

Drama in Gospel Proclamation

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Abstract: This paper explores the significance of drama in the proclamation of the gospel. Historically, drama is not considered a popular medium for the propagation of the gospel. While one school of thought argues that the use of drama for gospel propagation is not biblical some others castigate drama as amoral and actors as hypocrites. Originally, the gospel was proclaimed with the words of mouth. This is seen in the scriptures through the dealings of the apostle. The priests and religious overtime have also utilized their voices as assets and vehicle for the purpose. This pattern of preaching makes the congregation or listeners sleep off at times when their interests dwindle. In some cases they go home without a well assimilated message. Therefore, to sustain attention and completely comprehend a message, people need to observe it, understand it, and integrate it for an extended period of time. This is because people tend to understand faster, and retain better and longer what they see than what they hear. In recent times, however, drama, with its illustrative and entertainment qualities has proved important in the task of proclaiming the gospel which is Jesus' injunction to his apostles and by extension all men.

Key words: Gospel • Gospel proclamation • Drama • Character • Actor

INTRODUCTION

The concept of gospel proclamation can be seen in Jesus' injunction to his apostles and by extension to all men when he said, "Therefore it is written, that the Messiah is to die and rise from the dead on the third day, and that atonement and pardon of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to every nations, starting from Jerusalem" [1]. After Jesus was crucified and buried, in the thoughts of every worldly, his chapter was finished; the disciples scattered, all man to himself and to his business. But Jesus resurrected. He gathered the disciples for a great function, the reach of the gospel which is the basis of Christ on earth, the resolve of God, and the purpose of the formation of man - to identify God, to love Him, to serve Him here on earth and live with Him eternally in heaven. The divine objective of gospel proclamation then is to prepare man for heaven which St Augustine calls the eternal "municipality of God". "There, ... no individual dies. There reigns that proper and ideal joy which is ... a reward of God." [2].

Christ himself has ordered that "You are witnesses of these possessions" [1] through the gift of God, the Holy Spirit [1]. However, the way and means of this proclamation differ according to the calling and gift of the individual. Drama is one of the means through which the gospel is proclaimed. On its own, drama can be said to be a story told in action; a recreation or imitation of real life situation to educate, entertain, excite an audience or expose some situation to them for corrective action(s). Drama employed gainfully in the announcement of the gospel may not only draw attention but goes further to implant a great message on the audience. This paper therefore will explore the relevance of play in the announcement of the gospel.

Proclamation of the Gospel: In his epistle to the Romans, Paul urges everyone created by God to live out the purpose for which he was created and further live a life that projects Christ. He tells them, "Do not be conformed to this earth, but be changed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may distinguish what is the spirit of God – what is good and adequate

and ideal” [1]. This implies that a moral and sound personal behaviour is the basic mode of gospel proclamation. One’s life style could tell a lot about Christ. No wonder the imitators of Christ were called Christians [1] because their lives mirrored Christ.

The ultimate aim of every man is to see God, his creator. To see Him, one must be guiltless; one must be good to himself and his neighbour because of God who is “superior”. It is to this effect that St Augustine notes that:

It is this Good which we are commanded to love with our whole heart, with our whole mind, and with our strength. It is toward this Good that we should be led by those who love us, and toward this Good we should lead those whom we love. In this way, we fulfill the commandments on which depend the whole law and the prophets: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with thy whole heart, and thy whole soul, and thy whole mind’; and ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’ For, in order that man might learn how to love himself, a standard was set to regulate all his actions on which his happiness depends [2].

For this reason, when one proclaims the gospel to anyone, it is because he loves him/her and wishes to share greater happiness together with Him who is superior.

Proclamation of the gospel demands respect and reverence to God which is called *theosébeia* in Greek. “*Theosébeia*, meaning ‘devoutness toward God’ ... is due wholly to God who is the truly God and who makes persons who love Him sharers in His spirituality” [2]. Therefore, to be capable to announce the gospel effectively, one must not only love his neighbour, he must also show admiration and allusion to God.

In the beginning, the gospel was proclaimed with the words of mouth. This is seen in the scriptures from beginning to end of the events of the apostles. The priests and religious overtime have also utilized their voices as assets and vehicle for the purpose. However, in recent times, music and drama have proved important in the task of proclaiming the gospel. This may be due to their entertainment potentials.

Drama in the Proclamation of the Gospel: Historically, drama is not considered a popular medium for the propagation of the gospel. While one school of

thought argues that the use of drama for gospel propagation is not biblical some others castigate drama as amoral and actors as hypocrites. This notion overtime provoked hostility against drama with dramatists being treated as outlaws. Arguably, till recently apart from the Medieval period where drama played role, other periods - including the fairly recent Nazi propaganda in Europe – imposed different levels of persecution on drama. [3] traces the historical involvement of drama in gospel propagation and notes that:

... there is evidence of great hostility to stage plays during many centuries of church history In the 2nd Century Tatian ‘described the actor as a man who is one thing internally, but outwardly counterfeits what he is not’. We read further, ‘In 397 from the Council of Carthage came one of the earlier decrees forbidding Churchmen to have any connection with the stage’.

Arguing further, Marshall notes that:

William Prynne ... in his massive work *Histriomastix* (1632), ... begins with the premise that the devil is the author of all stage plays. Prynne produces a vast body of testimony against stage plays: ‘Hence Saint Cyprian concludes that the Scripture hath everlastingly condemned all sorts of spectacles and stage plays even when it took away Idolatry, the Mother of all plays, from whence all these monsters of vanity and of lewdness have proceeded. <https://www.the-highway.com/dance.html>

“Miss Long’s assertion that ‘After the New Testament period there seems to be no evidence for ... dramatic presentation until the fourth Century’ is ... highly misleading. In a sense it is true, but [the fact is] that such activities were viewed with profound hostility” [3]. But “when it is considered how short is the span of human life, does it really matter to a man whose days are numbered what government he must obey, so long as he is not compelled to act against God or his conscience?” [2] That young Karol Wojty³a, (later to become Pope John Paul 11), could defile all these hostilities to practice drama with his troupe called The Rhapsodic Theater, meant there is something worth appreciating in drama [1].

Jesus in His time taught using parables. In some occasions His disciples had to ask him to explain His teachings [1]. In some situations where he demonstrated His message, there seemed to be no controversy [1].

Therefore, “to completely comprehend a message, people need to “see” it, absorb it, and integrate it for an extended period of time” [4]. This is because people tend to understand faster, and retain better and longer what they see than what they hear. This is a quality drama offers which makes it a formidable avenue for gospel proclamation. This writer utilized this to a great advantage through “Mirror of Justice”, a drama arm of Imo State University, Owerri Nigerian Federation of Catholic Students (IMSU NFCS) which he formed. In its two decades of existence, successive NFCS members have used “Mirror of Justice” religiously for the gospel employing drama, dance drama, mime etc as its components.

Drama imitates real life situations (and characters) using actors and actresses who are human being and seen as such by the audience. They communicate in the course of the drama using dialogue as in real life that the audience feel at home getting the message as though they are part of the dramatic actions. They feel the emotions of the action and sometimes see themselves in one of the characters presented before them.

However, in a bid to communicate certain actions, the drama can be taken out of context. This can misguide a gullible mind. “But it is not right to avoid the medium of drama completely just because people use it to communicate questionable values. Drama with a spiritual purpose can enhance worship. God can use it to communicate truth” and win souls [4]. To avoid misconception, it is proper that drama for gospel proclamation be considered with care and dramatic actions well blocked to achieve desired effect.

Often, preaching from the pulpit is unilateral and sedative depending on the preacher. The act of mono preaching when juxtaposed with dramatic acts, one would see that drama will not only attract audience but would also sustain it with pictorial highlights. This is because “a picture can convey more meaning than a thousand words. Drama can help engage more of the senses than just hearing, thus, increasing worshiper participation. Difficult subjects can be handled tastefully and sometimes even humorously with great effect” [4]. The use of drama has engaged many preachers and

Some have suggested that drama teaches us about life in a way that is clearer and more vivid than we normally live it. It tends to sort out complex problems in human lives, not by simplification, but through selection. Drama can make stories and ideas come alive, and because of its vital and creative nature, it is often a significant educational technique. Religious drama [or] Christian drama ... deals ... with significant and vital themes of life. In it we focus on ... effective methods for the communication of an absolute message.... Drama as a technique is amoral; it has no inherent characteristics of good or evil in itself. How we use it makes the difference. [5]

Obviously how a piece of drama is used in relation to its audience can make a big difference. Before a drama can be chosen for gospel propagation therefore, it must be censored and its audience as well as the actors should also be considered for desired effect. When the right things are done before staging,

drama can be a very powerful tool to lead people to Christ, to convey god’s messages and teach His principles in a fun way that appeals to all ages. With the technological advances of our society, people are accustomed to being entertained. They crave new and exciting experiences, therefore; even unbelievers are receptive to Christian drama, making it a powerful evangelism tool. [6]

Having then the awareness that evangelism is “the proclamation of the good news [of] salvation in Jesus Christ with a view to bringing about a reconciliation of the sinner to God the father through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit” [7], its proclamation through whatever means should not just be convincingly truthful, it should also be Christ-like. Today, drama no doubt is a veritable means for evangelism. Drama evangelism “is very good and very effective when being done in a way that it will Get people’s attention and make them to be willing for the message and not to distract and disconnect them from the message which the drama is passing across” [7].

Kalu further advises that:

Drama should be something that will appeal to people’s spirituality in terms of making decision on whom to follow, whether to follow God or

Devil. Drama in the church should also be presented in a way that people will not doubt the truthfulness of the message it is carrying along to the people. A good Christian drama message should not aim at entertainment but soul winning and revival of the body of Christ. [5]

On this note *EVERYMAN*, a morality play can be cited as a model. The play which is a morality play written by an unknown playwright discusses the vanity of man's worldly acquisitions. The character of Everyman in the play represents every person who must die someday and stand before his creator (God) to account for his life on earth. The play presents Good-Deeds as man's virtuous deeds on earth which finally will be his only passport to heaven. Every other thing are worldly and cannot take to heaven.

Why Drama for Evangelism: To effectively use drama for evangelism, it must be with the understanding that drama has certain merits on its own which can be utilized to the advantage of the gospel.

- Drama can be very effective in pinpointing solutions to problem which people face in real life, in other words, it helps people to be percipient. As a mirror, drama here is used to show people, who on a very good day command great authority yet condemn virtue, their real self without hurting their ego. This is because drama draws audience together in order to subtly show them their real life for a deeper emotional reflection and release (catharsis) geared towards truth discovery (*anagnorisis*), self recognition, evaluation and change. Emotional involvement is often associated with watching a play. An audience member may see himself reflected in one of the characters and recognize that the same solution explored in the play are applicable to his own life and problems, from here, he may wish to amend or have what the Greek will call *peripeteia* [8]. It then implies that drama not only raises issues, it equally finds solution(s) to the issue(s) raised.
- Drama can be used to animate and enhance worship experience. Most experience and activities of Jesus as recorded in the Bible are action packed. Some of His personal encounter with people and teachings can showcase highlights of the gospel. Imagine a dramatized passion of Christ as against a read version.

- Drama can help reveal insights into the message, character and personality of persons portrayed in the play. Critically examine the impact of drama on the personality of Joseph with great will power to withstand temptation of the flesh from Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39:1-23) when you want to reflect on morality, reward and God's favour.

However, some challenges can be associated with the use of drama for evangelization. The major problem often would be miscommunication associated with or arising from choosing a wrong drama for the wrong audience and occasion. Since the goal of those involved in drama for evangelism should be "to uplift Christ and bring others to know and follow Him", it will have to be re-emphasised that choice of drama and its actors should be done with care while not forgetting the audience.

Other challenges may include but not limited to:

- Time: Time obviously is a scarce resource that those involved in the drama may complain that rehearsal periods take up time that can be used for other things. This is because in order to stage a good drama that can communicate effectively, series of rehearsal periods should take place. These periods take a lot of time compared to just sitting down and writing the message to be preached from the pulpit.
- Funding: Sure, to put up a drama will demand some form of funding for its production including the acquisition of a minimal props, costume, and spectacles. A church or group without a good purse may not be able to afford the luxury of staging evangelism drama or a quality one.

These challenges can affect or obstruct the good effects derivable from drama for evangelism. Eliminating these challenges associated with drama for evangelism therefore involves some basic principles which for clarity may be called the "kpim"¹ of effective use of drama for evangelization:

- Carefully understand the purpose of the drama
- Consider your audience carefully.
- Choose your drama/theme meaningfully
- Discuss your choice and intention/situation with the parish priest/convener/coordinator
- Open your mind for discussion and possible inputs

- Choose a director who is respectful and tolerant since you are dealing with human beings (of diverse background).
- Understand the storyline well in order to interpret it better

From the above principles, drama for evangelism can be created through improvisation, expansion of biblical verses and use of play tests.

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to investigate the use of drama for evangelization. Drama for evangelization though very prominent in the recent times, suffered various degrees of set back over the centuries that it was not very popular as a means of evangelization but because of interest for its merits, proponents consistently pressed on for its popularity until its acceptance today. There is hardly any Christian community that does not employ drama for evangelism. This is also very prominent in school environment especially higher education campuses where youths often crave for entertainment. Drama here is then utilized to tell them the gospel.

In finality, the relevance of drama in the proclamation of the gospel can never be overemphasized.

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