

## The Use of a Joke in Introductions to Anton Fabian's Homilies

The Expository Times

1-6

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0014524617691717

journals.sagepub.com/home/ext



**Albín Masarik**

Faculty of Education, Department of Theology and Religious Education, Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

### Abstract

This article analyses 35 homily-introductions based on a joke from the collection of 71 homilies by Prof. Anton Fabian. Besides providing statistical data regarding the extent of the material in such introductions, the author examines the manner in which they are used, as shown in detail with three select examples. The conclusion reached is that Prof. Fabian always uses a joke to introduce the topic of a homily.

### Keywords

Homily-introduction, Humour, Joke, Topic, Homiletical usage

### Introduction

In 2010, Prof. Anton Fabian published a collection of homilies entitled *Vydarený život I: Zamyslenia inšpirované evanjeliom* (trans. "A life well lived: Mediations inspired by the Gospel").<sup>1</sup> Shortly after its publication, the book became a bestseller in the Slovak Christian book market. Prof. Fabian teaches at the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University in Košice, Slovakia, where he primarily focuses on the rhetoric, homiletics, pastoral theology, and history of social work. As a Catholic priest, he preaches rather frequently and his homilies often air on various church media such as the Lumen radio station.

Having discussed the matter with the author, I began to analyse this material, aiming to

examine various aspects of Fabian's homiletical work. The rationale behind this undertaking was, based on samples of the work of this excellent preacher, to find stimuli for further development of homiletics as a theory of sermon composition. I am confident that results reached in the analysis of his homilies are applicable and valid across the entire ecumenical spectrum.

The first in the series of these studies deals with the manner in which Fabian utilises a joke in introductions to his homilies. Having surveyed introductions to all of the 71 homilies in the aforementioned collection, I noted that, in 32 cases (i.e., 45%), Fabian employs a joke as the main tool to establish rapport with his

### Corresponding author:

Albín Masarik

Email: albin.masarik@umb.sk

<sup>1</sup> Anton Fabian, *Vydarený život I. Zamyslenia inšpirované evanjeliom*, (Prešov: Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 2010).

audience. Thus, he begins the homily in a fresh way that is palatable to the listener.

Naturally, this is only one of the possible functions and, based on my analysis of the relationship between introductory joke and sermon topic, I came to see that, in Fabian's homilies, jokes are never used purposelessly. Rather, he uses it in such a way as to grab the listener's attention whilst also making his way to the main theme of his homily. Fabian's jokes are amiable, culturally and religiously acceptable, and agreeable to both religious and non-religious listeners. In the collection, this approach may be found in homilies (H) nos. 2, 3, 5, 9, 11, 13, 14, 18, 20, 21, 23, 27, 30, 31, 33, 34, 35, 36, 39, 41, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 53, 54, 58, 59, 66, 70.

Typically, the jokes are told rather briefly, ranging from 22 words (H3, H5, and H13) to 145 words (H18), comprising 2 sentences (H2, H3, H13, H20, and H33), up to 8 sentences (H47 and H49). There are two exceptions where the introduction is longer (H48—10 sentences, and H18—15 sentences). Statistically, the extent of Fabian's jokes may be summarised as follows:

Average word count: 48.3

Average number of sentences: 4.7

Average sentence length (words): 10.2

The above figures indicate that, within a very limited communication-space (on average 4.7 sentences), Fabian is able—quickly and dynamically—to grab his audience's attention and build rapport, which is crucial for the further process of homiletical communication. At the same time, however, it seems that, once the joke has been told, Fabian does not need any artificial transition to the religious matters; on the contrary, a joke is always used as a key to the door of the sermon topic. In this way, a joke becomes a legitimate part of the kerygmatic process.

Needless to say, the fact that one preacher manages to use jokes successfully does not guarantee such success to others. I have observed preachers who attempted to utilise a joke—but instead of its being humorous and

effective, in some cases they were probably the only ones who found it to be such. From the standpoint of basic goals of public preaching, one could hardly attribute any effectiveness to such use of humour. For this reason, we ought to pursue the homiletical use of jokes with all due caution. The preacher must heed not only (1) the cultural acceptability of topics touched by his or her jokes and (2) the purpose of their utilisation at a given point in the sermon, but also (3) recognise one's own gifting, personality type and communication skills, so that, instead of a dynamic introduction pointing to the biblical proclamation, he or she may not place an obstacle before the audience—either regarding cultural/religious matters (compromising the atmosphere at the worship service), relationally (compromising one's acceptability to the listener), or in terms of the audience's concentration (digression from the main topic).

The collection of homilies under analysis clearly shows that these pitfalls may be avoided, so that the preacher may use even a joke very effectively to enhance the communication process in proclaiming the gospel. Naturally, this article cannot capture in a more complex way the entire breadth of Fabian's communication virtuosity. Hence, this study is meant as something of a stimulus for ambitious preachers, who can learn from communication methods of Prof. Fabian as well as other preachers who employ jokes in a theologically legitimate manner to bolster their proclamation of biblical message.

In what follows, I shall firstly note three examples of Fabian's homiletical usage of jokes, at each point highlighting the transition from the joke to the kerygma. After this, I shall spell out methodological implications followed by the conclusion.

### **Three Examples of the Homiletical Use of Jokes**

Since it would be impossible to include all the analytical details within the scope of this article, I shall attempt to enrich the theoretical basis

for crafting sermon introductions by following three illustrative examples.

### *Example 1*

Homily no.3<sup>2</sup> begins with a joke about a homeless person: ‘A homeless man was walking by a beautiful convertible in an open-air mode. He patted the owner’s shoulder and said, “I see that you, too, are without a shelter.”’ Immediately after the joke, the preacher transitions clearly and dynamically to the substantive theological statement:

The owner’s body is seated in a beautiful car. From the first sight, however, it is not obvious whether his soul, too, is in the state of luxury. Is he happy or sad, content or worried, tired and disappointed? It could well be that he is a millionaire in his body but homeless in his soul. What roof is for the house and shelter for the body, God is for the human soul. This is what Jesus of Nazareth came to show—that people may understand that God is the Father who provides protection and shelter to their spiritual lives.<sup>3</sup>

With the aid of these 101 (in Slovak 78) words that followed the joke, the preacher got straight to the main topic and established rapport with his Christian audience. His approach is, in my view, also intelligible to those who are not adherents to Christianity, thus providing sound basis for effective communication of the homily’s main subject matter. Following this method, the students can learn that the preacher may be at the same time faithful to Scripture and also amiable to one’s audience, clear and ideologically acceptable, with good connection to the contemporary culture.

### *Example 2*

Homily no. 5<sup>4</sup> opens with the following introductory joke: ‘A father tells his son: “My

greatest present will be if you are nice during Christmas!” The son replies, “Too late, daddy. I’ve already bought you socks!”’ The joke is immediately followed by this:

Let us change the cast. God says, ‘My child, my greatest present will be if you act lovingly!’ And a person says, ‘Too late, God. I’ve already given you a prayer! I’ve already given money to the church offering!’ Throughout the Old Testament, God wanted his people to understand that religion is an attitude of love to people as well as to Himself. But they were always clever and played it down—just like the boy with socks. They preferred to bring offerings, prayed, built temples and kept neglecting the love commandments and challenge to do good.<sup>5</sup>

The preacher could have spent a long time talking about deformations of spirituality, but it was precisely the introductory joke with which he opened his homily, that formed the basis for understanding the subject and enabled the audience to laugh at the deformation—before noticing that the message was, in fact, about themselves and the invitation to change their attitudes. The preacher could have criticised incorrect expressions of piety of his listeners, but he chose not to do so. He transposed the problem to a ‘safe zone’ where the listeners can understand that there are some deformations, some of which may pertain to their relationship with God. At the same time, they are motivated to seek change because of their relationship with God rather than merely on the basis of external, moralising pressure.

### *Example 3*

The homily no.13 begins thus: ‘A cardiologist saw his long-time patient, an older man, and asked, “How is your darling heart?”’ The old man said, “She’s at home cooking.”’<sup>6</sup> The preacher continues:

<sup>2</sup> Fabian, *Vydarený život I*, 18–22.

<sup>3</sup> *Vydarený život I*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Vydarený život I*, 27–9.

<sup>5</sup> *Vydarený život I*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Vydarený život I*, 65–9.

The old man did not answer medically (concerning cardio-vascular matters), but spoke about the one whom he loved and who loved him. Such people are agreeable: they are able to love, and they are loved. With a bit of imagination, we can rephrase this question in religious terms. If we now went to heaven for a press conference and asked God the same question, he could answer, 'Great! Right now, it is on the earth!' For, indeed, every person is God's 'darling.' On each of us God lavishes his love and affection. To love me—that is his most important work. From this logically follows the great commandment: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... and your neighbour as yourself.' (Matt 22:37, 39).<sup>7</sup>

The commandment to love God and one's neighbour is, in this homily, presented in a manner typical of Fabian. What is particularly valuable about his approach is that it is interesting not only from the standpoint of setting homiletical objectives. In fact, it shows that paraenetic statements in a sermon—especially those which are meant to lead his listeners to a change of attitudes and to confront them with God's commands or prohibitions—need not be presented in a legalistic manner. On the contrary, Fabian avoids legalism by developing a context, that is, the relationship of God with humanity. For this reason, the command to love God and neighbour becomes an obvious, unequivocal requisite. The preacher thus does not need to evade the fact that this is a 'commandment'. Instead, he respects this reality and leads his audience to its fulfilment, but without conceiving it as a law, to which they must submit and coerce themselves into obeying. Indeed, this is a good and sensible order of things, which he finds reasonable and which, in his view, 'logically follows' from God's relationships to us. This being the case, he does not need to compel the listener to thoughtless obedience. On the other hand, Fabian is also well-equipped to avoid relativising God's requisite as expressed in the commandment in

order to please the listener. The commandment is, instead, presented in a liberating way, as a natural and good response to God's love. The listener can thus adopt this attitude and work the double love commandment into his or her own praxis.

For the purposes of this study, it is noteworthy that it was precisely an introductory joke that the preacher utilised as a bridge to such a homiletically effective approach. From the analysis of this homily, it seems to me that, although the homily itself proceeds from a joke to a theological statement, Fabian's sermon preparation must have proceeded in reverse—from a theological statement, which he intended to deliver, to an appropriate means of communication, which found in a joke. It did not begin with wishing to tell a joke and then attach a religious matter to it.

## Methodological Summary and Conclusion

The preacher can use a joke as (a) a key to communication with audience but also as (b) a key to the subject matter of a homily. Ideally, a joke is used in such a way as to fulfil both of these functions.

### *a) A Joke as a Key to Communication with Audience (Possibilities and Caveats)*

I agree with B. Hybels, who notes that a joke may help build rapport with the audience,<sup>8</sup> but also adds there are caveats involved in this.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Hybels, 'Preaching that Oh-So-Delicate Subject', in: H. Robinson & C. B. Larson (eds), *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Zondervan, 2005), 665–671, on 669, emphasises the importance of the use of a joke precisely with people who are not inclined to attend church: 'As long as it's used appropriately, its importance when preaching can hardly be overemphasized. Some people come to church not expecting to find themselves enjoying the experience. If I can get them laughing, they relax and become more open to what I'm about to say.'

<sup>7</sup> *Vydarený život I*, p. 65.

Purposeless jokes devalue the sermon and may cause the preacher to seem like a stand-up comedian.<sup>9</sup> It seems prudent to ask, then, whether a joke that we intend to use has any added value and warrant in the context of public preaching. In addition, the preacher must also make sure not to use humour that may hurt other people's feelings.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, we may consider the use of jokes in Fabian's homily-introductions as a rich manual for effective communication strategy.

### *b) A Joke as a Key to the Homily's Subject Matter*

In Fabian's work, I have time and again observed such possibilities of the use of a joke that transcend formal rhetorical purposes and extend to the pastoral homiletical content. What is characteristic of Fabian's method is that he utilises a joke not only to draw closer to the listener, but also to the subject matter of the homily. Its use in a homily may be very significant indeed, because the listener 'who first laughed at a joke or a drama sketch and then came to realise: "You are the man (the woman)!" (2 Sam 12:7), knows how effective and helpful humour is precisely where one must

say something critical.'<sup>11</sup> The use of humor in connection with the subject of a homily is fittingly summed up by Ortberg, who notes that he 'uses humour for the same reason a surgeon uses anaesthesia: not to put people to sleep, but to prepare and enable them to receive painful truth they need.'<sup>12</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Statistical data regarding the extent of jokes in Fabian's sermon-introductions show that opening a homily with a joke is, in Fabian's case, very dynamic, facilitating a quick, civil transition to serious and substantial theological subjects. Thus, even though one might expect that a joke would distract the audience, the opposite is true. In this way, Fabian quickly transitions to the heart of the matter (which is often not true of other preachers)<sup>13</sup> along with the audience who observe the preacher with interest knowing that they would hear a message that is applicable to their present-day life situations.

Based on these observations, I can affirm that Prof. Fabian's approach answered my initial, homiletical-theoretical questions:

<sup>9</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001) 166. So also Jerry Barlow and Bradley Rushing, 'Humor in Preaching: A funny thing happened on the way to the Pulpit', *The Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 6.2 (2009): 63–74, on 74: 'Finally, when contemplating the use of humor in sermons, a preacher should ask: "Will the use of humor in my preaching make me a comedian or a communicator?"'

<sup>10</sup> Hybels, 'Preaching that Oh-So-Delicate Subject', 670, recounts his experience of trying to communicate jokingly with some men who did not belong to church and quoted a man who did not 'think he needs Christ because he's got a big home, a high paying job, a condominium in Florida, a nice wife and two kids, and a little thing going on the side.' Later on, several women confronted this preacher as to how deeply he underestimated the fact 'that being the victim of an extra-marital affair is a devastating experience. Many never get over it'" Based on this experience, he concludes, 'I would rather not use humour than use it at someone's expense.'

<sup>11</sup> Achim Härtner & Holger Eschmann, *Predigen lernen. Ein Lehrbuch für die Praxis* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus GmbH, 2001), 213: 'Wer bei einem Witz oder Theaterschetch zunächst gelacht und dann erkannt hat: "du bist der Mann (die Frau)! (vgl. 2Sam 12:7), weiß, wie wirksam und hilfreich Humor gerade dort ist, wo Kritisches angemerkt werden muss.'

<sup>12</sup> John H. Beukema, 'Why Serious Preachers Use Humor', in Robinson & Larson (eds), *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 133. He adds: 'Hearers try to defend themselves against hard truth, and humor can smuggle that truth past their resistance and automatic defenses.'

<sup>13</sup> Concerning caveats in using a joke, I should note a negative experience of my friend, an American missionary, who told a joke about a mother-in-law at a worship service in England—and, in keeping with his heritage, he told it as if it were his own mother-in-law. Unfortunately, what he achieved was the opposite of what he intended: several people in the audience gained a negative outlook on him, saying, 'What can he tell us about God, when he has such poor relationships in his family!?''

Can one use a joke in such a way that is not detrimental to a transition to the subject matter, to the atmosphere at the worship service, and to the concentration-levels of the audience?

Can one use a joke in a such way that would, in fact, enhance homiletical communication as well as the process of delivering biblical message?

Indeed, it is possible, and hence we may agree with Robinson that suitable use of humour may prove to be a ‘splendid tool’<sup>14</sup> of Christian proclamation. Nevertheless, this is not a self-evident and ‘automated’ process. A joke (or, more broadly, humour) can become such a tool only if the preacher knows what he or she ought to proclaim, is attentive to the content of a given biblical passage and its relevance to the audience, and, in selecting a joke, strives to seek the homiletical purpose rather than entertainment. Thus, we have come to see that this study is not so much about a joke as such, but about the preacher’s responsible endeavour to communicate the kerygma effectively—and also about utilisation of one of the available tools that can serve this purpose.

In taking this approach, the preacher (1) must be extra disciplined and withstand the temptation to tell a joke that is irrelevant to the homiletical task at hand, (2) must be industrious and work systematically to archive suitable jokes and then relate them to such topics where they may prove useful, (3), must also work with introductions based on other rhetorical devices

(not only on jokes), lest the audience develop Pavlov reflex (e.g., ‘A sermon begins, I am about to hear a joke!’).

To those preachers who are not willing to meet these criteria or lack personal gifting for communicating via humour, I recommend that they do not use this excellent tool until they are confident that their handling of it is—rhetorically as well as theologically—legitimate.

## Bibliography

- Barlow, J., and Rushing, B., ‘Humor in Preaching: A funny thing happened on the way to the Pulpit’, *The Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 6.2 (2009): 63–74.
- Beukema, J. H., ‘Why Serious Preachers Use Humor’, in Robinson, H. & Larson, C. B. (eds), *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching. A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 130–141.
- Fabian, A., *Vydarený život I. Zamyslenia inšpirované evanjeliom* (Prešov: Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 2010).
- Härtner, A., Eschmann, H., *Predigen lernen. Ein Lehrbuch für die Praxis* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus GmbH, 2001).
- Hybels, B., ‘Preaching that Oh-So-Delicate Subject’, in Robinson, H. & Larson, C.B. (eds), *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching. A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 665–671.
- Robinson, H., *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980).

<sup>14</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 166.