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Prophetic preaching in South Africa: exploring some spaces of tension²

ABSTRACT

In this article a sermon that was preached during the height of the apartheid era by the well-known South African preacher and political activist, Allan Boesak, is re-evaluated, utilizing the Heidelberg Method of sermon analysis in conjunction with certain elements of the Grounded Theory Model and the administrative support of the Kwalitan Computer Program. The sermon represents an interesting reflection on the *South African context* at the time, as well as the *homiletic methodology* implemented by one of South Africa's most gifted preachers – indeed a brave effort to articulate the living voice of the gospel within this context. The analysis strives not only to reveal the *basic hermeneutic structure* of the sermon as it becomes apparent on a linguistic level, but also to offer a *theological interpretation*, specifically in terms of the God-images and ecclesiology that underline the preacher's efforts to address the South African context under apartheid. The sermon and analysis open up the possibility for a *retrospective reflection* on the question: did this form of prophetic preaching in fact serve the “living voice of the gospel” in a time of trial and transition?

1. THE ACOUSTIC SPACE OF VOICE

Allan Boesak can be described as one of the most gifted preachers that South Africa has ever produced – rhetorically, theologically, and especially prophetically.³ It has been said that “Allan Boesak belongs in the company of the great preachers of the Christian church, who have found in Jesus of Nazareth the authentic voice of Moses and the Prophets, and in Paul of Tarsus and John of Patmos formative hearers and doers of that voice. The voice of Boesak is a contemporary voice, joining in a single chorus of affirmation that ‘the Word of God is that which strikes the conscience!’”⁴

In this article we endeavour to re-hear this “authentic ... contemporary voice”, through listening to one of Boesak's own sermons.⁵ Boesak's sermons can indeed be described as “prophetical”,

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3 Cf. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 92. Tisdale refers to people like Allan Boesak, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King Jr., and others as people who put their lives on the line for what they believed in.

4 Paul Lehmann, “Foreword”, in: Allan Boesak, *The Finger of God. Sermons on Faith and Responsibility*. Translated from Afrikaans by Peter Randall (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979), ix.

5 “Jesus Christ Frees ... and Divides” In: Boesak, *The Finger of God*, 76-81. The complete sermon is attached as an addendum. Direct quotations from the sermon are in bold. In some instances, I also compare Boesak's homiletic theory, as reflected in the preface to this compendium of sermons, to the sermon as such.

or, in his own words, as “situational”⁶ His brief definition of preaching states: “Preaching is the proclamation of the gospel in a language that can be understood by persons in a specific situation.”⁷ These keywords – prophetic and situational – fit in well with the notion of “voice”, which carries within itself the promise of a (prophetic, situational) *event*.⁸

A voice contains a personal element; the speaker creates an *acoustic space* that helps to express his or her identity.⁹ In fact, one can even say that if we do not hear another person’s voice, true communication with that person, is usually impossible – or at least affected.¹⁰ For example, reading a letter is not the same as personally meeting the writer when one can hear his or her voice.¹¹ When one speaks of a voice, one normally has sound and hearing in mind, and when one has sound and hearing in mind, it usually also implies acoustics.¹²

Preaching, in my opinion, communicates more than mere information about God to others; it is the *performance of God’s voice* through historical distances, the mists of incomprehension and deafness of ears – it is, as the classic advertisement stated, all about “hearing his Master’s voice”.¹³ A sermon is much more than the transfer of religious information, also much more than mere words on a written manuscript. It rather is a word event and a Word event, the sound of a voice, non-recurrent and unique. In fact, sermons cannot be repeated, nor be re-preached, because God’s voice is not static, not fixed in time and place, but historical, contingent, living and redeeming. Sermons are more than concepts or truths on paper, no matter how exegetical or dogmatically correct they may be. They are words that need to be re-grouped and re-tuned acoustically (i.e. in terms of *hearing*) by the Spirit to become a voice that articulates the Word of God.¹⁴

6 “What is true for theology is true for preaching: it is situational.” Boesak, *The Finger of God*, 7.

Obviously, prophetic preaching can be described in various ways, also linked to cultural settings.

According to Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, prophetic preaching reminds us of at least the following: the fact that God is compassionate, not deserting that which God has created; that God has made certain promises, expressing God’s enduring faithfulness; and that there are alternative manifestations of God’s inbreaking new world that can be discerned even in our darkest moments. Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, “God’s Word in the World: Prophetic Preaching and the Gospel of Jesus Christ”, in *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation Between Pulpit, Pew & Bible*, ed. David B. Greiser and Michael A. King (Telford, PA: Cascading Publishing House, 2003), 84-91.

7 Boesak, *The Finger of God*, 7.

8 Cf. John D Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1; A wide semantic field evolves around the Afrikaans word stem (voice), with concepts such as: instemming (concurrence), eenstemmigheid (unanimity), stemreg (the right to vote), stemloos (voiceless), buite stemming bly (refrain from voting), om stemming te skep (to create an atmosphere), stemmingsvol (full of atmosphere), stemmig (subdued), etc. These concepts all underline the fact that the voice is a living phenomenon – more than words or concepts on paper. Cf. Johan Cilliers, *The living voice of the gospel: Re-visiting the basic principles of preaching* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2004), 31 ff.

9 Cf. Cilliers, *The living voice of the gospel*, 35; also C Möller, *Der Hörer als zweiter Prediger. Zur Bedeutung der Rezeptionsästhetik für die Homiletik* (in *Predigen aus Leidenschaft*) (Karlsruhe: Verlag Evangelischer Presseverband für Baden e. V, 1996), 33-36.

10 This does not exclude, for instance, deaf people from true communication. However, the rule is that the component audio- forms one of the basic points of departure in human communication.

11 This of course also underlines the limitations of a paper like this – trying to re-hear a sermon preached more than three decades ago!

12 An interesting challenge to this point of departure would be a painting like the famous artwork by Edvard Munch, titled *The Scream*. There is no sound, but the visual depiction is so strong that one actually can “hear” the sound in the mind’s ear, so to speak. In the painting, however, it is not the living voice of hope that one “hears”, but rather the anguished cry of despair and death.

13 Advertisement for a gramophone and gramophone records.

14 Cf. Cilliers, *The living voice of the gospel*, 35. This notion of the acoustic, i.e. *hearing*, does not exclude

This re-grouping and re-tuning of words finds its voice within, but also creates, certain *spaces of tension*. One can say: *the living voice of the gospel becomes audible within certain spaces of tension*. Boesak is acutely aware of this. Speaking about the authenticity of the preacher, he says: "Authenticity lies in the correct combination of exposition of the word, sensitivity to the situation of the congregation, and the inner conviction resulting from a personal experience of God's liberation in the life of the preacher."¹⁵ At least three tensions are implied here: the tension caused by the situation (context); the tension arising from the historicity of the biblical text; and the tension generated by the experience of the preacher. In this article, I add two more spaces of tension, namely those of God-images and ecclesiology.¹⁶

The sermon in question was preached during the late 70's – a time of socio-political turmoil in South Africa as seldom experienced before. The tension of this catastrophic phase of South African history forms the contextual background of the whole sermon. The details of this period need not be repeated here;¹⁷ suffice to say that the country was balanced on a knife-edge, with a full scale civil war and unimaginable bloodshed a real possibility. If ever there was a time when the "living voice of the gospel" needed to be heard, it was then. We are reminded of Bonhoeffer who declared that although life should not be overburdened with the ethical in a pathological manner, there may come times when this very life is threatened to such an extent that the church, if it wishes to retain its integrity, has no other alternative

communication via the other senses. Rather it acts as metaphor for a comprehensive, multi-sensory "observation" of reality. According to Bohren, our senses are actually connected much more closely than we can ever imagine: For instance, we also 'see' with our ears, and 'hear' with our eyes. On this interaction of the senses, this "engen Verknüpfung von Hören und Sehen", he says: "Was ich höre, stelle ich mir vor, und das heisst doch, dass ich auch mit den Augen höre." [Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre* (München: Kaiser, 1980), 268.] In this regard, also see Ola Sigurdson's comments: "As we all know, in the Christian church, different senses have been regarded as the theologically most noble sense during different historical periods: vision in Orthodox Christianity, audition in Protestantism. But this hierarchy needs to be critically studied, since one could suspect that some of the theoretical accounts might be quite different from the established practices in the same historical period. But this is not the only reason for a theology of the senses. As theology often has realized in passing, our senses are ways of relating towards each other and towards God, and as there are different manners of looking, listening, touching and so on, there is need of a more systematic investigation into the theological and/or philosophical implications of the different way of sensing." [Ola Sigurdson, "How to Speak of the Body? Embodiment between Phenomenology and Theology", *Studia Theologica: Nordic Journal of Theology* 62, no 1 (2008):41.]

¹⁵ Boesak, *The Finger of God*, 15.

¹⁶ These will be discussed in more detail in the analysis. Obviously more "spaces of tension" could be mentioned here. Cf. Johan Cilliers, *Soos Woorde van God: Ontwerp van 'n Preekanalitiese Model*. (Stellenbosch: Ongepubliseerde DTh Proefskrif, 1982), 100-133.

¹⁷ For an extensive discussion, cf. CFJ Müller (red), *Vyfhonderd jaar Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis* (Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 1980), 510-520. The period 1960 to 1980 was, on the one hand, characterized by post-war prosperity among a large part of the white population, and, on the other hand, by a growing relational problem and alienation among the various population groups. In this respect, the events at Sharpeville (1960) formed a type of watershed, and focused the world's attention on South Africa, with increasing foreign isolation, sanctions, and internal unrest and violence. South Africa's subsequent withdrawal from the Commonwealth (May 1961) caused its greatest economic crisis since the depression of 1930 to 1932. A combination of political, economic and social factors escalated into another watershed moment for South Africa, with the youth taking to the streets in the Soweto-uprising of 1976, resulting in a governmental clamp-down, called the "state of emergency". All of this eventually led to the release of Nelson Mandela, resulting in the first democratic general elections on 27 April 1994, which were described by many as "nothing short of a miracle". Time and space constraints do not allow me to describe the momentous events leading up to this breakthrough in detail. For an overview of this period, cf. H Gilliomme; B Mbenga, *New History of South Africa* (Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 2007), 330ff.

but to proclaim the gospel as law for the hour.¹⁸ This was clearly such a time, such a *kairos*, in South African history.¹⁹

It is within this space of almost unbearable tension, this “situation”, that Boesak the preacher steps in and opens his mouth.²⁰ He does this, well knowing that he puts his life on the line. In his reflections on the act of preaching, he states: “The white government of South Africa has a vast array of oppressive laws that have an intimidating effect on the preacher. A sermon that is too clear may land the preacher in the hands of the dreaded security police, because such a sermon could, within the definition of the law, be anything from ‘instigation’ to ‘terrorism.’ To preach the word of God relevantly in South Africa is to walk through a minefield – blindfolded.”²¹ Boesak himself knew this from own experience – a member of the security police pointed a gun at his head after one of his so-called “political sermons.”²² The broad coordinating system within which this sermon can be placed is indeed the experience of threat on the one hand, and the intention to preach the gospel “in a language that can be understood by persons in a specific situation”²³ on the other hand.

In what follows I offer an analysis of this sermon, utilising the Heidelberg Method,²⁴ combined

18 D Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 66f.

19 Many South Africans would say that we are in fact experiencing another such a *kairos* at present.

20 The theological tradition within which Boesak stands, is Reformed, with a strong affinity with Calvin in particular. Cf. Boesak’s comments on “Reformed Christians”, who “ought to know better”. Boesak, *The Finger of God*, 14.

21 Boesak, *The Finger of God*, 5-6.

22 Narrated to the author of this paper in a personal conversation.

23 Boesak, *The Finger of God*, 7.

24 Briefly, the Heidelberg Method can be described as: the method originated from research done by homiletic study groups at the Practical Theological Seminary of the Karl Rupprecht University of Heidelberg, Germany, during the late 1970s. After the theoretical basis was formulated, it was published for the first time at an international symposium on preaching held in Heidelberg on 8-12 October 1986. Here the Swiss practical theologian Rudolf Bohren, the German author Gerd Debus, and others shared their experiences in applying this method with a broader homiletically community. Generally speaking it can be called an intra-textual approach, which intends, by means of a “close reading” of sermons, and by implementing rhetorical and theological criteria, to interpret the Word of God in, and often against, the preached Word. Simply put, it asks: to what extent does the preached Word articulate the Word of God? Or in the definition of Bullinger: is the preached Word of God indeed the Word of God (*predicatio dei est verbum dei*)? As an analytical method it naturally represents a framework of interpretation. Its intention is therefore not to be the final word on specific sermons, but rather to open up dialogue concerning these sermons. It wishes to serve the maturing of preachers and congregations, the latter to its full stature as complete church (*ecclesia completa*), a church that has both the ability and right to judge the preached Word (Luther). It therefore literally takes preachers at their word(s), trying to truly understand them, sometimes even to the point of understanding them better than they understood themselves; trying to grasp the pivotal and often subconscious hermeneutical decisions which underlie their sermons. In doing this, the most basic questions are asked, such as: How is the biblical text implemented in the sermon? What role does the preacher play? And, of specific importance for this paper: What (kind of) God is pictured in the sermon? And: What congregation is presupposed and/or invoked? Cf. R Bohren, KP Jörns, *Die Predigtanalyse als Weg zur Predigt* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1989), 55-61. There are of course also other methods of sermon analysis, for instance the Heidelberg model with the use of the Kwalitan computer program; the hermeneutical model developed by Vaessen; the model for researching the sermon as a Word of God by Stark; the combination of the Heidelberg model and Stark’s model by De Klerk, De Wet and Letsosa; and the grounded theory model for inductive analysis of sermons in order to develop a theory from the data. For an overview of these approaches cf. HJC Pieterse, “Die Keuse van ‘n model vir inhoudsanalise van preke oor armoede en aan armes as hoorders.” In *die Skriflig*. (2010), Vol 44 No 2, 1-16. As indicated, I utilized a combination of the Heidelberg Method, the Ground Theory Model, and the

with certain elements of the Grounded Theory Model²⁵ and the administrative support of the Kwalitan Computer Programme.²⁶ The Kwalitan Computer Programme was initially used to identify certain key concepts in the sermon text. The Grounded Theory Model offers an inductive methodology that helps us to group key words and phrases that occur throughout the sermon together as categories, binding it together as a communicative unity. The Heidelberg method aims, *inter alia*, to disclose the *fundamental hermeneutic structures* of sermons. In the following analysis I will focus²⁷ on this, while also venturing a *theological interpretation*. The combination of these methods – all of which have been used within the South African context before²⁸ – seems most adequate to address both the empirical reality of the sermon, as well as offering possibilities for a hermeneutical and theological reflection. The methodological procedure was therefore one of data collection and selection; observation and interpretation, and (theological) reflection.²⁹

It is important to keep in mind, however, that this analysis does not pretend to be the final word on this sermon.³⁰ On the contrary, it intends to open up a provisional and experimental space within which the on-going discussion about “the living voice of the gospel” can be served.

We now turn our attention to the analysis of the sermon.

Kwalitan Computer Program in this article.

25 According to Pieterse “the process of grounded theory analysis of sermons develops in a bottom-up approach in three cycles: (1) open coding as an inductive exercise, initial identifying of categories and the development of an open coding analytical model; (2) selective coding that is a deductive exercise in which sermons are selectively chosen for analysis on the basis of the hypotheses that are developed in the open coding analytical model; (3) theoretical coding and the construction of a theory of preaching on the theme of the analysis. Open coding is an inductive analysis of what the preacher says, teaches, admonishes, appeals, etc. in the segments and is coded in short sentences. The idea is to move from the code as a linguistic designator to concepts in the sense that the codes are treated as indicators for larger conceptual categories.” Cf. HJC Pieterse, “An Open Coding Analytical Model of Sermons on Poverty with Matthew 25:31-46 as Sermon Text” In: *Acta Theologica* (2011), 31/1, 95-112; also T Pleizier, Religious involvement in hearing sermons. A Grounded Theory study in empirical theology and homiletics (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010), 113. In this article I restrict myself to the first cycle, i.e. that of open coding.

26 This programme enables researchers to acquire qualitative data from written texts, for instance in the form of keywords, codes, categories of codes, etc. Website: www.kwalitan.nl/english. For an example of how this programme was used in the South African context, cf. HJC Pieterse (Ed), *Desmond Tutu's Message: A Qualitative Analysis* (Köln: Brill, 2001), 112f.

27 This implies that not every sentence and/or word of the sermon is necessarily reflected in the analysis. Obviously the preacher also says some other moving and noteworthy things, but insofar as they do not impact on the basic hermeneutic structure, they are not mentioned or analysed.

28 Cf. for instance Johan Cilliers, *God for Us? An Analysis and Assessment of Dutch Reformed Preaching during the Apartheid Years* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2006); HJC Pieterse (Ed), *Desmond Tutu's Message: A Qualitative Analysis* (Köln: Brill, 2001); HJC Pieterse, “An Open Coding Analytical Model of Sermons on Poverty with Matthew 25:31-46 as Sermon Text” In: *Acta Theologica* (2011), 31/1, 95-112.

29 Cf. Pieterse, *Desmond Tutu's Message*, 113.

30 This analysis therefore does not profess to represent an exact image statistically of all (reformed) preaching from this time. But it can indeed say: preaching was also done like this. Naturally, there were other voices that expressed the “situation” completely differently. There were also “reformed” sermons – perhaps the majority – that made no mention of the situation.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1 Primary and secondary codes

A close scrutiny of the sermon following the notion of *open coding* reveals the following most often repeated phrases – grouped underneath as the *core code*, with *secondary-codes*. The core code indicates the dynamic key concept – mostly found in the form of a *verb*, in accordance with the definition of preaching as an *event* – on which the basic structure of the sermon in fact hinges. The core code (not necessarily inferred from the number of repetitions) appears at certain key moments in the sermon; the secondary codes are connected to and dependant on this core code.

Core code:

- Jesus/God/humans come (10); are in movement (4)

Secondary codes:

- Jesus/God/humans *decide/choose* (19)
- Jesus/God/humans *divide* (8)
- Jesus/God/humans long for *peace* (36)
- Really/real/reality (8) – used mostly as *emphasis*

We now take a closer, analytical look at these different codes.

2.2 “The coming of Jesus ...”

The very first sentence of the sermon sheds an interesting light on the preacher’s understanding of the *coming of Jesus* (the core code): **“The coming of Jesus the Messiah is a sign of great decisions.”** (paragraph 1) Three observations are of importance here, as they also have an impact on the unfolding of the rest of the sermon – in a sense, this first sentence contains the whole sermon, *in nuce*; the core code sets up the rest of the sermon.

Firstly, it is interesting to note that the preacher uses the nominalisation of the verb (**“The coming of ...”**), and not the active, indicative form (“Jesus comes ...”). One could say: this nominalisation of the verb represents a type of general description of “the coming of Jesus”; not so much as a performative articulation of this coming. The “coming of Jesus” is still historically abstract, not revealing *how* and *when* Jesus comes, at least in South Africa, today.³¹

The second observation concerns another important word in this first sentence, namely the word **“is”**. “Is” is the present tense, here pregnant with meaning. It actually means: so it is, and so it must be. Or, in theological terms: “is” contains and combines the indicative and the imperative. The first part of the sermon strives to proclaim the “coming of Jesus”, the how and when thereof, in clear indicative terms, by referring to a number of biblical instances, which the preacher defines as God’s **“liberation movement”**, and **“movement of freedom”**.

³¹ “Today” here means South Africa during 1979.

(paragraphs 4, 8). But the potential for the imperative – which is strongly emphasised later on in the sermon, is also already implanted in the word “is”.

Thirdly, the potential for emphasising the imperative is furthermore enhanced in the way that the preacher slightly adjusts the biblical text that he uses as basis for his sermon in this first sentence.³² The text articulates the words of Jesus: “I have come to bring division”; the preacher speaks of **“decisions”**. This secondary code is repeated 19 times throughout the sermon, and the first sentence already indicates the preacher’s intent: to call upon his hearers to *decide*, to *choose*. Although he does use the term “division” – another secondary code, found 8 times – which underlines the idea that God initiates this action, the notion of “decision” offers a better platform to speak about human responsibility and even “capacity” later on in the sermon (cf. paragraph 10). It is also interesting to note that the first sentence is in the form of an *impersonal construction* – “a sign of great decisions” – without revealing who in fact *makes* these decisions.

This brings us to a second occurrence of the core code.

2.3 “When Jesus comes ...”

Now the preacher no longer speaks of **“The coming of Jesus”** in a nominalised construction, but he prefers the verbalised form: **“When Jesus comes ...”** (paragraph 9). This seems like a step towards answering the question that was evoked by the first sentence of the sermon: how and when does the “coming of Jesus” in fact take place in South Africa, today? But it is interesting to note that the preacher – rhetorically gifted as he is – does not answer this question, at least not at this stage of his sermon. He keeps the suspense going. The *conditional terms* of the how and when remain open.

But the preacher in fact does *prepare the ground* for answering this question carefully and rhetorically. It is significant to see that the imperative is used quite emphatically in the section following this **“When Jesus comes ...”** One could say that the potential for the imperative that was given in the first sentence of the sermon now comes to fuller fruition. Now “is” does

³² It is not possible to do an extensive *exegetical reading of the biblical text and/or pericope* within the limitations of this article. The following broad strokes are however relevant for the *analysis of the sermon text*: Firstly, the pericope from which the sermon text is taken, forms part of the narrative of Jesus’ *journey to Jerusalem* (starting in 9:21), and his *escalating contrast to and conflict with the Pharisees and Lawyers* (cf. 11:37-54). The text that the preacher uses as basis for his sermon is furthermore part of the segment that calls for a *preparation for the coming judgement* (12:1-13:9), and is followed by an extended segment about reversals now and to come (13:10-14:35). Secondly, the pericope is drenched in Old Testament language and symbolism. For instance the fire here denotes *God’s intention* to purify God’s people in *God’s time*. For this purpose Jesus also came to the earth – to realize *God’s kairos*. Thus Jesus does not stand as fiery Judge over against the world – He himself will be judged, will be immersed in fire. He knows and expects this, but awaits *God’s timing* of this (eschatological) event. Thirdly, it is important to note that it is not clear *how Jesus is to be seen to be initiating this conflagration*. The reader is rather left with puzzling, paradoxical speech, e.g. the apparent clash between “fire” and “peace”. *Nowhere, however, is it expected of the church – or followers of Jesus – to initiate the how and when of God’s kairos in Jesus*. It remains an eschatological, and in this sense, also Christological event. For good overviews of this pericope, cf. SJ Patterson, “Fire and Dissension: Ipsissima Vox Jesus in Q 12:49, 51-53?” *Forum* 5.2 (1989), 121-139; P Sellw, “Reconstruction of Q 12:33-59.” In *SBL Seminar Papers* 1987, ed. KH Richards (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1987), 617-668; A Vögtle, “Todesankündigung und Todesverständnis Jesu.” In *Der Tod Jesu: Deutungen im Neuen Testament*, ed. K Kertelge (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 51-113; J Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 35b: Luke 9:21-18:34* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1998), 131f.

in fact mean “should be”; now “decisions” should in fact be made. But all of these imperatives are still taken as examples from biblical incidents, i.e. they are not at this stage of the sermon directed at hearers in South Africa, today.

Many examples of this emphasised imperative can be pointed out in this section, perhaps culminating in: **“He demands of his followers faithful obedience and total trust; he demands of them the capacity to take up their cross ... ”** (paragraph 10). These imperatives are surrounded by strong words, like **“painful and controversial tension”; “confrontation”; “collision”; “radicality”; “division”; “radical”; “more radicalized”**, etc. (paragraphs 9, 10, 12),

This paves the way for the third nuance of the core code.

2.4 “ ... the real division still has to come!”

The preacher now starts to shift his attention to the hearers in South Africa, today. In a bridging paragraph, he speaks of Christ’s hold on **“our lives”**, about the fact that **“he has the last word over my life, that he rules over my total being – that makes it so difficult for us ... ”** (paragraph 12). For the first time we hear “our”, “my” and “us”. Then comes the bridging word – we often find variants of these in sermons – linking the first part of the sermon with that which is to follow: **“Therefore ... ”** (paragraph 13).

Again, the emphases catch the eye. The word “really” – another secondary code in the sermon, repeated 8 times in different forms – comes to the fore. But what is even more significant in this turning towards the hearers in South Africa, today, is the change in verbal tense. While the present tense was used predominantly in the first part of the sermon, inter alia to express the **“reality”** brought about by “the coming of Jesus” (paragraph 2), the future tense now takes over, strengthened by the use of emphasis. Now we hear: **“The real issue has still to come!”**, and: **“No, the real division has still to come!”** (paragraph 13, 14).

One could say: the reality of the peace that Jesus has brought, referred to in the first part of the sermon, and expounded in the closing section of the sermon, becomes the peace that Jesus will still bring – in the future, when certain conditions are met. The future coming of division places peace – another secondary code (repeated 36 times) – on hold.

It would seem that even the God-image of the preacher changes, or is at least affected by, this transformation of tense. In the first part of the sermon he stated that through God’s decision for the world **“old forms are affected in their innermost core”** (paragraph 2); in this section we hear: **“God is not yet even in this picture ... ”** (paragraph 14).

This prompts an array of questions: how then must or can God be brought (back?) into the picture? How can peace become “real”? What conditions must be met to activate the *when* and *how* of “the coming of Jesus” and “when Jesus comes” and the “real issue that still has to come”?

These questions lead to the fourth articulation of the core code offered by the preacher.

2.5 “When Christians really take Jesus seriously, then his fire and sword will become apparent”

Because “real” division (and consequently “real” peace) lies in the future, the hearers of South Africa, today (**“Christians in this country”**), are called up with the imperative to **“really take**

Jesus and the demands of the gospel seriously". "When" this happens "then it will be seen how dissension will really tear South Africa in two" (paragraph 15). Linguistically speaking, this emphasis means: only the "real" seriousness of Christians will or can lead to "real" division, i.e. the "real" gospel. The condition is clear: "when ... then".

With this unfolding of the core code of the sermon, the potential for imperative, already found in embryonic form in the first sentence of the sermon, reaches its rhetorical climax. At least on a linguistic level, this structure means that the "coming of Jesus" is now determined by the "real" seriousness of Christians. "Coming" becomes "becoming" – through the "**faithful obedience and total trust**" of the followers of Jesus, as well as the "**capacity to take up their cross**", (paragraph 10) as the preacher stated earlier in the sermon. The immediate relevance and reality of the Messiah now becomes a mediated relevance and reality; "the coming of Jesus" becomes dependant on temporality and human timing – "when" they are serious. We noted that the preacher used an *impersonal construction* in the first sentence of the sermon – "a sign of great decisions" – without revealing who in fact *makes* these decisions. Now, this impersonal construction is dissolved in the ecclesiological imperative: "When Christians ... "

This structure determines the rest of the sermon, or at least throws its shadow over it. The preacher for instance states: "And the decision of those who go with him through the fire will bring division" (paragraph 16). We are again reminded of the preacher's use of "decision" in the first sentence of the sermon, instead of division (as in the bible text). In this instance the division that Jesus brings, does not lead to our decisions, our decisions rather lead to divisions. Here the continuity of the "liberation movement" of the Messiah through history becomes the chain reaction of momentary "decisions" of serious Christians in history. No longer does Jesus make peace with us – we "now have to make peace with him ... " (paragraph 23).

3. RETROSPECTIVE REFLECTION

It is clear that the sermon represents a brave effort to confront the status quo, and preach against the powers that be. It could justifiably be called *prophetic preaching that strives to address a concrete situation* – in accordance with Boesak's own understanding of preaching. He articulates his aversion of pietistic traditions and preaching in the church in no unclear terms, stating that "this kind of theology is often the handmaid of authoritarian structures that preserve the status quo within the church, with the result that the church is being held back to an era that has irrevocably passed."³³ For Boesak, the gospel – and preaching – is about *this* world, not an "other-worldly theology".³⁴ In my opinion, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, to a certain extent, we still suffer from such forms of theology and preaching in South Africa, and perhaps even more so than before. We still need a prophetic voice that challenges this pietistic, "other-worldly" trend. For this, the sermon of Boesak gives valuable food for thought.

Obviously, prophetic preaching can be described in various ways, also linked to cultural settings. According to Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, prophetic preaching reminds us of at least the following: the fact that God is compassionate, not deserting that which God has created; that God has made certain promises, expressing God's enduring faithfulness; and that there are alternatives manifestations of God's inbreaking new world, to be discerned even in our darkest

³³ Boesak, *The Finger of God*, 5.

³⁴ Boesak, *The Finger of God*, 4-5.

moments.³⁵ Looking back at Boesak's sermon as an example of a "living voice" during the time of apartheid, how could or should we then evaluate it? I venture a few brief comments – using Ottoni-Wilhelm's understanding of prophetic preaching as broad parameters:

Firstly, it would seem fair to state that the preacher's hermeneutic structure is decisively influenced by his experiences under apartheid. For him, the situation under the apartheid government is so bleak and dangerous, so godless, that he interprets it in exactly this way: God-less, Jesus being not-in-the-picture. This then becomes his intention with his sermon: to bring God back into the picture, and the way to achieve this is by calling on the Christians in South Africa to act in such a manner that God can again be (experienced as) present in the South African situation. One could ask whether this intention does not open up one of the most profound spaces of tension to be found or created in any form of preaching – the presence of God's absence, and the absence of God's presence.³⁶ Or, in other words: of God being present – God is compassionate, not deserting that which God has created (Ottoni-Wilhelm) – and yet being (experienced as) elusive, as "not being in the picture". The "situation" under apartheid seems to have radicalised this fundamental space of tension – forcing Boesak to opt for the latter (God not being in the picture).

Secondly, it is clear that Boesak calls upon his listeners to act in a certain way with an eye to the future. He expects divisions and confrontations as a direct result of the earnest obedience of Christians in South Africa; he even foresees a chaotic future and suggests that the present is but an introduction to the greater crises which loom over South Africa – the "real issues" are still to come. Boesak's sermon hopes to call forth the future, so that the status quo can be shattered – in contrast to "the silence that some want the church to maintain on these issues (which) means that they are affirming the status quo."³⁷ In Boesak's sermon there is a search for what does not yet exist, namely true Christianity – when people will "really" be earnest and "radically" obedient.

Perhaps the conviction that underpins this stress on the future can be connected to Boesak's understanding of God's promises. According to Ottoni-Wilhelm God has made certain promises, expressing God's enduring faithfulness. This brings us to another profound space of tension within Boesak's prophetic preaching – that of the future of the presence, and the presence of the future.³⁸ Obviously the future by implication means "not now" – the future is the future – but this is often misunderstood as an experience of time exclusively related to a *futurum*, i.e. an attitude or mentality that somehow bypasses the present in its eagerness for the future. In the New Testament sense of the word, *advent* indicates a close connection between the saving presence of Christ who has already come and the future. The future is more about *adventus* (the coming of the present One), than it is about *futurum*.³⁹ Once again, it seems that the "situation" under apartheid has radicalised this fundamental space of tension – tempting Boesak to favour the latter (the *futurum*).

Thirdly, the basic intention of the sermon also has far-reaching implications for the ecclesiology implemented by the preacher. Boesak clearly expects much from his listeners. In a certain

³⁵ Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, *God's Word in the World*, 84-91.

³⁶ Cf. Johan Cilliers, "The absence of presence: Homiletical reflections on Martin Luther's notion of the masks of God (*larvae dei*).", *Acta Theologica* (2010) 30/2, 36-49.

³⁷ Boesak, *The Finger of God*, 11.

³⁸ Cf. Johan Cilliers, "Time out. Perspectives on liturgical temporality." NGTT. (2009) 50 (1 and 2): 26-35.

³⁹ Jürgen Moltmann has written extensively on this topic. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *Geloof in de toekomst* (Utrecht: Amboboeken, 1969), 177-178.

sense, the future is made dependant on the actions of Christians in the present, even to the point where “the coming of Jesus” flows forth from the chain of decisions made by Christians in South Africa. In this process Christology functions in an exemplary manner: Christ is the great and ultimate example of how Christians should make their decisions in the present; He is the culmination of a series of acts of God, but also the main Player in the Christians’ history of decision-making. In effect, Christ is shifted out to the future, and Christians are called upon to move towards this future by means of their devout “seriousness”.

This confronts us with yet another profound space of tension – that of *Christ in the Church, and the Church in Christ*. On the one hand, there is truth in what Boesak propagates. In a certain sense it *is* true that Christ is present in this world in the form, and through the mediation of, the church. We are reminded of Bonhoeffer’s “definition” of the church as: “*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*”.⁴⁰ This means: Christ exists in this world *as* church. And furthermore: the world (or, in this case: South Africa), will see Christ through the (devout and earnest) actions of the church. Christ *is* in the Church. But does this mean that the Church is (always) in Christ? That our hope of seeing and experiencing Christ and his peace is (always) dependant on the Church? Can the *adventus* of the Messiah (the coming of the present One) only be found in the serious devotion of Christians? Or, again in the words of Ottoni-Wilhelm: does the Church offer the only viable alternative of God’s inbreaking new world, to be discerned even in our darkest moments? It would seem, once again, that the situation under apartheid has radicalised this space of tension – causing Boesak to proclaim the latter (the serious devotion of Christians being the alternative).

So, the sermon of Boesak, preached in the late 70’s, prompts us to rethink certain spaces of tension when preaching. It reminds us that the living voice of the gospel is heard within the tension of – amongst others – these spaces: the presence (or absence) of God; the presence (or absence) of the future; and the presence (or absence) of Christ in the Church.

In conclusion, at least this critical question must linger: is the “coming of Jesus” indeed dependant on the “real seriousness” of Christians, and their “capacity” to take up the cross? If that is the case, South Africa is in trouble again, today (2012). “Really seriously” in trouble.

ADDENDUM

Jesus Christ frees ... and divides

Do you suppose I came to establish peace on earth? No indeed, I have come to bring division (Lk. 12:51, NEB).

The coming of Jesus the Messiah is a sign of great decisions. The introduction to the Gospel of John makes this clear from the very beginning: this event – his coming – is something extraordinary, because here indeed is the revelation of “the Father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14, NEB).

In Jesus the Father makes an incomparable and unrepeatable decision for his world and for his people. Through this decision old forms are affected in their innermost core, and the disorderly “order” of this world is totally overturned and made unstable. The Messiah brings a new understanding, and a new (because changed) reality.

⁴⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological study of the Sociology of the Church*. Translated by Reinhard Kraus and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1998), 92.

God's decision for a changed world sets humankind before a similar decision.

God's decision about Jesus' coming forces humankind and the world into movement, because the decision is a powerful continuation of the liberation movement that he began with his people when he led them out of slavery in Egypt. And just as it was impossible for the pharaoh and the Israelites to withdraw from this movement inaugurated by God, so it was impossible for persons to withdraw themselves from Jesus of Nazareth.

Time and again Israel was confronted by God and faced the decision whether they wished to go further with him. Every time the choice had to be made anew: either further *with* God in faith to his promised land, or back to the reassurance of the fleshpots of Egypt. And later, when God had led them into the promised land, it was to be the same again. Then the choice was to be between Yahweh, the Living One, the Only One, and the idols; between trust in Yahweh and the temptation to follow Baal.

And each time this decision held the deepest repercussions for the people. And each time it brought dissension and division. So it was when Moses came down from the mountain and had to see how his people, while he was on the mountain struggling with God on their behalf, had begun to exchange, under the leadership of his brother Aaron, worship of God for worship of the golden calf. And then, once again, the challenge had to come: Moses "took his place at the gate of the camp and said, 'Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me'" (Ex. 32:26, NEB).

So it was also when Elijah threw down the challenge to the prophets of Baal and thus also (how could it be otherwise?) to those who wished to be the people of God. How deep this decision cuts each time: "How long will you sit on the fence? If the Lord is God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21, NEB).

This is the same God who in the same movement of freedom throughout history calls persons, in his decision to give his Son, in his choice for humankind, to make their own decision and choice.

When Jesus comes, he brings a painful and controversial tension. Inevitably he causes confrontation with tradition, with powers, with persons. He comes into collision with sinful attitudes, wrong structures, and vested interests. When his parents brought him to the temple and sacrificed two turtledoves, Simeon prophesied: "Many in Israel will fall and rise again because of him" (Lk. 2:34, NEB).

Confrontation with this Jesus makes it impossible for "the ordinary life" to run its normal course. His radicality with respect to the law, the Torah, the attitude of the Pharisees and the scribes, bring him into conflict with tradition. His majestic association with the poor and the oppressed, with harlots and tax collectors, causes division among the people. His followers worship him as Lord and thus come into collision with the Roman state and the idolatrous emperor. He demands of his followers faithful obedience and total trust; he demands of them the capacity to take up their cross, to regard everything else of lesser importance, and to follow him. Father and mother, brother and sister, husband or wife, are no longer all-important to his followers. Even the preservation of life is given a different, radical perspective by him:

If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind: day after day he must take up his cross, and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake, that man is safe (Lk. 9:23-24, NEB).

His hold on our lives is so total that all other human relationships have to be seen in another light. The word of the Torah, "There is no other god besides me...", becomes yet more radicalized in Jesus. and it is this fact that Jesus Christ is king, that *he* has the last word over my life, that he rules over my total being – that makes it so difficult for us, and brings division and fire in its wake.

Therefore the division caused among us South Africans by "the enlightened" and "the closed-minded", and the dissension brought about in the churches by the Koot Vorsters and the Beyers Naudés⁴¹ (think, for example, of the battle over sports policies) – all this is really nothing. The real issue has still to come!

In the squabbling about sports policies Dr. Vorster is of course correct when he says that sports must not become an idol. This is a very great danger in South Africa. But what is his alternative? The idol of ethnic identity? The purity of the volk? How many bloody sacrifices have already been laid on its altar in our history? God is not yet even in this picture and the issues are not yet really important. No, the real division has still to come!

When Christians in this country really take Jesus Christ and the demands of the gospel seriously, then his fire and his sword will become apparent. Then it will be seen how dissension will really tear South Africa in two. But then at least it will be for something, for in the Bible the fire of which Jesus speaks is always a sign of purification. The fire separates the pure from the impure, and tests for what is lasting. Jesus says: "I have come to set fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Lk. 12:49, NEB).

He knows that he will have to go through this fire himself. He knows that he will not escape the testing and the purification, and "What constraint I am under until the ordeal is over!" (vs. 50). And the decision of those who go with him through the fire will bring division. Verse 51 can perhaps best be translated: "No peace, nothing but division." This shows how radical is this choice, how deeply it cuts, how final it is.

But how can Jesus say these things? What about the angels' message on the night of his birth? What of the song about peace on earth? What of the promise that his kingdom will be one of peace? Is there a contradiction here?

No, Jesus is not denying the angels' song. His critical words here apply to another kind of peace, the peace that is proclaimed and sung about when in reality there is no peace and there can be no peace. Just like Jeremiah in his time, so Jesus has no patience with the slippery merchants of piety who barter away genuine peace at the clerical market and try to palm off artificial products on the assembly of the Lord. Jesus desires a peace that is authentic. Not the sort of peace in which differences are patched over, sins are concealed, and irreconcilables are reconciled.

Jesus speaks of peace as the Old Testament understands it: God's longing that *shalom* should prevail on the earth. *Shalom* is the wish that things may go well with others. It is concern for the welfare of one's fellow beings. It is a sign of solidarity, of commitment to one another, of

⁴¹ Dr. Koot Vorster was for many years the most famous leader of the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. He was an unbending, articulate spokesman for, and symbol of, the extreme right in Afrikanerdom. Dr. Beyers Naudé was also an Afrikaner, and once a leader in the Dutch Reformed Church, but he committed himself to the struggle for justice in South Africa, and was later shunned by most Afrikaners, but respected by those in the struggle. He was banned by the government on October 19, 1977.

standing in for each other. In this peace, responsibility for each other – before God and before humankind – is embodied. In the Old Testament peace is always associated with right and justice. Peace is there as a *socio-political* reality.

It is in this kind of peace that swords will be turned into ploughshares and spears into pruning knives. It is of this kind of peace that Jesus speaks. For this reason he opposes a superficial understanding of this word to which God himself has given content and meaning through his love and his liberation.

Peace, yes, but it must be genuine. Peace is not the power to pose a greater threat to the other with my better and more sophisticated weapons. Peace is not possible while thousands suffer hunger and the uprooting of communities and the destruction of families are glibly argued away with euphemisms such as “influx control”.⁴² There is no peace while millions are oppressed, and while right and justice openly stumble in public. There is no peace as long as conditions that give rise to hatred and bitterness, to repression and rebellion, are regarded as God-given. There is no peace while justified protest is smashed into the ground in the most brutal way. Let us not mislead ourselves: there is no peace.

The peace of God is different from the peace of the world. It is not only the absence of war, but the *active presence of justice*. And as long as injustice rules, no church and no Christian may not be at peace with themselves and the world. If Christians in South Africa are not purified in the fire of God’s love, then we shall be consumed in the fire of his wrath.

The peace of God is a summons to battle with sinful structures, with those who resort to injustice, with the prejudice and sin in my own heart – with everything that obstructs his true peace. We have to make peace with him and with each other, and quickly too. To paraphrase for our situation the famous saying of Martin Luther King, Jr.: I am convinced that we shall still have remorse in our time, not only over the poisonous words and the detestable actions of evil persons who take no account of God and give his word no place in their lives, but we shall also have remorse over the horrifying silence and the indifference of the good persons who did not know “what served their peace.”

If we are honest, we have to admit that the words which Jesus said in tears over Jerusalem also apply to South Africa:

If only you had known the path to peace this day; but you have completely lost it from view! Days will come upon you when your enemies encircle you with a rampart, hem you in, and press you hard from every side. They will wipe you out, you and your children within your walls, and leave not a stone within you, because you failed to recognize the time of your visitation (Lk. 19:42-44).

If only South Africa would listen so that we could know what serves our peace. If a Christian people would only stop shouting its own prophets down, ignoring them, shutting them up in prisons where they are treated as if their lives were not worth a cent. If Christian leaders would only stop glossing over evil, thereby strengthening evildoers in their evil. If only we would stop twisting, mutilating, and manipulating God’s word to make it fit the framework of the prevailing ideology. If only we could find the courage to speak the truth to each other and not to mislead each other for the sake of money or status, or out of fear.

⁴² An expression used by the South African government in reference to its limitation of the rights of black people to reside in areas reserved for white people.

It is painful, but we shall have to learn to accept that our obedience to Christ will also bring divisions within the church. We shall not always have everyone go along with us. And it would be wrong to sacrifice genuine peace for the sake of external conformity. We cannot indefinitely postpone doing what is right simply because not everyone is willing to go along with us.

Obedience and dedication to the Lord's work will bring division and a lack of peace. And of course they will then take sides against each other. But then it will no longer be on the grounds of race or colour or ideology, but on the basis of our willingness or unwillingness to follow the Messiah on his way through history. We seek not the peace of the world, but his peace, the peace of him who has made us one in him, and who has broken down the divisive wall of hostility.

KEY WORDS

Prophetic
Preaching
Space
Voice
Analysis