

## Session Six—Perspectives on Preaching

Can preaching survive in a postmodern era? A quick answer might be, 'no'—after all, some of the key characteristics of preaching seem fundamentally opposed to postmodern sensibilities. Three aspects of modern preaching spring to mind:

- *Preaching is authoritative*—one person has 'the truth' which they attempt to communicate to others.
- *Preaching is not participative*—one person stands and expounds while many others sit and passively listen.
- *Preaching is cerebral*—one person shares the results of their research and study; the focus is on the 'meaning' of the text.

Admittedly, the above is more of a parody than a summary of modern preaching but it has some grain of truth in it—and it does highlight some of the challenges for preachers today. And these challenges are going to get more potent. Not only do we find ourselves in situations where the unchurched are expected to 'endure' a sermon (weddings and baptisms are the obvious occasions) but as more and more churchgoers are assimilated into postmodern culture we will need new ways to engage with them.

So what principles could we use to guide us through this new territory? Is there a postmodern equivalent of the three-point sermon? Well, there could not be any universal formula, of course—that would be against the sensibilities of the age. But there are some guiding principles which might see us through. In this session we are going to focus on three key themes: story, testimony and performance. None is strongly emphasised in most traditional modernist preaching (though all are present) but they will pervade the whole of this session.

### Preaching as story

As a culture we are rediscovering the importance of story and storytelling. Story is democratic: it invites the listener to participate in the process of discovery; story draws the listener in and encourages deeper reflection; story engages both head and heart; story provokes more story as we find ourselves retelling the story we have just heard with ourselves as key characters. After all, storytelling is what Jesus mostly did.

Narrative preaching opens up the possibility of connecting with people at a deep level. There are a number of ways in which we might include narrative perspectives in our preaching:

- Use illustrations.
- Make the structure of your sermon mirror the structure of a typical story.
- Write a story which illustrates the point of the sermon.
- Tell the story from the perspective of a character within the text.

### Use illustrations

The easiest way to harness the power of story, even in the context of a traditional sermon, is to use illustrations. Any preacher knows that it is usually the illustrations which people remember:

*A preacher dies and is waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him is a London cabbie who's dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket and jeans.*

*Saint Peter consults his list. He smiles and says to the taxi-driver, "Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven."*

*Saint Peter then turns to the preacher. "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven."*

*"Just a minute," says the preacher. "How come a taxi-driver gets a silken robe and golden staff and I don't?"*

*"Up here, we work by results," says Saint Peter. "While you preached, people slept; while he drove, people prayed."*

There are lots of online illustration resources, some of which are given in the notes. It is rarely a good idea to use an illustration just as you find it. Take the trouble to alter it so that it fits your style and is appropriate to the congregation.

### Use story structure

A lot of work has been done on the structure of the story, starting perhaps with Aristotle and his work *De Poetica*. One very simple way of looking at the basic story structure is to see it in four parts:

- A protagonist
- A goal
- An obstacle
- A resolution

*John [protagonist] was thirsty [goal]. He looked around but could see nothing to drink [obstacle]. So he went to the kitchen and got some orange juice from the fridge [resolution].*

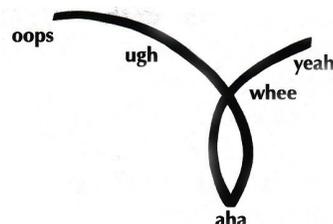
The above example illustrates the fact that structure alone doesn't make a good story. We don't care about John; it isn't much of a goal or an obstacle and the resolution is predictable and boring. However, the same basic structure could lead to a very different response if we learn that John is only 10, has been abducted and then abandoned in an old warehouse and hasn't had a drink for over 12 hours. Now we start to care about the character, empathise with his situation and long for some resolution. If the detail is further developed in a compelling way we have the makings of a good short story or script.

### Narrative preaching

Traditional preaching offers the results of the preacher's study and prayer around a given passage or topic. By contrast, narrative preaching aims to take the listeners on a voyage of exploration so that they can discover the richness of the gospel themselves. The classical structure for this is the three-point sermon. By contrast, narrative preaching aims to make the structure of the sermon the same as the structure of the basic story. The three-point sermon advocates, the narrative sermon inquires. The three-point sermon is best for those who seek certainties; the narrative sermon speaks to those on a spiritual journey.

One approach to structuring the sermon in a narrative way is that expounded by Eugene Lowry, a professor of homiletics and a jazz pianist. He has taken the simple pattern a little further and argues that the narrative sermon should have a five-part structure (2001). The five parts of Lowry's structure are:

- Oops!—upsetting the equilibrium;
- Ugh!—analysing the discrepancy;



- Aha!—disclosing the clue to resolution;
- Whee!—experiencing the gospel;
- Yeah!—anticipating the consequences.

### Oops!

The first step is to upset the equilibrium of the congregation. They will come with a variety of experiences, expectations and moods. The first task of the preacher is to engage them and offer something which enables them to engage with the sermon. Lowry suggests that *ambiguity* is a good starting place, and that one of the best ways to create a sense of ambiguity is to introduce people, especially people with a problem. (If we publish a sermon title beforehand, says Lowry, it should help introduce this sense of ambiguity rather than resolution; “How can we choose the lesser evil?” is a better title than “Jesus is the answer”.)

For instance when I preached about the resurrection, I started by asking what really happened. There are a number of possibilities, I said, the first one of which is that it happened exactly as the Bible tells us. I then said that this is the least likely of all the options. Needless to say, this had the congregation suddenly listening hard, if only to see if I would preach heresy openly in their midst.

Many preachers give away the ending right at the beginning; they may even have been taught to offer a brief summary of the sermon so that people have a ‘signpost’ or won’t get lost. It is indeed important to offer some sense of direction, but not by giving away the plot. Doing so loses any sense of tension and means that people are less likely to want to travel with you on your journey through the sermon.

### Ugh!

Having presented the ambiguity, the next stage is to ask why. Why are things as you have just presented them: paradoxical, uncomfortable, inexplicable, morally confusing, or whatever? This will often be the main part of the exposition and needs careful thought and preparation.

The basic position of every preacher, says Lowry (2001:40), is that there is a *gap*, a discrepancy between what is and what ought to be. In this stage of the narrative sermon, the question of the gap is explored, while still trying to keep the suspense. Don’t reveal the reason for the gap you’re exploring too soon. What most preachers fail to master is depth of analysis; too many preachers offer description instead of diagnosis. Yet it is deep diagnosis which is necessary for the narrative to continue to engage the listener.

So, to continue the resurrection example, I then looked at all the other different possibilities including that Jesus wasn’t really dead and that he recovered; that the Romans were bribed to give him a drug; that someone intervened to take him down before he died; that he did die on the cross and that the body was stolen; the disciples saw a ghost and interpreted that as Jesus being physically present with them; that his disciples were so aware of his ongoing presence that they started to think of him as being still with them.

### Aha!

When the issue has been properly analysed, then it is time to disclose the clue to resolution. This is characterised by the *principle of reversal*. Lowry quotes Foster Harris who says:

*...the answer to any possible problem or question you could pose is always in some fantastic manner the diametric reversal of the question. (1959:6)*

The principle of reversal is at the heart of all humour—the basic joke pattern sets up an expectation, then pulls the rug away by reversing it, evoking laughter as the cathartic response to the suddenly experienced alternative way of perceiving.

Jesus was particularly adept at the reversal: a good man and a bad man pray; the good man acknowledges that he is good, the bad man acknowledges that he is bad; yet Jesus says that the bad man has done good *and* the good man has done bad.

In the resurrection sermon I asked if we could tell which of these options was the most likely. I then suggested that the Biblical options was the most likely *because it was the least likely!* (This is Tom Wright's argument that the Biblical account is so out of keeping with contemporary Jewish expectations that no-one would have made it up and no-one would have believed it even if they had.)

### **Whee!**

It is at this point that the hearers are ready to receive the gospel remedy to the dilemma posed and exposed in the first three stages. Lowry sees the gospel as, "continuous with human experience *after* human experience has been turned upside down." (2001:79) If the ground has been properly prepared this stage will flow easily and effectively, both for preacher in preparation and congregation in reception.

The preacher can now challenge the listeners to respond, leave them with food for further thought, lead them into worship, or whatever future-facing response is appropriate. If they have stayed with you throughout your narrative journey (and they are more likely to than if you had preached a traditional expository sermon) they will be ready to journey forward.

In the sermon we now move forward into a deeper certainty about the miracle of Jesus' resurrection, it's amazing novelty and the hope it offers for our own resurrection.

### **Yeah!**

The gospel has been preached and the congregation have received it. The final task of the preacher is to point to the future. As Paul said, "What then are we to say about these things?" (Roman 8:31). Whether this part be a detailed examination of the practical consequences of the gospel or a brief pointer to future action it is important to end in this way.

### **Write your own story**

Sometimes you don't have an appropriate story to hand. If so, why not write your own? In the sermon below I wanted to end with a story that would make an impact on my listeners. Nothing I came across seemed to fit. Then I remembered a story I had read many years ago in one of Paul White's *Jungle Doctor* books about a monkey stuck in a bog (1958). I rewrote it and used it to end my sermon. The feedback I received was that it had made a great impression. (It also fits quite neatly into Lowry's *Homiletical Plot* model and so I have indicated where the five stages occur.)

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

- *That's a nice little story isn't it? The sensible man, who built his house on the rock and the silly man who built his on the sand.*

- *There's a little song, isn't there? (Sings)*  
*The wise man built his house upon a rock*  
*The wise man built his house upon a rock*  
*The wise man built his house upon a rock*  
*And the rains came tumbling down*
- *But let's look more closely. We'll find that things are not quite so nice. [Oops!]*
- *The wise man is the one who 'hears these words of mine and puts them into practice', the foolish man is the one who does not.*
- *But what are 'these words of mine'?*
- *Well, this story occurs at the end of a long piece of teaching from Jesus which we call the Sermon on the Mount.*
- *So we must hear and put into practice the sermon on the mount. And what does that say?*
- *Among other things it says, [Ugh!]*
  - *If you are angry with brother or sister you're liable to judgement*
  - *If you say, 'you fool' you'll be liable to the hell of fire*
  - *If you look at someone else & think I'd like to sleep with them, then you've committed adultery*
  - *Swear no oath*
  - *Do not resist an evil doer*
  - *Turn the other cheek*
  - *Love your enemies*
  - *Do good to those who hate you*
  - *Give to everyone who begs from you*
  - *Do not worry about food or clothing*
  - *Do not judge others*
- *Whew! Can you honestly say you've heard and done all these?*
- *If you can, please stand up.*
- *What? No-one?*
- *Just me, then! (Sink to knees).*
- *This means, then, that we are all like the foolish man. When the storm comes—and it will—we will get washed away.*
- *This seems to be a gospel of despair, not hope. But there is more... [Aha!]*
- *I'm reminded of time when a rich young man came to Jesus...*
- *Disciples ask, "who then can be saved?"*
- *"What is impossible for men is possible for God"*
- *Paul knew this. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*
- *That is what sin is—whenever we fall short of the glory of God; whenever we fall short of the kingdom behaviour and attitudes outlined by Jesus in the sermon on the mount.*
- *So what can we do about it? Nothing.*
- *What will God do about it? Everything.*
- *Faith, Paul tells us, is the answer. If we reach out to God in faith he will save us. That is why Jesus came: that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. [Wheel!]*  
*There was once a man who went walking by himself when he fell into some quicksand. He didn't really notice at first; just thought the ground was a bit soggy. And then, as he sank down a bit more he said to himself, 'this is fun.'*  
*As the quicksand covered his thighs and waist he became aware of a sense of weightlessness. 'This is really quite relaxing', he thought, 'I needed a rest anyway.'*  
*And he took out his sandwiches and began to eat them. Just then a woman came along and spotted him. 'Quick', she said, 'grab my hand and I'll pull you out.'*  
*No thank you' he said rather snottily, 'I'm fine. When I need to get out I'll be able to manage by myself.'*

*But as the sand came up to his chest and towards his neck he began to realise that he was in a bit of a difficult situation. Again the woman offered her hand. Again he refused. 'I'm perfectly capable of getting out of this' he thought 'and anyway, I'm not going to lose face by being rescued by a woman!'*

*So he started to struggle towards the solid ground. But this only seemed to make him sink faster. The woman's hand was still outstretched and still he ignored her. Finally, in desperation, he grabbed at his own ears and tried to pull himself out. But to no avail. The last thing he saw, as he sank under the sand, was the woman's outstretched hand.*

- *We cannot build our house on solid rock by our own efforts. We will only do it if we reach up and take Jesus' outstretched hand. [Yeah!]*
- *Have you? Will you?*

*(Preached 28<sup>th</sup> May 2005 at St Andrew's, Bacton)*

### **Preaching as a character in the story**

A really effective way of re-telling a well-known story is to tell it from the perspective of one of the characters. Indeed, it can often be effective to have a character who does not appear as the narrator. One suggestion was to tell the story of Eli and Samuel from the standpoint of Eli's cat!

This not, perhaps, an approach to use all the time but whenever I have done it the response has been very positive. "The best sermon you've ever preached" was the verdict of one parishioner after I adopted the persona of Bartholomew to recall the story of Peter's confession:

- *You wanted to know about the church?*
- *I was there when it was founded, you know*
- *I'd been with the Master from the beginning*
- *I remember when he called out the twelve*
- *I was gobsmacked when he called out my name, Bartholomew.*
- *Little did any of us know what kind of journey he would take us on*
- *Anyway, one day, towards the end, we were up in the northeast, in the Golan Heights*
- *We were going from village to village as usual, telling people the good news that God's kingdom is near and that there is a new way to live your life*
- *We'd got to Caesarea Philippi—do you know it?*
- *It's at the top of a sheer rock face, 100 feet high. At the bottom is a cave with a spring where the pagans have put a shrine to Pan.*
- *A stream gushes out from the rock and we all stopped for a drink and a rest.*
- *Jesus asks us, "Who do people say I am?"*
- *Well, they said all sorts of things, from demon possessed to one of the prophets returned.*
- *So we told him this (except the demon bit but of course he knew that).*
- *Then he goes, "Who do you say I am?"*
- *A huge silence you could cut with a knife.*
- *Of course we all knew in our hearts but how to say it out loud?*
- *Then Simon—of course—blurts it out: "You're God's anointed, his messiah, his Christ. You're the son of the living God"*
- *Well, when he'd said it we all knew. It was out in the open. And nothing was ever the same from that moment on.*
- *And then he made one of his jokes (he was always joking; such fun to be with).*
- *Simon, he said, your nickname is Peter the rock and on this rock (not the one in front of us) I will build my community, my church.*

- *I have to say that none of us paid much attention to that; there was just too much going on. It was only later that we remembered it.*
- *You know the rest of course: the journey to Jerusalem; that terrible day when they... and we all ran away and left him.*
- *And the despair, and the feeling of failure and the conviction that they'd come for us next...*
- *And then that wonderful day when we saw him again. So radiant, so full of love and forgiveness as usual. You've got to experience him for yourself to understand...*
- *And so the end became the beginning. And that's when we started to understand the church.*
- *At its best—when it is a community where the only law is love, where there is no judgement, when forgiveness happens over and over again, when everyone supports everyone else and where Jesus is the head and the heart—then it is better than anything I've ever known; just like being with him.*
- *Of course, it doesn't always work like that. We all too easily forget him and forget what we're called to.*
- *After all, none of us are perfect; but as I always say, he didn't call us to like each other but to love each other.*
- *What we have to remember is what brother Paul taught us—and he wasn't always so easy to like—that it's like we're all one body. As long as we work and live together, with Jesus at the centre, we'll be fine.*
- *Anyway, all this talking's got me tired. I need to sit down. My journey here has nearly ended; but the story goes on, you know.*
- *I have a vision of the church of the church stretching thousands of years into the future and reaching into every part of the earth. All it needs is for people to catch the vision.*
- *I did, you know. Will you?*
- *Well, God bless you. Thank you for listening.*

*(Preached 30<sup>th</sup> September 2007 at All Saints, Chedgrave)*

### **Preaching as experiential storytelling**

Mark Miller (2003) suggests that we take preaching as storytelling to the next stage. He advocates creating events in which people can experience the power of the story themselves through participating in a dramatic re-enactment of the gospel story. By use of installations, labyrinths and other multimedia enactments the postmodern consciousness can be immersed in a new kind of preaching.

Miller's ideas are not always clearly expressed and there is clearly a lot of cross-over with some forms of alternative worship but his emphasis on a combination of experience and participatory storytelling resonates with the experience of many emerging churches where creativity is a key value. (For an example of the sort of thing Miller is writing about, see the notes).

This approach is also closely related to scripture-based liturgy, which we will look at in the next session.

### **Preaching as testimony**

In a modernist context there is a strong case to be made for distinguishing preaching and testimony. Preaching is authoritative, based on study and reason; testimony is personal and subjective. Anyone can give a testimony but only the learned and gifted can preach. Today such distinctions seem less solid than they once did. In particular, contemporary culture is suspicious of learned authority and much readier to take notice of personal experience because it is more likely to demonstrate that key quality of *authenticity*. This suggests that those preachers who use a lot of testimony in their preaching are likely to be more effective.

One way to do this is to use personal illustrations. As you study the text and reflect on it, does it resonate with your own life experience? Is there a specific incident in your life story which you could use to show how God works, or demonstrate our need for God's working? Some preachers are very adept at finding personal illustrations and drawing the congregation into the text. Others are less successful, merely drawing the congregation into themselves. The purpose of the personal illustration must always be the glorification of God not the preacher.

But personal illustrations do not necessarily amount to testimony. There needs to be a sharing at a personal level and this can bring its own difficulties. If the testimony is personal, on whose authority can it be offered? Suppose it seems to contradict the commentaries; suppose it sounds illogical; suppose no-one will believe me; suppose I can't prove it—testimony is fraught with danger.

Anna Carter Florence argues that testimony preaching has long been a part of church history but that it has largely been hidden because it has been the province of women. She offers a number of reasons for adopting testimony-based preaching (2007:xxvi):

- It brings into focus a vast repertoire of women's sermons.
- It changes the subject of preaching to include those who have preached and testified from the margins.
- It shifts the locus of authority away from the office of the preacher and places it with the one who testifies.
- Preaching moves from the ecclesiastical centre to the personal faith struggles of the person who risks disclosing themselves in specific embodied situations.
- Testimony-based preaching offers another view of the role of experience. The preacher is called to engage with the gospel and then to narrate and confess what she has discovered and believed.
- It offers another view of what it means to be a preacher.
- It calls the preacher to live in and live out the Word of God.

Testimony preaching is not about the preacher; it is much more than simply talking about your own life and experiences. It is all about God's word; it is about what happened to you when you encountered this text at this time—what did you *really* see or experience, rather than what your training or the commentaries or your concept of orthodoxy tells you that you *ought* to have seen or experienced.

This is dangerous stuff; is the congregation ready for it, could they cope? And the answer may be that they can't, if they are a very traditional congregation still steeped in 'vicar knows best' ways of thought and action. But even so, congregations are often a lot more resilient than people give them credit for. To hear their own difficulties honestly expressed from the front may unlock some of their resistance to moving forward in discipleship. In testimony preaching there is a three-fold move: from *attending* through *describing* to *testifying* (Florence 2007: 139ff).

### **Attending**

The first step is to attend to the text, to live in it. To this end Florence offers a number of exercises for attending to the text, suggesting that the use of two or three can help develop deep attention to the text. The exercises include:

- *Write it*—handwrite the passage in a large unlined notebook.

- *Pocket it*—write it out again on a small piece of paper and put it in your pocket or handbag.
- *Memorise it*—read it over and over again, read it at odd moments when you have a break, go for a walk, get stuck in a traffic jam, etc. keep it with you at all times.
- *Underline it*—read the text you've written in your notebook and underline whatever stands out for you. Don't think too hard about this. Now take the underlined words and phrases and write them out again. Pray and ponder. Ask questions of them; what do they say to you? Where are they leading you?
- *Subtext it*—what is the subtext here? (See the 'Left Hand Column' exercise in the Bible Study section). This can be good to do with a group.
- *Block it*—look at the physical movement stated or implied by the text.
- *Create it*—draw, paint or sculpt the text.

### **Describing**

The next step is describing. The question which describing tries to answer is, "what do you believe about what you have seen?" Again, Forster offers a number of exercises, including:

- *Image it*—make a list of the images that appear in the text (light, salt, blood, etc.). take one, close your eyes and say it aloud. Let yourself 'see' whatever words or pictures are evoked. Then write rapidly and without editing whatever came to you. Now reflect on what you have written.
- *Rewrite it*—rewrite the text in your own words. Try doing this from memory. Then look at what you have included, what you have left out and what you have changed or added. What do these tell you about the text and your own responses to it?
- *Character-sketch it*—write a description of someone in the text, either a character or the narrator. What do they look like, how do they talk, what are their interests, what are their prejudices, etc.
- *Letter it*—write a series of short letters on the text, perhaps from one character to another or perhaps from you to the narrator or principal character.
- *Change it*—rewrite the text as you would like it to be. What does this tell you about you and the text?

### **Testifying**

Finally, what are you going to say? How much of your wrestling and questioning dare you share with the congregation? This is the nub of the testimony approach. You could use the preparation as the basis for a conventional dispassionate disengaged sermon. Or you could take the risk of exposing yourself with all the possibility of displaying error, incompetence and weakness. But if you will take the risk there is always the possibility that your listeners will hear an engagement with the Word which strikes them as real and authentic, and which will move their hearts and minds.

Testimony preaching, according to Florence, is not about us. It is not about what happened when we encountered the text. It's about what we saw and heard *in* the text.

### **Preaching as power play**

Testimony preaching raises some interesting issues about the nature of the preacher. After all, anybody can give testimony, can't they? So does this mean that anybody preach? Different congregations will answer this in different ways. Not everyone is spiritually mature

enough to be able to reflect on their own encounter with the Word; not everyone is able to offer the fruits of their encounter in ways which will edify others. The nature of the public arena, especially in larger congregations, will disqualify many who might offer fruitful testimony in a small group. Nevertheless, there are some serious issues about power and authority which are being raised today.

For instance, does preaching perpetuate a hierarchical model of Christianity which is incompatible with Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom? For many unchurched people (and quite a few in the church), the pulpit can be seen as symbolising a distance between preacher and listener which is unhelpful and undesirable. It encourages their natural scepticism about the integrity of authority figures and makes it harder for them to listen with an open mind and heart.

After all, Jesus *sat* to preach (Luke 4:20). Today, nearly every preacher stands, and many use a pulpit—*six feet above contradiction*, as the saying goes. Some see the very nature of the relationship between preacher and congregation as one of power and powerlessness: the all-knowing professional drops pearls of wisdom before the ignorant congregation.

Interestingly, Jana Childers (1998:45) argues otherwise. She claims that *distance* plays a vital role in any attempt to view the sermon as drama. Without distance there is no space for the drama to unfold. Childers also stresses the importance of the eye in appreciating the performance of the sermon; pulpits usually offer better sight lines so that the preacher can be better seen than if he or she is at the same level as the congregation.

And as long as most congregations sit in rows as passive consumers, it is difficult for the preacher to sit, as Jesus did. For while it might be possible to sit in a circle and share stories of Jesus in a small congregation, it will never be an option when the congregation gets above thirty or so. There are also two things to remember about Jesus' ministry. Firstly, he must often have sat above his listeners so that they could see and hear him. Secondly, sitting was a posture associated with teaching in first-century Palestine. It did not symbolise egalitarian participation but authority and wisdom (Mt 23:2).

### **Collaborative preaching**

Nevertheless the arguments continue. Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon's Porch an emerging church in Minneapolis and one of the leaders of the emerging church in the USA, is very critical of traditional preaching:

*For Pagitt, it is unhealthy—even abusive—to suggest that only a few, privileged individuals can speak for God. “Why do I get to speak for 30 minutes and you don’t?” “A sermon is often a violent act,” says Pagitt, a key figure among emerging leaders. “It’s a violence toward the will of the people who have to sit there and take it.”*

*To treat the sermon as an oratorical performance delivered by a paid and trained professional who claims to speak for God sets up an artificial power imbalance within the congregation, says Pagitt, a Baptist by training. It’s hard for a congregation to practice the priesthood of all believers when the preaching perpetuates an image of the pastor as somehow more authoritative or spiritual than his or her listeners. (Allen 2006)*

At Solomon's Porch, Tuesday night is Bible discussion group. Anyone who wishes turns up to study the passage of scripture to be preached next Sunday:

*...this group is like a microcosm of our community, standing in for others as we enter into the [Bible] passage. In many ways this group sets the form and feel and*

*content for what will happen on Sunday night during our worship gathering. Together we explore the questions and issues so that when the same passage is presented to the larger group, it will be clear that it has been wrestled with not just by the theologian (me) but by “regular” people as well. (Pagitt 2003:87)*

This evening is Pagitt’s primary preparation for the Sunday sermon. As part of the sermon time each Sunday they open up for comment, reflections, views and dissent. Pagitt likes to view this as an integral part of the sermon:

*I think of the sermon itself as a discussion involving our community, the Bible, those who have come before us, and those around the world who seek the same goal of living lives faithful to the way of Jesus. Our sermons are not primarily about extracting truth from the Bible and applying those realities to people’s lives. Rather, we are trying to allow the world we live in and the faith we hold to interact, to dance, to inform each other. We can’t do that if I’m the only one who gets to talk. (2003:94)*

### **Preaching as performance**

The third of the great themes in this session is *performance*. St Augustine notes that Cicero, the great writer on rhetoric, says that, “an eloquent man must speak so as to teach, to delight, and to persuade.” The first of these is about what we say; the second two about how we say it. Augustine agrees with Cicero with respect to oratory but feels that some change is necessary for preaching: the order should be to teach, to give pleasure, and to move. (*On Christian Doctrine* IV:12ff).

Some while ago, before I came across Augustine’s views, I reflected on my own preaching. I came to realise that my aims were to move, to entertain, and to teach. I had included the same elements as Augustine but my order was different. For him, teaching was primary; for me it came third. For me, teaching seems to be most effectively done in a group context. The purpose of the sermon is to inspire, provoke or stir up. Someone said recently that it isn’t important whether people remember your sermon; what matters is that they might be changed by it.

If this is true—and I think it is, at least for those today who are no longer persuaded by rational argument—then we may need to re-think our approach to preaching. Jana Childers (1998:34) writes about the ‘lively sermon’ which opens, draws and holds people, creating a moment for God to move in. This is preaching as performance; emotion coming before reason. As the theatre critic Arthur Hopkins wrote, “In the theatre, I do not want the emotion that rises out of thought, but thought that arises out of emotion.” (cited in Childers 1998:39). In preaching today, we want the same.

Because of this, preaching now becomes a much more physical, embodied, activity. Gesture and posture become as important as inflection and tone of voice. In performance there is a direct link between actor and audience, leading to a rapport and suspension of disbelief—very important for those who reject authority and tend to see conspiracies in the world’s mysteries.

### **Notes or no notes?**

If the sermon is to move people and change their hearts and minds, there must be a connection between preacher and congregation. The text of the sermon is important but it must never come between speaker and listener. Most preachers read their sermons from a written text yet an actor always learns the lines or else, as in a Mike Leigh play, improvises them after an extensive rehearsal period.

Does this mean that the performed sermon should never be preached from notes or full text? I hesitate to be dogmatic, but to preach without notes offers some freedoms. There is no need to have a lectern or pulpit between preacher and congregation. There is the possibility that the Holy Spirit may intervene and lead you in paths which you had not thought of in preparation (see below on 'preaching as jazz'). It also enables you to use your body more freely since there is nothing to hold and nothing to consult.

Despite the manifest advantages, most preachers consider it folly to preach without notes. They don't want to use their bodies freely; the idea of 'connecting' with the congregation is scary. Instead the lectern or pulpit is seen as something to hide behind. It is true that many preachers—especially white middle class Anglo-Saxon male preachers—find it very hard to be comfortable in their own bodies. Gesture during a sermon can be very effective but it does have to be of an appropriate size: too small and it is either lost or simply looks feeble and detracts from the message; too big and it looks silly or as if the preacher is drawing attention to himself.

The answer is training (how about your local dramatic society?); practice (an empty church can be useful for this) and constructive feedback from peers (which isn't always easy to arrange).

But even worse, for most preachers, is the fact that they don't believe that they could memorise what they are going to say. They point to the dangers of getting lost, forgetting the words, wandering around in circles or simply waffling on for long minute after long minute.

It is true that some who preach without notes fall into these traps. But it is not inevitable and in most cases simply betrays a lack of proper preparation. If preaching without notes is to be undertaken it must be preceded by a period of prayer and study until the shape of the sermon is crystal clear. You must be absolutely certain about where you are starting, where you are ending, and the main staging posts on the journey between them. And then, even if most of the sermon is improvised, the congregation will not get lost (and neither will you) but will be carried along the 'arc of the story'.

### **Beginnings and endings**

In performance, beginnings and endings are crucial. 'Grab their attention straight away', and 'always leave them wanting more' are staples of show business and apply just as much to preaching as theatre. For instance my first sermon at Loddon was on Jesus standing before Pilate and Pilate's question, "Are you the king of the Jews" (John 18:33-37).

I waited in silence for a while and then said, "He's having a laugh, isn't he? Pilate—he's having a laugh." The content is not in any way original: it's fairly clear that Pilate was being ironical at best as he looked at the ragged peasant standing before him and asked him if he was a king. But the delivery and language were not what the congregation expected and I had their attention instantly.

This approach can be especially effective with an unchurched congregation, at a baptism, perhaps. I started one baptism sermon with, "There's this woman, right..." Suddenly they were listening.

Endings are equally important. I must admit that I struggle more with finding a good ending. The 'rule of three' can be effective if you want an upbeat inspirational ending. It's a device used often by politicians and consists of a repeated, but varied, phrase at the end of a speech. So, at the end of a sermon on Revelation 21 you might say something like, "We have the promise of a future with no weeping, we have the promise of a future with no pain,

we have the promise of a future with no death. Let us praise God and work together with him for the indwelling of his kingdom.” If you try this approach you got to deliver it with conviction and courage. If you’re half-hearted, it won’t ring true.

### **Using props**

It has been said that every preacher is a frustrated actor. Acting is a physical business and actors often use props to emphasise or clarify a point. When we preach to children we, too, often use props, games, jokes, and participation. What we notice is that the adults are often just as engaged as the children. An appropriate use of physical props can help us reach out to 21st century unchurched adults.

### **Preaching as stand-up**

Will unchurched postmodern people sit in rows for long periods of time engaged with a single speaker? Yes, if that speaker is a stand-up comic. What can we as preachers learn from the art of stand-up? The stand-up comedian is a modern storyteller, offering parables from the everyday experience of the audience to offer new perspectives on their lives and beliefs—rather like Jesus, really.

As preachers we may not be able to match the quick-fire delivery and fast thinking required of the successful stand-up but we can learn a lot from their observations of the minutiae of daily life, their attention to detail and their ability to see things differently. We can also look to aim for the degree of rapport established between the successful stand-up and their audience.

There are many different kinds of comedian, including observational comics (such as Jack Dee); topical comics (Rory Bremner); character comics (Steve Coogan); prop comics (Tommy Cooper); physical comics (Lee Evans) impressionists (Ronnie Ancona) and improvisationalists (Paul Merton).

One thing they tend to have in common is that they are often vulnerable, exposing themselves (or their constructed persona) to ridicule yet in the process getting audience sympathy. This has particular resonances with the testimony preacher who also makes herself vulnerable in presenting her own frailties in encountering the text.

### **Preaching as jazz**

The jazz pianist and composer, Cyrus Chestnut said,

*I always keep myself open to any last-minute inspiration because I thrive in the realm of spontaneity...As long as there is a theme, there can always be variations...whether it's a jazz standard, a pop song or a gospel hymn. I'm like a minister giving his sermon. He will state his theme; he'll improvise variations on that theme; he'll take it to a high point, and then he'll make his closing statement. I'm doing the same thing at the piano.*

Both Kirk Byron Jones and Eugene Lowry have explored links between jazz and preaching—Lowry is a jazz pianist as well as a professor of preaching at Kansas City's St. Paul School of Theology. Lowry says that jazz and preaching have a lot in common.

*If somebody had said to me early on, 'Gene, try to shape a sermon as you shape a jazz improvisation', I would have picked up upon it and known that what I was doing at the keyboard was narrative.*

Jones (2004) stresses the role of creativity and openness to others in jazz. Unless the jazz musician really listens, it is impossible to play good jazz. Unless the preacher really listens to the Spirit, to the text, to the voices of those who have gone before, she will be unable to approach the sermon in an open and creative way. "If you can't hear it, you can't say it." (2004:53)

For many it is improvisation which characterises jazz. Jones quotes an account of a performance by the jazz trumpeter Winton Marsalis written by David Hajdu. Marsalis was playing a ballad, *I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You*, unaccompanied. At the most dramatic point of his conclusion, someone's mobile phone went off. Hajdu writes:

*Marsalis paused for a beat, motionless, and his eyebrows arched. I scrawled on a sheet of notepaper, MAGIC, RUINED. The cell-phone offender scooted the hall as the chatter in the room grew louder. Still frozen at the microphone, Marsalis replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it, and began improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly came back to him. In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation—which had changed once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo—and ended up exactly where he had left off: "with... you..." The ovation was tremendous. (Jones 2004:80)*

Jones suggests that there are a number of elements in successful improvisation:

- *Playfulness*—the hapless phone user became part of Marsalis' play. By taking the ring tone and transforming it, the performer is showing openness to creativity and an ability to stay 'in the flow'. The 'fixed script' is abandoned for a time as a new creative opportunity is offered. Jones suggests that when Marsalis paused he had not stopped playing. The pause was part of the play, in which he was able to sense the possibilities ahead.
- *Variation*—jazz operates under the presumption that there are always a million and one ways to do things. Some preachers seem to feel that there is only one way to expound a passage and that it is their task to find that right way and to bring it to the congregation. This does not resonate with contemporary culture, nor does it resonate with the multiplicity of approaches found in the different genres in the Bible.
- *Daring*—it takes nerve to do what Marsalis did. It takes nerve to be prepared to abandon the prepared script and launch into the unknown. There is the ever-present possibility of abject failure. But the reward is worth the risk—and if you do crash and burn, will the congregation be the worse for it?
- *Mastery*—finally, good improvisation requires mastery. Every good musician practices and studies. No good improvisation will ever come from an unprepared heart and mind. In the case of a preacher the preparation may be a prayerful emptying of self before God or days of study and meditation. A master will be able to 'resolve the composition' by drawing on a well of notes, phrases, songs and performances. The preacher who is steeped in scripture, the good sermons of others and a keen understanding of contemporary culture will also be able to resolve the story even after a wild improvisation.

### **Multi-media preaching**

In a multi-media age, do we need multi-media preaching? And if so, what form might this take? The increasing availability of video projectors and large flat screen displays give rise to many possibilities, with PowerPoint® and video offering two distinct sets of approaches.

### PowerPoint

- *Bullet points*—The most obvious (and least helpful) way of using PowerPoint is to structure the sermon like a business presentation, complete with bullet points etc. Occasionally this might be appropriate but in general it should be avoided; a sermon is not a presentation.
- *Commentary on the Bible text*—by picking some key words and animating them it is possible to provide a commentary on the Bible text. This could be played at the same time as the preached sermon, offering another ‘layer’ of interpretation, sometimes amplifying and sometimes challenging the spoken word.
- *Audio-visual presentation*—PowerPoint is capable of having both audio and video files embedded. In theory you could put together a set of slides to music. In practice this doesn’t work very well; you’d be better off using a crude video editor such as Windows Movie Maker (included with Windows 2000 and later).

### Video

- *Use as a attention grabber*—take a video camera and get some *vox pops* on the topic of your sermon. If you’re preaching on justice, say, go into the streets where you live and ask people a simple question such as, “What’s the biggest injustice in the world at the moment?” Cut the answers together into a three or four minute film and you’ll have the congregation grabbed.
- *Offer another perspective*—perhaps a music sequence can portray something which words alone cannot.
- *Use a commercial video*—is there a clip from a feature film or pop music video which could illustrate your sermon? Do you have a Church’s Video Licence?
- *Use a Christian video*—there are a number of Christian videos which are very suitable for use in sermons. Aid agencies such as Tearfund and Christian Aid produce videos which can either be used intact or edited. There are also videos such as *40* which offer a new perspective on a familiar theme.
- *Let them preach it*—using the *vox pop* technique you could go to members of your community (both those who are and those who are not church members) and ask them, for instance, “What is the real meaning of Christmas?” Edit the result into a short sermon, arranging the answers so that they form some sort of progression.

There are lots of possibilities, limited only by your imagination.

### Conclusion

Preaching today can be just as effective as it was in the age of reason. The key is to find ways to engage—both with the text and with your listeners. The key approaches seem to be based around story, testimony and performance. Experiment and find out what works best in different contexts.

## Session Six Notes—Perspectives on Preaching

### Sermon illustrations

There are lots of sermon illustration sites. Three of the better ones are:

<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/> offers a very comprehensive range of illustrations, arranged under a large number of topic headings. The site is easy to use.

[http://www.bible.org/illus.php?topic\\_id=961](http://www.bible.org/illus.php?topic_id=961) also offers a good range of illustrations (many appear on all the different sites). Every book of the Bible is included in the topic index, with a number of illustrations tied to specific verses or passages.

<http://www.ozsermonillustrations.com/searchbytopic.htm#W> is an Australian site which focuses on illustrations with a contemporary resonance.

### Preaching as experiential storytelling

The example of experiential storytelling given by Miller is of *The Jesus Journey*, a weekend-long event for teenagers, consisting of six 'journeys' (2003:134-148):

- *Journey 1*— the longest journey of the weekend, featuring lights, sound and narration. With poetry, music, sound and lighting effects, and dramatic narration the story of creation and fall is told from different perspectives. In the darkness that follows the fall, Jesus is introduced as the light of the world. At the end of the journey participants are encouraged to respond creatively.
- *Journey 2*—the only teaching of the weekend takes place here as a staff member portrays Jesus and recites the sermon on the mount. This is followed by group discussion.
- *Journey 3*—in small groups, people pick a parable and then acts it out for the others. Then everybody is struck with an incurable 'affliction' (a blindfold for blindness; ropes to incapacitate a limb, etc.). there is a rumour, however, that a man with a red cloth over his head can cure diseases. There is then a break during which people are free to act this out as they please. After a while some of them encounter 'Jesus' and ask for 'healing'.
- *Journey 4*—a re-enactment of the Last Supper.
- *Journey 5*—with narration and video, the events of the agony and crucifixion are recounted. There is a single candle on a red cloth. At the words, "it is finished", the room is plunged into darkness. There is then a time of response.
- *Journey 6*—on the last morning, the final journey enacts the resurrection. A single candle is lit; it rests on a white cloth. People are invited to light a candle from the 'Jesus candle' to join in the dance of faith.

For an article by Mark Miller, see:

[http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/story/beyond\\_words.php](http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/story/beyond_words.php) From here you can find links to other articles on storytelling.

### Preaching as Testimony

Anna Carter Florence (2007:146ff) has a number of exercises to help you live the text.

## Preaching as performance

Augustine's *Christian Doctrine* can be found at

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/ddc.html>

## Preaching as Stand-up

An approach to stand-up comedy:

### Gather material

First, examine yourself. Divide a sheet of paper into three columns. In the first, write down things that worry you. In the second, things that make you angry. In the third, things that frighten you. Make a list of all your negative personality traits. Self-effacing humour is always safe territory because if you laugh at yourself, others will feel comfortable laughing at you too. If you're ugly, talk about it! Think of yourself as a safe venue for mocking the ugly, since you're really just making fun of yourself.

Make a list of things that are unique about yourself, both inner and outer. Do you have freakishly large hands? An unusually high tolerance for alcohol? A phobia of eating in front of people? If so, talk about it. Keep a notebook with you always. Notice things which strike you and write them down immediately.

### Put an act together

The stand-up comedy act consists of two main parts: the script and the persona. First, write some jokes and put them in a narrative sequence; then decide on the appropriate persona to adopt for your act.

A joke usually has a simple two-part structure. The first part sets up an expectation, the second confounds it: "(a) My wife just ran off with my best friend. (b) Boy, do I miss him." or "(a) I had a mud pack facial done, and for three days my face looked much better. (b) Then the mud fell off." Notice, too, that both of these jokes are in some sense told against the teller—I've lost my wife; I'm ugly. Although the basic structure is simple the accomplished performer will, like any good story teller, weave these basics into more complex narrative structures. Other common structures include:

- *Lists*—The magic number in comedy is three. The first two are alike, but the third is the opposite. ("Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some hire PR officers." -Daniel J. Boorstin)
- *Comparisons*—Pointing out vast differences. ("My girlfriend's idea of a romantic night is a candlelit dinner and a walk on the beach. Mine is a six-pack and a bag of crisps.")
- *Simile*—Describing something by likening it to something else. ("He looked like a squid in stretch pants." -Judy Tenuta)
- *Observations*—Pointing out how absurd everyday life is. ("You can't have everything. I mean, where would you put it?" -Steven Wright)
- *Mimicking*—Making fun of someone by acting like him/her. (Your interfering mom, your whiny significant other, your pesky parole officer . . . just make sure they're not in the audience that night.)

(From <http://www.soyouwanna.com/site/syws/standup/standup3.html> which has further advice.)

Good stand-up isn't just in the writing, it's also in the delivery. Each comic has his or her own style, often developed over a long period of trial and error in comedy clubs. For

instance, I once saw a lorry with the slogan “Eat Healthy British Chicken” emblazoned on its back. The thought came to me that if they were healthy chicken they’d still be alive and so not very good to eat. The question is, how would you write and deliver this mildly comic observation in such a way as to have the most impact.

Jester is a site which recommends jokes for you, based on your tastes: <http://eigentaste.berkeley.edu/user/index.php>

Simon Critchley, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Essex, investigates humour in this essay:

<http://www.royalinstitutephilosophy.org/think/article.php?num=7>

### **Preaching as Jazz**

The quote from Cyrus Chestnut is cited in Jones 2004:35.

A streaming movie about Eugene Lowry and Jazz can be found at

<http://www.lightworksdistribution.com/EpisodeDisplay/tabid/54/pid/20/Default.aspx#>

You will need to register (it’s free) to view the programme, one of a series about great preachers.

As an aside, a jazz setting of BCP was broadcast as the Sunday service on Radio 4 on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2007. The script and details of the music can be found at:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/programmes/sunday\\_worship/documents/20070218.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/programmes/sunday_worship/documents/20070218.shtml)

### **Multi-media Preaching**

40 can be bought from Proost (<http://www.proost.co.uk/altworship.html>) or from

### **Further reading**

David Allis 2006, *The Problem With Preaching*—Allis argues that preaching is out of date, ineffective and unbiblical. See more, and some responses to his article on

<http://www.the-next-wave-ezine.info/issue93/index.cfm?id=16&ref=ARTICLES%5FDOING%20CHURCH%5F253>

Graham Johnston 2001, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*—after an examination of what postmodernity means, Johnston offers four ‘rules for engagement’: don’t engage at the expense of the message; communication takes two—and time; risk involvement; address where you live. He continues with chapters on challenging listeners; obstacles to postmodern preaching; how to make inroads into contemporary culture; and some practices for engagement.

Roger Standing 2002, *Preaching for the Unchurched in an Entertainment Culture*—Roger Standing has experience of youth services with West Croydon Baptist Church. He looks at changes in communication style & the importance of narrative. The book gives results of a small experiment Standing conducted into different styles of preaching (topical and expository) and whether multimedia support is effective with young people. His findings were that younger people prefer topical sermons; that sermons which aid spiritual growth are appreciated most by people under 30; and multimedia sermons have no greater impact than voice-only. Standing’s research also suggested that topical sermons stick in the memory better and that multimedia sermons are remembered longer than voice-only sermons.

Roger Standing 2004, *Finding the Plot*—explores narrative preaching in some detail, including a lengthy section on Lowry’s work. The book contains a number of sample

narrative sermons and also contains insights from a number of interviews which Standing conducted with narrative preachers.

Jeremy Thomson 2003, *Preaching as Dialogue*—argues that preaching should be a collaborative activity and that its crystallisation into the sermon has robbed it of a dynamic interactive element which needs reviving today.