

Squib: Timing Grace

Johan Cilliers

Preaching is, *inter alia*, about what to say to whom, when. It is about the art of connecting the gospel (what) to the audience (whom), at a specific moment in time (when). This is true of all preaching, but, I will contend: it is particularly true of what could be called prophetic preaching. False prophecy could have a good content, and even sound like the gospel (what); it could be seemingly addressed to the relevant people (whom) ... but it misses out on the time, i.e. on the timing (when). Therefore false prophecy often sounds sound, even popular ... but it is still false. The “right” content, delivered to the “right” people, but it does not fit into the “right” time. False prophecy might be correct, but it is still wrong; as a matter of fact, it can be *so* correct, that it is *so* wrong ...

Or, the other possibility is that wrong timing (when) may also affect, indeed pervert either the what or the whom, or both. More often than not, wrong timing needs and creates its own message (what), and constructs its own audience (whom). The what, whom, and when in preaching need to be in sync, but perhaps timing is the most important *homiletical synchroniser*. It is, after all, about *synchronos*; about timing (or: tying) truth together with, and to, the addressees of this truth. Or, in other words: the gospel (what) is always intended for somebody (whom); always now (when).

For me, timing is linked (in sync with) grace. Grace has its own time, and indeed timing. It cannot be scheduled, manipulated, or choreographed – homiletically, or otherwise. Grace happens – therefore it is called *grace*. In terms of (biblical) temporality, grace could also be called *Kairos*. Theologically speaking, *Kairos* indicates a fullness of time; a specific time in which God’s intentions with this world is fulfilled. The Christ-event signifies the ultimate *Kairos*, as the Timing of an Event that embodies all of God’s revelation.

Timing grace presupposes discernment, indeed: to know what to say to whom, when. It entails reading and interpreting the time(s) right, expecting the advent of an event within a specific moment in time. Timely preachers know and acknowledge the *Kairos* when it comes. More than that: these preachers help to kindle the *Kairos*. Herein lies the brilliance of the wisdom of preaching

– even though others might deem it to be foolishness.¹ Perhaps the brilliance of such a form of preaching could be called *wise foolishness*. This stands in stark contrast to what Karl Barth had to say about the “brilliance” of unwise foolishness:

Foolish people are always either too early or too late. They sleep when they should be awake, and are awake when they should sleep. They remain silent when they should speak and speak when it would be better to remain silent. They laugh when they should cry and cry when they should be comforted and could have laughed. They work when they must pray and pray when only work could make the difference. They consider everything at the wrong time; say everything to the wrong people; do everything in the wrong direction; always choose the complicated but irrelevant things, while the simple but crucial are required. Herein lies the brilliance of foolishness.²

Brilliant, but unwise fools miss the point (of time); bypass the *Kairos* of event. But, when this happens, time loses its fluidity and becomes solidified. Time then does not become a space for the event of the gospel, but rather an enclave that should safeguard the eternity of our own convictions and agendas. What preachers need, indeed, could be called a *theology of the event*, to borrow a phrase from John Caputo.³ Timing opens up a new experience; leads to a new event. The gospel – and preaching of it – is more of an event of truth than an explanation of truth; more of an experience of truth than an exposition of it (although explanation and exposition surely have their place). The gospel and preaching thereof should never be monumentalized, or “pillarised” as Edward Postma describes it.⁴ Once the gospel and preaching are changed into safe and secure certainties, or institutionalized enclosures or enclaves of the “truth,” and no longer understood and experienced as event, it becomes time (!) for timely, prophetic preachers to step in.

It becomes time for the timing of grace ...

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¹ Cf. Charles Campbell/Johan Cilliers, *Preaching Fools. The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*, Waco (TX) 2012, 38ff.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV, 2*, edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Edinburgh 1958, 413.

³ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God. A Theology of the Event*, Bloomington and Indianapolis (IN) 2006, 1–20.

⁴ Edward Postma, *Dilettant, pilgrim, nar: De positie van C. W. Mönnich in cultuur en theologie*, in: *Jaarboek voor liturgie-onderzoek* 24 (2008), 239–247, 247.