

Callam's Law

Murphy, whoever he was, has gained immortality of a sort by enunciating a law which, if not absolutely universal, is close enough to experience to be universally quoted: "If anything can go wrong, it will." Similarly, The Peter Principle captures an aspect of contemporary society that most of us recognize: "Everyone rises to his level of incompetence." Today I intend to make my bid for immortality by means of Callam's Law, which goes like this: "Preachers always address the wrong congregation."

The truth of this law can be demonstrated by calling to mind the topics that are the staples of preachers today and then contrasting that list with sermons preached, say, a hundred years ago. Contemporary preaching, if my experience is representative, is usually centred on the biblical readings used in the liturgy. More abundant and varied now than they were a century ago, these texts invite comment and exposition, and a few preachers seem able to resist the circuit from one to the other. When the congregation hears, "And in the Gospel . . .," it knows that Father has rounded third and is heading for home. But it is what the priest derives from Scripture that reveals what are our contemporary concerns. The homilist will often draw from a scholarly commentary on the texts, for we all want the expert opinion, even if only at second hand. Vibrant preachers, who follow politics and have a social conscience, will make their listeners aware of the needs for social justice in society and in the world. The victims of war, of economic exploitation, of racism and sexism will be brought vividly before the mind's eye. At the great feasts—Christmas and Easter—the emphasis will be on the presence of a loving God among his people in the Eucharistic banquet that the whole community confects. At funerals, again, the people will be invited to deepen their relationship with a loving God as they rejoice in the fulfillment of the promise of salvation in one of Christ's members.

Callam's Law states that these beautiful and encouraging sentiments would have been much more helpful to the Catholics of 1908 than 2008. What they actually heard from the pulpit way back then stressed a holy fear of God and his inescapable judgments. It was a society that glorified the rapacious "self-made man" for his use—and abuse—of others and that was chauvinistic, in both the literal and the current sense of the term. How greatly people would have benefitted from hearing the consoling message of our version of the Gospel: about an accepting and understanding God who loves the poor and disadvantaged. How wonderful it would have been if our grandparents and great-grandparents could have experienced the rich banquet of Scripture that the lectionary spreads before us, and if they could have been encouraged to approach the Holy Eucharist in frequent—even weekly—communion as we do today without even thinking about it.

These were the messages they needed to hear instead of what was actually preached. And what was that? Not surprisingly, it was the very things they already knew and practised. At a time when there was a tremendous reverence for the Blessed Sacrament, they were exhorted to exhibit even more; when everyone knew his catechism, there were expositions of the sacraments and the creed; when the saints were much honoured, their glories were endlessly retailed; when all practising Catholics went to confession often, there were explanations of indulgences and exhortations to frequent reception of the sacrament of penance; when everyone feared the pains of hell, fire and brimstone poured from the pulpits. In other words, Catholics were told about the things that everyone accepted. Preachers merely restated the obvious.

But Callam's Law goes further than that simple fact. For to claim that preachers always address the wrong congregation is to imply that there is another one that could profit from hearing what these misplaced apostles had to say. What congregation, I wonder, would constitute the right audiences for the sermons of 1908? Could it be that *we* would benefit from hearing them? I think we could, for those sermons contain Catholic truth, a truth that we pass over as we follow the trends that are popular in religion today. (For there is fashion in religion just as there is in clothing or entertainment.) And what are the elements of Catholicism that we bypass nowadays? They are, I would say, precisely those that loomed large in 1908. When was the last time you heard anything from the pulpit about the creed, for instance, or about the afterlife? About saints or about the Real Presence? Our practical ignorance of the fearsome and salutary doctrines of our faith has left us only partially evangelized. Furthermore, while the Church must honour what is good in a society—such as the unquenchable demand for social justice in ours—it also must go beyond or even against some aspects of whatever society it finds itself in, whether it's 1908 or 2008.