

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 Karen K Campbell**, Minister of Marchmont St Giles, Edinburgh for this month’s contribution.

## A Marriage

A marriage is a partnership for life. Once you have committed, you spend a life learning more and more; becoming one through thick and thin; developing strategies for making life as best as it can be and being a companion, whom the other wishes to share their life with.

Preaching fills the soul, can leave it bereft and exasperated, but also is that which is an ever present companion along life’s pathway.

On my ordination I was sent a card by a close friend. It was a quote from St Francis of Assisi, which said, “Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary use words.”

For a Reformed Church in the 21st Century, words are vital, necessary, part of the whole worship experience, but we must choose them very carefully. They should be treated like a rich resource and not squandered, nor treated lightly.

For me, the preaching is about how the Word lives in me and others in daily life. How does God’s word affect the way I live and move and breath. Micah says:

*“God’s already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbour, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously – take God seriously.”*

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

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As a preacher, a sermon is that which lives in others and changes lives. That is why it is of prime importance that a preacher should always be fed with the hearing of a sermon and not trying to give it marks out of 10 or how they would have done it differently.

The power of preaching and its effect should never be underestimated. A sermon praised at midday can be forgotten days later, while silence and pondering of the heart, can last a lifetime, setting men and women on paths they had never expected.

Andrew Purves, a native of Edinburgh, who holds the chair of Reformed Theology in Pittsburgh Theological Seminary says:

*"It is not the preacher's word that heals, blesses and announces hope, or that convicts, transforms, or declares forgiveness. The preacher's job is to bear witness to what the Lord is saying to the people as the Word of God. The kerygmatic task is predicated on who Jesus Christ is and what he has said and done and what he says and does. For this reason preaching is derivative work. On these terms and only on these terms, preaching is the foundation of the church's life."*

## To Have and to hold

Preaching is both a privilege and a burden. When I have not preached for a couple of weeks, I feel like there is a hole somewhere at the heart of my soul, and I become agitated that I need to get back to it. Some people might call that an addiction; others the call of the Holy Spirit. Whatever it is, since I began, I have felt this drive to do so.

Equally, it can be a huge burden on the soul. We look back at the sermons we have written in some dim and dark past and often, although not everyone is strong enough to admit it, you wonder why they went down so well. The answer is always time, place and context and the Spirit's working.

What you preach has a resonance with those there. If you know people well, you may know some or many of their issues, but no one will ever know all that those who are gathered there for worship are feeling,





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facing, worrying over. A word in season, is always a word which works in the hearts and minds of those present, but 5 years or more later, you may wonder why these words brought comfort, challenge and grace to those there. The answer is the Holy Spirit. A 'Good Sermon' only needs to be preached once. A preacher should never feel the need to preach anything ever again.

A sermon is never finished until the word *Amen* is said at the end of the sermon. A sermon is never complete in the writing, nor in the delivery. For the preacher it may be complete at 'Amen', but in the hearts and lives of the hearers, it has only begun to take shape. It is also true that for the same number of people sitting there, they have each heard a different sermon.

I sit here writing and so many words come to mind of ministers whom I have had the privilege of serving with throughout the years. Each bit of advice, even if unconsciously given, has seeped into the soul and sits with me as I write and prepare for worship.

A minister once said to me after a sermon I preached when I was training that I should accept that I could not preach like that once I was in a charge and preaching every week. I think he meant it as a complement, but at the time, I received it like a dire warning. What was the preparation and delivery of the sermon going to be like in a parish? Less time? Perhaps not.

## **From this day Forward**

I have no set for plan how I prepare worship. Not only is each week different, but each season challenges me in different ways. The presence of the sun or the snow affect my preparation, my thought processes, even the way I pray.

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An important part of my thinking begins with preparing an order of service. Thinking about the lessons and



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how they will work with certain hymns or themes in prayers are part of what I do to prepare. I also write prayers for the congregation to use before and after the service for the order of service.

I once heard a fellow minister say that *"Ministers do not spend enough time preparing sermons!"* My experience has been that those who preach God's Word, do a lot of preparation and some, or most of it, is not even given credence. Someone who says that they spend 20 hours a week at their desk is to be respected. If that is how they prepare, then fine. I have a different attitude and practice of preparation, which involved spending time reading, but also in being outside. Walking and breathing in the fresh air, is where I do a good deal of preparation. I need to think and reflect, and I do this far better walking round the parish between visits, or up the hill throwing sticks for the dog. I need to clear my head and relocate all that I have read and all that I have heard.

A family in the midst of trauma, funerals of many varieties, a difficult Kirk Session on a particular issue, can and should colour and influence the way we read our bible.

Who is sitting there in the pew, what is going on in their lives that we do not know and may never know about? What balm can be brought to trouble; what comfort or challenge can be heard in the passage. However, we should resist the temptation to deal with issues of conflict in our midst in the pulpit. God's Word should never be used as a weapon.

## For Better or Worse

Rob Bell, in his book, *Velvet Elvis* says that:

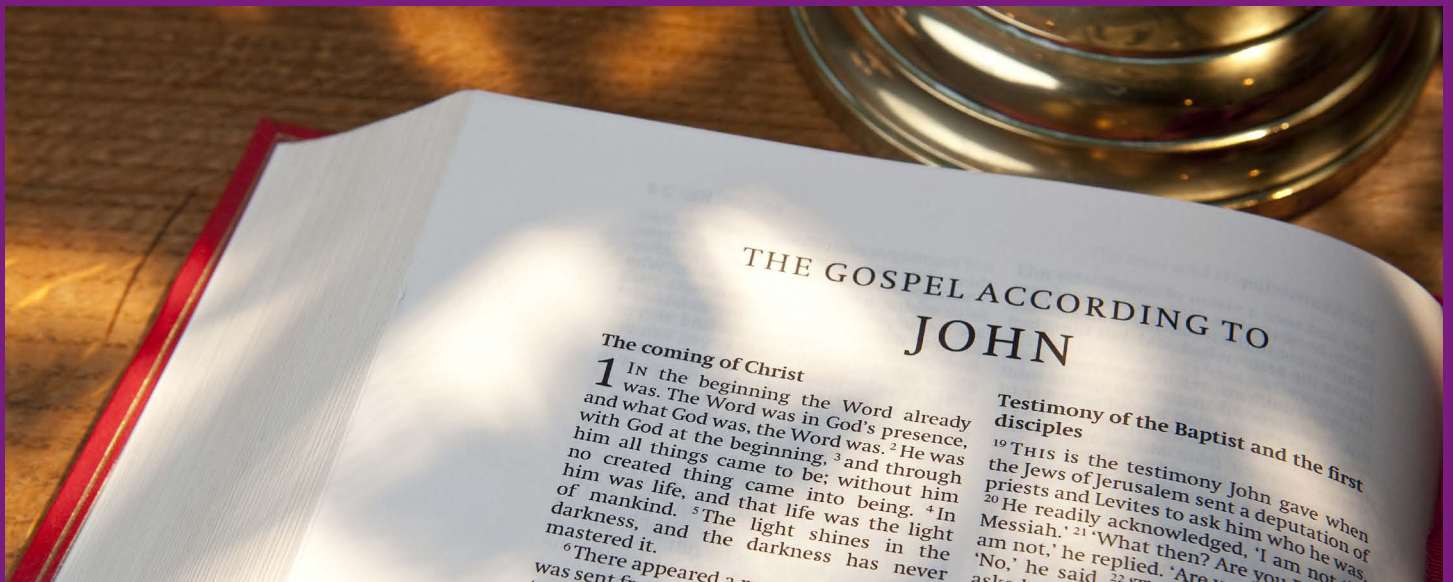
"The ultimate display of our respect for the sacred words of God is that we are willing to wade in and struggle with the text – the good parts, the hard-to-understand part, the parts we wish weren't there."

That which upholds all preaching is the Holy Gospel in particular and the Bible in General! Good News cannot be preached without hearing the Word of God from the Gospel. For me however, the Good News of Christ is that we have to share the Word, discuss the Word, pray on the Word, and be challenged by the Word.

Preachers who think their task is always to comfort, forget the challenge of the Gospel. There are words that are neither comforting, nor helpful and if we ignore them we do so at our peril.

It is important that as preachers we understand the context in which a book was written in; and not only what is obvious and helpful, but also what was controversial at the time. Equally, here and now, what builds up our faith, what challenges our faith and what consequences are there for us as we here these words in our time and place?





Are there texts that in their time and place were perfectly acceptable and are now beyond the pale? Slavery was once taken for granted; in this time and day is abhorrent to think that there are still human souls which are subjected to this evil. What do we have to say about that? Do we say that the bible was right, do we ignore it and can we be honest enough to say that in our time and place the bible was wrong.

I read a variety of commentaries, both from history and from the present day. My first question is not, what theological stable do they appear out of, but do they engage with the text in a mature and sensible way. Biblical discussion is always healthy and should be engaged in regularly and often with those we agree with, and those we find it hard to listen to.

I am also intrigued by the commentaries on the internet. The website [textweek.com](http://textweek.com) comes from a healthy and broad theological stable and is helpful. Anything that broadens our thinking and challenges our preconceptions of faith and life, and a text is all to the good. Anything that subscribes to the Reformation principle of *ecclesia semper reformans, semper reformanda*; or in plain English "the church is always reformed and always reforming" brings value to Faith. Walter Brueggemann in his book, *Redescribing Reality* sums up the need to be as broad and insightful as possible when he says:

*"When the church is genuinely ecumenical, it is required to listen to widely different voices of interpretation, thereby necessitating the modification of our own best, preferred interpretative judgments. The critical point is to remember that our preferred interpretation, even if passionately held, is provisional and penultimate. A great deal of courage is required to offer provisional and penultimate interpretation that, in the moment of offer, is the best reading we can imagine."*

## In Sickness and in Health

As we go through life, we face life in all its fullness, both the highs and the lows. At the most stressful and painful times of life, I have found that sermons are the easiest times to preach. When you are faced with illness, death, or bereavements of other varieties, the vitality and importance of what we are trying to do in the pulpit, has often seemed easier.





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Saying that, they have also been the times when I have been exhausted and while I have prepared as fully as other times, I have usually entered the pulpit without a note and preached.

Preaching without a sermon manuscript does not mean that I do not have one, I simply do not always use it. Each sermon should be written down, somewhere and somehow, preparation is all, but this does not mean that the text has to accompany the preacher into the pulpit. Another piece of advice I was given many years ago, was that a preacher should have a full text, or no text, but never notes. Notes hinder the preacher. I still do not know whether I agree with this. If you have prepared, they should not be a hindrance. I have used notes, and I have used them differently at different times of life. My jury is still out on that one.

In healthy times, when times are fine, I have found that it is often when a sermon seems to take an age to be written down. Lengthy prayer, preparation and a blank page have often characterised those times in my life, when I have nothing to complain about. I am sure that there is a full and frank exposition of the working of the Holy Spirit to be had, but just now I will live that fluttering somewhere up there.

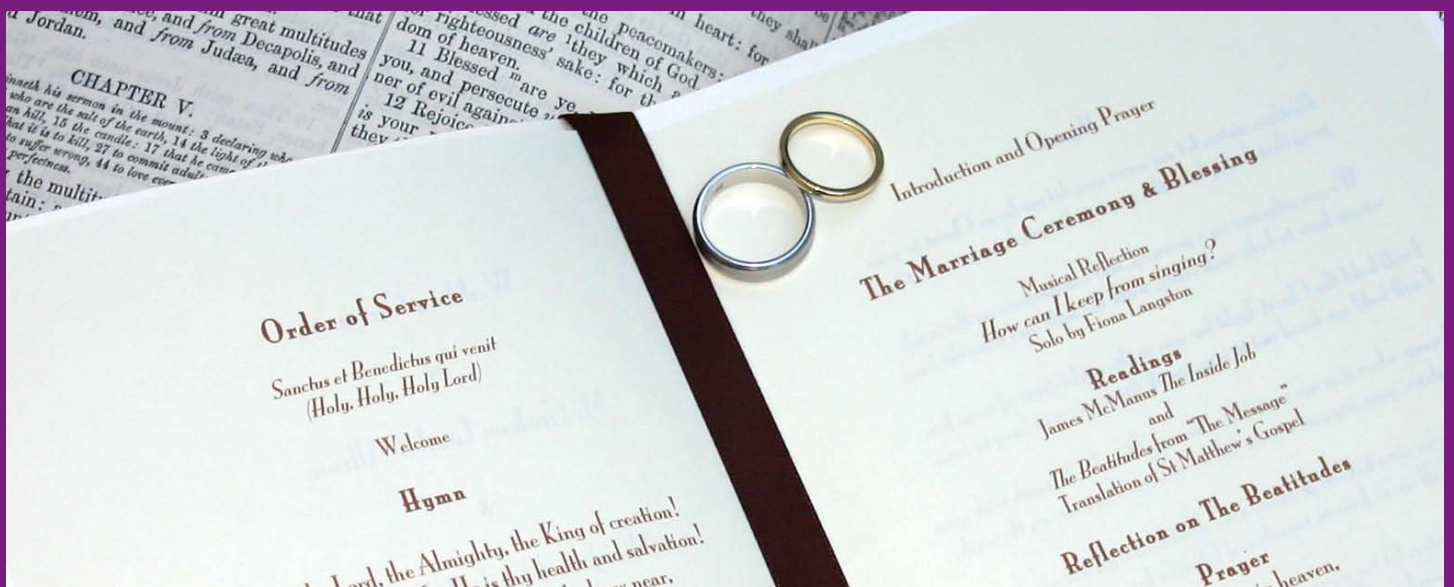
## To Love and to cherish

How long should a sermon be? A sermon should last until you have said what you believe you are being called to say and then you should stop. I was told that as a first year trainee minister. My supervisor in question had a habit of not having a habit. I heard him preach for 4 minutes; I heard him preach for 24 minutes and even longer on occasion. He was challenging, funny, biblical, poignant and he held people's attention because he never had a habit. If they did not listen, they might miss something. We should not be bound by a perceived tradition. I do not fear going "over the hour" – for the service that is – nor finishing "early".

A sermon should always be in balance with other things that are happening in worship. A sermon is not the worship and worship is not the sermon. God's Spirit and message should equally be shared in the prayers as well as a well-crafted silence, or in the words of the hymns and anthems, where choirs are involved. We confess our faith in the words of the hymns and psalms and should always see the sermon as part of the whole. That is why the words we use in the other parts of the worship, should be seen as equally as important as the preparation of the sermon. Lazy stock phrases in prayers, images used week in and week out and take away from the power of the sermon. Preparation is everything. Stephen Platten reminds us in this way:

"Worship is not simply words, but a drama partially clothed in words. The story which stands at the centre of our faith, of our crucified and resurrected Lord is the mystery at the heart of all things. It is that story which gives flesh to God. Somehow we must enact that mystery so that by regular re-presentation of it, all of us grow in and deepen our faith. It will require words – scripture, preaching and prayer – but it first and foremost requires us to tell the story with vigour, imagination but also with solemnity."





## For as Long as we both shall live

A good preacher gets to know the people: not just those in the congregation who come week in and week out, but the people who find it difficult to come, to people who might never come to worship. For we will never know the time and the place, when someone turns up and if we only say what we know those who turn up every week want to hear, then our prophetic voice has been lost.

God's Word is for all people at all times. Throughout the Bible, God's messengers have been continually reminded and reminded of it at their cost. Jonah, Simon Peter, Paul all have been reminded that God calls all people unto God's-self, particularly the least, the last and the lost. We can preach to them as well.

Preachers cannot lose their prophetic voice, or if they do so, it is always at a cost. One last that I always remember when I am preparing a sermon. We are not called to be brilliant preachers, although at times, vanity might want it, we are all called to be faithful preachers.

## Endnotes

- 1 Micah 6:8 *The Message*
- 2 Purves, Andrew *The Crucifixion of Ministry* Intervarsity Press, Downer's Grove, Illinois, 2007, page 90
- 3 Bell, Rob *Velvet Elvis* Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005 page 68
- 4 Brueggemann, Walter *Redescribing Reality: What we do when we read the Bible*, SCM Press, Norwich, 2009, page 15
- 5 Platten, Stephen *The Uses of Liturgy: Worship Nourishing Mission* (volume 83, Number 3, May 2009) page 243

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](mailto:mandd@cofscotland.org.uk)

