

Preaching the Old Testament in the Majority World

Author: Stuart Reid, Itinerant preacher based near High Wycombe, UK.

Easier travel has allowed many of us ordinary Christian workers and pastors to preach all over the world. Although based in the UK all of my life, I have been greatly blessed with the opportunity to spend time in a variety of cross-cultural contexts, particularly in Peru, Ghana and India.

The people I minister to are usually very poor, frequently uneducated but often very intelligent. They are usually intrigued by the presence of a foreigner but there also seems to be a genuine quest for spiritual truth. Generally their world view does not rule out the supernatural realm both of the divine or demons.

How does one preach from the Old Testament?

“If you ask” Alec Motyer says ““How does one preach from the Old Testament?” The answer is “How does one preach from the New Testament?” There is no special mystique or approach to preaching that has to descend on preachers when the Lord leads them to minister from the old rather than from the new” [1]. All Christians, whether in the hill tribes of India, the plains of Africa or the burgeoning cities of the majority love to hear preaching that tells them of God’s story. Imagine the Bible as a two act play with many scenes. Without Act One (the Old Testament) you can’t possibly understand Act Two (the New Testament); without Act Two we would not know where Act One was going! It is like going to a foreign language class and missing all the early lectures on grammar, syntax and vocabulary – you would find the later lessons very difficult. The Old Testament is essential for understanding the New Testament and the overall big story of the Bible.

Every tribe and people has a story but they may have never heard the master story, the true meta narrative. This is not a domineering story written by the “winners” but a story which is sensitive to suffering and written with a view to bringing healing and joy to the nations. So the Old Testament heralds the first few scenes of God’s great drama where he is the author and the chief actor. But this is real history, not a cosmic myth or fairy story as God’s people move in to slavery, out of it and in to it again. The first testament people finish back in the land of Israel but still, according to N.T. Wright, in spiritual exile awaiting a true deliverer. Essentially the Old Testament is not a story of conquerors but of underdogs, the powerless and the poor – but they are nevertheless God’s family on earth. As C.J.H. Wright puts it, “God so loved the world that he chose Israel” [2].

Telling the big story

We have to tell the Big Story to get us out of our little stories; just as Abraham was taken out of his and put into God’s story. God takes ordinary, displaced people like Ruth and places her story between the great national themes of Judges and Samuel. This little soap opera highlights how God takes and uses ordinary people. The little sweeper Dalit lady in India needs to be told she has true significance. And the heroes and heroines of the Old Testament invariably are taken from the most mundane of places. Each person created in the image of God, though this image is badly defaced, is immensely valuable. But you have to show them that in Christ they are now in something big. As in Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings on the journey to Mordor, Sam the little hobbit asks Frodo “What sort of tale have we fallen into?” The Bible tells our tale. From chapter one of Genesis we are impacted by the size of the story and its teller, our great creator God. From the outset, in the market place of other religions we have to preach “the scandal of particularity”; that God chooses a particular people, Israel, to bear his message to the nations. It also becomes their story as they

respond to his self-revelation and plan of salvation. The Bible is to be preached as a great story, not just a quarry for blessed thoughts and promises! Even the non-narrative parts, the law, psalms and wisdom literature presuppose this particular story line. And the story told must be allowed to shape the community. We must teach that God works his purposes out, not from the outside but from the inside, guiding and teaching his people by his Spirit and of course finally by becoming a character in the story. We must avoid the fantastic abuse of 'spiritualising' the text.

The Bible is all history where, unlike secular history, God is seen to be central. He makes covenants/treaties/deals with people – all people understand that! These covenants give unity to the Bible and God is always faithful to his word, even when his people are not.

Preaching and poverty

Within the context of global poverty, it is important to get across the message that God does have a 'bias to the poor'. The new churches have to be taught that we are not just offering tickets for heaven but making disciples of Jesus. Even the poor Christians have to be taught to be generous. In fact their generosity often shames us affluent western Christians. We have to teach them to see the world through God's eyes, as his prophets did, who protested passionately at the injustices and suffering of the weak and poor at the hands of the strong. We overseas 'helpers' must always accompany the preaching and teaching of the gospel with deeds of compassion. This is not just handing out money but by setting up small businesses, orphanages and self help projects. James 1:27 picks up on many of the cries of the Old Testament prophets and is an essential ingredient of the true gospel.

It is great to be able to show the believer born into the lowest castes they can now trace their roots back 4,000 years to Abraham and beyond. Our emphasis should be not that they invite God into their little story but that they step into God's big story. Just as Abraham didn't invite God to come and live with him in his cosy mansion in Ur but arose and followed God's call. As we teach the biblical picture we seek to immerse each believer in this big story, thereby enabling them to encounter God and learn about his passion for his glory and the gospel in this world.

Preaching characters and genres

There is a great temptation to preach the Old Testament characters as exemplary moral models, extracting principles of godly living from their lives. Indeed when looking for, say, models of workplace excellence, people like Boaz, Nehemiah and Daniel stand out and it is essential to show that the motor rickshaw driver, the market stallholder and the sweatshop sewing machinist can make their place of work into a real place of ministry and service for the Lord. But most of the people God highlights in scripture are unsuitable and flawed. Their chief function seems to be to show God's grace in choosing, using and persisting with them. It is this honest portrayal of Old Testament characters as failures and sinners that helps people today find hope in God's gracious dealings with them. As you preach through 1 and 2 Kings, for example, look at it from the perspective of the Babylonian exile. The people must have asked, "How did we survive those hundred years of mess?" The answer is of course the gracious presence of the Lord. What the Old Testament preaches is that God cares for his people then and now – "warts and all". The clear note of God's faithfulness to his word sounds out right through the first testament and its fulfilment in the New Testament reinforces our confidence in his word. "For all the promises of God find their yes in Him" (2 Cor. 1:20a).

The people I preach to in the majority world have less difficulty than many Westerners in believing that scripture is God's word. However, it is not always easy to get them to understand the different genres of scripture. I remember how difficult it was in South

America to overcome the literalism of dispensationalism that missionaries and North American broadcasters had sown very successfully in to the new churches! Andrew Walls has reminded us that one of the greatest achievements of the missionary movement of the last centuries was to take the Word of God to lands where it was unknown. But the task of contextualisation is always before. As Philip Greenslade puts it, “We will acknowledge that these ancient texts were not addressed to us in the first place but to another people in another time and place, but that in the continuity of faith we can take these texts as written for us (Romans 4 vs 32; 1 Corinthians 10)” [3].

Psalms and songs

One thing all believers love to do throughout the world is sing. How stirring it is to hear full throated singing, whether it is in Peru, India, Ghana or wherever. And the cosmic drama in the Bible comes to us like a musical – there are songs everywhere. Bollywood films have it right when periodically the whole company burst into song. That’s why the psalms are central to the Old Testament – they cover the whole of the pilgrim life. When you preach through the psalms to the poor you invariably hit the right note. Kathleen Norris wisely says that “the psalms reflect our world but they do not allow us to become voyeurs” [4]. As Philip Yancey says “They help me reconcile what I believe about life with what I actually encounter in life” [5].

The Psalms are so practical, real and vivid. I have carried a bag of chaff around India and Africa to demonstrate the qualities of chaff as depicted in Psalm 1, as opposed to the qualities of a living tree. Like Jesus’ stories and parables, they ‘work’ in all cultures.

Simple believers like the honesty of the Psalms of lament, which show that the God-centred life is not a carefree stroll in the park. They are allowed to unburden all their negative emotions on God rather than pouring them on other people. There are a lot of angry people in the church and these Psalms provide a safety valve to let out noxious gases and breathe in the truth. They say God understands them and still cares for them. He wants an honest people who will face real, daily suffering with Him. “Covenant minus lament is finally a practice of denial, cover up and pretence which sanctions social control” [6].

But the Psalms also call us to celebrate who God is and what he has done as our sublime creator, provider and deliverer. Many of these struggling Christians demonstrate most clearly that an authentic church is a thankful church that constantly sings, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his love endures forever” (Psalm 107). This is the appropriate response to the preaching of the good news. It celebrates a covenantal relationship – a marriage of God and humans conceived in heaven and made on earth.

Community

People in the western world are soaked in individualism; the tribe, the clan and increasingly even the extended family is not seen as a vital part of life. But especially in Africa, the community is essential – they are all part of a people, a tribe, a family. And so they see far clearer the social and corporate nature of God’s people. They see the need to march together like Israel if they are to survive. The Amalekites pick off stragglers in every generation! Great people movements in the 20th and now 21st Centuries are causing many to leave their villages and their homelands. It provides a great opportunity for us to reach those people who have cut their roots, whether in Mumbai, Bangkok or High Wycombe. Many of these migrants are believers who take the gospel into unevangelised places. For instance, seven percent of the 8 million contracted Philippino overseas workers are evangelical Christians. I digress!

The Old Testament and the spirit world

Most majority world Christians have a very clear view of a world inhabitant by spirits (angels and demons). The commands of Deuteronomy 18 etc., against occult practices which were common among the neighbours of Israel were paramount to ensure their survival. They knew that behind the gods to whom the other nations sacrificed were demons (Deut. 32:16-17; Psalm 106:37-38). Christians in many non western nations are still brought up in families where spirits are revered and worshipped. The prohibitions against occult involvement are essential in any teaching of discipleship throughout the world. Several pastors have said to me "Don't expect to set up churches here if you can't deal with demons!" These pastors routinely discern and cast out demons from people coming from other religions and pagan tribes. In these areas visiting western pastors can learn much from the local Christian workers in the whole area of demons and deliverance.

Conclusions

We have to teach the Old and the New Testaments in such a way as to show the unity of God's story. The Bible tells the story of one God and one family. Even the New Testament is about the family of Abraham, for Christians are children of Abraham by faith in Jesus Christ. There is only one Israel, one chosen people. In the New Testament believers are the circumcision (Philippians 3:13). We teach and preach to get these new believers to indwell this great story of the God of mission, so that they can look out from within the world of the Bible and on to the world in which they live. We have to introduce them to this strange wonderful world of the Bible. To use David Wells' words, "to take meaning we come to give up the narrative of our own life with its parables of self-constructed meaning in order to find the truth that God has given in His own narrative" [7].

It is hard following the Lord in any culture, surrounded by opposition which can be much more than just verbal abuse. And so there is always the tendency to draw back and compromise. We have to so thrill our listeners with the glory of working with and for God that being built up they will say with Nehemiah "Should such a man like me run away...?" and "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down" (Neh. 6:11, 3). There is no greater joy than knowing and serving the Living God of Israel.

Notes

[1] A. Motyer, Preaching the Word, Christian Focus, 1999, p.99.

[2] C.J.H. Wright, Deuteronomy, Hendrickson, 1996, p.57.

[3] P. Greenslade, A Passion for God's Story, Paternoster, 2002, p.29.

[4] K. Norris, The Cloister Walk, Lion, 1999, p.119.

[5] P. Yancey, 'How I learned to stop hating and started loving the Psalms' in Christianity Today, 6th October 1989.

[6] W. Brueggemann, The Psalms in the Life of Faith, Fortress, 1995, p.102 (Quoted in P. Greenslade, Psalms Songs for All Seasons, CWR, 2003).

[7] D. Wells, No Place for Truth, Eerdmans, 1993, p.279.

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