jochen Cornelius-Bundschuh/Jan Hermelink (ed.), *Nicht durch Gewalt, sondern durch das Wort. Die Predigt und die Gestalt der Kirche*, Leipzig 2011.

The question of *Political Preaching* was discussed in Central and Northern Europe very intensively in the late 1960s and 1970s, and also in the context of the political revolutions of the late 1980s. However, it has not been discussed intensively in the last two decades. It is the time now to reflect on political preaching again – this was the basis of our joint research project.

With the theme, *Political Preaching*, at least two imminent theological questions are touched:

(1) The God-question: Put roughly: In the development of the last centuries, of the Neuzeit, God more and more found his place and home in the inner lives of the religious people – as a way of individual self-understanding or feeling. In other words: God lost the world as the world lost God. God seemed to be no longer active *in the world*, but only in the hearts and souls of the pious folks. Of course, this is a rough description, but we can see its effects quite clearly e.g. in the way intercessory prayers are usually formulated. Prayers to God are quite often imperatives to those who listen to the prayers, because (and this is a very famous quotation at least in Germany) 'God has no other hands than our hands.'

But of course: Just to claim that God *is* active outside, in this world, in politics does not only raise the theodicy-question, but can also lead to terrible misunderstandings, which are prominent not only in German history, but which can be discerned there very clearly: 'God with us, the Germans' – as a slogan in the wake of World War I; 'God with us, the Nazi-Regime' – around 20 years later.

(2) The ecclesiological question: The second question is the question of the self-understanding of the 'church': What is the role of church in a western democratic society? Is it the institution for the 'spiritual maintenance' of those people who still belong to it and may from time to time need it? Or does it have a role in public discourse – an aspect often discussed as talking about societal values on the one hand, and reflecting on "Public Theology" on the other hand.

The so called Refugee Crisis seems to be crucial for religious self-understanding, because from the very beginning this 'crisis' was in its public discussion in the media connected with the appearance and growing influence of Islam in Europe.⁵ This is why it is a societal, but also a religious 'crisis'

⁵ There are many titles showing this connection – many of them are very problematic; cf. e.g. the discussion between Thomas Sternberg, a German politician (Christian Democratic Union) and the President of the Central Committee of Catholic Christians in Germany, and Alexander Gauland, one of the leading figures of right-wing nationalist party "AfD" ("Alternative für Deutschland"): *Thomas Sternberg/ Alexander Gauland, Sorge ums Abendland? Ein Streitgespräch*, Leipzig 2017.

and challenges the self-understanding of 'Christian' countries or societies (whatever this may still mean in highly secularized in post- or at least late-modern times!).

As a first step, I collected sermons from September 2015, preached in Leipzig, and analyzed them asking the following questions:

- *Homiletical hermeneutics*: How do preachers connect the Biblical texts with the political situation? Which hermeneutical 'moves' do they make use of in order to bridge between 'Jesus and Assad', the letters of Paul and the European crisis?

- *Ethical orientation of the sermon*: In the German discussion already in autumn 2015 theologians asked which ethics seems to be most fruitful in the current context of crisis: an ethics of ultimate ends (which maybe prevailed in September 2015) or an ethics of responsibility (which does not just do what has to be done according to ultimate ends, but reflects the consequences more clearly)? What kind of ethics do the sermons show? And how do they perceive the role of the individual, the congregations, and the churches?

- *Political awareness*: What do the sermons say about the refugee crisis? Does the sermon just reflect the mainstream public discourse – or is there something new and different in the pulpit? Does preaching just reflect the mainstream societal mood – or does it somehow make a difference and bring something into the public discourse which wasn't there before?

- *Role of the preacher*: Who are the preachers in these sermons? Do they behave as political experts? Or as prophets? Or as social-workers? How do they use "I" in their sermons? Do they dare to show their feelings and emotions? Or do they rely more on rational argumentation?

- *Language in the sermons*: How do they describe the situation? Do they speak about a *refugee crisis* in order to speak about the situation of citizens of Central or Northern European countries? Or do they see that the refugee crisis is first and foremost the crisis of the refugees – the crisis *they* live in? In 2016 German sociologist Elisabeth Wehling published a book about "political framing."⁶ Her main insight is that there is a 'frame' in every speech-act we use. In German discourse e.g. a lot of people were talking about the 'flood of refugees' thus depersonalizing the 'refugees' and bringing them into the frame of a natural catastrophe from which we have to protect ourselves. Do preachers try to oppose

⁶ Cf. Elisabeth Wehling, *Politisches Framing. Wie eine Nation sich ihr Denken einredet – und daraus Politik macht*, Köln 2016.

such framing and find a more precise way to talk about the situation? Do they speak in an abstract way about the situation and political alternatives – or do they tell concrete stories?

- *Interreligious sensitivity*: Do sermons deal with the question of Islam and the Christian-Muslim relationship? Do they mention that most of the migrants/refugees are Muslims? How do they construct Christian identity in the context of an increasingly multi-religious society (taking into account that *social identity* is always connected with the awareness of differences between social groups)?

First results of this preliminary research were presented at the 2016 meeting of Societas Homiletica in Stellenbosch, South Africa – and it became clear that many questions were left open, which proved to be relevant for colleagues from all over Europe. This is why we decided to meet in an European symposium connecting our different perspectives and asking the following questions:

What exactly should homiletics do and try to find out?

What methods should and could be used in order to do this?

What project or projects do we need?

Is all this the starting point of a new union of European homiletical research?

And can thus the political crisis become a chance for European homiletics – and for a renewed preaching in our different contexts and our united Europe?

2. Perspectives from different European countries

2.1 Danish perspectives

The Danish research team, Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen and Pia Nordin Christensen, presented the results of the analyses of fifty-two sermons held by thirteen different preachers in September 2015, January 2016 and Easter 2016 in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. One of the research questions was the use of Biblical texts in the sermon (homiletical hermeneutics) showing that the same lectionary text can be used for opposing ethical perspectives.

The Danish survey also showed a clearly discernible *change* of the content and intention of the sermons dealing with the refugee crisis in the different periods of the survey. Whereas the refugee crisis was seen as a “game changer” in all of the sermons in September 2015 and an ethics of

ultimate ends was predominant in many sermons, an ethics of responsibility and a growing awareness of worry and fear coined the sermons in the later periods.

In addition, the difference between congregations having a huge number of refugees in their midst and those in which refugees were not present, was noted.

2.2 German perspectives

The German research was carried out in two different perspectives: first in the above mentioned preliminary analysis of sermons from Leipzig (September/October 2015), presented by Alexander Deeg.

A second research perspective, presented by Jula Elene Well, focused on sermons in “hotspots” of the current German discussion about ‘refugees’ – e.g. on sermons delivered immediately after a refugees’ home was burned or attacked. The analysis used a critical-ideological paradigm of research discerning the *theology* and *ideology* of the sermons: How is the ‘world’ seen and how is ‘God’s action’ portrayed?

2.3 Greek perspectives

Dimitra Koukoura (Thessaloniki) presented aspects of the perception of the refugee crisis by the Greek Orthodox Church and by the “Great Council of the Orthodox Church”, which met in its Holy Synod in Cyprus, June 2016. The contribution showed the special awareness of the Greek Orthodox Church of the current situation in Greece (affected by the financial crisis *and* by the refugee crisis) and in Near-Eastern countries like Syria or Iraq which used to have a high percentage of Christian population.

Many examples also revealed, how churches on a local level (and the church on a national level) try to support all those who give practical help to the refugees and to exercise influence on political decisions.

The refugee crisis also opened up ways for a new ecumenical collaboration – as e.g. the Joint Declaration of Bartholomew (Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople), Ieronymos (Archbishop of Athens and Greece), and Pope Francis (Lesbos, 16.4.2016) shows.

2.4 Hungarian perspectives

Zóltan Literaty (Budapest) presented insights into the situation of the churches (Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran) in Hungary today – showing especially the difficult role of the Reformed Church as the biggest Protestant church in Hungary. Solidarity with the refugees *and* loyalty to the mainstream public discourse come together in the practice of the congregations and in the sermons of many of its pastors.

In addition, Zóltan Literaty claimed that the role of the Hungarian history should not be underestimated – being a country which still remembers the history of foreign (and Muslim!) oppression. This is at least one reason why xenophobia is also widespread *in* Christian congregations – encouraged and fortified by a strong anti-Bruxelles course of the Hungarian leading party and its prime minister Victor Orban (a member of the Hungarian Reformed Church). The 15 sermons analyzed show a whole set of different attitudes and concepts in this complex political and societal situation.

2.5 Perspectives from the Netherlands

Theo Pleizier presented the results of an analysis of a social-media sampling of sermons. The only criterion for sending in sermons was that they should have to do with the 'refugee crisis' and should have been preached in the 'last year'. Six sermons by five different preachers were analyzed.

The qualitative study started with an *open coding* of the sermons with some leading questions in mind: When is the 'refugee crisis' introduced in sermons? What perspective does the preacher take? What makes this perspective a 'religious perspective' in the sermon? What homiletical strategy does the preacher use in relation to the perspective he/she takes?

The analysis of three different sermons was presented (on fear, on Christian identity, on not understanding God). The analysis had (among others) the following results: (1) The way the 'refugee crisis' is introduced, determines the perspective on the 'refugee crisis' in the sermon. (2) The metaphorical use of the 'refugee crisis' exploits 'refugee crisis' for (religious) meaning-making. (3) The closer the 'refugee crisis' is to the life of the listeners, the more concrete it is portrayed. (4) The 'refugee crisis' awakens both ethical and religious reasoning: transformation of attitudes or spiritual quests.

2.6 Norwegian perspectives

The Norwegian case study (Sivert Angel, Tone Stangeland Kaufman, Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen) clearly showed a shift of the public discourse in autumn/winter 2015/16. The new Norwegian immigration minister used the term “Godhetstyranni” coined by Terje Tvedt: the tyranny of Goodness. The idea behind this concept is that in public discourse there may be a tyranny of a totalitarian opinion (demonizing discord) connected with “goodness” – and that this may be the problem in church declarations and sermons in 2015 (and 2016). The term can – of course – be used in a polemical way, but also in an analytical perspective.

On this backdrop the Norwegian research team analyzed sermons from a congregation near the Norwegian border and sermons from a cathedral in the capital. The striking result: In the border case there was a stunning silence about the refugee crisis. If it was mentioned at all it could be used as just an example of bad things happening in the world and an introduction to the question, how God acts in this world.

The situation was totally different in the cathedral case, where nine out of 12 sermons addressed the refugee situation and stressed the solidarity of the preachers with a liberal refugee politics.

2.7 Swedish perspectives

In Sweden 40 sermons were analyzed by Carina Sundberg and her team. The 18 sermons from September 2015 speak in ‘one voice’, welcome the refugees, and plea for a radical openness of Sweden that attempts to empower the congregations to continue the good work with the refugees. Biblical, historical, ethical, empirical, and theological arguments go hand in hand in order to prove this point.

Also in Sweden, the political and public discourse changed totally in the following months – and the position of the church was and is challenged by new paradigms of public argumentation. But in the sermons, openness remained, sometimes new decisions of the government were addressed, terrorism was a new topic named, but there was not more complexity or any other change.

3. A possible research agenda

The Leipzig symposium of October 2016 showed impressively that the *interrelation of public discourse (on its many levels) and homiletics* is a fundamental question in *all* the European contexts we had the chance to get into conversation during the two days of our symposium.

Put in other words: *Local speech* and *public discourse* 'meet' in preaching – and the question is, how they relate to each other. The sermons can be seen as an outstanding example and research object in order to find out (1) how public discourse 'enters' religious discourse and is perceived there, (2) how religious discourse tries to influence public and political discourse.

It is important to note that none of these discourses 'is there'. Both of them are being constantly made and changed, constructed and destructed. Sermons are one of the instruments of this construction and deconstruction – and are thus worthwhile of more extensive study.

There are many open questions which can be seen primarily on the *homiletical* side: How do political themes enter into sermons? How are they made relevant for listeners? How are they connected with theological or Biblical aspects? Do these sermons use arguments or rely more on the evocation of emotions (or do they do both)? How do they differ from political speeches? Do they only 'use' political realities as metaphors for spiritual aspects they are actually dealing with?

One of the most important questions for future research is the question of sermon sampling – of bringing together the material for international homiletical studies. Then the most suitable empirical methods have to be chosen. It can be expected that empirical analysis will help to sharpen homiletical theory and to connect it with other scientific perspectives (interdisciplinary cooperation).⁷

All this should be done in order to help preachers to find a 'voice' in their sermons that not only affirms what is already there, but fractures, interrupts, and challenges the discourses to proclaim God's power against the powers and principalities of this world.⁸

Alexander Deeg, born in 1972, is Professor of Practical Theology at Leipzig University, Germany.

⁷ A panel at the International Academy of Practical Theology, Oslo, April 2017, continued the discussion of this article and considered possibilities for further collaboration.

⁸ Cf. *Charles Campbell*, Preaching Gospel. Four Theological Tones, in: idem/Clayton J. Schmit/Mary Hinkle Shore/Jennifer E. Copeland (eds.), Preaching Gospel. Essays in Honor of Richard Lischer, Eugene (OR) 2016, 1–15, esp. 9–14.