

We asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly. Each month we will post a new contribution on the Starters for Sunday website.

We hope that this resource will assist you to ‘fan into flame the gift of God that is in you...’ 2 Timothy 1:6.

We are very grateful to the **Reverend David Scott**, Minister of Logie and St Johns (Cross) Parish Church for this month’s contribution.

A Pattern for Preaching

What follows is a personal perspective on preaching, illustrated from a recent example, so please forgive the many uses of ‘I’ and ‘my’. I hope it may be of some help and encouragement to others to share some of the principles and practices (no doubt with the odd prejudice too!) that have informed and shaped my preaching.

Throughout my ministry, my general pattern of preaching has been to preach consecutively through books, or sections of books of the Bible 2 Timothy 3.16

“There’s nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us;” (From The Message paraphrase by Eugene Peterson)

and with that, also seeking to take seriously what the Lord Jesus himself indicates, that all of Scripture, in one way or another, points and leads us to him (see Luke 24.27).

Over the years I have broken the pattern, regularly at the Festival times – Christmas, Easter, etc and also from time when I have preached various topical series on such things as the Apostles Creed, the character of God, Cross Shaped Living, Mission, among others. However, the bulk of my own preaching during the last





It allows the Bible to set the agenda for preaching. It forces me to consider, wrestle with and then preach on passages and subjects that I would probably avoid, if the choice were simply left to me.

Rev David Scott

25 years has been systematically through books (or sections of books) of the Bible, and in seeking variety, moving between Old Testament and New Testament books and also between the different types of biblical literature – for example gospels and letters in New Testament, history, poetry, wisdom, prophecy in Old Testament. As an aside for anyone who may have been put off preaching from the OT, some of the most positive comments I have had over the years in response to preaching have come from looking at such books. I have preached on sections of Hosea, Proverbs, Genesis 1-3, the life of Joseph, and more recently the Song of Solomon (though with that last one it took me over twenty years to find sufficient understanding and courage to tackle it) In the end rather than preaching right through Song of Solomon verse by verse, I actually selected 4 different passages from the book which highlighted what I regarded as some of its major themes.

I am aware this is not the only way to preach but let me highlight some of the advantages and benefits I have found.

First, it saves you having to think up texts to preach from every week, though obviously you have to give prayerful and careful consideration to which books you are going to preach from and when, particularly in terms of where the congregation is in its life and development. These days I would aim for a series to last no more than about 12 weeks before taking a break and maybe returning later in the year, or in a future year.

It allows the Bible to set the agenda for preaching. It forces me to consider, wrestle with and then preach on passages and subjects that I would probably avoid, if the choice were simply left to me.

It means when we do come to controversial or pastorally sensitive issues, people can see that we are addressing the matter because it is there in the passage not because it is a personal hobby horse of the preacher, or the preacher is trying to get at someone.

On many occasions the particular passage we have been scheduled to look at has proved of significant relevance to circumstances and events of that past week. For example, I remember when 9/11 took place in New York wondering whether I should break from the series in Acts we were considering at that time on Sunday mornings, and preach a 'one-off', but in fact as I looked at the passage I realised that there was some very relevant material to some of the issues that the terrible events of that week had thrown up.

At its best, it helps people in their own reading of the Bible because one of the aims is to help folk see that





Context, both immediate and larger, is vital in understanding and interpreting and applying the message of the Bible.

Rev David Scott

the Bible is not a collection of isolated texts, but a library of books which were arranged to be read as we would read any book – consecutively, but also to help them see each book is part of big picture story of God creating and redeeming our world through his Son Jesus Christ. Context, both immediate and larger, is vital in understanding and interpreting and applying the message of the Bible.

A Recent Example

Simply for purposes of illustration, here is a relatively recent example of the kind of things that might be involved for me in the process of preparing and preaching a sermon. This one is taken from a series preached at our Morning Service on Philippians and in this case, specifically, on 1. 18 – 26.

Background Work

A member of our congregation very generously gifted me the Bible Works programme for my computer and I use it all the time. It is a wonderful tool providing at your fingertips many different translations of the Bible, with cross-references on every text, breakdowns of Hebrew and Greek, Bible dictionaries etc. I use it both for personal reading and for preaching. One of the best things about it is that it provides you with the facility for jotting down notes at any time. So if I happen to be reading a passage of the Bible as part of personal devotions and something strikes me and triggers off a thought, I will write it down and it will be there if I ever come back to preach on that. Over the years I have sought to build up a file on every book of the Bible into which I put comments, thoughts, etc

When coming to Philippians I would seek to read through the whole letter (or listen to it on CD or MP3 version) a number of times, remembering who wrote the letter and to whom and in what context and trying in particular to gain an overview of the main thrust and themes of the letter. Sometimes in Paul's letters there is a key verse or two which sum up the main reasons for Paul writing the letter which can be



At this stage I try not to look at any commentaries but just look at things myself, asking for God's help in understanding his Word.

Rev David Scott

of tremendous help in trying to see where other bits fit in. With Philippians Chapter 1 verses 27-28a seem to provide a reasonable summary of Paul's main concerns and desires for the church in Philippi:

"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you"

As they seek to live out their Christian faith and serve Christ and his gospel, the church in Philippi appear to be facing two main pressures, one external in terms of opposition and the other internal in terms of disunity. As I work my way through the series I will try and keep those main reasons in mind and see how each section of the letter, whether in describing his own situation and experience or exhorting or enlightening the Philippians might address and impact on these issues. In trying to get an overview of the letter I have found commentaries helpful, but also in recent years I have benefitted hugely from the work of the Proclamation Trust which have many online and written resources to aid preachers see <http://www.proctrust.org.uk/resources>

Work During the Week of Sermon

Coming to the passage itself (Philippians 1.18b-26) and beginning on Tuesday morning (Monday being my day off) I open up my Bible Works programme and read it through a number of times,

(NRSV) What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

I explore out any cross-references and any significant words and phrases and noting down anything in particular that strikes or surprises me. At this stage I try not to look at any commentaries but just look at things myself, asking for God's help in understanding his Word. I may spend an hour or two on this, but even if the rest of the day is spent on other things I know I have begun to think about the message of the passage (and with that possible some initial thoughts about themes, ideas for presenting, maybe even some hymns and songs that might fit these themes.)



I sometimes think of preparing a sermon a bit like cooking a stew, or something similar. On Tuesday morning I collect together some initial ingredients and put them together into a pan and leave them gently cooking, simmering on a low heat while I go off and do other things. Then throughout the week I keep returning to the pan to see how it is doing, adding some things, developing others – but in effect I live with the sermon. I am not always working on it but it is always there in the back of my mind, simmering away. I am thinking about it, praying about it – coming back to it. Throughout the course of the week, reading from commentaries or sometimes in conversation with someone or in reading an article or watching the news, thoughts, ideas, insights, illustrations and applications may come to mind that will be added to the pan with the intention and goal that by Saturday evening the sermon is pretty much ready for serving.

In this case, fairly early on in the week, I have what I think is at least something of what the passage is there in the letter for – Paul sharing his response to his own imprisonment and potential death for the sake of Christ and his gospel with a view to encouraging the Philippians (and of course future generations of Christians) to live a life worthy of the gospel in the face of the struggles that they have, perhaps especially in the form of external opposition. Having got that far then it becomes a question of working on how to explain and illustrate and apply the message.

Presenting the Message

I do not always go for alliteration or specific points but I can see something about

1) The **perspective** from which Paul writes and approaches his situation (the mention of **my deliverance v19** indicates he is thinking not of the present, but of the future and in particular his vindication in Christ before God on the last day)

2) the source of the **power** he is depending on to see him through all of this – namely, the prayers of the Philippians and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ **v19**. I decide (at the last minute) to speak of these in terms of **partnerships** because already partnership has been a key theme that has surfaced in Philippians (1.5,7) and we are seeking to encourage one another to see ourselves as partners in the gospel.

3) the **purpose** that Paul seeks in all of this – namely the exalting or honouring or magnifying of Christ (v20)

In introducing the sermon I remember a film I had recently watched 'The Next 3 days' in which Russell Crowe stars. In it, he plays a husband and father whose wife is charged, convicted and imprisoned for a murder she did not commit. It portrays the devastating impact of this gross injustice on his wife, their son and Crowe himself and then, when it becomes clear he cannot prove her innocence, the lengths to which he is prepared to go to get her out. As a way into the Philippians passage, I thought it might be worth taking Paul's response to his unjust imprisonment and the possibility of a death sentence, working as he is within a Christian worldview, and then compare this with the responses the film presented to such injustice and hardship, operating of course from a very different worldview – so that is what we do in the sermon.

In elaborating and illustrating and applying the various points, I am conscious that we have a range of people present on a Sunday morning. There are people of all ages and stages of the Christian life and faith and so I would seek on the basis of the passage to say something of relevance to all at some point. So for example I know there are those who have been on the Christian journey for some time and also those relatively new to the faith, but both are seeking to live out their Christian faith in daily life and work and are coming up



against obstacles and struggles of one kind or another. They are perhaps particularly in my mind, as on the basis of Paul's words, I encourage folk to take a long term, and really an eternal, perspective in responding to some of the problems they may face.

I know there are also those who are seeking and who may have very basic questions about who Jesus is, what Christians believe and what is involved in being a Christian. It is those perhaps especially I have in mind, so on the basis of Paul speaking of his dependence on the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ I mention the vital importance of a living and dependent relationship (partnership) with Jesus Christ as the essential foundation of living the Christian life. Equally as we think about Paul's dependence on the prayers of the Philippians, I want to stress for every Christian the importance of sharing our life and particularly our struggles with one another.

Lastly as we recall that of Paul's purpose, whatever happens to him, is to see Christ exalted or magnified we conclude by seeing that as a great and true goal for life.

Now, in the children's talk that morning I decided to use an idea that I got from John Piper who writes in one of his books about Paul's desire to exalt or magnify Christ (v20). He compares and contrasts the way in which a magnifying glass or a microscope magnifies objects as opposed to a telescope. I bring in and show the children a magnifying glass and a telescope and ask them the difference in the way each works. The magnifying glass/microscope make small things bigger than they actually are – whereas the telescope makes things, that we see with the naked eye as small (like stars and planets), bigger, as they actually are. The point then being that Paul wants to magnify Christ in the manner of a telescope – to make One whom we often see as small and insignificant, look bigger, as he actually is) Later, at the end of the sermon I make a reference back to the children's talk drawing on this image.

I also make a passing reference to George Clooney's latest and pretty bleak film 'Descendants', which I happen to have seen that week, indicating the difference Jesus Christ makes, and the hope he brings, in facing life and death.

Prayer in all things

Throughout all of this, and perhaps especially on Sunday morning before the service, I would seek to be praying that God might be able to honour himself and his Son through whatever is said and in the manner in which it is said, and it might be of real help and encouragement to the folk who will be there.

Preaching is undoubtedly a daunting task and yet it is also a great privilege and one in which we are all, like Paul, dependent on the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ and the prayers of his people (Philippians 1.19).

This resource is an initiative of the Church of Scotland, Mission and Discipleship Council, Resourcing Worship Team. Any queries or suggestions should be directed to the Resourcing Worship Team via email: mandd@cofscotland.org.uk

