

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 the **Rev. Ruth Harvey, Congregational Facilitator in the Presbytery of Annandale and Eskdale** for this month’s contribution.

Introduction

Ian Fraser reminds us that worship, or the liturgy is ‘the people’s work’. When I think of worship, or preaching the word, I think of Ian, and of the great thrill and privilege it is to be involved in ‘the people’s work’, which in its entirety is a preaching of the word. This understanding of liturgy fits for me with the ‘tag line’ to my job description as a Congregational Facilitator in the Presbytery of Annandale and Eskdale where as a Further Ministries Team we have been tasked to ‘release, equip and empower’ the people of God. To release, equip and empower begins with the assumption that the people of God are gifted in ministry and mission already. It is our privilege and our task to walk alongside all in our communities. In an era where ministries are being evolved to meet the demands of a changing church scene, the gift of the preaching of the word is a gift to be recognised not just in ordained clergy, but in all God’s people. Part of our task is perhaps to recognise the unlikely places where the word is already being preached, if only we would listen. So it is with this background that I would like to explore four starting points for me in terms of preaching.

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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... what would it be like if the preacher paused, and invited the congregation to share their own wisdom or thoughts on the word preached so far? How would it be if the preacher paused and asked: 'does this make sense?'

Rev Ruth Harvey

Starting with the People of God

One Sunday, sitting in the pew of our local church, I was struck by a simple thought: what would it be like if the preacher paused, and invited the congregation to share their own wisdom or thoughts on the word preached so far? How would it be if the preacher paused and asked: 'does this make sense?', 'What do you think?' Since then, I have reflected often on the power of conversation within worship, because conversation in an open and safe environment can allow us to plumb new depths and discover new truths that 'stick'.

Another experience, and quite a different mood, was during a Good Friday ecumenical service in a local town. The prayers, hymns and mood all reflected the quiet, reflective mood of a typical Good Friday. When the preacher rose to speak, the collective mood was down-beat, thoughtful, sad and contrite even. So I was utterly and profoundly shocked when he preached a resurrection sermon, ending with us all singing 'Thine be the Glory'. His sermon, while wonderful for an Easter Sunday, was shockingly inappropriate for a time of mourning, of waiting, of not knowing. Through my tears of shock and grief, I wondered what might have been the response had the preacher then paused to ask of the congregation: does this make sense? What do you think?

The connection between preacher and people, usually cemented through a pastoral relationship, is crucial. In my experiences, this can go badly wrong if the preacher is 'disconnected' not only from the people, but from the flow of the liturgy, or the liturgical year.

I have experimented with pausing during, or after a sermon and inviting conversation. One recent experience was during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in a united service in a small town. In the middle of the sermon, I stopped, and invited the congregation to turn to their neighbour and to share their own thoughts on the theme explored so far. I asked for one or two reflections to be shared with all, and then picked these up and carried on with the rest of my prepared reflection. The pause took a total of 5 minutes – very brief, but I hope an opportunity to engage and to connect with the word. A further experience was in a café style service of worship when, after coffee and tea had been served during the morning worship (along the pews even), I shared a brief reflection on the theme, then invited the congregation to share their own reflections with those around them. Each time two further encounters occurred: i) I invited all to remind each other of their names. Maybe too often we take it for granted that we all



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know each other. And ii) in inviting some reflections then to be shared, through the microphone, with the whole congregation, new voices, new insights were added and a sense of empowerment was felt in the congregation.

This kind of 'preaching' has to be timed carefully, for worship is not a workshop. But there can be a profound journeying together when a) the preacher acknowledges that wisdom is lodged within each one of us and b) that despite all our theological training and experience, we are not the sole repositories of this wisdom. By dividing the sermon into two or three clear, short sections, and inserting here the simple question: 'what do you think?', inviting the congregation to turn briefly to their neighbour and to share their own insights can provoke a gentle murmur of thoughtful reflection. It is also a useful tool for keeping folks awake! Or if the sermon does not lend itself to being split into sections, simply inserting this question at the end, and inviting conversation while the offering is being received could be an alternative. Of course this style of preaching may not work on a regular basis, and certainly may not be universally accepted. But for some this will offer a real sense of engagement and affirmation that a typical sermon may not.

Another style could be to offer a sermon as a dialogue, well-rehearsed and practiced, but nevertheless a natural conversation based on the lectionary, or on the theme of the service. This can provide a neat foil to the more typical sermon style, but can also be a great encouragement to all: that if this conversation being shared in worship can lead us closer to God, then perhaps all of my conversations during the week are holy also?

So starting with an affirmation that we are each one of us wise people with insights and wisdom to share can be a deeply enabling and reviving experience in our churches. This is not to say that we are pretending that all have equal theological training and insight: but rather, acknowledging that given time and encouragement, wisdom can be drawn out of each and every one of us.

In our Presbytery we have tentatively set up a Preaching Practice Group as a space for those interested in testing their preaching skills to practice in front of others. Most were elders, some Session Clerks, some youth leaders. None were trained preachers. Participants each prepared a short sermon, not more than 10 minutes long, in any style they liked. The rest of the group, with clipboard in hand, sat in various places throughout the church (to test audibility and visual line of sight) and 'scored' the preacher on content, body language, clarity of message, audibility, visual impact etc. The scores, and most importantly, constructive comments were then shared with the whole group. For me this was a deeply moving experience of the power of the people of God – the insights and wisdom shared not only in the preaching, but also in the communal sharing afterwards was extremely encouraging and supportive. With local ministers acting as mentors, each preacher could then be encouraged to preach in public worship, with appropriate on-going support and learning opportunities. If this were then to become a mutual relationship, where the trained theologians and the skilled church members could share feedback, encouragement and support to each other as worship leaders, and as preachers, then the learning would be taken to a deeper level for all.

The challenge is to have confidence in the people of God, through enabling conversation, and through releasing the preaching gifts in our pews.





Starting with the word

I have been given three pieces of advice about preaching which I treasure. The first piece of advice is 'use the lectionary!' I know this will be familiar to many reading here, and has been said in previous essays, but it is worth saying it again. The lectionary is important not because we have to or ought to use it, but because it is a great leveller. The lectionary, in the normal course of life, is a great democratic tool for a number of reasons:

- a. It roots us in scripture, rigorously helping us to follow a pattern and a path through the great words and wisdom held there;
- b. It roots us in the world, in the knowledge that on each continent, in most churches, in many homes, these passages, this message, this wisdom will be being reflected on and lived out in a huge variety of cultural contexts;
- c. It challenges us to 'speak truth to power' as Christians whatever the text, whatever the 'story' of the world around us – it reminds us that God's love, peace and justice shine through all of our biblical texts, wherever we start.

Of course there are times when it is right to use other inspirational texts, or to focus on particular events in the liturgical or world calendar, such as World AIDS day, Racial Justice Sunday or One World Week. The Anglican Diocese of Gloucester produces a very useful calendar of 'Special Sundays' to remind us of the resources available to support our Sunday worship each month.

The second piece of advice I have taken to heart in preparing to preach the word of God is an oft-quoted line attributed to Karl Barth who apparently advised young theologians 'to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.' Perhaps a 21st century reading of that would say 'take your bible and your live news feed from your smart phone, and read both...' Whatever the medium, the point is that we are invited to read the world into scripture, to read scripture through the eyes and the hearts of the immediate concerns of those around us in the world – those we see and know, and those we do not see or know, but whose lives are intricately bound up with ours.



But what stayed with me was the sense that this was one great big missed opportunity for the church. Why not invite the children to give an address – to talk with the congregation.

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And the third piece of good advice I was given re. preaching the word is from a 9th century Celtic philosopher, probably from Ireland, who said that “God speaks to us through two books: the ‘little book’ of Scripture and the ‘big book’ of creation.” John Scotus Eriugena, whose writing has been interpreted for me through a superb book by Philip Newell called ‘Listening for the Heartbeat of God’, SPCK, 1997, encourages us to ‘read’ creation as if it were a book, to walk in the world giving thanks to God for the mystery of creation, and noticing our own part as stewards in that creation. I experience this ‘big book’ profoundly not only when I am lying in the sun on a glorious heather-drenched hillside, but when I notice the intricate beauty of a small pebble on a vast beach, or when I notice dandelions bursting through the cracks of city pavements, or our neighbours glorious display of geraniums on her windowsill. I notice this when a child gasps in awe at a sunset, or at a beautiful work of art. Noticing and giving thanks for the mystery of creation, hand in hand with reading the ‘small book’ of holy scripture can offer a rich source of material which can then be preached.

Starting with the word, in our holy scripture, in the world, is a key tool for preaching.

Starting with children

As a child I was puzzled by the ‘children’s address’. I wondered, for a good while, when the children were going to be invited to address the congregation! Then the penny dropped, and I realised, probably at age 12, that this was the slot when the adults thought they were telling good stories about God and Jesus to the children. Aha – now I understood what they had been getting at. But what stayed with me was the sense that this was one great big missed opportunity for the church. Why not invite the children to give an address – to talk with the congregation. This could be another example of using conversation to preach the word. With very small children, it is possible to engage in great dialogue, to ask questions and to hear the response. But how about tasking church youth leaders to work with children over a longer period of time to draw out from them their thoughts and their reflections on a passage of scripture, on its links to a world event, and to share this in a creative way, possibly as a series of short readings and reflections, in the sermon slot in the main diet of worship. Like the conversational style described already, this style of preaching wouldn’t necessarily work on a regular basis, but occasionally it could enliven and move our worship at a deep level.

Working with the wisdom of children can be offered in a number of ways. Engaging and rehearsing a children’s conversation as above is one. Another is working with the gifts that children give us all the time, and weaving these profound pearls into our worship. I give you two from my own experience:



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1. Conversation between a three year old and her mother:

'What happens when you die? And mummy, are you dead when you're born?'

'Well, no one really knows what happens when we die, but inside everyone there's a little spark, called the soul, or God, that lives forever.'

'But I don't want to die. Will my dolly die?'

'You don't need to worry about that right now. We've got a whole lot of living to do. And most people don't die until they're much older'

'But I'm old Mummy. Are we born again after we die?'

'Jesus taught us that we'll be safe and loved after we die, although we can't imagine it. And he taught us to love each other now on earth, which is what we try to do.'

'Mummy, can I have some more beans.'

And so it goes on. In the flow of everyday living and breathing, large questions are posed, conversation flows, and curiosities are worked through – whatever age. In the course of a profound conversation, the need still to be aware of our bodies, our hunger (the beans), or needs does not go away. We integrate metaphysical learning with incarnational living.

2. Arms open wide

My then 8-year old daughter was about to return from her first school residential trip. I had been eagerly anticipating her return all week, but I was not prepared for the powerful experience of actually waiting for her in the playground, watching as she rounded the corner, laden with bulging suit case and spilling lunch box! Despite the protestations of the other two children, and the potential embarrassment to all, I squealed, and ran across the playground to sweep her up in my arms, as if an invisible elasticated and endlessly long umbilical cord was pulling us back together again. And in that moment I knew how it would be to be swept up into the arms of God, to be held as a dearly loved child, to be so loved that nothing, not even playground embarrassment could hold God back!

Starting with the children, we can learn profound truths about God, about faith, about the Gospel message if only we have ears to hear.





... if we begin with silence,
with stillness, with emptiness,
with nakedness before God
then perhaps God will speak
first through the Holy Spirit.

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Starting with silence

Although I am an ordained minister with the Church of Scotland, have preached on and off all my adult life, and love my church, and the ministry of word and sacrament, I am also a member of the Religious Society of Friends and have learned a great deal from the Quakers over the years of my involvement. I find worship in a Quaker Meeting deeply moving and inspiring, and a helpful contrast to the glorious praise, preaching and led-prayer in a more typical act of Christian worship.

I do know that silence, particularly in worship, can for some be a fearful experience. The 'moment of silence' in a typical Presbyterian act of worship can sometimes be timed to just 4-seconds, or may be accompanied by the very un-silent use of music to accompany the silence! Maybe there is a feral fear that silence will reveal – nothing, emptiness. But perhaps if this fear is real, then it could be instructive. Maybe it is possible to begin with nothing, to empty ourselves, in prayer and to be open completely to where the Holy Spirit may lead us. So in preparation for the sermon whether it is a typical sermon preached by one voice, or an understanding of each word being 'the people's work', the liturgy, if we begin with silence, with stillness, with emptiness, with nakedness before God then perhaps God will speak first through the Holy Spirit.

Quakers talk about coming to Meeting for Worship 'with hearts and minds prepared.' We do not come with speeches, or ministry, or sermons prepared. We are invited to come to worship open to what the Holy Spirit may reveal to us in collective silent prayer, in the sure and certain knowledge that each moment is pregnant with the potential to change us for good.

Within that context, we enter the Meeting Room and the worship begins. There is no other indication of Worship beginning, than that the first person sits in the presence of God, the Holy Spirit in a spirit of openness and worship. Any who then join in, join the circle of seated worshippers, join in with an existing act of worship. If, at any time, a worshipper feels moved to speak then they will stand, share their ministry, then sit. Silence will return. Further ministry is welcomed, but only after a time of silence, in which what has been shared in ministry is held and savoured, and has infected and affected all there. Any subsequent ministry will be in the flow of what has already passed.





How do Quakers know when to minister? When is it clear that it is God prompting us to speak, rather than our ego, or our own particular hobby horse, or angst? There is a clear process of discernment, practiced by Quakers, precisely to test these promptings. And a parody of this final stage is that the worshipper 'quakes', or in more transparent language, feels compelled to stand and to minister.

Ministry in this context is not, and should not be given lightly. It is a gift, and must be tested. But the context of the 'preaching of the word' is silence. And the faith/hope/belief is that out of this communal silence, with hearts and minds prepared, comes truth and light and love: the Gospel is preached.

While this style of 'preaching' may not sit easily in a conventional Sunday morning service there is absolutely no reason why we cannot explore the ministry of the Holy Spirit through this kind of sharing in a service of quiet reflection at specific times of year, or at other times of the week. Or even, God-forbid, experiencing five minutes or more of silence, with no musical accompaniment (coughing is allowed!) during a morning service. Of course any of us would be welcome, on a Sunday when we are not preaching, or mid-week, to attend a Quaker Meeting for Worship and to explore with our Quaker F/friends what they understand by 'the preaching of the word' in silence and in ministry.

I have explored a number of starting points, all of which have worked for me as a preacher over the years, and at different times: starting with the people of God, starting with the word of God, starting with children, and starting with silence. I hope these may be of interest to some who preach in our midst.

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

