

The Eye of the Homily

“Did you see that?” “Did you notice the look on his face?” “Did you watch the news last night?” “I’ve never seen anything like this!”

What strikes the eye stays in the mind. So, what did your listener “see” in last Sunday’s homily? An Arab proverb states that the eloquent speaker turns the *ear* in an *eye*. That ancient advice is even more pertinent today when Facebook YouTube or is as likely to open a door to divine mysteries as a Byzantine icon.

Icons. They’re not just for the Orthodox any more. In a culture focused on visual media, preachers must communicate in like manner.

The Bible itself provides the strongest argument for the power of image when it comes to religious discourse. In the Gospels, for instance, forgiveness is not discussed, it is demonstrated in a father’s embrace of a wayward son. Betrayal is a man weeping in an alley with the sound of a rooster crowing in the background. The virtue of humility is defined by the sound of water falling across a dusty foot and into a basin of water.

Move on to the epistles and you’ll find that the sensory aspects of the divine Word take top billing in John’s homiletic strategy: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life (1 John 1:1).*

Show, Don’t Tell

Images employed in homiletic discourse are not the same as sermons illustrations. In sermons, illustrations illustrate a point. In homilies, images are the point. Consider this example from a homily for the Easter season by Susan McGurgan of the Athenaeum of Ohio:

Jesus just keeps on appearing. On a street in the East End, where a desperate mother wages a private war, determined to keep her child free from drugs. Jesus just keeps on appearing. In a lonely room beside a frightened man held captive by plastic tubes and blinking lights. Jesus just keeps on appearing. In a dusty village where a silent child sits beside an empty bowl. Jesus just keeps on appearing.

And when it becomes too hard for us to walk with that mother, and hold the man’s hand, and offer the child a loaf of bread, well, fortunately for us, we are blessed with a God who just keeps on appearing.¹

Reveal, Don’t Point

Symbols function at a deeper level than illustrations. Like the sacraments themselves, images don’t point to something up ahead as a does a road sign. Rather, like a wedding ring, they reveal something deep within.

In the above excerpt, the multiple images do more than exemplify the hope of the Resurrection, they invite the listener to experience it.

The ultimate goal of homiletic preaching isn’t to explain the teaching of Christ but to reveal his face.

An effective homilist, therefore, doesn’t go about ministry gathering examples to stash inside a preaching file. Rather, the homilist enters deeply into the Mystery—which *we have looked at and our hands have touched*—and beckons others to do the same.

¹ Dr. Susan McGurgan, April 15, 2007, www.mtsm.org.