

# 'Preaching as God's Mission'

by J.C Vaessen

## **Comment on the conference theme of the Societas Homiletica Conference in Kyoto, Japan in June 1997**

Preaching as God's Mission in cultural and traditional contexts that go through drastic changes is I think a very actual theme that characterises the turn of our millennium world wide. But at the same time it is a very biblical theme that characterises the very history of the evolution of the biblical text and canon as well as the history of the Church.

I am particularly interested in the chosen theme, that is: to see the basics in our calling to preach the Gospel in the context of changing traditional cultural and social patterns. Indeed they are going through drastic changes, and this development - as I think - brings our basics in a hermeneutic realm. I am very interested in this theme, because I do research into the hermeneutics in sermons. And I would be very pleased if the Conference could create some space for the hermeneutic aspects - especially the traditional Japanese ways of interpreting reality and the Bible-texts - in sermons. The hermeneutic models I use in my research are all very western and it would be very instructive to open up the horizons of non-western models of interpretation. As O.C. Edwards once said when the Societas gathered in Oslo: it will take a long time for us to learn how to communicate with each other. I think hermeneutics will play a very important role here.

I have been reading some novels by the Japanese author Shusaku Endo (Deep River and The Scandal). From these novels I did get the impression that Christianity in Japan is suspect - too easily and without solid reflection linked with evil in its individual identity of guilt and sin and too rapidly giving - European - solutions that are worse than the problems they try to solve. In so doing evil is not recognised in its true identity - individual, social and occult in terms of existence - and therefor solved in artificial ways. What struck me most was Endo's search for integrity of his Christian beliefs and his Japanese or should I say Asian identity. In Deep River his religious journey leads him to the Ganges in India and in The Scandal his psychological journey leads him deep into his own unconsciousness. My impression was that all these different realms of human experience are for Endo far more one integral whole than in western thinking with its rational and - in comparison to Endo - maybe even superficial distinctions.

I think the Gospel takes evil more seriously than many western rational - whether philosophical, theological, social or technical - myths. The latter very often give solutions to theodicee problems that go beyond human control and cannot be solved by man. Our modern prophets of suspicion - Freud, Marx, Nietzsche - have shown this to us time and again, only to be rejected by modernity because it could not cope with the real depths of evil. Endo is different. Instead of rejecting the masters of suspicion he becomes suspicious himself not to be stopped by any superficial solution. I find him very modern, western and eastern at the same time: western in the sense of post-modernity taking suspicion seriously and eastern in the sense of respect for the unsolvable aspects of evil and yet finding grace in the midst of it. And for me this is precisely what is at stake on Calvary and Easter Morning: dialectics of

good and evil within and beyond human control with effects on human reality. Christ as the Symbol of self sacrificial love stronger than death, stronger than evil in all its different realms and depths.

As I said I am doing research on the hermeneutics in sermons and I will defend my dissertation on this subject after this summer. As I am deeply influenced by Ricoeur my way of sermon analysis is quite different from the Heidelberger method. My present research is restricted to western models of interpretation and I would like to investigate the possibilities of enlarging the scope of the research to non-western contexts. And for this I think Societas Homiletica is a very suitable platform, because of her multi-cultural character. So I would be glad to get in touch with people during our Conference in Kyoto who are interested in this way of analysis of Christian sermons within and beyond the scope of mere Western interpretation and cultural settings. With current e-mail facilities we should be able to set up something in this realm on a world wide scale with Societas Homiletica as a shared platform.

What I like about our time is that superficial solutions no longer work. We'd rather go for the real thing or not go at all. The history of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ goes on. As the Gospel has always been deeply touched and influenced by the cultures and traditions in which it was received also our time will form no exception to this rule. I think the new challenge of our time is to be prepared to sacrifice our exclusive cultural ego and receive a new multi-cultural self from each other through the very Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. I think Shusaku Endo did hit the real spirit of our turning age in a very modern way. How Japanese is he? I mean is his search for truth and redeemed integrity representative for Japanese Christianity? If so I am glad we have decided to come to Japan and we will learn a lot here.

Peace and warm greetings,  
Jan Chr. Vaessen.