

The Practice of Preaching in a Pandemic

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COVID-19 has forced people into isolation and lockdown with little notice. Suddenly the nature of Christian ministry has changed. Much of what is usually done face-to-face, such as pastoral care and preaching, now needs to be conducted at a distance.

What is the impact on the preacher and preaching at a time like this?

With the rapid impact and turmoil that COVID-19 has wrought; the preacher's spiritual, mental and emotional strength can be profoundly affected. In the rush and pressure to decide how or even what to preach – the preacher needs to be mindful of their spirituality. For the how-and-what-of-preaching comes directly from the who-is-preaching.

Preachers in lockdown face new pressures. Such pressures are internal (e.g. confined to home and finding it difficult to find time and space to write a sermon) and external (e.g. uncertainty about financial income). These pressures take a toll. The preacher endeavouring to prepare a sermon can find themselves depleted mentally, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. The local, national, and international news threatens to overwhelm with the latest statistics and stories about the unrelenting impact of COVID-19.

So, the “who” of preaching requires attention and auditing.

In lockdown and as a preacher, are we increasing or decreasing?

Is our vitality leaking or peaking?

One thing I love about Scripture, is how it teaches us to consider our family–in–the–faith from generation–to–generation (e.g. Heb 11). We have the opportunity to consider their way of life and faith to help us as we seek to be faithful to Christ and his call on our life. We will reflect on the life of one of the great preachers in church history.

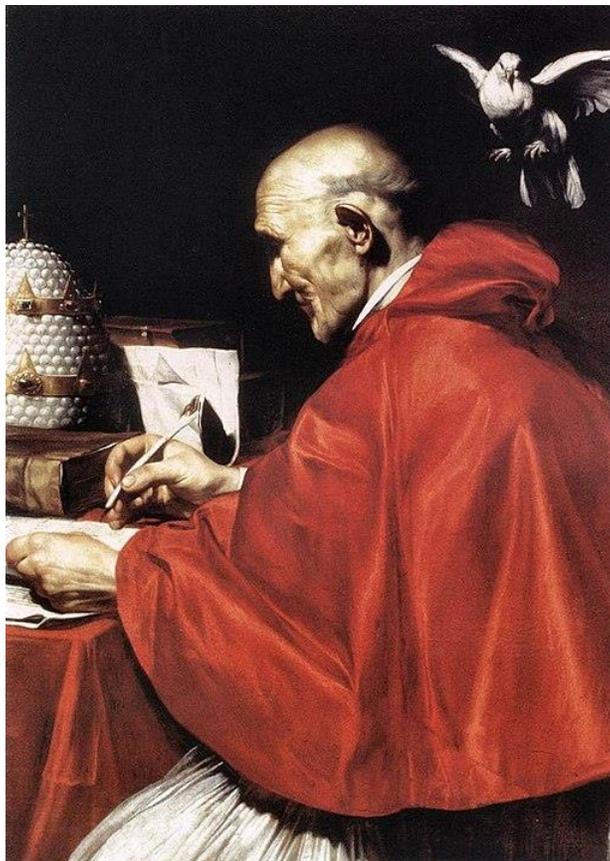
Let us consider Gregory the Great (ca 540–604). Gregory was an outstanding preacher and leader in the sixth century church in Rome.

What would Gregory say to us today as we are confronted with the challenges and uncertainty of ministry in a pandemic?

“Listen to God’s call in the presence of change”

Gregory’s first love and call was to a life of prayer. Gregory was drawn to life in the monastery and would have happily lived and died there. However, given the huge disruptions to life and society, his extraordinary gifts (such as administration) were needed by the wider church. This caused deep inner conflict for him: whether to serve God as a monk dedicated to a life of prayer or leave that life to serve the church as her leader? Then in 590 circumstances dramatically forced Gregory into a new season of ministry. Pope Pelagius died of the plague and Gregory found himself as Pelagius’s very reluctant replacement leading the church. He remained a monk living in community *and* attended to the office of leading the wider church.¹

A painting of Gregory gives us a visual aid of the inner conflict that Gregory suffered. This painting is by Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652). de Ribera was known as the “Spanish Caravaggio” and his depiction of Gregory gifts us insight into what Gregory faced and how he responded.²



¹ O.C. Edwards Jr, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 138.

² My reflection is informed and guided by Father Justin Huber, “Art Reflection: Pope St Gregory the Great”, *Priest*, 8-9. [Publication year unknown]

The painting has a play of light and darkness. The darkness forms the background and spills onto Gregory. Yet the prominence of the dove speaks of the fact that Gregory is not alone in this. The presence of the dove in the painting, a regular feature in art works of Gregory, is representative of the Spirit. Like on Gregory, light, and darkness interplay on the form of the dove. In fact, the dove is even more enveloped with light and darkness than Gregory. But the flight path of the dove is from the darkness, into the light and towards Gregory and about to alight on Gregory. Beautiful! Light or darkness be assured of this: God is God. And God is with us. “Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

The painting positions Gregory so that he is half turned away from the viewer. The symbols of the office of leadership sit on the desk. His shaven (tonsure) head in the tradition of monks is emphasised. Books are stacked on the desk. He has a quill in hand and is writing. All this depicts the inner conflict for Gregory. His back is not only to the viewer but to the world. His shaven head signifies his desire to spend a life in prayerful contemplation. The books represent his monastic life and his writing which resulted in deep theological reflection for generations since.³ But what ministry space can he occupy? The contemplative (monastic) or the active (the church)?

Illustrative of the dilemma Gregory faced, scholars debate which age Gregory belongs to. Is he the evening star of the church Fathers, or is he the morning star of the great medieval theologians?⁴ I like it that there is uncertainty about that. It adds a layer of meaning to the transition of ministry that we see Gregory needed to make in response to all that was happening in his world. And with reference to the painting, the posture of being half-turned away from the viewer (or is it half-turned towards) represents that Gregory’s life was marked by transition.

Yet the look on his face is enigmatic. Initially his expression, especially marked by his mouth, appears grim. Yet the longer you look at it seems the grim look becomes a gentle smile. It is as if the longer you gaze at his face, you begin see Gregory slowly surrendering to the call of God and a soft joy and peace invades his spirit.

Gregory was confronted with either/or: either monastic life or church leadership. He decided it was both/and: both monastic life and church leadership. Both contemplation and active ministry.⁵ Perhaps his example laid the foundation for the spirituality that future generations termed as “contemplatives in action.”

³ His most significant work was entitled *Pastoral Care* in which he developed so much of his thinking about preaching, leadership and the pastoral responsibilities of leaders.

⁴ Edwards, *History*, 426.

⁵ Edwards, *History*, 139.

What changes in your ministry are being called for in response to COVID-19?

What inner conflict does this cause for you?

If Jusepe de Ribera painted you: what symbols, colours and items would best depict this season of ministry for you?

**“And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”
(Esther 4:14)**

Around the year of Gregory’s birth (540), an outbreak of the plague killed one third of Europe’s population. For the rest of that century – and throughout Gregory’s lifetime – there were frequent outbreaks of the plague. But this was not the only pressure confronting life in the sixth century. “During his lifetime there were also famine, disease, floods of the Tiber [the river running through Rome], inflation, panic, and at times even riots.”⁶ Gregory obviously had no control over the forces of life and death during the time in history he lived.

Life was tumultuous.

Death was up close and personal – constantly so.

When considering the life and ministry of Gregory the Great, two biblical examples come to mind: Esther and Jeremiah.

Like the young Jewish queen Esther – Gregory found himself in a position of great influence at time of great national difficulty.

Like the young prophet Jeremiah – Gregory was initially very reluctant about where the call of God was leading him.

Like Esther and Jeremiah – Gregory ministered at a time when the risk to human life was especially heightened. Anxiety was great.

Like Esther and Jeremiah – Gregory ministered in the midst of times when the presence of God was both opaque and obvious.

⁶ Edwards, *Preaching*, 136.

Like Esther and Jeremiah – Gregory needed to navigate events with a spirit of submission and surrender with trust in the God of all the earth.⁷ A God whose “ways are just, right, wise, but neither transparent nor immune to misunderstanding. There is an unfolding and a shrouding, a concealing within a disclosing, consoling as well as confusing.”⁸

Gregory’s humanity is evident when we see him through the lens of Esther and Jeremiah: he discerns what God is asking of him and he struggles with it. Yet, he says “yes” to God and Gregory’s legacy can be summed up in the words of Acts 13:36; “After he served the purpose of God in his own generation he died.”

Gregory was a person of action who thought deeply.⁹ He had a deep grounding in God and ministered profoundly from that basis. Gregory’s life is evidence he surrendered to the Potter crafting his life (Isa 64:8).

While I have taken the liberty of utilising Esther and Jeremiah as two biblical figures to describe Gregory – he chose someone else. The book from the bible which aided Gregory the most in making the transition into his new sphere of leadership was the Book of Job. The book of Job became his tutor and influenced his understanding of pastoral work and preaching.¹⁰

Consider events over the past year that have affected local, national, and international life (e.g. Christchurch mosque shootings, Whakaari/White Island eruption, Australian bushfires, COVID–19). Include those events which are local and personal to your immediate ministry context.

This is the context you preach out of and into.

“And who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this?”

Which biblical character or book of the bible serves as a helpful companion for you at this time?

⁷ F. Lionel Young III, “Caring for your Inner Life while Caring for the Church: the Counsel of Gregory the Great”, *The Clergy Journal*, 10.

⁸ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962/2001), 224.

⁹ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Volume 2, The Patristic Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 426.

¹⁰ Edwards, *Preaching*, 138 & 142.

“This is my unchanging conviction in changing circumstances”

The circumstances that forced Gregory into new ministry spaces and the inner conflict he experienced because of that – caused him to think through what might be the best response:

Granted, then, that he continued to feel acutely the tension between his own desire for the contemplative life and the care for all the churches, which fell upon him daily, it is not surprising that he devoted much thought to how not only he but others as well should resolve that conflict and exercise authority in the church. *An outgrowth of his thought on the subject is his conviction of the importance of preaching and his understanding of what makes it important.*¹¹

As Gregory reflected on the catastrophic events traumatizing life for people, these shaped his understanding the gospel.¹² While there were times when one particular catastrophe threatened (e.g. war), Gregory would frame it with a wider perspective from Scripture and history. This perspective leant on eschatological hope and an emphasis on the church’s primary business of salvation. Gregory called people to adjust their lives so that should even the world be destroyed, they would not be. For Gregory, all other church responsibilities that demanded attention were secondary to the proclamation of salvation.

What convictions about preaching do you hold onto – that not even the threat and effect of COVID–19 can change?

What new convictions are being created for you during this time?

¹¹ Edwards, *Preaching*, 138. Emphasis mine.

¹² Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 436.

“Preach to the one and the many”

The fruit of Gregory’s internal struggle and his realisation of the importance of preaching resulted in his preaching ministry operating at two levels.

1. The Importance of Preaching as a Person

Gregory was foremost a man of prayer before he was a preacher. He was foremost a child of God in deep conversation with his Creator. Hence, Gregory’s sermons were fueled by his prayerful contemplation and the individual listener was very much in view. Gregory’s personal spirituality came to bear on each person listening to his sermon. A striking example of this preaching dynamic is found in one of his sermons from his famous series on the Book of Ezekiel:¹³

“Mortal, I have set you as a watchman to the house of Israel.” Note that Ezekiel, the one the Lord sent to preach the word, is called “a watchman.” A watchman or sentinel takes a post on the highest point, in order to see whoever may be coming from a distance. Similarly, anyone appointed watchman to a congregation should live a “higher” life so as to keep all things in sight.

As I say these words, I realize I am reproaching myself. For I do not preach as I ought, nor does my personal example accord with these principles that I’m preaching even now. I can’t deny my guilt, for I’ve become lethargic and negligent in my work; though perhaps by recognizing my failure I’ll win some sympathy and pardon from the Judge. Before I started this work, while living in a religious community, I was able to refrain from talking about idle topics and to devote my mind to prayer. Since taking up this new pastoral position, I have been unable to concentrate on prayer, because I’m so distracted by my responsibilities. . . I am split and torn to pieces by the variety of weighty things on my mind. When I try to concentrate and pull myself together to preach, I feel inadequate to that sacred task. I am often compelled by the nature of my position to associate with worldly people, and sometimes I become casual in my speech; because if I spoke as my conscience dictates with all formality, I know some of them would simply drop me and that I could never influence them towards the goal I desire for them. So I endure their aimless chatter in patience. Then, because I am weak myself I am drawn gradually into idle chitchat — and I find myself saying the kind of thing that before I didn’t even want to listen to! . . . What kind of a watchman am I? Far from the heights to which I aspire, I am constrained by my weakness. And yet — the one who created me and redeemed me and all humanity can give me, even in my unworthiness, some grace to glimpse the whole

¹³ <https://gregorians.org/gregorians/gregorythegreat.php> - accessed 1st May 2020

of life, and the skill and ability to speak of what I see. So it is for the love of God that I do not spare myself in preaching.

Gregory bares his soul and his sermon shows evidence that he – as preacher – is the first person confronted by the Word of God. While people may have different responses to such personal disclosure and even question the wisdom of it, it is hard not to be moved by Gregory’s raw description of his spiritual struggle and to find yourself connecting with it.

Gregory advocated a preaching dynamic which was preacher-to-individual.

2. The Importance of Preaching as a People

Gregory was strong in his belief that everyone was equal.¹⁴ Such were the times he lived and the nature of the church, these deeply held views about equality could not be easily aired and expressed.¹⁵ The nature of how leadership was structured in the church distressed him greatly, especially given his leadership role was so elevated. His view that all were equal influenced his vision of the ministry of preaching. He considered all Christians had a responsibility to each other through the duty of preaching.¹⁶ “As Gregory sees it, the ministry of the Word is a ministry of the whole Christian community.”¹⁷ Gregory’s preaching ministry allowed truth to be received from members of the community to the preacher, and in turn for the community to receive truth from the community. This might appear as nothing especially extraordinary, but at that time in history with a strongly hierarchical church leadership structure this was astonishing.

It is helpful too, to see how Gregory located the preacher and community within the context of Scripture and divine revelation.

As mentioned in the previous section, one of the prominent sermon series Gregory preached was from Ezekiel. He used the vision of the four creatures in Ezekiel 1 to formulate his vision of the word of God as it related to preaching.¹⁸ The four creatures had the face of a human, lion, ox, and eagle. In considering Gregory’s reflection, it needs to be noted that allegory was often utilized in his day and age. Gregory proposed the vision of the four creatures:

¹⁴ Whit Trumbull, “Equality and Pastoral Rule: Pope Gregory the Great’s Inner Conflict”, *Priscilla Papers*, Vol 22, No. 1, Winter 2008, 17-20.

¹⁵ He also advocated against slavery but conceded the expediency of it as a social institution but called for humane treatment of slaves. Trumbull, “Equality”, 17.

¹⁶ Edwards, *Preaching*, 139.

¹⁷ Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 441.

¹⁸ Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 442.

- ◆ Speaks of Christ (Word of God)
- ◆ Speaks of the gospel writers (writers of the Word of God)
- ◆ Speaks of preachers (proclaimers of the Word of God)
- ◆ Speaks of the faithful (who hear and obey the Word of God)

Such was the Word-shaped community Gregory envisaged. The immediate worshipping community to which he preached was part of a wider, historical, and timeless community formed by the giving, receiving, recording and response to the Word of God.

Gregory advocated a preaching dynamic which was community-to-preacher.

What spiritual fruit is emerging from your time in lockdown that will bless individual listeners when you preach?

What opportunities are arising from the COVID-19 lockdown that allow you as preacher to receive truth from the community you serve?

“Preach taking seriously Christ’s declaration that ‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away’”

Of all the preachers the world has been blessed with, Gregory the Great is well-named. His deep love of the Scriptures and study of them birthed beautiful sermons.

He brought the sprawling and eternal message of the Scriptures to bear on the sprawling and temporal nature of the world. He is also one of the first great preachers to introduce non-scriptural illustrations and stories to illuminate the bible text.¹⁹ Gregory’s preaching practice ranged between *lectio continua* (preaching through a book of the bible) and using the lectionary.

For example, when the Lombards were invading from the north, Gregory was engaged in a *lectio continua* sermon series in Ezekiel and was at chapter four. However when the Lombards were at the gates of Rome he jumped to Ezekiel 40 which is about the heavenly Jerusalem. Ezekiel had preached to a people invaded from the north and prophesied a heavenly kingdom; Gregory took his lead from the prophet. In this Gregory demonstrated the skill required when employing *lectio*

¹⁹ Edwards, *Preaching*, 140.

continua: “Half the genius of great *lectio continua* preaching is selecting the right book or portion of a book at the right time.”²⁰

Gregory’s extraordinary sermons on Ezekiel highlighted the everlasting glory, holiness, and majesty of God at a dark time in history when the grandeur of human achievements were fading. “Gregory’s greatest contribution was to assure an age that was at the edge of chaos that there is an ultimate order.”²¹

Also during his time, the lectionary was still being formulated and there were a number of Sunday’s and special occasions with no assigned text. Gregory populated these with selected texts and he is considered the final authority of the Roman lectionary. The tension between Gregory drawing on what had been done previously and adding to that, is contained in this observation about him: “This very creative Christian leader understood himself as a definer of the tradition rather than as an innovator.”²² Yet perhaps defining traditions in times of great uncertainty is a crucial kind of innovation. Especially when new traditions are birthed from circumstances never before experienced. Such innovation is clothed with challenging creativity (“new”) and comforting familiarity (“tradition”).

Answer one of the following two questions:

I. If you are mostly a lectionary preacher: how has the Spirit led you in the use of the assigned Scripture during this COVID context?

OR

II. If you are mostly a *lectio continua* preacher: how has the Spirit led you to select a Scripture during this COVID context?

Then consider this:

Gregory utilised both the lectionary and *lectio continua*: if you favour one approach over the other - what would it mean for you to create a new tradition by trying the other approach?

²⁰ Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 438.

²¹ Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 438.

²² Old, *Preaching of the Scriptures*, 430.