

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 **Very Rev. John Christie, Moderator to the Church of Scotland General Assembly of 2010-2011** for this month’s contribution.

Introduction

The knowledge that I had to write this piece was much on my mind as I watched a television documentary about David Peat who for some 40 years has been a TV cameraman and documentary film-maker. He was in front of the camera telling something of a career spanning 40 years. Taking the opportunity to meet with some of those who he had filmed and who had touched his life and he theirs.

Early in the programme David Peat said ‘People have never stopped loving documentaries because they educate, they illustrate, they illuminate life’. So should a good act of worship...so should a good preacher, I thought. I watched the programme from beginning to end, caught up in David Peat’s story and realised that the programme from a preacher’s perspective might be a parable. It touches on key themes about which we should always be aware, most notably engagement with the audience, engagement with the subject, while using all the professional skills and insights we have to create something memorable which stands the test of time! The programme, from this preacher’s perspective is certainly a parable for those of us who create an act of worship Sunday by Sunday.

Week by week I marvel that a service of worship germinates, grows until it reaches full-flower when the Christian community meets to worship God and then as the Christian community disperses I discover that, already, the seeds of next week’s worship are already being sown.

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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Very Rev John Christie

Preparation

Creating an act of worship requires quality commitment and time for its preparation. No two of us are the same and each of us will have a way of working with which we are comfortable. What follows, therefore, works for me and is offered as a personal reflection which might help you in your rôle as one who leads worship.

I should mention that, for most of my ministry, it has been my custom to use the Scripture readings from the Lectionary as the foundation for Worship. I read all the suggested sections of scripture early in the week and then allow them to drift to the back of my mind. In tandem with this, I will be giving some thought to the themes and praise. The week will have two targets. First is, if a printed Order of Service is used, there will be a copy deadline. The second is Friday which is sermon preparation day for me.

All of these are woven into the developing memory-mixture which the working week of pastoral encounters, meetings, conversations, prayers, joys and sorrows somehow seem to allow scripture to tell their story in the context of the circumstances in which worship will take place. This is of absolute importance; what is essential is that it is the **Message** which is important not the minister or other worship leader – an insight which was offered in the sermon preached at my Licensing Service by the then Moderator of Presbytery of Glasgow the Rev David Easton. All our preparation will be to no avail if we forget that truth. There is another consequence of this and that is I prepare an act of worship for every occasion – I've never felt comfortable about 'reheating cold kale'.

Praise

Scripture and praise go together – the one the Word of God, the other the offering of the People. Selecting praise is a time-consuming task. Praise must, to the very best of one's ability and so far as it is possible, reflect the mood and circumstance of the congregation's life. I'm a bit of a traditionalist in that I like to begin an act of worship with a Psalm. Not only do the Psalms have a history which is the better part of 3000



years old, they provide supreme insights about the timeless questions people ask of God, the insights people have of God and the words which people use to address God - whether of praise or complaint, prayer or reflection, despondency or joy, optimism or pessimism. While offering all of these the Psalms too have a central role in the development of (Scottish) Presbyterianism. I would usually select one of the Psalms from the lectionary assuming it is contained in the congregation's hymn book. It is worth noting in the passing that Church Hymnary 4, for example, has a very helpful section which relates Biblical references to the Praise.

Praise and music are the threads which create the atmosphere. It is while singing that the congregation as a whole is clearly actively - and outwardly – involved in participating in worship. The use of, for example, the Biblical references index allows first the opportunity for worshippers to be immersed in and contribute to the overall atmosphere. A second less obvious aspect, perhaps, is that such a use of praise and scripture also allows unfamiliar praise items to be introduced as a positive contribution to the overall tapestry of worship.

Prayers

Leading congregational Prayers is a demanding task and it is a profound privilege. I consider it to be one of the most difficult of tasks in which I engage in the context of worship. While his language is now dated, Alexander Cruden in his introduction to the word 'Prayer' well describes why I feel as I do. *'Prayer is an offering up of our desires to God for things lawful and needful, with an humble confidence to obtain them through the alone mediation of Christ, to the praise mercy, truth and power of God...it is either mental or vocal, ejaculatory or occasional, either private or public; for ourselves or others; for the procuring of good things, or the removing or preventing of things evil.'* Cruden goes on *'Prayer comes from a word in Hebrew which signifies appeal, interpellation, intercession; whereby we refer our own cause and others, unto God as our judge, calling upon him, appealing to him for right, presenting ourselves and our cause unto him. The prayers that we present unto God are the ordinary conveyance of the graces that we receive from him: Christ himself the great example of the righteous, and of the elect, taught us to pray, to inform us that it is by that we honour God and draw down on ourselves his favours and graces.'* Cruden concludes *'The parts of a prayer are said to be invocation, adoration, confession, petition, pleading, dedication, thanksgiving, and blessing'*

Small wonder then that, in the company of the Jesus whose life was a prayer, the disciples asked Jesus *'teach us to pray.'* Me too! Over the years I have written prayers for worship and I've offered extempore prayers during worship. I have certainly found that using parts of a prayer which Cruden lists as to be very helpful in terms of structuring prayers. The particular reason being that they offer a discipline which assists in avoiding duplication and repetition because attention can be directed to the prayer being prepared and the particular purpose for which it is being said. Prayers should relate not only to the themes of Scripture they should contain 'touching places' to enable worshippers to be drawn into them.

Comparatively recently I have begun to create prayers which are derived from the sentiment of the praise which precedes it taking the language and thought about which we have sung and using that language and the thinking it inspires as a foundation for the prayer to be offered – praise and music are the threads which create an atmosphere of worship then prayer is the 'sacred chain' to borrow a phrase which binds these threads together. Often I will deliver the prayer spontaneously.

There is another aspect of prayer which I have learned to use. This insight was the gift of one of the Rev Esther Jamieson with whom I undertook one of my attachments while a student. It is the use of silence





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in prayers - often a prolonged silence. I tend to use silence during the Prayers for Others usually known as the Intercessions, though not exclusively for it is also appropriate during the Prayers of Confession. Such opportunities mean that worshippers are given time to create their personal and private prayers in the silence of the worshipping community. It is fair to say, in my experience, that once members of a congregation become accustomed to the silent times they become a positive part of the prayer life of the worshipping community.

All that being said, however, I know that time and again I am encouraged by the Apostle Paul's wisdom when he writes '*God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans.*'

Children and Young People

Our children and young people are growing up in a rapidly-changing world, things which were once certainties are now less certain, cultural norms are changing; the use of computers and social media advances; global challenges in terms of, for example, the economic climate, global-warming, bacterial resistance to antibiotics, international terrorism give cause for a degree of anxiety for everyone not least for the up-coming generation which has its life in front of it.

How do those of us who are older encourage our young people in their faith? How do we include them in worship? What can we do to affirm them and their insights? How do we tell them that they belong? Perhaps patterns of worship will need to change. Our 24/7 world is no longer thirled to worship at 11.00am on a Sunday morning and yet the opportunity to be involved in all-age – intergenerational – worship is something to both value and enhance and support.

Key to that is the way we use language in our prayers with children and in the way we speak to children and young people. Drawing children into the fellowship of faith is made a little easier if children and young people are valued for who they are and are encouraged from an early age to feel at home with in the context of congregational life.



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This is not a question born in the 21st century which cannot be answered. Jesus already has. Remember that Jesus offered an imperative for those of us who lead worship and attend. *'Let the children come to me and do not stop them'*. Spending time in preparation for worship includes making time to prepare the section of the act of worship in which children and young people are involved. It should be relevant to their life and circumstance, it should use language which is inclusive and easily understandable, it might have an element of humour – never a bad thing in an act of worship – but that humour should be laughing *with* the children and young people not *at* the children and young people. Prayers which identify their needs are important as are the choice of hymns. Most children and young people enjoy contributing to worship from time to time. To summarise the same care should be taken in preparing for the children and young people as is taken for the older members of the congregation.

Preaching

I am a listener to every sermon I preach. By the time that the task is complete I will have been challenged, encouraged, reprimanded, enthused, supported, comforted, nurtured, affirmed. I hope too that those who have been my listeners will have had a similar experience. However not all the listeners will have heard the same sermon for there are, in my view, as many sermons as there are people in the congregation. A sermon sparks a thought and a listener's mind meanders, chasing a new insight discovering something to add to that person's treasury of Christian insight which is part of what we call maturing in faith.

Now let's return to the 'mental mixing'. It is now Friday morning. First it is uncanny that so often the lectionary readings seem exactly appropriate to address the week's events. Somehow they seem to speak to the day and perhaps that is where the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit is best recognised. The Holy Spirit is so essential for any preacher whose weekly discipline is to deliver a sermon which will be part of the resource for fulfilling the Divine purpose in a congregation's collective life as well as an individual's personal life.

I recall in the far off days of the late 1980s while preparing for ministry that I wrote my BD dissertation under the title *'Exploring the Deeps'*. I have kept that thought in mind throughout my ministry and for me Sunday by Sunday the sermon is an exploration of the infinity of the love of God; the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ expressed in his life and death and resurrection and their meaning for us; the fellowship - and fruit - of the Holy Spirit. There can be few greater privileges than to preach a sermon which enables others to make new discoveries for faith and life. Such exploration excites and inspires. A sermon speaks to the moment and is rooted in time. It is that place where the temporal is touched by eternity.





Sermons are alive ... only when they are relevant to the occasion, circumstance and the events surrounding congregational and community life.

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I do not draw that thought from the recesses of my own mind but from the word of scripture. Sermons which give me a sense of perspective come from people like Joshua '*Choose today whom you will serve*'; from John the Baptist '*Repent and be baptised*'; from Peter on the Day of Pentecost; from Paul in the Areopagus and supremely, of course, from Jesus in the Gospels - can there be anything better than the Sermon on the Mount? I am not unique - preachers down through the centuries have discovered that too. These give a proper perspective.

A sermon cannot be other than well-prepared. My discipline is to have a fairly full script not because I will read the sermon from the script because I won't. Rather a prepared script reassures me that I have put the work into the task of creating the sermon. It ensures I am familiar with the thrust of it: The opening words; how it will be delivered; the key points I want to make and the way in which it will conclude.

Sermons are alive, of course, when they are spoken but they have an energy and vitality only when they are relevant to the occasion, circumstance and the events surrounding congregational and community life. There are plenty of readily available resources to illustrate sermons. I believe that best material comes from the congregation itself. This is one reason, among many others, why face to face pastoral care is so essential to the preachers' task. It is from the people who worship that incidents, experiences, comments can be found which turns the sermon into something personal and offers something to which people can relate in a meaningful way. One of the aspects of the 'mental-mixing' is that having read the Scriptures on a Monday then subconsciously through the week I have kept attuned to encounters insights or comments which might assist as an illustration for the sermon. Used well such word pictures assist helping concentration or offer opportunities to draw people back to the spoken word because the change of voice tone, sound of silence as a story or incident is built up also offer a time for the listener to relax.

Notwithstanding that there are occasions which will necessitate a late-change of focus or direction or even a new sermon. It doesn't happen often but when it does what might have felt good on a Friday would not be appropriate on a Sunday. During my ministry the most notable such occasion was the death of Diana Princess of Wales in the small hours of a Sunday morning. It required an early rise to reshape the sermon so that it would mark that sad occasion in an appropriate way.

Is a sermon good or bad? Well, it is certainly bad if it has not been prepared, lacks direction and has no apparent structure. 21st century society is not used either to undue repetitiveness, or to prolonged



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directionless listening. Deliver one such of these and criticism is undoubtedly justified and there is little defence against it. Criticism of a sermon which has been carefully prepared and addresses particular matters about which there might be a spectrum of views in a congregation is quite different. Such criticism is often constructive and offers a view which, while it may have little appeal for the preacher, is valid in the context of the overall thinking which the sermon invites. I hope everyone will have known the pleasure of preaching a good sermon which has attracted some positive comments – these are the encouragements which enable the preacher to know that folk are in tune. Enjoy the moment!

Most preachers never know what effect a sermon has on those who listen. Most of us can only hope that the hard-won sermon has made a difference. Given that the task of preaching is about 'exploring the deeps' then it is my hope that someone, somewhere, at sometime might just have discovered that he or she has been drawn into harmony of the Holy Trinity and discovered the limitless love which never fails; or perhaps someone has been encouraged to touch the hem of Christ's cloak; or has felt the grip of Christ's hand in the storm. Most of the time we'll never know – I draw my encouragement from the fact that, if the sermon has been well-prepared and delivered appropriately then God will honour a task well done – and that is an aspect of faith which is both sustaining and ensures that on Monday morning I'll check out the scripture readings for next Sunday and begin again!

To conclude

The Lord bless you and keep you

The Lord make his face to shine upon you

And be gracious unto to you

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you

And give you peace

Appendix – Illustrations for Sermons Children's Ministry and Prayers

The value of a good illustration is worth many words. There are as many illustrations anyone would ever need on the internet, in books, magazines and newspapers but unless they are properly used they are second best. They should never be used for 'padding' if they have no particular relevance to the themes of the day. The very best illustrations are the ones which have inspired a new insight or positive thought in the worship leader himself or herself.



Let me illustrate using 3 examples which may assist the reader which might be of assistance in awareness raising in the context of illustrations for sermons or prayers.

The first arose from a Sunday morning conversation with the organist of the congregation where I am currently serving as interim minister. I am not a musician but began David mentioned to me that the musical arrangement for the anthem had, while unrelated to it there were echoes of Paschobel's canon and I might like to mention that to the congregation. We had a discussion about this and he then said 'you know when I was teaching musical composition I used to say to my pupils don't start with the melody create the harmony and then the melody will follow'. I am not, at the time of writing, used this yet but I will on an appropriate occasion.

The second I used at the General Assembly when I was Moderator. Everyone will be familiar with story of Jesus walking on the water and inviting Peter to step over the gunwale of the boat and walk towards him. Peter did, reluctantly, panicked and began to sink. Jesus rescued him. This scene is featured in a stained-glass window in St Columba Church, Mallaig. I'd been looking at it for several months reflecting (judgmentally) on more than one occasion that Peter did not seem to have much faith in Jesus. I can tell you that my thinking was turned upside down as I began to think further. The Fisherman's Mission in Mallaig has on its wall a memorial naming fishermen who had been lost at sea. Far from lacking faith Peter had shown himself to be a man of some courage. Recalling the sailor's motto 'one hand for the ship and the other for yourself'. Peter overcame every professional instinct he had to step into the sea. Peter, as a fisherman showed quite remarkable courage – and remarkable faith too for he knew that Jesus was in control.

The third comes from a School Assembly. I had explained to my listeners - a 3rd year Group in a school with a significant number of students from different faith communities – there are circumstances in ministry where there are no words. I went on in such circumstances I use the Hebrew Prayer 'Shalom' which can be translated 'Healing Peace – body, mind, spirit.' The classes began to leave and Muslim boy stopped and said to me "We say 'Salaam'". It is similar to 'hello'. I was fascinated 'Shalom' and 'Salaam' come from the same language root. Taken together they become in the context of that day a prayer of peace and a word of greeting.

I hope that these examples may be of use, not for themselves, but as a window to discovering illustrations from your own life, congregation and experience in which which helps to educate, encourage and inspire.

Beannachadh leibh – as the Gaels might say – A blessing with you.

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

