



Smith, Allen Permar (2006) *From pulpit to fiction : an examination of sermonic texts and their fictive qualities*. PhD thesis.

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**From Pulpit to Fiction: An Examination of Sermonic Texts
and Their Fictive Qualities**

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April 2006

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Acknowledgements

The process of writing a Ph.D. is long and complex. Nonetheless, it is a privilege and honor to undertake. During the past four years, I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to a host of people who have helped and supported me along the way. I am grateful for the love and support of Wendy Louise Dick who has taken on the role of “suffering servant” on numerous occasions. I am also grateful to Judy Smith, who told me “I Can;” David Kirk Allen who was always there and Kirk and Dorothy Allen who helped find the path in the dark wood. I am indebted to my whole family Nancy Mackenzie, Anderson, Charile and Taylor Mackenzie, Haddon and Shelly Allen, Zack and Emmie Allen, William and Lisa Allen, Caroline Harrison and Fletcher Allen and Sam Smith and the unconditional love that was always mine.

Further, I am indebted to Elizabeth W. Holden for her soulful support on numerous levels. Likewise, I have benefited from the support of Black Mountain Presbyterian Church and the Presbytery of Western North Carolina especially Bobbie White and Lamar Williamson. In Scotland, I have enjoyed the support of many including Chris Foxon John Brewster, and the community of the University of Glasgow, particularly the Department of Theology and Religions Studies and the Center for the Study of Literature Theology and the Arts including Brad Johnson, Brad Pickens Michael DeLashmutt, Brannon Hancock, Chris Kopel, Amanullah DeSondy, and Mona Siddiqui. Also I am grateful to Ian Hazlet, Louise Lawrence, Christine Chan, Linda McSheffery, Petrina Traynor, Sheona Robertson and Graham Forshaw. Further thanks are expressed to Professor Alec Garvie and his invaluable insight and Professor David Llyle and Professor George Newlands for their rigorous and insightful examination.

Finally, I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, David Jasper, for his vast knowledge, patience, understanding, humor, dedication and deep humanity as he labored with me and helped me discover the transforming power of education. David is a mentor, supervisor and friend.

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.
 But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.

T. S. Eliot. 'Four Quartets'

It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
“By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp’st thou me?

Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Abstract

This thesis will argue that the authority and power of a ‘sermonic text’ is found in its fictive qualities. The term ‘sermonic text’ is chosen in preference to ‘sermon’ to indicate the distinction between the singular occasion of a preached sermon, and the consignment of this singularity to the permanent condition of a written text, that may be read on many occasions by readers separated by time and space. A sermonic text functions in the manner of a work of fiction and creates an event and space that forces a decision upon the reader. Within the text the reader is in a place where the Kingdom of God is about to happen and is happening. Consequently, the reader is forced to make a decision. Will he or she, “Go and do likewise,”¹ or reject the Kingdom of God?

This is possible because the sermonic text has what I describe as ‘fictive qualities.’ These qualities include setting the context in which the sermon is proclaimed which in turn creates a space and event for various ‘worlds’ to meet. Necessarily, a sermon, whether historical or in fiction, must be ‘preached’ in a particular place and at a particular time—e.g. Capernaum, the Rolls Chapel in London or the Whaleman’s Chapel in *Moby-Dick*. At the same time, the ‘sermonic text’ opens up a ‘space of literature’, which is universal, and of no specific time or place, but entertains the various worlds of the reader, the biblical narrative (e.g. the Jonah narrative in Father Mapple’s sermon) as well as the historical setting. Other fictive qualities include a dialogical relationship between the reader and the text and the capacity of time and place to be both specific and universal, temporal and eternal. Finally, the voice of the sermonic text has authority and authenticity because it is at once familiar in the human experience and, at the same time, set apart and distinct through a particular relationship with the divine.

In this way, a sermonic text acts like a work of fiction and invites a reader into its space and event. As with any fictive text, the reader has the choice to engage in what S. T. Coleridge describes as “that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which

¹ See Luke 10:37. Revised Standard Version.

constitutes poetic faith.”² If the reader of the sermonic text chooses temporally to enter the event of the text, the reader has the potential to participate in its dynamics and is forced to make a decision either to believe or not believe.

Therefore, the sermonic text, like a work of fiction, may be described as a ‘self-authenticating’ world unto itself. And, like a work of fiction, it does not require those external guarantees of authority that are found in the community of faith: its doctrines, creeds and ecclesiology. Rather, the authority of the sermonic text is intrinsic as in a work of fiction and stands on its own. This claim may be related to the claims of Douglas Templeton for the gospels in his book *The New Testament as True Fiction* (1999).

The sermons include: the sermons in the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel, which will serve as a template for each following text; the sermon of Saint Stephen found in chapter seven of the Acts of the Apostles; John Chrysostom’s sermon, *Homily after the Remains of Martyrs etc.*; Meister Eckhart’s German sermon twenty-one (DW 86, W 9), based on Luke 10: 38-42; Martin Luther’s *Sermon on the Tenth Sunday after Trinity*; Joseph Butler’s Rolls Chapel sermon *Upon the Ignorance of Man*; Charles Haddon Spurgeon’s sermon, *The New Year’s Guest*; Corporal Trim’s sermon in the novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) by Laurence Sterne; Father Mapple’s sermon in the novel *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville; and the final sermon in John Updike’s novel *A Month of Sundays*.³

² Coleridge, Samuel. *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of my Life and Opinions* (1817) Volume Two. London: William Pickering, 1847. p. 2.

³ *The Holy Bible, The Revised Standard Version*. London: Collins’ Clear-Type Press, 1946, 1952. Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen. *John Chrysostom*. London: Routledge, 2000. Eckhart, Meister. *German Sermons and Treatises with Introduction and Notes by M.C. Walshe*. London: Watkins Publishing, 1979. Doberstein, John, Ed. *Luther’s Works*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959. Butler, Joseph. *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*. London: Macmillan and Company, 1913. Cook, C. T. *C. H. Spurgeon’s Sermons for Special Occasions*. London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1958. Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. New York: Signet Classics, 1960. Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994. Updike, John. *A Month of Sundays*. London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1975.

Introduction

The patristic theologian Rowan Greer begins his book *Broken Lights and Mended Lives: Theology and Common Life in the Early Church* with the following suggestion:

If we were to seek for one way of describing the experience of early Christians, it would be to point to a representation of victory like the Jonah story. Christ's victory by his death and resurrection is found in Jonah's deliverance from the whale, Daniel's deliverance from the lions' den, the three young men's deliverance from the burning fiery furnace, and above all in the deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. What did the victory mean to the early Christian? In one sense, it was a way out. The social, political and economic evils that make up a large part of life in late antiquity would all be left behind as the Christian passed through death to life. And the new age is pictured as the obverse of this life. A banquet would replace the hunger and poverty of the present. Peace and rest would replace toil. But in another sense, the victory was a way in. For many early Christians the Church provided for the first time a place to belong, a community of hope in what must often have seemed a hopeless world. And, for all Christians, the victory was a moral one. The life of virtue enabled them to see that what really counted was what could not pass away.¹

In this passage, Greer alludes to an important aspect of the early texts of Christianity. The texts of the Hebrew and Christian scripture have the ability to bring the reader into the world or worlds that are created within biblical narratives. Indeed, as Greer points out, the biblical stories of Jonah, Daniel and the like open a 'way in' for the reader.²

1 Greer, Rowan. *Broken Lives and Mended Lives: Theology and Common Life in the Early Church*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991. pp. 21-22.

2 Also see: Alter, R. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. London: Basic Books, 1981. Ruth. apRobets. *The Biblical Web*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. Wicker, Brian. *The Story-Shaped World: Fiction and Meta-Physics: Some Variations on a Theme*. London: Athlone Press, 1975.

This thesis will examine Christian sermonic texts and their capacity to create an event and space for a reader that has the potential to force a decision on him or her. The reader can will himself or herself to participate in the sermonic text or not. If the reader chooses to participate, the text offers the reader an event and space where he or she encounters the demands of the Kingdom of God and has the choice to accept or reject this. Indeed it is proclamation—proclamation rooted in Christ. It is proclamation that creates a crisis of choice and forces a decision upon the individual. Rudolf Bultmann echoes this idea in his interpretation of Christ's message. This message, he notes, is not neutral. It requires a decision. He writes:

Hence too there are situations in which it is possible for a man to do nothing—neutral situations. And just this Jesus expressly denies. To the accusation that he was breaking the Sabbath to help a man, he answered, "Ought a man to do good or evil in the Sabbath? Save a life, or kill?" The implication is that there is no third way besides doing good or doing evil; to do nothing in this case would be equivalent to doing evil. There is therefore no neutral position; obedience is radically conceived and involves man's whole being. This means that the whole man is under the necessity of decision; there is no neutrality for him, he has to decide between the only two possibilities which there are for his life, between good and evil.³

In the same way, the sermonic text is the message of Christ that calls the reader to make a choice for or against, or to accept or reject. At the same time, this experience can open a new way for the reader of the sermonic text to understand his own life experience in the living presence, as it were, of Christ.⁴ Indeed, Robert Scharlemann suggests:

3 Bultmann, Rudolf. *Jesus and the World*. London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958. pp. 61-62.

4 See also Moore, William. *Sermons from Literature: a reader/teacher's experiences*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2001. Moore's discusses the relationship between literary reading experience and religious experience. He notes, "my essays are not 'sermons,' but I use the provocative term to define religious experience unconventionally...I distinguish my sense of literary art from didacticism and suggesting that sermonic force may occur in sharable moments of (re-)reading." and Nabers, C. H. *Gladness In Christian Living*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1931. In his work, Nabers believes that, "the task of the Christian leader is to bring the glory of God into human lives. The messages given from the pulpit of the church...seeks to bring peace to the troubled in heart, hope to the despondent, strength to the weak, joy to the gloomy, and inspiration to the discouraged." In essence, Nabers asserts that the preached word brings the world and experience of the Christ to humanity. Forward, p. i.

But the intention of the concept of kerygma is clear. If Jesus was resurrected into the kerygma, then the kerygma is the materiality of his living presence, and the word of preaching is not concerned with interpreting the meaning of the words of a text but with mediating the living reality in them.⁵

Scharlemann points to the idea of a living experience in the sermonic text and the way a reader reacts to it.⁶

Some of the sermonic texts that will be examined in this thesis have their origin in what can be called ‘an actual community.’ That is to say, the original sermon had its beginning in a community of faith. A person at a specific place and time delivered the sermon. Other sermonic texts we will consider originate in works of fiction. An author of a work of fiction created these sermons. Finally, some of the sermonic texts we will examine sit somewhere in the middle of the above two distinctions. For example, we will examine the sermonic text found in Laurence Sterne’s novel *Tristram Shandy*. This particular sermonic text actually originated as a sermon delivered to a specific congregation in York Minster by the Reverend Laurence Sterne himself. However, we are examining the sermonic text as it is subsequently found in the novel *Tristram Shandy*. Similarly, the sermons taken from the New Testament canonical texts may claim to have their origins in an historical setting. That is to say, the reader finds the following statement in the Gospel of Mark: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee

5 Scharlemann, Robert, “The Textuality of Texts”, in Klemm, David and William Schweiker eds. *Meanings in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricoeur*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993. p. 23.

6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer alludes to this idea in his work *The Cost of Discipleship* when he notes that Christ meets one in his word. He writes: “Who tells us that the Pauline Christ is as alive for us to-day as he was for St. Paul? We got this assurance only from the scriptures. Or are we talking about a presence of Christ which is free and unbound by the Word? No, the scriptures are the only witness we have of Christ’s presence, and that witness is a unity, which also means that the presence they speak of includes the presence of Jesus Christ as he is presented in the synoptic Gospels. The Jesus of the Synoptists is neither nearer nor further from us than the Christ of St. Paul. The Christ who is present is the Christ of the whole scripture. He is the incarnate, crucified, risen and glorified Christ, and he meet us in his word.” See Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: Touchstone, 1995. p.p. 29-30.

preaching the Gospel of God...”⁷ In this example, the reader encounters a sermonic text that claims to have its origins at a place and time delivered by a person and whose historicity may be upheld within the faith community of the Church. Yet, unlike a sermon presented by Joseph Butler or Charles Spurgeon, which can be dated fairly accurately, it is impossible to know if the sermon in question actually happened as the text claims. Indeed, Jaroslav Pelikan in his book, *The Preaching of John Chrysostom* makes the following observation about sermonic texts in general:

...most sermons that have been preached are now lost forever. Many of the sermons that are available in various collections—perhaps most of them—appear in a form that does not correspond exactly to their state when they were delivered. Some of them were written down by listeners and then edited for publication; ...Some sermons were delivered *ex tempore* and then written down or dictated by the preacher for wider circulation; this seems to have been the procedure which Cicero followed in composing at least some of his orations, and in this respect as in others Christian preachers imitated classical orators. But this makes the sermon more a written essay than an oral address, and a later scholar has great difficulty attempting to distinguish between what was actually said and what was added for effect when the sermon was transposed into the literary modality.⁸

Indeed, once a sermon has been proclaimed that event is gone. The only access to a sermon is either through memory, or more specifically through a text.⁹ Pelikan further notes: “Thus, it would seem that one might be able to write a history of the sermonic essay as a literary form, one cannot write a genuine history of preaching.”¹⁰ Likewise, John Doberstine, in his introduction to Luther’s sermons, reinforces the point by arguing:

7 Mark 1:14. *The Holy Bible Revised Standard Version*. London: Collins Fontana Press, 1952. All quotations from the Bible are taken from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

8 Pelikan, Jaroslav. Ed. *The Preaching of Chrysostom*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967. p. 2.

9 For a discussion on orality and literacy see Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge, 1982.

10 Pelikan, *The Preaching of Chrysostom*, 1967, p. 3.

Yet, when all of Luther's sermons are taken into account, relatively few were published in his lifetime. The fact that a sermon was printed in his lifetime, however, is no guarantee that it represents what he actually said in the pulpit, even when it appears directly after it was preached. Very seldom do these printed versions stem from Luther himself. Indeed, whenever a first printing of a sermon appears outside of Wittenberg, in Augsburg, Nurnberg, or Erfurt, this may be accepted as clear proof that Luther had nothing to do with the form in which it appears. These contemporary prints are the product of notes and transcriptions by enthusiastic listeners and printers eager to profit by Luther's popularity. Luther was frequently obliged to protest that these printings misrepresented what he had said, and then proceeded to have them printed in an authorized form. But then he prepared a text from memory and often added much, so that the printed form still cannot be said to transmit what he actually uttered.¹¹

By necessity, then, one is involved in an exercise of textuality. Thus, no matter what the case, our concern is the sermonic text as it is presented in written form. How close it may or may not be to a historical occasion of preaching is an argument for another place and time and is not the concern here.¹²

With the above in mind, this thesis will argue that a sermonic text opens up an event and space that forces a decision on the reader.¹³ The reader is in a place where, it

11 Doberstein, John. ed. *Luther's Works, Volume 51*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959. p. xiii-xiv.

12 E. M. Forster suggests in his Clark Lectures delivered at Trinity College Cambridge, that the notion of a linear history is not necessarily relevant to the English novel. Indeed, Forster makes this illustration thusly: "Time, all the way through, is to our enemy. We are to visualize the English novelist not as floating down that stream which bears all its sons away unless they are careful, but as seated together in a room a circular room, a sort of British Museum Reading room—all writing their novels simultaneously. They do not think as they sit there, 'I live under Queen Victoria, I under Anne, I carry on the tradition of Trollope, I am reacting against Aldous Huxley.' The fact that their pens are in their hands is far more vivid to them." Indeed, the novel like a sermon is present at the time of reading and is not tied down by history. Forster uses the phrase "History develops, Art stands still." See E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1971. pp. 16-31.

13 Marina Warner makes a similar point in her description of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. She writes: "While reading the *Rime* or listening to it on tape, we become the mesmerized Wedding Guest:

might be said, as in the gospel preaching of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is about to happen and indeed is already happening. This is possible precisely because the sermon text has fictive qualities. These qualities include setting the context in which the sermon is proclaimed, which in turn creates a space and event for various 'worlds' to meet including the world of the reader, the biblical world and the fictive context of the sermon text itself. Other fictive qualities include a dialogical relationship between the reader and the sermon text and the capacity of time and place to be both and at once specific and universal, temporal and eternal. George Eliot's fictional town Middlemarch, for example, has never actually existed and yet always exists in the act of reading in any time and place, and still remains specific to the nineteenth century of the author.¹⁴ Finally, the 'voice' of the sermon text has authority and authenticity because it relates closely to the human experience and, at the same time, is set apart through its relationship, in some sense with the divine or with the authority of the author.

In this way, a sermon text acts like a work of fiction and invites a reader into its space and event. This can be illustrated from Plato's *Ion* as follows:

Socrates. I wish you would frankly tell me, Ion, what I am going to ask of you: When you produce the greatest effect upon the audience in the recitation of some striking passage, such as the apparition of Odysseus leaping forth on the floor, recognized by the suitors and casting his arrows at his feet, or the description of Achilles rushing at Hector, or the sorrows of Andromache, Hecuba, or Priam, - are you in your right mind? Are you not carried out of yourself, and does not your soul in an ecstasy seem to be among the persons or places of which you are speaking, whether they are in Ithaca or in Troy or whatever may be the scene of the

like him we are drawn into the story almost against our will, commanded to follow the flaring and leaping of Coleridge's images as hallucinatory phantoms raise one after another, and enigma follows enigma. The deliberate, faux-naïf simplicity of the ballad meter gives the poem a rocking pulse that forbids halting at any stanza; the internal rhymes pull from line to line inexorably while the end-stopped rhymes add touches of stiff, jagged syncopation." See Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. London: Vintage Classics, 2004. p. v.

14 Eliot, George. *Middlemarch* (1871-2) Edited by David Carroll. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.

poem?

**Ion. That proof strikes home to me, Socrates.
For I must frankly confess that at the tale of pity,
my eyes are filled with tears, and when I speak of
horrors, my hair stands on end and my heart
throbs.¹⁵**

Thus, as in a novel, the reader has the choice to engage in what Coleridge describes as the “willing suspension of disbelief.”¹⁶ In Coleridge’s dialogue with Wordsworth, Coleridge recounts that their discussion often revolved around what Coleridge calls the “two cardinal points of poetry”¹⁷ which include “the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination.”¹⁸ Coleridge writes:

In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so far as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.¹⁹

If the reader of the sermonic text chooses to ‘willingly suspend his or her disbelief’ and enters into the fictive space of the sermonic text, the reader has the potential to participate in the event and space created by this text.

Indeed in Derrida’s now familiar phrase, there is no outside the text, no external guarantor of its authenticity beyond its capability to convince the reader by its own power; and, like Jesus, who speaks as one with authority, from his own being

15 Jowett, B. *The Dialogues of Plato*. Volume I. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1875. p. 249

16 Coleridge, Samuel. *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of my Life and Opinions*. (1817), Volume 2. London: William Pickering, 1847. p. 2.

17 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1847, p.1.

18 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1847, p.1.

19 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1847, p.2.

(*διδαχη καινη κατ εξουσιαν*), so the sermonic text is ‘self-authenticating.’ Therefore, the sermonic text, like a work of fiction, is self-authenticating. And, like a work of fiction, the sermonic text does not require external guarantees of authority that are found in the oral sermonic event of a liturgical community, including ordination of the priest or minister and church order, theological education and the like. Rather, the authority of the sermonic text stands on its own.

The methodology of this thesis is interdisciplinary. The sermonic texts included in this work are similar in construction because they share a narrative structure and therefore they will be examined from a literary critical approach. Due to the nature of the argument and the texts themselves, there is an emphasis on rhetorical structures and reader response or reader orientated criticism. Each sermon will be analysed as a literary text. Close attention will be given to the fictive qualities outlined above in each sermonic text and how these elements create an experience and space for the reader. At the same time, the literary critical analysis holds theological and kerygmatic implications for textual proclamation both within and beyond the Christian community. Thus, the two approaches will inform one another and conclusions will be drawn accordingly. There is, furthermore, recognition of the role of rhetoric in the sermonic text, what Walter Nash has called “the wit of persuasion.”²⁰ For like the speeches of classical rhetoric, the sermonic text affects the reader by involvement in both the emotion and arguments of the narrative, an involvement in the world of the text through tropes and literary devices that we shall have occasion to examine. Recent years have seen much study of the rhetorical background to the New Testament, though the work of George A. Kennedy remains of fundamental importance in this respect.²¹

Over the last thirty years, biblical criticism has employed the techniques of literary criticism as a hermeneutical tool. This has lead the discipline in new and exciting directions and opened the biblical canon to interdisciplinary study. One example is *The*

20 Nash, Walter, *Rhetoric: The Wit of Persuasion*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

21 Kennedy, George A. *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980. And, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

New Testament as True Fiction: Literature, Literary Criticism, Aesthetics by Douglas Templeton. In the same way, the field of homiletics is on the cusp of this trend. Indeed, there are numerous works emerging in the field which are working in this realm including John McClure's book *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* and William Moore's work *Sermons from Literature: a reader/teacher's experiences*. Further, Jeffery Bullock has added to the field with his work on Gadamer's hermeneutics and 'Homiletical Conversation.' This thesis seeks to contribute to this discussion and the overall field of homiletics by noting the importance and relevance of sermonic texts, literary criticism and fictive qualities. In this way, sermonic texts discover a new life from a literary critical approach specifically in the area of reader response criticism. In so doing, there is the possibility of reclaiming the power of sermons from the past and opening new directions of preaching for future generations. Indeed, Greer puts it succinctly when he notes that biblical texts are a 'way in' for the reader. The sermonic text, too, is a 'way in' to the power of proclamation through the fictive.

We will begin this discussion with the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. In this chapter, we will suggest that the sermonic text in Mark is an ideal because it claims to speak with the mouth of Christ himself, prompting the listener or reader into an act of repentance and change. In Mark 1 the sermons uttered by the 'character' of Jesus are already constructed within a literary and dramatic narrative that makes its claims on the reader. In short, Mark 1:15, the first sermon to be considered, is what may be described as a 'fictive utterance.'

Therefore, in order to read these sermonic texts, the reader must take his or her lead from Coleridge and be willing to suspend his disbelief and grant credence to the event and space which the text creates. The term 'willing' is important. That is to say that a reader is invited into the event and space of the sermonic text and he must make a willing choice to accept the invitation or not. In this way, the 'willing' is a moment of judgement for the reader. And, furthermore, once the reader enters the world of the sermonic text, she becomes an 'insider' in that world. Yet, as an insider, the reader does not understand all the mysteries of the sermonic text, but rather is an active and

responsible participant in its narrative. Later in Mark (4:10-12), Jesus makes the distinction between insiders and outsiders –those to whom the ‘secret’ has been given (but not explained), and those who remain outside, notoriously exempt from understanding and forgiveness.

The sermonic texts chosen for this thesis are as follows: the sermons in the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel presumed to have been written around 70 C.E.; the sermon of Saint Stephen found in chapter seven of Acts of the Apostles, probably written about 85 C.E.; John Chrysostom’s sermon, *Homily after the Remains of Martyrs etc.*; Meister Eckhart’s German sermon twenty-one (DW 86, W 9) based on Luke 10:38-42; Martin Luther’s *Sermon on the Tenth Sunday after Trinity*; Joseph Butler’s last Rolls Chapel sermon (15), *Upon the Ignorance of Man*; Charles Haddon Spurgeon’s sermon, *The New Year’s Guest*; the sermon in Laurence Sterne’s novel *Tristram Shandy*; the sermon found in the novel *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville published in 1851, and the final sermon in John Updike’s work *A Month of Sundays*, published in 1975.²²

The author is aware that this thesis is limited to male preachers and writers. However, by and large, preaching has been a male dominated activity throughout the history of Christian proclamation. Indeed, as we shall see in chapter two, even classical rhetorical practice, to which preaching is indebted, only allowed males to speak in public. Likewise, the church has believed that proclamation is reserved for men. It has often been argued rightly or wrongly that this belief has its roots in the fact that Christ was a male and therefore in order to properly imitate Christ the preacher had to be male. However, during the later part of the twentieth century, many protestant denominations began to ordain woman preachers of which there are many influential and important

22 *The Holy Bible, The Revised Standard Version*. London: Collins’ Clear-Type Press, 1946, 1952. Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen. *John Chrysostom*. London: Routledge, 2000. Eckhart, Meister, *German Sermons and Treatises with Introduction and Notes by M.C. Walshe*. London: Watkins Publishing, 1979. Doberstein, John Ed. *Luther’s Works*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959. Butler, Joseph. *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*. London: Macmillan and Company, 1913. Cook, C. T. *C. H. Spurgeon’s Sermons for Special Occasions*. London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1958. Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. New York: Signet Classics, 1960. Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994. Updike, John. *A Month of Sundays*. London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1975.

examples. Likewise, George Eliot in her novel *Adam Bede* introduces the reader to a female Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris. But, Eliot concisely notes the concerns of society and female preachers when the stranger in the village comments, “A sweet woman...but surely nature never meant her for a preacher.”²³ Thus, to some extent, the authority of the preacher is connected to the nature of the preacher which follows the example of the natural authority found in the Christ. Women, it has been asserted by some, do not possess this inherent nature. There is no question that the field of homiletics and the church has benefited from the female voice. However, the attempt here was to consider preachers that hold, as far as possible, a universal recognition and influence.

Therefore, these texts are, of course, representative, and no doubt an entirely different canon would make the argument equally well. They are chosen, however, to properly indicate the variety of origins of what I am calling a ‘sermonic text’, beginning with the first and perhaps most perfect of all Christian sermons – the single sentence put into the mouth of Jesus in Mark 1:15.

23 Eliot, George. *Adam Bede*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968. p. 21.

Chapter 1

Augustine, Rhetoric and the Sermon (354-430)

This chapter will briefly discuss the history and role of rhetoric in relationship to sermon texts. Of course, the history of rhetoric and its relationship and influence on Christianity is too vast a subject to be considered here in any detail. However, it is important to note some of the important ideas in rhetoric that relate to the development of the sermon and sermon texts. Arguable, the most important is the influence of St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.)—who was himself a celebrated preacher and teacher of rhetoric—had on the use of rhetorical practice in Christian proclamation. Thus, despite the fact that rhetoric has been linked, following Plato's *Phaedrus*, with deceitful communication, and consequently mistrusted by some of the West's greatest thinkers, it has always had an integral relationship with the Christian faith especially in the area of proclamation. Indeed, James Kinneavy writes in his opening chapter of *Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith*:

The juxtaposition of “Greek rhetoric” and “Christian faith” may seem a trifle bizarre, maybe even irreverent—the two notions appear somewhat distant. Yet if we remember that rhetoric is the art of persuasion and that the Greek word for persuasion was *pistis* and that the Christian word for faith was also *pistis*, the embodiment of both meanings in the same word suggest that the two notions may not be too far apart.¹

Likewise, D. W. Robertson remarks in his introduction to Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* that classical thought, and with it classical rhetoric, was essential to the development of Christian theology:

We do not always realize today the extent to which the theology of Christianity was at once a logical outgrowth of late classical thought and, at the same time, an astonishingly brilliant fulfilment of the best

¹ Kinneavy, James L. *Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. p. 3.

**traditions of ancient philosophy as they extend from
Pythagoras and Plato to Cicero and Varro.²**

As Kinneavy and Robertson observe, the Christian faith is intertwined with the classical rhetorical tradition.

In its basic form, rhetoric is the art and practice of persuasion.³ Originally, rhetoric was confined to oral persuasion in the form of public speeches. However, rhetoric came to include a broad range of topics including composition, art, architecture, poetry, drama and music. It is a term that is used many times, and is a concept that has become so broad that one could argue that rhetoric has almost lost its meaning. Likewise, rhetoric has been used to describe negative communication especially in the field of political discourse. Frequently, rhetoric is seen as corrupt and a metaphor for deceit.⁴

This thesis, however, is concerned with rhetoric and its relationship to sermon texts. Every sermon considered in this argument is only accessible through a text, and therefore, by necessity, we are considering sermons that have been consigned to the permanent condition of a written text that may be read on many occasions by readers separated by time and space. With the above in mind, we will begin with a brief discussion of classical rhetoric.⁵

Classical rhetoric developed in the societies of Greece and Rome and is considered by many scholars to be virtually universal. However, this does not take into account various forms of non-western rhetoric including African, Asian and the rhetorical forms found in South America.⁶ Nonetheless, classical

² Augustine. *On Christian Doctrine*. Translated, with an Introduction by D. W. Robertson, Jr. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1958. p. iv.

³ For a detailed study of rhetoric and its history see: Kennedy, George. *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980; Nash, Walter. *Rhetoric. The Art of Persuasion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 and Vickers, Brian. *In Defense of Rhetoric*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

⁴ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001. pp. 92-93.

⁵ Here this discussion relies to a great extent on the article written by George Kennedy, "Classical Rhetoric." Contained in Sloane, Thomas. *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. pp. 92-104.

⁶ Sloane, Thomas. *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 94.

rhetoric is a logical place to begin because this thesis will be couched in the classical western rhetorical tradition.

George Kennedy defines classical rhetoric using two distinctions: historical and theoretical. Historically, Kennedy notes that classical rhetoric:

is the total record—many thousands of printed pages—of Greek and Roman rhetorical teaching and practice from the time of the Homeric and Hesiodic epics to that of the Sophists, orators, dramatists, and philosophers of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE; to Roman speakers and writers beginning in the second century BCE; to speeches, sermons, rhetorical poetry, and handbooks of composition dating from the time of the Roman Empire.⁷

Kennedy goes on to note that theoretically, classical rhetoric is, “a systematic and comprehensive body of knowledge primarily intended to teach public speaking, which was conceptualised between the fourth century BCE and the early Middle Ages.”⁸ Here, Kennedy offers a comprehensive understanding of classical rhetoric, which encompasses over one thousand years of thought and practice.

In the second half of the fifth century BCE, Kennedy explains, there was what came to be called a “literate revolution”, whereby writing and speaking took on the elements of form and function and was learned by a larger part of the general population. This process has been compared to the revolution brought about by the printing press in the fifteenth century. This “revolution” brought about an increased ability to create texts on various subjects in this society. And, of course, the field of rhetoric benefited from this stage of development with the introduction of textbooks, aids and the like. Yet, the elements of persuasive speaking had been in existence for some time including the idea of emotional and moral appeal. However, the literate revolution brought about the ability to express concepts of public speaking in a way not seen before due to the use of written texts.⁹ Kennedy goes on to note that the word rhetoric first appeared in

⁷ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001. pp 92-93.

⁸ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, pp. 92-93.

⁹ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, pp. 92-93.

Plato's *Gorgias* but it was not until Aristotle had developed the subject more fully that rhetoric was to gain a respected place in education.

As rhetoric developed, Kennedy continues, it was, by and large, a male dominated activity. Indeed, classical rhetoric began and always remained a system that trained young men how to speak effectively in the courts of law within the context of the democracy of that time. Rhetoric, then, has always been connected with a system of law in a democracy. Kennedy has noted that in the fictitious story of the creation of rhetoric by Tisias the Crow that "...two features...seem important: litigation and democracy."¹⁰

Indeed, the court system of the time was based on public speaking. There were no public prosecutors and no professional lawyers. A concerned party brought criminal and civil cases before the court. The court was convened by a clerk who did not act in the capacity of judge; however, he was charged with organising the proceedings. The two interested parties were required to speak on their behalf in front of a jury of at least 201 male citizens chosen by lot.¹¹ In this way, the success, or lack thereof, of either party depended on the ability one possessed in the art of public discourse. Therefore, it was important for one to master the persuasive art of rhetoric.¹²

However, not every male citizen had natural rhetorical ability. Accordingly, one had options when faced with a court proceeding. One option was to hire a professional speechwriter to create a speech one could memorise and then present to the court. Another option was to consult a handbook that instructed one on the art of speaking in court. There were a large number of these books available for common use.¹³

The judicial speech itself, as Kennedy notes, was divided into four parts, each performing a certain task. First there was the *proomion* to get the attention and the good will of the jury. Following this the speaker preformed a *narration*

¹⁰ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, p. 94.

¹¹ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, p. 94.

¹² Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, p. 93-94.

in which the facts of the case were presented as the speaker wanted them to be understood. Next, the speaker was required to exhibit *proof* of his case. Finally, the speaker concluded with an *epilogue*, which was a summary of the speech concluding with an emotive appeal to the jury to vote in favour of his case.¹⁴ The argument of probability was very important in the overall thrust of the speech—was it probable that a person would or would not do a certain action? Indeed, human motivation and moral character were considered to be better arguments than direct evidence because direct evidence could be considered corrupt from bribes, political pressure and the like. Here, one could argue, that rhetorical skill held more weight than evidence. Of course, to a greater or lesser extent, the above elements of a speech have been present in sermons throughout history.¹⁵

In any study of classical rhetoric one must take into account the influence of the sophist tradition. Two of the most famous sophists were Gorgias and Protagoras. Kennedy notes that their tradition was:

characterised by celebration of the powers of speech, cultivation of epideictic in preference to other rhetorical genres, acute sensitivity to language usage and style, and teaching by example rather than by precept.¹⁶

Kennedy observes that as a movement, the Sophists emerged in Athens in the second half of the fifth century BCE. Young aristocrats were attracted by their extreme ideas (Many preachers have had the same effect on their congregations including Eckhart, John the Baptist and Christ.) The Sophists provided a general education that could be used throughout the Greek empire, but the Sophists stressed the notion that rhetoric is not just a separate discipline but part of an overall general curriculum.¹⁷

¹³ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, p. 95.

¹⁴ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, p. 94.

¹⁵ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, pp. 94-95.

¹⁶ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, p. 96.

¹⁷ Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, p. 94-96.

Kennedy notes that Isocrates (436-338 B.C.E.), too, was an influential teacher of rhetoric who was part of what was known as the ten Attic Orators.¹⁸ His method of teaching involved reading his speeches to his students, and in turn, they learned public speaking through imitation. (This practice, of course, is still used in homiletic classes today.) His school, likewise, stressed living a moral life and the importance of political leadership. Isocrates stressed a holistic education by which more than rhetoric was studied. In this way, he is considered to be the founder of what is today the liberal arts education. According to Kennedy, Isocrates himself did not speak in public, but in order to influence public opinion, he wrote on a variety of subjects during his career. Though he distanced himself from the Sophists his methodology was similar to them in many ways. He never used the term rhetoric as such but preferred to refer to the subject as philosophy.

Finally, Plato (c. 428-347 B.C.E.) is one of the best-known writers on rhetoric. Throughout his writings one will find many examples that include a reference to or discussion of rhetoric. However, two publications specifically are devoted to the subject: *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*. In *Gorgias*, Socrates has a highly critical view of rhetoric, which is described as flattery and deceit. In *Phaedrus*, Plato softens his view on rhetoric; however, his mistrust is essentially the same.

There are three major elements that Plato discusses that are important for this discussion. First, is Plato's understanding of what is real. This is the key element in Plato's thought and must be the starting point for any discussion on his writings on rhetoric. Second, one must have an understanding of Plato's distrust of rhetoric and the harm he perceives it has on a structured society. Finally, one must consider Plato's understanding of what is true and good, which is linked to Plato's understanding of ultimate reality.

Plato's main concern was discovering the objective universal realities that lie behind the appearances of those realities found in the natural world. True reality, Plato argued, was the essence of good, justice, beauty and the like. The

¹⁸ The other nine include Antiphon, Lysias, Andocides, Isaeus, Aeschines, Hyperides, Demosthenes, Lycurgus and Dinarchus. Their speeches were considered the best models for imitation by students. See Sloane.

empirical world, the world in which humans interact, only allowed one to see imperfect approximations of these things. Further, the only way one could encounter true reality was through intellectual rigour not, as the Sophist argued, through the senses. In this way, Plato is concerned with questions of what is true, and the truth is found beyond the natural world.¹⁹ Plato expresses this idea through a discussion between Socrates and Glaucon. Plato writes:

Whenever a number of individuals have a common name, we assume them to have also a corresponding idea or form--do you understand me?

I do.

Let us take any common instance; there are beds and tables in the world—plenty of them, are there not?

Yes.

But there are only two ideas or forms of them—one the idea of a bed, the other of a table.

True.

And the maker of either of them makes a bed or he makes a table for our use, in accordance with the idea—that is our way of speaking in this and similar instances—but no artificer makes the ideas themselves: how could he?

*Impossible.*²⁰

For Plato, then, the *idea* of a table is the ultimate reality. A table in its physical form is only an imitation of the true idea.

With this in mind, one can start to reflect on Plato's ideas on rhetoric. As is consistent with *Gorgias*, Plato takes a very dim view of this so-called art. Indeed, rhetoric, in Plato's opinion does not even achieve the status of an art at all. Rather, Plato treats it as an irrational *knack* acquired by habit. Rhetoric is not something that has the ability to teach; rather, rhetoric is only able to change one opinion to another opinion without reaching or imparting knowledge. According to Plato, rhetoric perverts the facts and produces false impressions. Teachers of rhetoric may teach the subject through a structure of lessons, but this

¹⁹ See Taylor, A. *Plato: The Man and His Work*. London: Methuen, 1926.

²⁰ *Rhetoric*, Chapter XI.

does not increase the value of rhetoric. In the end, rhetoric simply entertains the masses by appealing to their emotions as opposed to their rational thought. In *Phaedrus*, Plato does acknowledge that rhetoric may indeed have value if it instructs and inspires and is not just for persuasion. Indeed, from the time of Plato, rhetoric has been mistrusted almost from its inception.²¹

However, when we confront Aristotle's (384-322 B.C.E.) ideas on rhetoric in his work *Rhetoric* the reader finds that Aristotle sees value in rhetoric and demonstrates that the practice of rhetoric can be an ethical undertaking depending on the character of the person engaged in the persuasion. Aristotle writes:

Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.²²

And, the early church seems to hold this same uncertainty about the art. Later, in the seventeenth century, John Locke echoes this sentiment:

It is evident how much men love to deceive and to be deceived, science rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great

²¹ See Taylor, A. *Plato: The Man and His Work*. London: Methuen, 1926.

²² *Aristotle's Rhetoric*. Book 1, Chapter 2

reputation: and I doubt not but it will thought great boldness, if not brutality, in me to have said thus much against it.²³

Above, Locke points out two qualities of human nature that made Plato and the early church wary of using rhetoric: the fact that men love to deceive and love to be deceived. This, of course, is problematic for Christianity that is an institution confronted with the task of proclaiming the truth. Deception and persuasion has no place within the Christian community. However, as we shall see, Augustine and his work *On Christian Teaching* (*De Doctrina Christiana*) would change the relationship between rhetoric and the church. Indeed, Augustine was aware of the power and passion that rhetoric provided and that the Christian corpus was lacking. Elaine Fantham observes in her article on Eloquence:

As a teacher of pagan rhetoric, the young Augustine had been alienated by the linguistic clumsiness of the Vulgate Bible, and its lack of eloquence, but in his maturity he argues that the Christian speaker must not let the inelegance of the Vulgate blind him to its message, rather, he should use good Christian writers such as the Apostle Paul or the Old Testament prophet Amos as his models.²⁴

Thus, it would seem natural and logical that Augustine, who was a skilled teacher of rhetoric, would promote the power and use of rhetorical skills in the Christian community. Augustine understands the concerns of Plato but echoes Aristotle's ideas by linking the ethical quality of rhetoric to the speaker—in Augustine's case the ordained preacher. Augustine, therefore, can be seen as the bridge between the classical understanding of rhetoric and the use of rhetoric in the Christian tradition. Yet, as Peter Brown explains, Augustine did not want to be seen as teaching rhetoric in a traditional sense. Brown writes:

Augustine never faced the problem of replacing classical education throughout the Roman world. He merely wished to create for the Roman world for the

²³ Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. New York: Dover Publications, 1959. pp. 146-147.

²⁴ Fantham, Elaine. "Eloquence." Sloane, *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, pp. 243-244.

devotees of true ‘Wisdom’ an oasis of literary culture that was distinguished by being unselfconscious, unacademic, uncompetitive, and devoted to the understanding of the Bible alone.²⁵

No matter what the case, Saint Augustine of Hippo is by all accounts one of the most influential thinkers of the early church. His writings have influenced Christian thought and practice throughout Christian history and beyond.

Augustine was born in Tagaste in 354 to a family that was not well off; however, due to his father’s position, they held some respect and privilege in the city. Augustine’s father was a pagan and his mother, Monica, was a devout Christian. Of course, through his mother’s influence, the young Augustine received a Christian education which would prove to have a lasting effect on his life and thought.²⁶

In his work *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine devotes Book Four to the study of Classical Rhetoric and its use and application to Christian life and preaching. Augustine opens his book by lowering the expectations of his readers (a common rhetorical trope in itself). The work, he writes, is not a presentation of “rhetorical rules”, which he taught in the past.²⁷ It is, however, an attempt by Augustine to make the case to Christians that rhetoric in itself is a neutral activity and, therefore, should be embraced by those who seek to promote the truth of God. Augustine writes:

oratorical ability, so effective a resource to commend either right or wrong, is available to both sides; why then is it not acquired by good and zealous Christians to fight for the truth, if the wicked employ it in the service of iniquity and error, to achieve their perverse and futile purposes?²⁸

²⁵ Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. p. 265.

²⁶ Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

²⁷ Augustine. *On Christian Teaching*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by R.P.H. Green. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1997. p. 101, 3.

²⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 102, 5.

Here, then, one sees for the first time that a major Christian thinker embraces rhetoric. Augustine sees it as a natural tool that can be employed for good or evil depending on the rhetorician. Indeed, R.P.H Green writes in his introduction:

To the educated Christian he has provided...a delineation of what is permanently useful in the art of rhetoric, a strong legitimisation of its use, and a clear demonstration of its presence both in scriptures and in the Church Fathers. That Augustine should not only explicitly accept, but also warmly embrace, rhetoric in this way is an important landmark in this history of Christianity; but given that Christians had not in fact been slow to do this, and could perhaps have hardly done other wise, the book's most important long-term effect may have been not so much to convince Christians of the legitimacy of rhetoric as to reassure them of the acceptability of scriptural style in a world still delighted by the influence of its classical heritage.²⁹

In this way, Augustine legitimates classical rhetoric as a primary tool for Christian work. And, as we have noted above, this was, in many ways, the major shift in rhetoric's perception by the church.

With this in mind, Augustine notes that the study of rhetoric, if studied at all, should be done by the young and done quickly.³⁰ Those, Augustine continues, who have more pressing matters will be able to learn rhetoric sufficiently as, "those who read and listen to the words of the eloquent than by those who follow the rules of rhetoric."³¹ As the work continues, Augustine stresses the importance of wisdom above eloquence because eloquence alone is dangerous. Augustine writes:

But the speaker who is awash with the kind of eloquence that is not wise is particularly dangerous because audiences actually enjoy listening to such a person on matters of no value to them, and reckon that

²⁹ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. xix

³⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 102, 7-8.

³¹ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 102, 9.

somebody who is heard to speak eloquently must also be speaking the truth.³²

And how does the Christian gain wisdom? Augustine notes that true wisdom is gained by a deep understanding of the scriptures. In this way, Augustine attempts to stabilise the morality of rhetoric by linking rhetoric with wisdom and wisdom with the word of God recorded in holy writ. This, in itself, is similar to the way the preacher stabilises his discourse through the use of scripture.

As his discourse continues, Augustine turns his attention to the question of whether or not scripture is wise and eloquent. To this question, Augustine affirms that scripture is eloquent as well as being wise. Augustine writes, “For when I understand these authors, not only can I conceive of nothing wiser; I can conceive of nothing more eloquent.”³³ Indeed, one could make the case that Augustine is alluding to the rhetorical quality embedded in scripture. David Jasper echoes this idea when he writes: “A problem for the study of rhetoric is that one can never stand outside rhetoric. It is, by its very nature, itself rhetorical.”³⁴ In this way, Augustine finds himself snared in a rhetorical world which is found in scripture and his own writing. Therefore, the only way to defend the use of rhetoric is through rhetoric. And, as we shall see, rhetorical fictive qualities are essential to the process.

Following this, Augustine takes two passages from Paul and demonstrates how Paul created a rhetorical eloquence in his writing. Augustine spends a good amount of space breaking the passages down by sentence structure to prove his point. However, Augustine is keen to stress that Paul did not follow rhetorical rules; rather they naturally occurred as a result of Paul’s wisdom.

In the next section, Augustine follows a similar pattern with a passage from the prophet Amos in which he again shows the elements of Classical Rhetoric. Finally, Augustine summarises his point by stating:

³² Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 104, 17.

³³ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 106, 25.

³⁴ Jasper, David. *Rhetoric, power and community: an exercise in reserve*. London: Macmillan, 1993.

For such things were not produced by human labour but poured from the divine mind with both wisdom and eloquence; and it was not a case of wisdom being devoted to eloquence but of eloquence keeping pace with wisdom.³⁵

Further Augustine makes his point by noting that:

The things that are learnt in the so-called art of public speaking would not have been observed, noted, and systematised into a discipline have they had not been first found in the minds of our orators.³⁶

Augustine makes the point that the most important thing for a Christian speaker to do is speak in a way that all may understand. And, for the sake of clarity, a speaker may evoke common word usage that may even offend the learned. Augustine writes:

What is the use of correct speech if it does not meet with the listeners understanding? There is no point in speaking at all if our words are not understood by the people to whose understanding our words are directed?³⁷

Augustine's comment seems to allude to a slight insecurity he may have concerning education. It seems that, although Augustine is keen to stress the importance of inner wisdom that is inherent in the Christian faith, he feels the need to defend his actions to the educated elite.

In the following section, Augustine discusses the way a speech is formed. From his references, it is clear that he is basing his discussion on the writings of Cicero and his notion that a speech should, 'instruct, delight and move

³⁵ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 114, 59.

³⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 114, 60.

³⁷ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 116, 66.

the listener.’³⁸ Augustine notes the importance of instruction but also acknowledges the importance of delighting the listener to the point that the listener may then be moved to take action. And the point is, as Augustine notes, for Christian orations to bring one to the point of action or, as we argue in this thesis, a crisis of decision. In this way, the good Christian orator “should be in no doubt that any ability he has and however much he has derives more from his devotion to prayer and his dedication to oratory.”³⁹

Augustine then begins a discourse of the importance of not only being inspired by God for teaching and speaking but also the importance of being prepared for these tasks through work and dedication. Augustine concludes this section by writing:

So the speaker who is endeavouring to give conviction to something that is good should despise none of the three aims—of instructing, delighting and moving his hears—and should make it his prayerful aim to be listening to with understanding, with pleasure, and with obedience, as I have stated above. If he does this properly and appropriately he can fairly be called eloquent, even if he does not meet with his audience assent.⁴⁰

Augustine refers back to Cicero to point out another triad include the axioms ‘restrained,’ ‘mixed’ and ‘grand.’ In this way, Augustine combines Cicero’s triads to make a complete matrix for Christian speaking. Augustine writes:

The eloquent speaker will be one who can treat small matters in a restrained style, in order to instruct, intermediate matters in a mixed style in order to delight, and important matters in a grand style in order to move an audience.⁴¹

³⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 117, 74.

³⁹ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 121, 87.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 123, 96.

⁴¹ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 123, 96.

Yet Augustine stresses that in all matters dealing with the church the fate of the human soul is in the balance. Thus, in reality, most matters are to be treated in the grand style. Augustine explains:

Since we must relate everything, especially what we say to congregations from our position of authority, to the well-being of human beings not in this temporary life but in eternity, where there is the added danger of eternal perdition, all matters that we speak of are important, so much so that not even what a Christian teacher says about acquiring or losing sums of money should be thought of as a small matter⁴²

Nonetheless, Augustine spends a great amount of time citing examples of the three styles and points out why they are thus classified. In his summary of this section, he comes to the conclusion that a mixture of all styles can be used for maximum effect. And this system of speaking has had a lasting effect on Christianity. Again D. W. Robertson writes:

***On Christian Doctrine* offers abundant evidence of an intellectual acumen which had a large share in creating the patterns of a culture which endured in the West throughout the thousand years we rather unjustly call “the Middle Ages.” It formulates an approach to the scriptures whose principals determined the character of education during that period; and the ideal of *sapientia et eloquentia*, “wisdom and eloquence,” adapted from Cicero and here given a Christian fulfilment, was still an important part of Christian humanism in the Renaissance.⁴³**

Although Augustine has gone to great lengths to explain the different styles used in speaking and assigning a certain task to each one, he makes the point that no matter what style in which one is speaking the aim will always be to move people away from what is bad to strive to do what is good. In this way, the aims of the three styles are used interchangeably for the one purpose.

⁴² Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 124, 98.

⁴³ Augustine. *On Christine Doctrine*, 1958, p. x.

In the following section, Augustine explains the importance of the speaker living a life worthy of example. Augustine concedes that one can speak the truth even though he may not live it, but it is far better to practice what one preaches.⁴⁴

In the final section of the book, Augustine discusses the use of sermons that are not one's own. Augustine makes the point that if the writer of the sermon and the speaker of the sermon believe in God then there is no case for plagiarism because the word of God belongs to no one. In this way the speaker and writer find their inspiration in God.

For our discussion here, let us summarise the major points of Augustine's work. First we must note that Augustine embraces the use of classical rhetoric in the Christian sermon. This, of course, as we have noted, establishes and affirms a place for classical rhetoric in Christian oratory. Secondly, Augustine outlines a systematic approach for the use of rhetoric based on Cicero's notion instructing, delighting and moving an audience. Augustine works these statements into his own idea of being listened to with understanding, with pleasure, and with obedience.⁴⁵ But, of course, the main goal for Augustine is to bring people to God. Finally, Augustine discusses the importance of the ethos of the one who is speaking that they may practice what they preach.

Thus, Augustine provided for the Christian preacher a methodology for the use of rhetoric that forged the classical ideas of the past with the Christian tradition that was to be the future. As we shall see, the above qualities outlined by Augustine serve as a model for Christian preaching throughout history. Rhetoric has an invaluable place in the history of Christian proclamation. Likewise, rhetoric, through the medium of fictive qualities, is embedded in sermonic texts.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 143, 153.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1997, p. 121, 87.

Chapter 2

The First Chapter of the Gospel of Mark

We begin in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. Mark, it is generally agreed by scholars, was probably the first gospel written. Robert Wilson suggests in his commentary on Mark:

Long regarded as no more than an abbreviation of Matthew, and hence comparatively neglected, Mark is now commonly recognised not only as the earliest canonical Gospel but also as one of the sources used by Matthew and Luke in the composition of their works. It is therefore a primary authority for our knowledge of the life and teaching of Jesus.¹

Furthermore, Mark immediately establishes the importance of preaching. Indeed, the “good news” (εὐαγγέλιον) is the primary theme of the whole gospel (Mark 1:1), which might be described, therefore, as a sermonic text in itself. Paul Achtemeier notes:

For Mark the fact that Jesus went about preaching was of importance. The first figure we meet in our Gospel is John the Baptist and we hear of him first of all that he was “preaching.” This indicates the importance of preaching since for Mark, John is the forerunner of Jesus, a forerunner not only in what he says, but also in what happened to him...Further indication of the importance for Mark's understanding of Jesus as one who went about preaching is to be found in his introduction to Jesus' public ministry. The first thing we learn about his activity is that it included preaching (1:14-15). In fact, the placement of this information may mean to imply that everything Mark wants to tell us subsequently about Jesus is to be understood under the rubric of Jesus' proclamation that the

¹ Wilson, R. McL, “Mark”, in Black, Matthew and Rowley, H. H. eds. *Peake's Commentary of the Bible*. Revised, London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Limited, 1962. p.799.

time long awaited was fulfilled and that with him, the kingdom of God was now dawning. If so, then preaching is the common denominator to which all Jesus' activity can be reduced.²

Accordingly, the sermonic text in the first chapter of the gospel, Mark 1:15, provides us with the prototype of the sermonic text and, therefore, as it were, a template for sermonic texts in general. However, the reader of the first chapter of Mark encounters no less than three sermonic texts. The first is in the preaching of John the Baptist.³ Second, the reader encounters the preaching of Jesus in Galilee, which will be the main focus of this discussion.⁴ And, thirdly, the reader finds the proclamation of Jesus in Capernaum.⁵ In each text, the reader encounters in some sense the presence of Christ; each sermon occurs in a clear place: Galilee, Capernaum or the wilderness; each text is a statement about the present time in the context of an eternal moment; and each text is a call to decision for the reader.

These three sermonic texts provide a template for this entire discussion. The elements include setting the context or place in which the sermon is preached. This, in turn, creates a textual space for various worlds to meet including the world of the reader, the biblical world and the literary context of the sermonic text itself. Consequently, a dialogical relationship between the reader and the sermonic text is formed and time and place are at once specific and universal, temporal and eternal. Finally, the voice or preacher of the text is established as authoritative and authentic because it is within human experience and, at the same time, set apart through some kind of a relationship with the divine. In a sense, we might say, each sermonic text is 'christological', at once human and divine. The above fictive qualities force a decision to change (*μετανοια*) by the reader of the sermonic text.

First, it is important to review some of the academic commentaries concerning the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. During the latter part of the twentieth century, there was

2 Achtemeier, Paul. *Mark*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989. pp. 66-67.

3 Mark 1:4-5.

4 Mark 1:15.

5 Mark 1:21.

a great deal of discussion devoted to the nature and length of the Markan prologue, including that by R. H. Lightfoot. At the beginning of the last century, it was accepted that the prologue to the gospel consisted of verses 1-8. This section of the gospel contains the preaching of John the Baptist that, it was argued, naturally creates a prologue to the ministry of Jesus. Yet, as the discussion progressed, it was argued that the prologue should be extended to include verse 13, which presents a short account of Jesus' time in the wilderness. In the additional verses, the reader learns that Jesus comes from Nazareth and encounters the statement of Jesus' divine sonship.⁶ Indeed, the American New Testament scholar L. E. Keck argued that the prologue should be extended to include verse 13 because of this description. Keck's understanding was that the gospel, which John proclaimed, was found in the person of Jesus.⁷ And, from the publication of his thesis, Keck's argument has been the generally accepted length of the prologue.⁸

It is clear that there has been considerable discussion and disagreement concerning the beginning of Mark's Gospel. Yet, by and large, there is a consensus that the prologue provides essential information to the reader that allows her to have a better understanding of the gospel as a whole. Indeed, Frank Matera notes that the prologue of the gospel:

suggests that the dramatic irony of the narrative derives from the fact that the readers possess inside or privileged information, given in the prologue, which the characters of the story (Jesus excepted) do not know. As in all good narratives, the narrator does not reveal everything to the readers at the beginning. The information given in the prologue tells who Jesus is (the Son of God), but does not disclose the full significance of his person through this title. This information must be supplemented by what is told in the rest of the narrative. Thus, by the end of the narrative, the readers discover that they must integrate their knowledge of Jesus learned

6 See Lightfoot, R. H. *The Gospel Message of Saint Mark*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1950.

7 See Keck, L. E. "The Introduction to Mark's Gospel", *NTS* 12 (1965/66), pp. 352-370.

8 Telford, William, ed. *The Interpretation of Mark*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1995.

in the prologue with their knowledge of him
learned in the light of the cross and
resurrection.⁹

Matera is correct in his assertion that the prologue provides information to the reader. However, it is the assertion of this argument that the fictive reader of the *sermonic texts* (just like the ‘original’ congregations of the sermons) is not given inside information as Matera suggests. Rather, the reader becomes a participant in the narrative and finds himself in the same position as the characters of the story and in this way, is offered the same choices as the characters found in the narrative, which leads to the moment of choice or decision in the sermonic text.

At this point in the discussion, a closer reading of the first chapter of Mark needs to be made which will demonstrate the template for sermonic texts being argued here. The author of Mark opens his work with the following statement: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”¹⁰ This opening itself is a moment of proclamation and alerts the reader to the announcement of the gospel, or good news, found in the person of Jesus who is the Christ. This statement also aids in the development of the context for the sermon. The reader will come to understand that this is not a statement of opinion, but it is a statement of fact - in other words, the fact of the ‘real presence’ of Jesus in the text. Indeed, the sermonic texts found in the first chapter are embedded within the larger context of the proclamation of Christ’s coming.

Further, the opening statement begins to establish the nature of the coming preacher, in this case, Jesus. The statement shows that Jesus *is* himself the good news to be preached and is the anointed one. This is verified by a reference to the passage from Isaiah, “Prepare the way of the Lord.”¹¹ The reader will understand this because the author of the gospel will demonstrate Jesus’ divinity and he embodies the gospel in his own person. And, like the people in this narrative, the reader will be “astonished at his

9 Telford, William, ed. *The Interpretation of Mark*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1995. p. 290.

10 Mark 1:1.

11 Isaiah 40:3.

teaching for he taught them as one who had authority.”¹² As the narrative progresses, it will show also the familiar, human aspect of Jesus, ensuring both the authority and authenticity argued for here.

However, as the reader continues, he encounters the context for the first sermon text put into the mouth of John the Baptist. John is shown to have authority because he is foretold by the prophet Isaiah:

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight—”¹³

Indeed, then, the reader realizes that what is foretold by Isaiah’s text is manifested in the figure of John the Baptist. Mark reads:

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

Here, then, the reader discovers that the prophetic text of Isaiah has come to pass. Therefore, the proclamation of John the Baptist is true and the authority of the Baptist is established through intertextual authority. This passage also shows the familiar aspect of

¹² Mark 1:22

¹³ Mark 1:2-3.

¹⁴ Mark 1: 4-8.

John because John proclaims his own humanity and humility through his own admission: "And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.""¹⁵ Thus, the preacher is both set apart through his sacred calling indicated in scripture, and yet remains familiar and human to his intended audience.

The geographical placing of this sermon text is the wilderness of Judea by the river Jordan. John's sermon is an event and place where different worlds meet including the world of Hebrew prophets, the world of first century Palestine and the world of the contemporary reader. In the meeting of these worlds in the text, the reader is being called to "repentance for the forgiveness of sins."¹⁶ The call is made both in the present and universally, across all time. The reader of the text, like the people of Jerusalem and the Judean countryside, are also called to change in light of John's proclamation of the presence of Christ. Thus, this is the choice offered to the reader—will he repent and follow the call? If the reader repents, the remaining text of the gospel can be read. Only by 'repentance' can the text of the whole gospel be truly entered into.

It follows then that John's proclamation about Jesus is accurate:

"After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."¹⁷

At this point in the narrative, the reader is introduced to Jesus, the next and ultimate preacher:

¹⁵ Mark 1: 7-8.

¹⁶ Mark 1:4.

¹⁷ Mark 1: 7-8.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.¹⁸

The narrative establishes clearly the line of authority which concludes with Jesus himself, setting up the continuity from Isaiah to John to Jesus. Jesus’ authority is discovered through the events surrounding his baptism. Here, the reader is witness to a voice—which is assumed to be that of God—and which proclaims that Jesus is God’s son. In so doing, the narrative establishes for the reader the authority of Jesus and therefore the authority of his proclamation and preaching as well. As we shall see later in the narrative, the authority of Jesus will be dramatically illustrated with the call of the first apostles as they immediately follow the Christ after hearing his proclamation.¹⁹

Here, then, is the first element of the template: the establishment of the authority of the speaker and sermon through the use of authoritative texts. The author of Mark has used the text of Isaiah to show a progression of authority, first with John then contributing to the authority of Jesus. John has authority because he is the one who fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah. And with the authority of John and Jesus established, their preaching holds authority in the same way. Of course, as the narrative progresses, the author of Mark continues to demonstrate the authority of Jesus in other ways as well. Indeed, David Rhoads and Donald Michie enforce the point by noting:

¹⁸ Mark 1:9-11.

¹⁹ See Mark 1:16-20.

We can discern the narrator's views toward a character from the way in which the narrator introduces the character into the narrative and provides views into the mind of that character. An example of this occurs when the narrator introduces Jesus in the first line as 'the anointed one, the Son of God,' then confirms it by John's prophecy, the spirit's descent, the voice from heaven, and Jesus' successful confrontation with Satan in the desert. By the time Jesus first speaks, the reader accepts him as a reliable character and is ready to hear and trust what he says.²⁰

However, it is also important to discuss the familiar and human aspects of Jesus. It is clear that he is set apart through a divine relationship with God; yet, does the text present a Jesus that is at once familiar and set apart? Indeed, the human aspect of Jesus is described in a number of places including the fact that he comes from "Nazareth of Galilee."²¹ And, Jesus is referred to as "Son."²² Further, Jesus was driven into the wilderness and tempted.²³ Temptation is a human experience. Thus, the preacher is both set apart and 'one of us'. Jesus is at once divine and immersed in the human experience.

The discussion will now turn its attention to another important element in the template of this thesis: context and place. Sermons have to be preached somewhere, in a particular place and at a particular time. Thus, the fictive world of the sermonic text must also be anchored in time and place – in other words, given a context. Indeed, the sermonic texts in Mark establish a context for the sermon to be proclaimed. As was noted above, this began with the beginning of the gospel followed by the ministry of John the Baptist. In the same way, the first sermon of Jesus is contextualized in the highly significant Galilee described in verse fourteen: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God..."²⁴ In this way, the context of the first sermon

20 Rhoads, David and Michie, Donald. *Mark as Story*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1982. p. 40

21 Mark 1:9.

22 Mark 1:11.

23 Mark 1:12-13.

24 Mark 1:14.

of Jesus takes place in Galilee, importantly and symbolically in contrast to the wilderness preaching of John.

With the establishment of a significant context for the sermon, the reader encounters the capacity of the sermonic text to be an event and place for different 'worlds' to meet. That is to say the reader finds himself, in a sense, in the fictive world of Galilee as Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God.²⁵ Further, the reader is placed in the biblical world of the Christian scriptures and the world of the Hebrew prophetic tradition. Therefore place is specific: the world of the reader and 'Galilee'. Yet, the place is also universal because it is a place that transcends actual space and occupies an eternal position that is common to any reader of the text. In the same way, time is fictive because it is both specific and eternal. It is the time of first century Palestine and it is also the time of the reader. Yet, it is also the time of the eternal in that it is always happening in the moment, the 'kairos', the reader engages with the sermonic text. Thus, as with those who are gathered to hear the proclamation in Palestine, the reader, too, can hear it at his moment of reading. Finally, then, the reader is confronted, so to speak, with the Kingdom of God and the presence of the Christ. It is the possibility of a new life²⁶ with a call to decision. Will the reader repent and believe? Will the reader go and do likewise?

And the above pattern continues in the next two 'sermons' of Jesus, which include the calling of Simon and Andrew, James and John. The text reads:

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going

25 One might recall D. H. Lawrence's words in his essay "Hymns in a Man's Life": "The Lake of Galilee! I don't want to know where it is. I never want to go to Palestine. Galilee is one of those lovely, glamorous *worlds*, *not places* that exist in the golden haze of a child's half-formed imagination. And in my man's imagination it is just the same." *Selected Literary Criticism*. Ed. Anthony Beal. London: Heineman, 1967. pp. 6-7. Emphases added.

26 Mark 1:14.

on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.²⁷

The context or place of these two sermonic texts, one explicitly reported, the other left unspoken, is on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Earlier, Jesus was established as different and yet also human and familiar, which continues to be the case here. Therefore the sermonic text again creates the place for the various worlds to meet, including the world and work of the disciple and the world of the reader, which is part of the biblical world. Time, too, is both specific and universal. Yet, it is the universal quality that is important here because the reader sees that the disciples immediately follow Jesus and this action is always happening during the time of every reading. The reaction of the disciples is immediate, almost instinctive—the text does not describe a decision process on the part of the two fishermen. And, it seems that this is the point. The authority of Jesus' sermonic discourse is such that no thought is needed but only immediate response on the part of those he calls – including the reader. In essence, the sermon is a command by the presence of the Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reinforces this point with his comments on the call of Levi in Mark 2: 15-17. Bonhoeffer writes:

The call goes forth, and is at once followed by the response of obedience. The response of the disciples is an act of obedience, not a confession of faith in Jesus. How could the call immediately evoke obedience? The story is a stumbling-block for the natural reason, and it is no wonder that frantic attempts have been made to separate the two events. By hook or crook a bridge must be found between them. Something must have happened in between them...Unfortunately our text is ruthlessly silent on this point, and in fact it regards the immediate sequence of call and response as a matter of crucial importance. It displays not the slightest interest in the psychological reasons for a man's religious

²⁷ Mark 1:16-20.

decisions. And why? For the simple reason that the cause behind the immediate following of call by response is Jesus Christ himself. It is Jesus who calls, and because it is Jesus, Levi follows at once. This encounter is a testimony to the absolute, direct, and unaccountable authority of Jesus...Because Jesus is the Christ, he has the authority to call and demand obedience to his word. Jesus summons men to follow him not as a teacher or a pattern of the good life, but as the Christ, the Son of God.²⁸

Thus, the reader is called to the decision. Is the reader willing to drop what he is doing and follow the Christ? Is the reader in his or her turn willing to become a fisher of men?

However, there is another quality these two sermonic texts establish. It is the quality of taking something familiar and known and reinterpreting in a new way that leads to a theological understanding. In other words, it becomes an image or metaphor similar to the “Good Shepherd” in the Fourth Gospel. In this case it is the action of fishing. Fishing, which is a common activity, becomes, in the context of Jesus’ call, both new and different. Through the sermonic text, one has the opportunity to become a “fisher of men.” Thus, the everyday activity becomes a theological event.

Finally, as the reader continues in the narrative he encounters the third sermonic text in the first chapter of Mark. As this discussion has noted above, a context and situation is established for this sermon as well. Mark reads:

And they went into Caper'na-um; and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.²⁹

28 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963. pp. 61-62.

29 Mark 1: 21-22.

As above, the place and time of preaching are defined. Now we are in the *city* of Caper'na-um, on the Sabbath, in the synagogue at a particular time. Thus, the sermonic text includes the present worlds of the reader, the world found in Caper'na-um, the synagogue and its congregation within the world of the biblical narrative. And in the fictive narrative, the reader finds a place in each setting in the experience of the event of the sermonic text. And, the time is again temporal and eternal, taking place in an historical setting and beyond any one human experience. Thus, the reader here and now enters into a dialogical relationship with the sermonic text and in this case is confronted with the choice of acknowledging the authority and power of Jesus' teachings. Will the teaching of Jesus astonish the reader? Ultimately, then, the sermonic texts as 'fiction' will lead the reader to a response similar to that provoked by Jesus as he teaches in the synagogue and drives out an unclean spirit:

And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ³⁰

Jesus' nature and authority is recognized by an unclean spirit who states, "...I know who you are, the Holy One of God."³¹ And, in the same way, the reader of the sermonic texts in the Gospel of Mark will have the same reaction and understanding that Christ is "the Holy One of God." Indeed, this is sermon in the form of healing miracle, confronting the reader with the power of God.

Finally, the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark shows the reader that the role and purpose of the sermonic text is proclamation—proclamation rooted in Christ. C. H. Dodd notes:

The New Testament writers draw a clear distinction between preaching and teaching. The distinction is preserved alike in the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypse, and must be

³⁰ Mark 1:23-24.

³¹ Mark 1:24.

considered characteristic of early Christian usage in general.³²

Furthermore, Gerhard Ebeling remarks in *Theology and Proclamation*:

In spite of the richness of thematic material on which the Christian preacher may draw, Christian preaching may nevertheless be precisely characterized as the proclamation of Christ. The kerygma is *eo ipso* kerygma of Christ.³³

As the above has shown, the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark contains a template for the sermonic text. Indeed, each sermonic text in the first chapter of this gospel establishes authority and authenticity for the speaker and the sermonic text through some connection, either textual or theological, with the divine. Further, each sermonic text has a context in time and place in which the sermonic text is realized. At the same time, the sermonic text itself creates an event and space for various worlds to come together. Within these worlds time and place are both specific and universal helping to create a dialogical relationship with the reader. Finally, the reader is confronted with a call to decision. As this thesis progresses, this template for the sermonic text established in Mark will be used to guide the remainder of this discussion.

32 Dodd, C. H. *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*. London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1936. p.7

33 Ebeling, Gerhard. *Theology and Proclamation*. London: William Collins and Sons Limited, 1966. p. 32.

Chapter 3

The Acts of the Apostles and the Sermon of Saint Stephen Acts 6-7

The discussion will now turn its attention to the sermonic text of Stephen as recorded in The Acts of the Apostles chapter 7. Comparable to the first chapter in the Gospel of Mark, Stephen's sermon in Acts follows the example of the model for sermonic texts. Prior to the discussion of the sermon itself, an introduction to the Acts of the Apostles is necessary.

The Acts of the Apostles continues the narrative of The Gospel of Luke.¹ The book narrates the beginnings of Christianity and the movement of the infant church into the remainder of Palestine, and the larger world, concluding in Rome itself. The Acts of the Apostles does not stand alone. The book is an integral part of a larger, well-organized narrative. The writer of Acts assumes that its readers know the Gospels—at least the Gospel of Luke. Indeed, it continues the gospel narrative. The canonical gospel tradition closes with accounts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mark is the only one that gives any of the subsequent history in the early church, and he condenses his account into one brief sentence in the last verses which are generally thought to be a later addition to the gospel: "And they went forth and preached everywhere: the Lord working with them, and confirming the word by the signs that followed"². The Acts of the Apostles, beginning with an account of the ascension of Jesus, takes up the narrative and records the actions of the Holy Spirit in the early church. The author of Acts is keen to stress that the role of the Spirit is significant to the actions of individuals and the development of the community at large. Consequently, the dialogue contained in the work can be understood as an extension of the Spirit at work and fulfilling the promises of Christ.

¹ For a discussion of Luke-Acts see: Juel Donald. *Luke-Acts*. London: SCM Press, 1984. Maddox, Robert. *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982. Johnson, Luke. *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts*. Missoula, Mont: Scholars Press for the Society of Biblical Literature, 1977.

² Mark 16: 20.

Any student of Acts will note that a large portion of the work is devoted to speeches. Over the last two hundred years of Biblical scholarship, scholars have largely agreed that uniformity is found in the speeches contained in the work. Furthermore, many scholars have argued that the texts of the speeches trace their origin to the same source: the mind and understanding of the author of Acts. In his 1936 work, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, C. H. Dodd notes:

The author apparently used to some extent the liberty, which all ancient historians claimed, of composing speeches, which are put into the mouths of the persons of the story. It is therefore possible at the outset that the speeches attributed to Peter and others, as well as to Paul, may be free compositions of the author.³

This quality was a common ploy in classical literature which aided in the development of the narrative.⁴ Nevertheless, it has been argued that the author of Acts based his account, at least in part, on sources other than his own invention. Dodd continues:

It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that the speeches given in the earlier part of Acts, the author may have similarly made use of sources.⁵

Additionally, this would agree with the work of a number of German theologians at the beginning of the twentieth century, who believed that Acts was a reliable historical work which included examples of early Christian preaching formulated by the author.⁶ In this way, it was postulated that Acts was an historical document as well as a 'fictive' creation of the author. Also, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* notes:

3 Dodd, C. H. *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, p. 17.

4 For examples, see the speeches of Thucydides in *The Peloponnesian War*.

5 Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* 1936, p. 19.

6 See Soards, Marion. *The Speeches in Acts*. Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press: 1994. pp. 11-12.

At the beginning of his discussion on Acts, Soards offers a brief history of the interpretation of the speeches in Acts.

The accuracy of the author's information probably varies in different parts of the Book. There are errors...but it would be unreasonable to expect modern attitudes to historical precision, and at some points where Acts coincides with profane history Luke has been supported by archaeological finds...In general the narrative is condensed and impressionistic, not exact in its details.⁷

Certainly, the speeches in Acts contain elements of history. However, it would be a mistake to reduce any discourse to a specific category. Again, Soards notes that, in the final analysis, the speeches recorded in Acts are diverse in nature and material and repetitive in character in terms of occurrence and contents.⁸

The speeches, like the biblical canon itself, defy literary categories and should be seen as lively and complex portraits of meaning. They live and breathe and take their place in the expression of life. The debate will continue. However, more specifically, this argument is concerned with the sermon of Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles as it has been preserved and recorded. Indeed, there has been a considerable amount of debate concerning its authenticity as well. Marcel Simon makes the following observation:

It is hardly necessary to say that it was not, at any rate, delivered exactly in the form in which we now read it in Acts: there was certainly nobody on the spot to take it down in shorthand...When therefore we ask whether it is authentic, let it be clear that it cannot be so in its literal wording, but only substantially. On the other hand, even if we subscribe to Foakes Jackson's verdict that the speech is not to the occasion, this is not sufficient ground for dismissing it as purely artificial...The speech may bring a faithful echo, not necessarily of what he

7 Cross, F. L. and Livingstone E.A.. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Third Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. pp. 12-14.

8 Soards, 1994, *The Speeches in Acts* pp. 11-12.

said during his trial, but of his customary preaching; or it may represent a sort of summary of what his disciples taught after his death.⁹

And he further notes:

According to some critics, the information provided by Acts concerning Stephen's person and message is sufficiently sure and precise. Others find it doubtful and unreliable. Some would find in his speech a faithful echo of what he actually said, and think it comes, along with what is told of the appearing of the Hellenists, from some good source—possibly from the group itself—which the author was content to fit into his own narrative, at the price, perhaps, of more or less far-reaching and more or less happy alterations. Some others think that it is a purely personal editorial addition by the hand of the writer, and expresses his own views alone.¹⁰

However, even if scholarship was able to determine that the sermonic text was historical and proven to be the actual words of Stephen or, on the other hand, a construction of the author of Acts, the discourse still stands as it is. Indeed, perhaps the discourses may be considered history-like. No matter what the case, the sermon is part of the *literature* of biblical canon.

Likewise, similar arguments have been made about the historicity of Stephen himself. Again Simon informs this discussion by noting:

If we turn from the speech to the figure of Stephen, we shall find hardly less diversity in the interpretations to which it has given rise. Some

9 Simon, Marcel. *Saint Stephen and the Hellenists in the Primitive Church*. London: Longmans, Green and Company Limited, 1958. pp. 39-40.

10 Simon, *Saint Stephen and the Hellenists in the Primitive Church*, 1958, p. 1.

scholars consider that Stephen is nothing more – nor less—than a forerunner of Pauline Christianity, and that he had just an inkling of what it was Paul’s part to actualize. Some see in him the founder of the mission to the Gentiles and, as such, the father of Christian universalism. To some, he never passed beyond the limits of Judaism, fierce though his criticism of certain of its aspects may have been; and one scholar at least has, in recent years, called in question his very existence and reality as a historical figure.¹¹

In other words, the reader encounters a ‘fictive’ character existing between history and fiction. At the same time it is important to note that Stephen, who is believed to be a Hellenist, is part of the dispute between Hellenists and Jews alluded to at the beginning of Acts 6.¹² Here again, whether or not Stephen was actual or created by the imagination of an author or the necessity of a community is beside the point. Stephen as a preacher alive in the text is enough. It is within this portrait of interpretations that the reader encounters the sermonic text of Stephen.

It can be argued that the sermonic text of Acts 7 can be divided into two parts. The first part is a narrative of the history of the Jewish people. This section takes up the vast majority of the sermonic text. It begins with the call of Abraham¹³ and progresses to Solomon and the construction of the temple.¹⁴ In essence, the history of the Jewish people is recounted including Isaac, Jacob and the twelve patriarchs,¹⁵ the captivity in Egypt, the life of Moses and deliverance through him,¹⁶ the forty years in the wilderness¹⁷

11 Simon, *Saint Stephen and the Hellenists in the Primitive Church*, 1958, p.20. Further, see Simon’s footnotes from the above quotation where he references Ch. Guignebert, *Le Christ*, Paris, 1943, p. 126. M. Goguel, *La Naissance du Christianisme*, Paris, 1946, pp. 200-201. E. F. Scott, *The Varieties of New Testament Religion*, New York, 1946, p. 128. and H. J. Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judentums*, Tubingen, 1949, p. 441.

12 For a discussion on this aspect see Simon, Marcel, op.cit. p. 48. and Juel, Donald, *Luke-Acts*. London: SCM Press Limited, 1984. pp. 69-77.

13 Acts 7:2.

14 Acts 7:4-7.

15 Acts 7:8.

16 Acts 7:18-37.

and the rule of King David.¹⁸ Section two is devoted to the claim that God cannot be contained in something constructed by man: “Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands,”¹⁹ which, in language associate with idolatry in the Hebrew Bible, looks back to the speech of Solomon at the dedication of his temple (I Kings 8:27) and to Isaiah 66:

Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house which you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the LORD.

It is, in essence, a proclamation in the scriptural tradition that God is greater than the things of man and of this world. At the same time, Stephen’s speech to the Council was critical of Jewish Law and the politics of the Jewish temple—he criticized the lack of sincerity among the Jews in following the Law and practicing temple worship. Finally, Stephen condemns the Jewish leaders for being part of a history of persecution culminating with the betrayal and murder of Christ.²⁰

Here, the discussion will examine the way in which the sermonic text of Stephen follows a template similar to that examined in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. First there is the establishment of the authority and credentials of the preacher. In this narrative, the reader is introduced to Stephen at the beginning of chapter six when he is appointed by his fellow believers to ‘serve table.’ The text states:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up

17 Acts 7:38-44.

18 Acts 7:45.

19 Acts 7: 48.

20 Acts 7:55.

preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.²¹

This passage offers the reader a first look at the credentials of Stephen not as a preacher but because he was "a man full of faith, and of the Holy Spirit."²² Indeed, Stephen is even set apart from the other six chosen to serve in this way because only he is described as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.²³ As the text continues, the authority of Stephen is further demonstrated in two ways: first by the laying on of hands and the blessing of the apostles and through the description of Stephen as one who is "...full of grace and power,"²⁴ and a person who "did great wonders and signs among the people."²⁵ The text notes:

These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.²⁶

As the narrative continues, the reader learns that a dispute takes place involving Stephen and various sects of Judaism. However, the text records that no one was able to withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke:

21 Acts 6:1-6.

22 Acts 6:5.

23 Acts 6:5.

24 Acts 6:8.

25 Acts 6:8.

26 Acts 6:6-8.

Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyre'nians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cili'cia and Asia, arose and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.²⁷

Thus, the authority and spiritual credentials of Stephen are clearly established. He is set apart by his character, the blessings of the apostles, and his works and his wisdom. Further, Stephen, like Christ himself, is controversial and brought to trial because of accusations made by false witnesses.

By the same token, the reader discovers the familiar and authentic quality of Stephen as well. The text also presents Stephen as a person who is falsely accused of things he did not do²⁸ and then suffered for crimes he did not commit.²⁹ Accordingly, Stephen is set apart, special, and yet also deeply human – the proto-martyr. Ultimately, Stephen as a preacher imitates the Christ who is the ideal example of one who is set apart in holiness and yet one who suffers wrongly.

The context of Stephen's sermon is the council of the Jewish high priest and elders. In the description, Stephen is seized and brought before the council to stand trial. In simple terms, it is a court of law where Stephen is forced to make an appearance and defend himself.³⁰ There is no question that it is a situation in which there is great hostility toward Stephen. Indeed, the reader learns that: "...they secretly instigated men, who said, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes..."³¹ Thus, as in the Passion of Christ, the context is hostile toward the preacher because of previous things he had said. Stephen, through his previous preaching, probably offended a number of other Jews. He

27 Acts 6:9-10.

28 Acts 6:13.

29 Acts 7:54-60.

30 Acts 6:12-14.

31 Acts 6:11-12.

had offended them to the extent that he was brought before the Jewish religious court, the Sanhedrin, and his discourse eventually spurred on his execution either officially or in a mob action. Stephen, then, becomes the first Christian martyr. Thus, the reader sees the preacher here as martyr and witness.

At his trial, Stephen is falsely accused and brought to account before the council:

Then they secretly instigated men, who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us."³²

At this point in the narrative, the high priest asks him if the charges levelled against him are true.³³ Stephen, in turn, answers the question with his sermon.

And, this sermon text becomes, again, for the reader an event and space for various worlds to meet. It is, indeed, a *literary* event. Thus, the contemporary world of the reader is confronted with the biblical world of Acts in first century Palestine, and the historical world of the Jewish people. The sermon begins as follows:

And Stephen said: "Brethren and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopota'mia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Depart from your land and from your kindred and go into the land which I will show you.' Then he departed from the land of the Chalde'ans, and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are

32 Acts 12-15.

33 Acts 7:1.

**now living; yet he gave him no inheritance in it,
not even a foot's length, but promised to give it
to him in possession and to his posterity after
him, though he had no child.³⁴**

Thus, at the beginning the sermon establishes continuity with Abraham. The reader is led through the history of the Jewish people. This begins with Abraham the patriarch of the Jewish people; and, the history of the Jewish people is brought to life and reclaimed in this text. As in a novel, a world is opened up, at once remote and familiar, and the text invites us to participate in it: “Brethren and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham.....” (Acts 7:2). The listener/reader, of course, is part of these worlds and therefore active and responsible in them. Indeed, the reader enters into a dialogical relationship with the *worlds* – both the biblical and her own - in the sermon text because time and place are found to be both ancient and contemporary. Indeed, the reader finds himself, as it were, in the midst of the council sitting in judgement of Stephen, experiencing the call of Abraham and God’s relationship with his chosen people and finally in the presence of the risen Christ.

By the same token, the reader is immersed in the various times suggested by the text. The reader lives through the trial of Stephen, the historical time of the ancient Jewish people and returns again to hear Stephen admonish the Jewish leaders. And, in this discourse, both time and place are universal and ever present. The reader is in a particular place or moment but aware of the eternal quality of time and place.

The council is accused of being “stiff-necked” and resisting the Holy Spirit. This is also, in a sense, a challenge to the reader—is he or she “stiff-necked” as well? And, because of their state of mind, the council are responsible for betraying and murdering the Messiah the Son of God. They, too, are responsible to worlds which they have inherited – the world of their fathers. The text reads:

**You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart
and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As**

34 Acts 7:1-5.

your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.³⁵

And, with this final proclamation, the reader is confronted with a decision: Will the reader, also, resist the Holy Spirit? Or, will the reader choose to follow the example of Stephen? The reader, then, is given the choice of being one who resists the Holy Spirit or being one who, like Stephen, sees God and the risen Christ at God's right hand. If the sermon text has done its job correctly, there is only one decision, though in the narrative, the consequences of that decision are, perhaps foreshadowed in the death of Stephen himself – an image of what it is to follow Christ. But indeed, this decision by the reader is always urgent because the time is always now. The Kingdom of God is always at hand.

The reaction of the council is that of anger: "Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him."³⁶ Finally, the power of Stephen himself and the sermon text is reinforced at the end by noting that Stephen is "...full of the Holy Spirit..." This is reinforced by a powerful image - an appeal to our imaginations – as Stephen looks to heaven to see God and the figure of Christ standing at the right hand of God.³⁷ Ultimately, as was noted above, Stephen imitates the figure of Christ himself. The text reads:

And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.³⁸

35 Acts 7:51-53.

36 Acts 7:54.

37 Acts 7:55-56.

38 Acts 7:59-60.

In this way, indicated through the dramatic imagery and deliberately familiar patterning of the narrative of the story that frames Stephen's sermon, its necessary context, the choice to follow Stephen is a choice to follow Christ because Stephen, as our pattern establishes, imitates Christ. Indeed, *all* preachers properly imitate Christ and echo his life story in their proclamation. Again, Marcel Simon writes:

The striking fact in the account of Stephen's trial and death is its very close and possibly to a certain extent deliberate analogy with the passion of Christ as related in the gospels.

Stephen's trial takes its origin, just as Christ's, in the testimony of 'false witnesses', suborned by the enemies of the faith. The accusation is, in both cases, almost exactly the same. Of Jesus we are told that he said 'I am able to destroy the Temple of God and to build it in three days', and Stephen, 'speaking blasphemous words against the Holy Place and the Law', does nothing more than repeat the very words attributed to Jesus: 'This Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place.' Likewise the vision which closes Stephen's speech rests on the prophecy uttered by Jesus in a similar situation before the Sanhedrin.³⁹

The Kingdom of God, we might say, is at hand in the dramatic and literary power of this sermonic text. The reader is in the eternal moment of place and time mediated by the textual experience with a decision to be made by the reader at once.

39 Simon, *Saint Stephen and the Hellenists in the Primitive Church* 1958, p. 20.

Chapter 4

John Chrysostom

We now move forward some three centuries to the first sermon text which had its beginning in an identifiable liturgical community, the “Homily Delivered after the Remains of Martyrs.”¹ This sermon was preached some eight miles outside the city of Constantinople at a martyrium—a place of burial for martyrs—and commemorated the interment of their holy remains. The crowd had gathered to hear the Bishop speak after processing to the site the night before.² The preacher and bishop in question was John Chrysostom³ who, as the name Chrysostom indicates, was called “golden-tongued.” Indeed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pope Pius X declared him patron of preachers. Further, Philip Schaff writes of Chrysostom:

The crowning merit of Chrysostom is his excellency as a preacher. He is generally and justly regarded as the greatest pulpit orator of the Greek church. Nor has he any superior or equal among the Latin Fathers. He remains to this day a model for preachers in large cities.⁴

Chrysostom was born around 349 in Antioch to a family that held some standing in the community. During Chrysostom’s lifetime, Christianity was increasing in numbers and influence, and at the same time, the new religion was competing with other influences including the Hellenistic culture of the past.⁵ Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen note:

Christianity, while by no means as yet the dominant religion, was the ascendant; yet, at the same time, it struggled to compete with the older pagan religions, the

1 The text is taken from Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen. *John Chrysostom*. London: Routledge, 2000. pp. 86-92.

2 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 3

3 The given name Chrysostom was used the first time in the *Constitution of Pope Vigilius* (cf. P.L., LX, 217) in the year 553.

4 Schaff, Philip. ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Saint Chrysostom*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996. p. 22.

5 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000.

imperial court and Judaism, each of which had a strong and tenacious hold on the public space and upon the public mind⁶

Chrysostom's mother was believed to be a Christian and his father was a successful civil servant. His father died at a young age and his mother never remarried.

History can tell us little about the early life of Chrysostom. However, it is understood that he finished his schooling under a professional orator, Libanisu of Antioch. When Chrysostom was about eighteen, he presented himself for baptism by the pro-Nicene Bishop Meletius and spent the next three years as an aid to the bishop thus beginning his career in the church. However, the faction of Christianity to which Chrysostom attached himself was not considered orthodox at the time and, as a result, their worship was held outside the city walls.⁷

In 371, Chrysostom was appointed as a lector in the Meletian clergy but soon after, he left the position to take on the life of an ascetic following the Pachomian Rule. Chrysostom spent four years of study under a mentor and, according to tradition, a further two years standing in a cave with little food and sleep. During this time, it is reported that Chrysostom committed to memory the Old and New Testaments.⁸

Chrysostom eventually returned to Antioch and was ordained as a deacon and later joined the priesthood. It is clear that Chrysostom showed considerable talent for preaching because Bishop Flavian appointed him specifically as a preacher. Little is known about Chrysostom's life for the next twelve years save that he engaged in a considerable amount of preaching; and it seems that preaching was in vogue during this time. John Kelly notes:

⁶ Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 3

⁷ This discussion draws in large part from the information provided in the introduction contained in Mayer and Allen, 2000. pp. 2-25.

⁸ Kelly, John Norman Davidson. *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom—ascetic, preacher, bishop*. London: Gerald Duckworth and Company Limited, 1996. p. 57.

So for almost twelve years, from 386 to late 397, John stood out as the leading pulpit orator of Antioch, building up an unrivalled reputation. The Syrian capital was amazingly addicted to sermons. You could not find another city anywhere, he once observed, which had such a passion...for them; and he often inveighed bitterly against the crowds which flocked to church exclusively to listen to the preacher, only to rush off before the awesome climax when Christ would reveal himself in the holy mysteries.⁹

Ten years later, through brilliant speaking ability, fate and political calculation, Chrysostom became Bishop of Constantinople in 398. During his first years as bishop, Chrysostom involved himself with the various interest groups that vied for power throughout the city. Further, and importantly for our purposes, Chrysostom became closely connected with the emperor and his wife. Indeed, the empress became involved in many of the activities under Chrysostom's direction.¹⁰

As a preacher, Chrysostom was considered to be direct and even intimate in his preaching style, preferring on many occasions to be seated close to his congregation so that they could hear him better:

Just because an Episcopal throne was available in many of the churches in which John preached at Constantinople and because this was the place from which a bishop was expected to deliver his sermon, it did not mean that he always observed the time-honoured custom. Indeed, there is clear evidence to the contrary. Socrates tells us that, as bishop, he more often than not preached seated on the ambo out in the middle of the nave, where he could be better heard by the people...¹¹

9 Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 1996, p. 6.

10 Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom*, 1996, p. 7.

11 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 26.

Furthermore, Chrysostom could not separate his rhetorical education and the freedom which it granted in speech from his preaching. Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen write:

The traces of John's rhetorical education can be seen in every aspect of his sermon's structure, content and delivery. Nowhere are they more evident than in the homilies delivered on special occasions. In these the freedom from the demands of the liturgical year, the lectionary system or other customary considerations allows him to give his oratorical skills full rein.¹²

In fact, Chrysostom's rhetorical skills were so accomplished that, on several occasions, he tried in vain to prevent congregations from spontaneously applauding during the service.¹³ Yet, his primary concern was not rhetorical persuasion but the pastoral one of trying to reach his people: quite simply, classical rhetoric was the best way to accomplish this task. Indeed, George Kennedy writes concerning Chrysostom and other preachers of the time that:

....they were concerned with moving the hearts of their audience and inspiring their lives, and the devices of sophistic rhetoric had become the cues to which their audiences responded and by which their purpose could best be accomplished.¹⁴

The people that Chrysostom preached to were primarily from the powerful and influential upper classes and well educated, even as high as royalty. However, women and slaves would be present in the congregation as well: as Meyer and Allen suggest:

That the wealthy members of Antiochene and Constantinopolitan society attended church and, when they did so, constituted a high-profile sector among John's audience is readily evident, since he often addresses them directly....Contrary to previous opinion

¹² Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 27.

¹³ Kennedy, George. *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1980. p.145.

¹⁴ Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition* 1980, p. 145.

on the subject it has recently been asserted that women also attended in reasonable numbers on ordinary occasions in a number of the churches in both cities...With regard to the presence of slaves it is likely that they were usually to be encountered in the company of their mistresses or masters.¹⁵

Whether the truly poor were able to attend Chrysostom's preaching is unlikely.

Nevertheless, they might have been able to hear his message because many of them could have been gathered around the church building during the time of the service to beg for money:

Within this scenario one might expect that the poor who physically surrounded the churches and were the focus of the welfare programmes of the church and the recipients of its largesse were also to be found within the church buildings at the time of the synaxis and were among those who listened to the preacher's message. Yet, in this respect it seems more likely that the audience within the church mirrored external society.¹⁶

In any case, it would seem that Chrysostom's preaching reached all classes of society from the most wealthy to the very poor. Indeed, Chrysostom was held in high repute as a pastor as well as preacher. Thus, it is important to note that the congregation to which Chrysostom delivered his sermons would share many of the same qualities as the readers of the sermonic text which we now have. That is to say, like Chrysostom's hearers, the reader might be from any element of society, but some, at least, will be educated and perhaps aware of the numerous biblical references employed by Chrysostom. Thus, the milieu of the sermon is entirely universal, yet their reference is still linked to the specifics of a particular place and occasion in the church and the city of Constantinople. The sermons that Chrysostom left for posterity are varied in subject matter and setting, and thus for the student of homiletics, his work offers a diverse collection of sermonic literature. Again, Mayer and Allen note:

15 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, pp. 34-35.

16 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, pp. 35-36.

Whereas the contents of his sermons were shaped by the different strands of his education, it was the liturgical calendar in operation at each city, in conjunction with the civic calendar and local events, which to a large degree determined the kinds of homilies which John preached. Collectively, his sermons range from festival homilies, and panegyrics on saints and martyrs, to primarily exegetical commentaries, polemical or ethical discourses, and catechesis.¹⁷

There is no question that Chrysostom produced a great number of sermons and varied his sermon output considerably.

At this point in the discussion, we will examine in some detail the sermon delivered by Chrysostom in a suburban martyrion on the outskirts of his episcopal city of Constantinople. Here, this thesis will examine the fictive qualities in this sermonic text and demonstrate how it follows the template established by the sermons in Mark's Gospel already examined in chapter two. The sermon itself is an impassioned expression by Chrysostom of the importance of faith in God through Christ. This occasion provides the preacher with an opportunity to praise and support the people by noting their commitment and emphasising the importance faith plays in the life of a believer. It is at this point in the reading of the sermonic text that the reader takes on, so to speak, the role of a listener of the sermon as it was first preached.

The sermon begins with Chrysostom wondering what he can say in this particular situation because he claims to be already overwhelmed by the faith of the people. Indeed, as the listener will discover, Chrysostom has been moved by the faith of the city during the celebrations. Hundreds took part in the procession the previous night to the martyrion for the dedication of the holy remains. Thus, Chrysostom begins with a rhetorical ploy by expressing doubt in his own speaking ability. Of course, Chrysostom

¹⁷ Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 29.

employs the common rhetorical trope of false doubt.¹⁸ It can be assumed that those who are gathered to hear the bishop are perfectly well aware of his speaking ability. Thus, Chrysostom heightens expectation and draws his congregation into his discourse. Further, he claims to be actually jumping with excitement and in a frenzy that is beyond all common sense:

What can I say? What shall I speak? I am jumping with excitement and aflame with a frenzy that is better than common sense. I'm flying and dancing and floating on air and, for the rest, drunk under the influence of this spiritual pleasure. What can I say? What shall I speak?¹⁹

Here, too, it would seem Chrysostom is acting contrary to how a bishop should behave—in essence he sets up his foolish behaviour to make a point about the power of faith in Christ.

As the sermon continues, Chrysostom praises his audience, including women, magistrates and, of course, and above all, the empress, for their strong faith.²⁰ He ends this introductory section with a reference to 1 Chronicles where David, he says, “jumped with excitement and danced and leapt about, playing the complete idiot and prancing around.”²¹ Chrysostom dares to compare the empress in her faith with David and asserts that she, too, has a passion for these remains that contain “a blossoming grace, a radiant gift, bones that reflect the very rays of the sun.”²² And this is the point, engulfed with the power of faith one has no choice but to behave like a complete idiot. Of course, Chrysostom is careful to base this behaviour on the authority of scripture, noting that this is how King David behaved and the empress echoes this royal behaviour.

18 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000. Introduction.

19 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000. p. 86.

20 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000. p. 86.

21 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000. pp. 86-87.

22 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000. p. 87.

Chrysostom's next statement refers to 'demons' that are unable to bear the brilliance of these remains to the point that they are required to remain a considerable distance away.²³ This reference by Chrysostom reinforces a separation between good and evil—those who are in and those who stand outside. And, considering that this crowd is very diverse, with some in the congregation not even part of the Christian community, Chrysostom may be attempting to guide the non-believers in the congregation to the faith he proclaims. Indeed, the power of these holy remains will repel the unclean and sanctify those “who approach with faith.”²⁴

In the next section of his discourse, Chrysostom turns his attention to the empress noting that she was “constantly reaching out and touching the remains.”²⁵ Chrysostom deliberately sets up the empress as a model of Christian faith to be admired and followed. Perhaps his motives are mixed. Chrysostom is no doubt using this occasion as an opportunity to profess his admiration for the empress who will help him politically, and Chrysostom sees the empress's presence as a means to further legitimise the Christian community in the diverse city. By doing so, perhaps, the opportunity for more conversions to the faith becomes possible.

Chrysostom further compares the sacred remains to a “fount that is constantly drained but never emptied.”²⁶ And he describes the flow of “the grace of the spirit” extending to those who follow it with faith so that it “flows from mind into body and from body into clothing and from clothing into shoes and from shoes into a person's shadow.”²⁷ And, returning to scripture and the authority of the apostolic age, Chrysostom notes that St. Peter's shadow “performed deeds more powerful than those of any living things.”²⁸ Chrysostom then refers to this same grace being found in Elisha,

23 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 87.

24 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 87.

25 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 87.

26 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 87.

27 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 88.

28 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 88.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.²⁹ The numerous references to scripture reinforce the point that stories of scripture are filled with people who had a strong faith, linking them with the very people whom he is addressing and underlining the power of their faith. Indeed, it is a faith so strong that it drives people to engage in activity that appears to be contrary to common sense. And, as the stories attest, God rewards the faithful. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego live through the trial of the furnace because of this faith.

In the next section of the sermon, Chrysostom exclaims, in a vigorous metaphor, that he is “flying under the influence of pleasure.”³⁰ He acknowledges the success of this event with ever more vivid imagery: there are sheep and no wolves, grapevines and no thistles, grain and no weeds.³¹ In this section, Chrysostom addresses the audience as apparently universal – the common reader as well as the specific congregation.

Chrysostom goes on to contrast lamps that burn during the night with the “Inner Light” of the people gathered. Each person, Chrysostom claims, carries a double lamp: “the lamp of flame in the night; the lamp of enthusiasm in both the night and the day.”³² And with this enthusiasm, people have poured out into the street with a “spiritual joy” creating a single river of people.³³ Indeed, Chrysostom is continually pointing out how the life of faith goes beyond the reality of the everyday and the normal. Indeed, a common lamp points to the reality of the light of faith itself.

As the sermon continues, Chrysostom again turns his praise evermore openly to the empress herself, praising her zeal, her faith, and her mind. Remembering where they are he notes that she has “benefited the populace no less than the martyrs.”³⁴ This section of the sermon shows the listener the profound effect that faith has on the

29 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 88.

30 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 88.

31 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 88.

32 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, pp. 88-89.

33 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 89.

34 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, pp. 89-90.

individual Christian. Indeed the faith of the empress, he suggests, is hotter than a flame,³⁵ and he goes on to compare the empress to other women of faith found in the Biblical canon. Chrysostom ends this section with a long comparison between the empress and Miriam.³⁶ Indeed, Miriam, similar to the empress in her triumphal dancing, led a procession of celebration after the crossing of the Red Sea:

Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea." Then Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur; they went three days in the wilderness and found no water.³⁷

In his preaching, Chrysostom links closely the faith and life of biblical characters with the life and faith of the empress and people of Constantinople.

Chrysostom continues in this section by noting that the emperor is not present on the occasion of his sermon, but observes that this was a wise decision because “Had they [empress and emperor] both been present today, the events of the festival would have come to an end today.”³⁸ Yet, Chrysostom explains, because of the good decision to separate the couple, the celebrations can continue through the next day. The sermon ends with a call by Chrysostom to pray for the emperor and empress and demonstrate the same zeal seen today in tomorrow’s celebrations.

The above is an outline of the narrative of the sermon. At this point, this discussion will examine the qualities of the sermonic text as we now read it, as a whole. The first issue this discussion will consider is the context of the sermonic text itself. As

35 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 89.

36 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, pp. 90-91.

37 Exodus 15:20-22.

38 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 91.

has been noted above, the sermon is preached in the context of a suburban martyrrium. The specific place of the preached sermon becomes significant for the sermonic text as well. Just as we are told in Mark that Christ preached in Galilee or Capernaum, or John preached in the wilderness, all places of symbolic significance in the theological narrative of the gospel, so the setting of Chrysostom's sermon gives the sermonic text as we now read it particular power and significance. The martyrrium becomes a *literary* setting ever present to the reader in any place or time. This place in Constantinople was holy ground because of the presence of relics of past martyrs, saints and the like:

...the idea that the bones or ashes of those who had died for the faith had special powers gained credence, and such mortal remains were considered to sanctify the place where they resided. These associations led to the first translations of saints' and martyrs' remains, a practice which rapidly gained momentum.³⁹

Thus, the physical place, like a church building, is sacred and holds a relationship with the divine. It is on this hallowed ground that Chrysostom preaches and the text of his sermon remains tied to it.

The sermonic text also recognizes and draws power from the episcopal authority of the preacher. His pre-eminence is established in a number of ways. Most apparent is the fact that he is the Bishop of Constantinople, which gives him the authority of episcopal consecration. At the same time, Chrysostom holds an authority with the gathered audience because of his personal reputation as a speaker. Thirdly, his authority is enhanced by the presence of the empress who is not only present at this particular service of worship but had joined the lengthy procession to the holy site the night before. Finally, Chrysostom adds to the power and gravitas of his discourse by the numerous references to scripture at the beginning and throughout the sermon. His first reference begins with Psalm 106: 2 where he states: "It would be fitting to say of it all: 'Who will speak of your

³⁹ Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 3.

powers Lord? Who will make heard all your praises?''',⁴⁰ Of course, Chrysostom answers this rhetorical question by offering the power of God's word through his own oratory. All these historical, literary and ecclesial circumstances endue the sermonic text with a significance otherwise lacking – reminding us of the importance of historical critical investigations in the acknowledgment of the power of literary and universal (sermonic) texts.

The biblical pattern continues throughout the discourse with reference to 1 Chronicles 15:27-29 where King David dances and leaps for joy; Acts 19:12 and its description of Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons curing diseases and driving out demons; Psalm 139 with allusions to light and darkness; finally ending with 2nd Timothy 2:12 and a reference to endurance and perseverance. Indeed, Chrysostom is pointing out the present power of the spirit as attested to in holy writ. And, the aim is that the reader, too, will find herself in the company of Paul and David. Yet, as was noted above, one of the most significant displays of authority is the way Chrysostom is linked to King David himself. The text of the sermon opens with a powerful image and a series of rhetorical questions. The reader encounters a man who is in a state of ecstasy, almost akin to drunkenness, by the power of the divine. And this description mirrors King David when he is also in a state of excitement:

David was clothed with a robe of fine linen, as also were all the Levites who were carrying the ark, and the singers, and Chenani'ah the leader of the music of the singers; and David wore a linen ephod. So all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD with shouting, to the sound of the horn, trumpets, and cymbals, and made loud music on harps and lyres. And as the ark of the covenant of the LORD came to the city of David, Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David dancing and making merry; and she despised him in her heart.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 86.

⁴¹ 1 Chronicles 15:27-29.

Clearly, the authority of David is echoed in Chrysostom and his discourse. At the same time, those who may find themselves amused at Chrysostom's behaviour remember that Michal the daughter of Saul "despised" David for his actions. Clearly Chrysostom attempts to show that the person with faith acts like David despite the scoffers like Michal.

Thus, at the beginning of the sermonic text, the reader is drawn into the context established by all the above. This sermon text opens with a statement by Chrysostom of pretended doubt, which is a common rhetorical trope. These two questions bring the reader into the presence of Chrysostom's worlds. Chrysostom's pretended doubt heightens the expectation of a reader that anticipates Chrysostom's message. In this way, the reader is caught in Walter Nash's understanding of rhetoric, as a trap from which there is no easy escape.⁴² Here the sermonic text hosts imaginative "worlds" from which the reader finds escape difficult.

This opening is embellished with descriptive words that create a time of frenzy and excitement, which further enfolds the reader into Chrysostom's world. Like his original congregation we are challenged by the images the now 'literary' Chrysostom presents of himself acting under the power of the spirit. Chrysostom repeats his questions again⁴³ adding to the anticipation by listing a number of achievements he could discuss. The list is long including the faith of the martyrs, the Church, the Spirit, and monks. And, at the beginning of the oration, this is exactly where Chrysostom wants his listeners/readers to be.

In this space, the reader encounters her own world, the ancient world of Constantinople, sacred ground and holy remains and behind everything the biblical world that Chrysostom leads the reader in and out of. Thus, the elements of time and

42 For a full discussion on Nash's understanding of rhetoric see Nash, Walter. *Rhetoric: The Wit of Persuasion*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell: 1989. See further, Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*. Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1988. See also above chapter one.

43 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 86.

place are both eternal and specific because the reader exists in the imagination in each place as if it was the present and in each time as if it was the present moment. The reader thus becomes one, as it were, with the original congregation of the sermon. The eternal quality of time is reinforced with his comments concerning the event of the preached sermon and the empress's role in it. Indeed, Chrysostom claims that this event will live on in history and will not be forgotten. If God, Chrysostom exclaims, in a daring image validated only by scripture, "caused the action of a female prostitute to reach the ends of the earth and rendered her immortal in people's memory, even more so won't he allow to be forgotten the work of a decorous, grave and prudent woman who has displayed such great piety in imperium."⁴⁴ And, for the reader, the event has not been forgotten and, indeed, it is being relived through the present experience and challenge of the text.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the reader is confronted with a decision. At the beginning of this discourse, the text sets up for the reader an element of choice. That is to say, that in the 'worlds' of the sermonic text including the biblical world, the world of Chrysostom and his congregation, and the reader's own world, the reader is confronted with a choice. She encounters one who is, beyond reason, "jumping with excitement and a flame with a frenzy that is *better* than common sense."⁴⁵ (Emphasis added.) The choice to be made, then, is between a life filled with excitement for God and the power of the Spirit, or the everyday, reasonable and common-sensical life of so called 'reality'.

This choice is further reinforced by the notion that the most admired and indeed key people in scripture and history have chosen to be drawn into the frenzy of Christ and his gospel. As was noted above, the text makes numerous references to biblical characters and notes that the empress herself is in the company of the saints. Indeed, the

44 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 90.

45 Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 2000, p. 86.

reader, then, can choose to be part of this worthy and distinguished group if she makes the correct decision, even against reason.

This sermonic text follows the broad template which we established in the sermonic texts of Mark's Gospel. First, the sermonic text, drawing upon the circumstances of the original sermonic event in Constantinople, creates a context for the discourse and ensures the 'literary' authority of the preacher. As a result, the reader imaginatively enters the worlds hosted by the sermonic text. Further, the reader's experience of time and place is found to be both specific and eternal. Finally, and above all, the reader is confronted with a decision to accept the faith of the Christ. Yet, it is important to note that in this sermonic text, the devices of rhetoric play a central role. Its construction is influenced by the Greco-Roman understanding and practice of classical rhetoric. This is an important literary tool that will be encountered through the thesis because rhetoric and the power of texts to persuade cannot be separated. Yet, no matter what the case, this sermonic text echoes the proclamation and call in Mark: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Mark 1:15.

Chapter 5

Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327/28)

The next sermon text encountered in this thesis has its origin in the ministry and preaching of the German Dominican and mystic Meister Eckhart (c.1260 - 1327/8). The primary concern here, of course, is with Eckhart as preacher; however, it is clear that Eckhart has been understood as a diverse, controversial and colourful figure throughout the history of Christianity and, perhaps even more significantly, beyond. Indeed, Matthew Fox makes the following comments:

Meister Eckhart was a mystic and prophet, feminist and philosopher, preacher and theologian, administrator and poet, a spiritual genius and a declared heretic. While all reputable scholars today agree he was unjustly condemned—his condemnation bears all the earmarks of an attempt to silence his prophetic preaching on behalf of the poor in his society—his way of spirituality remains too little known in the West. While Hindus and Buddhists claim Eckhart as one of their own, while psychologists like Jung and Marxists like Bloch and Fromm learn from him, many many Christians hardly know the name, much less the spiritual tradition he represents so beautifully.¹

James Clark adds to his description by noting:

It can scarcely be disputed that Eckhart was one of the greatest speculative mystics. He was, moreover, one of the outstanding personalities in the history of European religious thought. In his own day his name was loved and venerated by his pupils and penitents, but at the same time he was the object of violent animosity and acrimonious abuse from other quarters. It was

¹ Fox, Matthew. *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear and Company, 1983. p. 3.

his fate to arouse both deep affection and uncompromising hostility. Even after his death the controversy continued to rage...At one time or another he has been claimed as a prophet or precursor by Lutherans, Romanticists, Pantheists, Hegelians, National Socialists, Theosophists and Existentialists. The Hindus claim him as a kindred spirit. The Quakers regard him as a rebel against rigid dogma and sacramental religion; they equate his 'spark of the soul' with the 'inward light'. Some Catholic theologians consider him as a champion of Thomist orthodoxy, albeit tinged by Neoplatonic ways of thought.²

Clearly a figure that divides and challenges, at the beginning of this discussion it is important to emphasise Eckhart's talent and skill as a preacher. Indeed, it can be argued that Eckhart, in his essence, is a preacher and mirrors an inner authority and challenging charisma similar to the figure of Christ himself in Mark's Gospel.

'Meister' Eckhart was born Eckhart von Hochheim in Thuringia around the year 1260. He was born into a noble family, and Eckhart entered the Dominican friary of Erfurt as a novice and was sent to study in Paris and probably Cologne under Albertus Magnus. After a rigorous program of study, he was made a Dominican friar and began teaching. Soon after, Eckhart was elected the Prior of Erfurt, which testifies to the high respect in which his colleagues held him. Undeniably, it was apparent that the young Dominican was gifted academically which accounts for his selection to study in Paris for the degree of Master of Theology. Thus, he came to be known as 'Meister' Eckhart, which distinguished him from others of the same name.³

Eckhart is considered to be one of the great Christian mystics in the history of the Church and is understood to have taken a leading pastoral and organizational role in the development of the Dominican Order. Eckhart uses graphic language that expounds the

² Clark, James. *Meister Eckhart: An Introduction to the Study of his Works with an Anthology of his Sermons*. London: Nelson, 1957. pp. v-vi.

³ See Clark's introduction on Eckhart to which this discussion is indebted.

eternal mysteries of faith and this quality pushes his listeners and readers to experience reality in a unique way. Through the vividness of his use of imagery, Eckhart directs his followers to things that lie beyond the mere physical world. Indeed, one who encounters Eckhart begins to understand that his theology revolves around the idea of ‘detachment’, ‘equanimity’, ‘composure’ or *gelassenheit* and he moves the reader to encounter a metaphysical experience of the oneness of all being.⁴ One does not so much ‘understand’ Eckhart; rather, it can be argued that one experiences him through an imaginative process of theological practice.

This argument will examine Eckhart’s German sermon twenty-one (DW 86, W 9) based on the text of Luke 10:38, *Intravit Iesus in castellum, et mulier quaedam, Martha nomine, excepit illum*. We will explain how the sermon and the sermon text follow the template established in the New Testament ‘sermons’ discussed above. The context of Eckhart’s sermon was a community of faith, which is, at the same time, an *anti-community* because Eckhart and his adherents were on the margins of the established medieval Church. Eckhart, we might say and not unlike Christ himself, is part of and leads the ‘anti-community’. That is to say, he leads a community of faith that is considered to be outside the bounds of the accepted Church. Further, the sermon was preached in German rather than in scholastic Latin, which was at least unusual for its day and leads one to assume the sermon was perhaps directed toward a less highly educated audience. Nevertheless, Eckhart uses a challenging form of High German, which is scholastic in its own right. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* remarks:

He became famous as a vernacular preacher, especially to nuns, and probably also to beguines. His brilliant, creative use of German makes him an author at once attractive and difficult. His readiness to exploit verbal ambiguities and dramatic paradoxes left him open to widely differing interpretations.⁵

4 The term is importantly used by Heidegger, drawing upon Eckhart.

5 Cross, F. Ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Third Edition, ed. E. A. Livingstone. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. p.527.

As the sermon opens, the reader of the sermon text becomes, so to speak, a 'listener' to the sermon, aware of the historical tensions of the original address. The sermon begins in the time of Christ's ministry in 'a little town,'⁶ that is probably the Bethany of Martha and Mary (John 11.1). Here, Eckhart explains why Mary chose to sit at the feet of Christ and, indeed, why the listener/reader himself sits at the foot of Christ as well: the goodness of God possessed her soul, as she experienced unspeakable longing and finally joy from the words of Christ. Further, Eckhart explains why Martha chooses to wait on Christ: mature age, wise understanding of outward works and the great dignity of her beloved guest. The text states:

Now there are three things which caused Mary to sit at the feet of our Lord. The first was that the goodness of God had seized her soul. The second was an inexpressible desire: she was filled with longing, but did not know what for. She was filled with desire, but did not know why. The third thing was the sweet consolation and the bliss which came to her from the eternal words which flowed from the mouth of Christ.⁷

From the beginning of the sermon, Eckhart constructs a sermon that is a hermeneutical exercise in *eisegesis* as opposed to a more traditional exegesis – that is he uses the biblical text as a source and basis to draw out his own theological and spiritual meditations. Further, the sermon is dialogical within a Trinitarian framework, which means his listeners are brought into a world in which Trinitarian theology and understanding is the norm. Thus the listener to the sermon text is engaged in a dialogical relationship with the sermon and its basis in scripture. The listener experiences the text in his own time and in his own setting, and yet at the same moment, he is developing this as if sitting at the feet of Christ in a small town with Martha and Mary. For Eckhart this is an important aspect of his theology. He does not really distinguish between biblical time and the time of listener to the sermon or the reader of the text.

6 Meister Eckhart. *Selected Writings*. Trans and Ed. Oliver Davies. London: Penguin, 1994. pp. 193-202. At this point there is still no full critical edition of Eckhart's German sermons. Their idiosyncratic German presents considerable difficulties for English translation.

7 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 193.

Once the listener experiences the *fictive moment* of the sermon, she finds herself in a universal reality, true for all time. Indeed, rhetorically, Eckhart offers questions that allow his listener to participate in the time and place of the dialogue (the biblical house of Martha and Mary), or the reader in both the biblical and medieval contexts. This pattern continues in Eckhart's shift from Mary to Martha, and the description of her maturity, understanding and the honor she bestows on her guest.⁸ After presenting the reasons for the actions of Martha and Mary, Eckhart goes on to say:

The masters say that God is prepared to satisfy the desires of every person both with respect to the pleasures of the mind and the senses. We can discern how God satisfies both our mind and senses in the precious friends of God.⁹

Eckhart defines satisfaction of the senses as God-given comfort, joy, contentment and mental satisfaction. Yet, how this is translated into 'our' experience of the world—specifically in the lives of his listeners, and later in the lives of the readers of the sermon text—is Eckhart's concern. Eckhart relates the world of Luke's Gospel to his listener's own experience of the world. In the sermon Eckhart sets out a 'way' to God, which is a process involving works, will, and virtue. The later reader of the sermon text becomes, in a sense, part of Eckhart's congregation as of the world of Mary and Martha, seeking in the layers of the text for advice for his own life.

The sermon text continues by quoting a statement of Martha's from the Lukan narrative: "Lord, tell her to help me."¹⁰ Eckhart, entering into the drama of the situation, suggests that this was not said in anger but rather in affection. The passage in Luke might strongly suggest that Martha is angry, but Eckhart and his congregation, immersed in the biblical world, feel free to explain scripture in a way that furthers their own agenda. Eckhart explains that Martha attempts to show Mary that nothing is possible without God. Eckhart puts it in this way:

8 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 193.

9 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 193.

10 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 194. Luke 10.40b.

That is why she said: ‘Lord, tell her to help me’, as if she meant to say that her sister seemed to think that she could do whatever she wished simply by sitting at the Lord’s feet and enjoying his consolation. ‘Let her see now whether this is really the case, and tell her to stand up and go away.’¹¹

The above is distinctive of the text’s pedagogical nature. Indeed, the listener is drawn into Eckhart’s interpretation because it is more a dramatization of the whole fictive world of Luke’s Gospel as opposed to an interpretation of Luke’s text. Indeed, in this world, Eckhart allows Martha to have a voice that is beyond the biblical text and speaks directly to the experience of the listener. In the literary world the reader is offered greater insight into and participation in the *experience* of the biblical narrative—not merely a particular meaning of it. And Martha stands, in her voice, between a number of worlds.

As was noted above, the listener is presented with a number of rhetorical questions that allow her a more expansive and reflective experience of the world she has entered. Eckhart states:

But why did Christ say ‘Martha, Martha’, thus naming her twice? Isidore says there is no doubt that neither prior to nor after his birth in human form did God ever call anyone by name who was subsequently lost, but the case is more doubtful for those whom he did not call by name¹²

Thus, a question is posed (drawing on the biblical narrative) and then answered (drawing on a late patristic theologian) for the listener, merging seamlessly the two contexts. The effect of the constant question/answer maintains a dialogue that disarms the reader and allows her to exist imaginatively in the composite world of the sermonic text. This pattern continues throughout the whole of the sermon. The authorial voice of Eckhart

11 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, pp. 194-195.

12 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 195. The reference is to St. Isidore, Bishop of Seville (c.560-636), though no trace of this suggestion has been found in his works.

offers questions to be answered. And through his answers he is constructing the theological world of the sermon, and thereby the experience of and way to God.

As the sermon progresses, the listener/ reader encounters a discussion on the importance of names and of being called by Christ. Indeed, the point is made, looking back to the authority of St Isidore, an early Bishop of Seville, that no one who is named by God is lost. Isidore, used in addition to the biblical narrative, was utilized throughout the Middle Ages as a storehouse of theological wisdom. This assertion is then elaborated on, in a return to biblical authority, though now from both Testaments, by describing the experiences of Moses and Nathaniel:

None of those....whom Christ actually called by name, were lost. Moses is proof of this, to whom God himself said, 'I have called you by name (Ex. 33:12), and Nathaniel, to whom our beloved Christ said, 'I knew you when you lay beneath the fig tree' (John 1:50)....Thus it is shown that none of those individuals were lost, *or ever shall be lost*, whom Christ addressed by name with his human tongue from the eternal Word.¹³ (Emphasis added).

The same type of rhetorical question is offered as the sermon to the Lukan passage: "But why did he call Martha twice by name?"¹⁴ By answering this question, Eckhart enters into a discussion concerning Martha's possession of "all that is good and all that a creature can possess, whether temporal or eternal."¹⁵ And, in her answer Martha is described as "careful" and one who "conforms" to "eternal light."¹⁶ Martha is very close to God and can be seen as a universal model for Mary and for the listener/reader.

As the sermon continues, the listener finds that the unity with God (a persistent theme in Eckhart's works) is compared to eternal light within the circle of eternity.¹⁷

13 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 195.

14 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 195.

15 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 195.

16 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 196.

17 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 196.

This, the sermon asserts, is the case with Martha and in time this is where the text hopes to place the reader.

Once this is established, the sermon explains what the circle of eternity means, again looking back to the authority of 'King Solomon' (Ecclus. 24:7). And, in the explanation, the listener confronts a Trinitarian path to God including seeking God in all creatures, a pathless way, and finally seeing God without means in his own being.¹⁸ For each path, the listener finds a quotation from scripture to support the example. At the end of the final path the goal is a joyous eternity. Eckhart states:

How astonishing: to be without and within, to grasp and be grasped, to see and be ourselves seen, to hold and be ourselves held—that is the goal, where the spirit dwells in peace united in precious eternity!¹⁹

And, as has been the pattern, the sermon is calling the listener/ reader to be part of this world of joyous eternity. The listener is held firmly in the world of the sermon with a description of how life can be if, like Martha, she chooses to be part of the mystical experience. Indeed, this is an experience of the eternal because the listener, like Martha, is both in the biblical text and also beyond it in a universal condition.

As the sermon continues, it moves back and forth from the world of the eternal to the world of Martha and "all God's friends."²⁰ Thus, the sermon itself moves through different worlds in the same way a person would move through different rooms in a house. And the voice of the sermon in the description of Eckhart takes the listener through each transition.

Indeed, the listener encounters a discussion on the importance and nature of works. And again this is presented theologically in a Trinitarian pattern including orderliness.

18 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 197.

19 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 198.

20 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 198.

insight and perspicacity.²¹ And the listener will note that the worlds of the sermon are structured in a Trinitarian form which, of course, for Eckhart, is the reality of God.

Continuing with the Lukan narrative, the listener is introduced to a discussion on why Christ said to Martha: "You are concerned with many things."²² And, within the world of the text the listener can feel the statement directed also to her and her life.

In the next section of the sermon, we find a discussion concerning the nature of virtue. The listener notes that virtuous living depends on three points pertaining to the will. The first is sensible will, following is rational will and finally eternal will. This creates a path to God that the listener is asked to follow, for the reader recalling the necessity of the *willing* suspension of disbelief in the text. The listener seeks guidance, to follow in the steps of Christ in order to reach the eternal will of God. The sermon states:

There are three kinds of will. The first is a 'sensual' will, the second a 'rational' will and the third an 'eternal' will. The sensual will demands instruction and motivates us to listen to authentic teachers. The rational will consists in planting our feet in all the deeds of Christ and the saints, which means to say that we direct our works, our way of life and all our actions towards the highest end. When all this has been fulfilled, then God causes something else to descend into the soul's ground: the eternal will together with the loving command of the Holy Spirit.²³

Of course the Trinitarian structure is clearly apparent and one is called actually to live the Trinity. In this way, the Trinity is, in a sense, a process in the text itself.

21 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 198.

22 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 199.

23 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 200.

As Eckhart persists in his sermon, the listener is offered the clear choice to follow the mystic life and path of the Christ:

Now some good people maintain that they have progressed so far that the presence of physical objects no longer affects their senses. But this is not the case. I shall never reach the point where a hideous noise is as pleasing to my ears as sweetly sounding strings. But this much is possible—that a rational, God-conformed will may be free of all natural pleasures and, upon hearing such a noise, commands the sensual will not to be concerned with it so that the latter replies: ‘I gladly agree!’ Then conflict will return to joy, for what we must strive for with great effort becomes our heart’s delight, and only then does it bear fruit.²⁴

At the beginning of the above quote, Eckhart tests his listeners, going on to warn of the struggle ahead: “Some good people imagine they can reach a point where sensible things do not affect the senses.” This is a rhetorical device that provokes thought. Does the listener agree with Eckhart’s assertion? One can imagine a dramatic pause before Eckhart proclaims, “But this is not the case...” Finally, the sermon closes with a call to do good works in the world and “...follow [Christ] faithfully in the practice of true virtues, so help us God. Amen.”²⁵

With the above commentary in mind, we will now describe the way this sermon text adheres to the template of Mark. First, a consideration of the authority of the preacher: from the beginning of his academic work it was clear to Eckhart’s contemporaries that he was a gifted and original writer and speaker and this gave Eckhart an authority and pre-eminence among his peers. Clark makes the following comment concerning Eckhart’s writings while in Paris:

The general impression gained from these Paris writings is that the author is of considerable

²⁴ Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, pp. 201-202.

²⁵ Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 202.

originality. His works stand out in strong relief from the pedestrian efforts of his contemporaries. He loves striking phrases and is apt to quote from very obscure authorities. The wide range of his reading is apparent. His language is vigorous and imaginative, and his words would be well calculated to arrest the attention of his hearers. The love of paradox is already visible, but it is kept within bounds.²⁶

Thus, as a preacher of the word, Eckhart's reputation was varied but always powerful and charismatic. Indeed, his authority not only came from his ordination and position within a community of believers; but at the same time, the power and ability of this intellect gave him an authority as well. He was respected, feared and loved because of his ability and position.

At the same time, the authority of the preacher and his discourse is established with the use of scripture at the beginning of the text and throughout the sermon. Similarly to the beginning of Mark's Gospel and its use of Isaiah, Eckhart opens his sermon by paraphrasing Luke's Gospel. The text states:

Saint Luke writes in his gospel that our Lord entered a small town, where he was received by a woman called Martha. She had a sister, whose name was Mary. Mary sat at the feet of our Lord and listen to his words, while Martha moved about and waited on our Lord²⁷

This beginning of the sermon text establishes it firmly within the world of the Bible. First, Eckhart uses the statement: "Saint Luke writes in his gospel..."²⁸ This reference grants the text authority because the sermon is linked to the texts of scripture. Thus, the

²⁶ Clark, *Meister Eckhart: An Introduction to the Study of his Works*, 1957, p. 16.

²⁷ Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 193.

²⁸ Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 193.

authority of scripture is evoked, confirmed by the references to St. Isidore²⁹ and fathers of the Church.

The context of this sermon is in a community of faith, which is, at the same time, an *anti-community* because Eckhart and his adherents are on the margins of the established Church. Of course, Eckhart's writings were considered controversial by enough people in the ecclesial community to eventually have him declared as a heretic. Eckhart is part of and leads the anti-community. That is to say, he leads a community of faith that is considered to be outside the bounds of the accepted Church. Thus, in a way, it is Eckhart's apartness that gives him authority. The quality of being outside the establishment links Eckhart with Christ, in that Christ also was an outsider in regards to the established Jewish faith.

Thus, when the sermon uses the phrase, "our Lord Jesus Christ went into a little town", the possessive "our" when referring to Christ helps to secure the community to its authority and to reinforce the community's continuing shared experience. What is being spoken about and what is being referred to is "our" agreed understanding. (The 'our' comes to refer not merely to Eckhart's first congregation but to all who encounter his words through the sermon text.) Likewise, the sermon is written in High German as opposed to Latin. It is, in a way, the language of the people; although it would assume that the congregation would be educated. Thus, the context of this sermon is one of a community of people composed of scholars, priests, nuns and the like, and into this particular congregation the reader enters in his or her own time.

To summarize the above, the context of this sermon text is an anti-community of believers lead by a charismatic preacher and scholar situated on the margins of the established Church and its theology. Because the original sermon text is in German,

29 Saint Isidore (c 560-636) was bishop of Seville. He was "much concerned with monastic discipline, clerical education, liturgical uniformity, and the conversion of the Jews." Indeed many scholars have argued that he evolved the concept of the Spanish Church. He was canonized in 1598. His feast day is 4th April. By referring to Isidore, Eckhart seem to be following the norm of his day in that many medieval scholars referred to Isidore's work and teachings. From Cross, F. L. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. pp. 851-852.

one can assume that the community was made up of people who were not a part of the Church's scholastic community, yet were, at the same time, responsive to the traditions of theology as well as scripture. For one can assume that the community have a common knowledge and belief in the authority and power of scripture. But, as will be noted below, the purpose of the sermonic text is to further develop the story in the gospel as a challenging and imaginative experience the life of the community and all subsequent readers.

Thus we see how the sermon and the sermonic text open an event and space for the meeting of different imaginative worlds. Indeed, as has been noted, there is the world of the reader and his beliefs, values and feelings at the time of reading. Simultaneously, the reader encounters the world created in the Gospel of Luke—that is to say, the reader takes his place with Martha and Mary at the foot of Christ to hear his teaching. Indeed the notion of the quality of time is demonstrated in the following discussion in the sermon:

There are two kinds of means. The first is that without which I cannot attain God: works and actions within time, which do not detract from our eternal blessedness. We perform works when we act virtuously from outside, and *actions* when we act from within with intelligent understanding. But the second means is precisely the abandoning of the first. For that is the reason why we exist in time at all, in order to come closer to God, becoming more like him, by rational 'actions' in time. This is also what St. Paul means when he says: 'Redeem the time, the days are evil.'(Eph. 5:16)³⁰

Here, the sermonic text shows the reader a description of time on a temporal level and time from an eternal perspective, and, using the text of Ephesians 5:16, offers a challenge and a means of change from the present evil world, just as Christ called for repentance. In this way, the text calls to the situation of the reader situated in her own temporal time

30 Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 1994, p. 196.

and the eternal time – the time of the Kingdom - manifested in the sermonic text. Thus, Eckhart's sermonic text is not simply concerned with a simple exegesis of the gospel text even though it is didactic in nature; rather, the text is brought to life for the reader in its reading—through an expansion of the sense of time and place.

With the reader firmly in Luke's setting or world—first century Palestine in a small village in the presence of Martha, Mary and the Christ—the sermonic text employs the elements of time and place which in the moment of reading, allow the reader to exist in the complex time and space of the textual world.

In this way, the sermon has taken the reader into its worlds and offered the reader a choice of life as usual, or life in Christ found through the mystical path of the soul. The sermonic text thus follows the template established in the Gospel of Mark by setting a context for the sermon, using scriptural authority and hosting worlds in which eternal and temporal time and place work together. Finally the reader is confronted with a decision that has the potential to be life changing. Above, Eckhart quotes Ephesians: "Redeem the time, for the days are evil." This of course echoes the quality of *metanoia* called for by Jesus: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."³¹ Eckhart leaves the sermon open-ended, drawing both listener and reader into the place where the challenge of the Kingdom of God is always at hand.

³¹ Mark 1:15.

Chapter 6

Martin Luther's Sermon on the Tenth Sunday after Trinity, (Luke 18:9-14) July 27, 1516¹

Anyone who attempts to undertake the study of Martin Luther's sermons is confronted with a formidable task. Luther's preaching output during his lifetime was, by any standards, prolific. In fact, the 'Weimarer Ausgabe' edition of his works, in some one hundred volumes, contains the text of over two thousand of Luther's sermons alone.² Yet, it should be noted that very few of Luther's sermons were published while he was alive. Furthermore, the texts of those that are published do not necessarily reflect very precisely Luther's original discourse. John Doberstein, in his introduction to Luther's sermons, notes the following:

Yet, when all of Luther's sermons are taken into account, relatively few were published in his lifetime. The fact that a sermon was printed in his lifetime, however, is no guarantee that it represents what he actually said in the pulpit, even when it appears directly after it was preached. Very seldom do these printed versions stem from Luther himself. Indeed, whenever a first printing of a sermon appears outside of Wittenberg, in Augsburg, Nurnberg, or Erfurt, this may be accepted as clear proof that Luther had nothing to do with the form in which it appears. These contemporary prints are the product of notes and transcriptions by enthusiastic listeners and printers eager to profit by Luther's popularity. Luther was frequently obliged to protest that these printings misrepresented what he had said, and then proceeded to have them printed in an authorised form. But then he prepared a text from memory and often added much, so that the printed form

1 Translation from: Doberstein, John, Ed. *Luther's Works*. Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press: 1959. pp. 14-17.

2 Doberstein, *Luther's Works*, 1959. p. xi.

still cannot be said to transmit what he actually uttered.³

Indeed, Luther seems to anticipate the problem of interpretation in the prologue to his spiritual last will and testament where he writes:

Because I see that the mobs are always growing, the number of errors are always increasing and Satan's rage and ruin have no end, I wish to confess with this work my faith before God and the whole world, point by point. I am doing this, lest certain people cite me or my writings, while I am alive or after I am dead, to support their errors, as those fanatics, the Sacramentarians and the Anabaptists, have begun to do. I will remain in this confession until my death (God help me!), will depart from this world in it, and appear before the Judgment Seat of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁴

Nonetheless, despite all discrepancies, the modern researcher can learn a great deal from the texts of the sermons that are available to one today. What Luther said when he delivered his sermons can never be known. However, the sermonic texts which we have certainly did originate in an event of preaching in history. The following discussion will consider the text of Luther's sermon on the Tenth Sunday after Trinity, delivered in 1516.⁵ This sermon functions as an introduction to a series Luther preached on the Ten Commandments. It was originally preached in the parish church in Wittenberg,⁶ and, like Eckhart, Luther preaches in German—the language of the people. Nonetheless, as with Eckhart, Luther's German and his construction is extremely complex. Luther would assume an educated audience, especially people well versed in biblical and theological

3 Doberstein, *Luther's Works*, 1959, p. xiii-xiv.

4 *What Would Martin Luther Say? An Excerpt From Martin Luther's Spiritual Last Will & Testament Confession Concerning Christ's Supper (1528), Part 3, by Martin Luther, 1483-1546.* Translation by Rev. Robert E. Smith from the German text in: *Dr. Martin Luther's Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimar: Herman Boehlaus Nachfolger, 1909, pp.499-500. Walther Library Concordia Theological Seminary www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-luther.

5 Doberstein, *Luther's Works*, 1959, p. 14.

6 See Doberstein's introduction, *Luther's Works*, 1959, p. 14.

studies. Thus Erasmus' notion of simple men: "the ploughman at his ploughbeam or the weaver at his loom" giving direct attention to the Word of God through Luther's preaching is somewhat disingenuous.⁷ Nonetheless, preaching and writing in the vernacular was still radical for the time.

This particular sermonic text, which was preached before the 95 theses of 1517, can perhaps be considered 'pre-Reformation'. However, a reader is still aware of the ideas of the doctrine of justification in Luther's work. Luther, of course, was deeply influenced by Paul and the writings of St. Augustine. Thus, underlying this sermon is a substantial amount of theological study and formulation by the preacher. At the same time, Luther was preaching to a community of the academy and his role as a university professor of biblical exegesis influences his work.

The sermon begins with two quotations from Psalms 113 and 138: "who is like unto the Lord our God, who dwelleth on high, who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven and earth"⁸; and, "Though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he knows from afar."⁹ With this introduction, Luther (or rather, the text of his sermon) states:

**How wonderful is the God above all other gods!
He sees what is remote and far off; the others,
however, see only what is right next to them. He
does not recognise what is close to him; they do
not recognise what is remote from them, just like
the rulers of this world. Therefore it is the true
nature of humility to retire far off from God and
from all that is God's. On the other hand, it is
the true nature of pride to approach as close as
possible to God and all that is God's...**¹⁰

7 The phrase is drawn from Tyndale's translation of Erasmus' *Exhortations to the Diligent Study of Scripture* (1529): "I wold to god the plowman wold singe a texte of the scripture at his plowbeme, and that the wever at his lowme with this wold drive away the tediousness of tyme."

8 Doberstein, *Luther's Works*, 1959, p. 14.

9 Doberstein, 1959, *Luther's Works*, p. 14.

10 Doberstein, 1959, *Luther's Works*, p. 14.

Luther backs up his words by quoting Isaiah 58: “as Isaiah says of the proud Jews: ‘They delight to draw near to God.’”¹¹ Luther believes that the only relationship with God is one that begins with humility—far off from God and from all that is God’s. The listener is invited to see Luther’s statement as, in a sense, an extension of the two Psalms. Indeed, the construction of the sermon clearly echoes the Psalter throughout.

Luther immediately links his thoughts to the story of the publican and the Pharisee in the Gospel of Luke 18:9-14. Here, the listener is invited to relate to the publican and the Pharisee just as in Eckhart’s sermon text the reader relates to the world of Martha and Mary. Luther states: “And both of these things are clearly disclosed in those two men in the Gospel, the Pharisee and the publican.”¹² In order to be like God and have the qualities of “...life, wisdom, power, righteousness, riches, beauty, and all good...”¹³ a person must follow the rule of Paul and: “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited.”¹⁴ Specifically, Luther focuses on the importance of associating with the humble. He declares:

Associate with the lowly; no matter how humiliating and difficult it may be for the rich man to put himself on the same level with any beggar who comes along, for the virgin to identify herself with a harlot, the chaste woman with an adulteress, the wise man with a fool, the strong man with a weakling, the living person with a dead one, the beautiful with an ugly one, the superior with an inferior one.¹⁵

Rhetorically, Luther anticipates the doubts of his congregation by asserting that: “If you say, I cannot do it; very well, then erase this statement: ‘Who is like unto the Lord our God...who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven and earth!’”¹⁶ Luther makes the point in the lives of his congregation that associating with the lowly is

11 Doberstein, *Luther’s Works*, 1959, p. 14.

12 Doberstein, *Luther’s Works*, 1959, p. 14.

13 Doberstein, *Luther’s Works*, 1959, p. 14.

14 Romans 12:16.

15 Doberstein, *Luther’s Works*, 1959, pp. 14-15.

16 Psalm 113.

vital to the Christian faith, anticipated in the life of Jesus himself, and again echoing Augustine's theology.¹⁷ Again Luther anticipates his congregation's concerns with rhetorical questions, forcing reflection:

How will it ever happen that the proud will do this? My answer is that they will do this only through this one word: 'Take what belongs to you and go'...or through this other saying: 'What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?'¹⁸

The above passage is reminiscent of Eckhart's use of the rhetorical question. Again, the reader can imagine in the preaching a dramatic pause after the statement: "How will it ever happen that the proud will do this?" Then, Luther drives home his point. Luther continues by emphasizing that to acknowledge God requires a person to draw away from God in fear and reverence, that is, requires of us the self-recognition of humility. Luther believes "a man recognizes his own nothingness and leaves all good to God, not daring to claim anything for himself."¹⁹ This, then, is the state of true humility found in the publican. Luther contrasts this with the aspect of pride, which Luther believes is like a person who draws away from God because of contempt and a false security in his own person - like the Pharisee.

As Luther continues, the listener encounters a dialogical element to the sermon. In a sense, the sermon is like the parable itself, inviting the listener or reader into its fictive world and forcing identification with problematic characters, which, in turn, prompts self-reflection on our own lives. Indeed, Luther orders his congregation to recognize the characteristics of a proud man.²⁰ The proud man, of course, needs no-one and no God: And, the proud man believes that he is self-sufficient and is not aware of his own shortcomings. Luther also explains that a proud man is blind and ignorant, and is not

17 See: Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

18 Doberstein, *Luther's Works*, 1959, p. 15.

19 Doberstein, *Luther's Works*, 1959, p. 15.

20 Doberstein, *Luther's Works*, 1959, p. 15.

aware of doing anything wrong. Finally, the proud man, like the Pharisee in the gospel narrative derides the humble man and "...goes after him with his tongue, which is a sword worse than one of iron..."²¹

Luther, of course, contrasts the man of pride with one who is humble, even though perhaps a sinner like the tax collector in the story. A sinner – but at least he knows it. The humble person longs for God and relies on God for everything. The humble man knows he is nothing without God. And the humble man, "...declares his neighbour just; he really accuses only himself, for he says, 'to me a sinner,' not 'to us sinners.'"²² With this clear distinction Luther implores his congregation not to assume that they are like the publican but, after all, more like the Pharisee. He is, we might say, giving us a lesson in how to read the fictive narrative of the gospel – not to jump too quickly to the wrong identification with a character in the world of the story and thus be wrong-footed and judged by it. Finally, the sermon concludes open-endedly by Luther exclaiming:

Therefore we shall rather acknowledge that we are like the Pharisee and shall groan over ourselves and hate ourselves more than he did, and not presume so confidently that we are like the publican; for he was blessed beyond measure and was a child of grace. We, however, are children of nature and, therefore, children of wrath.²³

With the above in mind, the discussion will note the 'fictive qualities' of the sermonic text when confronted by a reader of this sermon. At the beginning of the sermonic text, there are numerous references to scripture. For the reader, the authority of scripture is invoked at the beginning and throughout the text telling the reader that this discourse is based in and on the word of God—for Luther in particular a powerful authority indeed. Furthermore, the sermonic text is constructed in such a way that it takes

21 Doberstein, *Luther's Works*, 1959, p. 16.

22 Doberstein, *Luther's Works*, 1959, p. 16.

23 Doberstein, *Luther's Works*, 1959, p. 17.

on the very quality of scripture itself. Where, the reader may ask, do the words of scripture end and Luther's own words begin? The sermon is, truly, an extension of the Word of God in the Bible, an extension of the kerygma of the gospel and its one true preacher, Christ himself. Therefore, those who read the text are reading the word and authority of God through the words of this sermonic text, and all preachers, as we have seen since St. Stephen, St. Chrysostom and Eckhart, are themselves following in the way of Christ's call. In this way, the authority of the text, and therefore the preacher, are reinforced through this connection.

Luther, as preacher, also holds a place of authority in both the academic community and the congregation of the church, speaking as one "with authority." Indeed, Luther was appointed as an official preacher to the parish church in Wittenberg. Rupp and Drewery note:

Whatever Luther's progress and his ups and downs, as a private person and as a monk he became more and more involved in public affairs. He was appointed a Prior and a District Vicar within his own order, a preacher first to his fellow monks, and then an official preacher in the parish church of Wittenberg, a popular audience which became of immense importance for him.²⁴

Further, the sermonic text hosts the biblical world wherein one encounters the characters of the publican and the Pharisee. Further, the reader becomes part of the context of the sermonic text itself, taking his place, imaginatively speaking in the congregation that Luther is preaching to. Indeed, the use of rhetoric is important here because the text creates a series of opposites, as we have seen in Chrysostom and elsewhere: rich man and beggar, virgin and harlot, wise man and fool and so on. Within these dynamic tensions, the reader will, no doubt, seek to relate to one of the pairs of opposites and finds himself pulled into this rhythmic description of the human condition.

²⁴ Rupp, E.G. and Drewery, Benjamin. *Martin Luther*. London: Edward Arnold, 1970, p. 7.

The above qualities lead into the capacity of fictive time and place to be both specific and universal. The event between the Pharisee and the publican relates us to the time of Christ and the gospel, while at the same time being drawn into the early sixteenth century world of Luther during the actual preaching of the sermon and, finally, remaining in the ever contemporary event of reading itself. The nature of place shares the same quality as time. The reader shifts from place to fictive and actual place as he reads from moment to moment in the world of the imagination.

Finally, and above all, the reader is confronted with a call to a decision. The sermonic text challenges its reader to relate to the humble man. Indeed, who would do otherwise? “If you say I cannot do it; very well, then erase this statement: ‘Who is like unto the Lord our God...who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven and earth!’”²⁵ Surely, then, one who enters this text is obligated to follow Luther’s recommended course of action because the reader must necessarily follow the commandment of scripture or be judged by it. Indeed, the open-ended conclusion holds the reader on the edge of grace and wrath, waiting for his choice. Thus, it is both a call to decision and a warning—it is a compelling argument within Luther’s theology.

In this way, this sermonic text follows the template for the sermonic text that has been established in this thesis. The text and the preacher have an actual and a literary and intrinsic authority that is akin to the authority of scripture and the word of Christ itself. Further, the sermonic text hosts various worlds that the reader imaginatively enters including the world of the sermon itself as first preached in 1516, the biblical world and the reader’s own contemporary world. Also, time and place become both specific and universal as the reader moves through the various worlds of the text. Indeed the reader finally discovers that the place of the sermon is theological in its nature: that is to say it is *Coram Dei* or before God. In this way, the reader takes his place in a community of faith, he remains in his own time and place and he participates in the fictive place created through the words of Jesus in the gospel story of the Pharisee and the publican. Overall, however, the text confronts the reader with the fact that he is

²⁵ Doberstein, *Luther’s Works*, 1959, p. 15.

before God and his experience of place and time is governed by this fact. Following from this, the reader is confronted with a decision. Will he follow the path of the humble man? Is he the Pharisee called to make the decision? Or does he believe he is the sinner that is in need of God's grace? Will he live his life in a way that affirms his total reliance on God and the hope of the kingdom of heaven? It is the decision prompted by all the sermons so far discussed.

Chapter 7

Joseph Butler (1682-1752), The Rolls Chapel Sermons

This discussion now moves on some two centuries to Joseph Butler, Bishop of Durham. Butler, like the former characters and people considered earlier in this argument, was a gifted and experienced preacher. His sermon, *Upon the Ignorance of Man*, the last of the fifteen Rolls Chapel Sermons, preached between 1718 and 1726, is a well-known discourse in the field of homiletics.

Butler was raised in a Presbyterian family in Berkshire, England. He attended a dissenting academy, but converted to the Church of England choosing initially a career in parish ministry. In 1718, Butler was appointed as a preacher to the Rolls Chapel in London. The Chapel, first built in 1233, stood on the site of the Public Record Office in London and was the repository of the records (Rolls) of Chancery. While preaching there, Butler published a selection of Rolls sermons in 1726. These sermons, which brought Butler to prominence as a preacher and theologian, are still widely read today and have held the attention of philosophers, theologians and students of literature.¹ The sermons attempt to explain human nature and its implications for ethics and the Christian life. Butler believed that it is typical for a man to have an instinct of self-interest, which leads him to seek his own good. At the same time, Butler believed that one has an instinct of benevolence, which leads him to seek the good of others. Thus, the Rolls sermons attempt to explain the task of the conscience in the world.² Butler notes in his Preface to the sermons, written in 1729:

But that is not a complete account of man's nature. Somewhat further must be brought in to

1 This background information on Butler for this discussion is drawn largely from Cross, F. L. Ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Third Edition, Ed. E. A. Livingstone. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. pp. 256-257. And Ramsey, I. *Joseph Butler, 1692-1752, Author of "The Analogy of Religion": Some Features of His Life and Thought*. London: Dr. William's Trust, 1969.

2 Butler believed that human nature had three levels: desires, self-interest and the interest of others, and the conscience acted as the moral decision maker. For a detailed discussion of Butler's thought see Penelhum, Terence. *Butler*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.

give us adequate notion of it; namely, that one of those principles of action, conscience or reflection, compared with the rest as they all stand together in the nature of man, plainly bears upon marks of authority over all the rest, and claims the absolute direction of them all, to allow or forbid their gratification...³

Eventually, Butler moved north and became rector of Stanhope near Durham in 1725. While in this charge, Butler published his *Analogy of Religion* (1736) where he argues for the reasonableness of Christianity as a revealed religion as against natural religion and Deism. Soon after its publication, Butler became Bishop of Bristol and later Dean of St. Paul's in 1740. In 1750, not long before his death, Butler was elevated to the Prince Bishopric of Durham. Butler died at Bath in 1752 and is buried in the Cathedral at Bristol.⁴

In time, Butler has become an icon of eighteenth century intellectual theology. Yet, he is of interest in this argument because he expresses his ideas in sermons. One of his most well known and read works besides the *Analogy of Religion* is his collection of sermons delivered at the Rolls Chapel. This, of course, follows the pattern of the previous preachers that have been discussed. Each preacher is known for his or her preaching ability. In this way, Butler is first and foremost a preacher.

Butler can be regarded as a rationalist who has an objective analysis of moral judgements. He was, as were many Enlightenment thinkers of his day, influenced by the work of Newton and Galileo. Further, it can be argued that Butler is a pragmatist who believes that some actions are always good or always bad no matter what opinion one may have of a particular action at a particular time. Conscience knows what is right and

3 Butler, Joseph, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*. Ed, J. H. Bernard. London: Macmillan and Company, 1913. p. 10.

4 Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997, pp. 256-257.

what is wrong. The true conscience is always right because the conscience is linked with the voice of God.⁵ Lori Branch notes in her forthcoming essay “Bishop Butler” that:

For Butler, a human being is a complex system not unlike the matrix of forces at work in the natural world, and one that is regulated by two great principles—rational self—love and benevolence—overseen by the watchful eye of the conscience, which Butler also calls the “principle of reflection.”⁶

Likewise, Butler’s Christian theology is connected to his moral philosophy. Virtue lies, according to Butler, in acting according to one’s nature and conscience and vice lies in acting contrary to them. Throughout his work, Butler’s ideas are organised, clear and rational. His sermons are no exception. However, it has been argued by some scholars of Butler that he fails to clearly set out a universal definition for his ideas. Thus, his systems become less clear as they progress.⁷ However, Butler did not write speculative works. His writings were related to the performance of his pastoral duties as a clergyman. Indeed, the Rolls sermons are, we might say, devoted to ‘pastoral philosophy’.

First, a brief discussion of Sermon 15 as it was presented in the Rolls Chapel as its congregation would have heard it. In “Upon the Ignorance of Man”⁸ moral philosophy and Christian theology come together to argue the state of humankind in relationship to knowledge and human existence. The sermon was delivered in a chapel which attracted lawyers and other academics. Thus, a sermon on the ignorance of man seems at odds with this learned community. In this way, the sermon is immediately a call

5 See Duncan-Jones. *Butler’s Moral Philosophy*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1952.

6 Branch, Lori. “Bishop Butler.”. Andrew Hass, David Jasper, Elisabeth Jay, Eds. *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2007.

7 See Duncan-Jones. *Butler’s Moral Philosophy*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1952. Chapter 1 pp. 15-30.

8 Butler, Joseph. *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*. London: Macmillan and Company, 1913. pp. 190-200.

to attention. The discourse is based from the outset, perhaps with some irony, on Ecclesiastes and its words on the acquiring of wisdom:

When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night one's eyes see sleep; then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out; even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.⁹

The assertion of the sermon, which adheres to the Lutheranism within Anglican theology, is that even those deeply dedicated to finding knowledge of God remain ignorant. Butler supports this understanding by using the words of Solomon—traditionally assumed to be the wisest of men—and by peppering his discourse with numerous references to the Pauline corpus. Around this core of scripture Butler produces a rational and learned argument to demonstrate that humankind is ignorant of the ways of God. The sermon itself is a rhetorical paradox—the natural end of a rational argument is acceptance of learned ignorance and reliance on faith.

The introduction describes the ignorance of man in relation to the works and judgements of God. The sermon begins with a reference to and explanation of the words of Solomon. Butler assumes Solomon is the scriptural author, which assures the authority of his words:

The writings of Solomon are very much taken up with reflections upon human nature, and human life; to which he hath added, in this book, reflections upon the constitution of things. And it is not improbable, that the little satisfaction, and the great difficulties he met in his researches into the general constitution of nature, might be the occasion of his confining himself, so much as he hath done, to life and conduct. However, upon that joint review he expresses great ignorance of

⁹ Ecclesiastes 8:16-17.

**the works of God, and the method of his
providence in the government of the world¹⁰**

The listener/reader is introduced to Solomon who was famed for wisdom and understanding—an appropriate persona to discuss. The listener encounters the reasons behind this scripture and what its purpose is—indeed he is offered a glimpse into the very thoughts and musings of Solomon, and he, with all of his wisdom, cannot overcome his own ignorance. If that is the case with Solomon, how much more so for the rest of us! In the world (and writings) of Solomon one finds the vanity of humankind:

great labour and weariness in the search and observation he had employed himself about; and great disappointment, pain, and even vexation of mind, upon that which he had remarked of the appearances of things, and of what was going forward upon this earth. This whole review and inspection, and the result of it, sorrow, perplexity, a sense of his necessary ignorance, suggests various reflections to his mind. But, notwithstanding all this ignorance and dissatisfaction, there is somewhat, upon which he assuredly rests and depends; somewhat, which is the conclusion of the whole matter, and the only concern of man.¹¹

Here Butler's sermon is similar in structure to that of Chrysostom already discussed. Chrysostom links himself with the person of King David, and, like David, Chrysostom enacts a frenzied state of faith. In the same way, Butler links himself with King Solomon who is the personification of wisdom and yet, like Butler, embraces learned ignorance.

In this comparison, Butler employs descriptive language that allows the hearer to understand the mind of this wise man. The listener encounters a person who has experienced weariness, disappointment, pain, sorrow and vexation. Nevertheless, this was a necessity for Solomon because thereby he was able to understand the most important concern of man. Butler uses this as a turning point for Solomon and potentially

10 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 190.

11 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, pp. 190-191.

for his listener. There is a way out of the weariness and disappointment—there is something on which the listener can assuredly rest. The listener will discover that when one admits one's ignorance then there is a possibility for understanding:

Creation is absolutely and entirely out of our depth, and beyond the extent of our utmost reach. And yet it is as certain that God made the world, as it is certain that effects must have a cause. It is indeed in general no more than effects, that the most knowing are acquainted with: for as to causes, they are as entirely in the dark as the most ignorant. What are the laws by which matter acts upon matter, but certain effects; which some, having observed to be frequently repeated, have reduced to general rules? The real nature and essence of beings likewise is what we are altogether ignorant of.¹²

The point is that science and reason can quantify 'effects,' but remain ignorant of the cause of creation. The sermon takes this understanding of the ignorance of humankind and creates a world of reasoned argument, and reasons out our ignorance. Indeed, Butler outlines the agenda that his address will follow, with academic order:

- I. The assertion of the text, the ignorance of man; that the wisest and most knowing cannot comprehend the ways and works of God: and then,**
- II. What are the just consequences of this observation and knowledge of our own ignorance and the reflections which it leads us to.**
- III. The wisest and most knowing cannot comprehend the works of God, the methods and designs of his providence in the creation and government of the world.¹³**

12 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 191.

13 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 191.

As the sermon continues, the listener encounters a quotation from the Psalmist which celebrates the wonder of the creation and our 'soul's' knowledge of it: "I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well."¹⁴

At the beginning of the text, the listener finds himself caught in a variety of conflicting 'worlds', including the world of the scripture, the world of human ignorance, the place of reason and a world of wonder at God's creation. The sermon freely moves the listener in and out of the worlds persuasively controlling how the listener should react to a particular statement or argument. One must recognize the ambiguity of one's position when faced with total ignorance and yet overwhelmed by curiosity and a state of wonder at the same time. As the text continues, the listener encounters the following:

Our own nature, and the objects we are surrounded with, serve to raise our curiosity; but we are quite out of a condition of satisfying it. Every secret which is disclosed, every discovery which is made, every new effect which is brought to view, serves to convince us of numberless more which remain concealed, and which we had before no suspicion of.¹⁵

Indeed, it is as if the sermon is pulling the listener in various directions in order to demonstrate the human condition and its ignorance. It places the listener in a position of informed helplessness, and yet also directed towards a desire for true knowledge, that is "the nature of things themselves,"¹⁶ their divine origin and purpose. Again, this is a rhetorical paradox with echoes of Socrates—the more one learns of "natural knowledge" the more one does not understand.

With this point made, Butler moves to a discussion concerning the government of the world. He continues to make the point that man has trouble understanding the government of which he is a part, for without a knowledge of the whole how can we have

¹⁴ Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 191. See Psalm 139:14.

¹⁵ Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 191.

¹⁶ Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 192.

a knowledge of the part. And it is impossible for him to understand the vast government of creation, the scheme of Providence and how God works in the world of men:

As to the government of the world: though from consideration of the final causes which come within our knowledge; of characters, personal merit and demerit; of the favour and disapprobation, which respectively are due and belong to the righteous and the wicked, and which, therefore, must necessarily be in a mind which sees things as they really are; though, I say, from hence we may know somewhat concerning the designs of Providence in the government of the world, enough to enforce upon us religion and the practice of virtue; yet, since the monarchy of the universe is a dominion unlimited in extent, and everlasting in duration, the general system of it must necessarily be quite beyond our comprehension.¹⁷

In other words, humankind, with all its learning, is both ignorant of this world and all that is beyond. Butler quotes Paul to prove this point:

“Thy faithfulness, O Lord, reacheth unto the clouds; thy righteousness standeth like the strong mountains; thy judgments are like the great deep. He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart; so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.”¹⁸

Butler asserts that there are methods and designs of creation that the creator wishes to conceal from his creation and its capacity to understand:

And as the works of God, and his scheme of government are above our capacities thoroughly to comprehend; so there possibly may be reasons which originally made it fit that many things

17 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 192.

18 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, pp. 192-3.

should be concealed from us, which we have perhaps natural capacities of understanding; many things concerning the designs, methods, and ends of divine Providence in the government of the world.¹⁹

The listener is reminded that mankind is part of God's plan and mankind is not in control. Indeed, mankind is required above all and in the name of religion to submit to the divine will. As a consequence of our ignorance humankind need to learn discipline: "Religion consists in submission and resignation to the divine will. Our condition in this world is a school of exercise for this temper..."²⁰

Thus, it is not just ignorance but what ensues from our admission of it. Life is, in essence, a "school of exercise."²¹ Butler reminds the listener that one may not understand the reason for this. It may be that one is called to have faith that is content not to 'see'. Butler explains by quoting from John 20:29: "This fully accounts for and explains that assertion of our Saviour, 'Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed'"²² Here again, the listener is confronted with the paradox of the reasoned intellectual argument that leads one to faith.

Butler continues by discussing the reason why humankind was placed in a state of ignorance:

But after all, the same account is to be given, why we were placed in these circumstances of ignorance, as why nature has not furnished us with wings; namely, that we were designed to be inhabitants of this earth. I am afraid we think too highly of ourselves...²³

19 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 193.

20 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 194.

21 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 194.

22 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 194.

23 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, pp. 194-5.

In his dry and reasoned prose, Butler argues that humankind thinks too highly of itself. Indeed, theologically, the task of humankind is not to acquire knowledge—contrary to the popular belief of the learned congregation gathered in the Rolls Chapel—because one is ill-suited to the task: (“If to acquire knowledge were our proper end, we should indeed but be poorly provided.”²⁴) Therefore, Butler turns his attention to answering the question he has posed. What, then, after all, *is* the task of humankind? Indeed, what is the task of the listener/reader of this reasoned and learned sermonic text?

First, We may learn from it, with what temper of mind a man ought to inquire into the subject of religion; namely, with expectation of finding difficulties...He should beforehand expect things mysterious, and such as he will not be able thoroughly to comprehend, or go to the bottom of...And to inquire with this expectation, is not to inquire as a man, but as one of another order of creatures.²⁵

Thus, like Solomon, one must learn to accept the ‘temper’ demanded by the study of religion. It is beyond the simple capacity of the human mind. Therefore, Butler categorically asserts on the recognition of ignorance and upon the imperfections inevitably arising from our limited insight:

...Our ignorance is the proper answer to many things which are called objections against religion; particularly, to those which arise from the appearances of evil and irregularity in the constitution of nature, and the government of the world²⁶

Above all Butler makes his paradoxical point clearly. “Our ignorance is the proper answer to many things...” The quest for knowledge is, in the end, an acceptance of ignorance. Butler makes this point clearly when he states:

24 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 195.

25 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 195.

26 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 196.

...we should acquiesce in, and rest satisfied with our ignorance, turn our thoughts from that which is above and beyond us, and apply ourselves to that which is level to our capacities, and which is our real business and concern. Knowledge is not our proper happiness.²⁷

Therefore, part of the call of humankind is to be content with the ability one has and to aim for the “mark”²⁸ which is the mystery or “secret things”²⁹ belonging to God. Finally we have turned back to the Gospel of Mark and the recognition of the ‘mystery’ which is at the heart of all true insight into God (Mark 4:11). This, according to Butler, is the mark we are to aim for:

But it is evident that there is another mark set up for us to aim at; another end appointed us to direct our lives to: an end, which the most knowing may fail of, and the most ignorant arrive at. "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us, and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law." Which reflection of Moses, put in general terms, is, that the only knowledge which is of any avail to us, is that which teaches us our duty, or assists us in the discharge of it.³⁰

One's time is best spent acquiring the knowledge that teaches one to discharge his or her moral duty. Butler then makes the point, returning to where he began his sermon, that this is the conclusion of Solomon as recorded in Ecclesiastes:

The same is said, and with the same connection and context, in the conclusion of the book of Ecclesiastes. Our ignorance, and the little we can know of other things, affords a reason why we should not perplex ourselves about them; but no

27 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 197.

28 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 198.

29 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 198.

30 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913, p. 198.

way invalidates that which is the "conclusion of the whole matter, Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole concern of man."³¹

The fear of God and submission to his divine will is the role and duty of the individual. Nonetheless, the individual is called to act practically and morally, for in that alone lays our happiness and it is within our power. One is required to perform good actions and be of good temper. Submission to God still requires work for the good of the self and humankind.

Virtue is demonstrably the happiness of man; it consists in good actions, proceeding from a good principle, temper, or heart. Overt acts are entirely in our power. What remains is, that we learn to keep our heart; to govern and regulate our passions, mind, affections: that so we may be free from the impotencies of fear, envy, malice, covetousness, ambition; that we may be clear of these, considered as vices seated in the heart, considered as constituting a general wrong temper: from which general wrong frame of mind...³²

Finally Butler ends his sermon with a call to the acceptance of one's ignorance and a call to submission to God:

Lastly, let us adore that infinite wisdom, and power, and goodness, which is above our comprehension...The conclusion is, that in all lowliness of mind we set lightly by ourselves: that we form our temper to an implicit submission to the Divine Majesty; beget within ourselves an absolute resignation to all the methods of his providence, in his dealings with the children of men...³³

31 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913. p. 199.

32 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913. p. 199.

33 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 1913. pp. 199-200.

Finally, this is the call to decision. Through the realization and acceptance of one's ignorance the listener is offered the possibility to prostrate himself before God in humble submission. Butler is clear that the only thing one can know is that in this position one sees clearly that the kingdom of God is at hand and that the listener is called to believe.

In this sermon, Butler creates for his audience a space, and a familiarly learned one, in which they are allowed to follow the flow of Butler's discourse. That is to say that Butler opens this discourse with his voice linked with the authority of Solomon through scripture. Once this authority is secure, the audience is then put into a position to follow Butler through a logical and learned argument on the state of humankind, which ends in absolute submission to God through an act of faith.

However, this is an informed faith that is practised by an educated audience. It is, in other words, suited to the congregation, as Jesus spoke to the fishermen, and Chrysostom to the empress. This is a sermonic text that is adapted to its particular context, and yet participates in the universal model of preaching which we have been exploring. It is based on a logical progression through a systematic process of understanding that allows one to choose, in a sense, by reason, the best course of action. And, in the end, this is where Butler wants his congregation and the readers of his published sermons to be.

As a sermonic text, this work thus follows the template that has been established so far. The text and the preacher have an authority that is, from the outset, based on the authority of scripture. Indeed, the reader has the sense that Solomon himself is concurring with Butler's ideas. Further, the sermonic text hosts various worlds that the reader takes part in, including the eighteenth century world of the sermon itself and its learned congregation in the Rolls Chapel, London. The biblical world is present where the reader encounters Solomon and his wisdom, the voice of Christ and the musings of Paul. There are voices from the classics, especially Aristotle. At the same time, the

reader is brought, by reason, into a place of complete ignorance before the divine, where the only way forward is through faith and submission to God. And, of course, the reader of the published text is in his own world as he comes to terms with his own understanding of knowledge. In addition, the experience of time and place are both specific and universal as the reader moves through the various worlds of the text. As with all literature, it is of all time and yet bound by the historical particularities of its origins and its literary intertexts, especially those of scripture. Indeed the reader discovers that finally the world of the text is a paradox where reason leads to blind faith and knowledge leads to ignorance. The reader is surrounded at once in her reading by academics in the Rolls Chapel and a frustrated King Solomon. Time, too, is similar. The reader exists imaginatively at a meeting point of times – the present moment, the biblical time of Solomon and the moment when the sermon was first preached.

Yet, overriding the specific time and place is the link to the eternal where the reader is confronted with a decision. Through the realization and acceptance of one's ignorance the reader is offered the possibility to humble himself before God in complete submission. The most important knowledge one can attain is that through faith the Kingdom of God is at hand and the reader is called to believe. The kerygma has been preached, and its challenge issued in the language of Enlightenment reason.

Chapter 8

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892)

This discussion now turns its attention to the nineteenth century Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon who was known in his day as the “Prince of Preachers.” He was born in Kelvedon, Essex in 1834 and converted to the Christian faith during his teenage years, becoming a Baptist in 1850. By the age of nineteen, he was preaching and was to become one of England's best-known preachers during the second half of the nineteenth century. His preaching was popular drawing upon “his great oratorical gifts, humour, and shrewd common sense, which showed itself especially in his treatment of contemporary problems.”¹ While he was preaching in Southwark, the congregation outgrew their building and the Metropolitan Tabernacle in Newington Causeway was constructed specifically for him. Spurgeon frequently preached to audiences numbering more than six thousand, using only the power of his natural voice. We might recall the crowds who flocked to hear John the Baptist and Jesus himself. Thus, Spurgeon follows the pattern of preachers chosen for this discussion. Before everything else, Spurgeon was a preacher.²

As the discussion has established, the present-day reader is not listening to an orally delivered sermon but encounters the Word in a sermonic text. This text allows the reader to enter a variety of worlds that collide in it, among them, though not exclusively, the moment when the congregation first heard the preacher speak. The reader is introduced to the dramatic environment of the sermon in Victorian England in London. The place is a church that is filled with thousands of people waiting to hear Charles Haddon Spurgeon speak. The reader experiences in the imagination and through historical memory and record a setting that is filled with energy and anticipation. It is hot and crowded in this sea of humanity. Indeed, reports from the 1876 publication of *The*

1 Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997, p.1534.

2 The above draws from Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1997 and www.Spurgeon.org.

Sword and the Trowel describe one of Spurgeon's services in Southwark in the following way:

In a very short time the congregation so multiplied as to make the chapel in the evening, when the gas was burning, like the black-hole of Calcutta. One evening in 1854 the preacher exclaimed, "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, and by faith this wall at the back shall come down, too."³

Even though attempts were made to enlarge the structure of the chapel it proved inadequate for the sheer numbers who flocked to hear the preacher and his sermons. The description is hellish rather than heavenly to the imagination.

New Park Street, enlarged though it was, resembled the attempt to put the sea into a teapot. We were more inconvenienced than ever. To turn many hundreds away was the general if not the universal necessity, and those who gained admission were but little better off, for the packing was dense in the extreme, and the heat something terrible even to remember.⁴

Thus, no matter where Spurgeon preached people gathered; and, in a dense mass of people, we encounter and see in the mind's eye Spurgeon who is the familiar and trusted voice in the community. He is the sought-for preacher and voice of authority with the charisma to speak to the waiting thousands. Indeed it can scarcely be disputed that Spurgeon was a formidable and powerful preacher of biblical proportions. Helmut Thielicke writes:

In the midst of the theologically discredited nineteenth century there was a preacher who

³ *"The Sword and the Trowel."* April, 1876. www.Spurgeon.org

⁴ www.Spurgeon.org.

had at least six thousand people in his congregation every Sunday, whose sermons for many years were cabled to New York every Monday and reprinted in the leading newspapers of the country, and who occupied the same pulpit for almost forty years without the diminishment of the flowing abundance of his preaching and without ever repeating himself or preaching himself dry. The fire he thus kindled, and turned into a beacon that shone across the seas and down through the generations, was no mere brush fire of sensationalism, but an inexhaustible blaze that glowed and burned on solid hearths and was fed by the wells of the eternal Word.⁵

In his flamboyant and charismatic way, Spurgeon follows Butler, Luther and Chrysostom in the great tradition we are tracing. In this way, because the reader has willingly entered the world of the sermonic text he may find himself, as it were, in spirit and imagination, in Victorian England crowded into a large sanctuary with thousands of people. The reader waits for Spurgeon to begin his sermon.

Spurgeon's sermon in the present instance is "The New Year's Guest."⁶ This sermon was delivered in 1884 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle where thousands gathered to hear him speak. And, as is the case with each sermon in this discussion, it begins with a vivid illustration that draws the listener into the discourse. It is a simple story from everyday life about Spurgeon's receiving of a New Year's greeting card. It is an experience which we might assume is common to everyone. As the story is told, the listener finds that the card in this instance includes two passages from scripture on which the sermon is based: Matthew 25:35, "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me": And John 1:12, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." Spurgeon begins:

5 Thielicke, Helmut. *Encounter With Spurgeon*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963. p. 1.

6 Cook, C. T. *C. H. Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*. London, Marshall, Morgan and Scott: 1958. pp. 7-14.

I lately received a New Year's card, which suggested to me the topic on which I am about to speak to you. The designer of the card has, with holy insight, seen the relation of the two texts to each other, and rendered both of them eminently suggestive by placing them together. There is a freshness in the thought that, by receiving Jesus as a stranger, our believing hospitality works in us a divine capacity and we thereby receive power to become the sons of God.⁷

Of course, the sermon uses the commonplace event of receiving a New Year's greeting card. But in this case the designer of the card, by "holy insight", has offered an example of biblical interpretation to the preacher. Like the great preachers and prophets of the Bible, Spurgeon is alert to the signs of God's Word in the world around him, taking examples from objects and experiences that would be familiar to the simplest member of his congregation. Everyone would be familiar with the celebration of the New Year, with all its sense of the death of the old and the welcoming in of the new, starting afresh and turning one's life around in New Year resolutions – an act, it might be said, of 'metanoia'. The reception of a New Year's card would be a shared and common experience, bearing all such connotations. This can be illustrated by the familiar stanzas from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam*:

**Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light;
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.**

**Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.⁸**

⁷ Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, p. 7.

⁸ Alfred, Lord Tennyson. *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850). *The Poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson*. London: Oxford University Press, 1947. pp. 365-366. Of course, Herbert Warren writes in his introduction to Tennyson's poetry: "We are not directly conscious of their date, except that they belong to the Victorian

In this way, a simple New Year's card, which is familiar to all, can become, in the words of the preacher, theologically significant. As this poem of Tennyson suggests, there are theological overtones when one considers the symbolism behind the New Year. In the New Year, one has the opportunity to "Ring out the false, ring in the true." In the same way a person can leave the "false" life behind and embrace the "true" life in Christ. Thus, this common experience is redefined into a theological experience. One is reminded, perhaps, of Butler's discussion of knowledge and ignorance, or of Chrysostom's frantic and wild actions drawing in his listeners. In all cases, the preacher takes a common experience and reinterprets it theologically in a way that brings the listener into the discourse, reminiscent, perhaps, of the parables of Jesus and their use of daily life in the house, on the road, or in the farm.

The reader shares the imaginative experience of the first listeners to the sermon and finds his world challenged by the mixed worlds of the sermon. The references to scripture bring the listener into the world of the gospels, where Jesus is a stranger in this world. And, in turn, the sermon offers the possibility of letting Christ, the stranger, into one's own life. In so doing, the congregation themselves learn, through the grace of God, to take in strangers from the world around them and thereby follow the call of God. Further, throughout the sermon, there are continuous references to scripture, as in all the sermons we have considered, adding to the authority, power and familiarity of the discourse. At the same time, the sermon has an intimacy that speaks directly to each one who hears or reads. In spite of the huge crowds which he attracted, Spurgeon seems to have had the true preacher's ability to speak to the individual, as the text of his sermon still draws the reader imaginatively today, rather like a great work of Victorian fiction.

era, or of their relative distance from each other and from ourselves. This is the fate of all true poetry as it ceases to be the poetry of an age and comes to be poetry for all time. If the poems cannot survive this change by their innate vitality, nothing will really give them new life." p. v. Thus, the text of the poem and the sermonic text share the qualities of be specific to a situation and eternally new.

The bulk of the sermon is divided into two parts. The first part is a discussion about *the stranger taken in*, and the second considers *making strangers into sons*. As the sermon progresses, there is a discussion about the ability of Christ, the stranger, to make sons of all strangers in the world. Yet, this process can only happen through the act of one taking Christ into his life and soul. The sermon builds on this idea and compares one's soul to a house in which the doors can be open so that the stranger, 'did not lodge in the street.'⁹ The act of listening or reading is an exercise in interiorizing the text of the sermon, taking in its words so that we, in a sense, are inhabited by them, and, in turn, ourselves inhabit them.

To be sure, this idea not only makes the world of scripture more immediately accessible, but also makes the listener's understanding of her own life and its meaning more accessible as well. Thus, through the sermon and the sermonic text one comes to know scripture better, and one understands how scripture itself is involved in one's life. If this happens, the listener shall be, "in the best sense *happy*."¹⁰ And the listener to the Victorian sermon would be aware that the term 'happy' is embedded in a theological context. Indeed, to be happy in this sense is to be blessed by God. Thus, for Spurgeon, the unhappier a person is the further the person is away from God and God's blessing. Spurgeon refers to the prophet Abraham saying: "Our prayer must be that of Abraham, 'My Lord if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant.'"¹¹

As the sermon continues, the listener is introduced to the concept that Christ is the ultimate stranger in the world and his life and ministry is strange to the world because he was rejected throughout his existence (John1:10-11). The sermon reviews the whole notion of the word and meaning of the strange and 'stranger'. Indeed, Spurgeon remarks, in a play on the word, that the words of Matthew have a "...hue of strangeness over the whole passage."¹²

9 Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, p. 8.

10 Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, p. 8.

11 Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, p. 8.

12 Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, p. 8.

Spurgeon notes three meanings of Christ as stranger: Christ is a stranger in his own creation; humanity is able to receive Christ as a stranger; and Christ, the stranger, will dwell in our hearts. At the same time, the listener is confronted with and challenged by this concept of a stranger in his own life. It is a familiar enough idea, and a common enough experience. No doubt every person listening to the sermon has felt what it is to be a stranger or left out of a group or community. And, here again, Spurgeon shows the listener that being a stranger can ultimately be understood theologically through scripture, culminating in the person and role of Christ who is the great and yet deeply beloved stranger in his own world, who gives power to become children of God to all who take him in and receive him.¹³ The sermon thus reminds us that the role of Christ is to be the ultimate stranger, even to death itself, that humanity is called to receive.

Throughout the sermon, as we have seen before, the listener encounters the use of rhetorical questions. How can this Christ be a stranger in his own creation?¹⁴ What happens when one receives Christ as a stranger?¹⁵ Why would the perfection of Christ choose to dwell in the imperfection of the human soul?¹⁶ This is a similar ploy to that of Chrysostom, Eckhart and, indeed, Butler. The answer to all three questions, as the listener will understand, introduces the concept of grace and salvation. And the questions of the sermon hopefully prompt the thoughts of the listener. Thus, to hear the sermon is to become a 'theologian' in the true sense of the word, by reflection and incorporation.

Once a person embraces the stranger there is union with Christ and Spurgeon proclaims: "there springs up between us and him a living, loving, lasting union and this seals our son-ship."¹⁷ Humanity becomes one with Christ and sons of Christ. And, the listener shares in this possibility and hope. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me....." (Matthew 25:35ff).

13 Spurgeon also references the episode of Mary and Martha preached on by Eckhart. See above chapter five. Cook, 1958, p. 8.

14 Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, p. 8.

15 Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, p. 14.

16 Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, p. 9.

17 Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, p. 14.

Once one becomes a son of Christ the stranger, one has a better comprehension of the suffering of humanity. In this way, there is the opportunity, through the preacher's words, for the individual to unite with Christ and have empathy and love for all strangers in his own world. And, the final movement is into a 'son-ship' with God, which embraces a love for the entire world. The sermon then ends in the following way, a challenge to those who are about to leave their 'dwelling' in its world and words and go out into the world beyond:

Our love goes out to all mankind, and our hand is closed against none: if it be so we are made like God, as little children are like their father. Oh! sweet result of entertaining the Son by faith: he dwells in us, as we gaze upon him in holy fellowship; so that "we all with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."¹⁸

Thus, the journey in the sermon is complete for the listener and he is allowed to take his place in the Kingdom of God even as he continues to live in his own world and its everyday experience. Spurgeon finally returns to the theme of true happiness and states:

...and now I trust there are some who will rise up and open unto him, so that at the end of the year they may say with Job, "The stranger did not lodge in the street; but I opened my doors to the traveller." Verily, in so doing, you will not only entertain angels unawares; but you will be receiving the Lord of angels. The day in which you receive him shall be the beginning of years to you; it shall be the first of a series of years, which, whether they be few or many, shall be each one in the best sense *happy*.¹⁹

18 Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, p. 14.

19 Cook, *Spurgeon's Sermons for Special Occasions*, 1958, pp. 7-8.

The listener by the end, then, is no longer the stranger but a participant in the Kingdom of God. In this way, the sermon echoes the call of scripture.

The above is also the call for the reader as he leaves the world of the sermon and the sermon text and encounters his own time with a call to a decision. Will the reader receive the Christ into his life? Will the reader, through an encounter with the sermon text, come to a decision that will make him “in the best sense happy?”

As a sermon text, this work then follows the template that has been established in each sermon we have reviewed so far. Once the reader has willingly entered the sermon text, the reader finds a preacher has an authority that is linked both to scripture and the personal charisma of the preacher. Further, the sermon text hosts various worlds that the reader takes part in including the words of the sermon itself as they were first preached in a crowded London church in Victorian England. The biblical world is present here also wherever the reader encounters Christ as the stranger and a world filled with strangers whom one is called to take in. At the same time, the reader is brought into a place where he is called to love the stranger. And, of course, the reader must return to his own world as he comes to terms with his fresh understanding of acceptance and love. Time and place therefore are both specific and universal as the reader moves through the various worlds of the text. The reader learns, through the preacher, from the Christ of the gospels himself and sees the need to love the unloved in every place. Further, the reader is as if surrounded in the imagination by masses of people in a large public hall. Time, too, is similar. The reader exists all at once in his own time and, fictively, in the time of Spurgeon and in the time of Christ. In all of these times and in all places the call of Christ is heard.

Thus, overriding all times and every place is the eternal experience where the reader is confronted with a decision. The reader is called to accept the stranger Christ into his life and, in so doing, accepts and loves all those in need that are strange to the world—especially in the reader’s own world. Here again, the Kingdom of God is at hand

in Victorian England, in the world of scripture and in the moment of reading. With this fact comes the possibility of ‘true happiness’.

We turn now from the texts of sermons that have their origins in words uttered by preachers at various moments in history, from Christ in Galilee to Spurgeon in London, each preacher echoing the primal message and challenge of Mark 1:15, to texts that have their origins in the pages of fiction. From the perspective of this argument, however, there is no ultimate difference, for the strategy remains that of the ‘fictive’, opening up worlds of the imagination that teach and challenge in their call the ‘repentance’ and change. Sermons are, indeed, ‘true fictions’.

Chapter 9

Laurence Sterne (1713-1768)

In this chapter, the argument will study two sermonic texts by the novelist and preacher Laurence Sterne. Although today Sterne is primarily known for his fictional writings, during his life he was also well known as a clergyman and pastor in the Yorkshire parish of Sutton-on-the-Forest, and as a prebendary of York, famed for his sermons in York Minster. Here, the discussion primarily considers a sermonic text that is also to be found in a work of fiction. However, the sermon has its origins in Sterne's preaching in the Minster. Thus, his work serves in this thesis as a bridge from sermons that have their origin in a liturgical community to sermons as literary texts that have their origin in a work of fiction. Indeed, we might say, Sterne's discourses sit at the midpoint of the two.

Sterne was born in 1713 in Ireland, the son of a poor soldier but grandson of an Archbishop of York. He graduated from Jesus College, Cambridge where he was deeply influenced by the thought of John Locke, and eventually, already suffering from poor health, he settled in Yorkshire in 1738 and remained in England for the remainder of his life as a country clergyman. His two principal novels: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67) and *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), were completed near the end of his life. *Tristram Shandy* was initially rejected by the printer, Dodsley of London, and eventually finished "under the greatest heaviness of heart" following the deaths of his mother and uncle, and the mental breakdown of his wife. But by 1760 he was taken to the heart of London literary society and even invited to Court. He died in March, 1768, at the age of 55.¹

The two sermonic texts that are of interest here are Sermon 18 on the Levite and his concubine (Judges 19), from his collection of sermons rather scandalously entitled

¹ This discussion is indebted to Elizabeth Kraft's book: *Laurence Sterne Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.

The Sermons of Mr. Yorick (1760) and, more centrally, the great sermon on “The Abuse of Conscience” found in volume II of the novel *Tristram Shandy*. The latter sermon, as we have observed, has a dual existence. It was first written and preached for a congregation in York Minster in 1750. It was subsequently incorporated into the work of fiction. And, indeed, the sermon was so well received by those who read it in the novel, that Sterne quickly prepared for publication two volumes of sermons which he entitled after a fictional character *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick*, a literary whim which offended many people.² Sterne notes, perhaps slightly tongue in cheek, but all the more serious for that, the following about the sermon:

I suppose it is needless to inform the publick, that the reason of printing these sermons, arise altogether from the favourable reception, which the sermon given as a sample of them in TRISTRAM SHANDY, met with from the world;—That sermon was printed by itself some years ago, but could find neither purchasers nor readers, so that I apprehended little hazard from a promise I made upon its republication, “That if the sermon was liked, these should also be at the world’s service;” which, to be as good as my word, they here are, and I pray to GOD, they may do it the service I wish. I have little to say on their behalf, except this, that not one of them was composed with any thoughts of being printed;—they have been hastily written, and carry the marks of it along with them.—This may be no recommendation;—I mean it however as such; for as the sermons turn chiefly upon philanthropy, and those kindred virtues to it, upon which hang all the law and the prophets, I trust they will be no less felt, or worse received, for the evidence they bear, of proceeding more from the heart than the head.³

2 In his endnotes to his 1983 edition of *Tristram Shandy*, Ian Campbell Ross notes that the sermon was preached by Sterne on 29 July 1750 in the Minster at York and was published the following year. See his footnote 8, p. 555.

3 Sterne, Laurence. *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*. Volume I. The Shakespeare Head Edition of the Writings of Laurence Sterne Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1927. p. vii.

It is interesting to note that the sermon in and as a work of “fiction” found favour in the eyes of many readers. In the comic context of *Tristram Shandy*, and delivered by the ludicrous yet utterly likeable Corporal Trim, surely at least half brother to Henry Fielding’s Parson Adams, the sermon finds its true power, in spite of, or more probably because of, the endless interruptions of Dr Slop and others. However, on its own and in the Minster, the sermon seems to have attracted little interest. But before we turn to Corporal Trim’s oration, let us consider briefly Sermon 18 of *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick*, on Judges 19, which is included in this discussion to introduce the way in which, in the hands of Sterne – preacher and novelist - a sermonic text works with all the fictive devices of the novel. As Stephen Prickett suggests, “It opens in a way that, however startling it might have been to the congregation, is instantly familiar to anyone coming to it with the hindsight of *Tristram Shandy*.”⁴

This text of the sermon enters into a kind of dialogue with the gruesome story found in the book of Judges, chapter 19:

In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of E'phraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. And his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months.⁵

The narrative is typically Hebraic – spare and without elaboration or explanation, not least as to *why* the concubine became angry with the Levite. We are left to speculate. Sterne’s sermonic text assumes a highly imaginative reader, opinionated and shocked at the indecency of the subject – a concubine! That is to say, the relationship to this sermonic text begins with the act of responsive and creative reading. As the pattern has established in this thesis, the reader is drawn into the life of the sermon and the drama of

⁴ Stephen Prickett, *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p.122.

⁵ Judges 19 vv. 1-2.

the fictional voice and characters. The preacher (Sterne) adopts the fictional persona of the argumentative parson Mr. Yorick, and referring back, of course, to Hamlet's dead companion, "a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy."⁶ Yet, at the same time, the reader finds himself, so to speak, in a church setting preparing himself to hear a sermon. At this point after the reader has entered the worlds of the sermon text he also becomes, in a sense, a 'listener' to the sermon. And, at very the beginning of the sermon, 'Yorick' leaps straight in: "A CONCUBINE! -"⁷: And immediately reassures the 'shocked' reader/listener that the biblical text, "accounts for it..."⁸ The biblical text validates the shocking subject. For it tells us that there was no king then in Israel to bring law and order – each man suited himself ("did what was right in his own eyes"), as did, indeed, the concubine, since she took it upon herself to go back to her father's house. Here is the opening of the sermon text in full, and we may note the different voices in conversation present, including the implied voice of the reader himself ("you will say"):

A CONCUBINE! – but the text accounts for it; 'for in those days there was no king in Israel'; and the Levite, you will say, like every other man in it, did what was right in his own eyes; - and so you may add, did his concubine too, - *'for she played the whore against him, and went away.'* —

Then shame and grief go with her; and wherever she seeks a shelter, may the hand of Justice shut the door against her.—

Not so; for she went unto her father's house in Bethlehem-judah and was with him four whole months.—.....⁹

At the beginning, the listener is placed on the cusp of two imaginative worlds—the context of the sermon and in the fictive world of scripture and the story of the Levite. The sermon becomes a kind of interpretative conversation. The listener discovers that

6 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Act V. sc.i.

7 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 204.

8 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 204.

9 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 204.

Yorick expresses mock outrage at the idea of a concubine, but is reassured by its presence in sacred scripture. The reader/listener is drawn into participating in an imaginative (and, indeed, comic) reconstruction of the details omitted by the spare biblical text, suggesting motives and feelings that are nowhere mentioned in scripture. Again, Stephen Prickett, in his work *Origins of Narrative*, alludes to this, suggesting:

If we listen attentively, there are actually several dialogues going on here at once. The most obvious is that between ‘I’ and ‘you’: the preacher and his hearers, who are not passive listeners, but are made to interject with comments of their own. But the dialogue is, in turn, subverted by another voice, seemingly that of conventional wisdom, presumably the so-called ‘good commentator’ whose commentary begins ‘Then shame and grief go with her’. Even this shadowy voice is not the end of these phantom speakers, for no sooner has the speaker ‘I’ indulged in the wonderful fantasy of the Levite on his knees thanking God that the woman in his life has at last left him than we get the dry corrective: ‘The text gives us a different picture...’ By the end the very qualities of the reader’s mind are crowding in as separate personifications: Spleen and Prudery, Candour and Courtesy, the heart and the opinions, not to mention squabbling among themselves.”¹⁰

Thus, as the sermon progresses the listener is always a part of a multi-layered discussion.

‘Yorick’ continues by constantly pulling the reader out of the biblical world and anticipating his own thoughts. He states: “and the Levite, *you will say*, like every other man in it, did what was right in his own eyes;”¹¹ and “and *you may add*, did his concubine too.”¹² (Emphases added). Finally Yorick, in reference to the concubine’s departure (though no mention is made of her anger), deliberately anticipates too quickly and suggests that in her departure she “plays the whore”. But then he as quickly takes the

10 Prickett, *Origins of the Narrative*, 1996, pp. 122-123.

11 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 204.

12 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 204.

reader back into the world of scripture and reminds him that she merely went back to her father's house. By this time the reader is in conversation with himself, Yorick, the biblical text and the characters of the Levite and his concubine.

As the sermon progresses, the listener's sense of time, place and interpretative stability are rendered more and more uncertain. As the listener attempts to find his grounding, Yorick introduces another voice that adds a different perspective and dimension: "Blessed interval for meditation upon the fickleness and vanity of this world and its pleasures."¹³ Here, the listener may ask: "Which world are we now in: *this* world which I inhabit; the world of the biblical text; the world of 'Yorick' himself? The question is not answered because Yorick continues to pull the listener between the shadowy voices of what Prickett calls the "phantom speakers" in the sermon. Yorick appeals to our imagination – to see the 'biblical' scene: "I see the holy man upon his knees,—with hands compressed to his bosom, and with uplifted eyes, thanking Heaven that the object which so long shared his affection was fled."¹⁴ But immediately he reminds us that this is *not* back in the world of scripture, for "the text [the Bible] gives a different picture of his situation,"¹⁵ and not that of relief on the Levite's part that the wretched woman had gone! All this is a comic image intended to dislocate the listener as he is caught between different worlds and different conclusions.

As soon the listener discovers that the Levite is not on his knees thanking God he is given another and contrasting dramatic picture to hold in his mind – and this time one drawn from scripture: "he arose and went after her, to speak friendly to her, and to bring her back again, having his servant with him, and a couple of asses; and she brought him unto his father's house; and when the father of the damsel saw him he rejoiced to meet him."¹⁶ Here, again, the reader is pulled in a different direction in the world of scripture. The Levite is not engaged in thankful prayer that she has gone, but a friendly chase to bring her back. The two descriptions contrast. The imagination working overtime, the

13 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 204.

14 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 204.

15 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 204.

16 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, pp. 204-205.

reader/listener is pulled from construction to reconstruction of the spare narrative in a series of powerful and indeed comic images.

Yorick, then, offers the reader yet another angle on the situation: “A most sentimental group! You’ll say; and so it is *my good commentator*, the world talks of everything.”¹⁷ (Emphasis added). The reader is now (perhaps ironically) the “good commentator”, given but the bare “outlines of the story.” He is drawn between the opposing demands of Spleen, Prudery (the predominant ‘voice’ at the outset of the sermon), Candour and so on. But which voice in us prevails – as these ‘characters’ come to us like a procession from a medieval morality play?

Sterne is playing with the weaknesses, and sometimes the strengths of human nature as it attends to this difficult and provocative narrative. Finally, ‘Yorick’ invites the reader to re-read and reconsider the story again – give a ‘second hearing.’¹⁸ It becomes an opportunity to explore our own humanity since “the Scripture has left us no kind of comment.”¹⁹ The preacher has taken us through the varieties of response, showing us our own capacity to make hasty judgements, condemn and misunderstanding. We are given, by the sermon, the chance to think again – to ‘repent’ and revise our perspective. Is the Levite a saint or sinner? How should the world and actions of the Levite be judged if at all? ‘Yorick’ gives the reader an opportunity to stop for a moment and give the Levite and his Concubine a second hearing because “Humanity may say too much.”²⁰ What, then, does the listener do with this discourse? How is he supposed to respond to the words of this ‘Yorick’? Prickett again notes:

In his treatment of the stories of Elijah and the widow, or Jacob and Laban, Sterne takes a third-person biblical narrative and turns it, as it were, into a novel with elaborate characterization and direct dramatic speech. His Bible is no longer a monolithic unitary text, but a richly dialogical one. But this is something

17 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 205.

18 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 205.

19 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 205.

20 Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 1927, p. 206.

different again. Here, it is true, is dialogue a-plenty, but the dialogue here is not just that of the participants, but of the various critics, including our own varied responses and prejudices opinions: Sterne has now turned the biblical commentators *themselves* into dramatic participants in his biblical epic.²¹

Indeed, this is the point. The listener is involved in the sermon in the same way one enters into and experiences a fictional narrative and, as is argued here, other sermonic texts. And, for the reader of the sermonic text, this becomes an opportunity to change, to mature and learn what it is to appreciate the world and its characters.

The sermon continues. However, following the example of Prickett,²² the discussion of it ends here because the point is made. Indeed, this sermonic text acts in a fictive manner because the text has the capacity to invite the reader into its complex world which makes its demands, destabilizing certainties and challenging the imagination. And, of course, this has the capacity to change the reader inasmuch as the sermonic text confronts the reader and his own world. Now this discussion turns its attention to the sermonic text, “The Abuse of Conscience” in the novel *Tristram Shandy*.

Laurence Sterne wrote *Tristram Shandy* between 1759 and 1767, during much of which time he was living in “Shandy Hall” near Coxwold, Yorkshire, of which he held the benefice. The book was published in five separate instalments each containing two volumes, except the last addition which included only the final volume 9. The numerous cliff-hangers Sterne put in the closing chapters of each instalment are conventional features of serially published works which arouse curiosity for further instalments. Indeed, it is an attempt to pull the reader into the next work.²³ The term ‘shandy’ means ‘half-crazy’, and the novel is described by Sterne himself (in volume 6) as “a civil, nonsensical, good-humoured *Shandean* book.”

21 Prickett, *Origins of the Narrative*, 1996, p. 123.

22 This discussion examines the same passage from the sermon considered in Prickett’s *Origins of the Narrative*.

23 *Laurence Sterne Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.

For its time, the novel was unconventional in its narrative, and it looks back to Rabelais, Burton and even to Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which had so much influenced Sterne as a student, and forward to the twentieth century 'stream-of-consciousness' novel. Indeed, *Tristram Shandy* bears little resemblance to the orderly novels that were the convention in Sterne's day. The narration, by Tristram, is erratic, and more digression with the slimmest of narrative lines – original 'shaggy dog' story. Indeed, the story itself is barely discernible. The questions Sterne's novel raises about the nature of fiction and how the reader interacts with the text gives *Tristram Shandy* a particular relevance for today.²⁴

Thus the reader of the sermonic text on conscience has already learned much as the reader of the novel which is the context of the sermon. Indeed, the reader finds himself in a unique world of *story telling*. Elizabeth Kraft writes:

Tristram Shandy, of course, is as much about the telling of a story as it is about a story told, and to summarize *Tristram Shandy* is to recount narrative strategy as well as narrative. False starts; digressions; interruptions; sermons; legal documents; fables; addresses to the reader(s); list; blank, blank, and marbled pages; diagrams; and riddles—all of these and more interfere with our perceiving *Tristram Shandy* as the sequence of events outlined above. Our experience of sequence in this work is analogous to our experience of sequence in a conversation with someone we know rather well. There are digressions, questions, wandering thoughts—interruptions of all kinds in a conversation between intimate acquaintances, yet stories get told and opinions proffered. *Tristram Shandy*, is a conversation; Tristram does most of the talking to be sure, but we readers are the listeners and our part in the conversation is far from negligible.²⁵

24 Again, this discussion is indebted to Elizabeth Kraft's book: *Laurence Sterne Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.

25 Kraft, Elizabeth. *Laurence Sterne Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996. p. 49

Already we are in the textual world of Sermon 18, playing our part in the conversation, and *being played with* by the narrator and by Sterne. Indeed, as the reader discovers, the narrative in which the sermonic text is embedded creates a world of comic uncertainty and, in many cases, confusion. From the beginning the reader is led by Tristram Shandy himself, who serves the reader as narrator, philosopher, confessor, worrier and other roles throughout the story. Indeed, Tristram plays in and around the narrative he creates and in which he is a character, commenting on his thoughts, ideas, the actions of others and asking the reader himself to join in his discussion. Thus, Kraft's notion that the feel of the narrative is that of an old friend is correct. From the beginning of the work, the reader finds himself in conversation—if not communion—with someone who could be mistaken as an old friend:

Tristram writing, of course, is the primary activity of “now,” but *our reading occupies that realm also*, and Tristram is ever aware of that fact. Tristram's aim in writing, as he states in chapter 6 of volume 1, is “friendship” with the reader. But it is a particular kind of friendship, a friendship possible only in the world of print and a friendship that stands in contrast to the relationships of the past as they are configured by Tristram. Tristram addresses us as we read, asking us to “imagine” this and “picture” that. He invites us to pause, reread, answer questions, guess, fill in the blanks, and even, late in the book, draw. He constantly calls our attention to the fact that we are readers reading and that he is a writer writing.²⁶ (Emphasis added).

(It is not a bad textual lesson for the reader of the gospel accounts of Jesus to remember.) The novel begins with the moment of Tristram's conception in his parent's bedroom. From the very beginning, the reader finds himself immediately drawn into Tristram's world and Tristram's manipulation of time—which can move without notice from the past to present to future. Indeed the argument could be made that linear time does not apply in Tristram's world:

26 Kraft, *Laurence Sterne Revisited*, 1996, p. 50.

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humors and dispositions which were then uppermost...²⁷

From the very beginning, Tristram is born into a world in which his parents seem incapable of concentrating on the immediate present! We might even say that his conception itself was a kind of digression, a moment interrupted with “a silly question” about the clock. As the reader encounters the narrative, he discovers that it does not follow the normal progression of Tristram’s life as the reader might assume.²⁸ Indeed, time confuses and confronts the reader, or, at least, makes the reader wonder where he is at any particular moment. Thus, time is one of the elements that puts the reader on guard and alerts her to the fact that in this world, which is the context of the sermon to come, she is not simply a passive observer. At the same time, Tristram precisely attempts to focus the reader on the present or indeed the ‘eternal now’. The reader needs to keep his temper, keep in focus and stay to course. Ultimately, the point is that the reader’s world is most important because this is where true change can occur. Gerald Weales adds to our discussion by noting in his remarks about the novel:

27 Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Ed, Gerald Weales. New York: The New English Library, 1960. p. 5.

28 Kraft, Laurence *Sterne Revisited*, 1996, p. 47. In her discussion of *Tristram Shandy*, Kraft begins by examining the notion of time in the novel. She notes that, although the progression of time in the novel is not chronological, it is still not a haphazard construction. Indeed, she notes that Sterne is in complete control of the lives of the characters he creates. However, my point here is from the prospective of the reader who, at the beginning of the novel, finds himself drawn into what seem to be a normal progression of time. Yet he will find out that this is not the case, and this, I believe, allows the narrative to bring the reader to question his place and position in the work. How do we relate to it?

The modern reader, like the lady whom Tristram reprimands for “reading straight forwards, more in quest of adventures, than of the deep erudition and knowledge,” is likely to become impatient, not just with the tricks that offend Professor Sherburn (as Joseph Addison), but with the digressive structure—the starts and stops, the interruptions, the false promises, the asides. Yet, digressions are “the life, the soul of reading,” as Tristram says; “take them out of this book, for instance,—you might as well take the book along with them...”²⁹

Weales’ idea frames our second point which concerns the place of the reader. Not only does the reader confront the reality of time in the world of the novel, but there is a larger realisation that the encounter with Tristram and his world will prove to be a most destabilising experience for the reader herself. The reader is never allowed to be comfortable in this world and is never permitted to stay on firm ground. The reality *of* the novel and *in* the novel is one that shifts and moves throughout and the worlds of the novel along with the worlds of the reader collide and infuse one another continuously.

The relationship established between the reader and Tristram is vital, just as the establishment of the relationship between preacher and congregation or reader in every sermon and sermon text we have so far discussed is vital. Kraft is correct in making the point that Tristram’s concern in the narrative is to befriend the reader, for Tristram asserts, assuming nothing about his reader (as the reader can assume nothing about him):

...besides, Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to have let you into too many circumstances relating to myself all at once.— You must have a little patience. I have undertaken, you see, to write not only my life, but my opinions also; hoping and expecting that your knowledge of my character, and of what kind of a mortal I am, by the one, would give you

29 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p.528.

a better relish for the other: As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault , will terminate in friendship.³⁰

This quality in the narrative, it seems, goes beyond the common intention of fostering understanding for the protagonist. Indeed, there is no question that the intention of Tristram is to create an intimate relationship between himself and the reader. More to the point, Tristram – a good lesson for when we come to Corporal Trim’s sermon as the narrative seemingly attempts to deflect us from trust in the preacher - wants the reader to trust him. Indeed Tristram tells his reader:

Therefore, my dear friend and companion, if you should think me somewhat sparing of my narrative on my first setting out,—bear with me,—and let me go on and tell my story my own way:—or if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road,—or should sometimes put on a fool’s cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along,—don’t fly off,—but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside;—and as we jog on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do anything,—only keep your temper.³¹

(Perhaps here we might recall the madly capering Bishop John Chrysostom and his outrageous behaviour before his congregation, or Butler and his call for ignorance.) With this in mind, what is the reader to make of Tristram? Who is this narrator that the reader not only confronts but permits to take control of the story and invade his own world? And, of course, this idea holds implications for the role of the preacher in the sermonic text. It is, at its essence, a relationship of trust. Indeed appearances can be deceiving. Recall also the astonishment of the crowds at Jesus’ preaching in Capernaum.

30 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 15.

31 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 15.

One can see that Tristram follows many of the same patterns established in the narration he creates. Like the narrative, the reader never quite knows what to make of Tristram himself and his relationship to other characters in the novel and the text itself. Further, the reader has difficulty understanding his relationship to Tristram and how Tristram is interacting in the reader's world. Indeed, there is almost a note of desperation in Tristram's interaction with the reader. Again, Kraft notes that Tristram is concerned with making his reader aware that he is, if not a wise man, at least a learned one.³² Tristram is always in a process of wooing the reader and constantly reminding him of his value and worth endeavouring to impress the reader with his vast knowledge and intellect. However, Kraft notes that, despite it all, Tristram is very accessible:

Still Tristram does not intimidate us, and the reason he does not is that he has such a hard time writing his story that we cannot help but find him a bit of a clown. He even encourages that perception by telling us that he will stop occasionally to put on a cap and bells and dance about. And he does so in numerous digressions that are as engaging as the story he proposes to tell.³³

From the above discussion we can see that the novel itself creates for the reader a narrative that is intentionally unstable and disjointed. Tristram, like every preacher since Christ, is offered as limited and having his faults. Throughout the novel the reader finds herself in an unstable position, always having to make judgements, always distrusting and aware of the power of the comic, and yet the overall relationship with Tristram himself, this aloof yet intimate character who constantly manipulates and plays with the reader, remains somehow constant. The effect, it can be argued, is that the reader is, in fact, easily manipulated and brought into the various dimensions created by Tristram. Controlling this, of course, is Tristram who weaves a story that makes the reader uncertain as to where he is, and yet he is called to "keep his temper" – and this is the

32 Kraft, *Laurence Sterne Revisited*, 1996, p. 51.

33 Kraft, *Laurence Sterne Revisited*, 1996, p. 51.

context of Corporal Trim's sermon. In this, it is, of course, a question of the reader's relationship to his *conscience* (the text of the sermon is Hebrews 13:18; "For we trust we have a good Conscience"). Here one is reminded of Bishop Butler's understanding of the conscience as the link to God's voice. Indeed, conscience is crucial.

The reader encounters the sermon text through the novel. The reader then becomes, so to speak, the listener alongside Tristram's father, Dr. Slop, Uncle Toby and the others – that is part of the gathered few who 'listen' to the sermon in the pages of *Tristram Shandy*. The text of the sermon is Hebrews 13: 18, which affirms the desire to act honourably in all things. So it is with the comic Corporal Trim, though he is given a hard time of it. Indeed, since the time of Christ and the prophets before him, the true preacher has had his persecutors. The reader is presented with the would-be preacher Trim who is willing to read the sermon and claims that he has the authority to do so as clerk to his regimental chaplain. One, then, begins, absurdly, with an element of faith, and a text that, says Tristram's father, is "like a sermon" because it begins with a verse of scripture. And so poor Trim tries to begin:

...If Dr. *Slop* has no objection to it, to order the Corporal to give us a page or two of it,—if he is able to do it, as he seems willing. An' please your Honor, quoth *Trim*, I officiated two whole campaigns in *Flanders*, as Clerk to the Captain of the Regiment.—He can read it, quoth my uncle *Toby* as well as I can.—*Trim*, I assure you, was the best scholar in my company, and should have had the next Halberd, but for the poor fellow's misfortune.³⁴

The listener finds that Trim has the authority to read the sermon by his position in the regiment – an absurd enough pretext, but perhaps no more so than that of a carpenter's son. Uncle Toby, too, claims him to be the best scholar in his company. The authority of the preacher, Trim, is then established and, at the same time, the reader is fully aware of the comic irony in this process. The authority of the preacher is at once established and

³⁴ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960. pp. 95-96.

questioned. Further, there is a specific *place* designated for the proclamation to be read (remember how all our sermons have been place-specific):

**...Corporal *Trim* laid his hand upon his heart, and made a humble bow to his master;—then laying down his hat upon the floor, and taking up the sermon in his left hand, in order to have his right hand at liberty,—he advanced, nothing doubting, into the middle of the room, *where he could best see, and be best seen by, his audience.*³⁵
(Emphasis added)**

We might, perhaps, say rather, congregation. Tristram continues with a satirically droll description of the corporal's "attitude" — that is he must also *look* like a persuasive preacher, not like a soldier:

...I must first give you a description of his attitude;—otherwise he will naturally stand represented, by your imagination, in an uneasy posture,—stiff,—perpendicular,—dividing the weight of his body equally upon both legs;—his eye fix'd, as if on duty;—his look determined,—clenching the sermon in his left hand, like his firelock:—In a word, you would be apt to paint *Trim*, as if he was standing in his platoon ready for action:—His attitude was as unlike all this as you can conceive...He stood before them with his body swayed, and bent forwards just so far, as to make an angle of 85 degrees and a half upon the plane of the horizon;—which sound orators, to whom I address this, know very well to be the true persuasive angle of incidence;—in any other angle you may talk and preach;—'tis certain,—and it is done every day;—but with what effect,—I leave the world to judge!³⁶

The above is a vividly comic scene as the establishment of authority which is at the same time deconstructed. Yet, as the sermon is delivered by Trim, the listener will soon

35 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 96.

36 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, pp. 96-97.

discover that Trim's comic persona leads to an authority that surpasses even that of an ordained clergyman. Trim begins the sermon with the reference to Hebrews, and a trumpet call to the reader "TRUST!—Trust we have a good conscience!"³⁷ In the preacher, however unlikely or paradoxical, we must place our trust.

The subject of the sermon itself is Conscience. Why a sermon on conscience? The question posed by the reader is exactly where reflects the game being played by the sermon text and the interruptions by Dr. Slop and others. It is, indeed, a practical exercise in conscience. What about the good conscience of the listener or the conscience of the others listening to Trim?

Yet, even before the sermon is allowed to progress further, Trim is interrupted by Tristram's father. As throughout *Tristram Shandy*, the text is a series of interruptions and deviations which seem to undermine Trim's authority—and the authority of the sermon itself—by questing Trim's improper accent and the way Trim curls up his nose and read it with "such a sneering tone" as if the Parson was going to abuse the Apostle.³⁸

Thus, at the beginning of the sermon, the reader finds himself caught between a variety of positions and discourses. Of course, at the beginning, the reader is in the end being guided by Tristram himself. In this way, the reader is given every warning of the tongue-in-cheek setting and tone that the sermon will have and understands that with the authority of the discourse there is an ironic element to the work. Indeed – the irony is complex and works finally to support the sermon at ever deeper levels.³⁹ Further, the reader also finds that he is within the world of the small, gathered congregation of Tristram's father, Uncle Toby and Dr. Slop. Like them, the listener, too, is prepared to hear the word proclaimed by Trim.

37 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 98.

38 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 98.

39 On double and complex irony, see Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

At the same time, the reader finds that he is involved in a dialogical relationship with the sermon. The reader is invited, along with the small congregation, to pass comment on Trim and his halting words, and as the sermon continues, he is invited to be one of its many commentators. Here one recalls the way Sterne structured his sermon on “The Levite and his Concubine” with its many voices and perspectives.

The dialogue between Dr. Slop (an ardent Catholic) and Tristram’s father progresses with a debate on whether or not the writer of the sermon is Protestant or Catholic. Dr Slop assumes that he must be a Protestant because only such, in his view, would have a “licence” to insult the Apostle Paul. This, in turn, leads to a reference to the Inquisition, and then a digression about Trim’s brother’s tragic fourteen year imprisonment under the Inquisition. Trim (the sermon by now quite forgotten) is so overcome with grief that Tristram’s father intervenes:

Come, *Trim*, quoth my father, after he saw the poor fellow’s grief had got a little vent,—read on,—and put this melancholy story out of thy head:—I grieve that I interrupted thee;—but pri’thee begin the sermon again;—for if the first sentence in it is matter of abuse, as thou sayest, I have a great desire to know what kind of provocation the Apostle has given.⁴⁰

What in fact has happened, of course, is that Trim has indeed “acted honourably” as the text in Hebrews requires – and therefore literally, it seems, embodies the message of the sermon. The reader, then, is immersed in the activities and comments of the congregation and with this gathered few waits for the sermon to begin again (though it has already started in the digression.) For the digressions are also the sermon: it is not too far a stretch to suggest that just as the presence of Jesus *is* the presence of the Kingdom – so the conscience of Trim (his tears a “certain proof of pity”) ensures the ‘presence’ of the text from Hebrews.

40 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 99.

On his second attempt to preach the sermon, Trim is able to read a few more lines before Dr. Slop interrupts him.⁴¹ Finally, Trim proceeds, reading:

If a man thinks at all, he cannot well be a stranger to the true state of his account;—he must be privy to his own thoughts and desires;—he must remember his past pursuits, and know certainly the true springs and motives which, in general, have governed the actions of his life.⁴²

Dr. Slop continually interrupts the discourse, voicing his disagreement now even with the Apostle himself. As Trim reads on he states the idea that a good conscience is “...not a matter of *trust*, as the Apostle intimates,—but a matter of *certainty* and fact, that if the conscience is good the man must be good also.”⁴³ Again, there is a comment by Dr. Slop voicing the idea that, according to the sermon, the Apostle is altogether in the wrong and the Protestant divine is in the right. Tristram’s father replies to Dr. Slop’s statement by urging him to have patience and allow the sermon to take its course and opinions to have their say. And here the listener is reminded of Tristram’s hope that the reader will have the same patience while reading the novel. The point is that, unlike Dr. Slop, we should not hastily jump to conclusions.

The first part of the sermon establishes the pattern which the remainder of the sermon will take. And, the rhythm (or lack thereof) allows the listener to join in the discussion that is taking place among this small group of people, and which is, of course, provoked by the sermon and by Trim himself. Indeed, the listener is in the middle of a sermon, a dialogue and a present moment that allows him to join in the discussion with the full exercise of his own ‘conscience’. As with all sermons, reception is never passive but involves imaginative reflection and responsible decisions. As the sermon continues, Trim reads:

41 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 100.

42 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 100.

43 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 100.

In other matters we may be deceived by false appearances; and, as the wise man complains, *hardly do we guess aright at the things that are upon the earth, and with labour do we find the things that are before us.* But here the mind has all the facts and evidence within herself;—is conscious of the web she has wove;—knows its texture and fineness, and the exact share which every passion has had in working upon the several designs which virtue or vice had planned before her.⁴⁴

As the sermon progresses, the reader comes to an ever clearer awareness of false and deceiving appearances. Thus, who can truly understand what is right? As Trim continues, we are led to believe that only conscience is the true guide. Thus Trim continues:

At first sight, this may seem to be a true state of the case; and I make no doubt but the knowledge of right and wrong is so truly impressed upon the mind of man,—that did no such thing ever happen as that the conscience of a man, by long habits of sin, might (as the scripture assures it may) insensible become hard;—and, like some tender parts of his body, by much stress and continual hard usage, lose by degrees, that nice sense and perception with which God and nature endowed it;—did this ever happen;—or was it certain that self-love could never hang the least bias upon the judgment.⁴⁵

Here, then, the sermon makes the listener begin to question his own conscience—does he have the ability to discern what is right and wrong in the world he finds himself in or in the text of the sermon and finally in his own life? Is this question not the purpose of a sermonic discourse to provoke?

44 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 100.

45 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 104.

However, no sooner are these questions considered by the reader than the sermon moves on, pulling us along with it. In this section of the sermon, different aspects of the mind are personified, again exactly as in Sermon 18 on Judges 19 (see above p. 98). In the Court (which seeks to establish the difference between right and wrong) “Did WIT disdain to take a bribe in it”, while, “INTEREST stood always unconcerned whilst the cause was hearing”. Is it not the case that “passion” sometimes gets the better of that “reason” which “is supposed always to preside and determine upon the case.” What then of conscience? Trim continues:

Alas conscience has something else to do, all this time, than break in upon him...Perhaps he was gone out in the company with honour to fight a duel; or to pay off some debt at play;— or dirty annuity, the bargain of his lust: Perhaps conscience all this time was engaged at home, talking loud against petty larceny, and executing vengeance upon some such puny crimes as his fortune and rank in life secured him against all temptation of committing; so that he lives as merrily”⁴⁶

It is a lesson in getting your priorities right. Indeed, here the listener is confronted by many different voices from many different and conflicting directions. Here one is reminded again of Pricket’s description in our discussion on the role of voice in the sermon “The Levite and His Concubine”:

Here the tendency to break into dialogue is so powerful that it completely runs away with the traditional form of the sermon. It opens in a way that, however startling it might have been to the congregation, is instantly familiar to anyone coming to it with the hindsight of *Tristram Shandy*.⁴⁷

46 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 105.

47 Pricket, *Orgins of the Narrative*, 1996, pp. 122.

As the sermon continues so does this multi-voiced pattern. As Trim continues his reading, the reader is presented with four examples of men who have found their conscience to have failed them. First the listener hears of a man who is “vicious and utterly debauched in his principles”; second there is one who is “sordid, unmerciful...a strait hearted selfish wretch, incapable either of private friendship or public spirit”: third, there is the individual who is “crafty and designing in his nature” whose life has been “but a cunning conjecture of dark arts and inequitable subterfuges...”; and finally the reader meets “the barefaced villain, how he cheats, lies, and perjures, robs, murders.”⁴⁸ Indeed, with each of the four examples, the sermon brings the reader into four different possibilities encountering four colourful personalities.

At this point, perhaps the reader should begin to ask himself, “Who am *I* in this gathered crowd of people?” And, the same questions continue to emerge as this sermon continues. “Where is *my* place in this world?” “What time do *I* find myself in?” “Who am *I* in conversation with and who is talking to *me*?” And the sermon itself seems to ask these questions of the reader, distracted though he is by the comic world of Slop, Toby and Tristram’s father:

Of this the common instances which I have drawn out of life are too notorious to require much evidence. If any man doubts the reality of them, or thinks it impossible for a man to be such a bubble to himself,—*I must refer him a moment to his own reflections, and will then venture to trust my appeal with his own heart.*⁴⁹
(Emphasis added)

It is no more than Jesus does in his gospel parables. Again, the above illustrates the importance of the relationship between the conscience, trust and preacher. Further, as the pattern has established, there are the different worlds the sermon hosts. And these worlds appear to be colliding with one another. Who should be examining their own reflections: the reader, the characters in the novel, the community in which the sermon was first

48 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, pp. 105-107.

49 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 108.

preached in York? And the reader is always provoked to reflection, to judgement, to decision. Reading a sermonic text is not an easy thing!

As the sermon continues, Trim reads a strong statement concerning the true nature of the self and the distinction between appearance and reality:

Let him consider in how different a degree of detestation numbers of wicked actions stand *there*, though equally bad and vicious in their own natures;—he will soon find that such of them as strong inclination and custom have prompted him to commit are generally dressed out and painted with all the false beauties which a soft and flattering hand can give them;—and that the others, to which he feels no propensity, appear at once naked and deformed, surrounded with all the true circumstances of folly and dishonour.⁵⁰

Thus, what does the listener see when he looks? And where is he asked to look? And, as Trim continues to read, the world of the biblical narrative is finally reintroduced into the discussion. The sermon describes the actions of David's conscience in David's dealings with Saul and Uriah. Indeed, David's conscience was present when David cut off Saul's skirt; yet, was absent during the murder of Uriah. It was Nathan's parable that awoke, painfully, his sleeping conscience.

With the above examples in mind, the sermon concludes that man's conscience cannot do its work alone:

Thus conscience, this once able monitor,—placed on high as a judge within us, and intended by our maker as a just and equitable one too,—by an unhappy train of causes and impediments, takes often such imperfect cognizance of what passes,—that it is not to be trusted alone; and therefore we find that there

50 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 108.

**is a necessity, of joining another principle with
it to aid, if not govern, its determinations.⁵¹**

With this statement, the reader finds that in his negotiations with the complex voices of the sermon text, his conscience, that on which he has relied upon up to this moment, is not to be trusted alone. What, then, can be trusted? How does the reader find his way if his own inner self cannot be trusted to follow the correct path? Here, it seems, the listener has the choice to look to the grand narrator who supersedes the world of the sermon and indeed, the world of the narrative itself. The listener finds that above everything is the authoritative and finally reliable voice of the narrator, Tristram and finally Sterne himself, and the reader is reminded to stay with him.⁵² The reader is asked to stay the course, keep the dialogue going and participate fully and responsibly in any world that he may find himself in.

As the sermon continues, it finally affirms the statement of the “Apostle,” that is the text from Hebrews. Indeed, the rule will be infallible. The sermon goes on to refer to Ecclesiastes to further make its point. Yet, at the end of this reference, there is given an analogy of the mind as a watchtower: “...his mind shall tell him more than seven watchmen that sit above upon a tower on high.” This analogy sparks a comment by Uncle Toby concerning the need to flank a tower for strength, and, as the sermon progresses, there is a discussion on the merits of deploying seven men in a watchtower. It is a long digression which confuses the content of the sermon with the analogies the sermon employs. Here, the listener finds that this discussion leads him to an unlikely place within the text of the sermon. And, the reader finds that Tristram’s father is “inwardly” amused by this digression as well:

**My father smiled inwardly,—but not
outwardly;—the subject between my uncle
Toby and Corporal Trim being rather too
serious, considering what had happened, to**

51 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 108.

52 On the ‘reliable narrator’, see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961. Part II, “The Author’s Voice in Fiction.”

make a jest of:—So putting his pipe into his mouth, which he had just lighted,—he contented himself with ordering Trim to read on.⁵³

Thus the reader is reminded that the authority of the sermon is found from within and it is a deep relationship between preacher and the individual. In essence, it is an inward path. All outward joking and digressions apart, there is a deep underlying seriousness in Sterne's complex text as in his York sermon. As this part of the sermon finishes, Tristram's father notes that his first assumption about the sermon has been wrong and that the sermon agrees with the position of the apostle. In reading and in listening to sermons we may well find that we change our minds – and learn that first impressions can sometimes be delusive.

As Trim's/Sterne's sermon draws towards its conclusion, it makes the statement that in order to have the fear of God in our lives one must know the difference between right and wrong. And in order for one to know this, one must have within him both belief in religion and the possession of morality. These two elements, the sermon asserts, cannot be separated from one another.

To prove this point, the sermon offers the illustration of a banker and a doctor. Indeed, one is able to put one's trust in both a banker and a doctor because, even though they do not have a belief in religion, they would not be inclined to do harm to one since it would do harm to their reputation. Yet, what if a doctor or a banker were able to bring harm to a person and profit from it? Indeed, this scenario could happen if religion did not have a moral code.

Likewise, the converse is true. The sermon states that religion cannot live without morality. And, to prove the point here, the sermon employs the example of a prison of the Inquisition. And this part of the sermon (returning to the initial digression and the

⁵³ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 110.

fate of Trim's poor brother) brings the reader, in imagination, into a world of torture and pain:

To be convinced of this, go with me for a moment into the prisons of the inquisition."—[God help my poor brother Tom.]—"Behold religion, with Mercy and Justice chained down under her feet,—there sitting ghastly upon a black tribunal, propped up with racks and instruments of torment. Hark!—hark! what a piteous groan!" [Here Trim's face turned as pale as ashes.] "See the melancholy wretch who uttered it"—[Here the tears begin to trickle down], "just brought forth to undergo the anguish of a mock trial, and endure the utmost pains that a studied system of cruelty has been able to invent." —[D—n them all, quoth Trim, his color returning into his face as red as blood.]—"Behold the helpless victim delivered up to his tormentors,—his body so wasted with sorrow and confinement."⁵⁴

As Trim reads this section, he becomes more despondent, actually entering into the physical experience of the imprisonment of *Religion*, *Mercy* and *Justice*. Sermons, as we have seen, rarely deal in the abstract. Thus Trim laments:

Oh! 'tis my brother, cried poor Trim in a most passionate exclamation, dropping the sermon upon the ground, and clapping his hands together—I fear 'tis poor Tom. My father's and my uncle Toby's hearts yearned with sympathy for the poor fellow's distress;—even Slop himself acknowledged pity for him.—Why, Trim, said my father, this is not a history,—'tis a sermon thou art reading;—prithee begin the sentence again.⁵⁵

54 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 113.

55 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 113.

Yet, in many ways, this is the point, the sermon examines the listener in the same way the listener examines the sermon. Nothing and no-one stands outside the judgement of the sermon. Indeed, this has echoes of John Donne when he thunders in his great sermon: "...and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for *thee*."⁵⁶

This passage presents the listener with a number of interesting ideas. First, the listener finds that Trim, who has fallen into an emotional state, drops the sermon on the ground and claps his hands together. Thus, here the novel itself is exploring the notion what a sermon is. That is to say, in Tristram's world, is a sermon the actual proclamation by Trim? Is the sermon an object which Trim drops to the floor? Or, still further, is the sermon something that is taking place within the mind of Trim, or the reader as he reads the recorded text in the pages of the novel? In other words— precisely what and where is the *sermon*? And, as Trim continues he states:

I would not read another line of it, quoth Trim, for all this world;—I fear, an' please your Honors, all this is in Portugal, where my poor brother Tom is. I tell thee, Trim, again, quoth my father 'tis not an historical account,—'tis a description.—'Tis only a description, honest man, quoth Slop, there's not a word of truth in it.—That's another story, replied my father.⁵⁷

Yet, there is power in the story: a mere 'description' without truth – yet powerful enough to move Trim to tears. Indeed, Tristram is exploring the very nature of the sermon. It is here, perhaps, in well-placed irony, as the reader discovers, an irony that cuts to the very point of our argument. The egregious Slop proclaims, " 'Tis only a description...there's not a word of truth in it," but with this statement we find that the sermon itself can rest on the edge of irony in order to work. Tristram seems to indicate that only in the text that might be perceived as to contain no truth can ultimate truth be found. In other words, it is only in the fictive sermon that truth is proclaimed and probed.

⁵⁶ John Donne. *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, no. 17 (*Meditation*) 1624.

⁵⁷ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 114.

The sermon moves into its final stage noting three points: whenever one talks against religion itself he is talking from his passion and not his reason. Second, when a man claims that something goes against his conscience it is the same as something going against his stomach and finally the sermon ends where it began with the voice from Hebrews: “For we trust we have a good Conscience”:

In a word,—trust that man in nothing who has not a CONSCIENCE in everything.

And in your own case, remember this plain distinction, a mistake in which has ruined thousands,—that your conscience is not a law:—No, God and reason made the law, and have placed conscience within you to determine;—not like an Asiatic Cadi, according to the ebbs and flows of his own passions,—but like a British judge in this land of liberty and good sense, who makes no new law, but faithfully declares that law which he knows already written.⁵⁸

The reader is also reminded of the context of the sermon in eighteenth century England and the importance conscience played in both the academy and faith. What, then, does the reader make of this passage? It follows the pattern of creating dialogue between the text of the sermon and the listener. And, again, the reader is brought to a place in which he is asked to look at himself and his own conscience. Yet, at the same time, the sermon seems to offer a small counterbalance between the world and the world of the text—at least for a moment. Up to this point, the listener has been asked—if not forced—to “follow the ebbs and flows of his own passions” and live in the unstable world and time of Tristram’s chaotic narrative. Yet, at the end of the sermon text, we find a call for one to emulate a “British judge in this land of liberty and good sense.” A final irony: in this godly British land, the law which is from God and reason, is followed to the letter – and we, for our part have but to determine the right by the exercise of our conscience. After the sermon has finished, Tristram’s father notes:

58 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 115.

Thou hast read the sermon extremely well, Trim, quoth my father.—If he had spared his comments, replied Dr. Slop, he would have read it much better, Sir, answered Trim, but that my heart was so full.—That was the very reason, Trim, replied my father, which has made thee read the sermon as well as thou hast done; and if the clergy of our church, continued my father, addressing himself to Dr. Slop, would take part in what they deliver as deeply as this poor fellow has done;—as their compositions are fine (I deny it, quoth Dr. Slop),—I maintain it that the eloquence of our pulpits, with such subjects to inflame it,—would be a model for the whole world...⁵⁹

And, indeed, this is the point. The imaginative and energetic quality of the sermon must exist in order to relay the radical proclamation of its message. It is through its ability to create a dramatic dialogue with its reader that the sermon becomes an occasion for reflection and change. The good sermon is an event that is present in the sermonic text.

This highly complex sermonic text still follows the pattern established in all other texts studied so far. In *Tristram Shandy*, Trim's sermon is preached to a specific group of people in a clearly defined place in the Shandys' small parlour. Further, the preacher is granted a certain authority to speak. In this case, one encounters corporal Trim as one who holds a certain authority – though the true authority of his speaking emerges as the sermon progresses. At the same time, the sermon hosts a variety of imagined situations into which the reader enters. We find ourselves in the world of scripture, discussing military strategy, and with Trim's brother Tom in a Spanish prison. One also encounters a complex sense of time. Indeed, time is both specific and universal and the reader moves through different levels of time while also remaining in his own time. The same is true with place. In this sermonic text, places are many: England, a living room in a house, the biblical world, and the like. In short, the text makes huge demands on the reader both intellectually and imaginatively.

59 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1960, p. 115.

And, as in all good fiction, there is a dialogical relationship between the text and the reader. That is to say that the reader is permitted and encouraged to be in conversation and relationship with the sermonic text. In this way, the reader is invested in and affected by the worlds the text creates. And these worlds have the ability to profoundly influence the life of the reader.

This leads one to the final quality that is the call to decision. Here, the sermonic text calls the reader to examine his own conscience and how he lives and acts in the world. If the reader accepts the call of Christ, the reader is called to act in a way that exhibits this fact. And, this should have a lasting effect on the reader's life and actions.

Chapter 10

Herman Melville (1819 - 1891) *Moby-Dick*

Herman Melville was born in New York City in 1819. Although from a cultivated background, his upbringing was impoverished and his formal education did not go past his teenage years. This led him into various jobs before he joined a ship bound for Liverpool as a cabin boy in 1839. The journey was the first of numerous sea voyages, which afforded Melville experiences that influenced both his life and his writing.¹ Indeed, many themes found in Melville's work were influenced by the journey and struggles of life aboard a ship.

Thus, it is no accident that the influence of seafaring and its human struggles is the world in which Melville's best-known novel *Moby-Dick* (1851) takes place. *Moby-Dick* is considered by many to be Melville's greatest work and one of the major works of nineteenth-century American fiction. At the same time, religious and biblical themes play a vital and central role in the novel. Indeed, the beginning of the novel includes the sermon text considered here. Yet, we might say that the novel as a whole holds a sermon quality. In this way, Melville writes as a preacher and his fictional work is tied to sermon themes that are expressed through his literary proclamation. Indeed, before the work even begins, there are a series of "Extracts (supplied by a sub-sub-librarian)" which include various references to scripture in the same way that a sermon is usually based on the reading of scripture. For example:

"And God created great whales." GENESIS.

**"Leviathan maketh a path to shine after him;
One would think the deep to be hoary." JOB.**

**"Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to
swallow up Jonah." JONAH.**

¹ Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. London: Penguin, 1994. Foreward.

**"There go the ships; there is that Leviathan
whom thou hast made to play therein."
PSALMS.**

**"In that day, the Lord with his sore, and great,
and strong sword, shall punish Leviathan the
piercing serpent, even Leviathan that crooked
serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in
the sea." ISAIAH²**

Therefore, Melville himself might be seen as a kind of 'preacher' from a literary standpoint and is rightly included in this survey of preachers.

The character Ishmael (in the Bible Ishmael was the natural son of Abraham and Hagar, a desert wanderer and eventually the father of the Ishmaelites, the enemy of God's chosen people. Psalm 83:6) narrates the story as he recounts his journey aboard the whaling ship Pequod. The ship's captain, Ahab³ (the biblical Ahab is the seventh king of Israel, husband of the notorious Jezebel, and whose name means "God is a close relative".) is obsessed with chasing the white whale, Moby Dick, and takes his crew on an epic journey of struggle and hardship. As noted above, this is a profoundly biblical world that is embedded in the narrative.

As a result, *Moby-Dick* can be put in the tradition of an epic such as is found throughout the history of literature.⁴ Christopher Stern in his book *The Weaver-God, He Weaves* observes:

**...even as an epic *Moby-Dick* is an unusually
ambitious work that brings together two epic
traditions rather than one: the ancient or
primitive national epic of combat or conflict, as
in the *Iliad* or *Beowulf*, and the modern**

2 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, pp. 10-11

3 Ahab is described in I Kings: "...the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all that were before him...Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him." I Kings 16: 31-33.

4 See Christopher Stern's discussion in *The Weaver-God, He Weaves: Melville and the Poetics of the Novel*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 1996, pp. 135-216.

universal epic of spiritual quest of a search for a transcendent order or significance to human life, as in the *Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*. Though in Melville's treatment the two are in fact woven together to form a single story, with each of the two major characters crossing the line into the other's epic territory, the first can be said to focus generally on Ahab and the second on Ishmael."⁵

Stern notes the significant themes in *Moby-Dick* including conflict, spiritual quest, and questions surrounding the meaning and significance of human life. These themes will take the reader of the novel and the sermonic text within it on a journey of self-exploration and discovery. Nick Selby reinforces this idea by noting:

The narrative of *Moby-Dick* opens, famously, with an act of naming. 'Call me Ishmael' is a bold statement of self-definition, and it is an invitation to the reader's imaginative and interpretive faculties. From the outset, then, *Moby-Dick* makes us aware that acts of naming and of defining are complex and problematic. They are, necessarily, reciprocal: to define himself, Ishmael needs a readership.⁶

Indeed, the act of naming is itself a journey of self-exploration which conveys biblical themes.⁷ Of course, these themes are, naturally, sermonic in nature as well. The reader finds himself in a vivid and dramatic place as he experiences the narrative in reading—actually experiencing the struggles in the world of *Moby-Dick*. And, like Ishmael, the reader is offered the possibility of transformation through a call to decision. The reader discovers that Ishmael made the decision to change by the time the novel is read. Will the reader, in turn, follow Ishmael's lead, eventually rescued from the sea by the "devious-cruising Rachel"?

5 Stern, *Moby-Dick*, 1996, p. 136.

6 Selby, Nick. Ed. *Herman Melville: Moby-Dick*. Cambridge: Icon Books, 1998. p. 7.

7 One, of course, is reminded of Jesus' question to Peter: "Who do you say that I am?" See Mark.

Before the discussion considers the sermonic text in detail, it is important to note that the novel introduces the reader to a number of guides that will take him on his journey. This includes Ishmael, Queequeg and Father Mapple. Father Mapple, as will be noted later, acts as a type of gatekeeper. He will lead his congregation including Ishmael, Queequeg, and the reader, via the book of Jonah, through a journey that mimics the journey of the novel. The novel opens with Ishmael describing his own disposition:

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship.”⁸

This beginning brings the reader into Ishmael's world and state of mind. And, indeed the reader may relate to these feelings as well. Therefore, the reader finds Ishmael ready to embark on a journey that will literally swallow him up and bring forth a new person at the end of the experience. Indeed, the whale symbolizes, we might say, the struggle with nature and the power of religion – a mysterious force in the biblical narrative in the story of Jonah. In essence, then, Ishmael makes a decision to confront these powerful elements in life. And, the end of the novel itself returns to its beginnings because it is a coffin that saves Ishmael and he is finally brought to safety by a ship named Rachel, in the Bible the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph. The final words of the novel are:

⁵ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 21.

Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another ixion I did revolve. till gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst; and now, liberated by reason of its cunning spring, and owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin like-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. The unharmed sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks. On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan.⁹

Is the reader prepared for the same experience? Thus, from the beginning, the importance and the need for a quest and journey which hold the possibility of change and even rebirth are emphasised.

As the narrative continues, the reader is introduced to Ishmael's guide, Queequeg, who becomes for Ishmael and the reader a friend, visionary and by the end of the novel, a saviour. Stern writes of Queequeg:

Still, if Ishmael knew how to read the signs, he would know his destiny had brought him to the one man who can lead him through the maze of his future trials and onto the final, life-changing encounter with the beast of destruction. The next morning, waking to find Queequeg's arm thrown over him in a loving, protective embrace, he sees only that "this arm of his [was] tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure. Ishmael is too green at this point to recognize

⁹ Melville, *Moby-Dick*. 1994, p. 536.

that this figure represents a map of the path in and out of the maze of the Minotaur, the beast he must slay to gain whatever treasure awaits him.¹⁰

Finally, the reader is introduced to Father Mapple, who is the religious man and pastor of the sea-faring village of New Bedford. He preaches from a pulpit in the shape of a boat in a chapel that holds other lost and bereaved souls seeking solace, guidance and redemption. Stern describes Mapple in the following way:

A man of God, and agent of the Father (as his Catholic-sounding nickname rather obviously implies), he too had gone to sea in his youth and served as a harpooner in the whaling industry. Old in years and experience, then, yet forever young in appearance, he is thus a fit guide for young petitioners. But unlike Queequeg, Mapple counsels caution and obedience. He is in fact an example of a special kind of guide, called in Jung's term a 'threshold guardian', who stands at the gateway to the realm of supernatural power and warns the tender or fainthearted to stay away."¹¹

Accordingly, Ishmael, Queequeg and the reader find another guide in the person of Mapple. Mapple is a guide who holds authority both from his participation in the sacred ministry and his life experience on the sea. This allows Mapple to climb the pulpit and offer his guidance and proclamation. When Mapple speaks, he, so to speak, creates a community of followers. Again, Stern writes:

"When Mapple speaks...he is like the ancient oracles who guarded the path of the suppliant; he warns the would-be adventurer to stay within the confines of the known world and to flee all fearful encounters with the great powers beyond."¹²

10 Stern, *Moby-Dick*, 1996, p. 142.

11 Stern, *Moby-Dick*, 1996, p. 144.

12 Stern, *Moby-Dick*, 1996, pp. 144-145.

The theme of journey is important in *Moby-Dick* because the text seeks to guide the reader to a place where he is somehow closer to divine understanding and purpose. This is a journey about transformation both in the story of the novel and in the sermonic text. Indeed, the beginning of chapter 7, entitled "The Chapel", takes the reader on a journey through three chapters of the book, in which is explored the chapel, the pulpit, and finally the sermon of Father Mapple itself. Only at the point when the reader is fully settled in the imagination among the congregation in the chapel does Mapple begin to preach his sermon.

Here, then, the reader of the sermonic text becomes in a sense also the listener and, of course, a part of the congregation on various levels. Indeed, the context of the novel is nineteenth century New England in a whaling town in a Whaleman's Chapel. Ishmael as narrator takes the reader to visit the chapel before the journey. Ishmael notes:

In this same New Bedford there stands a Whaleman's Chapel, and few are the moody fishermen, shortly bound for the Indian Ocean or the Pacific, who fail to make a Sunday visit to the spot. I am sure that I did not.¹³

All who enter this chapel feel themselves to be on sacred ground. Upon entering, on a stormy day, Ishmael finds a small congregation gathered together, each member wrapped in his or her own grief. Ishmael explains:

Entering, I found a small scattered congregation of sailors, and sailors' wives and widows. A muffled silence reigned, only broken at times by the shrieks of the storm. Each silent worshipper seemed purposely setting apart from one another, as if each silent grief were insular and incommunicable.¹⁴

13 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 51.

14 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 51.

The listener, then, enters with Ishmael and is thus part of the fictive liturgical community.

On each wall of the chapel on either side of the pulpit there are a number of inscribed marble tablets. They are tablets engraved to the memory of dead seamen and each tablet begins with the words: "Sacred To the Memory of..."¹⁵ Thus the Chapel embraces the lives and deaths of the little community – a focus of its deepest fears and sorrows.

Soon, Father Mapple enters and ascends the pulpit. The pulpit, too, has meaning, and has a chapter all to itself (chapter 8). Ishmael describes the structure in this way:

Like most old-fashioned pulpits, it was a very lofty one, and since a regular stairs to such a height would, by its long angle with the floor, seriously contract the already small area of the chapel, the architect, it seemed, had acted upon the hint of Father Mapple, and finished the pulpit without a stairs, substituting a perpendicular side ladder, like those used in mounting a ship from a boat at sea. The wife of a whaling captain had provided the chapel with a handsome pair of red worsted man-ropes for this ladder, which being itself nicely headed, and stained with a mahogany color, the whole contrivance, considering what manner of chapel it was, seemed by no means in bad taste."¹⁶

When Father Mapple ascends the pulpit and gathers the rope-ladder in, Ishmael realizes that the design of this pulpit provides Father Mapple a self-contained, and to the seamen familiar, place from which to preach. Thus, the chapel itself can be seen literally as a kind of ship which shelters people from the storm outside and from the storms of life itself:

¹⁵ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, pp. 51-52.

¹⁶ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, pp. 54-55.

No, thought I, there must be some sober reason for this thing; furthermore, it must symbolize something unseen. Can it be, then, that by the act of physical isolation, he signifies his spiritual withdrawal for the time, from all outward worldly ties and connections? Yes, for replenished with the meat and wine of the word, to the faithful man of God, this pulpit, I see, is a self-containing stronghold—a lofty Ehrenbreitstein, with a perennial well of water within the walls.¹⁷

The pulpit is the shape of the prow of a ship, leading the way on the journey and yet it is also a place of withdrawal for Mapple, where time can be suspended for a moment, and worldly ties loosed. And, in the back of the structure, there is a painting of a ship at sea guided by the light of an angel. Ishmael concludes that this structure is a fitting place to hear the word of God:

What could be more full of meaning?—for the pulpit is ever this earth’s foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. From thence it is the storm of God’s quick wrath is first described, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. Yes, the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.”¹⁸

The chapel and the pulpit become a sacred place for Ishmael and the reader as they undertake their journey with Father Mapple.

Father Mapple orders the congregation to sit together in the language of shipboard. He cries, “Starboard gangway, there! side away to larboard—larboard gangway, to starboard! Midships! midships!”¹⁹ The people follow his orders and shuffle to their positions and every eye is on the preacher because he speaks the language of their world

17 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 55.

18 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 56.

19 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 56.

and life. Father Mapple has authority and knows his people. The congregation obeys his command and every eye is upon him—including the ‘eye’ of the reader. Ishmael describes his first sight of him in this way:

I had not been seated very long ere a man of certain venerable robustness entered; immediately as the storm-pelted door flew back upon admitting him, a quick regardful eyeing of him by all the congregation, sufficiently attested that this fine old man was the chaplain. Yes, it was the famous Father Mapple, so called by the whalemén, among whom he was a very great favorite. He had been a sailor and a harpooner in his youth, but for many years past had dedicated his life to the ministry.²⁰

Ishmael also notes, “...Father Mapple enjoyed such a wide reputation for sincerity and sanctity...”²¹ This Father holds both the authority of the man of God and the experience of the life of the whaler. Mapple has himself taken a journey similar to the one Ishmael is about to embark on and this experience allows the old Father a large measure of respect.²² At the same time, he is humble and obedient. Indeed, before his exhortation, Father Mapple

20 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 54.

21 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 55.

22 Later in Melville’s narrative, Ishmael attempts to persuade Bildad and Peleg to allow Queequeg to sail on the Pequod despite the fact that Queequeg is a “Cannibal.” Part of Ishmael’s defense of Queequeg is to proclaim that Queequeg is a member of the “First Congregational Church.” Ishmael, then, delivers a “sermon” himself saying: “I mean sir, the same ancient Catholic Church to which you and I, and Captain Peleg there, and Queequeg here, and all of us, and every mother’s son and soul of us belong; the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshiping world; we all belong to that; only some of us cherish some queer crotchets noways touching the grand belief; in *that* we all join hands.” Peleg and Bildad are impressed with Ishmael’s sermon and Peleg concludes that Ishmael’s “sermon” is the best he has heard. Peleg says: “‘Splice you mean’t *splice* hands,’ cried Peleg, drawing nearer. ‘Young man, you’d better ship for a missionary, instead of a fore-mast hand; I never heard a better sermon. Deacon Deuteronomy—why Father Mapple himself couldn’t beat it, and he’s reckoned something. Come aboard, come aboard; never mind about the papers.’” Thus, Melville demonstrates the importance and power of preaching. Ishmael, then, like Mapple is evolving into a good “preacher” because of his character and experience. The reader, then, is in good hands and was right to put his trust into the person of Ishmael. Indeed, the reader remembers that his is being led by this “preacher” on his journey. See Melville, 1994, p. 100.

...paused a little; then kneeling in the pulpit's bows, folded his large brown hands across his chest, uplifted his closed eyes, and offered a prayer so deeply devout that he seemed keeling and praying at the bottom of the sea. This ended, in prolonged solemn tones, like the condoling tolling of a bell in a ship that is foundering at sea in a fog...²³

The reader encounters a man with deep natural and spiritual authority, and at the same time humility. Like Christ before him, he is the best guide for the purpose here. After his prayer, Mapple leads the congregation in a hymn, which equates the trials of life with the fighting of a whale. The entire congregation joins in the singing of the hymn which "...swelled high above the howling of the storm."²⁴ Of course, this is also symbolic because, in the end, God prevails over the storms of life.

Thus, for Ishmael and the listener, the chapel and their guide are authoritative through experience, and a profound connection with the sacred. It is at this point that Father Mapple, after a short pause, "...slowly turned over the leaves of the Bible, and at last, folding his hand down upon the proper page, said: 'Beloved shipmates, clinch the last verse of the first chapter of Jonah'—And God had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah'"²⁵ The listeners in the chapel and the reader, too, are now ready to follow the familiar story of Jonah in their own lives.

However, before this discussion continues, one should remember that the text has placed the reader into a *scriptural* world in the sermon. The sermon of Father Mapple is a culmination of worlds and experiences that will lead his listener on a journey to God. However, in order to arrive at this point, the text has taken the reader and listener on a journey through different worlds and experiences. To be sure, the reader is now part of Ishmael's life, and experiences the world of New England, and the life of a would-be whaler. Also, the reader enters the place of the Chapel and finds a congregation in search

23 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 56.

24 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 57.

25 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 57.

of hope and comfort. This, in a way, gives him permission to share in their common experience of fear, misunderstanding and hopelessness. Father Mapple, then, is the guide the listener needs to hear. The sermon (chapter 9) begins in the following manner:

Beloved shipmates, clinch the last verse of the first chapter of Jonah—‘and God had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.’

Shipmates, this book, containing only four chapters—four yarns—is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the scriptures. Yet, what depths of the soul does Jonah’s deep sea-line sound! What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet! What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish’s belly! How billow-like and boisterously grand! We feel the floods surging over us; we sound with him to the kelpy bottom of the waters; sea-weed and all the slime of the sea is about us! But *what* is this lesson that the book of Jonah teaches?²⁶

The opening statement of the sermon entertains complex experiences for the reader of the novel to enter into. There is a sense of intimacy at the beginning and a feeling of sea life. The sermon uses strong physical and emotive words and images - beloved shipmates, floods surging, kelpy bottom, and sea-weed. And the experience is all around. The listener to the sermon experiences the world of whales, water and seaweed and feels the water around him and allows this to ‘clinch’, or grasp him as he encounters it.

As the sermon continues, it pulls its listener along and begins the process of explaining the lesson that can be found in this inhospitable environment into which the Pequod is shortly to sail. Father Mapple is quick to point out that the listener will encounter a two-strand lesson—a lesson to all sinful men. This statement reminds the listener that this is a lesson that is applicable to any world that contains sinful men—including the world of the listener himself. Thus, the listener finds that throughout this experience the everyday world and the imaginative worlds hosted by the sermon enter

26 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 57.

into a dialogue. Thus, the reader of the novel, too, is encouraged to respond to the call of Father Mapple not only as a participant in his congregation but in the affairs of his own life as well. Father Mapple continues:

Shipmates, it is a two-strand lesson; a lesson to us all as sinful men and a lesson to me as a pilot of the living God. As sinful men, it is a lesson to us all, because it is a story of the sin, hard-heartedness, suddenly awakened fears, the swift punishment, repentance, prayers and finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah.²⁷

As the sermon continues, Mapple reminds his congregation of Jonah's situation. Mapple explains that Jonah, like all sinners, like all of us, was disobedient to God. The text states:

As with all sinners among men, the sin of this son of Amittai was his wilful disobedience to the command of God—never mind now what that command was, or how conveyed—which he found a hard command. But all the things that God would have us do are hard for us to do—remember that—and hence, He oftener commands us than endeavors to persuade. And if we obey God, we disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists.²⁸

Here, the listener is confronted with the knowledge that all men are disobedient to God. And, in trying to obey God, it is necessary that one disobey one's own nature. There is a break in the sermon at this point and a command to, "remember that."²⁹ Father Mapple offers a word of warning and advice to his congregation. At the same time, at the beginning of his discourse, Mapple reminds his listeners of the need for one to let go of his own set perceptions and assumptions and follow one's faith. There is a need to be

27 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 57.

28 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, pp. 57-58.

29 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 58.

open to change and to be changed. This is necessary in every world that the sermon brings together—faith is a key element. Everything is dependent on faith in the command of God.

With the importance of faith instilled in the congregation, Mapple begins the journey of the life of Jonah. The congregation and the listener are encouraged to enter another world—the world of the biblical text. Note how this is introduced:

With this sin of disobedience in him, Jonah still further flouts at God, by seeking to flee from Him. He thinks that a ship made by men will carry him into countries where God does not reign, but only the Captains of this earth. He skulks about the wharves of Joppa, and seeks a ship that's bound for Tarshish. There lurks, perhaps, a hitherto unheeded meaning here. By all accounts Tarshish could have been no other city than the modern Cadiz. That's the opinion of learned men. And where is Cadiz, shipmates? Cadiz is in Spain; as far by water, from Joppa, as Jonah could possibly have sailed in those ancient days, when the Atlantic was an almost unknown sea.³⁰

In this world again which is familiar to the listener, Jonah flouts God and skulks (like many others after him, no doubt) about the wharves of Joppa. The listener finds that Jonah has attempted to flee God by travelling across the world, to a place as far away as possible (Cadiz would, no doubt, have had a particular resonance in the minds of Mapple's congregation). But yet there is more to be said of Jonah:

Miserable man! Oh! Most contemptible and worthy of all scorn; with slouched hat and guilty eye, skulking from his God; prowling among the shipping like a vile burglar hastening to cross the seas. So disordered, self-condemning in his look, that had there been policeman in those days, Jonah, on the mere

30 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 58.

suspicion of something wrong, had been arrested ere he touched a deck. How plainly he's a fugitive! no baggage, not a hat-box, valise, or carpet-bag,—no friends accompany him to the wharf with their adieux. At last, after much dodging search, he finds the Tarshish ship receiving the last items of her cargo;³¹

However, here again the pattern of Mapple's biblical world continues with an elaborate description of Jonah's state of affairs. Indeed, where does the world of the biblical narrative end and the world of Mapple's begin? The elaborate world created by Mapple is at once deeply biblical, and yet also familiar to all of us who seek to hide from the voice of God calling to us:

One day, the LORD spoke to Jonah son of Amittai. He said, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and speak out against it; I am aware how wicked its people are." Jonah, however, set out in the opposite direction in order to get away from the LORD. He went to Joppa, where he found a ship about to go to Spain. He paid his fare and went aboard with the crew to sail to Spain, where he would be away from the LORD.³²

Yet the listener, and indeed the congregation, is so engaged with the world created by Mapple that the boundary between the biblical text and the world of Mapple's sermon has no significance. As the sermon continues, the world of Jonah is made ever more real by the rhetorical skill of the preacher. Again, compare the biblical text with the text of the sermon:

...as he steps on board to see its Captain in the cabin, all the sailors for the moment desist from hoisting in the goods, to mark the stranger's evil eye. Jonah sees this; but in vain tries to look all ease and confidence; in vain

31 Moby-Dick, *Moby-Dick*, p. 58.

32 vv. 1-4.

essays his wretched smile. Strong intuitions of the man assure the mariners he can be no innocent. In their gamesome but still serious way, one whispers to the other—‘Jack, he’s robbed a widow;’ or, ‘Joe, do you mark him; he’s a bigamist;’ or, ‘Harry lad I guess he’s the adulterer that broke jail in old Gomorrah, or belike, one of the missing murders from Sodom.’ Another runs to read the bill that’s stuck against the spiel upon the wharf to which the ship is moored, offering five hundred gold coins for the apprehension of a parricide, and containing a description of his person.³³

Yet, the listener could be forgiven for making the case that Mapple’s description is, on one level, more powerful than the biblical narrative on which it is based. Indeed, the listener does travel with Jonah, knows the character, and watches Jonah as he struggles through his difficult journey. The listener is able to relate to this Jonah because of the all too human situation Jonah finds himself in. In this way, the listener relates to the themes of persecution, judgment, alienation and the like.

The sermon continues with the narrative of Jonah as he confronts the captain who is, “...at his busy desk, hurriedly making out his papers for the Customs...”³⁴ Mapple knows exactly how to conjure up the sense of the sailor confronting the daunting Captain of his ship for the first time. As the sermon continues the captain states:

...‘Who’s there?’ Oh! How that harmless question mangles Jonah! For the instant he almost turns to flee again. But he rallies. ‘I seek a passage in this ship to Tarshish; how soon sail ye, sir?’ Thus far the busy Captain had not looked up to Jonah though the man now stands before him; but no sooner does he hear that hallow voice, than he darts a scrutinizing glance. ‘We sail with the next coming tide,’ at last he slowly answered, still intently eyeing him. ‘No sooner, sir?’—‘Soon

33 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, pp. 58-59.

34 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 59.

enough for any honest man that goes a
passenger.'³⁵

In this part of the sermon, Jonah encounters a question from the Captain, "Who's there?" And, the listener may believe that the question is being asked of him. What is the listener doing in this world and whose voice calls him? Is the listener willing to journey with Jonah or Ishmael? Perhaps, then, the listener relates to Jonah and feels the need to turn and flee. Does the listener feel that he is an honest man? Indeed, the narrative quality of the sermon seems to turn outward away from the story to those who are engaged in the hearing of the tale. Further, it seems that Mapple himself steps out of his narrative and speaks beyond his world:

Ha! Jonah, that's another stab. But he swiftly calls away the Captain from that sent. 'I'll sail with ye,' –he says–'the passage money, how much is that?–I'll pay now.' For it is particularly written, shipmates, as if it were a thing not to be overlooked in this history, 'that he paid the fare thereof' ere the craft did sail. And taken with the context, this is full of meaning.³⁶

The listener, too, notes the stab to Jonah and wonders if, in some way, the comment is directed to him. Yet the narrative moves on as in life Jonah (and the congregation, in their way), pay the necessary fare and wait for the craft to sail.

In the next section of the sermon, Mapple discusses the captain's ability to discern the moral fibre of a person and we find that the captain has his doubts about Jonah. Indeed he charges him three times the going rate as the price of his fare. Jonah is shown to his room because he is tired from his travels. Upon entering his cabin, Jonah attempts to lock his cabin door but is unable to because there is no key in the lock. The captain hears this and this further affirms his assumption that his passenger is a guilty man:

35 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 59.

36 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 59.

‘Point out my state-room, Sir,’ says Jonah now, ‘I’m travel-weary; I need sleep.’ ‘Thou look’st like it,’ says the captain, ‘There’s thy room.’ Jonah enters, and would lock the door, but the lock contains no key. Hearing him foolishly fumbling there, the Captain laughs lowly to himself, and mutters something about the doors of convicts’ cell being never allowed to be locked within.³⁷

Once in his state-room, Jonah falls into his berth and looks for sleep. However, Mapple notes that Jonah finds himself in a small room below the water-line of the ship. The air is still and Jonah gasps. Indeed, in this small space, Jonah is in a space that acts as a precursor to the small space he will find himself in once swallowed by the great whale.

In the next section of the sermon, the listener finds a description of a swinging lamp in Jonah’s stateroom. The lamp which sways with the movement of the ship, “...alarms and frightens Jonah...”³⁸ In this way, the state-room with its swinging lamp, serves to jolt Jonah’s conscience and to remind, in his fear, of his disobedience toward God’s call. In the same way, the description reminds the congregation that they, too, are called to look into their own conscience and its response to God:

...as lying in his berth his tormented eyes roll round the place, and this thus far successful fugitive finds no refuge for his restless glance. But that contradiction in the lamp more and more appalls him. The floor, the ceiling, and the side, are all awry. ‘Oh! so my conscience hangs in me!’ he groans, ‘straight upward, so it burns; but the cambers of my soul are all in crookedness!’³⁹

And, the passage continues comparing Jonah’s conscience to a morning after a night of drinking. Yet, eventually, Jonah “...amid the whirl of woe he feels...”⁴⁰ is able to find

37 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 59.

38 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 60.

39 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 60.

40 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 60.

sleep. Here, again, the importance and power of conscience is found in the sermon. One, of course, is reminded of the preaching of Butler and Sterne.

Father Mapple proclaims to his congregation that Jonah's journey has just begun as the ship departs to sea. Not long into the journey, the ship is confronted by a great storm, which panics the crew. In an attempt to save the ship, the crew begins to throw off various pieces of cargo. Through this storm, however, Jonah continues to sleep until he is awakened by the captain who states: 'What meanest thou, O sleeper! arise!'⁴¹ Jonah, of course, is awakened from his deep sleep and staggers to the deck to see the storm beating down upon the ship. And, is this not the job of the sermon, in a sense echoing the storm outside, but to awaken the listener from a deep sleep?

However, the statement made by the captain of the ship is another example of the dialogue from the story in the sermon moving beyond its context and into the world of the gathered congregation and beyond to the reader of the sermon text in the pages of the novel. This has special significance for Ishmael as he is called out of the 'sleep' of his depression to undertake a life-changing journey. And, the meaning of the statement is not lost on the listener, as he, too, is invited to arise and join a journey that will bring him closer to God.

Further, the listener finds the words of Mapple's biblical text calling him into the world of the biblical text and thus towards a right relationship with God. That is to say that the original essence story of Jonah found in the biblical canon is accessible through the story created by Mapple in his sermon. The sermon is, if you will, the portal.

As the sermon continues, the listener finds Jonah in a state of terror and the other crew members grow more suspicious of his presence among them:

Terrors upon terrors run shouting through his soul. In all his cringing attitudes, the God-fugitive is now too plainly known. The sailors

41 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 61.

mark him; more and more certain grow their suspicions of him, and at last, fully to test the truth, by referring the whole matter to high Heaven, they fall to casting lots, to see for whose cause this great tempest was upon them.⁴²

As the crew cast lots, the lot falls to Jonah and they fall upon him with their questions:

What is thine occupation? Whence comest thou? Thy country? What people? But mark now, my shipmates, the behavior of poor Jonah. The eager mariners but ask him who he is, and where from; whereas they not only receive an answer to those questions, but likewise another answer to a question not put by them, but the unsolicited answer is forced from Jonah by the hand of God that is upon him.⁴³

Jonah's answer is a clear proclamation: "I am a Hebrew...I fear the Lord the God of Heaven who hath made the sea and the dry land."⁴⁴ Here the listener finds that the sermon refers directly to the biblical text at Jonah 1:9. As the sermon continues, Jonah makes a full confession and pleads to be thrown into the sea:

Fear him, O Jonah? Aye, well mightest thou fear the Lord God then! Straightway, he now goes on to make a full confession; whereupon the mariners became more and more appalled, but still are pitiful. For when Jonah, not yet supplicating God for mercy, since he but too well knew the darkness of his deserts,- when wretched Jonah cries out to them to take him and cast him forth into the sea, for he knew that for his sake this great tempest was upon them; they mercifully turn from him, and seek by other means to save the ship. But all in vain;

42 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 61.

43 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 61.

44 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 61.

the indignant gale howls louder; then, with one hand raised invokingly to God, with the other they not unreluctantly lay hold of Jonah.⁴⁵

And the storm immediately passes and the sea is calm again. Here, then, is the call to a decision and a 'portal' indeed for the coming account of the voyage of the Pequod in the novel. Will the listener to the sermon and indeed the reader of the sermonic text respond to the call? Indeed, will the reader and listener proclaim: "I am a Hebrew...I fear the Lord the God of Heaven who hath made the sea and the dry land?"⁴⁶ The message of the sermon is clear. If one turns to God the storms of life will cease. It is parabolic in nature because Jonah has finally learned this lesson and turned his life back to God as he waits for his deliverance:

He leaves all his deliverance to God, contenting himself with this, that spite of all his pains and pangs, he will still look towards His holy temple. And here, shipmates, is true and faithful repentance; not clamorous for pardon, but grateful for punishment. And how pleasing to God was this conduct in Jonah, is shown in the eventual deliverance of him from the sea and the whale. Shipmates, I do not place Jonah before you to be copied for his sin but I do place him before you as a model for repentance. Sin not; but if you do, take heed to repent of it like Jonah.⁴⁷

Indeed, Jonah is the model of choice and of repentance - metanoia. He is one who finally gives his life back to God. And, the listener to the sermon discovers that Mapple too is a model for his world. Indeed Mapple, so to speak, embodies the text of the sermon. And,

45 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, pp. 61-62.

46 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 61.

47 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 62.

one is reminded also of Christ as one who is what he preaches and preaches what he is. Here, this fiction is at its creative best:

While he was speaking these words, the howling of the shrieking, slanting storm without seemed to add new power to the preacher, who, when describing Jonah's sea-storm, seemed tossed by a storm himself. His deep chest heaved as with a ground-swell; his tossed arms seemed the warring elements at work; and the thunders that rolled away from off his swarthy brow, and the light leaping from his eye, made all his simple hearers look on him with a quick fear that was strange to them...There now came a lull in his look, as he silently turned over the leaves of the Book once more; and, at last, standing motionless, with closed eyes, for the moment, seemed communing with God and himself.⁴⁸

And, at the same time, Mapple, storm-tossed in his very person as preacher puts himself in the place of the sinner as well. Again, the preacher imitates the life of Christ as one who descends into the sinful world.

...for I am a greater sinner than ye. And now how gladly would I come down from this mast-head and sit on the hatches there where you sit, and listen as you listen, while some one of you reads me that other and more awful lesson which Jonah teaches to me, as a pilot of the living God. How being an anointed pilot-prophet, or speaker of true things and bidden by the Lord to sound those unwelcome truths in the ears of a wicked Nineveh, Jonah, appalled at the hostility he should raise, fled

⁴⁸ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 62.

**from his mission, and sought to escape his duty
and his God by taking ship at Joppa.⁴⁹**

Indeed, then the transformation brings about the mission to preach the gospel to the world. The preacher – and perhaps the novelist also – is called to speak truth over falsehood: “Jonah did the Almighty's bidding. And what was that, shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood! That was it!” The sermon ends with Mapple offering the congregation a benediction and he is left alone.

As a sermonic text, this work follows the template that has been established throughout this thesis. Once the reader has willingly entered the world of the sermonic text, the reader finds a preacher who has an authority that is linked to scripture, his own personal experience and charisma. Further, the sermonic text hosts various worlds that the reader takes part in including the place of the sermon, which is a Whaleman's Chapel in nineteenth century New England. The biblical world is present also, where the reader encounters Jonah, a run-away prophet aboard a ship (though very like a nineteenth century sailor) and in the belly of the whale. And, like Jonah, the reader is brought into a place where he is called to turn to back to the Truth. And, of course, the reader is in his own world as he comes to terms with his own understanding of the dark universe of Melville's epic fiction. In addition, time and place are both specific and universal as the reader moves through the various worlds of the text. The reader learns from Jonah and sees the need to change and repent. In fiction time becomes specific and universal – we are always present – with Jonah, in the Chapel, and in the timeless, ever present moment of our own imaginative reading.

Overriding all times and every place is the eternal experience where the reader is confronted with a decision. The reader is called to change and, in so doing the storms of

⁴⁹ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1994, p. 63.

life, as they did for Jonah, and will for Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, will cease. Indeed, the Kingdom of God is at hand in every time and in every place.

Chapter 11

John Updike and *A Month of Sundays* (1975)

John Updike (1932 -) published his first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair* in 1959, and continues to write prolifically to the present time. *A Month of Sundays* might therefore be considered one of his earlier works, though post-dating the earlier 'Rabbit' novels, which brought him to fame. It is the story of a lascivious minister sent to a desert retreat by his Bishop. The hope is that in the desert he will undertake a process of redemption by writing, through which he is returned to a state of upright and proper living. However, this abstract is too simplistic for Updike's writing. Updike's comic text deconstructs any notion of an uncomplicated or straightforward understanding of his work. Indeed, George Steiner notes, "In *A Month of Sundays*, the sexual and the clerical, the scatological and the eschatological are intimately, almost violently meshed."¹

The sermons in the narrative play a pivotal role in the novel. There are four sermons in the work (the 'month of Sundays') that bind the narrative to a theological setting. Of course, the title is also a play on the old saying—'never in a month of Sundays,' a common expression that is used to express that something will never happen. In this case, it is the rehabilitation of the central character Tom Marshfield to proper 'clerical' behaviour. Thus, Updike's title plays on our understanding of the 'real world' of the American middle classes, and Christian theology. The focus of this chapter is the last sermonic text in the work. This discussion will look at how Updike's comic and even deliberately scurrilous sermonic text still conforms to the established template of this thesis. Once again, this final sermonic text has its origins in fiction. Thus, its beginning has no connection with any liturgical community. Nonetheless, the sermonic text remains similar to each sermon in this discussion. Indeed, at the end of the sermon the reader finds the statement, to which we will return: "At last, a sermon that can be

1 Steiner, George, "A Month of Sundays: Scarlet Letters." From, David Thorburn and Howard Eiland, Eds., *John Updike: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eaglewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979, p. 95.

preached.”² But, as this discussion has argued, fiction is a key element of sermonic text. Preaching is always in some sense an exercise in the fictive world.

The reader begins with the context created by the novel. The world of the novel is America during the height of the Nixon Watergate scandal. It is a time when authority and the established order are in question. And, consequently, the importance of honesty in American life is on the mind of many. The narrative is peppered with quotes and images of Watergate and various reactions to it.

In this context, the reader first encounters the preacher, the Revd. Thomas Marshfield, who composes his sermon while forcibly resident in a desert retreat centre. Indeed, the very name Thomas Marshfield itself is highly suggestive. One is reminded of doubting Thomas in the gospels; and Marshfield is an effective description of one who is stuck in a marsh of sin and doubts about the church. Thomas, then, is a minister who is set apart by his ordination and, at the same time, decidedly human, especially in his sexual life! In this way, authority and order is both established through Thomas and deeply undermined by him as well. Authority is in an ironic limbo. The novel opens in the following way, begging forgiveness in an act of mock repentance – for his church and society:

Forgive me my denomination and town; I am a Christian minister, and an American. My bishop, bless his miter, has ordered (or, rather, offered as the alternative to the frolicsome rite of defrocking) me brought here to the desert, far from the green and crowded land where my parish, as the French so nicely put it, locates itself. The month is to be one of recuperation—as I think of it, “retraction,” my condition being officially diagnosed as one of “distraction.” I doubt it will work. In *my* diagnosis I suffer from nothing less virulent than the human condition, and so would preach it.³

² Updike, John. *A Month of Sundays*. London, Andre Deutsch Limited: 1975. p. 212.

³ Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 4

Thomas desires members of his congregation and staff. He is brilliant and endearing, perverse and deceitful. In short, Thomas is human – all too human. Thomas though is at least honest - he is what he preaches and he preaches what he is.⁴

He is split between the conflicting voices in his soul. He is in a disappointing marriage and finds little comfort in the numerous affairs he undertakes. Indeed, Thomas himself practices the frolicsome rite of “defrocking” (in a non-ecclesiastical sense) women in his parish. He is very aware of the hypocrisy of his ordination and holds a profane honesty and candid impiety as he struggles in this position. And, through the process of honest reflection—especially prevalent in his sermons, his authority and authenticity before the reader is achieved.

The reader is invited to understand that the human condition and its relationship to power is important. In other words, Thomas is corrupt and fallen; yet, through complete honesty he empties himself and becomes, paradoxically, one who speaks with power and authenticity. And, in the end, he even seems to echo the Christ figure. He is placed in stark contrast to Nixon and other government officials who are corrupt but *dishonest*. . Indeed, Robert Detweiler alludes to this in his discussion on Updike sermons when he writes:

...one recognizes this as post-modern narration: the four sermons display an attitude, beyond a prose of existential alienation, that is mainly confusion; technology is no longer viewed as potentially redemptive but as out of control; language itself is tricky, unmanageable, even demonic; intense self-consciousness frustrates attempts to know and love others.⁵

4 See Detweiler, Robert, *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction*. San Francisco: Harper and Row. 1989.

5 Detweiler, Robert, *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction*. San Francisco: Harper and Row. 1989. p. 103.

Thus, the context for the sermon is a place where the relationships between divinity and humanity are intentionally blurred and turned on their heads. In Thomas's world, holy ground is not an absolute rock that upon which one builds his moral house; rather, holy ground, such as it is, is more the consistency of quicksand that is always changing, shifting and never in the same place—it is, of course, a marshy field. Updike, then, is making the world and the pursuit of truth unstable and open.

The sermon text considered here is the last of four sermon texts in the novel and is composed by Thomas when he is nearing the end of his month in the desert retreat and looking toward returning to the real world—a world in his own words that is “the green and crowded land that his parish locates itself in.”⁶ Here, then, as the argument has noted, the reader becomes a listener in a sense; the sermon is set apart in the text of the novel. Indeed, the reader of the novel is the only true congregation for this sermon. Through fiction, we might say, there is the creation of a liturgical community of readers of which each new reader is a part. But in the novel, Thomas is supposed to be preaching to his fellow ministers who have also been sent to the desert. The sermon opens with the following statement:

My brothers: our text is taken today from that Prince of Preachers, the one born out of due time, Saul of Tarsus who became Saint Paul, his epistle to the Corinthians, the fifteenth chapter: “We are of all men most miserable.”⁷

Here, much like any other sermon constructed for a community of faith, the discourse opens in two ways. First, the sermon creates the feeling of intimacy and familiarity by using the phrase “My brothers.”⁸ Second, he quotes from the Bible – St. Paul to be precise. The listener sees this as the familiar voice of the minister on Sunday morning. The phrase invokes a setting of a church where those who are present are there

6 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 4.

7 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 205.

8 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 205.

often. The listener feels that he is a part of something—that is to say, he is on the inside of a liturgical community. At the same time, the phrase is ironic. If the listener is a “brother” is he corrupt also? Indeed, is the reader also “...of all men most miserable?”⁹ Yet, this is also literally true because Thomas preaches to clergy who are miserable—taken from their homes and sent to the desert. Indeed, Thomas claims he will preach humanity.

Second, the opening offers the reader an opening to the biblical world. However ironic, it is still like each sermon we have discussed so far. The sermonic text appeals, albeit ironically, to the authority and world of scripture and its connection with the divine voice of scripture. In this case, it is the connection with the “Prince of Preachers, the one born out of due time, Saul of Tarsus who became Saint Paul.”¹⁰ Following this introduction, Thomas begins to examine the scripture itself:

**“We? Who is this we? We who preach the risen Christ:
“And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching in vain
and your faith is also vain.”**

**“Your? Who is this you? You of Corinth who profess the
monstrous new faith, who have received the Gospel, the
good news derived from the reports that the dead man
Jesus, risen from the tomb, was seen by Cephas, and then
of the twelve, and after that of five hundred brethren at
once...”¹¹**

Indeed, Thomas examines who is included in the chosen few. Going back to Paul he opens up the question – who are these people: We? You? Are they not all of us? In the same way, the reader is asked the same question. Who does he think he is? Is the reader part of this community or is he looking in from the outside? Or, is he doing both? The text states:

9 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 205.

10 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 205.

11 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 205.

And now all have fallen asleep, and have long been so. Still to this day late in 1973 the rumour lives, that something mitigating has occurred, as if just yesterday, to align, like a magnet passing underneath a paper heaped with filings, the shards of our confusion, our covetousness, our trespasses upon the confusions of others, our sleepless terror and walking corruption.¹²

Is the community of faith made up of sleepless terror and walking corruption? Is the listener the same? However, Thomas interrupts his own discourse and considers the question of time. This is an abrupt change and one recalls Steven Prickett's discussion of dialogue and Sterne's sermon on the Levite and his Concubine. Prickett notes that throughout Sterne's sermon the reader encounters many voices as the text progresses.¹³ And this is also happening in Updike's text. Indeed, the voice embedded in the statement: "We? Who is this we?" and "Your? Who is this you?"¹⁴ reminds the reader of the instability of the voices in Sterne's sermon. Sermons are in the business of deconstructing and perhaps reconstructing our identities and sense of who we are.

As the sermon continues, Thomas begins to answer his question by examining those that receive the Gospel—first in Corinth, then, by implication, those in the present day. In this way, there is a universal feeling to the monologue—in this day and in everyday. Thomas continually refers back to the quotation from scripture: "the greater part remains unto this present, but some are fallen asleep."¹⁵ And he notes, "all are fallen asleep"¹⁶ Everyone is waiting for something to happen. Is the community waiting for the time when "Death is swallowed up in victory?"¹⁷

The sermon continues by noting that Paul hoped that something dramatic would happen in his lifetime. "Behold," Thomas states, "I show you a mystery; we shall not all

12 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, pp. 205-206.

13 The reader is referred back to Stephen Prickett, *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996

14 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 205.

15 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 205.

16 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 205.

17 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 206.

sleep, but we shall be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump.”¹⁸ But the last trump has not sounded even until the present day. However, the sermon goes on to note, that even now in the present day, “still men listen for the last trump.”¹⁹

To reinforce this point, Thomas takes the listener into a world ending in eighty days which was part of the content of a leaflet given to him by a street preacher. After quoting from the leaflet, Thomas states that though we “recoil from this gibberish”²⁰ we are no different from the message of the leaflet. Indeed we long for the same thing—our lives pay tribute to this very same message. We all live within our own fictions, we might say, and among these the fictions of religion are some of the most indecent – perhaps even pornographic.²¹ In the end, Thomas proclaims, “Does not this pornography of faith, like the pornography of copulation printed in the very same grimy shop, testify to a needed miracle, a true wonder, a miraculous raw truth which it is one of civilisation’s conspiracies to suppress?”²² This is an honest attempt to understand what a community of faith is and what a believer is concerned with. What separates the pious clergyman from the street preacher con-artist? And what separates the believers of each? Here, then, the beginning words of the sermon echo with the listener: “We? Who is this we?” This also reminds the reader that he too is immersed in worlds of fiction. The world ending in eighty days is, perhaps, a reference to Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Or is it just the wild imaginings of a mad street preacher? It is all, in the end, fiction. But how do we discern the ‘true’ from the false fiction?

Indeed this is what the life of a minister and believer is built around—the hope of the coming of the Christ. A true fiction? Thomas notes that we ministers and Christians are most miserable because, “for what to other men is but a hope, added to their lives as a

18 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 206.

19 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 206.

20 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 207.

21 This was an idea also explored critically by Wayne C. Booth.

22 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 208.

feather to a hat, for us it is the hat itself, and more than the hat, the shirt and the pants and the shoes.”²³

Yet, what is it that we hope for, Thomas muses? He claims that for his listeners the resurrection is not about the heavenly kingdom of angels and a new life after death. Rather, this hope is a continuation of earthly mundane life that one knows and is familiar with. Thomas, honestly and bluntly, states, “The only Paradise we can imagine is this Earth. The only life we desire is this one.”²⁴

At this point in the discourse, Thomas states, “No man, unless it was Jesus, believes. We can only profess to believe.”²⁵ This, we might say, endorses the sense that the only true preacher is Jesus – all others merely aspire to his truth, aspiring to the impossible. And this statement leads Thomas into a discussion about the role of the minister in the community of faith. “It is our station,” Thomas states, “to be visible and provide men with the opportunity to profess the impossible that makes their lives possible.”²⁶ And for Thomas, this may be the highest calling for the minister or priest. Indeed the minister can do no more but be visible. Again, this is an honest assessment of faith, belief and the human condition. It asks the listener to question his own life and belief.

Finally, Thomas offers his listeners a glimpse of hope noting, “Or perhaps—it would be a sin for us to deny the possibility—the Parousia so imminently expected by Paul will now come, and these two millennia between will have been as the absentminded hesitation of a gracious host’s hand on the way to ring for dessert, or to strike his wineglass with a knife and bring the table to attention.”²⁷

23 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 208.

24 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 209.

25 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 210.

26 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 210.

27 Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 210.

And this offering of hope ends this sermon. Thomas concludes with the question “Who has sent me here?”²⁸ This, Thomas notes, is the root question of our existence. On one level, the Bishop has sent Thomas to the desert and, on another level, it becomes an existential question for the human condition.

Who has sent us here, in this vocation, at this late date, out of due time? To ask the question is to imply an answer: there is a qui, a Who, who has sent; we have not accidentally fallen, we have been placed. As of course we already know in our marrow. God bless you. God keep you all. Amen.

In the end, the kerygma is proclaimed and the listener is offered a decision. Will he choose to remain miserable because of his belief and hope in Christ? Or, will the listener choose a different path. Will the listener choose the truth and folly of God or the dishonest imagery of humanity? Though what this might mean in the world of Marshfield is always open to question!

Yet, one may recall that, at the beginning of the novel, the one who sent Thomas to the desert was his bishop. And, he was sent to the desert to find redemption. Therefore, the sermon ends at the beginning with a question about redemption and religion itself. Indeed, it is a decision.

In this manner, the listener finds himself drawn into a world in which the authority of the sermon stands and lives by honesty. The power and authenticity of this sermon is its ability to ask the questions for which there are no answers. The sermon is the honest proclamation of the good news. Fiction and reality slip into one another and offer a new vision of the Kingdom of God. At the same time, the sermon is a remarkably shrewd exercise in the rhetoric of fiction. Indeed, rhetorically, fiction brings one to the place of decision with the power of persuasion.

²⁸ Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 211.

As this discussion has been arguing, the above occurs through dialogue, place and time. Throughout the sermonic text the reader is asked to be part of the discussion and comment on the statements. And, there are commentators a-plenty that reflect on and question everything. The place of the reader is made unstable by bringing the reader into places that may or may not contain truth or they may just have the appearance of truth. Finally, the element of time is universal as the reader moves from one event to another in his own time and during the fictional time of the novel and even the biblical narrative. In this way, everything that is known by the reader as truth is open to question and truth itself—if there is such a thing—is allusive at best. There is also a call to decision. Will one choose to be most miserable? Will one choose to believe and hope in Christ?

Thus, this sermonic text created in fiction and the sermonic text born in a liturgical community do the same thing—open a way in that helps to bring the reader to a place that allows easy reception of the discourse. Or, as we have noted throughout this discussion, the sermon attempts to bring the person into a willing suspension of disbelief thereby entering into the event of the sermon where various worlds meet and lives are transformed. At the end of this sermon, the text, suggestively, reads:

[in pencil, in the slant hand of another:]

Yes—at last, a sermon that could be preached.²⁹

And this is the common denominator in this sermon and the previous ones considered here. Each holds within the potential to be preached through the experience of the individual.

²⁹ Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1975, p. 212.

Conclusion

This thesis began with a quotation by Rowan Greer on how the early Christians understood and interacted with scripture:

But in another sense, the victory was a way in. For many early Christians the Church provided for the first time a place to belong a community of hope in what must often have seemed a hopeless world. And, for all Christians, the victory was a moral one. The life of virtue enabled them to see that what really counted was what could not pass away.¹

In a similar manner, this argument demonstrated how sermonic texts open a 'way in' to the Christian experience. This is possible because the sermonic text has what we have described as fictive qualities – that is the characteristics to be found in works of fiction. The qualities include setting the context in which the sermon is proclaimed which in turn creates a space and event for various 'worlds' of experience to meet. At the same time, the 'sermonic text' opens up a 'space of literature'² which is universal and of no particular time or place, but entertains the various worlds of the reader, the biblical narrative (Jonah, Martha and Mary and the like) as well as the historical setting of the preaching. Other fictive qualities include a dialogical relationship between the reader and the text and the capacity of time and place to be both specific and universal and temporal and eternal. Finally, the voice of the sermonic text has authority and authenticity because it is at once familiar in the human experience and, at the same time, set apart through a particular relationship with the divine.

Therefore, the sermonic text, like a work of fiction, may be described as 'self-authenticating.' And, like a work of fiction, it does not require those external guarantees

1 Greer, Rowan. *Broken Lives and Mended Lives: Theology and Common Life in the Early Church*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991. pp. 21-22.

2 The term is drawn from Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1982.

of authority that are found in the community of faith: its doctrines, creeds and ecclesiology. Rather, the authority of the sermonic text is intrinsic as in a work of fiction and stands on its own.³

Nevertheless, as of late, actual preaching seems to have lost this quality. The American Homiletics professor Fred B. Craddock writes:

Why do people week after week return to their hard chairs before dull pulpits to hear a man thrash about in a limbo of words relating vaguely to some topic snatched desperately on Saturday night from the minister's own twilight zone? Habit? In some measure yes, but the sermons they have been hearing have been such as to break even the strongest addiction. The survival of the habit can be partially accounted for by the nourishment it receives from a subterranean hope: perhaps today there will be a word from God. ⁴

The sermon and preaching, it can be argued, does not hold the esteemed reputation it has enjoyed in the past. Craddock is correct when he acknowledges that there is a hope that in the event of preaching there will be a word or experience of God—a way in to the experience of scripture. Indeed Helmut Thielicke notes:

...our preaching, is to be sure, largely correct, exegetically "legitimate," workmanlike and tidy; but it is also remarkably dead and lacking in infectious power. Very often it strikes us as an unreal phantom that hovers above and is isolated from what people feel are the actual realities of their lives and what they talk about in their language. There can be no doubt that for many preachers it is simply an escape when, in the face of this failure to get returns in the area of preaching, they take flight into the cultivation of liturgical ceremonial and even make a virtue of the vice of wanting to ignore the times and live in some timeless, spiritual world.⁵

3 See, J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.

4 Craddock Fred. *Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971.

5 Thielicke, Helmut. *Encounter with Spurgeon*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press: 1963. p. 2.

Indeed, preaching can be done correctly. Yet, according to Thielicke the discourse is dead. Therefore, this argument provides a way of understanding sermonic texts that demonstrates the ability to reclaim the experience of preaching. The discussion began in the Gospel of Mark and Jesus' sermon proclaimed in Galilee. In this passage, a reader encounters the perfect sermon. That is to say there is no separation from the preacher and what he preaches. Indeed, Jesus is what he says and he says what he is. In essence, then, there is no need for interpretation, but merely response and action. And this is evident in the way the would-be apostles react to the Christ. The apostles simply leave and follow the Christ – an act of what Robert Scharlemann has called 'accoluthetic reason'.⁶

The reaction of those that encounter Jesus and his message is a crisis of choice or what can also be called a call to decision. In other words, one who encounters the experience of Christ is offered a choice to accept or reject him. Bultmann expressed the idea in the following way:

Hence too there are situations in which it is possible for a man to do nothing—neutral situations. And just this Jesus expressly denies. To the accusation that he was breaking the Sabbath to help a man, he answered, "Ought a man to do good or evil in the Sabbath? save a life, or kill?" The implication is that there is no third way besides doing good or doing evil; to do nothing in this case would be equivalent to doing evil. There is therefore no neutral position; obedience is radically conceived and involves man's whole being. This means that the whole man is under the necessity of decision; there is no neutrality for him, he has to decide between the only two possibilities which there are for his life, between good and evil.⁷

6 Robert P. Scharlemann, *The Reason of Following: Christology and the Ecstatic I*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

7 Bultmann, Rudolf. *Jesus and the World*. London: Charles Scribner's Son's, 1958. pp. 61-62.

Indeed, with the presence and message of Jesus, a new order was ushered in and many believed that the decision was urgent because the end of the world was near. However, as time passed and, indeed, the world did not come to an end, the message and its delivery began to shift in its emphasis. C. H. Dodd writes:

Christ's death...had marked the end of the old order, and His resurrection and exaltation had definitely inaugurated the new age, characterized, as the prophets had foretold, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God. It remained only for the new order to be consummated by the return of Christ in glory to judge the quick and the dead and to save His own from the wrath to come...When the unexpected delay in the consummation broke up the community of the eschatological process, some readjustment of outlook was called for...As the revelation still delayed, the believers were driven to conclude that they had been mistaken in thinking that the Lord would return immediately, but a more attentive study of His teaching, and observation of the signs of the times, they thought, would enable them to divine the time of His coming, as well as the reason for its delay.⁸

Jesus was no longer the one who preached and the proclamation was no longer perfect. Indeed, as Dodd alludes, the early Church and the church today found it necessary to explain and interpreted the meaning of the Kingdom of God for the listener. Greer sums up this idea by noting the following:

The New Testament itself must be regarded as a series of desperately human attempts to explain Christ. These attempts lead in different directions and employ a wide variety of categories. Is Christ the Messiah? a prophet like Moses? the Son of Man? the wisdom of God? The only rule that works for the New Testament is that Christ is whatever you are hoping for, but he always fulfils these hopes in an unexpected way. Christian writers after the New Testament were obliged to find ways of explaining their own experience of Christ in the

⁸ Dodd, C. H. *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*. London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1936. pp.36-37.

light of the initial responses preserved in the New Testament.⁹

And, two thousand years later, for better or worse preaching it seems has lost the sense of urgency, replaced by a drive to create, maintain and uphold Christian communities. There has been a shift from the experience of the Kingdom of God to maintenance and importance of a Christian community and its role in future generations.

Therefore the implications of this discussion demonstrate that for preaching to be effective the church must reclaim its ability to offer opportunities to experience an encounter with Christ and the proclamation. Sermonic texts show that preaching can rediscover the eternal message and urgency of Christ's call to decision. Here, of course, one is reminded of Bultmann's belief that the Christ is resurrected into the kerygma. That is to say, Christ and his call to decision is found in the proclaiming of his word. Thus, the call to preach is a call to create an experience with Christ and a confrontation with a decision. Robert Scharlemann expressed it best when he noted:

But the intention of the concept of kerygma is clear. If Jesus was resurrected into the kerygma, then the kerygma is the materiality of his living presence, and the word of preaching is not concerned with interpreting the meaning of the words of a text but with mediating the living reality in them.¹⁰

Indeed, like the sermonic text and fiction, preaching can and must be an experience of a living reality for the listener. This can be illustrated in Plato's *Ion* as follows:

9 Greer, 1991, *Broken Lives and Mended Live*, p.26.

10 Scharlemann, Robert. "The Textuality of Texts." In Klemm, David E. and Schweiker, William, Eds. *Meanings in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricoeur*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993, p. 23.

Soc. I wish you would frankly tell me, Ion, what I am going to ask of you: When you produce the greatest effect upon the audience in the recitation of some striking passage, such as the apparition of Odysseus leaping forth on the floor, recognized by the suitors and casting his arrows at his feet, or the description of Achilles rushing at Hector, or the sorrows of Andromache, Hecuba, or Priam,- are you in your right mind? Are you not carried out of yourself, and does not your soul in an ecstasy seem to be among the persons or places of which you are speaking, whether they are in Ithaca or in Troy or whatever may be the scene of the poem?

Ion. That proof strikes home to me, Socrates. For I must frankly confess that at the tale of pity, my eyes are filled with tears, and when I speak of horrors, my hair stands on end and my heart throbs.¹¹

The sermon, then, puts the hearer into the experience which leads to choice. Here one is reminded of Coleridge's introduction to *Aids to Reflection* when he writes:

Reflect on your own thoughts, actions, circumstances, and—which will be of especial aid to you in forming a *habit* of reflection—accustom yourself to reflect on the words you use, hear, or read, their birth, derivation, and history. For if words are not things, they are living powers, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined, and humanized.¹²

As David Buttrick succinctly expressed it, "Perhaps the presence of God is, after all, a linguistic event, a presence in the world."¹³ Indeed, one is reminded of John Bunyan in the opening of *The Pilgrim's Progress* when he writes:

11 Jowett, B. *The Dialogues of Plato Volume I* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1875. p. 249

12 H. J. Jackson ed. *The Oxford Authors: Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. p. 666.

13 Buttrick, David. *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*. New York: Fortress Press, 1985. p. 8.

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold, I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked and saw him open the book, and read therein; and as he read, he wept and trembled; and not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, “What shall I do?”¹⁴

Indeed, “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.’” (Mark 1:15). Thus, in the end, the argument is simple. The possibility of the sermon is that it brings a person to a world or experience, which offers the listener a choice to embrace the Kingdom of Heaven or reject it. Therefore at the end, one is back to the beginning. The Kingdom of God is at hand.

¹⁴ Bunyan, John. *The Pilgrim's Progress*. London: Penguin Classics, 1965. p.51.

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