

THE PREACHER AS CRAFTY TEACHER

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

Suppose a teacher is about to introduce a new and difficult topic to her class. However, she is not sure the class are ready for the alertness and diligence required for the task. Things have been going badly recently and many in the class are weary and ready to give up. What's more, they are still struggling with some of the basics. The text topic, while difficult is, however important. Will the class have the energy for this new material? And, of course, new concepts are always threatening in some way. Will the students simply dig in their heels and refuse to learn these new ideas? How is the teacher to engage her students so that they will continue to learn and grow?

One approach she may try is a bit of reverse psychology. She could tell them there's an interesting and important topic due to come up, but she is not sure the class is ready for it yet. Maybe, some day, but not today. They must wait until they are more mature, ready for more adult learning. There would, of course, be cries of indignation and protest from the class. And so, apparently reluctantly, she agrees to give the new topic a try. If the tactic works she will have a class eager to learn and determined to prove to their teacher that they are up to whatever she gives them.

The Preacher of Hebrews is just such a crafty teacher. In the coming chapters of his sermon he will be delving into some very deep issues. The ideas will be complex and challenging. The congregation will need to be alert, ready to learn new things and ready to be challenged.

The Preacher has already wetted the congregation's appetite regarding this new material. He has been speaking about Jesus' role as high priest. Remember back in Hebrews 5 he says, "Although (Jesus) was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered and, having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." (5:8-9). This complex verse lies at the heart of the sermon. If the congregation can grasp the implication of this truth they will be able to "lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely and... run with perseverance the race that is before us." (12:1) If, however, they cannot grasp this, they will be like children wearing water-wings paddling around in the shallows. Eventually they will grow weary and drift away on the tide. So, important things are at stake. New truths must be learnt if the congregation is to go on. The preacher encourages them in three steps.

First, he tells the congregation, that they are a bit slow (5:11-14). "Slow to learn, (5:11), means a bit dull, not the sharpest knives in the draw, or, possibly, not really trying. "Could do better" about sums it up. By now they should be teachers

themselves, but instead they are still in primary school. They would rather eat “Readybreck” than steak and chips.

It is important to notice that this is a play. The Preacher is being somewhat facetious, (as he himself admits in 6:9). His goal is to stir the congregation to action. All through this sermon we see the Preacher’s aim is to encourage, never to put down. But if he has to give them a swift kick to get them moving, he will do it.

Second, he tells the congregation there is no turning back (6:1-8). Reading this passage I think there is a dramatic pause between 5:14 and 6:1. Having suggested that they are a bit slow on the uptake there is likely to be a bit of a backlash from the congregation. “Who do you think you are? How dare you call us slow and immature?”

Chapter 6 starts with a response to these complaints – “Okay then – let’s go for it.” (6:1) In fact, the expression the Preacher uses is “go on towards perfection”. Up to this point in his sermon the Preacher has reserved the language of perfection for Jesus alone. (cf 2:10; 5:9). This call to perfection is in essence a call to imitate Christ. But there is no hint in Hebrews that Jesus is simply a moral figure who serves as a worthy example for Christians. This call to perfection, (maturity, completeness), is a call to follow. Jesus is not a fellow-traveller to be imitated, he is a pioneer to be followed. A Christian who faithfully imitates Jesus is like a concert pianist who plays Mozart well. If a concert goer remarks that the pianist “played Mozart to perfection”, it is still a different order than that of Mozart himself. The perfection of the performer depends on the composer. So it is with the Christian life.

Rather surprisingly the Preacher says that the way to perfection is to leave behind the basics, the foundations. He is not asking us to repudiate the foundations; rather he wants us to move beyond them. They lay the basis for our common life in Christ but a Christian who does not move beyond the basics is like a child who never grows up. A Christian is to be childlike, but never childish.

A Christian is one who is always learning, always on the move. The Preacher sees only two directions that Christians can move – forward or adrift. We can either continue to grow and mature or we will float around on the surface, driven by the tides and winds which will pull us more and more off course, until we become hopelessly lost.

This possibility of becoming lost prompts one of the most solemn warnings in Scripture: it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened... and then have fallen away.” (6:4-6) This stern warning seems to suggest that any believing Christian who drifts away is forever lost, with no second chances, but we should be careful how we interpret these words. Remember that the Preacher has been seeking to encourage the congregation, not frighten or brow-beat them. Although this is a hard saying it is intended to motivate us, not paralyse us. As the Preacher says in 6:9, “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case.”

Furthermore I think the Preacher is not proclaiming a theological absolute, but rather a pastoral problem. When the Preacher says it is “impossible” to restore such a one he is not saying it is impossible for God, but pointing out the sad experience of all

congregations, those for whom we had such high hopes, but have lost their sense of direction and drifted away.

People reject Christianity for all sorts of reasons and while it is always sad to see such a thing it is not always tragic for there is always the possibility of a change of mind and heart in the future. But it is much more difficult when someone who has known the depth and power of Jesus in their life rejects that faith. They are not walking out on what they do not understand but on what they do. They do not fall away because they have never tasted the grace and mercy of God, but in spite of the fact they have. They are not turning their backs on the church, but on grace – they are, in effect, “crucifying again the Son of God” (6:5). Far too many of us have seen this. Just as Jesus warned would-be followers to count the cost, so the Preacher warns those who have risen to the bait. Once you go down this road toward perfection and maturity there is no turning back.

There is a third step in encouraging these weary and worn-out Christians before diving headlong into new mysteries. Having sparked them by daring to suggest they might not be up to it, then warning them of the dangers of biting off more than they are willing to chew, he now tells them of the high hopes he has for them (6:9-12). His hope rests on two things – their commitment to God and God’s commitment to them. They have shown their commitment by the lives they have led – even if they have grown weary. And God, well he is the promise-making, promise-keeping God. The Preacher calls the congregation to trust in God who promises rest and triumph and to be patient.

Before the Preacher finally turns to the advanced course of the high priesthood of Jesus he has one further thing to say about the promises of God. We will look at that next week before turning to the mysterious Melchizedek.

Amen

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