

Connect the Sunday readings to the lives of the parishioners

Why turn the assembly into passive bystanders during the homily?

Amid cell phones ringing, video cams rolling, and ice cream melting under the Florida sun, a blood-spattered Jesus stumbles through the crowd on his way to Golgotha, where nasty Roman soldiers strip him, nail him to the cross, and crucify him—while perspiring tourists look on in Bermuda shorts. After the resurrection sequence, visitors applaud and line up for a photo op, not with Mickey or Minnie, but a disciple or a bloody-handed yet friendly centurion. Welcome to Orlando’s most unusual theme park, the Holy Land Experience.

(JOAN R. BRANHAM, *NEWSWEEK*, MAY 23, 2008)

It’s a shocking scene: Christ’s Crucifixion play—acted for tourists dressed in shorts and drenched in sunscreen. Yet, we know something of the disconcerting experience whenever we listen to a homily and ask: “What’s this have to do with my life?” Each time a preacher fails to weld the texts of Scripture to the lived experience of believers gathered in worship, a verbal version of the Orlando spectacle soon unfolds: Listeners turn into spectators, and would-be disciples strike a pose.

Active participation

In his book *Surviving the Sermon* (Crowley Publications), David Schlafer argues the point that preaching involves more listening than speaking. In addition to the texts of Scripture assigned for the day, the preacher listens to the life stories of men and women struggling to believe. The preacher hears the cries of confusion in hospitals, the angry outbursts in troubled marriages, the moral dilemmas in the marketplace, the bantering of adolescents, the chatter of children, and the worries of the elderly.

In Schlafer’s view, effective preaching weaves the sacred text into the lived context of the believer’s life; it articulates the concerns, questions, commitments, and joys of the entire faith community. Sometimes the preacher hears the cry of the psalmist, “How long, O Lord, will you hide your face?” Other times, the community joins in the song of Mary as she proclaims, “My soul magnifies the Lord! My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior!”

This means that the preacher learns to gaze through different windows when viewing the Sunday readings. In addition to analytical study of the texts themselves, appraisal of the context is also required.

What does a fast-food worker hear in the story about the feeding of the multitude?

How does the rancher relate to the story of the farmer building bigger silos?

How might Nathan’s vineyard prophecy affect the subdivision developer, the contractor, or a loan officer?

If the homily is to do more than drop kick a historical text into a modern-day setting, an ongoing interaction between listener and preacher needs to take place. Opportunities for listeners to share their vantage points on the gospel with the preacher must be encouraged and discussion formats and times arranged.

According to Schlafer, “The wider the perspectives that are invited into the preaching conversation, the healthier the community (and the preaching) is likely to be.”

Homily Excerpt: “Living stones” Comprise a Prison Wall

The Clark County Juvenile Detention Center is no summer camp. It is a prison—for girls too young to drive and boys too young to shave.

At its center is the control room. Its windows look out on four cell blocks. Inside, taped to the walls, are photographs of children, happy children. They stand in backyard swimming pools and in front of Christmas trees. They are, of course, the children of the staff.

Yet, in this setting, these snapshots are more than reminders of family back home. They’re reminders that each kid in the lock-up is someone’s child.

"That boy in the blue jumpsuit likes to shoot hoops...just like my son, Eric. And that girl, the one with the scratch on her face, her name's Hannah. Oh, by the way, here's a shot of my niece, Erica. She's a senior at Lakewood."

The effect is immediately apparent. Just a shift of the eye changes the stone of a prison wall into a wall of "living stone." Sometimes, all you need to see through a wall of stone is the smile of someone you love. The gospel itself confirms the message. "I am the Way," says Christ. "I am the way through the wall; through each and every wall."