

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 Grateful to **Rev Dr Derek Browning, Minister of Morningside Parish Church, Edinburgh** for this month’s contribution.

The Privilege and Purpose of Preaching

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, writes in the third chapter about the “unsearchable riches” of the gospel, and the task of the preacher being to explore these, share these, and reflect on these with anyone who is willing to listen. The privilege and purpose of preaching has to do with engaging the listener with the living reality of Who and what God is through what we read in our Bibles and to attempt to evoke, or even provoke, some form of response that changes attitudes, behaviour patterns, thoughts or vision. Preaching is about encouraging a lively engagement with the majesty and mystery of God, and encouraging a process of enquiry and reflection that enriches and stimulates the life of the listener. I suspect if most preachers were honest with themselves, the main benefit of the sermon is to the preacher who has had the privilege of wrestling with the text, and the congregation is left to eavesdrop on the results.

I appreciate Tom Long’s observation about what sermons might attempt:

“Every sermon at least extends or amplifies its source; many sermons do much more. They imaginatively embellish a text, for example, or explain it, or do the second by doing the first. They publicly ponder the text, turning it this way and that, questioning it, conversing with it. They may juxtapose one text with another, letting the two cross-fertilise each other. Some sermons

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Each of us preaches in context; we are affected by what is going on in time and space around us, and we are as subject to our personal histories and shaping events as the next person.

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completely reset a source's context. They change all the drapes and upholstery around a text in such a way that, like an old piano in a newly remodelled room, the text suddenly sounds different to us."

Whatever our theological predilections – all of us arrange and rearrange. Even the preacher claiming to deliver the 'plain truth' of Scripture will inevitably have acted as a filter to the Word, and all filters leave a trace. All filters will exclude and include. This is something that all preachers need to recognise and accept. It is what makes preaching distinctive, and it is what ensures for the most part that our preaching has a relevance to those who listen because our words and thoughts on the Word are expressions of our humanity reaching out towards God. Preaching is not therapy, but it will often have a therapeutic effect as we look in to mysteries and ponder and wonder. As we look in to those mysteries, they will also look out back at us.

Preaching has to have some structure and point. Preaching is not at its best when it is only an aimless philosophising about the mysteries. Nor is it merely a verbalised form of baptised social work or politics. Preaching is, at its best, the blending of heart and mind and body and soul with what God is saying to His people today. Preaching requires openness on the part of the preacher to the vertical awareness of God and the horizontal awareness of the world. In that cruciform, the sermon has the opportunity to say something that has both a divine imperative and a human desire. If preaching is fundamentally about communication, the preacher is at that crossroads between the revelation of God's mystery and majesty and the human quest for understanding and hope.

For those who preach on a regular basis to a familiar congregation there are a number of practical guidelines that might help.





Preaching may have its head in the high places and look towards new and far horizons, but it needs its feet firmly planted on the ground.

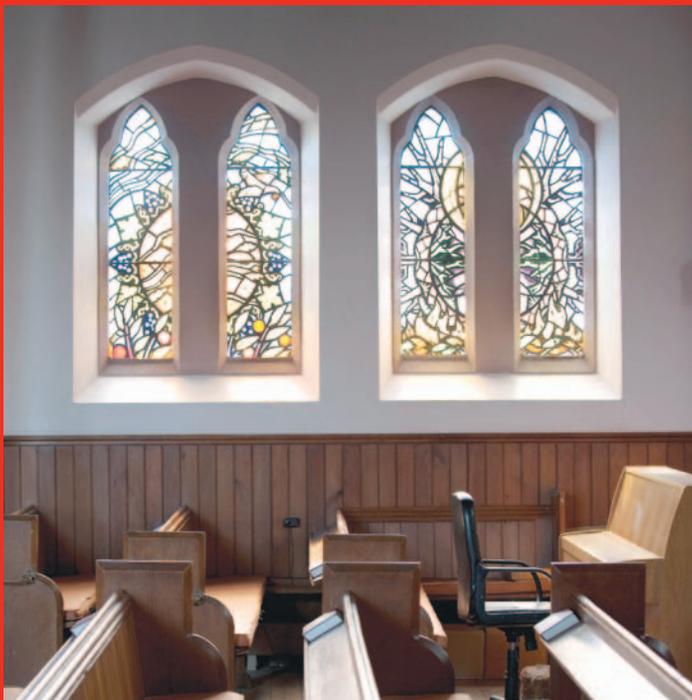
Rev Dr Derek Browning

Does anyone still need to be persuaded that preparation is key to the preaching process? There are few of us who should dare open our mouths in a pulpit without some prayer, some reading, and some pondering. I know there are preachers who leave everything to the last minute (though I am often reminded of a senior minister's wise words, "the Holy Spirit is not always minded to move on a Saturday evening.") Preparation, however, has to do with discipline. It means reading through a text, and preferably what immediately precedes it and follows it. What is the text saying? Equally importantly, what is the text not saying? Who is speaking? What has been happening to them? What are the plots and subplots in which the text is embedded? What about the writer of the text, and his or her motives, history, and background? Sunday-by-Sunday preachers may kid themselves that they have time to do all of this (though I appreciate many attempt this) but if we are to bring that divine/human word together in a sermon we do the Word no favours if we skimp wilfully on preparation. If preaching is a priority, we have to make it so.

The place of prayer has an important part in preparation. Whether it is the formal process of prayer, or the broader understanding of prayer which allows us to walk with, be silent with or talk with the text, prayer has to be present at some point in the sermon preparation. The more sermons one has to write in a week, the more difficult this is, but if the preparation of a sermon can be likened to the developing of a relationship, then that sense of intimacy between preacher, text and Spirit is fostered by prayer – spoken and silent. I might also add that I put great importance upon the short word of prayer or stillness I have before I rise to preach.

In preparing for and writing sermons – to what extent do we engage the senses? Taste, touch, sound, smell and sight are God-given gifts. They would have been part of the gifting of those who wrote the books of the Bible, and obviously a part of the lives of those who are being written





To sit down during the hymn before the sermon, and ask for God's help and anointing is no perfunctory ritual; it is an essential part of the process.

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about. Thought and the brain play their parts in sermon writing and preaching, but so too do our senses. I remember in recent years preparing a Holy Week series looking at the 'senses' of Holy Week. What were the tastes and touches, the sights and sounds and smells of that week – and how might they inform our understanding of what was going on at that crucial time in the development of God's purposes.

In pastoral encounters, or at meetings which have required further reflection, I often ask myself, "What did I see, what did I hear?" In other words what were the verbal and non-verbal signals being given or suppressed? A sensory appreciation of a text to be preached upon might reveal further clues to its meaning, as well as its context. To be involved in the act of preaching is not only to be involved with mind and reason; it is also to be involved in the deployment of our senses. An awareness of the senses in our texts can often lead to surprising insights.

It is no great leap to move from the engagement of our senses to the deployment of our imagination when preparing to preach. Some of the most memorable sermons are those that deploy the art of story-telling. If some are inclined to raise an eyebrow at such an approach, do not forget it is one often deployed in the Bible, and particularly by Jesus Himself. The deployment of imagination and story-telling engages the more poetic side of our nature and brings colour and texture to our words. The parables are nuggets of story-telling perfection in the gospels. For those engaged in giving children's talks in worship there is a sometimes soul-destroying regularity in the comments from congregations about how much they enjoyed the children's talks. Why is it that children's talks are to be enjoyed – but not sermons? Is it because the best children's talks are pithy, colourful, deceptively simple yet often concealing a great truth? Are we not in some way still preaching in a children's talk? If so – what are the skills that we are using there that might also be





our companions in the pulpit? There are pitfalls, of course, and preachers should beware the 'mere entertainment' aspect that can creep in to some children's addresses. At their best, however – a good children's talk can be used to prepare the way for a sermon by focussing on one point which can then be redeployed later in the sermon.

It is not always essential, but it is often part of the texture of preaching to include illustrations. Jesus drew from the world of nature and human experience in His preaching and story-telling. So should we. I remember some years ago going one December with two ministerial colleagues to see the film of C S Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. When the rule of the White Witch over Narnia was described as making it, "always winter but never Christmas", the three of us reached metaphorically for pens to write that down. It is a tremendous image of a world without faith, a world frozen without hope. So also the opening of the film *Love Actually*, where we hear a character speaking:

"Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrival gate at Heathrow. Love is everywhere, it's not always dignified, it's not always newsworthy, but it's always there. When those two planes hit the twin towers in New York, when people reached for the mobile phones, the messages were not of hate, or revenge, they were all about love, actually."

This is a tremendous vindication of the intrinsic goodness we know and experience in humanity and ought to encourage.

Or Jeanette Winterson's words in her enthralling and challenging autobiography *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, when she writes:

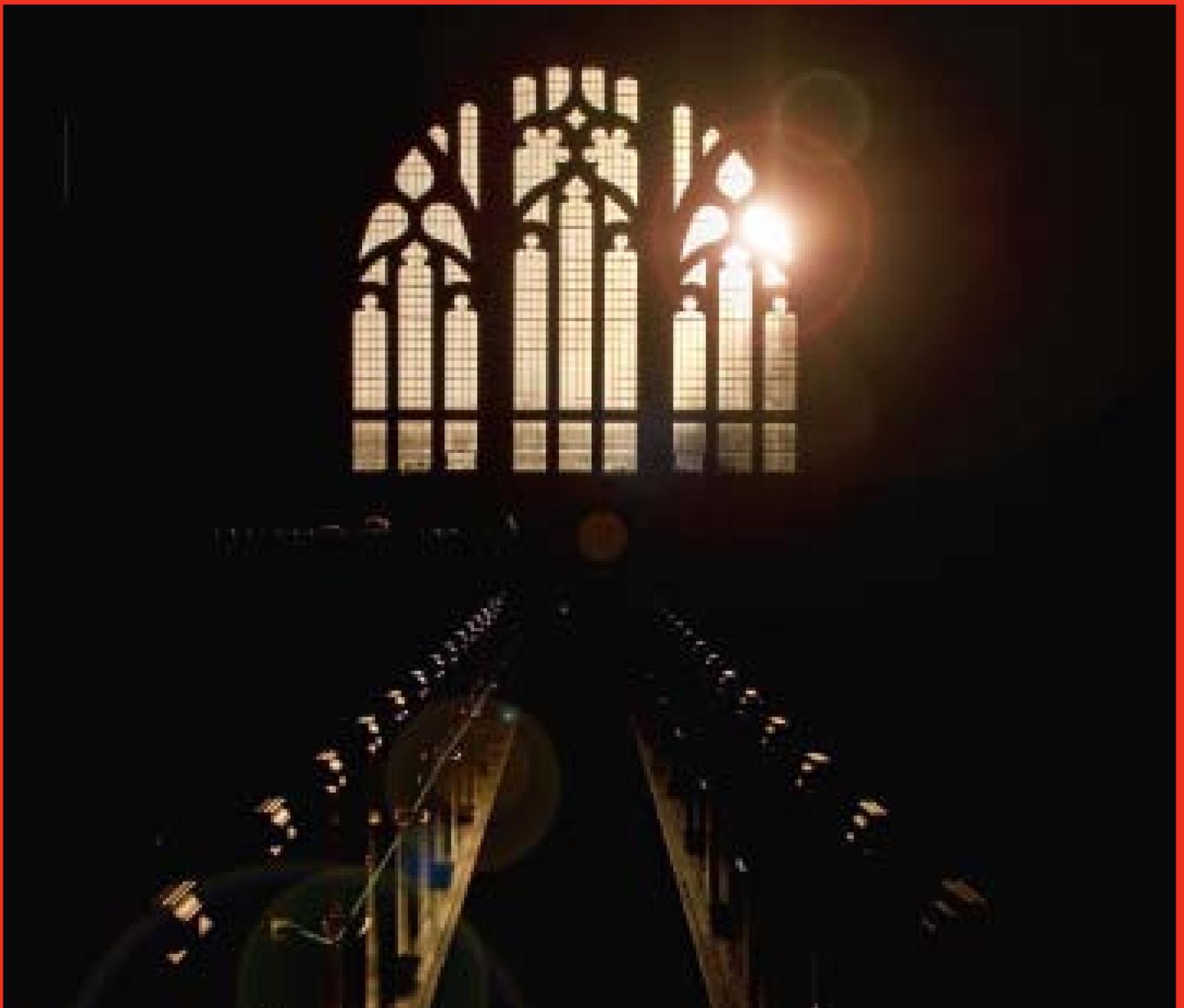
"The wound is symbolic and cannot be reduced to any single interpretation. But wounding seems



to be a clue or a key to being human. There is value here as well as agony. What we notice in the stories is the nearness of the wound to the gift: the one who is wounded is marked out – literally and symbolically – by the wound.’

Odysseus, Chiron, Prometheus, Gulliver, Harry Potter, Cain, Jacob, Jesus. The thought of the wounds of suffering and healing, of punishment and redemption is a powerful one.

Whether in film, or book, or television or radio, images, pictures, illustrations and ideas abound. A word or a phrase or an idea can add an insight that lifts a sermon and creates a connection in the mind of the person listening. The art of preaching may be about the art of communication, but is also about the art of connection: the connection between preacher and listener, the connection between text and experience; the connection between God and God’s children.



When preparing to preach I often have in mind two or three people I know, and at different times as I am writing, I ask myself the question, "What would Margaret, or Bobby, or Fiona, or Walter understand at this point? Would they be tuning in to what I'm saying, or tuning out?" The art of great radio broadcasting is to imagine that the microphone you are speaking in to is a real person sitting in front of you. It is the same with preaching. We may be preaching to a handful or to hundreds, but if we do not begin by imagining a small number of people known to us listening to us, then a sermon can come across as impersonal, lifeless, and dull. Incidentally another broadcasting technique is to remember to smile before you speak – it changes the colour and timbre of your voice.

Preaching must have a point. There ought to be some great truth, insight or hope, some comfort or warning or reassurance offered to those who listen. Michael Green, a former Rector of St Aldate's Oxford and Professor of Evangelism at Regent College, Vancouver, has written about 'Preaching for a Verdict'. It is not that one always need, or ought, to drive home a fact, belief or viewpoint, but that one ought to have in mind an idea of where preaching might lead a listener and what they might encounter upon the way. Green writes about people being attracted to Christ through preaching because there is a sense of discovery, of wonder, of love, of power and of need. Preaching can be thought of in many ways – opening windows and doors (and even closing them), or building bridges, or shattering illusions, or confronting issues. Handled graciously, the gift of preaching can equip and enable individual believers and enquirers in their daily lives by offering ways of looking at God and the world which might not have occurred otherwise. There is a tendency amongst preachers to give definitive answers to all the questions of life, what some have described as the 'killing certainties' which close doors, and minds, to the limitless opportunities of engaging with God in Scripture. The more years that I have preached, the more I have found the need to pose questions and to attempt to draw the listener in to the process and engage with what the Scripture says and means today. Of course there are certainties that must be told – but I have found in preaching that the issuing of certainties in our time – as in every time – has led to more questions. I suspect that preaching is about preparation for the journey, rather than absolute confirmation of the destination in advance.

This is not to strip preaching of personal conviction or viewpoint – but what kind of faith are we engendering if we give people little more than glib answers to complex questions? Simplistic sermons create simplistic Christians, just as judgemental sermons create judgemental Christians – and God has made us and formed us in a much more intricate, subtle and gracious way than that. Uncertainty and even doubt are difficult to live with – which is why the sermon is food for the way, not the banquet at journey's end. Preaching enables us to admit the tension between the divine and the human, as well, sometimes, as the fusion. There are times when we have to say things that are less than easy, and leave our preaching with questions, rather than spelling everything out to the last detail. If preaching can be said to 'work', or be 'for a verdict', that might only ever be judged by the often hidden impact the words and ideas have had on the listener.

Life does not always work out neatly and resolve in ways we would choose. Honest preaching should not be afraid to finish with a question mark. The Book of Job really finishes with a question mark – the epilogue is an attempt to tidy things up in a resolved and happy ending. The same might also be said of the ending of Mark's Gospel. Sermons should not shy away from finishing with a





The thrill of preaching is that just when we think we have understood all that there is to understand about Jesus, He reveals something more...

...to preach faithfully is to remain open to the surprise of the gospel.

Rev Dr Derek Browning

question mark, or wonder, or even uncertainty; life does not always end in a thunderous climax with all the plotlines neatly tied up. If life is not like that, sermons should reflect that at times too.

I finish as I began with that wonderful phrase from Ephesians, which says that the gospel is about preaching the “unsearchable riches of Christ”. In our preaching it is not that we begin with the idea that Jesus cannot be found; rather it is that the message entrusted to us can never wholly be quantified or measured. No matter how familiar the stories and passages, the more we read some new fact, some new understanding, some new revelation springs out and stops us in our tracks. The words have not changed, but we who read and preach them have been changed.

Preaching is as much an act of exploration as it is one of exposition. The challenge for all preachers is to remain fit for the adventure, honest in the engagement with God's Word, and transformed by what that Word has to say to us and about us, through us and despite us.

Revd Dr Derek Browning

Morningside Parish Church, Edinburgh

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



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