



SHABBAT SERMON

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I did something rather stupid at the beginning of this week. I do enjoy jokes and made the mistake of telling a joke about sermons. You may recall it was about the passage in Kohelet that says that there is a time to be born and a time to die, and lists other contrasting situations. I mentioned the suggestion that between each of these extremes there is a middle position, and gave as an example that between “a time to speak and a time to be silent” is the “sermon” – where one speaks but does not say anything! And now it is my turn to illustrate the truth of this remark!

I find it interesting that of all the possible topics to occupy this middle ground between speech and silence, the sermon should have been singled out for this unkind judgment. The joke was told to me by an Orthodox Rabbi friend in Israel, but the laughs it received here suggest that the joke is not restricted to any particular religious community. In fact it feeds into one of two contrasting views about the significance of religion. Either religion is just a harmless activity with no real significance in the world, so that the preacher is a fairly comic figure pontificating to a flock of largely disinterested people. Or else the sermon is a rabble-rousing, threatening call to arms for some sort of fanatical sect of people seeking to destroy all those who do not conform to their particular ideology. I hope that I fall into neither category as a preacher, nor does this community fit either model of religion.

Perhaps in self-defence, I started thinking about other examples of where there is speech but nothing is being said. It is not difficult to find them. We are daily bombarded with words, whether from the media, or our cell phones, or from announcements on public transport, or pop songs and music in public buildings – all designed to influence us, persuade us, inform us or simply hypnotise us. They form a kind of background noise to our life in western society. They often have no meaning for us personally and we probably cut them out, at least on a conscious level. Nevertheless they are our constant companions as we go about our lives, whether irritating or comforting. They are speech without content.

Whether they are harmless is a matter of debate. It can be argued that the constant stream of unnecessary information makes it harder for us to pick out that which is important, or rather, that everything becomes trivialised, and we become desensitised to the real messages we should be receiving about the state of the world. In order to be heard today a message has to become louder, more extreme, even more violent, and indeed the different media compete to shock us into paying attention. The trivia of the lives of so-called celebrities become heralded as ultimate truths for daily consumption. Conversely, the struggles and conflicts around the world are only real for us if reported, and tragically they are also subject to fashion. When interest fades they disappear to be replaced by something new. Father Gordian Marshall once defined “fundamentalism” as “selective literalism”. By that definition we could include the mass media as today’s

ultimate fundamentalists, selective in what they choose to report and simplistic in how they report it.

But perhaps the media, like the sermon, are rather obvious targets, easy to mock. So I want to come closer to home. While I was in Japan I was invited to speak at a small Christian Baptist congregation. We studied together the Book of Jonah, and the session went very well. At the end of the teaching session the floor was opened for questions. An elderly man, a former leader of the congregation, asked me to tell him what it was that I believed as a Jew. I was rather thrown, partly because of the problem of the translation of his question, but also in trying to understand what he meant by belief, given the very different cultural background of the Japanese Christian community. I found myself temporising, and the first thing that came to mind was a saying that I remembered as coming from Franz Rosenzweig. He wrote that as someone committed to dialogue, whenever he was asked a question he tried not just to answer the question, but to answer the person who was asking the question. I find the idea very attractive, though also somewhat problematic. It hovers on the edge of a kind of arrogance to assume that I know the person well enough to answer their inner meaning, rather than simply respond to the question at its face value. But I do recognize that this is one aspect of what real dialogue is about. So I quoted Rosenzweig and explained that I felt unable to answer his question in this particular forum at this moment. In time I might be able to do so when I had a better understanding of what he had in mind, when we had found a common language, and we had built some kind of relationship. And then I found myself making the point that there is all the difference in the world between giving information, and entering into a dialogue. I respected the questioner and his congregation, so I did not just want to offer them information about Jewish belief. But I hoped that in time, through dialogue, I could give a real answer. He expressed himself as satisfied, but I still do not know whether that was just the legendary Japanese politeness, or the first step in a true dialogue. I am not sure now whether this was an honest answer on my part or an evasion. If there was a dialogue it had already happened in the teaching session when we shared our knowledge of a familiar Biblical text.

To return to Kohelet, this week we have encountered in the Psalms many different kinds of silence, and the programme itself has been full of opportunities for speech. I hope that the space between the silence and the speech has been for us more than just a sharing of information, valuable as that can be. I hope that the space between us as participants, even if for only a few moments, has been as rich and full as that which sometimes happens when we meet in true dialogue.

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