
SEEING, SIGHING, SIGNING – CONTOURS OF A VULNERABLE HOMILETIC

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Abstract

In this article the many in-between spaces of paradox that characterise the society of South Africa, up to this day, are seen as liminal breeding grounds for what could be called a vulnerable homiletic. Three key concepts are discussed as being inherent to such a homiletic, namely seeing, sighing, and signing. These key concepts are exemplified by reference to sermons by former Archbishop of Cape Town, Dr Desmond Tutu in particular. The article concludes with a reflection on an art work by South African artist Marco Cianfanelli.

Key Words: Observation; Perception; Lament; Vulnerability; Signs; Hope

Entering the in-between Spaces of Paradox

South Africa is a place of paradox, in fact, many paradoxes. There is, for instance, the paradox between poor and rich, or rather, between *extremely* poor and *extremely* rich – South Africa being identified as the country currently with the biggest gap in the world between those who have, and those who do not have.¹ There is the paradox between luxurious mansions and affluent estates on the one hand, and, on the other, often just a few kilometers away, struggling townships and dilapidated shacks. There is the paradox – in comparison to many other countries – between the highest figures of unemployment, and the lowest rates of life expectancy; the highest forms of educational inequality, and the lowest forms of productivity rates; the most sophisticated technological advances in the world (for example the largest disk-shaped telescope, SKA, being constructed in the Karoo²), and a seemingly crumbling provider of electricity (Eskom); between being able to host one of the most successful Soccer World Cups in history (2010), and experiencing some of the worst bouts of xenophobia ever (in 2008); between indescribable natural beauty, and inexcusable waste and pollution; between having probably the best political constitution in the world, and some of the worst cases of poor service delivery; between having fabricated Apartheid, but also producing Nelson Mandela, etc. Need I say more?

After an American journalist, Allen Drury, visited South Africa in the late 1960's, he felt the need to write a book entitled: *A Very Strange Society*.³ If he could have visited South Africa last year, say during the 5th national democratic elections, held on 7 May 2014, he probably would have written a sequel: *Still a Very Strange Society*. And, if I may

¹ According to data released by the United Nations. In 2011, the United Nations' agency for human settlement, UN-Habitat, released its State of the World's Cities 2010/2011 report. Subtitled 'Cities for All: Bridging the Urban Divide' the report examined income inequality in cities around the world and reported that South Africa has the highest levels of 109 countries, with all regions studied.

² SKA stands for Square Kilometer Array. The project is shared with Australia.

³ Allen Drury, *A Very Strange Society. A Journey to the Heart of South Africa*. New York: Trident Press, 1967.

venture to say so: if he could have joined us for this conference in South Africa in 2015, he may have concluded his trilogy with the telling title: *An Even Stranger Society...*

It seems we have always been in a state of transition, in the in-between spaces of paradox – up till today. We are a country that has left behind a painful past, but has not yet reached its destination. We are *en route*, having achieved political freedom as a ‘rainbow nation’,⁴ – to use the colourful phrase of Archbishop Desmond Tutu – but at the same time still struggling with issues such as economic inequality, poverty, HIV and AIDS, unemployment, crime, corruption and the collapse of certain value systems. *This experience of being-in-liminality-and-not-certainty creates vulnerability*. As a matter of fact, liminality and vulnerability go hand in hand. In South Africa, we do, or should, understand at least something of ‘preaching vulnerability’ – in all senses of the expression.

Of course, liminality as such is not a new concept. It was already coined in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep (*Les rites de passage*), when he used the term *limen* (threshold, outlines, margins) to describe human rituals marking the passage from one life cycle to the other.⁵ Paul Tournier refers to liminality as the uneasy experience of having left your home and not yet having arrived at your destination.⁶ It is the experience of being *in limbo*. Eugene Peterson uses the striking metaphor of a trapeze artist swirling through space, *in transit* through mid-air, having been released from the arms of fellow trapeze artists and expecting to be caught in the firm and faithful grip of those waiting.⁷ Dare I say: in South Africa we are – again – swirling between heaven and earth? Who knows where we will land!

In liminality the borders remain porous, open to all sides. Here is given the possibility of (new) revelation and transformation, of dying and living, hope and resurrection.⁸ In a nutshell: in the liminal space one experiences both the fullness and emptiness of presence and absence.⁹

⁴ South Africa is a meeting point of North and South, East and West, with descendants of the Koi-San (probably the only truly ‘First Nation’ people in South Africa), Zulu and Xhosa speaking people, as well as Afrikaans and English speaking people, mainly descendants from countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, France, England, but also from India and Malaysia – to name only a few.

⁵ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University Press, 1960:192–193. Since then several other authors have made use of it, especially Victor Turner, who distinguishes between the phases of separation, liminality and aggregation. He also made use of the idea of ‘pilgrimage’ – which is essentially anti-structure and anti-status quo – but ultimately ends up with the formation of a new community (‘communitas’), which can in turn become a new structure or new status quo that eventually might need to be deconstructed. Victor W Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978:64–65.

⁶ Paul Tournier, *A Place for You*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968:163.

⁷ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2000:20. Essentially liminality implies an ambiguous phase between two situations or statuses. Often this in-between space or liminal state of displacement is filled with potential and/or actual danger. It breathes ‘*a sense of displacement, that sense of being in no man’s land, where the landscape appears completely different, there is no discernable road map, and where the journeyer is jolted out of normalcy*’ Anne Frank and John Meteyard, ‘Liminality: The Transforming Grace of In-between Places,’ *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling* 6, no. 3, Fall 2007:216.

⁸ Characteristically the liminal phase is constituted by the convergence or interweaving of qualities of both categories between which it is sandwiched: ‘Since the liminal is neither fully one type of space (category) nor the other, it will take on aspects of both; it is this indeterminacy of quality and therefore predictability that creates the aspect of danger’ Seth D Kunin, *God’s Place in the World: Sacred Space and Sacred Place in Judaism*. New York: Cassell, 1998:30.

⁹ Roger Friedland and Richard D Hecht, ‘The Powers of Place,’ in *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place*, (eds.) Oren Baruch Stier and J Shawn Landres. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006:35.

Liminality is also no stranger to the life of faith. After all, scriptures seem to be filled with experiences of, and metaphors for, liminality – the most representative probably being the tomb, the wilderness and exile. Each of these scriptural metaphors articulates a different nuance of liminality: the tomb speaks of the grief and pain that are associated with leaving behind old structures of identity and security; the wilderness suggests the possibility of having new and surprising encounters with God; exile sharpens the sense of longing, of looking forward to the alternative of the Promised Land.¹⁰ Liminality is without question an integral part of the life of faith, and therefore also of the church and her preaching.

What form should (vulnerable) preaching then assume in such a state of liminality? What are the contours of a vulnerable homiletic? In what follows, I propose what I consider to be three key notions in this regard, namely *seeing*, *sighing*, and *signing*. These concepts cannot be separated, and in fact overlap to a large extent.

Seeing...

Preaching is – among others – about perceiving; it is about saying something after having seen something; it is about voicing a vision.¹¹ Numerous homiletics have pointed out this link between preaching and perception.¹² Homiletics without optics is unthinkable: To preach is to see – and to invite others to see.¹³ It calls for a change of perception; a rebirth of the senses, and, in particular, a conversion of the eyes.¹⁴ In this sense, it is analogous to faith, which is to see the Invisible, or, in the words of Martin Luther, to see that which you do not see and not to see that which you do see.¹⁵ Faith – preaching – is to look deeper and to see further; to obtain in-sight; to have vision.

¹⁰ All of these experiences, however, have a common denominator, namely ‘the need to let go of, leave behind or even be forcibly expelled from old ascendant forms of self-definition and identity so that God can be found in ways never before experienced. It is thus in the place of liminality, when stripped of all structures of support and security, that the pilgrim and God are free to encounter each other in new and life changing ways.’ Franks and Meteyard, ‘Liminality’, 220.

¹¹ Cf. Johan Cilliers, *Die optiek van homiletiek: Prediking as om-raming van perspektief*. *NGTT: Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif* 2012:53, 3&4:52-69.

¹² Rudolf Bohren never tired of saying that preachers should not only be all ears, especially not only all mouths, but rather all eyes. According to Bohren, our senses are actually connected much more closely than we can ever imagine: For instance, we also ‘see’ with our ears, and ‘hear’ with our eyes. On this interaction of the senses, this ‘engen Verknüpfung von Hören und Sehen’, he says: ‘Was ich höre, stelle ich mir vor, und das heisst doch, dass ich auch mit den Augen höre.’ Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre*. München: Kaiser, 1980:268. According to Bethel Müller, as preachers, we must continue viewing life through the looking glass of the biblical text – a homiletical version of *Alice in Wonderland*, as it were. He states: ‘Naturally, all biblical texts are lenses through which we can look at the world, especially imaginatively, at the future. After all, the imagination is the ability to see, to see better, to see further, to see differently, to see the Invisible ... Texts are adventures (with Alice!) ‘wonderland’ ... A hermeneutic of amazement is a hermeneutic that looks into, and then through, the multidimensional lenses of the text, thereby opening creative new interpretations of the text.’ Bethel Müller, ‘Liturgical and Homiletical Revisioning to generate hope for a just society’. *Divine Justice – Human Justice*, (eds.) JS Dreyer & JA van der Ven. Pretoria: HSRC, 2002:209.

¹³ Tom Long, the American practical theologian, talks about a *double* vision: looking back through the lens of the text, and, through the same lens, looking forward towards the congregation, acting as eyewitness to the great acts of God. Thomas G Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd edition. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005:18-51; cf. also Johan Cilliers, *The Living Voice of the Gospel. Revisiting the Basic Principles of Preaching*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2004:6.

¹⁴ In Rudolf Bohren’s words: ‘Wir brauchen ... eine Wende der Wahrnehmung, und diese Wende muss eine Wiedergeburt sein.’ Rudolf Bohren, *Vom Heiligen Geist. 5 Betrachtungen*, München: Kaiser, 1981:73.

¹⁵ In his commentary on Hebrews 11:27, Luther states: ‘Haec enim est fidei natura ... videre, quod non videt, et non videre quod videt.’ Martin Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe (WA)*, Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883:57/3, 188.]

Preaching is about the formation (and the re-formation) or shifting of perspective.¹⁶ One could say the art of preaching is about the discernment of ‘signs of transcendence’ or epiphanies of a deeper dimension, even in the small things of life.¹⁷ This art of the eye, or re-visioning of reality, could also be called the *reframing* of perspective.¹⁸ Through reframing, preachers are called to *discern* everyday experiences as religious experiences, and to interpret them as such to those who listen to their preaching.¹⁹

The Reformer John Calvin often spoke about the knowledge of faith as a way of perceiving. For him, knowledge entailed more than just superficially taking note of the state of affairs around you, but was rather an attentive perception of life (he used the French word *l’entendement*).²⁰ In this regard, Calvin, in imitation of the Apostle Paul,²¹ was fond of using the metaphor of a mirror.²² To Calvin, this suggested a perception of God, albeit indirect and vague, that would otherwise have remained unknown – a perception that, similar to a mirror in direct sunlight, would often shock, captivate attention and create fascination.²³

¹⁶ Charles Campbell & Stan Saunders, *The Word on the Street. Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000:30.

¹⁷ Birgit Weyel, ‘Predigt und Alltagskunst. Wilhelm Genazino und der poetische Blick auf das Leben’, *Religion – Ästhetik – Medien. Band 2. Ästhetik und Religion. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Identität und Differenz von ästhetischer und religiöser Erfahrung*, (eds.) Gräß, W; Hermann, J; Kulbarsch, L; Metelmann, J & Weyel, B (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007:209-211); Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter. The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997:205. Stephen Pattison speaks about a *Haptic Vision*, which cultivates a person-like connection to the seemingly mundane things of life like crash helmets, toasters, etc. – rather than simply essentialising or functionalising them. Stephen Pattison, *Seeing Things: Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts*. London: SCM Press, 2007:17ff.

¹⁸ The theory of *reframing* was originally developed within the context of a philosophically based theory of change, which was subsequently adopted by psychologists and neurological-change theorists. Cf. Donald Capps, *Reframing. A New Method in Pastoral Care*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990:3; cf. also P Watzlawick, JH Weakland & R Fisch, 1974. *Change. Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Solution*, New York/London: WW Norton, 1974:1-12. Reframing is about revisiting the existing – the old and the past – as articulated in the prefix ‘re-’. However, seen through a theological lens, reframing comprises much more than mere repetition (*repetitio*) of, for instance, ecclesial tradition or a mere imitation (*imitatio*) of biblical truths; rather, it refers to change that in fact creates new ‘realities’. It is both *re* and *creatio* at the same time – in the strongest sense of both concepts. It is *real change*, but of the *existing*. It is interesting to note that someone like Jürgen Moltmann regards the prefix ‘re-’ as ironic, even negative. [Jürgen Moltmann, *Geloof in de toekomst*. Utrecht: Ambo, 1969:32-33. According to him, movements such as the renaissance and the reformation, as well as concepts such as revolution, revival, renewal and restoration, all re(!)veal a longing for a (golden) past, which, in itself, implies a cyclical understanding of history. It represents change while ‘dreaming backwards’. He opts for rather embracing the completely new reality (*novum*) instead of the old (*re*).

¹⁹ In the process, the realities of life are not only named, but also renamed – in the light of God’s future-in-the-present. Experiences must be renamed, for which purpose the preacher needs the language of experience. Grözinger, ‘The Way of Experience’, 2.

²⁰ Gerrit W Neven, ‘De Kwintessens van Calvinij’, *Het calvinistisch ongemak: Calvijn als erflater en provocator van het Nederlandse protestantisme*, (eds.) Rinse Reeling Brower, Bert de Leede & Klaas Spronk. Kampen: Kok, 2009:80. The French word *l’entendement* could also be translated as ‘comprehension’, ‘intelligence’, ‘discernment’, ‘appreciation’ and ‘judgment’.

²¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

²² The metaphor of the mirror was of course well known and beloved among the philosophers and authors of the time – reminiscent of the way in which Paul uses it to suggest the preliminary nature of our knowledge in this dispensation (1 Corinthians 13:12). The mirrors of antiquity revealed, but also concealed; they could offer only a dim reflection of reality.

²³ Neven, ‘De Kwintessens van Calvijn’, 80,81. According to Calvin, the metaphor of the mirror could be linked to certain places, facts, experiences and histories that function as mirrors of God, inviting us to get a glimpse of God’s acts, albeit indirect and incomplete. In other words, for Calvin, the mirror represents the palette of earthly media through which the multi-coloured knowledge of God can be reflected in order to create as well

From a homiletical perspective, one could say that the preacher holds up a mirror, reminding us that God *can* in fact be perceived in this world, though in indirect and often shocking ways – even if it is through the reflections of a murky mirror.²⁴ Standing on the threshold between God's new creation and the old age of the world, preachers help us perceive the former within the latter.²⁵

In this sense, preaching is *inter alia* about discerning signs of transcendence in everyday life. This means, in the first instance, that the preacher should be sensitive to, and observant of, life. Preachers should be able to discern the religious dimensions of people's experiences in space and time.²⁶ Experiences, those of a religious nature too, occur in space and time. However, the space and time within which these experiences take place are always particular spaces and particular times.²⁷ This means that preachers will have to linger, and even dwell, in the spaces and times of those to whom they intend to preach if they are to connect to these people's particular (religious) experiences.

This implies that preachers hold up a mirror that honestly and relentlessly unmasks the old age – an activity that obviously does not endear them to everyone. Seeing leads to naming also, and especially those realities that contradict the inbreaking of God's new world. Seeing implies *not* turning a blind eye; does *not* tolerate neglect by way of overlooking.

Seeing leads to naming, and naming leads to facing that and those who are named. Seeing, naming, and facing could be directed in two ways: towards the face of evil, and the face of humanity. During the years of Apartheid, people such as Desmond Tutu saw what was wrong, and fearlessly named and faced these wrongs. In a moving letter, actually a prophetic sermon of sorts, that Tutu wrote on 6 May 1976 (one of the darkest years of Apartheid) to Mr John Vorster, the then Prime Minister of South Africa, he repeatedly says (thirteen times!), in a rhetorically masterful manner: "I am writing to you, Sir..."²⁸ In the process, he names the evils of apartheid in no uncertain terms, e.g. the separation of white and black people in national sport teams, the so-called "petty apartheid" on beaches and stations, the pernicious system of migratory labour, overcrowded schools in black townships, inadequate housing, the draconian power of the Security Police, indefinite detainment in police cells (during which a leader such as Steve Biko was murdered), and

as nourish our faith. Cf. also Cornelius van der Kooi, *Als in een Spiegel. God kennen volgens Calvijn en Barth*. Kampen: Kok, 2002:22,23.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

²⁵ Charles Campbell speaks about a 'bifocal vision' that not only perceives the powers of the old age, but especially also the signs of the new amidst the old. Charles Campbell & Johan Cilliers, *Preaching Fools. The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*. Baylor University Press, 201:22.

²⁶ In order to find language of experience, the preacher needs to listen to (the experiences of) the congregation. Since the 1970s, there has been a strong movement in homiletics towards a 'hearer-friendly' approach, with people such as Craddock advocating an inductive method that seeks to unlock the experiences of the congregation in such a manner that preaching is indeed meaningful to them. FB Craddock, *As One without Authority*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971:25. Ernst Lange spoke about the 'homiletical situation', in which the hearer must become the actual theme of the sermon if preaching is to make any difference. Ernst Lange, *Predigen als Beruf*. Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1976:34. Since Craddock and Lange, many homileticians such as Lowry, Buttrick, Hilkert and others have pleaded for a form of preaching that in fact connects to congregants' experiences of life. Eugene Lowry, 1980. *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1980:76; Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 294; MC Hilkert, *Naming Grace. Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*. New York: Continuum, 1998:55.

²⁷ Albrecht Grözinger, 'The Way of Experience. Preaching as Shaping Experience in a World of Conflict', *Studia Homiletica* 5, (ed.) A Grözinger & KH Soon. Singapore: Gospel Works, 2005:1.

²⁸ Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *Hope and Suffering. Sermons and Speeches*. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1983:1-6.

many more. Tutu closes his letter in a remarkable manner, by saying: “Should you think it might serve any useful purpose, I am more than willing to meet with you to discuss the issues I raise here as you say in Afrikaans, *onder vier oë*.²⁹ This means: eye to eye; face to face. Tutu sees and names, but literally also faces the supreme symbol of the power of Apartheid in his time.

Since then, however, Tutu has not stopped holding up the mirror that exposes the powers of the old age. Although retired, he still sees, names, and faces injustices in society, whatever form it takes on. He once stated: “I do not do it because I like to do it...I cannot help it when I see injustice. I cannot keep quiet....”³⁰ In recent times he has spoken out against the massacre of mine workers at Marikana,³¹ the waste of almost 250 million Rand in so-called “security upgrades” being done at President Jacob Zuma’s private residence at Nkandla, and in particular the plight of abused women and children, and the fragmentation of family life in South African society. In a recent appearance on national television, he even said: “Be aware. We will start praying for the downfall of the ANC....”³² The paradoxes of the past, and the paradoxes of the present, still plaguing our country, perplex Tutu. He protested against the “God-with-us” theology of the Apartheid era, and he protests against the “God-with-us” theology of the current ANC government, from whom we often hear statements such as: “God was there at the inception of the ANC – therefore it is the only Party to vote for”; “If you vote for any other Party than the ANC, you will go to hell (*sic*)”; “If you vote for the ANC, it is your ticket to heaven”; “The ANC will rule until Jesus comes again...”; and so on.

But in the process of seeing, naming, and facing evil, Tutu (and others like him) also see, name, and face human beings *as human beings with an inalienable dignity*. Tutu believes that human beings are “made for goodness”. This seems to be a golden thread running throughout his preaching and career. In fact it is a logical consequence of his so-called “Ubuntu Theology”, which states that we are human beings through other human beings.³³ In his latest book, co-authored with his daughter Mpho, he declares:

God’s gaze is like the gaze between lovers wrapped in a tender embrace. God looks at us the way a mother looks lovingly at her newborn baby. If you can see the loving gaze between mother and child in your mind’s eye, you can begin a small meditation on being held in God’s loving gaze. Once you are able to fix the gaze in your mind, put yourself in

²⁹ Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, 6.

³⁰ Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, xiii.

³¹ In a violent clash between police and striking mine workers at the Lonmin Mine at Marikana near Rustenburg on 16 August 2012, 44 people were killed, mostly mine workers, with another 78 injured.

³² The ANC is currently the ruling party in South Africa.

³³ Etymologically speaking, the term *Ubuntu* comes from the Zulu and Sotho versions of a traditional African aphorism, often translated as ‘A person is a person through other persons’: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu. Motho ke motho ka batho*. *Ubuntu* is a combination of *Ubu* and *ntu* – the latter being a common root in most Sub-Saharan African languages, resulting in variations such as *shintu*, *muntu*, *Bantu*, *wuntu*, *kantu*, *bantu*, etc. *Ntu* as such simply means ‘human’. The concept of *Ubuntu*, although somewhat elusive, has become well-known all over the world as being typical of African and specifically South African culture. Welile Mazamiza claims that *Ubuntu* ‘defies all manner of definition because it is the very essence of being-in-the-world.’ ‘Re-reading the Bible in the Black Church: Towards a Hermeneutic of Orality and Literacy,’ *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 9, no. 2, 1995:18. Although *Ubuntu* as African cultural expression could strictly speaking not be called ‘theology,’ there are many prominent theologians who interpret this concept in theological terms. Desmond Tutu, for instance, has developed and practiced what could be called a *theology of Ubuntu*. In fact, Tutu’s theology must be viewed through the lens of *Ubuntu*, because according to him we can be human only in community, in *koinonia*, in peace. Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1997:5.

the sight line of the one gazing. Allow yourself to be the subject of that long, loving look. In this way you can imagine, then experience, the loving gaze that God turns to us. As we allow ourselves to accept God's acceptance, we can begin to accept our own goodness and beauty. With each glimpse of our own beauty we can begin to see the goodness and beauty in others.³⁴

When this beauty is discovered and celebrated, Tutu laughs; when it is destroyed, or thwarted, he sighs.³⁵

Sighing...

In a vulnerable homiletic, seeing more often than not, leads to sighing. There is something like a *homiletic of sighing*. In this vulnerable homiletic of sighing, another form of facing takes place: *God is faced with the language of sighing; with the grammar of groaning*.³⁶ In one of the most vulnerable days of Apartheid, Tutu preached at the funeral of Steve Biko after his death by the hands of Security Police during detention in a police cell.³⁷ In effect, Tutu faces not only the evil system of Apartheid, but the face of God.³⁸ The first paragraph of this sermon contains no more than seven questions of lamenting, of questioning God. "How long?" we hear, in true Psalter style:

When we heard the news "Steve Biko is dead" we were struck numb with disbelief. No, it can't be true! No, it must be a horrible nightmare and we will awake and find that really it is different – that Steve is alive even if it be in detention. But no, dear friends, he is dead and we are still numb with grief and groan with anguish, "O God, where are you? O God, do you really care – how can you let this happen to us?... What can be the purpose of such wanton destruction? God, do you really love us? What must we do which we have not done, what must we say which we have not said a thousand times over, oh, for so many years – that all we want is what belongs to all God's children, what belongs as an inalienable right – a place in the sun in our beloved mother country. Oh God, how long can we go on? How long can we go on appealing for a more just ordering of society where we all, Black and White together, count not because of some accident of birth or a biological irrelevance – where all of us Black and White count because we are human persons, human persons created in your own image."³⁹

This represents a homiletic of sighing, at its best – if 'best' is the appropriate word to use here.

South Africa is (still) a place of paradoxes. When one is brought into the liminality of such paradoxes, experiences of fragility and the transience of life are bound to follow.

³⁴ Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness, And why it makes all the difference*. Cape Town: Random House Group, 2010:221.

³⁵ Desmond Tutu, during his long career, cried as much as he laughed. Cf. Andrew Geoghegan, 'He Laughed, He Loved, He Cried: Tutu's Legacy,' ABC News, October 8, 2010, accessed July 29, 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/10/08/3032653.htm?section=justin>. Cf. also Cath Elliott, 'Desmond Tutu is One of a Rare Breed,' *Mail and Guardian* online, September 18, 2010, accessed August 2, 2011, <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-09-18-desmond-tutu-is-one-of-a-rare-breed>.

³⁶ The synonym for this would be the more orthodox concept of lament. In this article I use these terms interchangeably.

³⁷ The funeral took place during September 1977, in King William's Town, South Africa.

³⁸ Actually, God has many faces, with many metaphors used to describe God's presence. Cf. Jaap Durand, *The many faces of God: Highways and Byways on the Route towards an Orthodox Image of God in the History of Christianity from the First to the Seventeenth Century*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007:30f.

³⁹ Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, 12

When so-called secure structures fall apart, one can no longer escape from reality. Liminality leads to lament in which you no longer avoid, or hide, or mask (with the help of so-called secure structures) that which must be brought into light. Whilst lament does not easily find a place in existing and secure structures, and indeed is often actively kept out, the experience of liminal displacement literally cries out for, and with, lament.⁴⁰

The Bible, of course, speaks openly about the sighing of lament. In both the Old and New Testaments we find lament to be part and parcel of the people of God's way of worship, even of the core of their relationship with God.⁴¹ The language of sighing articulates those feelings and experiences on the edges of our existence, feelings and experiences of liminality that disrupt our equilibrium and shatter our mediocrity, and kindle in us a longing for transcendence. Using this language, we can speak out in an honest and liberating manner about the rawness of life, in contrast to conventional speech which is often nothing but a linguistic cover-up. The uniqueness of the language of sighing lies in the fact that through it we address God, even if it is an abrasive and argumentative way of protesting against that which caused the sigh.⁴²

It is important to realise that sighing is not synonymous with a type of *religious introversion* that bypasses reality and skips over the difficult calling of facing and indeed transforming society. Essentially, sighing is a profound ethical act; the beginning of a social and political praxis; the onset of the *interruption* of the *status quo*. Interruption has been called the shortest definition of religion, indeed a category that stands at the very heart of the Christian faith.⁴³ Preaching serves this theological act of interruption; it opens up our

⁴⁰ The language of lament, however, is more than a public outcry – however justified that may also be. It is more than psychological or religious self-pity. It is a voicing of suffering of individuals or a community within the community of believers, in the presence of God – as Tutu did in the sermon quoted above. Another South African, Denise Ackermann expresses this movingly: 'Lament is more than rallying against suffering, breast-beating or a confession of guilt. It is a coil of suffering and hope, awareness and memory, anger and relief, desires for vengeance, forgiveness and healing. It is our way of bearing the unbearable, both individually and communally. It is a wailing of the human soul, a barrage of tears, reproaches, petitions, praise and hopes which beat against the heart of God. It is, in essence, supremely human.' Denise Ackermann, *Tamar's Cry: Re-reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic*. Stellenbosch: EFSAS, 200:26.

⁴¹ Claus Westermann states: 'In both the Old and New Testament the lament is a very natural part of human life; in the Psalter it is an important and inescapable component of worship and of the language of worship. In the Old Testament there is not a single line which would forbid lamentation or which would express the idea that lamentation had no place in a healthy and good relationship with God. But I also know of no text in the New Testament which would prevent the Christian from lamenting or which would express the idea that faith in Christ excluded lamentation from man's relationship with God.' Claus Westermann, The role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament. *Interpretation* 28/4, 1974:25.

⁴² In this transitional time in South Africa, we have more than enough to sigh about. But we seem to find it difficult to practice this homiletic of sighing. Many reasons could be proposed for this: a residue of Greek Stoicism still being with us, the influence of a success-driven society that does not allow failure and therefore lament, our one-sided understanding of soteriology (confusing suffering from sin with confession of sin), our selective use of biblical texts, our reduction of the dynamics of the texts that we *do* use, our misunderstanding of what biblical patience entails and, ultimately, our highly abbreviated God-images. Cf. Johan Cilliers, Preaching as language of hope in a context of HIV and AIDS. In *Preaching as a Language of Hope. Studia Homiletica* 6, (eds.) Cas Vos, Lucy L Hogan & Johan H Cilliers. Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2007:155-176.

⁴³ Cf. the insightful articles by Lieven Boeve, 'The shortest definition of religion', 1, 2, and 3, in *The Pastoral Review*, 2012, Volume 5, issues 3, 4, and 5, resp. pages 4-9; 4-9; and 18-25. This notion could be understood on at least three levels: first, as the cultural interruption of Christian identity, i.e. as the fact that Christian traditions are constantly being challenged by culture (and could consequently either adapt to, or oppose, or re-contextualise themselves in the light of these challenges); second, as the interruption by the so-called 'other' – the marginalised, the powerless, the weak and vulnerable – an interruption that carries within itself the possibility of questioning of, and confrontation and conflict with the bourgeoisie of our 'closed narratives';

spaces (identities, traditions, narratives, rituals) towards the other, and in doing so, towards the Other, taking us out of our so-called “safe spaces”. This shortest definition of religion is probably also the shortest definition of preaching; a homiletic of sighing is also a *homiletic of interruption*.

Sighing is subversive by nature, as it refuses to accept that things which are wrong should remain like that. In sighing we face and confess the ongoing injustices; the destructive spirals of violence, whether they are brutal or subtle; the wrongs of the past as well as their painful lingering in the present. We sigh as an act of protesting. In contemporary South African preaching, there can be no other route.⁴⁴

In a sermon on Romans 8 – about the Spirit that sighs together with creation and the church for the final revelation of God’s children – the German theologian Eberhard Jüngel combines hope and sighing in two words that have become a standard expression in many Germanic languages: *Ach, ja*.⁴⁵ It is not easy to translate this expression, but the best English equivalent would probably be something like “Oh, well.” The first part (*Ach*, or ‘Oh’) expresses pain and suffering, but the last part (*ja*, or ‘well’), suggests a spirit of moving, and looking, forward – saying ‘yes,’ even if we suffer, and must also say ‘*ach*.’ For Jüngel, the hope of change comes not only through experiences of wellness, but also through sighing as one act of awaiting the birth of a new age. He states:

“Ach ja” – in both these words we find the mystery of Pentecost. Our world makes it necessary to groan ‘*ach!*’ But when we come to God with this ‘*ach*,’ we can also say ‘*ja*’ – ‘yes’ to God. He or she who declares in the Name of God “*ach ja*” is filled with the Holy Spirit. And when we all learn to really *pray* these two words, then our simple “*ach ja!*” becomes the most hopeful groaning that can be heard in this world.⁴⁶

Signing...

Sighing is indeed not an end in itself. In a vulnerable homiletic, sighing is the beginning, or better: flipside of hope. Sighing cries out for signs of God’s presence in this world, even if it is masked, incognito, and sub-contrario.⁴⁷ *Seeing that leads to sighing seeks signs of God’s face*. Those who sign up for preaching, become sign-seekers; sometimes even signs themselves. Signed-up preachers see signs of God’s face in the fragments of our existence; when they see, name and face realities, they also see and name the face of God, the *panim Jahwe*, hidden in the nooks and crannies, in the fragments of our realities. In this sense,

and third, the theological understanding of interruption as an act of God that interrupts our closed narratives, acted out in our closed spaces.

⁴⁴ We are reminded of the classic ‘Protestant Principle’ as proposed by Paul Tillich: ‘Der Protestantismus bejaht die absolute Majestät Gottes und erhebt prophetischen Protest gegen jeden menschlichen – kirchlichen wie profanen – Anspruch auf absolute Wahrheit und Autorität.’ In short: the absolute power of God is accepted, and prophetical protest is expressed against all human claims to absolute truth and authority – be they ecclesiological or profane. P. Tillich, ‘Prinzipien des Protestantismus’, in *Der Protestantismus als Kritik und Gestaltung. Gesammelte Werke VII*. Stuttgart, 1962:135.

⁴⁵ Eberhard Jüngel, *Geistesgegenwart, Predigten II*. Munich: Kaiser, 1979:240.

⁴⁶ Jüngel, *Geistesgegenwart*, 241. Freely translated.

⁴⁷ Cf. Johan Cilliers, The Absence of Presence: Homiletical Reflections on Martin Luther’s Notion of the Masks of God (*larvae dei*). *Acta Theologica* 30 2:36-49. Someone like Peter Berger has argued extensively that religion represents, among other things, the *longing for meaning*, and that one of the ways in which this longing is fulfilled is through the creation of structures that act as signs of, and for, transcendence. These signs, or signals of transcendence should, however, never be seen as evidence of the transcendence – an interpretation of this nature always remains a discernment through faith. Berger also refers to the role of notions like play and humour in the religious search for meaning. Peter L Berger, *Sehnsucht nach Sinn. Glauben in einer Zeit der Leichtgläubigkeit*. Campus-Verlag: Frankfurt am Main/New York, 1994:144ff.

preaching could indeed be called *Namenrede*, as Rudolf Bohren argued.⁴⁸ *Namenrede* entails speaking *about* the Name(s) of God, or rather speaking *out* (i.e. discerning) the multi-coloured presences of God within all the realms of our realities. *Namenrede* means to see the signs of God's presence, the outlines of God's face – which are also signs and outlines of the *novum* of God's future-in-the-present.

In the same sermon by Desmond Tutu that I quoted above, preached at the funeral of Steve Biko, in which Tutu faced God with the language of sighing, he also celebrates this future-of-God-in-the-present. His preaching becomes a type of prolepsis of God's promises, a celebration that God is faithful in keeping these promises:

There is no doubt whatsoever that freedom is coming. (Yes, it may be a costly struggle still, but we are experiencing today the birth pangs of a new South Africa.) The darkest hour, they say, is before the dawn. We are experiencing the birth pangs of a new South Africa, a free South Africa, where all of us, Black and White together, will walk tall, where all of us, Black and White together, will hold hands as we stride forth on the Freedom March to usher in the new South Africa where people will matter because they are human beings made in the image of God. We thank and praise God for giving us such a magnificent gift in Steve Biko and for his sake and for the sake of ourselves, Black and White together, for the sake of our children, Black and White together, let us dedicate ourselves anew to the struggle for the liberation of our beloved land, South Africa. Let us all, Black and White together, not be filled with despondency and despair. Let us Blacks not be filled with hatred and bitterness. For all of us, Black and White together, shall overcome, nay, indeed have already overcome.⁴⁹

With the rhetorical repetition of "Black and White together," expressed in a time where the exact opposite was the order of the day, Tutu crosses boundaries in such a manner that he takes his listeners forward, towards the future – a future that has already broken into the present as *novum*: black and white together "have already overcome." This, in my opinion, is signing of the alternative of God's future as reality in the present, *par excellence*.⁵⁰

The preacher's task is to see, name, and face realities, in particular also those that are evil, and that evoke a sigh. However, the preacher's task does not conclude here, or else this perspective on life would have been a fairly tragic one. So the preacher holds up the mirror again, this time to reflect an alternative reality, namely God's new creation, in ways that often reverse our 'normal' perceptions, such as mirrors do.⁵¹ Theologically speaking, preaching is more than merely connecting to or even clarifying experiences. Experiences could also be wrong, even destructive, and sighing over this does not say it all. Therefore, life's experiences and realities need to be interpreted, but, often, also directed and, indeed, transformed – in the light of the *novum* of God's promises.⁵²

⁴⁸ Cf. Bohren, *Predigtlehre*, 89-108.

⁴⁹ Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*, 15.

⁵⁰ This sermon was preached in a time of turmoil and uncertainty in South Africa, a true borderline situation. According to Karl Jaspers, borderline situations, inclusive of awe and doubt, point towards the true origin of philosophy because they are so closely bound up with the *experience of transcendence*. This experience, however, is only possible in the *enigmatic form of never fully decipherable signs*, or as Jaspers calls them: *Chiffre* or 'ciphers'. These *Chiffre* point towards something completely Other that can never be fully understood, for instance also God. Karl Jaspers, *Einführung in die Philosophie*. München: Piper, 1977:234ff.

⁵¹ Preachers, murky mirrors in hand, thus sharpen our *bifocal vision*, which enables us to perceive the light of the in-breaking new creation amidst the darkness of the old. Campbell & Cilliers, *Preaching Fools*, 22.

⁵² We are reminded of Dawn Ottolini-Wilhelm's definition of preaching that sees signs of God's new world in the midst of the old. Such preaching underlines '...the fact that God is compassionate, not deserting that which God has created; that God has made certain promises, expressing God's enduring faithfulness; and that there

For this, the preacher needs a specific perspective; a particular frame, lens or mirror within and through which life can be viewed, *namely that of Scripture*. Looking at life's experiences through this lens, alternatives become discernible: That which we have deemed to be wise could in fact be foolish, and *vice versa*. That which has been invisible to the human eye comes into focus through this lens. Through this lens, we learn "to picture, portray, receive and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens".⁵³

Through the spectacles of Scripture, realities are reframed and renamed – as signs of God's inbreaking future.⁵⁴ Preaching serves this act of reframing and renaming realities as signs of God's compassionate and enduring faithfulness, of not deserting that which God has created. Ultimately, preachers are witnesses to the profound truth that God is with us, and that we are with God. This not only entails that God has entered our space through the incarnation of Jesus, but also that we have entered the space of God through the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Our suffering is taken up into Jesus; it has become part of God's Being. God bears our suffering in such a way that it becomes part of who God is. This is the good news, proclaimed through vulnerable preaching: God is vulnerable. God carries our suffering in God's Being. We no longer carry our vulnerability, alone.

But the good news goes even further: not only is our suffering taken up into God's Being; God's future is also brought into our present. Our space in time and our time in space become filled with future, with the *novum* of God's intent to bring our space and time to fulfilment, to the triumph of God's *telos*. God is present as the Vulnerable; God is also present as Fulfilment. Preaching lives within this space between vulnerability and fulfilment, between fragment and fullness, between incompleteness and *telos* – indeed, in the in-between spaces of paradox.⁵⁵

Preaching that sees (and reframes), that names (and renames), that sighs (but also signs), that faces life's realities (and seeks the face of God), remains vulnerable in its deepest core, but is simultaneously drenched with hope. It remains a sign, not a final truth or 'arrival' after being *en route*; rather an invitation to be led into mystery, into the "God dimension" of life.⁵⁶ It remains a sign; never becoming a (new) *status quo*; remains a glimpse of God's face, not a glorious vision; remains a lingering sense of the footsteps of God (*vestigia dei*), not a full stop or a *cul de sac*. In short: preaching as signing invites us into a world of *alternative imagination*.

are alternative manifestations of God's in-breaking new world that can be discerned even in our darkest moments.' Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, 'God's Word in the World: Prophetic Preaching and the Gospel of Jesus Christ', in *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation Between Pulpit, Pew & Bible*, (ed.) David B Greiser and Michael A King, Telford, PA: Cascading Publishing House, 2003:84-91.

⁵³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination – Texts under Negotiation*. London: SCM Press, 1993:13.

⁵⁴ It is not by chance that John Calvin called this lens through which we must look the *spectacles of Scripture*. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (ed.) John T McNeill, translation Ford Lewis Battles, 2 volumes, Library of Christian Classics. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960:1,6:1. Regarding Calvin's vision on (and through) Scripture, Garret Green writes as follows: '... [T]he scriptures are not something we look *at* but rather look *through*, lenses that refocus what we see into an intelligible pattern.' He goes on: '[I]ts images permit us to see a dimension of depth in the world that is not otherwise apparent.' Garret Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989:107.

⁵⁵ Cf. Johan Cilliers, Between Fragment and Between Fragments and Fullness: Worshipping in the in-between Spaces of Africa. *HTS Theological Studies/Teologiese Studies*. 69 (2), Art #1296, 6 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i2.1296>

⁵⁶ Cf. John de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery. Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death*. London: SCM Press, 2013:189.

Perhaps all of this is said better aesthetically – as is often the case. Springing forth from the South African landscape, so to speak, comes an image that, in my opinion, portrays what is meant by a vulnerable, yet hopeful homiletic of seeing, sighing, and signing. Situated approximately five kilometres outside the town of Howick, Kwazulu-Natal, on the exact spot where Nelson Mandela was arrested on 5 August 1962, a sculpture by artist Marco Cianfanelli has been erected as a New National Monument that marks the capture site of the Father of Democracy in South Africa. It was here that armed Apartheid police flagged down a vehicle driven by Nelson Mandela, pretending to be a chauffeur. He had just returned from a clandestine visit to ANC President Chief Albert Luthuli to report on his African quest. These events lead to Nelson Mandela's disappearance from the public eye for the next 27 years, and irrevocably changed the history of South Africa as well as the future of Nelson Mandela himself.⁵⁷

The impressive sculpture consists of 50 steel poles between 8 and 10 meters tall, arranged in a pattern that at first seemingly portrays nothing but fragments, shards of steel protruding from the ground. These poles symbolise the fragmented nature of South African society, pointing upwards, like sighs soaring up to heaven. The shards of steel are reminiscent of isolation, of captivity, even of the iron bars of a jail cell – where Nelson Mandela spent 27 years of his life. The 50 steel columns represent the 50 years since Mandela's capture.



But the first impression is obviously not the last. In a remarkable achievement of aesthetic reframing, the artist has created an art work that springs to life when one views it from a specific angle and position. When the art work is approached from the footpath leading down towards it, exactly 35 meters away, the laser-cut steel poles line up to create the illusion of a perfectly flat image. Then the many fragments make up a whole; the shards form a face – that of Nelson Mandela.

⁵⁷ The sculpture was inaugurated and unveiled by President Jacob Zuma on 4 August 2012.



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Is this not a moving metaphor for preaching that sees through the sighing and the shards; that sees the signs of faces of hope?