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Let earth receive her king: Six Christmas sermons picturing God

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This article offers a qualitative analysis of six Christmas sermons from the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, focusing on their picturing of God. The analysis sheds light on the nature of the knowledge of God conveyed in the sermons and demonstrates that the homiletic theology expressed in preaching offers constructive insight into the image of God. By emphasising divine kingship and relational engagement, the sermons picture God as both sovereign and benevolent. Verbs play a more significant role than traditional attributes in offering insight into the image of God in these sermons. While Jesus is affirmed as divine, there is minimal metaphysical reflection. By emphasising the divinity of Jesus and God's independent actions in history, the sermons offer subtle criticism on contemporary views of God as evidenced by sociological research in Western society. God as pictured in the sermons is also not solely focused on individual well-being. God's kingship is presented with a critical attitude towards those in power. This ensures that the sermons remain connected to 21st-century thinking about kingship. Most sermons picture a God who is only marginally interested in contemporary social issues. This questions the sermons' fundamental proclamation that God is in control of all things and encourages homiletic reflection on the use of images in sermons.

Contribution: This article contributes to making homiletic theology more visible in sermons by providing a qualitative analysis of six sermons, with particular attention to the picturing of God. The findings aim to increase homileticians' sensitivity to the verbs and imagery employed in sermons, encouraging deeper reflection on their relationship to both tradition and contemporary culture.

Keywords: homiletic theology; sermons; Christmas; picturing God; Grounded Theory.

Introduction

Preaching plays a significant role in communicating the image of God to believers (Grethlein 2016:217; Satterlee 2012:194). Sermons picture God. This is not without risk. Kelsey (2012:33) puts it this way: 'We must acknowledge that all our efforts to picture God are dangerous undertakings.' It is not easy for people to distinguish an image of God from an idol (Peels 2000:11). In this article, I will be examining how six recent Christmas sermons (2017–2022) included in the sermon series *Uit de Levensbron* [From the Source of Life] picture God. The selection of six sermons provides the opportunity to map the homiletic theology in concrete 21st century preaching. This inquiry is motivated by the assumption that sermons can offer valuable theological perspectives, which are relevant for homiletical reflection. The purpose of this article is to reveal what picture of God emerges from the concrete preaching practice on a high feast day against the background of a changing cultural landscape.

Theological reflection on the image of God is often the domain of systematic theology, dogmatics (Van den Brink & Van der Kooi 2017:7–30), and the intersection of exegesis and systematic theology (cf. Peels 2003). When it comes to communicating the image of God in preaching, homiletics would do well to be informed by systematic theology. Systematic theologians provide preachers with theological insights through their reflection on normative theological sources such as the Bible, creeds and tradition. In this article, however, I will take another route. To be informed about the image of God, I do not primarily consult academic systematic theological works. Sermons offer reflection, which can be seen as a homiletical theology or a theology obtained from sermons (Kater 2019:7). Preaching is funding systematic theology 'both by generating constructive knowledge through participatory practice and by providing data for critical testing' (Kay 2007:5).

The sermon series, *Uit de Levensbron* [From the Source of Life] (1927–2025), includes sermons given by ministers from the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. This Protestant

denomination, which has existed since 1892, has 66 572 members (Bikker, Brons & Spijker 2025:239) and has both a more experiential Reformed and a more modern orthodox Reformed wing. The sermons are published in written form so that they can be read during church services by someone who is not an ordained minister. This study is based on the most recent sermons up to 2022, selected without reference to the theological diversity within the denomination. The decision to include only Christmas sermons in the study makes it possible to compare sermons, which are given on the same occasion. Christmas occupies a central place among the church feasts. According to Josuttis (2002:62), it is the celebration in which all dimensions of life are drawn together.

For a qualitative analysis of the sermons, I followed the three main steps – open coding, selective coding and theoretical coding – from the Grounded Theory Method (cf. Holton 2007:265–289; Pieterse 2020:1–5). I studied four sermons during the first round of open coding. These are: sermon 1 (Dunsbergen 2020); sermon 2 (Biesma 2021); sermon 3 (Ruiter 2022); and sermon 4 (Mijnders 2022). Then I added two sermons and coded them on a selective basis. These are: sermon 5 (Groen 2018); and sermon 6 (Aalderink 2017). The sermon series lists only the preachers' surnames. I refer to them as 'he' because all are male. After the first round of open coding, I became aware that the verbs used might provide a good way to gain a clearer picture of the image of God communicated in the sermons.

To gain further insight, an additional round of analysis was conducted in which particular attention was given to the verbs used to describe God's turning towards the world. The section titled 'Turning towards this world' presents the results of the verb analysis. The extended length of this section, compared to others, reflects the findings from the initial round of analysis, which highlighted the central role of verbs. Using this approach enabled me to construct three main categories. The categories identified in this study are 'Exercising kingship'; 'Turning towards this world'; and 'Relating between God and his Divine Son'. Before elaborating upon the three categories in more detail, at the outset. I situate them in the broader context of changing views of God in the Netherlands and Western society. The following section provides a brief sociological background for the empirical research.

Changing views of God

There is an ongoing trend in the Netherlands that shows a decline in affiliation with institutional Christianity, again evidenced by the recent survey 'God in Nederland' [God in the Netherlands] (*Onderzoek God in Nederland* 2024). For a growing number of Dutch citizens, institutional Christianity no longer serves as a primary source of moral guidance. This affects the image that these Dutch people have of God. Biblical images of God have become less influential. Old Testament scholar Eric Peels illustrates this divergence by referring to the image of God in the book of Jeremiah. He contrasts the theological portrait presented in this biblical text with prevailing developments in Dutch religious consciousness. The God portrayed in Jeremiah is deeply involved in human affairs and characterised by a range of intense emotions: anger, patience, love, pain, repentance and joy (Peels 2023:74). Central to this portrayal are notions of God as king and creator, emphasising divine sovereignty over Israel and the nations (Brueggemann 2007:132–133; Peels 2023:71). This image of God, however, is increasingly unfamiliar to the average Dutch citizen. Despots are not appreciated (Markus 2010:39). Peels uses the terms 'blurring,' 'depersonalisation,' and 'humanisation' to describe the transformation of the image of God in Dutch society (Peels 2023:68). His analysis draws on the work of sociologist Herman Vuijsje, who identifies a significant cultural shift: while belief in God persists in the modern context of the 21st century, the nature of that belief has changed substantially. Vuijsje challenges the traditional secularisation thesis – which posits a linear decline in religiosity – and proposes instead the 'blurring thesis' (Vuijsje 2007:210). According to this view, the image of God in the Netherlands is evolving to align with the values of a tolerant and pluralistic society. God is no longer perceived as a transcendent authority demanding obedience and moral conformity, but rather as a supportive presence who accompanies individuals in their personal lives (Vuijsje 2007:107–110).

Vuijsje's observations fit into a broader trend in Western culture. There are evident parallels between the developments Vuijsje outlines for the Dutch context and the findings of early 21st-century research by Smith and Denton on the religious beliefs of American teenagers. The term 'moralistic therapeutic deism' was coined by these scholars to describe the prevailing view of God among American adolescents, as identified in their sociological research (Smith & Denton 2005). They summarise the creed of this confession in five points:

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die (Smith & Denton 2005).

These socio-cultural developments provide the broader cultural environment against which the six contemporary Christmas sermons address the image of God. In the final section of this article, I will assess the extent to which these sermons reflect, resist or reinterpret the theological and sociological trends outlined in this section. But now I will first focus on the results of the empirical analysis of the sermons.

Analyses of the sermons

Exercising kingship

The six Christmas sermons all picture God as a king. My analysis reveals that 'God as king' is a central image

communicated to the congregation. The concept of God as king is a metaphorical expression. The preachers employ both metaphor and antithesis to convey picturing God in this way. I will demonstrate how these two rhetorical devices are used to shape a clear picture of God.

With the metaphor of God as king the preachers emphasise the reality of God's reign. In a world dominated by powerful rulers they proclaim, 'Zion, your God is king' (sermon 3; Ruiter 2022:4). Aalderink refers to God as 'His High Majesty' (sermon 6; Aalderink 2017:14). In the ancient world where people must contend with rulers who wield near-absolute power, the metaphor of kingship resonates. The preachers immerse their listeners in this reality, anchoring the concept of kingship in a historical context. The sermons mention historical kings and rulers, often in response to the biblical texts read during services. In his sermon on Luke 2, Aalderink states: 'It is the height of the Roman Empire, with Augustus as the powerful emperor at the helm' (sermon 6; Aalderink 2017:17). Mijnders takes a broader view than the Roman emperor and speaks of 'An intense world history in which Israel had to deal with Egypt and Babylon, with Persians and Romans. Great nations with powerful kings, surrounded by wise men' (sermon 4; Mijnders 2022:382). Kingship stands for power and majesty. However, preachers assure us that God has the greatest power.

Using the metaphor of the king, preachers express that God rules and has power. Ruiter expresses his amazement at this power 'That's quite something, rising above all other gods and kings and rulers' (sermon 3; Ruiter 2022:5). When faced with the power of God as king, other rulers do pale because 'it is not the emperor who is in charge, but this Child' (sermon 2; Biesma 2021:3). The significance of this power is not limited to Israel. 'This king brings a decisive change in the course of the life of the nations' (sermon 4; Mijnders 2022:377). This movement continues today: 'He conquers a place for himself in this world and from Bethlehem He gains ground' (sermon 5; Groen 2018:14). The word 'conquer' in this last quote shows that other words related to kingship are also used in the sermons. The word 'conquer' can evoke the image that God is equal to those kings who rule and destroy with their armies. I will demonstrate now that this is not the picture conveyed by the sermons about God.

In addition to portraying God as king through metaphor, the sermons also frequently employ rhetorical antithesis to contrast divine kingship with earthly rule. To fully grasp the image of God, we must not look to the rulers of this world. Apart from king David, kings and other rulers are portrayed negatively by the preachers. The kingship of earthly rulers reveals less of the image of God. They only reveal one aspect of God, namely power and majesty. In fine-tuning the image of God, the sermons work out the antithesis between Jesus as king and the rulers of the world. For the real image of God, we must look to Jesus. 'He is a king completely different from the kings of this world' (sermon 4; Mijnders 2022:379). And with the words of Ruiter 'he is the King on earth who brings peace in every way' (sermon 3; Ruiter 2022:7). The sermons are picturing a God who reigns and wants the best for this world.

In picturing God's involvement, the sermons are somewhat ambiguous, and the nature of this involvement in the here and now is unclear. It is challenging to find clarity in sermons on how God relates to specific instances of social injustice in the 21st century. They speak about God's kingship in a somewhat timeless manner. The first round of analysis, which included only the first four sermons, revealed an image of a God who appears almost unconcerned with these issues. Occasionally, social injustice and climate issues are mentioned in brief sentences (sermon 4 for example). In this context, the preachers place the greatest emphasis on human responsibility. In contrast, the fifth sermon, added during the second round of analysis, explicitly addresses God's involvement in contemporary social issues. Groen (2018) says in sermon 3:

> Because there is still so much darkness on earth. Through poverty and hunger, through violence, through disasters and lack of help and disease, injustice and lovelessness. Jesus is looking for a place. The Lord Jesus is looking for a place on earth today where He can live. From where He can let His light and love shine into this world. (p. 15)

To discover this aspect of God, one must listen to various sermons from the series *Uit de Levensbron*. After reading six sermons, I conclude that God is pictured in the sermons only to a limited extent as a God who is concerned with concrete social issues surrounding poverty, global conflicts and climate change. That this is not necessarily related to the fact that we are dealing with Christmas sermons is evident from another study. In the Christmas sermons by Thabo Makgoba studied by Ian Nell, a different picture emerges. These sermons picture a God who is intensely involved in the issues of social injustice in the 21st century (Nell 2024:37–43). An analysis of a Christmas sermon from 2022 shows that 'The sermon reflects on the mystery of God's presence in the midst of human suffering and conflict, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine' (Nell 2024:39).

Another aspect of God's kingship merits consideration. Jan Muis draws attention to the inherent weaknesses of the king's metaphor (Muis 2008:285–286). The sermon analysis shows that the preachers are aware that the king metaphor for God is a vulnerable one and can lead to the misunderstanding that God is a cruel tyrant who wants to control the world and its people. By also using antithesis, the preachers show that the opposite is true. With the antithesis, the preachers prevent God from being confused with earthly rulers who have so many victims on their conscience. God as king is of a different order. By using both the metaphor of the king and the antithesis between God as king and earthly kings, the sermons present a nuanced picture of God. On the one hand, the king metaphor maintains the classical theological notion that God rules in this world. On the other hand, the antithesis prevents God from being confused with a despot who has no regard for the welfare of people. This is

not the case at all. The following section will shed light on the image of God, who is intimately involved in this world, by focusing on verbs that highlight this connection.

Turning towards this world

In this section, I draw on a selection of key quotations to demonstrate that, alongside and connected with the theme of kingship, God's turning towards the world is a central element in the picturing of God in the six Christmas sermons. Particular attention is given to the verbs used, as they play a crucial role in articulating this divine movement. God is pictured as an actively engaged deity – a God who acts. With more than 100 different verbs, the sermons express God's turning towards this world. The sermons present a picture of a God who is moved, and this divine turning towards humanity is made especially explicit in the birth of his Son Jesus Christ. After a general introduction to the use of verbs in sermons, I will pursue this section by discussing three characteristics.

The sermons place a greater emphasis on actions (verbs) than on attributes when picturing God. Only the sixth sermon deviates from this pattern. Aalderink pictures God with his various attributes, such as omnipotence, faithfulness, holiness, majesty, uniqueness and immutability. The other sermons are concise in such attributing characteristics to God. However, this does not imply that these attributes are absent as themes. Instead, it is by verbs that God's image is revealed, thus providing insight into his nature. There is a rich variety of verbs. God comes, goes, is born, saves, liberates and descends. In addition to the verb 'to be', the verb 'to come' and the past participle 'born' are particularly prominent in the sermons. The central place occupied by the verb 'born' can be explained by the biblical passages and the theme of the Christmas sermons. The verb 'to come' is also frequently used in the sermons to express God's motion toward this world: 'God wants to come to people' (sermon 5; Groen 2018:13).

The verbs in the sermons reveal God's profound engagement with humanity and emphasise his condescension. God engages with people, seeking to establish a connection with them. Groen articulates God's turning towards humanity in his sermon with the following words: 'Once again, God is seeking contact with His people' (sermon 6; Aalderink 2017:14). The quote contains several features that typify the picture of God throughout the six sermons. The verb 'seek' conveys the idea that the movement originates with God – He is the initiator of the contact. The fact that God seeks once again shows that God is patient with people and repeatedly attempts to restore contact.

An examination of the verbs employed in the sermons reveals three main lines that delineate the picture of God presented. The first thing that stands out from the verbs is God's positive involvement. In God's turning towards this world, there is almost always an element of benevolence. God turns to people to bring them salvation, and He has good intentions for them. 'Jesus was born to save' (sermon 5; Groen 2018;15). God cares about the fate of people and is faithful. Even when people resist, he perseveres. Groen says: 'But when people shut God out, He breaks in with His love' (sermon 5; Groen 2018;14). There is the motif of a rupture between God and humankind in the sermons. Humankind has turned away from God. That is why God must intervene. In this context, Mijnders speaks about liberation from slavery. He says that 'Jesus will deliver people from all forms of slavery and bring them to true freedom. Jesus will defeat the forces that bind people to slavery' (sermon 4; Mijnders 2022:383). With words such as salvation, reconciliation and redemption, the idea of sin is always there in the background of the sermons. Not often, but clearly, the sermons emphasise that Christ's coming has to do with sin and guilt. Dunsbergen says specifically, 'He comes to deliver the world from sin and guilt' (sermon 1; Dunsbergen 2020:17). Ruiter places sin in a broad context and says: 'But also so that we may know ourselves to be free, redeemed from darkness and death, from sin and evil, from tyranny and coercion' (sermon 3; Ruiter 2022:7). Nevertheless, words such as sin and guilt are used sparingly in sermons.

Aalderink expresses God's turn towards this world in very personal terms when he says about God: 'He really cares about you, He is interested in you! Remember that' (sermon 6; Aalderink 2017:18). The preacher employs emotional language, thereby evoking an empathetic representation of the divine. Individual members of the congregation are addressed in the singular, affirming that God cares personally for each of them. The preacher reinforces God's involvement by adding that 'God is interested in you.' The repeated use of the personal pronoun 'you' underscores God's relational commitment and attentiveness to the individual. We also find this way of speaking about God in Biesma's sermon. 'Because: for you, a child has been born ...' (sermon 2; Biesma 2021:7) he proclaims in his sermon. The other four preachers express themselves less strongly, but the sermons all present a God who seeks positive contact with people.

Only occasionally do the verbs of God's turning to the world appear in the context of judgement. Ruiter mentions about God: 'He has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations' (sermon 3; Ruiter 2022:6). The context of the quotation demonstrates that God's judgement has the potential to be reversed against his people. However, the primary focus is on God's judgement of the nations, through which Israel will be liberated. At the conclusion of Groen's sermon, the verb 'come' is used to imply that God's patience has a limit (Groen 2018):

> For He will come again. What will happen then? How terrible it will be if you did not give Him 'room' here and now. Then, when He comes again to earth, you will have nowhere to stay. Then God will say to you, 'I have no room for you!'. (p.17)

The same language is present at the end of the sixth sermon. Aalderink says there: 'Eternal death awaits those who do not accept the Child Jesus Christ as their Savior' (sermon 6;

Aalderink 2017:20). I notice that the image of a judgemental God is not dominant in the sermons.

A second facet of God's image is expressed by his turning towards both Israel and the nations. This twofold emphasises, on the one hand, that there is room for every human being by God. Ruiter emphasises this room as follows 'The nations will see it. The whole world will see the salvation of our God' (sermon 3; Ruiter 2022:7). The sermons emphasise that God does not pass over anyone. His attention extends to people today. For 'all the people must hear it, they may all share in the joy that is proclaimed. Until today' (sermon 1; Dunsbergen 2020:14). Ruiter points out that there is also a sequel in God's turning towards this world. 'He is a salvation for his people Israel, but then also for all nations' (sermon 3; Ruiter 2022:7). In the sermons, God is presented as the God of both Israel and all the nations of the world. The next quote illustrates the broad perspective that the sermons attribute to God: 'And not just for a few people: the entire people, all of Israel, may receive and experience this, yes, the whole world may share in it' (sermon 2; Biesma 2021:5). As God turns towards this world, Israel is at the forefront, followed immediately by the nations.

This final quote reveals a significant aspect of the view of God. This is the portrayal of God as one who acts throughout history. There is a focus on God turning towards Israel. Mijnders sums this up in the following phrase: 'Jesus, the fulfilment of Israel' (sermon 4; Mijnders 2022:381). Velema notes that, after World War II, the sermons in *Uit de Levensbron* pay more attention to 'the lines that God himself draws in the history of the revelation of salvation' (Velema 1993:43). Velema's observation of this development is also clearly reflected in the six Christmas sermons of the 21st century. God's turning towards this world did not occur solely at the birth of Christ. In these sermons, God is portrayed as the God of Abraham (sermons 4 and 6), David (sermons 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6), the prophets (sermons 2, 3, 4 and 6), and the history of Jerusalem (sermon 3). 'God intervenes in history time and time again', Aalderink (sermon 6; Aalderink 2017:18) affirms. Earlier in the same sermon, he states, 'At many moments in the history of the Old Testament, we can see how God prepares and unfolds his plan of salvation.' These quotations reflect the view of God presented in the six Christmas sermons, where the coming of his Son, Jesus, is closely aligned with God's actions as revealed in the Old Testament. Jesus brings the salvation promised in the Old Testament.

The third thing the verbs of God's turning reveal about God is that he is a God who entrusts people with a great degree of autonomy. In the encounter, God makes himself vulnerable in a certain way to human rejection. The possibility of rejection is conveyed in the second sermon through a series of probing questions (Biesma 2021):

> Come on now – a child Messiah? Is this an intervention by God? Is this an act of salvation and redemption? Will this restore the house of David? Will this save the world? Will this bring peace on earth? (p. 4)

The encounter God seeks with people is not authoritarian. God's turning towards humanity can be rejected. Groen (2018:15), sermon 5, suggests that one possible response to the coming of Jesus is exclusion, as expressed by the phrase, 'But Jesus is excluded ...'. People are made responsible by God himself to respond to his turning towards them. That is why Aalderink says: 'Are you ready for that? Are you open to that?' (sermon 6; Aalderink 2017:20). In the relationship that God enters into with people, he expects reciprocity. In doing so, God generally treats people with caution. When he is a king, he is certainly not an arbitrary tyrant. The sermons show us God as a God who respects human autonomy and does not simply trample over it. He does everything he can to maintain contact with people. But the frequently used verb 'come' does also have powerful connotations. When God comes, He also acts. Occasionally, the sermons suggest that God's benevolent intervention is so powerful that it is impossible to resist. Groen says about this: 'But when people exclude God, He himself breaks in with his love. He himself conquers a place in this world and from Bethlehem He gains ground' (sermon 5; Groen 2018:14). However, God rarely shows this side of himself in the sermons.

I conclude that the sermons picture a God who continues to turn patiently towards this world. The picture of God in the sermons is largely shaped by how he acts and is strongly coloured by God's relationship with people. The verbs can be associated with theological concepts that denote attributes of God such as faithfulness, patience and forbearance. However, the sermons are cautious in attributing such characteristics to God. From the analysis of the verbs, it becomes clear that God: (1) is primarily benevolent towards people, (2) concerns himself with all people in this world starting with his people Israel and (3) takes people's autonomy seriously. The verbs are associated with both God and Jesus. The relationship between God and Jesus is the subject of the following section.

Relating between God and his Divine Son

The previous section emphasised the verbs used to describe God turning towards us. The third category concerns the alternating proclamations about God and his Divine Son. In the sermons, both are referred to as Lord. This highlights Jesus' exalted status. Jesus stands alongside God the Father and is more than just a human being.

The preachers seem hesitant to make statements about Jesus' divinity that aren't explicitly supported by the passage being read. Explicit references to the pre-existent nature of Christ are rare. Nevertheless, such statements about the nature and origin of Jesus are not entirely absent. He is called the Son of God in almost all sermons. Occasionally, sermons mention that Jesus is eternal. He existed before he came into this world. For example, Dunsbergen (2020:14) says, 'God, the Eternal One, comes into time' (sermon 1). In this quote, Jesus is portrayed as fully equal to God – he is the eternal one who enters time. The sermons affirm that Jesus is God himself. However, they do not provide any additional theological reflection beyond this audacious assertion. Instead, they

simply state that Jesus is God. The sermons are characterised by an astonished and wonder-filled tone. Biesma (2021:5) says: 'What a miracle: God, in human shape' (sermon 2). In doing so, he underscores the notion that, in Jesus, we are engaging with God directly. The sermons also explore and question the union of God and man in the Child in the manger. In his sermon, Ruiter (2022:8) addressed the following issue: 'But what does that mean with regard to this God and King? How does He appear? Well, in the vulnerable form of a newborn child' (sermon 3). The sermon implies that the vulnerable child in the manger represents more than just a human being. This idea is reinforced in the six sermons through the use of titles such as 'King,' 'Messiah,' 'Lord,' and 'Son of the Most High.' Among these, the title 'Lord' holds particular significance. That Jesus is 'Lord,' a title that affirms his role as king and leader, echoing the divine name used for God in the Old Testament. Concurrently, the sermons underscore Jesus's vulnerability. In the incarnation, God is revealed in humility and weakness. However, the sermons make clear that this poverty is not the full picture: the child in the manger is none other than God himself.

In his analysis of the sermons given from 1927 to 1993, Velema highlights the pneumatological character of the sermons in the series *Uit de Levensbron* (Velema 1993:44). In the six Christmas sermons from the early 21st century, there is minimal explicit emphasis on the person of the Holy Spirit. The experiential dimension of believers' lives is virtually not explicitly linked to the Holy Spirit. His presence is mentioned occasionally. Only a single preacher points out that the Spirit appropriates what we have in Christ. This provides insight into the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. In connection with the Apostles Creed the sermons inform us that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Another preacher points out that Spirit guides us today. However, when it comes to picturing God, the emphasis is almost entirely on the Father and the Son. The lens of the six Christmas sermons hardly lead to a Trinitarian understanding of God.

The way the sermons address the Father and Son confirms that they offer little metaphysical reflection on the image of God. Although the sermons sometimes explicitly state that Jesus is God, his divinity is more clearly seen in the titles he is given, especially the title 'Lord.' This title expresses the sovereignty of the vulnerable child in the manger. The image of a God who has everything under control is also seen here.

Conclusion

The integration of the three categories – 'Exercising kingship,' 'Turning towards this world,' and 'Relating between God and his Divine Son' – yields a portrayal of God as sovereign and in control. These three categories express the homiletical theology of the sermons. According to De Ruijter (2021:38 and 39), it is the crux of the matter of the Bible that we can never fully picture God. But different liturgical traditions have preferences for the use of certain images. As an example of a classic image for liturgy, he mentions church services as 'audiences with the king'. The six Christmas sermons have a clear preference for the image of God as king. This picture of God is clearly connected to one aspect of Peels's and Brueggemann's descriptions of Jeremiah's view of God. Here, too, God emerges as a sovereign king who cares about the well-being of his people. The sermons make it clear that God, as a king, is radically different from earthly kings. By emphasising this point, the sermons address the issue identified by Muis that the metaphor 'God is king' can be misinterpreted in the 21st century. God also allows room for human autonomy. The sermons position 'God as King' dynamically and critically in relation to earthly rulers. The sermons also illustrate 'God as King' through the lens of Jesus's humble coming to earth. The strong emphasis on God and his Divine Son in the sermons appears to limit attention to the person of the Holy Spirit and associated experiential questions of faith. The sermons do not directly lead to a Trinitarian understanding of God. From the perspective of the church's creeds, it can be concluded that homiletic theology, as derived from specific sermons, has certain one-sided tendencies. Within this one-sidedness, the themes of kingship and God's turning to this world are strongly emphasised. The strength of homiletic theology lies precisely in its elaboration of such concrete theological accents and alignment with current sensitivities.

Initially, the depiction of a sovereign and controlling God seems to resonate with the sociological trends in today's culture. Smit and Denton demonstrate that a significant proportion of American teenagers believe in a God who watches over the world. However, a closer analysis reveals important theological distinctions. The image of God presented in the sermons is clearly linked to Christian tradition and biblical sources. I'll start first by pointing out the fact that 'God' also refers to Jesus is a robust, classical Christian element in the sermons' picture of God. In the sermons, God is given a visage as he comes into this world in Christ. This picture of God clearly contrasts with blurring and depersonalisation. This contrast does not necessarily increase the distance to contemporary culture. The sermons virtually eliminate any room for metaphysical reflection on the relationship between Father and Son. The sermons are characterised by a tone of amazement. Jesus is God above all because he is 'King' and 'Lord'. Through this limited, abstract manner of speaking about God, the sermons remain in dialogue with a culture in which the image of God is less clearly defined. With their subtle speaking, the sermons contribute to homiletic reflection on the relationship between cultural developments and traditional Christian views of God.

The second point that distinguishes the sermons from views of God observed by sociologists relates to the verbs used. We mainly get to know the image of God through his actions. The sermons reveal a God who stands in a long history with humanity. The verbs used in the sermons show that God actively seeks connection with people. In doing so, he intervenes in this world without being asked. God takes the initiative, and his involvement serves a purpose beyond individual well-being. His intervention begins with the people of Israel. According to the sermons, a gap between God and man is caused by sin and guilt. However, this theme

does not play a significant role in the sermons' portrayal of God. Wrath and holiness also play a marginal role in the sermons' picturing of God. The verbs almost always express a merciful intervention. At this juncture, the portrayal of God in the sermons begins to intersect with sociological observations regarding evolving conceptions of God in Western society. Just as in many contemporary views of God the sermons reveal that God is often on the side of people, offering them support and guidance in times of need. He is rarely portrayed as opposing people. According to the sermons, God leaves room for human autonomy. This perspective in the sermons aligns with a predominant Western viewpoint that posits a universalist conception of the divine, where the divine is regarded as an entity that consistently supports humanity. Nevertheless, a discrepancy persists between the image of God as depicted in sermons and the prevailing trends observable in Western society. In the sermons, God is portrayed as taking initiative independently, without waiting for human recognition of the need for divine intervention. While the image of God in the homiletic theology of the sermons engages with contemporary representations of the divine, it is not subsumed by them.

Of the six sermons, only one explicitly addresses God's role in current social and political matters. This contradicts, or at the very least constrains, the scope of exercising kingship. Metaphorical talk that pictures 'God as king' becomes less clear when it is only marginally connected to the specific social and cultural issues of the time in which the sermon is delivered. These findings invite homileticians to reflect more intentionally on how their theological language engages with both tradition and contemporary culture.

Finally, I would like to offer a methodological comment. The qualitative method of sermon analysis allows me to identify dominant patterns in how God is pictured in the six sermons. The 'God as king' metaphor is truly dominant in the sermons. The movement of God towards this world and the alternating references to God and Jesus are also evident. But, preaching also has a dynamic in which surprising traits of God sometimes emerge. Sermons also reveal surprising details about God. The addition of a fifth sermon in the second round made it clear that God is concerned with real social issues. So, the first comment is that the analysis in this study is less suitable for demonstrating finer features of the God picturing. More marginal codes become often less relevant in the analysis process. The God portrayed in sermons is more dynamic than the three categories identified in this study show. Qualitative analysis does highlight the importance of verbs. The dynamic and limited metaphysical manner of discussing God is an important contribution that homiletic theology offers to theological reflection on the picture of God. Sermons reveal a God who is engaged with this world. To get a fuller picture of this God, a single Christmas sermon is not enough. But the theology of Christmas sermons offers a valuable lens to see a clearer picture of a God who comes to and rules this world. A picture that engages in dialogue with cultural views of God and subtly critiques them. These findings underscore the value and possibility of homiletic theology.

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Pieter Veerman: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Validation, Data curation, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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