

Pictorial Preaching In The Bible

Pictorial preaching is not a twentieth century phenomenon or the modern theological seminary's production. It antedates the creative work of contemporary teachers of homiletics. The Bible contains convincing and inspiring evidence of pictorial preaching.

This article focuses on six biblical preachers who excelled in painting verbal pictures. Three proclaimers - Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel - were preaching giants during the Old Testament dispensation. The pictures of the other three - John the Baptist, Jesus the Christ, and John the Prophet - dominate the period of the New Testament.

Pictorial Preaching in the Old Testament

Any serious study of biblical preachers must begin with an examination of their call. It is worthy of note that they were called to be preachers by God. He called them despite their sometimes serious protestations.

When God summoned him, Jeremiah sought to be excused on the basis of his youthfulness and inexperience. What the prophet-designate misunderstood was the fact that his being called to preach was not something over which he had the ultimate say. It was foreordained by God for him to preach.

God equipped Jeremiah by touching his lips with the sacred words. He put them in his mouth. This relieved Jeremiah of any previous anxieties about doing what God told him. So God called, commissioned, and equipped Jeremiah to preach.

Isaiah, in an exciting and dramatic contrast, was called to preach amid a worship experience of Yahweh's enthronement. A crisis of gigantic proportions had descended upon Israel. A strong king, Uzziah, had fallen into the sleep of death. Sorrow gripped the hearts and tears welled up in the eyes of the people. It was in that sad moment of history that vivid pictures of another King went on parade in front of Isaiah. Songs of adoration and exultation filled the temple. The angels sang antiphonally: "Holy, Holy, Holy." Vivid pictures of the altar came alive as fire danced past Isaiah's eyes, the smell of incense filled his nostrils, temple priests came upon the scene and revealed God himself on the throne. The prophet-to-be, in an ecstatic moment, acknowledged the receipt of a

unique religious experience by testifying that "he had seen the King."

Seeing the King was a crucial point of the call, for the King was sinless and pure. Isaiah was sinful and unclean. Moreover, "Isaiah was a member of a community that was in spiritual ill health." Thus, he was not ready to preach until his lips were purged and his life was purified (Isaiah 6:7).

One interesting question to ponder is: What, if any, might be the correlation between the experience of the preacher's call and his or her effectiveness as a pictorial preacher?

Ezekiel's call to preach also came in "an extraordinary vision" during the period of the exile. He saw the heavens open and breath-taking pictures of God passed before his eyes (Ezekiel 1). Equally as significant was the fact that he felt the hand of God upon him.

Ezekiel saw and heard hoofbeats as God's chariot roared toward him amid dark clouds accompanied by brilliantly flashing lightning. He saw what Bernard Anderson called "the throne-chariot" carried by unusual creatures whose movements were coordinated by the Spirit.¹ Beside these creatures was "a wheel within a wheel." Above the creatures and the wheel was the beautiful heavenly throne. And seated on the throne was Yahweh. Thus, like Isaiah, Ezekiel was privileged to see, what mortal men could not ordinarily behold, God exalted in his glory. In the midst of this ecstatic religious experience, the prophet fell flat on his stomach with arms, and hands and legs outstretched, face in the dirt, prostrate before God. There he humbly remained until the Spirit lifted him gently to his feet. A divine call and commission to proclaim God's Word emerged out of the preceding, dramatic, exciting, and rapturous events. Following this God promises to validate the prophet's call and prophecies.

Mention was made earlier regarding the dramatic manner in which Isaiah's call to preach came to him in a majestic vision experienced in the temple. The word "vision" does not refer to what the prophet observed with his eyes. It deals with what he saw with eyes of his mind. The sharing of a vision became an essential means of pictorial preaching for Isaiah.

The Book of Isaiah begins with a vision. It is replete with pictures. For example, it contains the picture of rebellious sons, the ox, and the ass; individuals suffering from headaches and bruised, sore and bleeding bodies. What is more, the cities had been burned out, aliens had taken the land and left it desolate (Isaiah 1:1-31). Picturesque language characterized Isaiah's preaching.

Isaiah used signs to make his message visible to his hearers. Bernard

¹Bernard, W. Anderson. Understanding The Old Testament (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1975), p. 405.

Anderson points out that "the purpose of a sign is to make visible. . . the truth and power of Yahweh's words spoken by His prophet."² Four of Isaiah's typical examples of this use of signs are found in Isaiah 7:3,14; 8:3 and 20:3. The first example was reflected in the name the preacher gave one of his sons, Shearjashub, which means "a remnant shall return." By choosing this name, Isaiah intended to communicate the fact that God's pending judgment upon his people should not rob them of hope. Shearjashub's presence and name was meant to remind them of that fact.

The second sign used by him was that of the birth of a son to a virgin. He would be called Emmanuel, that is, God with us. The assurance that God was with the Israelites was to be the ground of their hope.

The third sign was the name the Lord commanded the preacher to give his second son, Maherhalalhashbaz, "take quickly the prey." The name of the second son was an ominous sign of the coming conquest of Israel by the Assyrians. Therefore, the presence and name of Isaiah's second son must have been an unwelcome reminder of disastrous future events in the history of Israel. So, by the symbolic use of these three names, Isaiah made God's Word vivid to his people.

The fourth sign was dramatically different and probably shocking to some. Can you imagine the preacher walking in the streets of the city barefooted and naked? Yet this was what God commanded Isaiah to do as a sign that within three years the Egyptians and Cushites would be slaves of the Assyrians.

Another reason for Isaiah's success as a pictorial preacher was his mastery of the art of quick and brief description. Turn to Isaiah 2:10-21. Read it and you become caught up in the superb description of Yahweh's coming judgment. The preacher effectively used parable, poetry, imagery, metaphor, and allegory to accomplish his purpose. Therefore, as one listens to the preacher, cedars of Lebanon, oaks of Bashan, high mountains and hills, rocks and caves, moles and bats pass in kaleidoscopic fashion before the eye of the mind. What we have in this passage is a swiftly passing parade of pictures framed in repetition and contrast, pointing to the coming judgment of God.

Isaiah emphasized often that his hearers were hearing God's words when he preached to them through the preacher. Thus, the opening pages of the Book of Isaiah introduces one of the ways by which the Old Testament prophet hangs vivid pictures in his listener's minds.

Isaiah's classic sermon (Isaiah 6), based on the preacher's vision and call, illustrates the relationship between what we see and hear. For as the seraphim sing the song of praise to Him who sits on the throne, they

²Ibid, p. 310.

sharpen the focus upon the symbolism of the throne and the universal regality of the one who occupies it.

Another passage of equal merit is Isaiah 14:4b-21. It contains a great song of triumph to which the cypress trees and cedars of Lebanon add their voices. What imagination!

Perhaps the music and symbols do not speak to us as quickly and clearly as they did to Isaiah and the members of his transient congregation. This is understandable. We Americans know very little of the pomp and grandeur, pageantry and color that accompany monarchs, particularly during ceremonial occasions. However, such circumstances were significant for Isaiah's hearers.

Robert Rogers acclaimed Isaiah as "a wizard of words." The prophet's skillful, verbal transformation of silver into dross, imagery of "the smoke of a flaming fire by night," the effective use of similitudes (Isaiah 10:26), and the mini-verbal movie in 9:2-7 witness to Isaiah's wizardry.

The last reference mentioned in the paragraph above is considered to be "one of the most beautiful and moving passages in Holy Scripture." It contains familiar, picture-hanging, contrasting words. The passage moves gradually and then lifts the listener, or reader, to a level of grandeur from which can be seen a new day of endless peace, justice, and righteousness. If Isaiah had not produced another word picture, this majestic one would have been sufficient to qualify him for a prominent place among the pictorial preachers of the Bible.

We turn now to the proclamations of Jeremiah. Some readers of Jeremiah might be tempted to dismiss him as merely a "weeping prophet" whose words contain undue emphasis upon the notes of wrath and judgment. However, students of preaching who ignore the sermons of Jeremiah do a serious disservice to themselves and the history of pictorial preaching. Gerhard Von Rad reminds us that "Jeremiah not only announced what was to come but also on occasion gave a very graphic description of it even if it was . . . only a thumbnail sketch."³

In this brief analytical statement Von Rad, the noted Old Testament scholar, points to one of the "musts" of pictorial preaching. Skill in describing events, experiences, persons, and scenes is a basic requirement of effective pictorial preaching.

Jeremiah's employment of imagination and detail-description is evident in many sections of the Old Testament book that bears his name. For our purposes, it will suffice to mention one example found in Jeremiah 4:23-26. This is a poignant lamentation in which the prophet-preacher pictures the earth "without form and void" and the heavens without light. He describes mountains as trembling and hills lightly mov-

³Gerhard von Rad. The Message of the Prophets (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 165.

ing; but there are no human beings, birds, fruit trees, or cities in the description. How discomfoting.

More frightening is the fact that the Lord is fiercely angry. Doubtless this admixture of imagination and imagery may not be pleasing to the homiletical taste of many contemporary worshipper. What cannot be bypassed is the manner in which this imagery generates interest and excitement.

One of the indictments registered with justification against contemporary preaching is that it is dry, dull, and dead. Far too many sermons lack interest and excitement. Others are dull because of lack of variety in preparation and delivery. They are pronounced dead because of lack of movement. It remains to be seen whether there is sufficient evidence inside or outside the Bible to give the student of pictorial preaching reason to believe that pictorial preaching would help rescue preaching in the twenty-first century from some of these indictments.

Another method by which Jeremiah placed pictures in the minds of his listeners is one James Efrid referred to as "prophetic signs".⁴ These were dramatic acts performed by prophet-preachers under divine orders for the purpose of communicating a message from God to his people in order to effectuate behavioral change. These signs were visual expressions by which God confirmed his word as spoken by the preacher.

One of Jeremiah's prophetic signs was the purchase, wearing, and soiling of a waistcloth. There was a powerful sermon in the wearing of the waistcloth. It reminded the Israelites that they used to be as close to God as the cloth was to the preacher. Just as the soiled cloth could no longer be worn by Jeremiah, Israel could no longer enjoy her intimate status with God because of her sin.

Another prophetic sign was evident in the sermon on the bottle. Again the dramatic, personal mode of proclaiming God's message was not Jeremiah's idea. It was the command of God. When the Lord called Jeremiah he said to the prophet-preacher-elect: "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9). Sometime later the Lord told Jeremiah to go and get a bottle (Jeremiah 19:1), and break it in the presence of the people (Jeremiah 19:10). In this manner God gave Jeremiah an important message and an effective visual symbol with which to communicate it.

What a memorable, vivid way for the preacher to pronounce God's judgment upon the people. They had forsaken the God of their ancestors for false gods. They had offered human sacrifices to the strange gods instead of bringing a contrite heart to the God who had emancipated their ancestors. Because of these grievous sins, God was going to break

⁴James M. Efrid. Jeremiah Prophet Under Seige (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), p. 79.

the sinners. The broken bottle conveyed a pictorial message to the people. It is not too much to suggest that whenever they saw a broken bottle they heard Jeremiah's words; and as they heard Jeremiah's words, they also heard God's words.

Not only did Jeremiah use a waistcloth and a broken bottle to convey the divine message from God to God's people, he also dramatically utilized an ox-yoke. The members of the preacher's congregation, unlike parishioners in the churches of our day, recognized an ox-yoke when they saw one. They were familiar with the fact that a wooden bar was used for holding oxen so that they would work together. Also, they identified the yoke as a sign of humbling defeat. Therefore as the preacher walked among his people with a yoke upon his neck, they got the message. God would humble his people.

Thus, when Jeremiah appeared among the people with a bond and yoke upon his neck (Jeremiah 27:1-11), he captured their individual attention. But he did not allow their interest and attention to remain focused upon the bond and yoke. These were mere physical means by which the prophet-preacher obtained the mental concentration of those who saw and heard him. Thus, he shifted attention from the God-called man to the God-sent message. The prophet knew he was not an actor or an entertainer. He was the King's messenger. True, a discomfiting message regarding subjection to Nebuchadnezzar had been entrusted to him, but he could not remain true if he failed, or selfishly refused, to deliver it.

Isaiah has been referred to as "a wizard of words." Keith W. Carley recognized Ezekiel as "a master of allegory and fine poetry."⁵ We shall examine the pictorial preaching of Ezekiel against the backdrop of Carley's statement.

Before looking at Ezekiel's sermons, however, we must glance briefly at the man. For what a person preaches cannot be divorced from who the person is. Ezekiel has been described as "an unusual person whose psychic peculiarities would make a fascinating psychological study . . . [and whose] oracles often came in ecstasy or trance He was an eccentric." Professor Carley's next words are insightful. In them he referred to "Ezekiel's lively religious imagination." These interesting descriptive statements provide us with reason to conclude that Ezekiel was a preacher of fertile imagination whose spirit was in frequent contact with the Spirit of the universe.

All of this points to the following principle: Effective pictorial preaching is determined in large measure by the fertility of the preacher's im-

⁵Keith W. Carley, The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel in The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible, ed. P. R. Ackroyd, A.R.C. Leaney, and J. W. Packer (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 8.

agination. Proclaimers whose imagination is barren cannot be pictorial preachers, for it is imperative that the herald first see whatever he or she is trying to enable the listeners or readers to see.

Perhaps one of the most memorable scenes Ezekiel saw was a vision of dramatic power. It was the vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37). The vision sharply focused attention upon death, life, and triumph. These were important words in Israel's history. The exiles considered themselves "the prey of death." Ezekiel the preacher, saw the exiles as perennial dwellers of the district (valley-of-the-plain) of the dead. The once dried-bones, in the imagery of the Black spiritual, began to make accurate and proper connections with each other until live bodies, new life, miraculously emerged. The sovereign God is Lord of life. Death has no authority over him or ultimate power over his people. Death, therefore, cannot and does not emerge triumphant.

It is not too much to believe that not only did Ezekiel see the dry and decaying bones, he also walked among them. Although many details of his involvement in the vision are missing from his message, enough is included to permit us to imagine that the preacher was caught up in the realism of the events that transpired in the valley-plain. Thus he painted the picture for his listeners and caused them to see the death they experienced give way to life and garland of victory transferred from the Lord of death to the Lord of everlasting life.

These truths underscore the following principle: The would-be pictorial preacher must be able to see, hear, and feel the scenery, noises, and presence of objects and persons before bringing the listeners in on the experience. The pictorial preacher then is an individual who is involved intimately with the pictures he or she paints.

Ezekiel not only conveyed pictures to his listeners via vision; he also skillfully used stories whose real meaning was hidden beneath the surface. One of Ezekiel's most poignant and powerful allegories is found in the story of the cedar and the two eagles (Ezekiel 17:1-10).

It is interesting to note that the main characters of the story are not mere plants and animals. They act like persons. What we really have here then is a verbal cartoon that effectively foretells a significant coming historic event. It points to activities of a Babylonian king, the members of the House of David, and the presence of Yahweh.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were effective Old Testament preachers. They were pictorial preachers whose calls to preach were unmistakable. Their call was heard in an unforgettable confrontation with the Divine. Isaiah's and Ezekiel's summons came out of a compellingly dramatic vision, while Jeremiah's call came out of a frank dialogue with Yahweh. Each of these momentous experiences helped to shape the attention-arresting style of their proclamation of the Word. It was the mold in which their pictorial preaching took shape. Pictorial preaching included the

sharing of visions, use of signs, quick descriptions, and the masterful transformation of audio aids into visual aids. These were some of the open secret of successful pictorial preaching in the Old Testament.

Pictorial Preaching in the New Testament

New Testament scholars generally agree that there was an absence of authentic, prophetic preaching in Israel for a period of four hundred years following the proclamations of the Old Testament preacher.⁶ This long period of silence, however, did not rob the pious Jews of their hope of the revival of the type of preaching their ancestors had heard. The prophecies of Zachariah, Simeon, and Anna (Luke 1-2) witness to the hope. The actual fulfillment of the hopes began with the preacher known as John the Baptist. William Barclay referred to him as "one of the world's supremely effective preachers."⁷ Walter R. Bowie describes John's message as "swift and straight as lightning. It had the blazing and shadowless intensity of the desert noon-day sun."⁸U

The fact that John became a preacher must not have been a surprise. His father, Zachariah was a priest. The beginning of John's preaching in the wilderness was not surprising either, for W. R. Farmer reminds us that as a youth John "had close contacts with the wilderness."⁹

John's decision to begin his preaching ministry in the wilderness must not be taken lightly. It had a specific relationship to his pictorial preaching. The wilderness of Judea was "the symbol of the wilderness in which God had tabernacled with his people for forty years." The way of the Lord was to be made straight in the wilderness, and some believed that the Messiah would first appear in the wilderness.¹⁰ Thus John's preaching in the wilderness was an historic, mental, Old Testament flashback to his progenitors experience in the wilderness through which God led them to the promised land. The wilderness had historic and contemporary significance for John and his followers.

The preacher-baptizer did not elect to become a preacher, however, because his father was a prophet or because he had extensive experience in the wilderness. He had far more compelling reasons. First, the Word

⁶Robert H. Mounce. *The Essential Nature of New Testament Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann, 1960), p.19.

⁷William Barclay. "The Gospel of Luke," in the *Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p.30.

⁸Walter Russell Bowie. "Exposition of The Gospel According to St. Luke" Chapters 1-6, in Vol.8, *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952),

⁹W. R. Farmer, "John The Baptist," in Vol. E-J, *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick; (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 956.

¹⁰Ibid. p. 960.

of God called him just as it had the prophets before him. (Luke 3:2). Second, the hand of God had been upon him since childhood. (Luke 1:66). And, third, the preacher was possessed by a sense of being "sent from God." These brief introductory paragraphs should give the reader a feel for the spirit of the age in which John the Baptist preached and a brief glimpse at his call to preach.

What about his pictorial preaching? Some of the pictures John's listeners received came from conventional Jewish imagery. Examples of these are found in Matthew 3:12, where the preacher refers to the "winnowing fork," "threshing floor," "granary," and "chaff."

John also placed pictures in their minds by using metaphors. Edward Bauman's comment regarding John's preaching illustrates the point. The popular New Testament scholar said:

John's preaching was powerful and effective in its presentation of judgment and repentance. His metaphors of judgment were unforgettable: Vipers fleeing the flames of a burning field, wind separating the chaff from the wheat and fire consuming it. The woodman's axe lying ready at the foot of the tree.¹¹

Who could listen to these metaphors and not see snakes wiggling rapidly away from the flames and smoke of the pursuing fire, the wind collating the chaff from the wheat, and the sharp, shiny-bladed axe resting patiently at the trunk of the tree before swinging into its cutting action?

Bauman goes on to extoll John by saying: John's "pictures of judgment . . . are unsurpassed in the history of prophetic preaching."

John the Baptist also had a way of capturing attention and causing pictures to form in the mind by deft use of hyperbole. An example is clearly heard and seen in a statement addressed to those who smugly believed they would escape the judgment of God because they were Abraham's ancestors. John the Baptist turned to them and said in his scathing manner: "God can make children for Abraham out of these stones here" (Luke 3:8 NEB). By so saying, the preacher put a sermon in stones. Thus stones preached a replay of John's message for those who heard him.

John's pictorial preaching cannot be considered adequately apart from the rich symbolism in his ministry. The preacher's simple garb of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist provoked memories of a powerful preacher who had long since moved off the stage of time namely, Isaiah. John the Baptist was a symbol of the re-establishment of the biblical prophetic line.

The rite of baptism was also rich in symbolism. Ceremonial cleansing was widespread in the ancient world. Therefore, when those who listened

¹¹Edward W. Bauman. The Life and Teaching of Jesus (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), p. 58.

to John heard him speak of baptism, they doubtless made mental associations with the Jewish ritual of cleansing and initiation into the new community. Moreover, some must have recognized that John's baptizing was an extension of his preaching.

If John the Baptist was "one of the world's supremely effective preachers," then his successor was the most effective. The fact is, John, the herald of Jesus the Christ, prepared his followers for the coming of the Messiah.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus believed that the reign of God had broken into time. Their unwavering commitment was to proclaim, not define, the Kingdom.

The religious leaders were familiar with some of the popular notions regarding the Kingdom. Many of the Master's sympathizers had heard and read of the kingdoms of Old Testament kings. Jesus, however, was proclaiming the emergence of a radically different type of kingdom.

The primary requirement for entrance into the Kingdom of which Jesus spoke was not physical birth or citizenship. It was total reorientation-repentance (Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:15). Citizenship was limited to the poor in spirit, the pure in heart and members of the fellowship of those persecuted for the sake of righteousness. What kind of Kingdom was this? What could the preacher do to enable his listeners to grasp the radical nature of this new concept of the Kingdom?

Jesus communicated this new concept to his listeners by giving them pictures—snapshots and portraits—of the King and the Kingdom. For "the mind of man is so constituted, that it is awakened and quickened by pictures."¹²

Jesus' subsequent preachings concerning the Kingdom were not in vague generalities or academic abstractions. Neither was his purpose one of providing his listeners with a topic rich in possibilities of mental exercises. The Kingdom theme possessed too much systemic spiritual significance and historic timeliness to be treated lightly by the preacher or his faithful followers. Therefore, it was imperative that Jesus the preacher use means by which members of his transient congregation could see what the Kingdom was like, as well as hear his proclamations regarding the King and the Kingdom.

The dialectical and difficult problem Jesus faced was to find a way to help his listeners understand that although the King had come, he was coming again; how the Kingdom could be eminent, and yet laden with eschatological dimensions; how it could be a real Kingdom and at the same time be within its citizens. Plain and persuasive words were not adequate for the job. Therefore, Jesus used clear, powerful and convinc-

¹²Francis J. Handy, Jesus the Preacher (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1969), p.67.

ing pictures. Thus, as his listeners began to see, they also began to understand.

Two of the basic pictorial means by which Jesus preached the Kingdom of God were parables (stories) and miracles (signs). The Master used approximately 65 parables as He preached of the realm of God and other topics. It is significant that the Greek word for signs appears 48 times in the Gospels. The stories and signs witnessed to the contemporary and eschatological dimensions of the Kingdom.

Bauman states that "the parable is . . . the best known technique he (Jesus) used."¹³ Robert Stein makes a helpful distinction between the "Story Parable" and the "Example Parable." The former was referred to as a specific, one-time occurrence. It was used as an analogy. Samples of this type of parables are found in Luke 14:16, Luke 15, and Luke 18:2.

The latter is a parable used as an example. The story in Luke 12:16 illustrates this distinction. Jesus told a story of a man who thought he had a crop-storage problem, only to discover belatedly that he really possessed an impoverished-soul problem. Then comes the key sentence: "So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." What Jesus was saying to the members of his transient congregation was that the man in the story was an example of any person whose priorities needed reordering.

Equally important is the fact that the truth Jesus spoke in the Example Parable came home via the picture of the rich man in the parable. This indeed should be the purpose of all pictorial preaching. It should not be done to entertain, momentarily capture attention, or verbally visualize a point. It should be a means by which the Word of God comes home to, and makes an impact upon, those who listen to the preacher and see the picture he or she is flashing on the mind.

The topics of the parables Jesus used were familiar. They were not esoteric, ambiguous, theological labels; they were concrete and memorable. They were a part of the experiences of the people. The Master selected them from everyday life. Who among his listeners was not familiar with birds, hens, sons, bridesmaids, beggars, shepherds and widows? The contemporary preacher will do well to learn this homiletical lesson from Jesus.

The miracles, or signs of Jesus also flashed pictures in the mind. The uniqueness of miracles as signs and wonders is that they point to something beyond themselves.

The parables and miracles witness to the reality of God's present reign. The miracles of Jesus were "the Kingdom of God in action." They testified to the dawn of a New Age when Old Testament prophecy would

¹³Bauman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 129.

be fulfilled and the heel of the Roman Empire lifted from their necks. The signs of Jesus were, therefore, unique and messianic. They pointed to the life which awaited the faithful citizens of the Kingdom.

Another method Jesus employed to present pictures to his listeners was by the usage of hyperbole. For example, he spoke about "blind guides. . . and an individual swallowing a camel" (Matthew 23:23-24). On another occasion he spoke about a log embedded in the human eye (Matthew 7:3-5). Obviously, these two grossly exaggerated statements were not to be understood literally. They represented ways for the preacher to make two points: (1) that one's spiritual priorities were incorrectly focused if the emphasis was on the tithe to the exclusion of justice and mercy, and (2) that it was hypocritical to remove the impediments to the spiritual life of another person and ignore one's own. Thus, the truth Jesus was placing before his listeners rode home to the mind in the familiar verbal picture of a camel and a log.

Another method Jesus used to put pictures into his listeners' mind was by direct comparison. In Mark 10:24-25 he compared the rich man to a camel. In Matthew 10:16 Jesus, in a memorable statement, emphasized the required behavior of his disciples by putting a picture into their minds of a sheep, serpents, and doves. What an unlikely trio and how effective were the similes the Master-preacher employed!

Jesus, the preacher, also employed metaphors in his sermons. In one of his sermons he implied a comparison between the eye and the lamp. The impact of the comparison is not perceived as much by the citizens of the electric bulb as by those individuals who relied upon lamps to move confidently in their house. A verbal picture of a healthy eye and a bright lamp became the vehicles by which Jesus, the teacher-preacher, transported some external verities from his mind to his listeners' minds.

Two of the more recent eloquent preachers who used metaphors to put pictures into the minds of their listeners were Peter Marshall and Martin Luther King, Jr. Those who would preach pictorially will learn much from studying their sermons. Stein, Branscomb, et al, understandably placed emphasis upon the words of Jesus as if mere words capture attention, maintain interest, and subsequently lead to action. Of course, it is unnecessary to belabor the point that who the speaker is, how and when the words are spoken, and the receptiveness of the listeners influence reactions to what is heard.

One important point is missing, however, from these obvious facts. Reactions to verbal presentations are influenced by the pictures the words flashed upon the screen of the mind. Pictures are often vivid and effective communicators of messages. Witness the popularity of pictorial magazines, television, billboards and other such media.

We turn now to the question: Where did Jesus obtain the subjects for his parables, metaphors, hyperbola, similes, analogies and comparative

statements? One of his sources was the Old Testament. A tip-off regarding the Master's frequent reference to the Old Testament was received during the beginning of his public ministry. His scripture-reading, which was followed by a brief but dramatic exposition, was from Isaiah:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people" (Isaiah 61:1-2).

This was the beginning of the Master's heavy reliance upon the Old Testament for his illustrative material. Such reliance prompted Francis J. Handy to suggest that Jesus "was the first preacher to recognize the sermonic wealth in the Old Testament."¹⁴

Other subjects of the Galilean preacher's word pictures came from the domestic and religious lives of the people he knew, business and commerce, vocational pursuits, local customs, and political affairs. The subjects, therefore, came directly out of the experience of the listeners. Herein is another important lesson for contemporary preachers: illustrations must be simple, concrete, vivid, and arresting. They should come out of the life experiences of those who listen to the preacher.

Jesus was the most effective pictorial preacher of all time because he reached into a myriad of human experience for the topics of his hyperbola, similes, analogies, comparative statements and parables. What is remarkable about the pictures Jesus painted is that they are hardly subject to fading. They are just as vivid now as when the Master verbally painted them. The centuries have not caused them to blur. Detractors and objective scholars have examined the pictures with critical eyes and minds, but critical examinations have not robbed the pictures of the truth they communicate.

Jesus the preacher also put clear pictures in the mind and spirit of his listeners by his usage of living visual aids. He answered his disciples' question of who was the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven by putting a little child in the midst of them and saying,

Truly, I say unto you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Matthew 18:1-4)

On another occasion, immediately after supper with his disciples, Jesus arose and carefully laid his cloak and girdle on the floor. He unhesitatingly tied a towel around his waist, poured fresh water into a basin and proceeded to wash and wipe clean the dusty, dirty, and perhaps smelly feet of his disciples.

The sermon on humility and servanthood in the dramatic act of feet-

¹⁴Handy, *Op. Cit.*, p. 72.

washing was more powerful than an eloquent flow of abstract words from a preacher hemmed into an ecclesiastical cage. Moreover the act of Jesus placed a picture in the observer's mind which was immortal. The living visual aids reflected a truth, or dramatic actions whose illustration of Divine truth was irrefutable. Each made the truth come alive. This is why a numberless host of people heard him gladly. These examples should teach us some basic lessons regarding how to preach pictorially.

Stein registers an important caveat in the second chapter of his book. He warns his readers of approaching the words Jesus used in his teachings with the belief that the Master intended them "to be photographic portraits."¹⁵ Indeed we cannot categorically state what Jesus intended his words to be or do. But we can say that many of them had vivid pictures attached to them. Thus his words enabled his congregation to see as well as hear divine truth.

There is no gainsaying the fact that Jesus was an effective teacher. His pedagogical methods need to be studied by teachers and would-be teachers, but much of his teaching overlapped into preaching. Jesus, therefore, was also an effective New Testament pictorial preacher-teacher.

¹⁵Robert H. Stein. The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), p.32.