

Do Military Chaplains Preach?

Exploring Sermons for Soldiers by Protestant Military Chaplains in the Dutch Army¹

Theo Pleizier

Abstract

The practice of Military Chaplains has been studied from various angles (sociological, historical, ethical) except from an empirical homiletical perspective. What do military chaplains do when they preach, if 'preaching' is the correct label for their (religious) speeches. This paper provides a first introduction to study the actual sermons of military chaplains in order to contribute to homiletical theory. It presents the outline of a research design and presents some of its initial results. The paper is based upon 10 sermons by army and naval chaplains within the context of peace-keeping missions. Three concepts emerge from these data, focussing upon the homiletical activity of military chaplains. They redefine the liturgical conditions for preaching, they witness to sources of wisdom, and they dignify the individual soldier in the presence of Christ. The paper closes with a proposal to understand religious discourse in the military context by presenting a tentative typology that is based upon the ceremonial setting of discourse and its religious referentiality.

Introduction and Preliminary Observations

Among the many fears soldiers face, soldiers that work in modern armies and contribute to peace-keeping missions have to deal with the threat to intimate relationships and with the insecurity of being able to continue as a human being *compos mentis* after military service. In a complex variety of personal, relational, work, and battlefield related fears, military chaplains² (MCs) empower soldiers in the moral and existential challenges they encounter. One of the ways they do this is to speak publicly within or outside the setting of Christian worship, commonly called 'preaching.' Various

¹ This article is based upon a paper presented at the biannual conference of *Societas Homiletica* "Fearing God in a fear-filled World," August 2018, Durham NC.

² 'Military chaplain' (MC) is used in this article for chaplains that work within the legal and institutional boundaries of the ministry of Defense and are attached to a specific military unit. In the Dutch context, it is possible to speak about army chaplains, air force chaplains, military police chaplains or navy chaplains, depending upon the unit that the MC is attached to. This is relevant due to the fact units have different histories and cultures, including religious cultures. This article does not address these differences between the various types of MCs.

historical, sociological and moral-philosophical studies have been devoted to the work of military chaplains,³ including their practice of spiritual caregiving.⁴ The interest, however, among practical theologians in general and homileticians in particular, is strikingly scarce. When it comes to homiletics, we find references to memorial services and services for veterans or the topic of ‘war’ in Christian preaching,⁵ but a comprehensive homiletic study of the practice of MCs is lacking. In the literature ‘war sermons’ usually refer to sermons that were preached in the public domain during a time of war but not specifically with military personnel as audience.⁶ These sermons are important to understand the relationship between public religion and war but they do not pay attention to the practice of worship and preaching by MCs.

The literature that pays attention to sermons to soldiers tends to reduce the practice of preaching by MCs to those situations in which MCs are called to boost the morale of soldiers or to provide them with a – questionable – divine legitimation of the battle they are about to fight. This reduction of the military context to actual combat, means that liturgy and preaching are immediately turned into moral issues. A sermon from the 9th Century may function as an example of this rather stereotyped image of the MC as ‘morale booster’: “Men, brothers, fathers [...] Act on this campaign in such a way that God does not desert you in the day of tribulation. Whatever you do, do it for God and God will fight for you.”⁷ Obviously, this kind of preaching raises many ethical questions. Yet it also raises the question whether the moral ambiguities that surround the “preparation for war” preaching by military chaplains create obstacles for a homiletical or practical-theological approach to preaching for soldiers by MCs. If so, empirical research in practical theology and homiletics may help to move beyond a rather one-sided ethical interest in the military by theologians.

This lack of research stimulates the design of open research questions to study the sermons and speeches of military chaplains and to move beyond the rather dominant perspective of theological ethics. So in this paper I ask the question: What do military chaplains (MCs) actually do

³ Els Boon/Jan Hoffenaar/Wilco Veltkamp (eds.), *Met het Woord onder de wapenen*, Zoetermeer 2016; Torkel Brekke/Vladimir Tikhonov (eds.), *Military Chaplaincy in an Era of Religious Pluralism: Military-Religious Nexus in Asia, Europe, and USA*, Oxford 2017; *Kim Philip Hansen*, *Military chaplains and religious diversity*, New York 2012; *Ron E. Hassner*, *Religion on the Battlefield*, Ithaca 2016; Andrew Todd (ed.), *Military Chaplaincy in Contention. Chaplains, Churches and the Morality of Conflict*, Farnham 2016.

⁴ *David Alexander*, With Doug. An Eastern Orthodox Gestalt Framework for Pastoral Psychotherapy in the Armed Forces, in: *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 67 (2013) 4, 1–16; *David Coulter/Giles Legood*, *Military Chaplaincy*, in: Revd Dr Christopher Swift/Revd Dr Mark Cobb/Revd Canon Dr Andrew Todd (eds.): *A Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies. Understanding Spiritual Care in Public Places*, Burlington 2015, 201–214; *Carrie Doebring*, *Military Moral Injury: An Evidence-Based and Intercultural Approach to Spiritual Care*, in: *Pastoral Psychology* (2018), 1–16.

⁵ *Terry W. Eddinger*, *Preaching during War*, in: Paul Scott Wilson/Jana Childers/Cleophus J. LaRue et al. (eds.): *New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, Nashville (TN) 2008, 285–286.

⁶ *Michael Bledsoe*, *Sermons in War. Reflections One Decade After 9/11*, 2012; Gilles Teulié, *War Sermons*, Cambridge 2009.

⁷ *Michael McCormick*, *The Liturgy of War from Antiquity to the Crusades*, in: Doris L. Bergen (ed.): *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century*, Notre Dame (IN) 2004, 58–60.

when they preach for soldiers in war zones?⁸ This question focuses upon empirical phenomena (what do MCs actually do), it is driven by a practical-theological interest (when they preach) within a particular military domain or substantive area⁹ ('war zones'). An open research question helps to hold open possibilities to discover how the sermons of contemporary military chaplains are much more diverse than the stereotyped pastor who is called to bless the guns.

In the next section I describe a worship service led by a Dutch military chaplain in Kunduz, Afghanistan in 2013 to illustrate the nuanced practice of worship and preaching in the military.¹⁰ After outlining the empirical-homiletical research project on "sermons for soldiers," I present some of its initial findings.

Exemplary Case: Analysis of Worship in Kunduz

A group of soldiers assembles in a temporary building, built in a camp that is part of the NATO Trainings-mission Afghanistan (NTM-A), and located somewhere in the Afghan region Kunduz. Some of them wear camouflage, others are dressed in civilian clothes. The building is used for multiple purposes. The room contains a small library. We see photos on the walls; religious symbols, such as candles and crosses. Thirty soldiers are sitting in chairs. The chaplain is clothed in military uniform, without any recognizable liturgical symbols, except a cross on the uniform that designates his religious function which designates him as a non-combatant under international humanitarian laws because of his special religious duties as described in the Geneva Conventions. From the scene it can be concluded that the chaplain acts in a sacred space, indicated by the burning candle that bears a cross, the light of Easter; in front of the soldiers a simple wooden cross is placed at the centre of the room. As the service unfolds, the chaplain starts to dress the plain cross with a military uniform. Slowly he adds new pieces of military equipment to the cross. Finally, he adds a helmet on top of the cross. It gradually turns into some kind of soldier.

How do we analyse this scene? It obviously depends upon our liturgical theology and the assumptions we have concerning the military. Seeing a chaplain dressing a cross with a military uniform may generate resistance: the symbols of violence, death, and war on the cross, which is the ultimate symbol for God's victory over violence and death and Christ's reconciling love. This first reaction, however, connects to the stereotype that chaplains foremost relate to soldiers as

⁸ 'War zone' is used to indicate the situation between the base and actual combat, such as 'peace-keeping' missions.

⁹ Also called: 'area of interest' or 'substantive field' Barney G. Glaser, *Doing Grounded Theory. Issues and Discussions*, Mill Valley 1998, 118–131.

¹⁰ The example is taken from a recording by a Dutch Television channel that broadcasted an Easter service from a war zone. The documentary was broadcasted at Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013, on Dutch national television as part of a program called 'Zendtijd voor de kerken' [Airtime for churches], a Dutch television program that broadcasts religious services.

combatants. From this assumption, the cross and the violence of military combat cannot go together. The moral ambiguity is obvious. Yet there is another possibility to analyse the scene in the documentary on the Easter service in Kunduz. Suppose that the chaplain was standing in front of a group of doctors and that he puts a white doctor's coat on the cross. Suppose he was preaching for politicians and puts a suit on the cross. We may not like the idea of messing around with liturgical symbols. Yet the meaning that the preacher conveys becomes broader than the context of violence and moral ambiguity with which reflection on the military is permeated.

If the uniform symbolizes the daily life of the soldier, his or her daily clothing, like the doctor's coat or the politician's suit, then the cross is also the symbol that God comes into our everyday lives and that we are allowed to bring to God those things that we carry around in our everyday life. If we analyse the scene from a less ethically loaded and more descriptive practical-theological point of view, the association with violence and combat may not be gone entirely but it is put into its proper place. This theological point also illustrates that the soldier is not immediately put into the category of sinners, at least not quicker than anyone else. There is more than ambiguity alone. The soldier is a human being and the chaplain's vocation is to come as close as possible to the everyday life experience of the military personnel. Hence, the ultimate Christian symbol of the cross has meaning for the daily existence of a soldier, symbolised by the uniform and the soldier's safety equipment.

In the final analysis, we must conclude that in this scene the military chaplain does not primarily deal with soldiers in their role as combatants – or a group of morally vulnerable or even questionable people - but he approaches military personnel as human beings by bringing their everyday life in the reality of Christ's presence.

Research Design

This paper is part of a research project on preaching in the military. The central question in this project is how protestant chaplains fulfil their roles in worship and preaching in the context of the military within the changing conditions of modern war, including peacekeeping or state building. The data in this study varies according to types of sources, to sites, and to military units. For this paper, participatory observations (Afghanistan 2016), interviews with MCs (2017–2018) and 10 sermons are studied as a first step in the project that aims to reconstruct the homiletic practice of protestant army chaplains. The sermons are from three different chaplains, a navy chaplain and

two army chaplains, and all sermons are part of services that were held during deployments, in Mali, Afghanistan and Horn of Africa.¹¹

Two assumptions guided the initial collection and interpretation of the data. First, the conditions of contemporary warfare have an impact on the way military chaplains provide religious services to military personnel. This has consequences for function and topics of preaching. Though the complexity of modern war requires more discussion¹² peace-keeping missions changed the role of chaplains to a large extent¹³ and the fact that many Western armies moved away from conscription and changed into professional armies had consequences for the interaction between chaplains and military personnel.

Second, armies usually reflect the religious situation in the nations they serve and military chaplains adapt their work to this situation. For Western armies, such as the Dutch defence forces this means that military chaplains work in a highly secularised environment. The army is even more secularised than Dutch society, due to the young age of the soldiers. Though 19% feels affiliated with Protestantism, it is estimated that 3-4% of the soldiers regularly attends church; research, however, also shows that 18% of the soldiers attended a service led by a chaplain at least once during the year.¹⁴ These figures do not provide evidence of 're-churching' but they rather show that military chaplains are able to connect to soldiers that are not used to attending religious services.

Though theory formation might be an ultimate goal for empirical research, the outcomes presented in this paper are rather modest. The second part of this article presents three conceptual ideas that have emerged during the analysis of the data.¹⁵ They point to patterns in the data that provide promising leads to enrich existing theory in homiletics. One of these patterns is a model that describes the various types of religious discourse in the context of the military.

¹¹ The manuscripts of the sermons were coded in Atlas.ti, following procedures of 'open coding' according to Grounded Theory methodology *Kathy Charmaz*, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, London/Thousand Oaks (CA) 2014, 47–56; *Judith A. Holton*, *The Coding Process and Its Challenges: Coding Process*, in: *Kathy Charmaz/Antony Bryant* (eds.): *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, Los Angeles (CA) 2007, 265–289.

¹² *E.A. De Landmeter*, *The relevance of Clausewitz's On War to today's conflicts*, in: *Militaire Spectator* 187 (2018) 7/8, 386–399; *Richard English*, *Modern War. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2013.

¹³ *Angelika Dörfler-Dierken*, *The Changing Role of Protestant Military Chaplaincy in Germany. From Raising Military Morale to Praying for Peace*, in: *Religion, State and Society* 39 (2011) 1, 79–91; *S. K. Moore*, *Military Chaplains as Agents of Peace: Religious Leader Engagement in Conflict and Post-Conflict Environments*, Plymouth 2014; *Miroslav Volf*, *Agents of Peace in Theaters of War: Rethinking the Role of Military Chaplains*, in: *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 7 (2009) 4, 33–41.

¹⁴ In a research report on the scope and distribution of military chaplaincy in the Dutch armed force almost 18% of the military personnel report that they attended a religious service led by an army chaplain during the previous year *Ton Bernts/Ruurt Ganzevoort/Carlo Leget* et al., *Omvang en verdeling van de geestelijke verzorging in de krijgsmacht vanaf 2016*, Universiteit van Humanistiek, Vrije Universiteit, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, KASKI, (2014), 20.

¹⁵ *Theo Pleizier*, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons. A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics*, Delft 2010, 85–94.

Emerging Conceptual Ideas: First Results of Data Analysis

The first conceptual idea that emerges from studying the empirical material is that chaplains *redefine the liturgical conditions for preaching*. Second, the analysis points to a highly *personal use of Scripture as a source of wisdom*. Third, military chaplains are particularly sensitive to the *dignity of the individual soldier*.

Redefining the Liturgical Conditions for Preaching

Military chaplains conduct worship services in unusual circumstances. Despite exceptions, such as a chapel that is built at camp Marmal in Northern Afghanistan, the services conducted by Dutch protestant chaplains are usually held in informal and transient circumstances: in a bar, in the back of a truck, or in a dining room. If there is anything structural in Christian worship it is time and place: Sunday, as the day of the Lord; a church building that carries the traces of history and breathes the life of today's church that gathers for worship at this place. With some exceptions Dutch protestant military chaplains choose not to work within a traditional liturgical structure. In an interview with a chaplain, he compares the Dutch practice of worship with his German colleagues. Every Sunday the German chaplains in Afghanistan organise services in a specially built chapel at camp Marmal in Mazar-e-Sharif, part of the NATO mission "Resolute Support." The Dutch chaplains, however, he explains, are very pragmatic. They conduct services at the times that the soldiers are available.

Since the Dutch soldiers have their day off on Friday, the Islamic day of rest, the chaplain organises a service on Friday. The trainers of Afghan police and the Force Protection that provides the necessary security for the trainers, do not leave the camp that day. The soldiers are free, and the chaplain uses this time to offer a religious service. Sunday is a day of work for the military and they would probably not turn up in church unless they are highly motivated churchgoers. Therefore, liturgical time becomes redefined within the framework of "pastoral presence."¹⁶ The chaplain does not expect the soldiers to come to him when it suits the chaplain's religious time and place, he or she adapts the time of worship to the schedules of the soldiers. Another chaplain tells a story of accompanying soldiers on multiple day-trips for security checks in the desert of Mali. "Are we going to have a worship service," the soldiers asked him before they left, and they agreed that when the schedule allowed for a service, the chaplain would organise a "moment for reflection."

¹⁶ "Pastoral presence" reflects a particular pastoral attitude and practice. It falls beyond the scope of this article to explain the importance of the concept of "pastoral presence" for the work of chaplains. Cf. *Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, A Ministry of Presence. Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law*, Chicago 2014; *Sarah Dunlop, Is 'Being There' Enough? Explorations of Incarnational Missiology with Chaplains*, in: *Practical Theology* 10 (2017) 2, 174–186.

Likewise, liturgical space is being redefined in chaplaincy contexts. The redefinition of liturgical space in Western Europe is connected to processes of increasing multi-religiosity and secularisation. For example, Christian chapels in prisons and hospitals have transformed into multi-faith environments to facilitate diverse religious expressions of worship.¹⁷ Military chaplains have been redefining liturgical space for ages. They have used all sorts of terrains and places to celebrate worship where the soldiers are. Contemporary MCs provide worship services at the base where soldiers are located. The multi-religious and secular context strengthens the ancient practice of praying where the soldiers are: if the soldiers spend leisure time in a room with couches, television sets and a bar, the chaplain does not try to move them out of their space into a sacred space of a specially built chapel but rather uses the space of the soldiers and starts hosting small worship services in the room where they spend their spare time.

During the already mentioned trip in the desert of Mali, the chaplain used the back of a truck and creates a small worship space around the truck. This practice is also performative. One chaplain records the incident that soldiers started to ask whether they are allowed to use the room that is used on Fridays as sacred space, as they themselves had made a sign on the wall saying 'Lion's Rock Chapel' (named after the building at the Dutch part of the international military compound). The sign referred to the fact that this place is used as place for worship and it seemed appropriate to ask the chaplain's permission to use the space for leisure activities

Liturgical time and space become redefined, so is the definition of preaching itself. It is relevant to ask whether the Dutch protestant chaplains preach. They do not speak about preaching nor do they call their speeches sermons. Instead, they use terms like "moment of reflection," or even more accessible: "musings." A naval chaplain uses "column" for his speeches, like a column in a newspaper with an informed yet personal opinion. These redefinitions not only move away from church jargon but they help the chaplains to develop their own personal approaches to the practice of preaching. It creates a new theological attitude to the act of preaching in general and to the language, structure, and content of sermons in particular. It also demonstrates openness towards military personnel from all walks of life. They are not preached to nor are they offered sermons but they are invited to join the space of meditation and to engage with opinions on existential matters offered by the chaplain with help of Biblical texts and the Christian faith.

These redefinitions of liturgical space, liturgical time and liturgical elements such as preaching¹⁸ signals to the soldiers that the chaplain wants to meet them within the conditions of their life and

¹⁷ *Sophie Gilliat-Ray*, From 'Chapel' To 'Prayer Room': The Production, Use, and Politics of Sacred Space in Public Institutions, in: *Culture and Religion* 6 (2005) 2, 287–308.

¹⁸ The discussion is limited to space, time, and preaching as element of worship. Obviously, a more in-depth analysis of 'worship' with soldiers and how chaplains prepare for and lead worship also requires a discussion of the structural

work as military personnel. It also does justice to the widely expressed experience by soldiers that worship is a moment to relax, and to ponder life and especially home. As one of the soldiers told me during a visit in Afghanistan: “I am not religious but I usually go to these meetings with the chaplain because they make me feel human instead of useful.”

Using Biblical Texts: Witness to Sources of Wisdom

The connection between preaching and Scripture barely needs further argumentation. From a Protestant perspective, preaching may even be considered the “primary” use of Scripture. When the congregation assembles to hear God’s Word in preaching, the Biblical text is at the centre of attention, both liturgically and homiletically.¹⁹ Yet the situation for a military chaplain is rather different. The chaplains encounter a situation without a congregation that considers itself to be God’s people waiting for God’s word. Instead, as one of the chaplains tells in an interview, “most of the soldiers do not know anything about church, they do not mind the chaplain talking about God either.” The Bible as authoritative, sacred text for preaching is intrinsically related to the liturgy of the community of faith. How do military chaplains deal with Scripture if they cannot rely upon a commonly shared notion of a sacred text?

Despite differences in style, chaplains take a similar approach when it comes to the use of Scripture in their preaching. One of them, for instance, addresses the issues that are at stake in the mission, such as the dreams of peace that are shattered by cynicism. He raises the question whether their work in Afghanistan has any effect when they leave? The chaplain relates these hopeless experiences to Heman’s cry in Psalm 88: has God forsaken his people? In doing so, he helps to put shattered dreams in perspective, offering wisdom from the text of Scripture.

Another chaplain cultivates the hope of peace in the weeks of Advent with help from the story of Luke 1. The chaplain is realistic about the soldier’s quest for freedom and their contribution in the peacekeeping mission. But taking his cue from Luke 1, while he quotes the Biblical text that for God nothing is impossible, we should not recoil in cynicism nor lose our hope. “Even if you do not believe in God, even if there is enough reason for cynicism, leave the final word to someone else.” A third example: the story in Exodus about God who delivers his people through the Red Sea. The naval chaplain asks the question, “where does this journey lead us” and he refers to Jacob

elements of worship (what theological pattern is used in worship?) and other elements in worship, like prayer and (the use of popular) music. See also A. W. Velema, Gaandeweg, over liturgie in de krijgsmacht, in: G. W. H. Wildering (ed.): *Geestelijke verzorging bij de krijgsmacht als ambacht: over het gebruik van methodiek binnen morele vorming*, Budel 2016, 61–74.

¹⁹ *Theo Pleizier*, Using the Bible as a Protestant Religious Practice, in: Mathias Sonnleithner/Klaus Fitschen/Marianne Schröter et al. (eds.): *Kulturelle Wirkungen der Reformation/Cultural Impact of the Reformation*. Kongressdokumentation Lutherstadt Wittenberg August 2017. Vol. 2/2, Leipzig 2018; Pleizier (note 15).

who dreamed about a different reality, “for Jacob this has to do with God.” He closes by saying: “you don’t have to proceed in your own strength, God is also there, I would like to say.” These chaplains consult the Scriptures as sources for wisdom that communicate values as hope and expectation.

In these speeches, wisdom is not presented as general truths but shared in the form of personal testimony. It is common for chaplains to use phrases in the sermon like “for me as a Christian” or “I take this as.” The wisdom in Scripture is communicated through personal witness. The spirituality of the chaplain warrants Biblical wisdom. Speaking with a chaplain about this, she explained how spirituality and professionalism come together: “I tried other texts, but I came back to the Bible, because it speaks to me and I am able to enter these texts more than any other text.” Scripture as a treasure of wisdom, professionally communicated in a way that embodies personal spirituality. Chaplains become witnesses to the wisdom in Scripture and in doing so they combine professional competences with a spiritual attitude. They share wisdom grounded in the Scriptures. This wisdom has helped them and is offered to the soldiers to make sense of their life in the military. Though the image of the witness is well-known in contemporary homiletics,²⁰ empirical research shows how witness functions in contexts that do not assume the Christian church as an interpretative community.

Dignifying the Individual Soldier in the Presence of Christ

One of the army chaplains writes: “It is simple. Churchgoers are under no obligation. They choose their moment: not to be lived but to be aware of themselves. That’s the route into inner silence.” These thoughts reflect what chaplains aim for in the moment of worship and what they try to touch upon in their sermons. They remind the soldiers that they are more than functions within a closed system but foremost human beings to be cared for and to be respected.

In one of his sermons, the chaplain starts with naming the feelings that the soldiers might have after four months in Afghanistan. They start thinking about their return to home and with these thoughts necessarily come questions like: what are the sacrifices that we make, as a nation, as a unit, as individuals. “What do we actually think about the political decisions to participate in these missions?” The chaplain gives ample space for discontentment, sadness, and even cynicism. The soldiers are loyal towards the politicians that send them abroad, they are loyal towards the army as

²⁰ David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ. Preaching in a Postmodern World*, Grand Rapids 2003; Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, Louisville (KY) 2007; Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, Louisville (KY) ³2016.

organisation, yet they have ambivalent and mixed feelings about the value of their contribution: will everything fall apart at the moment they leave?

In his sermon on the first Sunday after the navy vessel departed for a mission in the Caribbean, the chaplain ends his sermon with a reminder of home. He helps the marines to both remember home, but also to cherish their work. While referring to Easter, the light of Christ's resurrection, he helps his listeners to accept who they are in their work as marines, not as a duty or as a functional element, but as individuals that work together. In a brief reflection during a mission in Mali the chaplain refers to king David – a young man, the age that the soldiers can identify with. In a simple movement, the chaplain helps his hearers to link their responsibility and the hardship of their work with the child of Ps 131. "Believe it or not," he suggests, "this has to do with the Lord." A simple proclamation, in which the soldier is affirmed in his dignity.

The contents of the sermons are usually close to the everyday life of the military personnel. The chaplain deals with a variety of topics in a light, accessible but profound way: soldiers feel there is more to the everyday issues; chaplains provide hints, but do not force the soldiers into a particular Christian religious framework.

Contextual Types of Preaching: A Tentative Typology of Situated Religious Discourse

Military chaplains engage in a wide variety of situations that, following their redefinition of sermons, could count as preaching. In a broad sense, however, preaching can be used for any situation in which an ordained person speaks before an audience in his or her role as ordained minister or religious representative. MCs do engage in various situations of public discourse. These incidents of *situated religious discourse* contribute to reflecting on preaching as empirical reality: what does count as preaching and what does not? This section integrates the concepts presented in the previous section with examples of situated discourse. This integration tentatively points towards a conceptual pattern in the data that classifies preaching in the military according to *types of situated religious discourse*.

One feature seems to apply for all the sermonic activities that MCs engage in: they are all incidents of *contextual* or *occasional* preaching because every situation is specific and requires a unique act of religious communication. To some extent, this is also the case with parish ministers: their preaching relates the Scriptures to contemporary contexts and each instance of preaching stands by itself as a very contextual act of religious speech. Further, in homiletics we find the distinction between Sunday worship as "regular" preaching and other types of preaching that are usually connected to special occasions, such as weddings and funerals. The distinction between regular and

occasional, however, does not seem to apply for preaching in the military. For MCs every event of preaching is contextual. The distinction between regular and occasional does not apply.

Comparing the various situations of religious discourse, the material in this study can be analysed with the help of two dimensions. First, the ceremonial dimension: official (or ceremonial) versus informal (or spontaneous) contexts. Second, the dimension of religious language: implicit versus explicit religious references. Let me give three examples:

- (a) The chaplain organises an Easter service with Holy Communion. This service is ecumenical in the sense that it aims to unite Christian soldiers from various Christian denominations and traditions. The service has the feel of a regular church service. The chaplain wears some kind of clerical robe, not entirely hiding his uniform but he is officially recognized as a member of the clergy. In the service in which communion is celebrated, the chaplain uses specific ecclesial language. During the service it is clear that this also is a very contextual instance of preaching. The chaplain addresses the problems of the mission, he speaks about those of the soldiers that are about to return home after four months of service in Mali, and he encourages them not to become a cynic about the effects of the many sacrifices they made. While this is a very contextual service and the sermon addresses issues that were meaningful for those present at that very moment, the language contains many *explicit religious references* and the service is rather *formal* as it can be recognized as a regular church service with Holy Communion.
- (b) Other examples of *formal occasions* in which the chaplains speak publicly, are examples of remembrance services. Given the ceremonial and public nature, the chaplain will not use very explicit religious language. Kim Hansen refers to civil religion which requires for preaching “a spirituality that is bland and generic because they (MCs, TP) have to integrate a large number of people who are diverse.”²¹ These services are not held for a specific, religious group of people, but they must include the wide variety of the military. If these services contain religious language it is only done very implicitly due to the public nature of these services. Perhaps “service” already is too explicit and too ecclesial. In the material used for this study one chaplain narrates the process in which he prepares his speech for a memorial day. The commander of the mission in Uruzgan had asked him: “Are you going to say something, Reverend?” In the story of his preparation, the chaplain shows how he is aware of the special place (earlier two Dutch soldiers were killed and the square was named after them) and how the theme of remembrance brings alive the stories of many soldiers that have been injured or killed. “How

²¹ Hansen (note 3), 34.

can the sacredness of human life be connected to the sacred, or ‘the glory of God?’” the chaplain wonders.

- (c) Then there are the *informal or spontaneous services*. These are most frequently done during missions abroad. The chaplain does not lead a formal worship service in church, but transforms the space of the common room into a temporary sacred place. The chaplain takes the initiative for the service. He puts candles on the table and uses the television set to play secular music or to show video-clips of popular songs, reads a few lines from a biblical story and gives a short talk in which he connects life issues with the biblical sources, all related to the life and work of the soldiers abroad. The “sermon” takes an existential topic, such as “farewell,” “comradeship,” or “relations.” In one of his services, one chaplain explicitly addresses non-believers by entitling the services as “A Special for Atheists.” The language in these meetings is not specifically religious, but the chaplain feels free to include his or her own spirituality and to share religious sources. Here we find a type of contextual preaching that moves between implicit and explicit religious language. The occasion is very informal: only those soldiers are present who choose to be here, regardless of their religious affiliation. There is no “congregation” that expects the MC to preach. Yet at the same time, the informality develops into more formal structures with expectations, regularities, and durability. Soldiers start to ask whether there will be a service, the chaplain designs a leaflet with his own personal approach to the services, and MCs that start to develop the informal services during the mission into something permanently back home at bases and veteran homes, an new initiative currently coined as “Soldiers-church.”²²

These three examples indicate a tentative typology of contextual preaching. From this an hypothesis that needs further research can be formulated: the formality of the speech-situation determines the use of religious language.

Concluding Remarks and Further Research

These first reflections on the sermons by Military Chaplains indicate a few possible contributions to homiletics as an academic theological discipline and to enrich the theory of preaching. First, what does preaching look like without a typical liturgical community? Second, how can we understand preaching as an existential hermeneutic? Thirdly, how can empirical research add to the growing interest in the role of the spirituality of the preacher for the practice of preaching? Homiletics in its turn can help in answering a broader set of questions, two of which particularly

²² Soldiers-church (Dutch: Soldatenkerk) is a recent initiative by a few Protestant MCs to have monthly services at various bases in The Netherlands, keeping the soldiers connected to the informal services that they attended when they were abroad during in mission.

emerge from this first study of the sermons of military chaplains: what contribution can practical theology make at the intersections of missiology, chaplaincy studies, and empirical research; and how does preaching as religious communication contribute to public theology?

Military chaplains have a specific professional experience in communicating *extra muros ecclesiae*. In a time in which the church invents itself again with help of fresh expression of church or pioneering spots as they are called in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the experiences of military chaplains can contribute to rethink the practice of preaching in creative ways of being church. They know how to do church when there is no church. Though they do not see themselves as missionaries, Victoria Slater is right in connecting the ministry of chaplains to the mission of the church.²³ Military chaplains have a mission in the mission though they have to reinvent and embody this mission constantly. The institutional framework of separation of church and state makes it necessary to reflect on the relationship between mission as Christian ministry and the context of this ministry, namely the military missions of the ministry of Defence. Preaching could be one of the practices to clarify this relationship and practical theology could contribute to appropriate the theological language of mission within chaplaincy studies which, according to Dunlop, is a “much-needed paradigm.”²⁴

For soldiers in peacekeeping or state building missions boredom is a bigger enemy for the soul than fear of death. Soldiers fear that they might lose their unique selves or experience different emotions as they are cut off from their loved ones. The secularised contexts in which military chaplains operate create a unique situation of preaching. In some ways, they operate in a religious vacuum: many young soldiers have never attended a church service before. The chaplains adapt to that situation by speaking as personal as possible in a public setting. They share the life of soldiers and in their role as chaplain they speak to the existential dimension against the functionalist bordering on the potentially dehumanizing structures in the army. They guard the soldier’s humanity before God. Or, as one of the chaplains in the interviews said: “Even if they do not believe in God, they welcome the thought that God cares for them.” Military chaplains preach though they would never call it preaching.

Dr. Theo Pleizier is Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at Protestant Theological University Groningen, The Netherlands. t.t.j.pleizier@phtu.nl

²³ Victoria Slater, *Chaplaincy Ministry and the Mission of the Church*, London 2015.

²⁴ Dunlop (note 16).