The Word of God and the People of God

Since the mid-1990s I have been working with a group of colleagues to develop and refine a distinctive approach to reading and to proclaiming the Word of God among the People of God. The approach has been known as the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching. This approach was first introduced in the three books I wrote with Bishop Peter Atkins exploring the Sunday Gospels selected for the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary.

Having run a number of diocesan workshops for clergy and Readers in the Church of England, I and my colleagues were delighted to be invited to work with the National Readers’ Conference 2012. We plan to work with the Conference in two ways, by offering some direct ‘teaching’ about the theory underpinning the SIFT method and by offering opportunities to test the theory in practice. We recognise that some people learn best by listening to ideas, and that other people learn best by trying out and experiencing things for themselves. We want to respect both approaches.

As keynote speaker I will be supported by the Revd Dr Andrew Village who co-authored our book Preaching with all our souls. The SIFT method draws on contemporary hermeneutical theory and on psychological type theory. Andrew will take the lead on presenting and discussing hermeneutical theory and I will take the lead on presenting and discussing psychological type theory. Other members of our team will support us in facilitating and interpreting smaller workshops and learning groups, and will be available for one-to-one conversations and consultations. The teams will include the Very Revd Dr Susan Jones and the Revd Greg Smith.

HERMENEUTICAL THEORY

Hermeneutical theory is concerned with the reading and interpretation of the Word of God. There are four basic principles that shape our view on hermeneutics:

- **The first principle** concerns the place of conversation between the Word of God and the People of God. The Word of God comes alive in this conversation and plays its part in forming and transforming the People of God. The process is revelatory and through that process God’s voice is heard anew and in fresh ways.

- **The second principle** concerns the distinctive perspectives that different readers bring to this conversation. Reader perspective in biblical hermeneutics has long recognised the distinctive voices of groups of readers shaped by different social experience. In this sense liberation theology emerges from the distinctive voice of the oppressed; feminist theology emerges from the distinctive voice of women; and black theology emerges from the distinctive voice of people of colour. Recognised sociological categories help the People of God to appreciate how the Word of God speaks into different contexts.

- **The third principle** concerns the value of dialogue between these different readings of the Word of God. Dialogue means that no one reading claims to have captured the whole truth. Rather, different readings challenge one another and allow the People of God to engage more vitally and more dynamically with the Word of God by listening to and learning from the divergent insights. It is this dialogue that releases the revelatory power of the Word of God and so transforms the whole People of God.

- **The fourth principle** (and the principle uniquely distinctive of the SIFT approach) concerns the way in which reader perspectives are shaped not only by external contextual factors (as identified by sociological enquiry), but also by internal personal factors (as identified by psychological enquiry). Our research has convinced us that individuals who are shaped by different psychological type preferences read and proclaim the Word of God in distinctive ways. The aim of the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching is to encourage respect for the four key voices shaped by psychological type preferences. By so doing, we maintain that the People of God are enabled to engage more fully with the Word of God. The next step, therefore, is to explore the theological relevance to preaching of psychological type theory.

THEOLOGY OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCE

The integration of psychological type theory into an approach to biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching is rooted in the notion of the theology of individual differences. The theology of individual differences is rooted in a strong doctrine of creation consistent with the claims made by Genesis 1:27. According to Genesis 1:27 God created humankind in the image of God to embrace diversity. Genesis 1:27 is specifically concerned with affirming that both men and women are equally created in the image of God, not one more so than the other. The theology of individual differences extends this notion to embrace ethnic differences. Both black and white are equally created in the image of God, not one more so than the other. The theology of individual differences extends this notion one step further to embrace psychological type differences. Both introverts and extraverts are equally created in the image of God, not one more so than the other.

In our research and in our workshops our aim is never to put people into boxes (male or
female, white or black, introvert or extravert) but to help the People of God to explore and to respect the rich diversity that comes with this strong doctrine of creation and with the firm belief that God intends, values and affirms individual differences among those of us who celebrate our creation in the divine image. The next step, therefore, is to examine more closely those aspects of psychological type theory that are fundamental to the SIFT theory of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL TYPE THEORY**

Psychological type theory has its roots in the work of Carl Jung and has been made much more widely known through the ideas and workshops promoted by users of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. I tried to provide an accessible introduction to this theory in my book *Faith and Psychology*.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator discusses and measures four psychological constructs, each of which is expressed in two opposite preferences. The theory distinguishes between two orientations (extraversion and introversion), two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition), two judging functions (thinking and feeling), and two attitudes (judging and perceiving). Within this context it is the two perceiving functions and the two judging functions that are core to the hermeneutical process.

The two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition) are concerned with the way in which people perceive information. On the one hand, sensing types focus on the realities of a situation as perceived by the senses. They tend to focus on specific details, rather than on the overall picture. They are concerned with the actual, the real, and the practical, and they tend to be down to earth and matter of fact. On the other hand, intuitive types focus on the possibilities of a situation, perceiving meanings and relationships. They may feel that perception by the senses is not as valuable as information gained when indirect associations and concepts impact on their perception. They focus on the overall picture, rather than on specific facts and data.

The two judging functions (thinking and feeling) are concerned with the processes by which people make decisions and judgements. On the one hand, thinking types make judgements based on objective, impersonal logic. They value integrity and justice. They are known for their truthfulness and for their desire for fairness. They consider conforming to principles to be of more importance than cultivating harmony. On the other hand, feeling types make judgements based on subjective, personal values. They value compassion and mercy. They are known for their tactfulness, for their desire for peace and for their empathic capacity. They are more concerned to promote harmony, than to adhere to abstract principles.

Jung’s view is that each individual develops one of the perceiving functions (sensing or intuition) at the expense of the other, and one of the judging functions (feeling or thinking) at the expense of the other. Moreover, for each individual either the preferred perceiving function or the preferred judging function takes preference over the other, leading to the emergence of one dominant function which shapes the individual’s dominant approach to life. Dominant sensing shapes the practical person. Dominant intuition shapes the imaginative person. Dominant feeling shapes the humane person. Dominant thinking shapes the analytic person. According to Jungian type theory, the function paired with the dominant function is known as the ‘inferior function’. It is here that individuals experience most difficulty. Thus dominant sensers may struggle with intuition; dominant intuitives may struggle with sensing; dominant feelers may struggle with thinking; and dominant thinkers may struggle with feeling.

The bold contribution of the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching is to suggest that psychological type theory provides a coherent framework within which to locate both the role of the reader in biblical interpretation and the experience of the preacher in communication within the liturgical community.

**LISTENING TO SELF, LISTENING TO OTHERS**

At the National Readers’ Conference 2012 our invitation is to give participants the opportunity to explore how their individual type preferences may influence the ways in which they read and proclaim the Word of God and to explore how others with different type preferences read and proclaim the same passage of scripture. This can become a profound experience, listening to self, listening to others, and listening to God. Those of us who will be facilitating the workshops come fully expecting to go home enriched by hearing the insights of the conference participants, enriched by hearing the Word of God speaking in a new and fresh way among the People of God gathered in Swanwick.

Our invitation to the Conference participants is to come to Swanwick with a willingness to work hard and to engage critically with us; to come to Swanwick with a willingness to learn about themselves and to engage with others who see differently and who read the Word of God through a different lens; to come to Swanwick with an open mind and with the expectation that the Word of God is alive and active among the People of God gathered in that place.

The aim of the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching is first to hear how the different voices of sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking engage with the Word of God, and then to learn how to address the different perspectives of those four voices in the way in which each of us reads the Word of God and proclaims the Word of God. If the National Readers’ Conference 2012 goes to plan, we should go home not just with a better familiarity with a theory about preaching, but with some greater insight into ourselves and with some experience of experimenting with the practice of preaching.

Information regarding booking for the conference can be found on the outside back cover of this issue of The Reader.

**References**


