

EASTER PREACHING

The well known composition, SHEHERAZADE, by Rimsky-Korsakov is based on an Arab legend about a woman who must continually tell a new story to prevent himself from being killed. I sometimes wonder if we preachers find ourselves under the same kind of pressure. It's not just the daily pressure to preach but also the special stress that comes from preaching about the "big" mysteries, such as the Resurrection of Our Lord.

The value of storytelling as an aspect of preaching has been well-explored by authors such as John Shea. And any casual glance at the gospel accounts and the parables of Jesus indicates that story-telling is a sine qua non of preaching! Perhaps we get caught sometimes by a perceived necessity to preach the theology of an event before we understand the story of the event. I know from my own experience that if I read a familiar story to a child, I'd better not edit it. The child knows the story by heart and will catch any change and correct it. Nevertheless, no matter how familiar the story IS, the child STILL wants it read, over and over again. The challenge to a preacher is to make the repetition serve the message - i.e. everyone knows the outcome, but how long has it been since anyone ever thought about the meaning of it. So, we have to stick to the story and still make the message come through!

The Easter season allows us to tell the story many times and from many different viewpoints. We may have to remind everyone that we are taking a closer look at one point of the story so that we stay anchored. But we can then pick up some of the "subplots". Is there a story in a procession with palms? What about angry confrontations with religious authorities, a sad

Passover meal with washing of feet, an agonizing vigil in a garden, a humiliating "trial", a terrible, tortuous death on a cross, frightened disciples who run away [especially the one who denies even knowing Jesus, let alone the one who 'betrays' him], a soldier with a lance, a disciple bold enough to take the body down and put it in a tomb, discovery of the empty tomb by the women [especially the story of Mary Magdalen], appearances by the Risen Lord ---- it's a story of stories. And most of these are known to the folks in the pew. Indeed, they may be the disciples on the road to Emmaus, trying to make sense of this story. The preacher can walk with them, stay with them, explain the scriptures and break the bread. Ultimately that's the way the story will be told and heard. We preachers also will have to be aware of where WE are in the story, even when we are the "storyteller."

(Remember the SHEHERAZADE is a story about a storyteller.) If we are going to "tell the story" we had perhaps better find ourselves somewhere in it and know the problems of perspective. Do we identify with Peter? Mary Magdalen? Thomas? Or are we some impersonal narrator without a stake in the story. If we are the latter, then we need to be re-evangelized ourselves! ALLELUIA comes from knowing that our place in the story is secure and that we are saved by the event to which all the "stories" refer!

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