

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 are grateful to the **Rev Nigel Robb**, Consultant Secretary to the Committee on Church Art and Architecture of The Mission and Discipleship Council.

It is very easy to talk about preaching in the abstract and often books and manuals of instruction do not really reflect the hard graft required and the false leads and the many difficulties in accepting the challenge of engaging with a biblical text and a congregation in order to produce a sermon.

Often the textbooks are written by great and accomplished preachers whose gifts are such that they have no idea what the rest of us struggle with when faced with the demands of preparing and delivering a sermon. Perhaps that is why I believe that most great preachers are themselves not the best people to assist the rest of us as we engage in the process that is simply ( but wrongly) called 'writing a sermon'. Instead it would be my contention that those who find it difficult to preach and are without innate talent might offer words of encouragement and assistance to others, who seek on a regular basis, to bring a fresh word of hope, love, comfort and challenge from the biblical witness to the contemporary situation.

Yet it is also true that what any preacher may write is a counsel of perfection – and most of us know how often we may not live up to the ideal and principles we declare – but it is good to think about what might guide and enlighten others from our experience. Some of the idea and views I offer may be provocative and unacceptable – but in that way may stimulate those who read them to think about why they find them so difficult and inappropriate and thereby serve the purpose of the exercise – to encourage preachers to reflect on what is helpful in the process of preparing a sermon.

My approach is to outline ten different perspectives, prejudices and principles of mine for you to react to.

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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## Ignoring the rough edges and the challenges which the lives of congregation members encounter will lead to ineffective preaching.

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### Perspectives

- **The prime focus of a sermon.** The old story goes that when a new candidate for the ministry asked her supervisor what she ought her first sermon to be about, he replied, 'About God and about 20 minutes'. We need to take account of the lack of concentration span (often dictated by the space between advertising break in commercial television) and remember not to go on longer than the congregation expect, and focus on God – not the newspaper, the current events or the soap opera. The sermons is to assist the worshipper in his or her exploration of the Christian faith.
- **The pain that is in members of congregations.** I recall Dr David Read, who had been a prisoner of war from the time of Dunkirk and spent five years in a concentration camp saying at a seminar on preaching, 'Remember that at least one third of your congregation is enduring some kind of private hell'. What does this mean for what we are saying in worship as a whole, and the sermon in particular? In what way are we trying to bring hope, or peace, or some message of encouragement – not based on any false interpretation of the biblical story – to people who are encountering times of difficult decisions and painful discoveries in their lives?
- **The dialogue of preaching.** Preaching is a dialogue, not a monologue, and in preparing it and in delivering it, we who are privileged to preach need to acknowledge the fact that there are real and valid questions being asked in the congregation. What are the issues that this text deals with that people find troubling? Ignoring the rough edges and the challenges which the lives of congregation members encounter will lead to ineffective preaching.
- **Context and location matter in interpretation.** Nearly every text comes with something before it and after it, and we need to take account of the context and significance of the placing by the writer of the text in the wider narrative. How does the panorama of the biblical narrative influence what is said here – why is this important? How does it link to the proceeding passages? What is this telling us about the writer's particular focus, or approach, or even his original environment, or culture and religious perspective and experience? What might be the values and the contradictions be here with some of the other texts? How does this contribute to the message of the love of God, and the response of faith?



# We need to be truthful about the difficulties and differences of interpretation, or else the congregation is short changed...

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- **The perception of relevance.** While there is no doubt that Karl Barth was right in articulating his belief that the Word of God is always relevant, there is a need for this relevance to be perceived in the contemporary world. Hence the preachers' job is not to 'make the Word of God relevant' but create through the sermon a means whereby the listener may begin to perceive or apprehend the relevance of the Word to their individual and corporate existence.
- **Preaching does not exist outside of worship.** Preaching relates to all of worship and needs to be part of the whole experience of those who worship. Therefore there is need for the sermon, the prayers and the hymns to relate to the themes in the readings so that they all have a certain wholeness and integrity. The Word of God does not only come through the preacher's presentation, but might reach the honest seeker by the line of a hymn or song and the phrase in a prayer which touches the heart and transforms a life.
- **Hear the Word of God.** We ask the congregation to listen to the Word of God as it is read in worship prior to the sermon. The listening is important and it may be that we ought to listen – through recordings of the text – as a first step in the process of preparation – so that we engage like the members of the congregation with the text aurally before we look at it in the written page and analyse it in a different way. It is often helpful to listen to a reading from the bible and then ask these questions
  - *What did I hear?*
  - *What did I not hear?*
  - *Why did I hear what I heard?*
- **The diversity of Scripture.** Different writers have different emphases and approaches and it is important to acknowledge this as a richness of diversity rather than try to make the whole of the narrative sound like something written by one person with one goal and aim in mind. Mark has a different purpose and audience and style from John – but how many of our sermons actually articulate that difference? The writers of the Old Testament have some contrasting views, like the prophets and their relationship with ritual in contrast to those outlined within some of the other writings. We need to be truthful about the difficulties and differences of interpretation, or else the congregation is short changed and may be confused and lack trust in the sermon's message of hope and love.
- **Acknowledge the problematical.** Honesty about the problems in a text is always dangerous, but is important for those who listen. The preacher may find reading the texts in a variety of translations and paraphrases helpful, to illuminate the meaning and see how the text may be encapsulated in a number of ways. The interpretation of texts that are tough, like the cursing of the fig tree by Jesus, and the parables of judgement are not to be evaded as too hot to handle, but ones where our honesty and integrity may be acknowledged by being open about the fact they get under our skin, or conflict with our understanding of 'natural justice' and fairness. Which one of us has not found the parable of the labourers in the vineyard in Matthew Chapter 20 a real challenge, or the saying of Jesus that 'the first shall be last' difficult to preach about?



# We are addressed by the text and bring it into dialogue with the situation of the congregation ...

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■ **Avoid the false comfort of the Gospel.** We are not there to take a congregation's temperature and hold the members by the hand and ask 'What would you like to believe today? Nor are we there to give them what they want or desire, and issue what has been called 'pastoral codeine tablets or spiritual anodynes'. Instead, we are there to remind them, and –just as importantly ourselves – that we are under discipline of discipleship and that Jesus often had tough words and serious demands to make of those he called to follow him. The old adage has truth in it when it says that preachers are there 'to comfort the distressed and distress the comfortable'.

## Prejudices

■ **Unrelated Texts.** I have real problems with Sermons which begin with the words, 'My text today does not come from any of the readings'. Why, I ask, did we then waste time reading them at all? Sermons, in my view are always based on the exploration of the Word of God and while they may not deal with the whole of the readings or just a part of one part of the Gospel, in Reformed thinking the basis of the whole of preaching is the Word of God as contained in the Old and New Testaments. It is really insulting to a congregation to grab a text out of thin air and 'attach a few thoughts to it'. Preaching is far too important to trifle with it.

■ **Personal references used too frequently.** While there is no doubt that the preacher is a witness to the Gospel and he or she brings her life experience to the task, there is no need to constantly allude to the personal encounter with others as it inclines the listener to be distracted from the main focus which is the hearing of the Word of God.

Too often the preacher who uses intimate personal reflections and revelations becomes a hindrance rather than a help. If personal experience is to be used it is often best to present it in the third person to make the point without the diversion of the preacher's own life. I heard one sermon being analysed in a class one time and the personal references in a sermon lasting just over 15 minutes numbered 17, most of them showing the preacher in a very favourable light as a spiritual example to the congregation. Such is to be avoided at all costs.

■ **Theological Jargon.** The use of fancy and esoteric language that excludes most of the congregation from understanding the point. The preacher is a translation expert in much of what she or he attempts in the pulpit. We are addressed by the text and bring it into dialogue with the situation of the congregation and its membership.

In our exploration we may have to deal with issues of theodicy, ( the problem of evil and a loving God), the nature of Christ ( both fully man and fully human, and have to address questions from theology like Arianism and Nestorianism), the ontological nature of the existence of God ( exploring how God differs from humanity and the nature of creation) but we do not need to use any words from philosophy and theology that are Greek in origin and not used in common parlance. We need to remember the





description of Jesus as a preacher – ‘the common people heard him gladly’. When I listen to a student and hear the words ‘By now you are suspecting me of anti- patri passivism and sabellian monarchianism’, I think, ‘No, not necessarily, but I know you are going to be boring’

■ **The absence of ‘God talk’.** A very limited mention of God, Father, Son or Holy Spirit in the sermon. The preacher needs to avoid presenting a sermon that is little different for the editorial of a Sunday newspaper. There is a distinct need for the allusions in a sermon to be grounded in the nature and purposes of God and the character of the Gospel, with reference, in a subsidiary manner, to the events of the world where the acts of God may be seen. Some years ago I regularly heard a preacher and if God got a mention three times in the sermon it was a particularly good day for God!!

■ **Too much of the heroic and unusual.** What I term as the overuse of ‘Readers Digest’ examples in sermons. While the heroic in faith are admirable and to be held in honour and can be a focus for our acknowledgement and gratitude, few of us are able to emulate them to any real extent. To use only great and highly successful examples of Christian witness is to suggest, unconsciously, that this is the only form of service that is acceptable to God and leaves many people feeling totally inadequate in their witness and discipleship.

It is far better to allude frequently to the very ordinary who do extraordinary things in life – by being truthful and honest in their place of work or families and asking the problematic, but necessary, questions of oppression or discrimination. Jesus demonstrates in the Gospel through his telling of stories of ordinary life and the people to whom he spoke and praised that the little and the seemingly insignificant are worthy and part of God’s commonwealth. Ask the question: ‘Does this help me be a Christian where I live?’

■ **Timelessness.** Timeless sermons are not sermons in my view. By that I mean that the sermon ought to indicate in its life and reference to the fact that we are living in the 21st century and that the words of the Bible are relevant in a true and living way to the way we live now as they were 100- or 200 years ago.

The sermon that is not time relevant is not relevant at all. Few are likely to be interested in theories of biblical criticism as could be found in sermons of the late nineteenth century. While there is some degree of truth in them, and they are not misleading, they do not engage the listener with life in the present, which a survey of the teachings of Jesus would suggest was his main preoccupation. The sermons is not just about biblical exegesis, however important that may be for accuracy and truthfulness, but it ought to



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build on that exegetical work to engage people with present day perspectives and understandings to see life and their choices afresh.

■ **Preacher's presumption of interest.** A false presumption that the congregation is interested in the details of the historical narrative by dint of being in the Bible alone. This was highlighted by Harry Emerson Fosdick in his seminal article in 1926 'What is the Matter with Preaching?' In that article he alleges that only preachers are filled with the idea that congregations come to worship concerned about what is happening to the Jebbusites this morning. (they were a lesser part of the tribe of Dan) It is of interest to congregations what relational issues and faith issues were faced by the patriarchs and prophets and the disciples and apostles, but this must be presented in a way that is accessible and interesting. Telling the story in modern form often is effective as most of the themes of the biblical narratives have much in common with those of films and novels, television plays and radio programmes and have obvious application, if they are presented in a way that is appealing.

■ **The midwife of calamity approach.** The concept in devising the sermon which suggests that the Gospel is not about 'good news', but is there to condemn and predict the collapse of civilization because of the modern fads and fancies of the current generation. There is, certainly a lot wrong in the way human beings live and behave today, but any attentive reading of the bible will soon remove any idea that this is something invented in the present generation. There has been a degree of broken relationships, isolation and alienation from God and God's ways for generations and what we are seeing now is not really different in principle, or essence, from what happened in the past. While the reality of living in a post-modern and post-Christian environment is to be acknowledged, it must not be at the expense of proclaiming the confident hope of the Gospel.

■ **Here is the Kingdom today.** The proclamation that 'the kingdom has come in this congregation'. This is the corollary of the above comment in that it praises the current congregation so much for its virtues that it inculcates a false view and makes the members blind to the reality of the sinful nature that is addressed by the Gospel imperatives. The congregation that is told for years (I know of one that had this for 20 years) that it was the best in the denomination and had so much to be proud of in its witness, often takes great umbrage when the next minister tries to address the self-satisfaction and self-righteousness of the congregation and indicate some ways in which it could engage more effectively with mission.

■ **Creating blame and guilt.** Blaming a congregation for things it cannot help, or hope to change. Congregations are what they are – they are perhaps middle class, white and predominately female. While we may wish to be more inclusive and welcoming and may mention this in our sermons, there is little point in highlighting the missing people to those who are there and making them feel guilty for not being less middle class, or white. Guilt is never a good motive for change and growth in the gospel and often is quite destructive and dangerous. It is far better to praise the virtues of inclusion and demonstrate the habits of exclusion as contrary to the way of Jesus and encourage the group to be open warm and welcoming. The congregation is a group of sinners not a collection of plaster saints. They are those who are seeking a word of grace. Remember always that the word for 'church' in Russian is 'hospital for the soul sick'.



# Principles

- **Language.** Use Anglo Saxon words that are used in every day conversation. No communication takes place if we rely on a huge and learned vocabulary. Most congregations are to be addressed in terms that a 13 year old might be able to use, and, if a technical term is required, it needs to be explained thoroughly and clearly with an example to bring its meaning home. While there is a danger of talking down to a congregation, we need to be conscious of the danger of 'speaking over their heads'. As one wit remarked 'Jesus said feed my sheep, not my giraffes'. The careful use of adjectives is to be practised rather than using too many and losing effect.
- **Structure.** If we are to use dialogical approaches to preaching – which I would suggest is probably the best method in preparing most sermons- we need to use dialogical structures that mirror conversation. Most conversations use sentences that are no longer than 12 words. Many conversations do not use sentences at all, yet still convey meaning clearly. We are not writing essays for the academic to read so we may try to avoid long complex sentences with subordinate clauses. The nature of human speech is such that articulation, emphasis, tone and pace all make a contribution to good communication, and we need to allow these to take part in the delivery of the sermon. A long and abstruse set of inter-related propositions is not nearly as effective as clear and concise use of words and phrases.
- **Inclusive language.** This refers not only to the use by the preacher of male and female nouns and pronouns, but to the types of examples used throughout a sermon. In most congregations the majority of listeners to any sermon are likely to be female and therefore the expression of examples ought to reflect that there are many women who are being addressed by the sermon or else they will switch off and see it as a 'male only' preserve.
- **Read short stories.** Not to use the contents of the short stories for illustrative purposes, but to learn how to construct such a verbal means of communication as there are many similarities between short stories and a sermon in terms of length and object.
- **Steer clear of soap operas.** While there will be some in the congregation who may be familiar with all the details of the characters and intricacies of the current soap operas, we need to avoid excluding those who do not watch them and have no idea of the dramas and dynamics. If we want to use mass media it is best to use a brief and concise description of a drama without complicating it by alluding to too many characters to make the point real –as Shakespeare says ' give it a habitation and a name'.
- **See the saints in the sinners.** The congregation might be introduced to see how the great saints in the past in the Gospel of the Old Testament narratives were originally very like them and were only made different by their journey of change and companionship with God. Too often we are liable to make them so unreal and unlike the members of our congregations by pointing out their many virtues when, in fact, all that really differentiates the early disciples for ourselves is their honesty about their possible betrayal of Jesus. They all asked 'Lord, is it I?' when Jesus predicted that he would be betrayed by one of them.
- **Listen to the text.** As the former archbishop of Sweden and Professor of New Testament at Harvard, Krister Stendahl, remarked, 'Do not presume to know what the text says without reading it first'. It is all too easy to presume we know what a text means because it is very familiar and this can lead to difficulties when we try to prepare a sermon on it – it is just tired and trite and not in any way engaging, or exciting. One imaginative way of avoiding this problem is to alter the text to its negative and hear for



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the first time what is lost by this. Examples might be the text 'God so love the world that he did not send his son, but chose to condemn the world' or the text from Galatians 'There is neither Jew nor Greek... for all are separate in Jesus'. The negative helps us perhaps to concentrate anew on what is good news in the Gospel.

■ **Stories communicate effectively.** Stories allow the congregation's members to become involved in a way that deduction and assertion do not. With careful use, when they are apposite and reflective of the Gospel message they work like the parables of Jesus in allowing the listeners to take responsibility for the impact of the message and how it applies to their lives. Stories use an inductive approach, as advocated by Professor Fred Craddock, and often enable the preacher to overcome the resistance to the message that occurs when the preacher attacks, or directly exposes, behaviour patterns and attitudes as not congruent with the message of Jesus.

■ **Variety is the spice of life.** Often preachers of the past let the standard structure of 'three points and a poem', or 'three points and a death bed scene', be the normal model of any sermon. This is no longer the case and we need to use a variety of forms that arise for the text and the needs of congregations. Therefore a narrative sermon may be the result of the use of a narrative passage, or a parabolic sermon may use modern stories to make the point of the parable applicable today.

Too often a deductive approach makes the preacher seem to be in control of the whole sermon in the minds of the congregation and therefore the sermon suffers as it does not involve them properly in inferring, or imagining, how the truth applies to their lives. There is a place for deductive reasoning, but not all members of a congregation will find that the most appealing and effective means of engagement with the message of the text. Using a variety of approaches will allow the various styles of learning in the members of the congregation to be active and attentive. The point of variety is not to be stuck in a rut (which is a grave with the ends knocked out) and try not to do the same thing week in week out, in an entirely predictable manner.

■ **Undertake a post mortem.** Did the sermon have a real and easy to understand focus statement which could be understood by all present? What function did the sermon have in this particular congregation? Did it help celebrate, grieve, reconcile or build bridges among the alienated and those at enmity? What determined how the sermon was expressed? Sometimes it is better to make a conscious effort to state the focus of the sermon and its function in two simple sentences at the beginning of the preparation process and keep these before the preacher as the work is undertaken. They act as a check or control. They may have to be altered if, in fact, as the process of preparation continues and develops, the focus and the function have to be revised in the light of the emerging meaning of the scriptural passage. One rather cynical teacher of preachers used to remark that many sermons aim at nothing and always hit the target. The use of statements of the focus and function and the adoption of the statements as part of process whereby the sermon can be subjected to analysis after the preaching event, may be a possible means of ensuring that preaching accomplishes its intended goals.

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)

