

“Woo Me, Sister; Move Me, Brother! What Does Pop Culture Have To Do With Preaching?”

Barry Marshall Lecture
Trinity College Theological School
May 12, 2004

One of my earliest memories of U2 is walking past my brother in our living room at home in Ferny Creek, back in the mid 1980s, and overhearing the sound of a band coming from his headphones. If anyone had told me then that I would be standing here today talking about how I've used U2's music in preaching, I would have told them they were crazy. That wasn't my type of music, and anyway, it wasn't Christian: why would I ever think of preaching on it? And surely that would take away from scripture?

It's not to my credit that I missed the connection between my faith and the lyrics of the song I remember most clearly, “Sunday, Bloody Sunday,” with its echoes of Psalm 40 and Revelation 21, and its final haunting words,

And the battle's just begun
There's many lost but tell me who has won
The real battle yet begun
to claim the victory Jesus won
On Sunday bloody Sunday.
Sunday, Bloody Sunday

But U2 is not what we would typically consider to be a “Christian rock group.” They don't work the Christian music circuit, their music is rarely found in Christian bookstores. They come from a mixture of Protestant and Roman Catholic backgrounds, and when they were young adults, three of the four band members were members of an intentional Christian community called Shalom. But they decided in their early years to stay within the mainstream of rock music. That decision has given them far greater influence than if they had stayed in the specifically Christian marketplace; their music, which naturally draws on biblical and religious imagery, has opened the way to consideration of things spiritual for a whole generation of music fans.

I rediscovered U2 just over 3 years ago. I was at a conference GenX and preaching, and someone played a song from their most recent album, *All that you can't leave behind*. I can't remember what it was — probably “Grace.”

Grace...
It's a name for a girl
It's also a thought that, changed the world
and the profound ending
Grace makes beauty
Out of ugly things
Grace finds beauty in everything
Grace finds goodness in everything

In the 20 odd years that had passed since I last paid attention to their music, U2 had grown from a little know Irish band, to one of the greats of rock music. Their work is passionate, full of big

ideas about justice and grace and love. That night, I went and bought the CD, put it into my computer, and began to listen.

Later on that year, four planes were hijacked and crashed on September 11, and the US invaded Afghanistan. Our TV screens were full of wreckage and horror and bodies, I found it difficult to find words for what I was feeling. U2 gave me the words.

Heaven on Earth, we need it now
 I'm sick of all of this hanging around
 Sick of sorrow, sick of the pain
 I'm sick of hearing again and again
 That there's gonna be peace on Earth

When it came time that Advent, to preach on Isaiah chapter 2,

The word of the Lord to Isaiah: “Many peoples shall come and . . . they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”

U2's words rang in my mind. And as I worked on the sermon, I began to wonder again, what does pop culture have to do with preaching? Can a secular band really convey the truth of the gospel?

As we explore these issues, I'd like to address three questions: first, what should the relationship be between faith and culture? Second, how are faith and culture related in the homiletical task? And third, how do you actually preach in a way that integrates pop culture with the gospel?

First, what should the relationship be between faith and culture? The fact that we even ask this question is based on a presumption that there is a dualism between faith and culture. That is, faith and culture are two distinct and parallel categories, that are placed in relationship with each other in one way or another. The construal of that relationship has taken many forms, perhaps the most well known being that explored in H. Richard Niebuhr's 1951 book, *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr posited five modes of interaction between Christ and culture: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture.

This same typology can be applied to the relationship between faith and pop culture in preaching, the two extremes being the easiest to identify. The Christ against culture type is echoed in the stereotypical opposition of faith and pop culture, as two areas divided by a vast chasm. On the one side, fans fear contamination of their life-giving pop culture with life-denying pulpit prognostications; on the other, preachers hark back with puritanical disapproval to the excesses of “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll,” the music of the devil. A state of mutual abhorrence.

At the other extreme we have the Christ of culture type, reflected in unconditional appropriation, where the trappings of religion are borrowed for a multi-media effect, or the beats of pop music are added to Christian hymns “to attract the young people.” This midpoint of Niebuhr's paradigm are more difficult to identify, but have been represented in many ways. In the medieval period, mystery plays and their accompanying, and often bawdy, music taught the great themes of Christian theology to the uneducated; in the sixteenth century, hymn tunes were derived from tavern songs. Even in the twentieth century, faith has frequently found expression,

or at least come under examination, in popular music, whether in the influence of gospel music on jazz and blues, or the explicit questioning of Joan Osborne's "One of Us." And we have also seen the rise of a whole new genre of "Christian music," along with the proliferation of multi-media worship experiences.

But Niebuhr's typology has its limits — central among them the assumption of a dualism between faith and culture. The reality is that our religious experience is embedded in our culture — we only know Christ the Incarnate One as incarnate beings ourselves, something to which I'll return later. And if our faith is only experienced in the context of culture, then there is necessarily an integral and substantial relationship of mutual influence between the two — it is more complex than we ever dreamed.

Inherent in our own ability to recognize this more complex and interdependent relationship are the philosophical shifts that have taken place over the last fifty or so years. Niebuhr wrote at the height of modernism, a period that is usually identified as beginning with the Enlightenment, and which has as a basic assumption the notion that it is possible to achieve objective knowledge that is universally valid. Truth equals whatever corresponds with replicable empirical observation, and is subject to the rules of logic — it is objective, abstract, and universally valid. But Christian faith has its roots in pre-critical, communal faith; so there is a built in tension between the pre-scientific world of faith, and the objectively defined modern world, a tension which is at the heart of Niebuhr's typology.

But the world has changed, especially the so-called Christian world. Modernism arose in a context where the balance of power was held by the Christian capitalist west, the so-called "first world." Colonialism and Christianity went hand in hand, and there was a more or less unified Christian world view. A hundred years later, the scene had changed dramatically. The dramatic growth of the Christian community in Latin and South America, Africa, Asia and Oceania, and a parallel shrinking of Christian influence in the former colonial powers, changed the balance of power. While the content of the gospel remained constant (albeit with greater attention to issues of justice), its expression varied across different cultures. We began to recognize pluralism in world views, even among Christians, and it became impossible to ignore the reality of religion and culture influencing one another.¹ And this recognition of plurality, and of the importance of culture to what we know, believe and understand, is given expression philosophically in what we call postmodernism.

Since the 1970s, the philosophical underpinnings of our culture have begun to shift. Postmodernism has arrived, and while not pervasive, its values of pluralism, diversity, and inclusivity shape the rising leaders in our world. I remember my first year here at Melbourne University in 1985, being introduced in our English lectures into the world of deconstructionist postmodernism, and participating in a workshop at church which did a deconstructionist reading of Umberto Eco's wonderful mystery, *The Name of the Rose*. Deconstructive postmodernism is probably best known for its rejection of the notion that there are universal truths that we can use to interpret reality. It rejects the notion of grand narratives, and instead looks to the particular, the stories that relate to everyday life as it is lived in a local, culturally distinct way, rather than

¹ Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), xi.

global assumptions or claims. Of course these local narratives are inherently perspectival. What that means, is that we only know things from our own perspective, from the context of our own time and place, and we are constantly making interpretations and judgements that shape what we think we know. Other people will experience life differently. When we claim that something is true, deconstructive postmodernism demands to know, “True for whom?” So knowledge is always construed as situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability. And unlike modernity, which is fundamentally about creating order out of chaos, postmodernism celebrates values diversity and provisionality. Instead of looking to impose order, it revels in difference.

The problem, of course, with deconstructive postmodernism, is that its claim that there are no absolutes is itself an absolute. And that’s where constructive postmodernism comes in. It has a more open view of knowledge — it identifies truth which might potentially exist, but knows it cannot be accessed directly and without mediation. All perception involves interpretation, and hence any truth is an interpreted truth, reflected through the lenses of our experience. Truth always comes to us in a particular form, rather than a universal one, and is always in conversation with the world around us. And if truth has any currency beyond our own experience, it’s because we have been able to communicate with one another, and so build a kind of consortium of consensus, an agreement that our experiences are close enough.

So while what I am saying tonight comes from my own distinct perspective, there is enough that I share in common with other people, particularly Anglican Christians in Australia who might show up at a lecture at Trinity College, that you can recognize truth from your own experience in what I say, and so we can agree about something, that while it is not universal, is a shared perspective among us. The difference, I think, from modernism, is that everyone doesn’t have to agree. We all have to test what we hear against the reality we know. And that means that although the broad values of pluralism, diversity, and inclusivity can be identified, there are many postmodern perspectives.

By now, some of you are probably wondering what this has to do with preaching and pop culture. Recognizing that what we know, believe and understand things from our own distinct perspectives makes us much more aware of the way culture shapes what and how we believe, and what and how we speak of our faith.

Religion looks different in different places and cultures. Geography can shape theology. I remember my first Advent in the US. Instead of the weather getting gradually hotter, and usually having my first sunburn of the year, I found myself out shopping for an overcoat. Instead of being searingly hot, the sun was a pale reflection in the sky. Christ the light of the world is very different in the gloom of winter rather than the bright light of summer. And the Easter promise of resurrected life is much more astounding in the slow greying of autumn than among the daffodils and tulips of a northern hemisphere spring.

Our context shapes how we read and interpret Scripture. The calls for justice in chapter 2 of the prophet Amos sound very different if it’s heard by a Koori Community worker, or a corporate lawyer; a Prime Minister or a youth in the Gaza strip. Acts 2’s call to sell all you have and hold everything in common is almost unimaginable for those of us living in suburban Australia; in a culture where the primary unit is the village or even the extended family, rather

than the individual or nuclear family, it might well be common sense.

A Christian in Saudi Arabia where public practice of religions other than Islam, and where even access to many Christian websites is blocked will have to struggle with how to be obedient to both Jesus' command to go and make disciples in Matthew 28, and Paul's admonition to be subject to the governing authorities in Romans 13. Most of us here have never experienced a culture where even the simple act of wearing a cross could get you arrested.

The examples are endless. But in all of them, it's clear: religion and culture are intertwined, and shape one another. Even though we most often don't notice it. We usually just assume that the way we understand things, the way we do them, is universal, that everyone is like us. We need reminding that we only speak from our own perspectives, that the way we live out our faith is distinctively shaped by our geographical and cultural contexts and our own histories.

And of course, the influence doesn't just go one way. As much as our culture shapes our faith, so our faith shapes our culture, in many different ways. Our educational system still has traces of the influence of the churches which provided schooling in the early days of Australian colonization. Our legal system is significantly shaped by the structures and strictures of first biblical and then canon law. And where would our language be without the influence of the cadences of the king James Bible?

Faith and culture are enmeshed. When we pay attention to a specific instance of the influence of culture on faith, we become aware of where that influence has itself been shaped by faith, and so on, in a never-ending dance.

And for the most part, this happens not so much on a formal level, in the councils of the church and the parliaments of our country, or through direct decree, but on an informal level, in the lives and communities of the faithful, from which it trickles up to the structures. People grab hold of their culture in one hand and their religion in the other, and then try to work out how it is that they can not only co-exist, but be in harmony. They trace the connections, they ask questions and forge answers, they look for places of genuine coherence, for authentic emotion, for congruity with experience. Both culture and religion tap into the very essence of who we are; they are the building blocks of our identity. It is no wonder, then, that they are integrally and substantially related, but also that that relationship looks different in different places.

Pop culture is a subset of the broader culture, and as such, it's one of those things that shapes our faith and is in turn shaped by it. Just count how often church comes up in *The Simpsons*; watch the yearning for a robust ethic that pervades many of our soaps; listen for the sound of despair in pop music. They ask questions about what really matters in life, and of how we should live. They often becomes a place where faith and culture are fused — though the faith may not be Christian.

I guess you know that I'm a U2 fan. And I came to love their work, not first of all because of the music — my tastes generally run more towards Bach and Vivaldi. It was the lyrics that caught hold of me, the wonderings about grace and the laments about evil and the cries for justice. And then I began to discover how their music echoes and expands their lyrics, how it drives their words deep into your heart and soul. Robert Schreier suggests in his book, *Constructing Local Theologies*, that "the poet, the prophet, the teacher . . . may be among those

who give leadership to the actual shaping into words of the response of faith.”² They give voice to the voices that are not being heard. It is here that U2 belongs: singing the laments of Zion, echoing the prophetic shouts for justice, calling the faithful and the faith-less to action. They give us a language that unites faith and culture, that speaks colloquially of the hope that is in us.

So to return to our initial question, what should the relationship be between faith and culture? Clearly the answer is not just that they should be — but that they are — inherently related, and are meshed together inextricably. That leads us to our second question, how are faith and culture related in the homiletical task?

To talk about this, it’s helpful to go on a brief tour of the last fifty years or so of preaching. For most of the twentieth century, the dominant model for sermons has been nicknamed “three points and a poem.” Sermons followed a predictable pattern of an introduction, three ideally memorable points, sometimes connected by alliteration, and then a conclusion. Each of the points was an abstract proposition, a theological point, and they were accompanied by illustrations and application. So for example, an outline for a sermon on the parable of the good Samaritan might look like this:

Introduction: Question - who is my neighbour?

First point: Not answered by creed

Second point: Not answered by colour

Third point: Answered by compassion

Conclusion: Go and so likewise.

Three simple points, all beginning with ‘c’. Plug in an illustration of each, and you have a sermon.

The “three points and a poem” type of sermon demonstrates the ideals of order, reason, and objectivity. And if that sounds familiar to you, it should. Those are the same ideals that are valued by modernism. And in terms of our discussion of faith and culture, what you get is a bunch of principles of faith, with bits of culture thrown in to keep it interesting.

I’m skipping fairly rapidly here, leaving out some of the significant but less influential developments in homiletics. Next, I want to jump to the 1970s. It was in this period that we saw the development of narrative preaching, preaching that follows the logic of a story. It might be as simple as retelling a bible story, or telling a contemporary story in parallel with the bible story. Or it might be something more complex, like what’s known as the Lowry loop. You start with the ‘oops’, the point when a problem is posed. Then the ‘ugh’, where the problem intensifies. Then the ‘aha’, here the problem is resolved. Then the ‘whee’, where we experience the resolution in practical terms. Then the ‘yeah’, where we are told what to go and do.

It’s the pattern of fairy tales. Think of the three little pigs. Oops. There are three little pigs, and a big wolf on the prowl. Ugh. The pigs build houses, but the wolf blows down the one made of straw and the one made of sticks. Aha! The third pig has built his house of bricks, and

²Schreiter, 17.

the wolf can't blow it down. Whee! The wolf tries to get in through the chimney, and falls down into a nice big pot of boiling water that the pig has there, and the pig has wolf stew for dinner. Yeah. And the little pig lived happily ever after.

It works just as well for the parable of the good Samaritan: Oops. The traveler is robbed and left half dead. Ugh. A priest and a Levite pass by without helping. Aha! A Samaritan stops to help. Whee! The Samaritan goes far beyond normal kindness in caring for the traveler. Yeah. Go and do likewise.

The heart of this sermon form is narrative. And it's no surprise that it emerged when it did, because, if you remember our earlier discussion, narratives are at the heart of knowledge in postmodernism. But the relationship between faith and culture still tends to be unidirectional, with culture providing fodder for faith.

Now let's leap to today. Narrative preaching has become a little worn. There have been a number of alternative models proposed, but none has really caught the imagination of most preachers. And part of that reason, I think, is that they deal inadequately with the essential interconnectedness of faith and culture in a way that has the ring of authenticity — another word that is important for postmodernity.

One way forward in working out how to preach in a way that reflects the enmeshing of faith and culture is to draw on the insights of the postmodern theory of intertextuality. From a theoretical perspective, this mutual influence is called “intertextuality.” Broadly simplified, this is the idea that every human utterance (or “text”) is drawn from numerous other texts. Nothing we say is entirely new, nor is it entirely objective: it is all the result of the collision and influence of everything we have ever heard, read and experienced. Every text is a mosaic or tissue of quotations.³ Some of these influences are subtle, barely noticeable; others are strong, demanding our attention.

Intertextuality suggests that the relationship between text and experience as it is expressed in the sermon, between the life and work of God as expressed in Scripture and human life experiencing God today, might be better understood as a web of connection underpinning all we say, rather than a simple linear relationship of text and hypothetical lived experience.

Of course, this is nothing new. In preaching, we have always had multiple influences. They might have been labeled “illustrations,” or “the use of experience in preaching,” but anyone who has ever tried to write a sermon with an “illustration” already ringing in their ears knows how that illustration shapes our reading from the very beginning of our work. The Christmas gospels always come to us laden with Christmas carols; I cannot read the Easter gospels without thinking of a friend who died one Easter morning, welcoming the risen Christ.

Alongside the biblical text are many other texts, all vying for our attention. They come from our family histories, from our reading, the media, from the world around us. They color the biblical text, shaping how we read it, and that text in turn shapes how they are understood to be meaningful. Nothing we say is entirely new, nor is it entirely objective: it is all the result of the collision and influence of everything we have ever heard, read and experienced. Some of these

³Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. L. S. Roudiez, trans T. Gora, A. Jardine and L. S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia University Press, 1980), 66; Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang), 146.

influences are subtle, barely noticeable; others are strong, demanding our focused attention. To preach intertextually is to draw into prominence particular dimensions of the already existing web, and to make explicit the meaning-making connections, enabling others to search their own lives to do the same.

As preachers, if we are consciously aware of the intertextual nature of the preaching event, we are able to make use of the web of meaning and draw elements into prominence so that life and faith are reconnected in the hearer's mind, juxtaposing the world as we know it, and the world of faith, of God, so that a new reality is able to emerge, a vision of faith and life which are integrated.

And of course, that reality is theologically rooted in the incarnation. At the heart of our faith is our worship of a living and incarnate God. God is not an abstract principle, nor a disembodied spirit. We follow a God who became flesh and lived among us, who ate, slept, cried and died, and in resurrection has invited us into new life. Christ didn't simply preach the gospel; he *was* the gospel, the good news of God. God is, in Christ, the model for the faithful human life, *and*, in the Holy Spirit, the means by which we live that life.

God intimately connected with our world, and it is that God whom we preach. And so an essential part of the preaching task is to open our hearers' eyes to the presence of God, to see the continuities and connections between the God testified to in Scripture, and the God experienced here in our world, the glimpses of the brooding Holy Spirit at work in creation.

So, back to the question of preaching and pop culture, when we connect the story of God and our story and the stories we find in pop culture, it's more than just a superficial borrowing to keep people's attention. Rather, it's a matter of bringing into view the rich theological reflection which surrounds pop culture, a modeling of how we might in fact find God right in the middle of our everyday lives, a constant search for incarnation.

So, in practical terms, how do we do it? What steps can we take as preachers to prepare sermons that are richly intertextual, that reflect the web of meaning that we find ourselves in, that draw appropriately on popular culture alongside scripture?

First, listen. Listen prayerfully to the world around you. Saturate yourself in the articulations of our culture, whether in music, art, film, or TV. They articulate the questions and concerns of the world that we live in; they carry the traces of the life-giving Spirit of God. Be attentive to the connections, the allusions, both explicit and implicit. So whether it's Homer Simpson wondering if he has to go to church, or President Bush invoking God's blessing, whether U2 dreaming of peace on earth or a news story about the degradation of the rainforest, hunt out the places where God is active, where questions of God most naturally arise. Look for the depths of human experience in poetry and love songs, hear the things that make people angry on talk shows, and the places where they struggle in country music. Look for God, beating the bounds of this earth of ours, and walk alongside for a time.

Listen to your people. Spend time at soccer games, over coffee, in the grocery store, in the nursery. Find out where they struggle, and where they find joy; where life is unbeatably painful, and where it is unexpectedly good.

Listen prayerfully to your self. Take note of where your mind wanders, what is consuming it, what is distracting it. Find where the tension is in your body, and explore how it

came to be. Pay attention to the images seared on your brain, the people you carry in your prayers, the places you are uncomfortable, and of course, the songs you just can't get out of your head.

Listen prayerfully to the text. And listen prayerfully to the text. Read it, first, not for understanding but for God's word to you. Listen for what it says and what it does not say, for the places where it is nice and neat, and the places where it leaves you troubled and your questions unresolved. And bring to this listening the fruit of your other listening. Bring the movies and TV and music, children and the grown ups, the images and prayers and struggles and joys, bring all these to the text and allow them to play together, to push you around. Find the connections and the contradictions, the unexpected agreements and the painful inconsistencies. And look for the word of God in the middle of it all.

When it comes time to write the sermon, you won't need to hunt for illustrations on the web, or conjure stories from thin air. It'll all be there for you, in that intertextual web. Pick up one thread, follow it carefully, and there you will find your sermon. And then prepare your sermon. You won't need to hunt for an artificial illustration or application, because you will already have all you need to say, there in that intertextual web. Just use it. Pick up one thread of the mass of material, and follow it faithfully, through all your listenings. And above all trust. Trust that your mind will do its work, and the Holy Spirit of God will do no less.

Does pop culture have anything to do with preaching? Absolutely! It expresses the longings, the doubts, the hopes, and the celebrations of the human spirit, the very same longings, doubts, hopes, and celebrations that are woven into Christian spirituality. Pop culture challenges religious practice and at the same time draws on the wealth of spiritual tradition. And it is a rich conveyor of the incarnational "stuff" that sets preaching apart from learned lectures like this one about theories; it points us to a living, active God.

So "Woo me, sister/Move me brother," preach the gospel of a God who lived and died and lives again among us, and who dares to keep speaking the language of incarnate being, the language of love.