ASPECTS OF PREACHING AND MINISTRY IN EAST AND WEST AD 400–600

1. The Liturgical Context

There is evidence of both eucharistic and non-eucharistic liturgies in the period I am dealing with, and as well as taking place in a church or martyr-shrine these liturgies were conducted in monasteries and convents, at cemeteries, in the open air, and in the context of processions. Most liturgies comprised readings from both the Old and New Testaments, some aspect of which the homilist then usually focused on in the course of his preaching, to which the congregation was invited to listen by an announcement from the deacon. The main preacher was the bishop, although there was some local variation in this, and while in special circumstances he could delegate this responsibility to a priest or a deacon, it was the bishop who appeared in the legal codes as the one responsible for continual preaching and teaching. This legal obligation on the bishop/preacher is reflected particularly in the very frequent comments in homilies calling on his audience to pay attention, and to the effect that he owes them a debt, which of course is the homily itself. The fact that the doors were closed meant that the preacher could ensure that he paid his debt to his congregation. Gregory Nazianzen (c. 330–390) informs us that topics such as

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(2) See e.g. *Codex Theodosianus* 16.2.38; *Codex Theodosianus*, ed. by P. Krueger and T. Mommsen, vol. 1/2, Hildesheim, 1990, p. 848.

the following were commonly treated in preaching: the creation of the world, the human soul, angels both good and bad, divine providence, the creation of the human race and its restoration through Christ, the two covenants, the first and second coming of Christ, his incarnation and passion, the general resurrection, the day of judgment, and above all (perhaps surprisingly) the difficult topic of the doctrine of the Trinity. In some places the bishop preached every day, especially during Lent and Easter, and sometimes twice a day, in the morning and again in the evening. During the Easter vigil and on certain other feast days it was possible for a series of preachers to speak, a practice that must have affected the length of such homilies.

The authority of the bishop and the importance of his teaching role when preaching is illustrated by the fact that generally he sat on an elevated chair in the middle of the nave of the church while the congregation remained standing around him. This practice derived from Judaism, as we can see from such passages as John’s Gospel 8:2: “He sat down and taught the people in the temple”. On the other hand, we know that in some churches sitting was allowed for both preacher and audience, whereas when the priest or presbyter preached he was required to remain standing. We are informed that in Gaul the disabled or infirm were allowed to sit when the passions of the martyrs were read, when there were long readings, or when the homily was delivered. There are frequent references in the homilies to crowding and fatigue among the audience if the homily was long. The usual arrangement during a liturgy whereby the homilist sat and the congregation remained standing around him resulted in a physical immediacy that communicated itself in the contents of the homily and in audience reactions.

2. The Art of Preaching

The homily was not only the main teaching medium of the early church but was intrinsic to the cultural and political self-identity of Christians.


(5) On the stance of preachers and audiences see the discussion in Bingham, The Antiquities of the Christian Church, Book XIV, ch. IV, XXIV–XXV, pp. 590–596.

(6) See Olivar, La predicación, pp. 670–721, on the length of homilies.

(7) See Cunningham and Allen, Preacher and Audience, passim.