

**THE**  
**ART**  
**OF**  
**PREACHING**

**By Rev Alex B Noble**

## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to my minister and father  
**Rev George Strachan Noble**  
who, more than anyone, taught me the art of preaching;

also, my congregations over the past 25 years  
**St Mark's Parish Church, Stirling**  
**Dunbar Parish Church**  
**Fyvie linked with Rothienorman Parish Churches**  
**Saltcoats North Parish Church**  
who have helped me to refine the art;

and the 60 student preachers whom I have been privileged  
to help in some small way to learn the art of preaching.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

The Reverend Alex B Noble was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1955 in Fraserburgh, Scotland and brought up in the twin Aberdeenshire fishing villages of Cairnbulg and Inverallochy. His father, George Noble, was a fish market auctioneer who came to own a fish salesman business and then became minister of Newarthill Parish Church near Motherwell.

Alex graduated MA from Glasgow University, BD (Hons) from Aberdeen University and ThM from Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey, USA. After serving as an Assistant Minister in St. Ninian's Parish Church, Corstorphine, Edinburgh, he was ordained as a Church of Scotland minister on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1982 and inducted as minister of St. Mark's Parish Church, Raploch, Stirling. He married Patricia West in 1991 and after serving for over eleven years in this urban priority area charge he moved to Dunbar Parish Church in 1993. In 1999 he moved to Aberdeenshire to the rural charge of Fyvie Parish Church linked with Rothienorman Parish Church and in 2003 he became the parish minister of Saltcoats North Parish Church in Ayrshire.

In his 25 years as a parish minister, Alex has preached week in, week out, to a wide variety of congregations. All the time he was practising the art he was studying it in great detail – immersing himself in many books about preaching and sitting at the feet of some of the greatest ever preachers. This book is the distilled wisdom not only of his own quarter century of preaching and reflection upon it, but is also some of the corporate, cumulative wisdom of many famous preachers down the centuries. The baton inherited from our predecessors in the pulpit is passed on by Alex to you the reader and a whole new generation of preachers.

## **A Synopsis of: “THE ART OF PREACHING” by Alex B Noble**

This is a book written for preachers by a preacher. Of course anyone who ever listens to preaching, (and there are rumoured to be one or two such people in every congregation), would also find it to be an interesting insight into the mysterious human-divine inter-action which we call preaching. The book sheds light on questions such as: How is it that God speaks through human words? In what sense is the preacher’s human and fallible words the Word of God?

This book is born out of my 25 years in parish ministry, in five congregations, in village to city parishes, ranging from the east to the west and the north to the south of Scotland. During that time I have preached nearly 1,000 sermons, in 52 different churches in Scotland, USA, Kenya, Jamaica, Taiwan, Brazil, the Bahamas. On the other hand, I have also listened to preaching for over 50 years now. This book is written by a preacher for preachers, but it is also written by one long accustomed to sitting through sermons (of mixed quality) for those who share the joy or agony.

The basic premise of this book, as the title states, is that preaching is an art and has to be seen as such by both preacher and hearer. We never master the art fully, but we keep learning and improving by thinking and praying about it and by studying it and doing it. Hopefully this book will contribute a little to that process.

Throughout my preaching ministry I have been studying the art of preaching by listening very carefully to other preachers and by reading many books on preaching by past masters. I lament the fact that their classic books on the subject are passing away, out of print, representing a huge loss of wisdom, so I have studied their books and distilled some of their priceless, timeless wisdom into this book. We have inherited a very rich preaching heritage and I want to help to pass on the baton to the next generation of preachers.

The contents of the book make it very obvious what it is about, namely the who, why, what, when, where and how of preaching. It is a mixture of my own personal ideas and also the distilled wisdom of past masters of the art of preaching. So let those who have ears to hear, hear here and those who have eyes to see, read on!

### **WHAT IS PREACHING?**

Where does one go for the answer? The dictionary? Which dictionary? Why should it know? My two dictionaries clearly do not know. The Collins English Gem Dictionary says:

“To Preach: deliver sermon; give moral, religious advice; set forth in religious discourse; advocate.”

The Chambers Everyday Paperback Dictionary says:

“To Preach: to pronounce a public discourse on sacred subjects; to discourse earnestly; to give advice in an offensive or obtrusive manner; to deliver a sermon; to advocate; to inculcate  
Preachify: to weary with lengthy advice.”

Reading that, what father or mother would ever want their sons and daughters to become preachers! Preaching has slipped into popular slang as “jumping down people’s throats”, “force feeding of ideas”, “getting at people”, “speaking without listening”. What a bad press preaching gets! Where

does God come in to the Dictionary or the colloquial understandings of preaching? How much further from the truth can it get?

So what is it then? Andrew Blackwood's opening line in chapter one of his classic book, "The Preparation of Sermons" is (p13):

"Preaching should rank as the noblest work on earth"

(and adds that the preacher should be seen as the most important person in the community)!

Bernard Lord Manning in "A Layman in the Ministry" (p138) said:

"(Preaching is) a manifestation of the Incarnate Word,  
from the Written Word, by the spoken word."

The Larger Catechism (Q155) makes the reading and preaching of the Word:

"an effectual means of enlightening, convincing and humbling sinners;  
of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of  
conforming them to His image; and subduing them to His will; of  
strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building  
them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort  
through faith unto salvation."

Professor H.H.Farmer writes in "The Servant of the Word" (p27-28):

"Preaching is that divine, saving activity in history, which began  
two thousand years ago in the advent of Christ....Preaching is not  
merely telling me something. It is God actively probing me,  
challenging my will, calling on me for decision, offering me His  
succour, through the only medium which the nature of His purpose  
permits Him to use, the medium of a personal relationship."

So preaching is a DIVINE activity. It is God speaking to people through human agents. It is divine Word communicated through human words. To distinguish the divine word from the human words we give a capital "W" when meaning Gods' Word. The main point about preaching is that it is something which God does, while the preacher is preaching as one human to other human beings. The vertical and horizontal dimensions go together. The man or woman in the pulpit is the voice and instrument of God. This is variously understood but it seems pretty obvious that it is human to human communication but God can somehow inspire both the speaking and the hearing to greater or lesser extents till He is able to communicate Himself through the medium of that human communication. So, we do not just preach what God has said...in preaching God is saying! The dictionaries quoted earlier completely miss this vision. As cause or consequence the general public also seems to miss this wonderful vision and fail to appreciate the great miracle of preaching.

The minister is the channel of a communication, not the source of it. The sermon is a message. Behind the preacher is a God who speaks. Halford E Luccock writes in his book "In the Minister's Workshop" (p11):

"It (preaching) is not giving all that is in us; it is giving that which  
is not in us at all."

On the same page, Luccock quotes Rodin the artist with regard to sculpture:

"the search (of the mature artist) is to express, not himself, but his  
sense of something that exists in himself, something not personal  
but universal. What that something is has never been clearly defined;  
it has been felt as the reality behind appearances. To express not his  
own feeble or defective emotions, but his conception, his apprehension  
of that reality, felt through his emotion – that is the object of his search."

Luccock says that sermons begin where rivers begin – in the sky. The preacher bears a revelation from God and behind his words is the Word. He says (p12):

"Himself confronting the reality of God, the preacher in his message  
confronts men with the revelation of a God who has unveiled Himself."

Every week I and every other preacher participate in a wonderful miracle. We sit down to a blank sheet of paper, with a pretty blank mind, wondering what on earth we are going to say next Sunday. The deadline already looms, the Damacles sword is hovering ever lower above our heads, the clock is ticking, and there are no extensions to our “essay” as at University! The faithful people will be there, ready and waiting for a Word from the Lord and we will have to give them such a Word. It is nothing short of a literal sin when the hungry sheep look up and are not fed or at least under-fed! Yet week in, week out, God somehow fills my blank sheets and mind! It is a miracle!

Throughout history preaching has changed lives and changed lives have changed the world. The great Old Testament prophets were called “great” because of their preaching. The New Testament shows the Church growing through Apostolic preaching. The Middle Ages were greatly influenced by preachers like Bernard and Francis and preaching was at the heart of the Reformation. Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox revived the neglected art. Revivals have usually sprung out of preaching from the likes of Wesley and Whitefield. The city of Glasgow had the motto: “Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of the Word” but, in keeping with the decline in the prestige of the pulpit, Glasgow has abbreviated it to simply “Let Glasgow flourish.” When we cut out the preaching of the Word, we have no chance of flourishing! Too many people undervalue preaching; and too many preachers cannot preach! Great musicians, artists, craftsmen, experts in anything, take decades to master their arts. Preaching is still the main function of a minister today.

Let’s try to understand this miracle of preaching a little bit in the course of this chapter and indeed the whole book; but remember that fundamentally it is a mystery and a miracle and it is God’s own secret so we will not comprehend the whole answer till we arrive in Heaven and see face to face rather than live by “seeing through a glass darkly” as Paul says. All we can do is delve into a mystery and hope to apprehend a little more at a time.

Preaching is Proclamation. We proclaim God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Trinitarian God. We proclaim what He has done, is doing and will do. We proclaim Him Himself, who he is, what he is like, how He operates, what he wants. We proclaim as often, where and when He wants us to. The who, why, what, when, where and how of preaching is God. He is the message. He is the initiator. He is the controller. He is the motivator. If it was a film He would be all the credits apart from the minor roles played by human agents. He would be the producer, director, chief backer, leading actor, author of the novel on which the film is based etc.! The film would be all about Him and his dealings with people.

The Trinitarian God, at one specific time and one specific place revealed Himself to the world. He became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. Preaching therefore is primarily the proclamation of the Good News that God was in Christ Jesus revealing Himself and reconciling us to Himself. As Paul says, we preach Christ. Too often we have become idolators, worshipping a god of our own making, created in our own likeness and designed to match our own aspirations. People were created by the Creator for relations with Himself but all too often they end up worshipping idols and false gods. Preaching therefore tries to keep people in the right relationship with God. Leonard Small cried: “Your God is Too Small” in one of his most famous sermons and preaching has the job of keeping our tiny minds and hearts and imaginations ever open to the infinite greatness of God and the wonderful possibilities in His dealing with us. In a world where many prematurely pronounce that “God is Dead”, preaching has the joyful task of proclaiming that “Christ is Risen” and identifying where and how God is alive and active in our experience and throughout the world. Today we have too much “Churchianity” rather than “Christianity” as people are devoted to their church even more than their Lord. Preaching proclaims Him Lord.

Today there is great interest in spiritual matters but often in alternative ways than traditional church-going. People pursue their personal spiritual quests for unknown holy grails. Preaching proclaims that lost sheep never find shepherds; only the Good Shepherd can, and does, find His lost sheep. We do not find God, He finds us; we do not choose Christ, He chooses us. Preaching is not an aid to our spiritual searching; it is the proclamation that we have been found! Thereafter God uses preaching to nurture us in the faith.

Human preaching therefore has a lot more to it than meets the eye! It is not “a man talking to women” as one cynic put it; nor “just a couple of auld wifies crowding in”; nor “the inculcation of the incomprehensible by the incompetent to the indolent”! It is above all God’s self-revelation and communication to His people through His preachers.

Preaching is a unique form of communication. It is not a talk, a speech, an essay, nor even teaching. C.H.Dodd wrote in “The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments”:

“The New Testament writers draw a clear distinction between preaching (KERUGMA) and teaching (DIDACHE)...It was by Kerygma, says Paul, not by Didache, that it pleased God to save men.”

William Barclay in his Daily Study Bible Commentary on Acts 2 v 14-42 identifies four different kinds of preaching in the Early Christian Church: (1) KERUGMA – Proclamation; (2) DIDACHE – Teaching; (3) PARAKLESIS – Exhortation; and (4) HOMILIA – Treating an area of life in the light of the Gospel. In analysing KERUGMA (or KERYGMA) in particular, Barclay identifies the same recurring pattern throughout the New Testament i.e. KERUGMA consists of – (a) Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy; (b) Jesus is the Messiah; (c) Jesus is Risen and Present with us now; and (d) the promise and threat that “in Jesus alone is salvation”.

Leslie Tizard, in “Preaching: The Art of Communication” says that preaching proclaims the historical facts through which God revealed Himself – in particular what God has done through Christ – and proclaim these things to have been done for us and for everyone. The Old Testament is full of the mighty acts of God e.g. Creation, the Flood, the Exodus, the Covenant, Bringing Israel into the Promised Land, Exile and Return. This is how God is experienced and known. This is how God chose to reveal Himself and communicate. He also sent prophets, priests, scriptures to point out what He had done, was doing and would do. The preachers did not do it, they just pointed out what God was up to. Preachers do not save the world, but they can point to the Saviour of the world. However it is also true to say that the very act of pointing to God can itself be one of God’s mighty acts! Preachers don’t do, they just speak; but God is doing even as they speak! Not always of course, and not necessarily, but sometimes, maybe even most times – but only God knows that!

God who spoke and who acted mightily encountering people through prophets, scriptures and big events, eventually communicated and self-revealed in the most effective way possible. He came Himself in person! You can’t beat that! Now preaching is proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth and Heaven. Christian preaching is Christ-centred. Jesus, God become incarnate in flesh and blood, is the content of our proclamation. As Paul says, we preach Christ crucified and risen, our God, a message which is foolishness to Gentiles and a stumbling block to Jews. This is the uniqueness of Christian preaching. We preach Christ and as we preach Christ, Christ is speaking and self-revealing through our words. He is proclaiming Himself even as we proclaim Him. So, preaching is not condemnation, nor moralizing; it is not so much about human life and human behaviour and relevance to our human situation; preaching is primarily proclaiming Jesus our God and letting Him introduce Himself to us and encounter us. Preaching is not so much us speaking about God as it is God addressing us and encountering us. Preachers do not even introduce people to God He does that Himself through our preaching. As always the initiative always lies with God. The spotlight is always on Him. It is all about Him. We come in when He addresses us like He did to Zacchaeus, Bartimaeus, Mary Magdalene etc. What will be our response to (a) all the things He is and has done

for us and (b) to His pointing out what He is and has done. Note, we do not simply respond to preaching; we respond to the God who has been proclaimed and to who He is and what He has done for us.

The reason I am labouring these points is because today, as far as I can tell, we have lost these core fundamental understandings of what preaching is. We have lost the plot! No wonder the Church declines. How can they hear without proper preaching?

So often what pretends to be preaching is not preaching, just nice talks or lots of sound and fury signifying nothing or even plain heresy! If we get a reformation of what preaching is, then the Church will blossom again and the fragrance will fill the whole earth and the world will never be the same again!

Preaching is also **Inspired Utterance**. God speaks through His preachers. Isn't that a mind boggling thought?! It is not my own "tuppence worth", my own opinions from my own soap box. God is inspiring me! It is not like the ecstatic frenzies of the Old Testament prophets, nor like the disciples on the Day of Pentecost speaking in tongues (glossalalia). The outer form may not be so dramatic, but the inner reality is no less miraculous and wonderful to be part of. This is what really excites me to my core as a preacher! Through disciplined quiet communion with God we gradually learn to look at things in God's way. In dog training the key advice is "think dog"; in preaching it is "think God"! It is not an exact science and while God broadcasts perfectly, we as receivers are very imperfect. However it is incumbent on God to reach us who can never reach up to Him, so He does what it takes to make up the deficiencies in us. God also inspires the hearers so that even if the preaching is not that well delivered it can still have tremendous impact at the hearing end. Sometimes great preaching will fall on deaf ears while at other times poor preaching will have amazingly favourable responses! It is not all down to the preacher....thank God! As a preacher it is also slightly frustrating that you never can know for sure whether you did a good job or not! You just have to live with that. You cannot prove that you did a good job just because people said that they thought God had inspired you. Hitler got crowds praising his oratory and Jesus watched crowds melt away from Him! We try to be good Word of God communicators but it is difficult to measure and define just how successful or not we are at it.

If we are ever to be inspired by God and enabled to preach His Word, it will be by being receptive to God. It is not about any one sermon; it is about a lifetime of tuning in to God's wavelength. Like life-long partners, we may get surprised by one message, but generally we know our partner well enough to know their likes and dislikes, attitudes, opinions, outlook etc.

Non-Christians claim to get inspiration. They say that they were inspired to write a poem or compose music. Without God I am not sure what the word inspired means. Christian preachers mean by it much more than "I had a bright idea". We mean that God literally in-spires, breathes into us His "ruach (Hebrew) or pneuma (Greek)". Both words mean "breath or wind or spirit". God gives us content, desire, ability. It cannot be pinned down in a legalistic, literalist, definitive way but it is real, practical, down to earth, actual enabling. God sometimes gives seed thoughts, sometimes particular mental pictures, sometimes exact sound bites and sometimes precise words. Nothing is automatic nor necessary. God is not obliged to say anything. God does not limit His inspiration to fixed channels and set patterns. It is all very flexible, creative and vitally alive. The preacher, for their part must always, ceaselessly develop the art of listening for the voice of God. Sheep know their Master's voice when it does call.

Inspiration comes occasionally in Eureka moments, in sudden flashes of inspiration, but usually it is born of much perspiration. Estimates vary but it is something like ninety nine per cent perspiration and one per cent inspiration!

In one of his novels, Hugh Walpole makes the artist say:

“The whole duty of art is listening for the voice of God.”

That is certainly the whole duty of the preacher. We shall not hear voices nor see visions (well not usually anyway) but we shall, week in week out, receive our inspiration as we study the Bible, other books, life situations etc. Experience of life, whether it be our own experience or that of others will furnish us with much of our inspiration. Self awareness is very important and can, paradoxically, open our eyes to a whole world beyond us. Leslie Tizard in “Preaching: The Art of Communication” (p16) writes: “No preacher can be convincing unless he knows himself and speaks to his own condition.”

Tizard quotes Alexander Whyte, the great Scottish preacher, who once wrote to a minister who had sought his advice:

“Look into your own sinful heart, and back into your own sinful life, and around on the world full of sin and misery, and open your New Testament, and make application of Christ to yourself and your people;”

Inspiration happens whenever God finds a receptive mind and spirit.

John Calvin believed that the Bible is uniquely inspired and in its written form is the objective Word of God, so that the sermon only has authority when it is an explanation of the inspired Written Word. He also believed that the sermon only becomes redemptively effective when the Holy Spirit is operative in inspiring both the preacher and the hearers. For Calvin, the sermon had to be delivered as the living Word, and by that he meant that the preacher must remain a pliable instrument of the Holy Spirit right up to and including the very moment of delivery. He was a truly extemporaneous preacher taking nothing into the pulpit except a Bible. This did NOT mean he did not do his homework, using the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as a feeble excuse for laziness. He writes (“Sermons from Job” p xiv):

“If I should enter the pulpit without deigning to glance at a book, and frivolously imagine to myself, ‘Oh well, when I preach God will give me enough to say,’ and come here without troubling to read, or thinking what I ought to declare, and do not carefully consider how I must apply Holy Scripture to the edification of the people – then I should be an arrogant upstart.”

The point is that having done his thorough preparation, Calvin firmly believed that there must be a place in the act of preaching for the continuing inspiration of the Holy Spirit. My father advised me early on that there is a highway code in preaching which gives the right of way to the new inspiration coming into mind over the pre-prepared inspiration on your notes. Why should not God speak to you even in the middle of your speaking – a bit like a radio or television producer speaking in the presenter’s earphones even as the show is being broadcast live? It is a living God speaking a live word through a living preacher as he/she addresses a live audience. Preaching is very much inspired utterance - both planned and spontaneous.

Preaching is **The Word of God**. This phrase is often misunderstood. It is not simply a case of opening a book and finding the answer to all issues. The story goes that this is what one woman thought, so she opened the Bible randomly and looked at the first verse which caught her eye which happened to be: “and Judas went and hung himself” (Matt.27.5)! Better luck next time she said to herself; but this time she found (Luke 10.37) “Go thou and do likewise”! Third time lucky she thought, but only found the words: “Do what you have to do quickly” (John 13.27)!

The Bible is very different from the Muslim scriptures in the Quran which are more in the form of specific rules giving clear black and white instructions. The Bible is not a rule book, nor even a book of general principles for us to apply. The Bible is rather an introduction to the person, the

man, the God, Jesus who in Himself is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The Bible requires a living God giving live communication to living, changing people in a dynamically changing world. God inspires the writing and the preaching, the reading and the hearing. It is a fluid, dynamic, personal matter. The result can be that two people come to opposite conclusions after reading the same passage or hearing the same sermon! Reading and prayer must go together. What counts is obedience to God, not uniform conformity to some inflexible law. The Bible has within itself differing opinions and from it different people come to different conclusions even after praying about it. The important thing is sincere, faithful obedience to God.

We must sit under the Bible and not proudly above it. We must let it read us rather than us reading it. We must listen rather than read what we want to read into it. We are not the judge and jury with the Bible, nor even God Himself in the dock. The same also applies to preaching. We sit under the spoken Word, not above it. We listen humbly and critically but not as self-appointed re-interpretors.

The Word of God is His communication with us. Preaching is part of that but it is not the whole story. Some preaching is not the Word of God and therefore not proper preaching. Where the Word of God is present in a sermon it will not be every single word literally. God's divine Word or message will come through the preacher's human words. The Word of God comes to us in a threefold way – in an inter-related trinity: 1. The Word Written (i.e. the Bible)

2. The Word Spoken (i.e. the preaching and teaching of the whole Church)

3. The Word Made Flesh (i.e. the life and work of Jesus).

Each of these three alone can be misunderstood (and have been). Jesus was crucified; the Bible is mis-read; and the Church speaks with many, confused voices. However, all three together are a check and balance system. Each must be brought into line with the other two, like a stereoscopic picture. For instance, if you hear preaching which sounds a little strange, ask whether it accords with the Bible and the life of Jesus. If you read something in the Bible which you are not very sure about, ask what the Church and what Jesus say. When all three agree e.g. that God is Love (the Bible says it, the Church proclaims it, and Jesus lived it), then that is the Word of God and the Christian's "bottom line" which is non-negotiable.

If God wants to speak through us then we have no real choice but to obey and preach. Many of the most famous preachers did not want to preach e.g. Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Chrysostom, Augustine, Luther, Knox. However they each felt compelled to let God speak His Word through their words. Paul, for example, ran away into the desert but came back saying: "Woe is me if I preach not". Martin Luther, who produced a book or pamphlet at the rate of one per fortnight throughout his ministry, when thinking about preaching could only stutter out:

"You see we preachers are like young children who are learning to speak and can only use half words and quarter words".

They felt compelled to speak because they possessed a Word from God to say. In fact it is more accurate to say that God's Word possessed them.

George McLeod in his book on preaching, "Speaking the Truth in Love", points out that the Word of God is eternal, the same yesterday, today and forever; yet it must be communicated appropriately to every time and place in a multitude of different ways. The Word is constant like the sun's beams but it is reflected and refracted in many ways. The Word cannot be pinned down and labelled as a fixed body of truth. For example the fact of the Atonement is a constant but it has been variably understood – e.g. Anselm's satisfaction theory, Aquinas' penal theory, Aulen's Christus Victor, Abelard's tree illustration etc. Jesus became a "creature of His day" and preachers similarly have to incarnate the eternal Word as children of their day. Some anonymous person rightly said:

"Every true sermon must have heaven for its father and earth for its mother."

Phillips Brooks in his book "Lectures on Preaching" (which is the Yale lectures on Preaching in 1877), gave one of the most famous definitions of what preaching is. He said that preaching is communicating **Truth through Personality**:

"Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men.

It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality.....

Preaching is the bringing of truth through personality.

It must have both elements." (p 5)

Brooks points out that Jesus considered other methods but chose preaching as His way of communicating with us. He taught a few men and women then told them to tell others. Jesus chose preaching because it is personal interaction. Since the Gospel is Christ Himself, not dogma but the person...(Jesus said: "I am the truth")...how else could He, or we, communicate than by personal preaching? Brooks re-emphasises (p 8):

"Truth through Personality is our description of real preaching.

The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and out through his pen.

It must come through his character, his affections, his intellectual and Moral being. It must come genuinely through him."

Preparation for the ministry therefore must be "nothing less than the making of a man" (or a woman). It cannot be mere training to do tricks nor even acquiring knowledge. Phillips Brooks remained confident that nothing can ever take the place of preaching because of the personal element in it: (p 11)

"Let a man be a true preacher, really uttering the truth through his own personality, and it is strange how men will gather to listen to him."

He adds two cautionary notes: preachers should not blame people for their hardness of heart when it is often their own mistakes; and preachers should not rely on people's faithfulness to cover for their carelessness and laziness.

Phillips Brooks goes on to draw out several important points relative to (a) truth and (b) personality. He says (p14):

"it is a message given to us for transmission, but yet a message which we cannot transmit until it has entered into our own experience, and we can give our own testimony of its spiritual power."

The message is the important thing, not the preacher. We are not the first messenger and not the last and we are indebted to the messengers before us. It is not our exclusive message to get all possessive about. It possesses us and we are duty bound to share it widely. Brooks strikes a cautionary note (p19)-

"The heretic in all times has not been the errorist as such, but the self-willed man, whether his judgments were right or wrong. 'A man may be a heretic in the truth,' says Milton. He is the man who, taking his ideas not as a message from God, but as his own discoveries, has cut himself off from the message-bearing Church of all the ages."

In particular he names two great errors: the mistake of sitting above things instead of under them, of imposing prejudgments rather than listening to and learning from the subject in hand; and the mistake of working for the means rather than the end, by which he means "Churchianity" rather than Christianity.

Every preacher has his or her own personality. This is not a problem but an asset to be developed. Beware of role playing and minister's voices but remember (p26):

"The real preparation of the preacher's personality for its transmissive work comes by the opening of his life on both sides,

towards the truth of God and towards the needs of man.”

The skill, he says is in combining Truth and Personality, the Gospel and Life. He gives two correctives to guide us to the truth (p29) and (p30):

“If a preacher is not a man of his age, in sympathy with its spirit, his preaching fails.”

However...

“The desire to meet the needs of the people to whom we preach may easily become servility. There is a line beyond which adaptation becomes feebleness. There are some things which St.Paul will not become to any man.”

Whatever one’s personality, the highest standards are required. When a friend of Alexander the Great asked him for ten talents, he gave him fifty. When his friend said that ten were enough, Alexander replied:

True, ten are sufficient for you to take, but not for me to give.”

Preaching is also **Worship**. It is part of most acts of public worship and many would argue that it is the most important element of the service. (Personally I don’t like the exercise of weighing one element against another – they are all important in their own ways). The key point here is to remember that the sermon, or any other way of preaching, is part of an act of worship. It is worship. It is not just “a talk”. Preaching should inspire the rest of the public worship and the rest of the worship should help the preaching. Preaching helps us to see God more clearly and when we see God more clearly we worship better. It is a happy hen-egg situation, an upward spiral.

We offer God the best we have as preachers because our preaching is an act of worship on our part as preachers. In wider context, our preaching is part of an act of worship on our part as the corporate Body, the congregation. The preacher does his/her best but the congregation also has a vital role for preaching is a corporate activity. Dame Cybil Thorndike, the famous actress, said in reference to the effect of an audience on an actor: “The quality of the audience makes all the difference in the world.” At its best, the disparate group which constitutes any congregation, becomes more than merely the sum of its parts. It is bonded by love, inspired by the Holy Spirit, focussed upon God. It is like a field of ripe corn swaying rhythmically in the same direction, like a flock of birds flying in formation following the promptings of invisible forces within, beyond and between them. The congregation is like a keyboard of many notes united in beautiful harmony at the touch of the Master’s hand. God and human beings, individually and corporately simultaneously, are in communion and communication. It is quality time together between God, the worshipper and the other fellow worshippers, God the preacher and the congregation. It is genuinely two way communication and all parties human and divine are deeply moved by it. P.T. Forsyth in “Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind” said:

“[Preaching is] a sacramental act, done together with the community.”

“The word is living only in a living community.”

“Preaching is the organised Hallelujah of an ordered community.”

“Preaching is the Church confessing its faith.”

Dom Gregory Dix: “The Shape of the Liturgy” (p29-30) said:

“THE WHOLE CHURCH prayed in the person of Christ; the whole Church was charged with the office of proclaiming the revelation of Christ...Christ and His Church are one, with one mission, one life, one prayer, one Gospel, one offering, one being, one Father.”

Donald Coggan in “Stewards of Grace” (p93) says that the congregation is “in on” the preaching as well as “in on” the Lord’s Supper:

“The act of preaching is not something done by the man up in the pulpit,

any more than the Holy Communion is an act done by the man who stands far away at the Lord's Table. Both are acts of the Body corporate, every member in his own office having his own function to perform."

Preaching is also worship because in it God is encountering us and we are responding. God is alive and active initiating and prompting our responses. His coming to us is even more wonderful than our coming to Him. Worship is a supernatural event and encounter. Henry Sloane Coffin in "the Public Worship of God" (p25) said:

"Through what is seen and heard, thought and felt, the living God imparts His truth, His love, His life to us. We both give and receive. and what we receive far exceeds what we give."

Martin Luther said: "To have God is to worship Him." Worship is the relationship we have with God. The aim of all preaching and all worship is, as Victor Hugo said of his Bishop Bienvenu: "He did not study God: he was dazzled by Him." Preacher and hearer should both alike be dazzled by God. Dazzled includes stretching the intellect, unleashing the emotions, stimulating the imagination and stirring the will; or put another way, blowing the mind, moving the heart, pricking the conscience and captivating the soul. Preaching as worship cultivates awe and wonder, gratitude, love, confession, commitment. Henry Sloane Coffin's test of a good sermon was: "Does it enhance God for worshippers?" Preaching should bring us closer to God and should result in our offering of ourselves to Him in His service. George McDonald in his novel "The Marquis of Lossie" describes the preaching of a schoolmaster:

To those who understood, it was as if he would force his way through every stockade of prejudice, ditch of habit, rampart of indifference, moat of sin, wall of stupidity, and curtain of ignorance, until he stood face to face with the conscience of his hearers."

Thomas Chalmers, the famous Scottish preacher, began with moralistic preaching, but radically changed when he saw it was getting nowhere. He changed, and so did his congregation. He preached the free offer of salvation. One of his hearers records:

"He would bend over the pulpit, and press us to take the gift as if he held it at that moment in his hand, and would not be satisfied till every one of us had got possession of it."

Instruction and discussion are valuable but they are not worship.

There is nothing more wonderful in all the world than to have the privilege and pleasure of preaching and realising, as you preach, that God is really at work, and people are really listening and responding. You can hear a pin drop, all eyes are fixed on the preacher and all hearts attuned to God's wavelength. Something very real, miraculous and divine is happening and you can know it and feel it, as can the congregation!

If nothing happens for us in preaching and public worship in general, it may be because the Spirit chose not to blow our way, but it is far more likely that the fault lies with us. The Spirit is God in action. It is the Spirit's action in preaching which makes it supernatural. God's Spirit helps us pray, puts substance into sacraments, helps us to understand and respond by offering ourselves as living sacrifices, and the Spirit makes the reading and preaching of the Word...

"an effectual means of enlightening, convincing and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to His image; and subduing them to His will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation." (Larger Catechism Q155)

The Reformers drew no sharp distinction between a service with Communion and one without because, to them, all acts of worship are communions with the Living God. Henry Sloane Coffin in his book "The Public Worship of God" (p128) explains:

"In both sermon and Sacrament God is personally present and giving Himself to those who will receive Him in faith. In a sermon He is symbolised in words suffused with the personality of the preacher and brought home with the force of his conviction. Its message comes from God in that it rises out of His historic self-revelation recorded in the Scriptures. It comes from Him more immediately in that it has laid hold of and has spoken through the mind, soul, and voice of a living ambassador. And in preacher and message God Himself faces a congregation and speaks... We believe in the real presence of God in Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper... He is both Host and Food. We believe also in the real presence of God in Christ in the ministry of the Word... He is both the speaker and the communication."

Augustine calls the sacrament a "Verbum Visible", a visible word, and the sermon conveying the Word of God is not mere information or explanation about God; it is God acting dynamically upon the hearers and evoking from them a response. The word is the chief means God has chosen to save the world. It is Christ who speaks. He is the Host at the Table and the Preacher from the Pulpit. The Word spoken helps produce faith and unites the body of believers and prepares them for participation in the Communion. Paulinus Milner in "The Ministry of the Word" (p29), quoting Vatican Council's "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" (56), says:

"The ministry of the word and the ministry of the Eucharist together go to make up the Mass, it means that just as the celebrant or president acts in the Eucharist IN PERSONA CHRISTI, so he does in the homily. Just as in the Eucharist he is part... in the making present of the mystery of Christ by consecration, so in his preaching he is performing a sacramental role in making Christ present by the word."

It is also a wonderful thought that we worship corporately. Probably the majority of people think most clearly when by ourselves, but we worship best in a devout gathering. Henry Sloane Coffin in "The Public Worship of God" (p19,21):

"In a Christian congregation are stored memories and a corporate devoutness which exceed the religious feeling of all its members....  
...a worshipping congregation is more than the sum total of its component members – vastly MORE! There is a PLUS in public worship which private worship lacks."

Coffin quotes Martin Luther as saying:

"At home in my own house there's no warmth or vigour in me;  
but in the church, when the multitude is gathered together,  
a fire is kindled in my heart, and it breaks its way through."

Baxter says:

"When my heart declines and faints, it's raised by their heat and light."

Of course we worship God for His own sake not for the warm glow that worship gives us. We love our wife for herself, not for the nice feelings that being in love gives us. There is a mistaken view today that we gather for the edification of the worshippers and to honour God. That is man centred! Worship is rather the offering of ourselves to God. We offer lip praise and practical service but above all we offer ourselves. With our co-operation, God now possesses new entrances into His world in us.

There are many views about what worship is and correspondingly there are many views on what preaching is. For example, worship and preaching can be "retelling the story", "being addressed by God", "nourishing the faithful", "building up fellowship", "getting our lives in focus", "offering

God to the world”, “offering the world to God”, “being energised for service”, “being open to the Spirit of God”, “a sacramental moment”, “a human-Divine encounter”, “a mystery unfolding”, “proclamation”, “group therapy or pastoral counselling en masse”, “liberation”, “a liturgical experience”, and many more descriptions besides! Arguably worship and preaching are all of the above, plus many more facets to the diamond!

Preaching is also **Prophecy**. Both Old Testament prophecy and modern preaching are the same thing. God speaks to His people through the preacher/prophet. I as a twenty first century preacher share with Jeremiah a consciousness of having been in the presence of God and of having been chosen (even before birth) by God to tell others God’s messages.

The purposes of the messages remain the same – the building up of the Body of God’s people, challenge and comfort, trying to turn people to God and keep them looking to Him and not false gods.

The content of these messages is the same – God loves you and wants you, exclusively; repent of sin and turn to Him. The world would like the Church to keep out of politics, but that it cannot do for it has always been the prophet/preacher’s job to relate the messages from God to the burning moral and ethical problems of the day. Donald Coggan in “Stewards of Grace” (p111) writes:

“Christian men and women have the right to look to the preacher for guidance on the rights and wrongs of moral questions; and the Christian preacher has the right and the duty to “convict” and to “challenge” his hearers....’Practical insight’ and ‘moral strengthening’ - these are integral parts of any preaching which is to tell in a world morally and ethically adrift.”

A mere social Gospel is an abuse of the pulpit; but on the other hand, preaching with no social interest is also an abuse. Prophets and preachers aim to stimulate the mind and conscience. One of the main messages is that no amount of ritual and ceremony can replace good ethical conduct (e.g. Isa.1.12-17; Jer.7.8-10; Amos 5.21-24; Micah 6.6-8; Hosea 6.6 etc.) Still today we preach the danger of “Churchianity” replacing Christianity. Still today we preach that social justice is part of everyday life down to the smallest details. God insists in the sanctification of ordinary daily life.

Prophets and preachers remind people that God is God; that He is the Creator, Provider, Redeemer, King, Saviour, Shepherd, Lord of Nature, Lord of History, the only God who tolerates no false gods, a jealous God who claims exclusive, personal relationships with us. William Barclay in “Communicating the Gospel”(p8) says:

“the religion which is to survive is the religion which refuses to compromise with its environment and which worships God alone.”

The word from God to us, which prophetic preachers have always stressed, is that He sees our relationship in terms of a monogamous, loving marriage (e.g.Isa.54.5;Jer.2.2; Hosea).

The prophetic message continues to be addressed to the nation as well as to individuals and groups. Indeed it was not until Ezekiel that the individual emerges in sayings like “the soul that sins shall die” (Ezek.18.4). Today we are too individualistic; we have lost much of our corporateness. The vision of the prophets was, and still is, a vision of the WORLD. The Jews originally and the Christians subsequently were always chosen by God not so much for privilege and their own benefit so much as for service, responsibility, and to be witnesses to the whole world – to be a light to the nations (e.g. Isa.42.6; Isa.49.6; Isa.66.19; Zech.8.20-23). The Good News which prophets and preachers alike proclaim includes the coming “Day of the Lord” (e.g. Isa.13.9; Joel 2.11,30; Amos 5.18; Zeph.1.14,15; Malachi 4.5).

They spoke of it as an age to come, a golden age, the coming of the Kingdom of God, God's direct intervention in human history. The "Day of the Lord" would come suddenly, without warning and involve the disintegration of the present world and the start of a new and wonderful world of God. It would be the day of God's final judgment. We preach essentially the same message with regard to the Second Coming of Jesus. The message is still the same that God has not left the world to itself and history is leading to a climax. This eschatological dimension has always been and still is an essential and integral part of preaching and prophecy in every age.

Prophecy and Preaching and Prophetic Preaching is never limited to words. The Old Testament prophets were master wordsmiths putting the finest thoughts into the most eloquent of words but they also used dramatic, symbolic actions (e.g. I Kings 11.26-37; Isa.27.1-7; Jer.13.1-11; Ezek.4.1-3, 4-9,12-15; 5.1-17; 12.1-16, 17-20; 24.15-24; 37.15-17. We must communicate one way or another! To this end, we always need to be prepared to experiment.

W M Macgregor in "For Christ and the Kingdom" says that it is pitiful when a prophet is regarded as merely a public entertainer; it is tragic when entertainers are regarded as great prophets; and it is sad when a preacher who is merely an entertainer is given the respect due to a prophet. It is a great tragedy when "the hungry sheep look up and are not fed". Macgregor says that these mistakes arise because people don't know what the minister's task is. He says what the task is....(p91):

"In the Old Testament the prophet is referred to as the "eyes" of the people – the man who saw when others were groping. He was able to tell them about God and the way to God, about life and its meaning and the secret of victory."

Preaching is **Good News**. It doesn't always sound that way when you hear it today but it is fundamentally good news for a world desperately in need of some good news. It is Good News that at the heart of the universe beats a heart of love – powerful love and loving power – a cosmic Being with a personal concern for each of us – the Almighty Father and Father Almighty. It is Good News that He has come down to us who could not reach up to Him, as the Good Shepherd finding the lost sheep who could never of themselves find Him. It is Good News that he forgives and heals and saves. It is Good News that He who was infinitely rich, powerful and life itself, became poor, weak and crucified for our sake so that through His poverty, powerlessness and death, we might become rich, strong and enjoy eternal life. It is Good News that God became incarnate, human, (without ceasing to be God), the God-Man, the Representative Human, the Head of the Human Race, sharing in our human lot in order that we might be raised up as adopted children of God, sharing in His Crucifixion, Resurrection and Life both now and in eternity. It is Good News that He breathes His Holy Spirit, His own breath and life into our dry bones and makes us come alive and truly live the fullest quality life, literally inspiring us. It is Good News that we belong to the Church, the Family of God, the Communion of Saints on Earth and in Heaven. (See the Creeds for further details)!

Early Christian preaching was very much Good News preaching but it came in four basic varieties:

- 1 KERUGMA (literally a herald's announcement) – stating the facts
- 2 DIDACHE (literally teaching) – elucidating the meaning of the facts
- 3 PARAKLESIS (literally exhortation) – encouraging people to live by these facts
- 4 HOMILIA – treating every area of life in the light of the Christian message

The KERUGMA consisted of five main messages:

1. Jesus, and all that happened to Him, is the direct fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. Interestingly the Jews interpreted Scripture on four levels:

- (1) Peshat – the simple meaning
- (2) Remaz – the suggested meaning
- (3) Derush – the meaning after investigation
- (4) Sod – the spiritual meaning

On every level Jesus was understood to be the fulfilment of the Old Testament.

2. Jesus, by His life death and resurrection, is the Messiah ushering in the Kingdom of God and the dawn of the new age.
3. Jesus is alive and knowable, a real, living presence whom we can know, love and serve.
4. Jesus will return in glory (and surprise) at the Second Coming. This can be seen in personal terms i.e. when I die or in cosmic terms i.e. when the world ends.
5. Jesus is the only Saviour. We must choose life or death. With Jesus is the gift of the Holy Spirit and eternal life. Without Jesus is godlessness, death and hell. So, repent (literally turn round) and receive the Holy Spirit.

Notice that the preaching is all about Jesus. The Good News or Gospel is Jesus. William Barclay, in “Communicating the Gospel” (p48) gives a summary of the KERUGMA:

“The new age has dawned; God has acted directly in the life and the death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. All this is the fulfilment of prophecy and the very conception of prophecy implies a plan and a purpose which are being steadily worked out in the world. This Jesus who lived and died and rose again will come again; He will come to the individual heart, and in the end He will triumph over all the world. There comes the demand for repentance, for a new attitude to life and to living, and the promise of forgiveness for the past and strength for the future. And finally there comes the threat that, if a man will not accept life, then he has accepted death.”

The earliest recorded Christian sermon we have is in Acts chapter two – Peter’s preaching to a very mixed crowd on the Day of Pentecost. It follows all we have been saying above about KERUGMA. Again it is all about Jesus.

(1) 1Peter claims that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament. In particular he quotes Joel the prophet (Joel 2.28-32). The Cross was no accident. It was part of God’s eternal plan and purpose (Acts 2.23; 3.18; 4.28; 13.29). The O.T. has been working up to this.

(2) Peter says Jesus is the Messiah (in Hebrew) or Christ (in Greek). The long awaited “Day of the Lord” or “Kingdom of God” or “Age to Come” have arrived with Jesus, in fact in Jesus. Jews believed that all time was divided into two ages – the present, utterly evil and doomed age and the golden age of God which was still to come. In between the two was to be “the Day of the Lord” which would be the terrible birth pangs of the dawning new age. It would come suddenly like a thief in the night; it would shake the world to its foundations and it would be a day of judgment and terror. (See eg Isa.2.12; Isa.13.6f.; Amos 5.18; Zeph.1.7; Joel 2; 1Thess.5.2f; 2pet.3.10) Peter is saying that the Day of the Lord has come with Jesus. He is the Lord and this is the Day.

“..this Jesus, whom you crucified, is the one that God has made Lord and Messiah!” (v36)

(3) Jesus is Risen, alive, with us and for us. We can know Him personally

(4) Jesus will return in glory at the Second Coming. Admittedly Peter does not stress this particular element on this occasion but then why should every sermon try to say everything? Arguably Peter does preach about the Second Coming if we take it as His coming at Pentecost as the Holy Spirit or if we interpret it as His coming to us the hearer or if we interpret it as a process begun rather than a one off event still to happen. I still think that for Early Christian preaching, the Second Coming was an integral part of their preaching but on this particular sermon peter

emphasises more the other core matters. So in at least four out of the five main points of the KERUGMA, Peter's sermon is a good example.

(5) Jesus is the only Saviour. Accept Him. Do not reject Him for that is a sin punishable by death (Acts 2.23; 3.13; 4.10; 5.30). The Cross opens eyes to see and hearts to repent (John 12.32). Every one of us helps to crucify Jesus but the Cross demands repentance – a change of mind and a change of heart. Jesus' Holy Spirit helps us not to sin again.

“Each one of you must turn away from his sins and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God's gift, the Holy Spirit.....Save yourselves from the punishment coming on this wicked people.” (v.38,40)

Peter's second sermon in Acts 3.11-16 also shows the characteristic features of the preaching of the Early Church:

(1) Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament:

“The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our ancestors, has given divine glory to his Servant Jesus.” (v13)

(2) Jesus is the Messiah:

“God announced long ago through all the prophets that his Messiah had to suffer; and he made it come true in this way” (v18)  
....”Jesus, who is the Messiah” (v20)

(3) Jesus is alive and knowable:

“It was faith in Jesus that has made him (the lame man) well,” (v16)

“God chose his Servant and sent him first to you, to bless you..” (v26)

(4) Jesus' Second Coming:

“..he will send Jesus, who is the Messiah he has already chosen for you. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for all things to be made new,” (v20-21)

(5) Jesus is the only Saviour:

“You killed the one who leads to life” (v15)

“It was the power of his name that gave strength to this lame man...

...it was faith in Jesus that made him well” (v16)

“times of spiritual strength will come from the Lord” (v20)

Early Christian preaching included these recurring themes-

- The Crucifixion was the greatest crime in human history
- The Resurrection is the vindication of Jesus
- Jesus is Lord
- Mercy and warning are combined
- There is no excuse for rejecting Jesus
- Repent and change
- The slate will be wiped clean
- The Second Coming
- The Old Testament foretold it all
- The Jews are God's chosen people
- Privilege brings responsibility

We pick up the gist of early preaching from various sources including Peter's two sermons in Acts 2 and 3; Paul's sermons in Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13), Lystra (Acts 14) and Athens (Acts 17). They followed the pattern of the Synagogue service which included (a) the Shema (Deut.6.4) (b) reading Scripture (one reading from the Law and one from the Prophets) and (c) an exposition of Scripture i.e. preaching. Remember that there was no professional ministry; everything was done by the members of the congregation. When it came time for the sermon,

anyone could give a message (subject to the approval of the head of the synagogue). Here was a wonderful opportunity which the earliest Christian preachers eagerly seized with both hands. Interestingly the sermon was always followed by general discussion so early preaching was both monologue and dialogue.

Preaching is Exegesis and its opposite Eisegesis. Both can be done badly and do a great disservice to the Bible, the hearers and God; but let us assume that they are done well. Basically they are the two ends of the one stick or two sides of the same coin. That is why I have paired them together in the same section. They approach the same matter from opposite sides and both of their contributions are necessary for the full, rounded picture. They both try to relate the Bible and Life.

Karl Barth wrote in “The Word of God and the Word of Man”(p100-101):

“I sought to find my way between the problem of human life on the one hand and the content of the Bible on the other. As a minister I wanted to speak to the *people* in the infinite contradiction of their life, but to speak the no less infinite message of the *Bible*, which was as much of a riddle as life. Often these two magnitudes, life and the Bible, have risen before me (and still rise!) like Scylla and Charybdis:”

Exegesis - begins with the Bible and tries to listen to what it is saying to us today. It begins by doing the scientific thing of putting the thing we are studying in the centre-stage and ourselves off-stage. We try not to pollute the experiment with our own views nor contaminate the results with our own pre-conceived ideas. We try to get alongside the original author, try to get into his mind, join the group of those who first heard the message and hear it with their mind-set. Obviously all of this is difficult but we try our best in this direction. For example, Moses condemned the Israelites for making a Golden Calf. We try to feel Moses’ anger and behind it God’s heartbroken frustration. We try to understand what was in the minds of those Israelites. Having just been rescued from Egypt and made God’s special people, why did they so quickly and so wickedly go off the rails? Was there more to what they did than meets the eye? Is there a logical or psychological explanation in terms of their culture and context? For example, the fact that every other grouping at the time had idols. What exactly is an idol? Were people really so stupid as to make a gold thing themselves then immediately talk themselves into believing that it had just saved their lives? Was it maybe just “an aid to worship”? Why was this incident recorded in oral tradition for centuries – what was the message? Why was it recorded in Exodus 32? Why was it also recorded in Deuteronomy 9? Why are both now part of Holy Scripture for both Jews and Christians. Are the Jews back then and nowadays and the Christians over the past two thousand years all getting slightly different nuances out of the same recorded event? From immersing ourselves in 3,000 years ago Middle Eastern thinking, we begin to learn things and see things differently, and in turn these new insights can shed light on our current circumstances. For instance, we begin to ask ourselves: do we have any idols in our own way? What? Why? What does God feel about it right now? What should I do about that? etc.

Eisegesis – approaches the Bible and Life more from the Life side. The primary interest is not in what happened long ago and on the pages of the Bible so much as in what is happening now in our own lives. Most sermon listeners today are not all that interested in history nor the Bible. You have to spend the introduction trying to awaken interest, creating an appetite, before saying in effect, “come with me back into history...back into the Bible world and I will show you things that are timeless and amazingly relevant to today.” It is a bit like the radio 4 programme called “Taking the Long View” which begins with contemporary news items and seeks to show that “there is nothing new under the sun” as Ecclesiastes believes – it has all

happened before and indeed many times over. As someone wisely observed: “those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it!” God is also timeless and “we are all Jock Tamsin’s bairns” as we say in Scotland, so although the scenery and costumes may change, in many ways the play remains much the same. In every time and place life is a story of recurring power plays, passions, familiar sins, cycles of violence, love and hate etc. This is why Greek tragedies or Shakespearian plays also remain relevant. Beyond that of course, Shakespeare is dead but God is alive and still communicating to us vitally and dynamically through the Bible and through our reading of it and our listening to sermons from it. In the case of the Golden Calf we might begin by singing the hymn “When I survey the wondrous Cross” with the lines in it:

“the dearest idol I have known, what’er that idol be,  
help me to tear it from its throne, and worship only Thee.”

Then we preach something on the lines of:

“What might your “dearest idol be?” Is it a pop idol?  
Do you “idolise” anyone? Why do football fans nowadays  
Make bowing gestures to their heroes on the pitch and use the  
Vocabulary of “hero worship” calling them “gods” etc.  
Have you ever seen a live..I mean dead..idol? I have – in Taiwan...  
...We may not erect statues but we perhaps have idols in our minds.  
Some people say openly that they “idolise” their family...”

From this contemporary analysis (which is quite similar to what comedians do when they observe modern life) we suggest that a similar situation happened in our first reading this morning.

As you can see good exegesis and good eisegesis complement each other. Both are also easily contaminated and abused. In the light of all the above you can see why Old and New Testament Studies are essential for Preaching in a beautiful hen-egg complementarity. The Old and New Testaments give Preaching its content and preaching gives them ever new life, relevance and articulation. They serve each other. Similarly Theology exists to give Preaching content and keep it correct while Preaching communicates Theology. My Professor of Systematic Theology, James Torrance, just could not help climaxing every lecture in preaching and prayer. At the same time my Professor of Preaching, Ian Pitt-Watson emphasised in lectures and in his book “A Kind of Folly” (p6):

“preaching is, quite literally, the beginning and the end of theology”

Good preaching, week in week out to the same people ought to leave them much more theologically literate and enthused!

Preaching is therefore **Theology** given voice and communicated. Theology is literally “Theos” - Greek for “God” and “logos” - Greek for “study of”. As Ian Pitt-Watson points out in “A Kind of Folly”(p11):

“Our primary task is to speak not of what *we* think and feel and ought to do but of what *God* is and does. There is a simple but necessary discipline to which all our preaching should be subject. The question must always be asked ‘What doctrine does this sermon seek to present and illuminate? If no clear answer can be given to that question the subject matter of the sermon must be suspect. All preaching should be doctrinal preaching.”

Of course this does not mean that it must be dry and academic. Our job as preachers is to be a living bridge between two worlds: that of the great Christian theologians and that of contemporary “ordinary” people. We must commune in the rarefied, intellectual atmosphere of

Karl Barth and Co. while also pastoring Mr and Mrs Smith through their domestic crises. What is the point of theology if it is not to be useful in daily, routine life? What is the point of daily, routine life if it is not in tune with God's plan and purpose and if it lacks vision and insight?

To be fair, the great theologians do not live up ivory towers detached from everyday life. (These are the not so great ones). Their theology was smelted in the fiery furnaces of harsh reality and sculpted in the school of hard knocks which we call life. Also to be fair, Mr and Mrs Smith often surprise us by the depth of their theology – it is just that they cannot articulate it so fluently nor in so much jargon. Often the preaching theologian or the theological preacher is only articulating what the congregation has already experienced and learned. However this is a vital function of preaching. When you preach that “The Lord is Your Shepherd” at a funeral, you may not be telling them anything new, but you are reminding them of what they already know. They want to hear it again; they want to hear it officially declared; and in hearing it they experience it again!

The doctrine in our preaching can be more or less explicit but it should always be there in the foreground or in the background, but never absent. David H C Read in “Preaching about the Needs of Real People” (p31) reminds us:

“Just as the scaffolding used in the construction of a good building is not visible in the completed edifice, so the solid theological and exegetical work that underlies a good sermon should be skilfully hidden in the finished product.”

We have to translate the theology into everyday language. Theology is a living process not indoctrination into set answers. Hermeneutics can be defined as taking outdated, currently meaningless images, words and thought patterns and finding the modern equivalent meaningful ways of expressing them to your present congregation. We have to translate Biblical words and images into contemporary language, thought and experience. For example we could say that Elisha at Dothan was wearing the bi-focal spectacles of faith! He could see all the problems in the foreground but also the heavenly army in the background!

The Church has to speak God's Word in the world's language. And this is more than merely a matter of words, vocabulary. It is also to do with the world's thought patterns and styles. Life can only be truly understood and interpreted in the light of God, the Bible, theology; and God, Bible and theology can only win people's hearts and souls once they have been incarnated into daily human life.

The discovery of God and the discovery of ourselves go hand in hand. Conversely, the loss of God inevitably involves a loss of humanity. You cannot have good theology without it being applied theology; nor can you have quality life without some theological appreciation of God. Fortunately the world is full of God and theology and God is passionately interested in the world. God did not become incarnate only once in one way. Continually He is getting alongside people on their Emmaus Roads and through preachers of many varieties, He is explaining this journey of life and what it is about.

Preaching is theology but not in the sense that we study the subject matter, God. Rather, God studies and encounters us. He stops us in our tracks, holds up a mirror to ourselves, challenges us to change and shows us His will for us. It is far more exciting that way round! It is not God who is at stake – does He or does He not exist?; how can he allow suffering? etc. – it is our lives which are in question! How arrogant of human beings to ever entertain the notion that we can examine God and pronounce regarding Him! Preaching is the humble matter of letting God address us, listening very carefully to what He is telling us, confessing our sins hitherto and asking His help to make the necessary changes! Theology and ethics are inseparable. Preaching ought to be God-centred but it does aim to change us.

Preaching is also theology from another angle: preachers are theologians and theologians are preachers, by definition really. When they are not, you get very dry preaching and dry theological teaching! Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, to name but three, were both preachers and theologians. In my home congregation someone stood up and declared:

“I am not a theologian, but I love Jesus.”

The minister immediately retorted:

“I am a theologian and I love Jesus. In fact it is my love of Jesus which prompted me to become a theologian.”

Heinrich Ott in his book, “Theology and Preaching” (p22-3) writes:

“It may be necessary to affirm that dogmatics is the conscience of preaching and that preaching, again, is the heart and soul of dogmatics.”

W E Sangster used to put it this way:

“Doctrines must be preached practically and duties doctrinally.”

(Introduction to “The Craft of Sermon Construction”).

It is also important to remember that every person is a theologian – the only question is whether they are a good one or a bad one! People do have their thoughts and opinions. The problem is that there is a lot of ignorance out there and heresies abound. There is little family worship and wholesome private study. People need instruction in the faith, they need nourishment - milk then meat, but above all they need to see Jesus. The minister must be a good theologian and with his/her help the congregation can become good theologians too:

“Over the years the preacher should stimulate the congregation to acquire the habit of thinking theologically, growing in biblical knowledge, and in interpreting the doctrines of the faith in relation to their daily problems and decisions at home, at work, and as Christian citizens.”

-D.Read “Preaching about the Needs of Real People” (p98)

The main point to make when thinking about preaching as being theology, is to stress that preaching must be Christ-centred, not man-centred. That is the number one mistake in terms of seriousness and in terms of frequency in sermons which I hear. We humans find it extremely difficult to get away from the subjective “I – strain” of seeing everything from our own point of view. We must preach Christ crucified and risen as Paul says. We have no other Good News. Christ IS the Gospel. We point others to Christ. We see the whole of life through Christ spectacles. We judge things in the light of Christ. He is the standard. God is not a bigger version of ourselves; He is as revealed in Jesus Christ. Preaching pin points what Jesus has done and is doing today as He continues to minister among us. Preaching IS the Risen, Living Christ encountering us and revealing Himself to us. Preaching is a mysterious, sacramental, liberating, therapeutic existential moment of encounter. It is a mini-Damascus Road experience (and maybe not so “mini”). Preaching is both the worshipful moment itself and the theological articulation of the doxological “wow” moment.

Preaching can also be defined as **Pastoral Care** en masse. We usually think of pastoral care in terms of one to one counselling. But it need not be. We have family and group counselling sessions, so why not large group sessions? For all their diversity, people share an awful lot of problems in common. It makes sense to address common personal problems and corporate communal problems together. When God speaks to us human beings He does so as a loving Father in a pastoral way, not as a capricious, book-keeping, judge. Love for us is the wavelength on which He broadcasts. People are very much in need of comfort and Jesus always has compassion. But preaching is not a depressant drug to suppress pain, an

“escapism”, a placebo, a favourite comfort blanket. Preaching fails if all it does is help Stoics to endure. Nor is it a pep pill to artificially stimulate people into hyperactivity. Preaching should be realistic revealing God, life, self, dangers and reasons for hope and give cause for courage. It should encourage us to go forth and claim the victories in Christ who makes us “more than conquerors”.

Ian MacLaren, a Scottish minister, used to say:

“If I had my preaching days over again I would preach much more frequently from the text ‘Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.’”

Comfort, meaning to make bold, is at the heart of our commission. One of Jesus’ favourite catch phrases was: “Fear not.” When you address the congregation who do you think you are speaking to? Are they wicked sinners, fools, lions to be tamed, fish to be caught or maybe just little lost sheep looking for a Shepherd who will carry them home and nourish them? How we look upon our congregation makes a big difference to our preaching. May the flock of the Good Shepherd who are looking up to us in the pulpit for feeding never go away hungry! May those wounded by the daily blows of life in the school of hard knocks find healing and support in God’s first aid stations! May those drowning in storms of passion, temptation, addiction, doubt, adversity find rescue and resuscitation by God’s emergency services! May those bamboozled by the cocophany of siren voices in the market place luring them to destruction hear and recognise the loving call of Jesus through His heralds and town criers! David H C Read in “Preaching About the Needs of Real People” (p15) says:

“There is no such thing as a sermon ‘in vacuo’. It may be thoroughly researched, beautifully constructed, well illustrated and biblically grounded, but if it has no roots in a loving relationship to those to whom it is addressed it is, to borrow a phrase, ‘as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal...the homiletic sin is the lack of sensitivity to what a congregation really is. It is not a solid block of hardened sinners, or a phalanx of diehard conservatives, but a group of living, loving, struggling, aspiring and sometimes despairing human beings, each with quite individual aches and aspirations, fears and worries.”

Dr. Read himself used to interrupt the theological flow of his sermon writing to think about specific people in his congregation and imagine them challenging what he was writing. He called them “intruder” controls. They challenged him to supply their needs. Preachers need to remember that we serve God and God’s people and we need to be sensitive to both. We try to relate the vertical and the horizontal and as Barth says be ambidextrous preachers holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Jesus’ preaching is full of pastoral care expressed in simple and concrete images rather than in propositional statements and theological arguments. Beware of being so intent on preaching the theology that we lose touch with the people and their needs and the humanity of the Bible passages. Good preachers learn to read people’s minds just as translators learn their second language before they can translate. People seldom want heavy theology or intense adult Christian education; what they want is comfort, peace of mind, and a way out of the drabness and frustration of life. Read says (p25):

“A sermon must reveal that the preacher is not just some kind of authority on theology and ethics, but a human being engaged like other members of the church in the daily task of being a true disciple, and subject to the trials and temptations that afflict them.”

This does not mean that we have to betray confidences and be continually quoting case studies i.e. give people real life but not real lives.

Often in communication, much more is heard than is actually said. This is because we speak within a personal and pastoral relationship. The congregation know their preacher and he/she

knows them. They know what he is trying to say even if he is not very articulate; they know that he is speaking from the heart because he has recently experienced it himself; they know that he regularly does certain actions which show that he really does practice what he preaches. Of course it can work the other way too and when our words and actions contradict, the result is that a lot less is heard than is said, and people say:

“I can’t hear a word of what you are saying because of what you are”.

It is a sobering thought but, sometimes our failures as preachers are only our failures as pastors in disguise. When it all goes to plan, God speaks in love, preachers pass on the message in love, and the people receive it and act on it in love.

Preaching is about feelings and emotions as well as thoughts and intellectual content. Preaching is comfort as well as challenge. Preaching is healing through words. Preaching is so much more than words. The communication event is a therapeutic experience. It can be cathartic and it can bring about personal and corporate shalom. It is one of God’s most favoured ways of building up the Body of Christ. Words can hurt but words can also heal. Preaching can be pastoral care in many different ways and when it is primarily reaching the intellect, the emotions, the imagination or the will. We wrongly assume that the most intellectual believers are the spiritually deepest Christians. Apart from the folly of trying to judge these things, suffice it to say that a mature feeler or a vivid imaginer or a determined will person could all be contenders for the maturest or greatest disciple and the seat next to Jesus in the kingdom!

The truth is that intellect guides feelings, channels the imagination and directs the will; while feelings give the intellect, imagination and will warmth and humanity. Similarly, the imagination causes the intellect to bloom, feelings to well up and gives the will vision; while the will focuses the intellect, emotions and imagination on practical outcomes. It is a rich tapestry with many interweaving threads. Preaching is all of this and all of this directed to our pastoral care and our better pleasing of God.

Given all of the above, it is obvious that the functions of preacher and pastor go together. A visiting preacher is at a disadvantage to a regular minister who preaches within an on-going pastoral relationship. The sheep hear their shepherd’s voice much more than a stranger’s voice. But consider this sobering thought: the hearing of the Word of God will depend not primarily on the relationship between preacher and congregation but much more on the relationship between the preacher and congregation with God. That is why the preacher and congregation ought to relate closely in prayer, Bible study, mission, service, education...in a close, joint life as the context in which preaching is said and heard.

Preaching is pastoral care also in this sense. If we want to preach the grace of God (and what else is there?) it will not be communicated by eloquent words on an intellectual level. What has to happen is that God Himself the Great Pastor has to give people a real, living experience of grace. Following on from that, the preacher articulates what it is that people have already experienced. On hearing it, God’s Holy Spirit opens their eyes to recognise it for what it is. Suddenly they realise that what the preacher is saying strikes a cord with them, rings a bell, rings true for them, accords with their recent experience. Preaching of words in the pulpit is only a part of the Divine-human communication. Preaching would be greatly enriched if preachers and people looked on it in this light and saw it more as pastoral care and more to do with feelings. J. MacMurray said:

“What we feel and how we feel is far more important than what we think and how we think.”

There is also a lot of truth in the words of Franz Kafka who said:

“People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did.

But people will remember how you made them feel.”  
Personally I would argue for emphasising all four: intellect, emotion, imagination and will.

H. E. Fosdick in writing the introduction to Samuel McComb’s book, “Preaching in Theory and Practice” suggests:

“start with a live issue, a real problem, personal or social, perplexing to the mind or disturbing to the conscience of the people; face that problem fairly, deal with it honestly, and throw such light on it from the Spirit of Christ that the people will go out able to think more clearly and live more nobly because of that sermon’s illumination....  
....That is real preaching, and not only has such preaching not been outgrown, but there are few things that modern folk are hungrier for than that.”

In another book, “If I had Only One Sermon to Prepare”, Dr. Fosdick writes:

“My ideal of a sermon is an animated conversation with an audience concerning some vital problem of spiritual life....  
....discusses real questions with real people in a real way.”  
“Put another way, this means that the preacher is primarily interested in personalities, in what is actually happening to them, and all the while has in his mind’s eye not primarily a subject he is developing or a text to which he is giving an exposition, but people in front of him whom he is trying to help

Preaching is also **Mission**. It aims to change people...to renew, transform, win over, revive, convert, evangelise...whichever word you prefer. We preach for a result. We try to change lives because changed lives change the world. We want to spread the Good News of Jesus, make disciples and extend the Kingdom of God. We try to bridge both apathy and hostility, preoccupation, disinterest and sales resistance. Beecher in his “Yale Lectures” (p20) says:

“If there is one thing more worthy of being worked for than another, it is the human soul.”

George MacLeod in “Speaking the Truth in Love” says that just as Jesus sat down with the publicans and sinners, we also have to sit with all the impediments to good discipleship e.g. the cult of leisure, the idea that science knows everything, and the humanistic spirit. We will be criticised like Jesus but as we better understand people and their mistaken ideas we will be better able to show them where they miss the mark. Preaching is talking with people in love, in their own language, on their own wavelength, in their own terms in such a way that their lives, and ways and language are turned around and transformed towards Christ. MacLeod adds an encouraging thought that we are not really preaching to an indifferent world for the harvest fields are white and the whole of creation groans waiting for its new birth. Samuel McComb, in “Preaching in Theory and Practice” (p6) says:

“The preacher must gain a new and compelling vision of the age, and a new and compelling sense of the power of his message.  
He must get face to face with the real forces of his time, and proclaim his message in terms that can be understood, that are relevant to the living issues of his age.”

The Word of the Lord is “the sword of the Spirit” i.e. a weapon or a surgical instrument. Preaching is not a soliloquy opening up a theme but a communication, an assault, a challenge, a harvesting of souls, radical surgery. It gives people new starts in life. A great Scottish preacher, Dr. John Ker said that a minister should lead his/her people to three places: to Sinai where the Law of a righteous God was published; to Calvary where the very Son of God gave

Himself for the redemption of the world; and to the Great White Throne for we must all appear before the Judgement Seat of God. (W M Macgregor: "For Christ and the Kingdom" p106). Above all we preach Good News in a world of bad news and that should make a difference.

If you are wondering just how mission-minded you are as a preacher consider the case of the young preacher who complained to Charles Spurgeon that he wasn't getting any converts. Spurgeon asked him:

"Surely you don't expect people to be converted every time you preach?"

"Of course not," replied the man.

"And THAT is why they are not." diagnosed Spurgeon!

Preaching therefore is about an **I-Thou personal encounter** between God and ourselves.

Herbert H Farmer in "The Servant of the Word" (p27) writes:

"The necessity of preaching resides in the fact that when God saves a man through Christ He insists on a living, personal encounter with Him here and now in the sphere of present personal relationships.

Preaching is that divine, saving activity in history, which began two thousand years ago in the advent of Christ and in His personal relationships with men and women, and has continued throughout the ages in the sphere of redeemed personal relationships (which is the true Church), now focussing on me, confronting me, as a person indissolubly bound up with other persons at this present time...

Preaching is telling me something. But it is non merely TELLING me something. It is God actively probing me, challenging my will, calling on me for decision, offering me His succour, through the only medium which the nature of His purpose permits Him to use, the medium of personal relationship."

God Himself is addressing and encountering human souls even as the preacher speaks. The live, dynamic, real encounter is the miracle of preaching. This is what makes it so exciting. If a thousand people are listening to a sermon, God can be having a thousand personal encounters and all on different wavelengths, at the same time! A thousand people can come out of church saying "I felt that sermon was just for me"!

Preaching is a bit like high noon shoot outs in cowboy films! There is a head to head, direct, personal encounter. Two wills meet and only one can come out on top. It is either "my will be done and God can go to hang" or "Thy will be done and be it unto your servant as you wish". God Himself forces the crisis and corners us into choosing Him or self. Preaching is for a decision, a verdict. Too often preachers sit on the fence and invite everybody else to join them. True preaching is like Jesus Himself, it strides into town and claims the territory. "The town ain't big enough" for two egos, either God rules or there is trouble to pay. God claims our total surrender. When souls rebel there can be violent interaction.

Changing the metaphor, God encounters the hearers of the sermon like a lover wooing his beloved. He seeks nothing less than a corresponding commitment like His. Total, unconditional, eternal love seeks nothing less than reciprocal total, unconditional, eternal love in response. He does not "kick the door in" but nor will he give up and slink away at the first rejection. The lover will woo with "the love that will never let us go". He who died on a cruel Cross for us will not easily, or ever, just walk away from us and wash His hands of us.

You can change around the metaphors – the Good Shepherd seeking out the lost sheep; Frances Thompson’s “Hound of Heaven” on our trail etc. - but the underlying point is that preaching is about God encountering individuals and groups in I-Thou personal encounters and wooing them to Himself. God is forever comforting the challenged and challenging the comfortable and the comfort is only obtained and the challenge is only met when we make a response of commitment to God’s prior commitment to us.

It is interesting to think that the preacher is a Thou, God’s Thou, in the I-Thou encounter. When Moses came down Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments he represented God to the people as well as being one of the people himself and having to obey them himself along with his fellow Hebrews. All preachers similarly face in two directions at the same time. We represent God as we face the people and bring a Word from the Lord. Simultaneously we stand with the people facing God and we listen for God’s Word and we must, with them, obey it. So in this legitimate sense all ministers must be two faced!

What an amazing thought it is that God enters into personal relations with people through other people. Existence is all about human and divine relationships. We know no other existence. The human relationships cannot be separated from the divine relationships. We are related to God in our neighbour and to our neighbour in God. Why it should be so, only God knows, but it means that preaching becomes immediately very important for it is the channel through which God encounters human beings through other human beings.

Words are very powerful. When we find ourselves speechless in a foreign country we appreciate better just how powerful speech is. Speech is the communication of will to will. Speech is full of claim: when I speak I claim your attention, and I claim your response. Speech conveys meaning and truth and speech conveys my very inner self to you. Speech is the highest form of communication and it is the unique medium of personal relationship, both human to human and human and divine relationships. Nothing can change the fact that a sermon is a public address and not a private conversation, but the more of an I-Thou encounter it is, the better. What detracts from it being a powerful I-Thou encounter is things like merely reading the sermon notes; being too literary; over-using quotations and the lack of the pronoun “you” which gives direct encounter.

So, what is preaching? Preaching, in the sense of someone in a pulpit, is part of a complex communication event between God and us. It is a precious diamond with all the glittering facets mentioned in this chapter: it is proclamation, inspired utterance, God’s Word, Good News, truth through personality, worship, prophecy, exegesis and eisegesis, theology, pastoral care and mission, an I-Thou encounter...and this is not a complete list!

Dr Trevor Davies in a newspaper article puts it very eloquently:

“I find the challenge of today stimulating and thrilling beyond the telling. What a tremendous opportunity we preachers have to awaken interest in eternal things, to fan the flickering flame of faith, to recall men and women from an all too easy absorption in material things, to present continually the worth and significance of the human soul, to translate the abiding gospel into contemporary terms, to comfort, encourage, to revive hope, to guide our fellows in the true way of life – above all to uplift Christ, that seeing Him men may be drawn into Him irresistibly.”

## 2. WHY PREACH

Once we know what preaching is, we really have the answer to why preach. However let me spell it out even more clearly. I can suggest at least six good reasons why we preach and why we shall continue to preach until Jesus comes again.

### 1. God Commands us to Preach.

If God commands us to do something, we obey; simple as that! What other reason do we need? “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel” (Matt.28.16-20) is Jesus’ Great Commission to us His Church. We are as commanded to preach as the congregation is commanded to attend and listen. An audience is a voluntary gathering of people to hear what and when they want; a congregation on the other hand is summoned by the Church bell, and God, like the imam calling from a mosque minaret. If God says speak we simply must speak and if God says listen we equally must listen. Preaching is essentially missionary and evangelistic because God is an outgoing God always reaching out and touching people.

W.E.Sangster says in “The Craft of Sermon Construction” that preaching is in the shadows when people do not believe in God and when preachers themselves disbelieve in preaching! He says that preachers can gradually and unconsciously lose faith in preaching and divert their energies elsewhere, for example into pastoral work. But what is the point of gathering in the flock if, when they come, they are not fed? People do not value sermons as much as they should because they think it is just one person talking to other people. Sangster points out the vital difference (p13):

“an address is a man talking to men; a sermon is a man speaking *from* God.”

The preacher’s authority is not in himself. He is a herald proclaiming not his own word but a Word from God. The Reformers had a very high view of preaching. They saw preaching as far more than someone’s comments on readings for the day or as a few thoughts for the day or a little advice to do you good. Ministers were ordained to both Word and Sacrament. Bernard Manning said:

“[Preaching is] a manifestation of the Incarnate Word, from the written Word, by the spoken word.”

W.E.Sangster says that preaching is a

“showing forth of the reigning Christ. It is an assault upon the gates of hell, and, indeed, a piercing of them. It is a deed, not of man merely or chiefly, but of God.” (p14)

He also says that

“A personal God, seeking the love and fellowship of persons, seeks best by a person speaking direct to persons.”

Christ came preaching. Immediately on Pentecost and ever since the Church has preached. Sangster (p24)

“Commissioned of God to teach the Word! A herald of the Great King!  
A witness of the eternal Gospel! Could any work be more high and holy?  
To this supreme task God sent His only begotten Son. In all the frustration and confusion of the times, is it possible to imagine a work comparable in importance with that of proclaiming the will of God to wayward men?”

Only if God calls and fits us do we dare to take this on; otherwise it would be a gross impertinence. Shoddy workmanship is always a bad thing but in this case it is also blasphemous.

And why does God command us to preach? Because People need preaching

## 2. People Need Preaching.

In answer to why preach, Augustine said: DOCERE, DELECTARE, FLECTERE meaning to teach, to delight and to move. Newman said: “the salvation of the hearer is the motive of the preacher”. Both the congregation and the preacher need to hear a word from the Lord.

Many people feel that we could live happily without the sermon. This is a fallacious and dangerous line of thinking. Yes we could do without some of the rubbish sermons, but we could not do without our spiritual food and drink. Sermons abounded in the Early Church, at the Reformation and indeed whenever the Church has blossomed, while conversely, the decline of preaching quality and quantity has been part of the withering decline periods of Church history. The Scots Confession declares:

“The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God.....secondly, the right administration of the sacrament of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts”

Today there is a decline in the prestige of the spoken word. Oratory is despised and television has made this a visual generation rather than an auditory one. We have also allowed ourselves to be convinced (wrongly) that people have only a very short attention span. We can concentrate when we like. Strangely it is often the clergy rather than the laity who question the sermon’s existence.

A sermon is not a theological lecture, an entertaining discourse nor a social commentary. People come in saying what they said to the disciples: “Sir, we want to see Jesus” and hopefully they go out saying what they said to Peter after the first great Christian sermon on Pentecost Sunday: “What shall we do?” The answer of course is that we should repent, turn to Jesus and begin a new life with Him as our God. We have Good News to proclaim. As heralds we should boldly proclaim it for we and everyone else really need to hear it. We are pointers to Jesus.

People need the relating of the Bible to life. If life is a journey from the womb to the tomb and then beyond, we all need a road map. The Bible is such a map but it requires understanding and interpretation. Life is not so simple and the Bible can be a bit complicated, so there is need for the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit. We also have Jesus our constant travelling companion on the journey of life and the One who waits to give us welcome at journey’s end. However God as Father, Jesus or Holy Spirit is not so clear and obvious either. We still also need human fellow-travellers to contribute thoughts and insights on what God is saying to us in His map. Discerning the will of God is our aim but it is not an exact science. Preaching helps us to discern His will.

Travellers on the long and winding road of life also need nourishment to keep their strength up. As we need our daily baked bread so we also need Jesus the Bread of Life and we need to feed on the Word of God. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh and bone, the Bible conveys something of the Word of God in written form, and the human speech of preaching can be used by God to communicate His Word too. Preaching does not add something missing from Jesus or the Bible but it helps people to unpack the complete package of Jesus and the Bible. Preaching helps people to digest the Word of God in bite size pieces.

Preaching also helps people who walk in darkness to see the great light of Jesus. He and He alone is the light of the world but preaching has a role to play in reflecting His light and in presenting it in ways which do not dazzle. Preaching can be like the mirrors in a lighthouse. They are just mirrors; they are not the light; but they can be used to focus and direct the light on to particular human situations. How often something which a preacher said has reached right into the heart and soul of a person and spoken to their situation, shedding light on the darkness of their dilemmas. Preaching like a lantern carries the light of God’s Word into the darkness of this world’s sin and ignorance.

Andrew Blackwood in “The Preparation of Sermons” urges preachers to begin with human need and meet it with divine truth, just like the prophets and apostles did. He goes on to amplify the needs he has in mind. He says that there are the particular needs of the times we live in for today is not yesterday and each age has its own issues and spirit. Each congregation and community also has its own needs so the preacher tries to be the local interpreter of God’s truth. Phillips Brooks for example used different tactics in different parishes.

Halford E Luccock “In the Minister’s Workshop” writes (p41):

“Life in a difficult time needs positive affirmations for its sustenance.”

He also writes (p47):

“The preacher is the interpreter who has specialised in people, who knows them so well that he can throw up a highway for truth in their minds....to build a personal bridge to people over which spiritual traffic may pass is a difficult task of engineering.”

Changing metaphor, Luccock encourages us to think of it this way: the preacher breaks up currency bills of larger denominations into smaller units which can circulate more readily. A £500 note is handy to have but is not much use at the corner shop. It has to be converted into forms which can be used without having to call in the police!

Charles Spurgeon in “Lectures To My Students” urges preachers to preach so that the hearers will make a decision to embrace the truth i.e. the truth that God exists; that He is loving; the Bible is His Word; the Trinity; atonement; the Holy Spirit etc. We need the truth about God, about life, about ourselves and about our relationship with God. We need the truth about the reality of sin; the necessity of new birth; salvation by grace and justification by faith. Spurgeon says that if the truth is in the preacher it will exude out of his/her whole being like perfume streams from a flower.

Illion T Jones in his classic book on preaching, “Principles and Practice of Preaching”, makes some very pertinent points regarding people’s need of preaching. He says that basically the importance of preaching stems from the nature of human beings. Speech is the most unique of all human gifts and words are immensely powerful for us. Christian preaching is the noblest use of the power of speech. Human beings generally need speech, communication and particularly need good news and THE Good News. Humans need God’s self-revelation and preaching helps to communicate it. Jones says that preaching is more than just proclaiming like a herald; it is also communicating.

Jones amplifies this crucial point. He says that the very act of proclaiming the Gospel becomes an instrument of God’s saving word. Paul told the Corinthians that he and his colleagues were “ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us” (2 Cor.5.20). In other words, it is not our word but the Word of God which we proclaim. P.T.Forsyth said in “Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind” (p6,22):

“The Gospel...is an eternal, perennial act of God in Christ, repeating itself within each declaration of it....It is this act that is prolonged in the word of the preacher and not merely proclaimed....The Gospel is an act of God.”

H.H.Farmer echoes the same sentiments in “The Servant of the Word” (p27):

“The necessity of preaching resides in the fact that when God saves a man through Christ He insists on a living, personal encounter with him here and now....[Preaching] is not merely *telling* me something. It is God actively probing me, challenging my will, calling on me for decision.”

We need preaching because, as D.G.Miller says in “Fire in Thy Mouth” (p10),

“to preach is not merely to say something, but to do something  
- it is to become the living arena in which Christ personally

confronts men in judgment and redemption.”

Henry Sloane Coffin thinks that we need communion with God through the Word as much as we need it through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

Illion T Jones goes on to say that we need preaching because it relates the Bible to our lives. All preachers, he says, have to understand the thoughts of God revealed in Christ, assimilate them into their own thinking and then devise sermons that will explain these thoughts. Preachers must themselves first of all live with Christ, then have a passionate desire to help others to understand Christ too, and be articulate in helping to transmit this experience and faith in modern terms.

W.B.Garrison said:

“Communication is as effectively cut off by language failures as by deafness.”

J.R.Lowell said:

“We need the tongue of the people in the mouth of the scholar.”

Jones himself says (p40):

“If preaching is to be consequential it must be directed to earthly inhabitants in definite human situations, with specific needs.”

Jones further argues that we all need worship and that preaching is a very important part of worship. Preaching ought to make people more God-conscious. We also need pastoral counselling and preaching is a specialised form of pastoral counselling – a method of group spiritual therapy. Preaching promotes health, wholeness and harmony (shalom) and prevents dis-ease, disintegration and disharmony. People who regularly listen to preaching, and respond favourably to it, have less broken homes and marriages and hearts. Illion T Jones quotes (p32) John Ruskin’s statement about sermons, suggesting every preacher re-read it each time they begin to prepare a sermon:

“That hour when men and women come in, breathless and weary with the week’s labour, and a man “sent with a message”, which is a matter of life and death, has but thirty minutes to get at the separate hearts of a thousand men, to convince them of all their weaknesses, to shame them for all their sins, to warn them of all their dangers, to try by this way and that to stir the hard fastening of those doors, where the Master Himself has stood and knocked, yet none opened, and to call at the opening of those dark streets, where wisdom herself has stretched forth her hands and no man hath regarded, - thirty minutes to raise the dead in! – let us but once understand and feel this, and the pulpit shall become a throne, like unto a marble rock in the desert, about which the people gather to slake their thirst.”

Donald Coggan, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in “Stewards of Grace” points out that modern people generally are outwith the Church and are bombarded by life. They are becoming de-sensitised and out of reach of the Word of God. Education is becoming more a case of training monkeys to jump through hoops than a broadening of the mind. And people, underneath their sophistication, are increasingly frightened and struggling to cope. Astronomers have introduced us to an enormous universe and physicists have unleashed terrifying powers which previous generations did not know. The State is becoming an all enveloping if benevolent monster. So he says, (p16)....

“Small wonder, then, that man is frightened, oppressed by a sense of loneliness in a universe which so often appears to be unfriendly and hostile.”

He says that modern people have lost faith in science and there is widespread disillusionment. As Augustine said, we are restless till we find our rest in God. We are sinners in need of the grace of God. The central facts according to the Christian faith are: the sin of man and the more than

matching forgiveness of God; the need of man and the all sufficient grace of God; the quest of man and the truth of God. Between the two stands the preacher (p18):

“It is his task to link human sin to forgiveness, human need to divine omnipotence, human search to divine revelation....

....The day of preaching is not over, precisely because God’s grace and man’s sin remain, and preaching is one of the mightiest links to join the two.”

Of course methods of preaching have to change:

“New conditions call for creative thinking and daring experimentation in the difficult art of communication.” (p18)

but man has huge needs and God has infinite resources and preaching can channel the grace to the need.

These sentiments are echoed by David H C Read in his book, “Preaching About the Needs of Real People”. He reminds us that the common people heard Jesus gladly (Mark 12.37). He says that the point of preaching is to point people to Jesus. If we preach like Peter on the day of Pentecost, people will cry out “what shall we do?” and the answer is repent, turn to Jesus and start a whole new life. We have good news to proclaim and we are heralds of it.

Read points out that there are always many people who do not see why we need sermons but history teaches us that we need them. Sermons abounded in the Early Church and at the Reformation; and when they have been neglected we have got into a mess. The Scots Confession says:

“The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed Himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to Seal and confirm them in our hearts.”

Read admits that we live in a visual age rather than an auditory one and oratory is “despised”.

Often good things are despised; it doesn’t make them despicable. There are more popular channels of communication; but that does not make them better. Preaching is not claiming to be the only channel of God’s communication but it does have a unique, ordained, sacrosanct and indispensable role.

Herbert H Farmer, in “The Servant of the Word” explains the importance of preaching and why we must keep preaching sermons. He gives four reasons. (1) the most distinctive function of ministers is to produce, preserve and utilise a sound theology for we need that. (2) We also need to know about God, others and ourselves. (3) God brought the Church into being, sustains it and keeps it unified in the face of crumbling humanity, largely through preaching. (4) There is tremendous potency in speech. Preaching and message, delivery and content, are indissolubly one and uniquely powerful. We are not just preaching what God has said; in preaching, God is saying!

W E Sangster in “Power in Preaching” stresses that there is no power in the pulpit unless preachers believe in the Gospel and believe in preaching. He outlines four good reasons why we preach and why we preach with confidence:

(1) The Gospel, being a revelation, can only be known as it is proclaimed. How can they hear without a preacher asks Paul? Jesus came preaching; and the disciples were sent out to preach. Sangster (p20) suggests that preachers, on their way to the pulpit, should remind themselves that:

“Nothing more important will happen in this town this week than the work I am doing now.”

(2) Preaching facilitates the God-man encounter. It was God who chose “the foolishness of preaching” as His preferred way of communicating, and we have to go by what God likes rather than by what the people “in their confounded wisdom” like.

(3) God has worked wonders through preaching in the past. He has changed lives, cities, countries, empires, the world through preaching.

(4) When we look into our own experience, we can each say that preaching has changed our own life.

### 3. Preaching Works.

God uses preaching to encounter people and change them. He uses preaching to inform, inspire, argue, persuade, enlighten, stir the imagination, move the emotions, rouse the will, convict of sin, draw repentance, show a better way, offer forgiveness, challenge the comfortable, comfort the challenged, heal broken hearts, relieve guilt, give vision and hope and joy etc. etc. We know this because of the testimony of millions of people all round the world, down through the centuries, from all peoples and tribes and tongues. Even now, and certainly around the throne of God in Heaven, the grateful chorus will ring out that preaching works. It is one of God's most wonderful gifts to us.

We may not know why God gives us the gift of preaching and we may not understand precisely how it works but the important thing is that it does work. God's grace is sufficient for our needs! So like a thirsty man in a desert, when offered water we accept it enthusiastically and gratefully. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for the preaching of God's Word for they will be truly satisfied! As both a preacher and also a hearer of preaching, I can testify from personal experience that preaching works in my life and experience. Preachers have no right to preach unless they are totally sold on it themselves. Preaching will never move others if it does not move the preacher first. Preachers simply must be convinced of both the content of what they say and of the importance of preaching it. Praise God that preaching really does change lives and changed lives change the world! Great reform movements and revivals have been initiated and developed by preaching. There is no greater privilege than to preach the Word of God to needy people and part of that is the knowledge that it really does work in people's lives. Preaching feeds the faithful, comforts the wounded warriors, gives courage to the fainthearted and gives strength to those who are tempted. Isaiah 55.10-11 reminds and reassures all doubters about preaching:

“My word is like the snow and the rain that come down from the sky  
to water the earth. They make the crops grow and provide seed for  
sowing and food to eat. So also will be the word that I speak – it will  
not fail to do what I plan for it; it will do everything I send it to do.”

I take these verses to apply to God's Word whether it be written in the Bible, lived out in Jesus or spoken in the preaching and teaching of the Church.

W.E.Sangster in “Power in Preaching” reminds us that since the Gospel comes to us as external revelation it can only be known as it is proclaimed. How can they hear without a preacher as Paul says? Jesus came preaching and He sent His disciples out to preach. Revelation needs preaching to make it known, says Sangster, so on your way to the pulpit remind yourself that (p20):

“Nothing more important will happen in this town this week  
than the work I am doing now”

Paul points out that no other form of communication surpasses preaching when it comes to God encountering people (1Cor.1.21):

“For God in His wisdom made it impossible for people to know Him  
by means of their own wisdom. Instead, by means of the so-called  
“foolish” message we preach, God decided to save those who believe.”

God seeks an “I-Thou” personal encounter with us, to use Martin Buber’s famous phrase, and the best way of forming and deepening relationships is to speak from the heart to one another. Preaching is God speaking from the heart to us. The very nature of the Gospel means that it has to come in spoken form. Praise God that it does and when it does it works: we are encountered and changed.

Every great movement in history has been prepared for and partly, at least, carried forward by preaching e.g. the beginning of the Christian Church, the Crusades, the Abolition of Slavery, the Reformation. Even negative movements depended on demonic preaching e.g. Nazism. We live in a world noisy with sermons – radio, TV, internet, newspapers, magazines, leaflets. Everyone texts their neighbour nowadays, not just preachers in pulpits! Ideas are weapons and we are engaged in a psychological and spiritual warfare for the hearts and minds, the souls of our people.

#### 4. Preaching Awakens Repentance and Prompts Conversion

Preaching is for a purpose and a large part of the purpose is to awaken repentance and prompt conversion. Samuel McComb in his book, “Preaching in Theory and Practice”, writes (p3):

“Is it not the aim of the preacher who understands his task, to evoke from his hearers sorrow for past wrongdoing, new resolutions for the future, a throwing of themselves upon the Divine mercy and an earnest aspiration after higher things?”

D T Niles in his book, “The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant” says (p12):

“The reason why we preach is determined for us. Men must be led into an acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Lord of their lives and as the Saviour of all men.”

Niles then quotes a prayer for the Lambeth Conference of 1948 which beautifully expresses what good preaching hopes to achieve in both the preachers and the hearers:

“Almighty God, give us grace to be not only hearers but doers of Thy Holy Word, not only to admire but to obey Thy doctrine, not only to profess but to practice Thy religion, not only to love but to live Thy Gospel. So grant that what we learn of Thy glory we may receive into Our hearts and show forth in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

The Bible itself preaches that “All we like sheep have gone astray” (Isaiah 53.6) and “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us” i.e. we tell lies as well! (1John1.8). John the Baptist then Jesus came preaching: “Repent and be baptised and God will forgive your sins” (Mark1.4). The word in the original New Testament Greek which we translate in modern English as “repent” is METANOIA. It literally means to turn around. So repentance involves us being sorry for the past and turning round to face a new future in a new direction. Jesus says to Nicodemus that the turn-around is so radical that it can best be described as being “born again” (John 3.3). The turning is therefore 180 degrees rather than a minor adjustment.

The turning can be dramatic as in the case of Saul of Tarsus’ conversion on the road to Damascus or it can be a slow, steady, almost imperceptible change in our lives. The likeliest scenario is that it is a combination of the two. Even in Saul/Paul’s case there was a gradual build up to the dramatic moment. God had been working on his life since before he was born! The usual learning process is like a staircase of level plateaus and sudden leaps. The Engel Scale is something which sheds light on this. According to it, our spiritual growth can be measured on a scale from minus ten to plus ten. We start at minus ten as a spiritual baby with no awareness of God, His love, His presence or anything. Then we grow to minus nine which includes a vague awareness that there is more to life

than meets the eye. Gradually we mature through superstition, confused ideas and general instincts to input regarding the Christian faith and other beliefs till we perhaps come to zero, the point where Paul flips over from resistor and persecutor to believer. Then we grow in faith from one to two and so on.

Some people limit the definition of “conversion” to passing from minus one to plus one and they tend to think of it as happening at one specific moment or at most in a fairly short process. Others define “conversion” as the whole process of maturing from minus ten to plus ten. They usually think more in terms of process than event and a longer rather than shorter one – a life-long process in fact. I was brought up in my childhood to think of the Sunday morning service as being for those who are “saved”, i.e. already converted, and the evening service as being the “Gospel Service” for the evangelising of those who were not yet saved. In crude terms (but true to people’s thinking), Sunday morning was for the one to tens and the evening service for the minus tens to plus ones. Nowadays I see every service as catering for everyone simultaneously. That is no mean feat, but then it is the Holy Spirit’s achievement rather than mine. Of course today most congregations only have the one service anyway.

The main point however is that preaching is not just giving a talk and giving a talk for no particular purpose. Preaching is like a lawyer trying to persuade the jury to convict or acquit the accused person. It is a very serious business. It is a matter of eternal life and death. In Iona Abbey when you stand in the pulpit you can see opposite you carved faces on the wall. They have really grotesque expressions on their faces. This is deliberate and intended to remind the preacher that if he or she does a poor job they will contribute to the hearers ending up in the eternal torments of hell! Before you lose any sleep, we should remember that people’s eternal destiny lies in God’s hands not ours. However it is a salutary reminder that we play an important though small part in God’s seeking out lost souls and bringing them home rejoicing. Bad preaching is a sin and the penalty for it not only causes the preacher to suffer but also the long-suffering hearers!

C. H. Spurgeon in “Lectures to my Students” (p336) makes an important point:

“The grand object of the Christian ministry is the glory of God.  
Whether souls are converted or not, if Jesus Christ be faithfully  
preached, the minister has not laboured in vain.... Yet, as a rule,  
God has sent us to preach in order that through the gospel of  
Jesus Christ the sons of men may be reconciled to Him.”

He points out that Noah only convinced his family and Jeremiah wept in vain over an impenitent nation. Often we sow on stoney ground but we keep preaching and praying for a harvest. Spurgeon again says (p336):

“The glory of God being our chief object, we aim at it by seeking  
(a) the edification of saints and (b) the salvation of sinners.”

In his book on preaching, “For Christ and the Kingdom”, William M Macgregor says that the goal of our ministry is the Kingdom of God. He quotes Newman who said:

“The salvation of the hearer is the motive of the preacher.”

We preach, we proclaim salvation here and now, in Richard Baxter’s words, “as a dying man to dying men”. I slightly prefer, “as resurrected souls to dying souls”.

We are not hirelings; we care for the sheep. We want God’s ways to become their ways, God’s thoughts to become their thoughts and God’s law to be written upon their hearts. Then the congregation truly becomes what it is meant to be – a foretaste of Heaven, “a colony of Heaven”, the Kingdom of God in miniature, or at least a pale shadow of it. Why do we preach? We preach to win souls. Preaching is essentially evangelistic.

Samuel McComb’s answer to the question why preach is:

“Is it not the aim of the preacher who understands his task, to evoke from his hearers sorrow for past wrongdoing, new resolutions for the future, a throwing of themselves upon the Divine mercy and an earnest aspiration after higher things?”

(“Preaching in Theory and Practice p3)

He quotes an anonymous wise man who said:

“there is nothing by which more good might be done than by good preaching.”

McComb also mentions that Jesus was interested in social matters as well as individual salvation. Corporate salvation is just as important. The Kingdom of God is a corporate body not just an aggregation of individuals (p16):

“[The preacher] will not cease to enforce the great truths of personal religion, the love of God, forgiveness, conversion, the new life, immortality, the Lordship of Christ, but he will so preach them that they will inevitably lead to a passion for social reform and social reconstruction. His preaching will render it plain that the sincerity of personal faith can be judged by the effectiveness of the believer’s social service.”

It is also important to remember that everything said so far about personal repentance and conversion also applies to corporate bodies. Families, congregations, groups, organisations, communities, societies, nations, the world.....all corporately sin and corporately need to repent, turn round (“METANOIA”) and be born again. God called Israel as a nation, not just a collection of individual Hebrews. He sent the people as a whole into exile and brought them back as a body. God sent Jonah to the whole city of Nineveh. All the metaphors for the Church are corporate ones: flock, family, salvation army, body, living stones etc. God so loves the “world”.....not just many individuals. So we have to preach to corporate bodies as well as individuals and preach for their conversion.

Ilion T Jones says that one of the purposes of preaching is to offer hope to sinful men and women. Our job as preachers is to proclaim the grace of God, the forgiveness of sins and the wonderful reconciliation between humankind and God – all available to us courtesy of Christ Jesus. Jones further argues that the ultimate aim of all preaching is to persuade folk to believe the Gospel and live by it.

In his book, “Message, Media, Mission”, Ronald Falconer laments that we have all kinds of magnificent facilities for communicating the Gospel at a time when the Church does not seem to have any clarion call. The climate of this age is hostile to Christianity and the Church needs a good spring clean itself. He thinks that the West has got its values all wrong and become selfish and materialistic. He quotes George McLeod’s point that when everyone is out for themselves, the Devil takes not only the hindmost, but the lot! Our society needs salt and light, he says, adding (p122)

“It is the personal witness of Christians in the most forbidding of circumstances which wins the respect of those they are seeking to serve, rather than the preaching of sermons and the repeating of slogans...  
...Men and women became Christians by the sheer quality of the lives of the first Christians as much as by any preaching...they were the Remnant through which Israel was to be saved. Or in twentieth century terms, they were the “Creative Minority”, to use Toynbee’s striking phrase.”

However mission is not an “either or” but a “both and”. We need real lives as living sermons but we also need sermons preached to nurture the saintly lives and to point the sinners towards the

saintly lives (for otherwise they might not notice what is there to be seen). Both sermons and lives are signposts pointing sinners to their Saviour, lost sheep to their Good Shepherd, prodigal sons to their loving Father.

## 5. Preaching Nurtures Faith and Action.

God not only forgives our sins and deals with the negatives of the past; He also helps us to live and grow in the future and not repeat the mistakes of the past. He promotes positives and well as negate negatives. Preaching fits in with that and is used by God to fulfil these purposes. God is the one and only Minister. He does all the ministering. His ministry is complete and perfect and needs no adding to or improving upon by mere mortals. However God has chosen to need and use us to proclaim and point to what He has done, is doing and will do. We don't convict people of their sin; we do not make anyone repent; and we cannot convert anybody nor build them up in faith. God does all that. However we can be God's channel of communication and the means through which He opens people's eyes to see what He does.

We can do things which even God Himself cannot do. We can stand before sinners as fellow-sinners saying "we sinners" just as Father Damien one day said "we lepers" to the leper colony at Molokai. We can stand as human examples of what the grace of God can do in human lives. We are the before and after examples which advertisers so love to use. We show people and preach the grace of God by our lives as well as our words. Just as former alcoholics, or rather recovering alcoholics play an invaluable role with new members at Alcoholics Anonymous or widows help the newly bereaved in Cruse so "forgiven-sinners" like us can help everyone at the Church or "Sinners Anonymous" as I like to call it. My professor in theology Prof. James Torrance used to say that our maiden name was "Sinner" but now that we are wedded to Christ our married name is "Forgiven-Sinner" emphasis on the hyphen for we are always liable to sin and yet God is ever willing to forgive. So we contribute by our preaching of word and deed to God's nurturing of faith and action in the lives of others.

Preaching is directed at reaching people's wills. It aims at getting them to repent and change, to turn around and believe and show fruits of faith by their actions. Preaching aims to move people within their hearts but also to move them to constructive action. The hope and prayer is that after the preaching they will never be the same again. Ilion T Jones in "Principles and Practice of Preaching" puts it this way (p44):

"The gospel is not offered as hypothetical advice, as something about which the preacher has not made up his mind, or as something that has not yet been tested and experienced. He cannot be completely objective and unemotional. He is not neutral. He is a partisan, and unabashedly so. Life and death are in the issues which he preaches. His avowed intention is to convince others, to persuade them to come to decisions and to make commitments."

Beethoven said of one of his compositions:

"It came from the heart: may it go to the heart."

Preachers must not frustrate themselves with undue haste and unrealistic expectations. Just like the farmer we have to wait for harvests. Just like the doctor we have to be patient along with the patient as they heal sometimes imperceptibly. One sermon cannot change the world. All we can do is our very best, with God's help, to contribute one more drop into the bucket of people's experience and add one more drop into the common pool of wisdom. Oh the joy when this latest drop is the significant one which just tipped the balance of the scales in someone's life!

David Read in “Preaching About the Needs of Real People” says (p98):

“Over the years the preacher should stimulate the congregation to acquire the habit of thinking theologically, growing in biblical knowledge, and interpreting the doctrines of the faith in relation to their daily problems and decisions at home, at work, and as Christian citizens.”

He says that people need instruction in the faith from the pulpit all the more since there is little family worship or private study to give them nourishment. He also points out that everyone has a theology – the only question is whether it is a good one or a bad one.

## 6 The Value of the Human Soul.

We preach because of the value of the human soul. How can we measure the value of the human soul? It is not measured in terms of its own intrinsic worth; but rather it is worth what it is worth to God – and it is of infinite worth to God. So God’s valuing of the human soul underlies everything we do in preaching. Phillips Brooks: “Lectures on Preaching” (p257):

“If we could see how precious the human soul is as Christ saw it, our ministry would approach the effectiveness of Christ’s.”

Brooks then quotes a man who said to a preacher:

“I am not convinced by what you say. I am not sure that I cannot answer every one of your arguments, but one thing which I confess I cannot understand, puzzles me, and makes me feel a power in what you say. It is why you should care enough for me to take all this trouble, and to labour with me as if you cared for my soul.”

Brooks concludes:

“It is a power which every man must feel. It inspires the preacher; and his hearers.”

He says that all other motives are subordinate to this one. Brooks says that if we think this way, there are good effects on our preaching, such as giving it more humanity, dignity and honesty. We see below the surface. There is much more pleasure in preaching and it gives greater motivation for longer. It keeps the preacher independent of people’s whims for you respect them too much to let them rule you. The sermon is seen not as a work of art but as a practical tool for the good of the human soul. It helps the preacher to be interested in everyone, year after year. It also enriches the preacher’s own soul (p273):

“This is the ministry of the people to the preacher, which is often greater than any ministry that the preacher can render to the people.”

We learn both from books and from people. Our care for souls is not only for their salvation but also for their nurture – we are saved from and saved for. We don’t just want to save souls; we want to maximise them. Of course we cannot value the souls of others unless we value our own soul. God so valued the human soul that He died for it! That is the Good News we preach! Brooks adds that it is by working for the soul that we best learn what the soul is worth. Finally, Phillips Brooks closes his whole book on preaching with these climactic words (p281):

“May the souls of men be always more precious to you as you come always nearer to Christ, and see them more perfectly as He does.”

So, why preach? We preach because the human soul is of infinite value to God and He ordains that we should preach in order to save the human soul from destruction and positively help it to experience His grace now and eternally. Preaching nurtures faith and action in a number of ways. Preaching is like a torch shedding light on the mysteries of life, death and life beyond, things visible

and things invisible. Preaching is like a road map showing us the way to go and the way is Jesus. Preaching is a window on life. It is a microscope revealing things in great detail and a telescope giving us the wider picture so that we can see our little lives in context. Preaching is a mirror helping us to see ourselves. It is also our food and drink giving us nourishment for our souls. Preaching is a two-edged sword working both for and against us – defending us and piercing us to the heart, convicting us of sin and challenging us to greater discipleship. As someone once said, preaching comforts the challenged and challenges the comfortable. Preaching is also a sword championing the plight of the weak and needy. Preaching is also like a telephone in that it facilitates Divine revelation and communication and also human response. It is noteworthy that all of the above can be said of the Word of God whether preached, written in the Bible or lived out in the life of Jesus.

In 1980, as an exercise in a preaching class at Princeton Theological Seminary, I was required to write out “My Objectives for Preaching”. Here is some of what I wrote then, and still believe now:

“My chief objective in preaching is to lead the people in worship so that they may glorify God. I want the people to look away from themselves for a moment and see Jesus; then, with greater vision and insight into God’s grace they may see their lives in better perspective.

Preaching is not simply passing on information; it aims to evoke a response from the listener. Knowledge of God’s grace and love as revealed in Jesus ought to change people’s whole lives. The preacher too ought to listen to the sermon even as he preaches it.

Preaching is aimed at the whole person. The sinner hopefully will repent and the saved hopefully will be comforted and challenged.

In each sermon, I hope (in God’s name and in His power) to communicate simultaneously with all of the congregation irrespective of age, intelligence, and social differences.

In preaching I, the preacher, am given by the grace of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit, to participate in the activity of the One true Preacher – Jesus. God confronts people with His own self-revelation, and He does so through preachers. Only God speaks the Word of God, but preachers are allowed to participate in part of that event of communication which is God’s confronting of people. God inspires the preacher and God moves the hearers and God alone effects communication.

I, the preacher, am also allowed to participate in people’s response to God. I help them (including myself) to participate in the one true response to God, the one true worship of God which is the worship and response of the One true Worshipper – Jesus the God-man.

Through individual sermons and the cumulative effect of sermons over a period of time, I hope to facilitate the growth process which involves disintegration and accommodation and so widen people’s vision and horizons, give them greater understanding, clearer insight and unbounded hope and expectation.

Preaching ought to convey information, convict, comfort, challenge etc. It ought to be pastoral counselling on a grand scale. It ought to deal with human relationships, help people to cope with life, cultivate a sense of the Transcendent and generally help people to live in relation to God primarily and live in relation to their neighbours secondarily and derivatively.

Preaching ought to create a public which could best be described as “forgiven-sinners”. I intend to address both believers and non-believers in every sermon, but when addressing the Body of Christ it is only pastorally logical to address primarily “forgiven-sinners”.

If all this is done, then God will be glorified and His Kingdom extended – for we have His own assurance that when His Word goes out it does not return empty. The blind will see, (at least metaphorically), the deaf hear and those who are burdened, find release.

### **3 PREPARING THE PREACHER**

The congregation should come to Church eager and prepared in themselves to worship God and to receive God’s Word to them. When they come they should hear a well prepared sermon. Similarly, the preacher should also come well prepared! No book on preaching is complete without some focus on the preacher. He or she is by no means the most important person – God is, followed by the hearers – but the preacher is a vital link person between God and His hearers. As Paul says, “how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom.10.14), and we all add: “a good one that is!”

Of course everything does not hang on the preacher, for God can mightily communicate in spite of bad preaching, and conversely, great oratory does not guarantee God is speaking through it. However it makes God and the hearer’s lives a little easier if the preacher pulls their weight and does a good job! Not that being a preacher is an easy job – it isn’t! e.g.

“If he is energetic, he is considered highly strung

If he is calm, he is lazy

If his hair is white, he’s too old

If he is young, he lacks experience...

...If he preaches against sin, he is a fanatic

If he does not, he is worldly

If he gesticulates when he preaches, he is theatrical

If he stands still, he is wooden

If he raises his voice, he shouts too much

If he does not, he is monotonous...”

(from the magazine of Ladysmith Presbyterian Church, Natal, South Africa)

The preacher is the personality referred to in Phillips Brooks’ famous definition of preaching: (“Lectures on Preaching” p5,8):

“Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men...

Preaching is the bringing of truth through personality...

The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips,

Not merely into his understanding and out through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him.”

Brooks emphasises that every preacher has their own personality and has to utter the truth in their own way. This is not a difficulty, nor even just a cold fact, but one of the really exciting things about preaching! A living God speaks a live word to real people in real situations through a real live personality! You can’t get more exciting than that! Think how far better that is than T.V. soaps in which T.V. companies churn out insignificant fictional plots about fictional characters to couch potatoes through T.V. screens!

Just as a sermon is not merely prepared within the week leading up to the Sunday on which it is preached, so the preacher is prepared over the years too. Someone humorously but truly said that the only way to preach well is to begin ten years ago. As in most things in life, the preparation is a ceaseless pursuit of excellence involving the whole of our being, all day, every day. Within general

preparation there is of course more specifically focussed preparation both of sermons and of preachers. Come on Sunday with a sermon fit to be preached and come as a preacher fit to preach it! I confess that as a busy, stressed parish minister I have often failed to give a really good sermon script the full justice it deserved because I arrived in the pulpit at the end of the week physically shattered! To be fair to God and to our hearers we should be

“willing, not simply as so many men are, to bear sickness for God’s work, but willing to preserve health for God’s work; and going to his preaching with the enthusiasm that shows it is what God made him for.”

(Phillips Brooks:”Lectures on Preaching”p42)

It is important to prepare ourselves for the delivery as well as for the content. We should therefore come thoroughly prepared and rehearsed. Even more importantly, come with the sermon not only on paper but in our bloodstream and in every fibre of our being. Come feeling thrilled and excited and bursting to tell the world the most wonderful Good News ever! Every sermon should seem to us like “the greatest thing since sliced bread” until the sermon next week supersedes it and we should enter the pulpit with our faces radiant like Moses having come down the mountain after a month with God and dying to tell God’s expectant people God’s new commandments!

Preparation is not something we do to ourselves. It is God who prepares the preacher. Our part is to let God do that – to co-operate as compliant clay in the potter’s hands and, more actively, to run the race with determination as spiritual athletes striving to do their utmost in God’s service. This requires prayer and hard work and will result in inspiration and perspiration (usually 1% the former and 99% the latter of course)!

So what should all our hard work preparing the preacher focus on? Phillips Brooks suggests ten things: develop (1) pure and holy character, and (2) freedom from self-consciousness i.e. get so engrossed in the sermon that we forget ourselves. (Michael Angelo used to carry a candle in his cap to stop his own shadow from being cast on his work while he was hewing out his statues). (3) Have genuine respect for the people whom we preach to – not just the interesting and talented ones, but respect all human beings. Remember that we are theirs rather than they are ours. Don’t patronise people but have a deep respect for humanity. (4) Thoroughly enjoy our work because the more we enjoy it the better we will do it. (And of course the better we do it the more we will enjoy it)! The athlete enjoys the sport s well as the victory and the carpenter enjoys the work as well as the finished product. So the preacher should enjoy preparation, meeting people, public speaking and all the work that goes into serving God as a preacher. Enjoy the actual work of preaching. (5) Keep the sacredness of our profession clear in the sense of refraining from cheap jokes about the ministry, sermons, congregations etc. Humour is a virtue but so too is dignity and respect for the high calling. (6) Develop courage for it is essential. The timid minister is as bad as the timid surgeon says Brooks (“Lectures on Preaching” p59):

“If you are afraid of men and a slave to their opinion, go and do something else. Go and make shoes to fit them...but do not keep on all your life preaching sermons which shall say not what God sent you to declare, but what they hire you to say....

....It must be from a sincere respect for men’s higher nature that you must grow bold to resist their whims.”

(7) Take both success and failure in your stride. Success and failure are often hard for us to judge and they are only relative anyway for no one wholly succeeds nor wholly fails:

“make us ready to FAIL for Him with joy as well as to succeed for Him, if such shall be His choice; and ready to work as hard for Him in failure as in success, because we work not for success but for Him.”

God does not call us to be successful but to be faithful. (8) Always be careful not to get soft because of people’s apathy or praise. Work hard and be tough on ourselves and strive to maintain

high standards. Be harder on ourselves than others are and never appeal for sympathy. (9) Beware of narrowness. Keep pushing outwards. Keep growing, experimenting, questioning, trying. (10) Cultivate the pastoral heart. The work of preacher and pastor belong together inseparably:

“The preacher needs to be pastor, that he may preach to real men.

The pastor must be preacher, that he may keep the dignity of his work alive. The preacher, who is not a pastor, grows remote. The pastor, who is not a preacher, grows petty...be both; for you cannot really be one unless you are also the other....The powers of the pastor’s success are truth and sympathy together. ‘Speaking the truth in love,’ is the golden text.” (Lectures on Preaching p77)

A pastor with sympathy but not truth is too soft and although loved loses respect. A pastor with truth but no sympathy is too hard and although respected is not loved. The person with both in balance says the right word at the right time.

Brooks goes on to give a whole plethora of good advice. Read his book for full details – I really recommend it – but let me briefly list some of his gems. For example, he says that we should always be aware of our limitations. We are not popes speaking infallibly. We are mere mortals. (King Philip of Macedon employed a man to remind him all the time of his mortality)! Don’t blame the congregation for our failure to communicate. Beware of hobby-horses and simplistic solutions.

“Routine is a terrible master, but she is a servant whom we can hardly do without.” (Lectures on Preaching p93)

“..For the best minister is simply the fullest man. You cannot separate him from his manhood.” (p98)

Voltaire said of Louis XIV:

“He was not one of the greatest *men* but certainly one of the greatest *kings* that ever lived.”

Brooks says that it would not be possible to say that of a minister for:

“He who was one of the greatest of ministers must be one of the greatest of men.” (p99)

Brooks says that the “crowning disgrace” for a minister is writing sermons on a Saturday night. He calls it dishonest and cheating.

Set good habits early on for it is when the clay is soft and still setting that lasting impressions are made.

Our ministry must be ours and not just a feeble echo of someone else.

Christian ministry is not about busy actions so much as about relating closely to people so that the Christ who has entered into our life may also enter theirs through us.

Leslie Tizard in “Preaching: The Art of Communication” (p20) quotes Brooks’ dictum that preaching is truth through personality, then elaborates:

“Truth is received into a human personality and through it is passed on to others, It is this double process of receiving and transmitting truth which constitutes the act of preaching.”

Tizard says that the process may be blocked (a) between the preacher and God, (b) between the preacher and the congregation, and (c) within the congregation.

Tizard continues that the preparation of the preacher requires a strong sense of call – whether by sudden illumination or by gradually growing conviction. Martin Luther declared with hindsight that God had led him like an old, blind horse! Tizard says that preachers should feel (a) oppressed by the needs of people. He quotes John R Mott: “The perception of a need and the consciousness of the ability to meet it,

That constitutes a call.”

Preachers should also feel (b) “the constraining love of Christ” upon them(2Cor.5.14).

We need to hear the call not only once but all through our lifetime.

Tizard also stresses the importance of keeping the freshness of the fact that Jesus loves me. He says that if we visit a familiar art gallery we should try to see the pictures as if we had never seen them before, for only then can we make discoveries. Similarly, he advises (p24):

“Again and again all through his ministry the preacher needs to go and stand before the Cross, trying to forget all he has ever heard or read about, and looking upon it as though he were seeing it for the first time. Only so can he make discoveries.”

Tizard also says that the preacher must have an urge to preach like Jeremiah or St. Paul. If we do not preach we feel we shall burst! Savonarola said:

“Without preaching I cannot live”

Tizard (p25):

“When a preacher finds that he can live equally well without preaching it is time for him to stop.”

There are temporary times when the urge diminishes and we suffer what Leyton Richards called “the tyranny of the sermon” when the damocles sword of Sunday looms and we feel “preached – out”. These are just temporary blips which have to be worked through in between purple patches.

Another piece of advice from Tizard is to keep checking your intellectual integrity and sincerity. Keep asking yourself whether you really do believe what you are preaching or is it just a case of they must practise what I preach. Charles Darwin always kept a notebook of things which seemed to contradict his theories because he knew that he would be especially prone to forget them. Tizard points out that doubts can arise from many sources: a guilty conscience, frustrations, slights and misunderstandings, a depressed physical state, over-tiredness, slackness in prayer and study and the refusal to submit ourselves to spiritual discipline or from some bitter experience of suffering.

Doubts do not mean that we have to stop preaching. Doubt our doubts. Check them out. Track them to their source and address them. Even in agony of spirit we must go on preaching. Everybody who speaks to the crowd has times when we speak in virtue of yesterday’s faith hoping that it will come back tomorrow. In the middle of life’s storms we batten down the hatches and ride out the tempest, trusting the God who gave us the sunshine yesterday will give us better weather tomorrow. It is also noteworthy that Tsychoovsky the composer who was a manic depressive created his best music at his highs and at his lows rather than on his average days. Adversity and pressure can actually help sermon creation.

We can and have to live with doubts to some extent but we cannot live as preachers without love.

Tizard says (p29):

“No man can preach who does not love people”

We also need authority. We no longer live in an age of authority but that does not matter so much because the authority Tizard is meaning is inherent authority not conferred authority. We speak from first hand experience, we know what we are talking about. When people see that, they respect

our right to speak and so we have authority to speak. No amount of eloquence compensates for the lack of such authority. Thomas Carlyle said:

“What this parish needs is a minister who knows God other than by hearsay.”

Tizard also encourages preachers in their self preparation to cultivate healthy self-acceptance. If we have few talents learn to live with our limitations. Remember, he says (p33):

“God does not require that we shall serve Him with the powers of another man but only to the utmost of our own.”

If we have many talents, we need to learn to resist the attendant temptations including the craving for power, acting as a dictator and assuming that the pulpit is “six foot above contradiction”. There is also the danger of self-display:

“In the case of the preacher there is a paradox: he must express his personality to the full while submitting to its total negation.”

Preaching is “truth through personality” but beware of the personality obtruding too much. If people get mesmerised by the preacher they end up not seeing God. We must decrease and God must increase yet our personalities are God’s chosen channel of communication. When we cease to be anxious about ourselves then we are able to be ourselves. Every power carries with it the need for self-discipline.

Beware also, says Tizard, of hiding ourselves, or trying to hide ourselves even when we are most public. Sometimes preachers going on about things in the pulpit betray the fact that they have not dealt with the matter themselves in their private life. E.G.

“We tend to wax hottest against those evils towards which we ourselves have secret and repressed tendencies.” (p45)

He gives another example (p46):

“The dogmatic-authoritarian type of preaching may be a way of sublimating a lust for power.”

He adds (p47):

“It is so easy to avoid dealing honestly with our own personal problems by preaching to others about theirs. That we dare not do.”

It is interesting to consider what other great preachers advise with regard to preparing the preacher. St. Francis of Assisi took his assistant into town, to the market place to meet everyone. On the road home the assistant asked when St. Francis was going to start preaching. He replied: “we have been”! He was also preparing himself and his assistant for future preaching. Preparation is not all done at a desk!

Bishop Quayle said:

“Preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that. It is no trouble to preach, but a vast trouble to construct a preacher.”

James S Stewart in “Heralds of God” (p191) asks himself:

“Can it have been that I was so busy preparing that I omitted to prepare myself?”

Richard Baxter said:

“Many a tailor goes in rags but maketh costly clothes for others;”

All Christians, but especially ministers, must really believe and practice what they want other people to believe and practice. I sometimes joke with parishioners that they have to practice what I preach – but it is only a joke. James S Stewart in “Heralds of God” writes (p194):

“There is no sure defence against that grim and tragic loss of reality and zeal and faith except in a daily renewed surrender of life to Christ, nor is there any easy alternative by which to evade the cost of this rigorous and surgical self-discipline and commitment. There is no

by-pass road round Calvary.”

James S Stewart goes on to outline facets of the diamond of the good preacher. He says that the good preacher is utterly dedicated to God’s work, mastered, dominated and controlled by the great task. Having said that he urges preachers to beware of over-work, neglecting hobbies and missing holidays, pseudo-busyness and mis-directed zeal.

“Beware the professional busy-ness which is but slackness in disguise!  
What is at stake in our work is the lives of men. Every sermon is to be preached in the knowledge that for someone present it may be now the fullness of time and the day of salvation.” (p196)

And Ezekiel echoes in support: “Woe is me, if I preach not the gospel!” St. Paul describes his care for the Galatians as labour pains.

Stewart also describes and defines the good preacher as a person of prayer. Thomas Chalmers used to say that most failures in the ministry were due not to a lack of visiting, study nor organisational activity, but to a lack of prayer. Stewart says that preachers, as pastors too, should pray for each person and family by name, using the Communion Roll as a directory of intercession. We know our own limitations, says JSS, so we learn to trust in God. The power is of God, not us.

“It is when a man strikes rock-bottom in his sense of nothingness that he suddenly finds he has struck the Rock of Ages.”

The true preacher has a humble heart for a number of good reasons including:

“What hast thou that thou didst not receive?  
What are our best words for Christ compared with the Christ of whom we speak?” (p206 Heralds of God)

The magnitude of the task keeps us humble i.e. building the new Jerusalem in our own parish, fighting for social justice and the Christian ethic in the wider community, carrying in your heart the sorrows, shames and sins of the souls in our care, and being a witness and herald. It also keeps preachers humble to realise that many in the congregation are “further ben” with God than we are. It is also humbling to remember that it is God who does things, not us:

“All we can do is nothing worth, unless God blesses the deed;  
vainly we hope for the harvest-tide, till God gives life to the seed.” (p209 JSS)

Stewart also characterises the true preacher as a person of authority, as a herald and ambassador. Even Paul who thought of himself as “the chief of sinners” also considered himself to be “an ambassador of Christ”. G K Chesterton makes the point:

“What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place.  
...a man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed.” (p210)

Our authority lies in the fact that it is God’s Word, not ours. Preach as if the Lord God Almighty is at our shoulder, for He is! We are also within the universal Church and part of the testimony of Christian Church down the centuries. It also gives us authority when we realise that we do not possess the Word but rather the Word possesses us.

James S Stewart also says that the real preacher is a person on fire for Christ who like Cleopas finds that his heart burns within him and like Jeremiah feels that he will burst if he does not preach the Good News to others. Real preachers have a sense of urgency and “fire in the belly” passion.

Donald Soper in “The Advocacy of the Gospel” urges preachers to prepare themselves in several ways. Prepare to be hobby-horsed, pigeon-holed and dismissed as irrelevant. Preachers are integrated until they touch people’s sore points. Then they think he/she should not meddle in politics etc. They are happy if we play at religion in our box, but if we touch a raw nerve, look out!

He counsels us to keep our courage up so that, when the time comes that it is necessary, we may be able to “flutter the doves”. We need to maintain high levels of integrity. The other side of the same coin is that we should not pose as certain in matters which are far from certain.

He also says that preachers should meticulously prepare in as professional a manner as entertainers, broadcasters or lawyers etc. That includes everything down to the smallest details – e.g. enunciation, appearance.

Soper says we should prepare to address the congregation where they are actually at, not where we imagine or would like to think they are at. Answer the questions they are really asking, not the ones they are not. Be like Jesus and begin with what people know e.g. sowers, wheat and weeds, lost sheep etc.

Above all, spiritual preparation involves the following (p39):

“The true preparation for the preaching of the Gospel is the possession of the golden secret of the love of God, a personal experience of the forgiveness of sins, and an overwhelming desire to communicate that experience to others.”

David A MacLennan in “A Preacher’s Primer” gives some great insights into the preparation of a preacher under five roles: the preacher as interpreter, prophet, therapist, workman and spiritual athlete. These being our goals they give us an idea of what the preparation will require.

Preachers are teachers and **Interpreters** of the Word of God. It is a heavy responsibility and it is too great a burden for one person e.g. Moses’ hands fell, Elijah felt all alone, Jesus Himself wept in Gethsemane. It is God’s ministry, not ours; we are just helping but it is God alone who does the heavy work. We proclaim the Word and are interpreters of it. George McLeod of the Iona Community tells of a Clydeside communist suddenly bursting into his room to proclaim:

“You folks have got it; if only you knew that you had it,  
and if only you knew how to begin to say it.”

What we have got is the Word of Life (1John 1.1-3). Paul Scherer in “Best Sermons” insists:

“Without Him the whole of life is a ridiculous cage where human squirrels keep chasing themselves about in circles, gnawing on a few moral precepts for sustenance while they stop and catch their breath. Christianity is a friendship with God in Christ where nothing stands between Him and any one of us anymore.”

Dr. Homrighausen found that the worst enemy

“is not outspoken secularisation but a subtle sterility within our churches.  
The message of the churches has not been uncompromisingly Christian enough.  
It is easy to be a church member and easy to remain one in many churches.”

The preacher is also a **Prophet**. Principal James Denny castigated the minister who spoke and acted as a pet lamb within the fold rather than as a courageous shepherd of his flock. Prophets today are like Old Testament prophets, forthtellers rather than foretellers. They are spokespersons for the living God speaking His living Word. The prophet can diagnose the present predicament to people who do not even know that they are ill. The prophet gives eternal context to temporal affairs. He or she articulates which is the way of life and which the way of death. Bernard Lord Manning described preaching as:

“a manifestation of the Incarnate Word, from the Written Word, by the Spoken Word.”

Preachers, like prophets, as prophets, sometimes need to speak God's judgment, even if it does mean a loss of popularity. David MacLennan in "A Preacher's Primer" (p42) "preach with such directness and concreteness that no man can

raise a mental umbrella to divert the rain of truth to his neighbour's head."

Jesus did not get crucified for speaking in generalities. Once a Scottish preacher in St. Andrew's annoyed King James II by his forthright preaching. The King shouted:

"You'll either speak sense or come down from that pulpit!"

The minister shouted back:

"I'll neither speak sense nor come down from this pulpit!"

Having said all this, we are duty bound to proclaim the whole Gospel which means mercy as well as judgment. A wise minister put it well when he said:

"There is a greater triumph than to make a sinner wretched, and that is to make a sinner righteous... God's love lays a greater burden on the soul than His justice ever could."

MacLennan goes on to say that the preacher is also a **Therapist** i.e. one skilled in the art of promoting health. This requires first hand knowledge of God and people, the Bible and life. While preaching is pastoral care "en masse" it does heal individuals as well as whole groups. Richard Davidson in "A Faith to Live By" wrote:

"Once every Lord's Day the Lord's people have a right to be taken to the Upper Room, where with Christ sorrow is assuaged, burdens are lightened, temptations relax, sin is uncovered and forgiven, the good will is reinforced, and the soul is flooded with the joy and peace of another world."

This is group therapy. People are not so much villainous sinners as victims of disease. We are not professional psychiatrists and we should beware of playing amateur psychology but we do have a healing ministry. When we preach on pastoral matters say more than "trust God". Address HOW we can progress to healing. Touch people's sore points not to rub salt into their wounds but to bring health and wholeness and the full meaning of shalom.

Preachers wear many hats and require many skills. Another one is **Workman** or craftsman and what is required is hard work allied to skillfulness. Hopefully we will not deserve the put down which one Scotswoman gave to her minister:

"incomprehensible on the Sabbath and infeasible on week-days."

We need to be highly organised. MacLennan gives some practical advice including: pick your time for sermon preparation and fight hard to keep it. He gives the example of Lyman Abbott who issued instructions that when he was working on sermons he was not to be disturbed except in case of fire, and only when the flames were at the second storey! Control the time spent on committees. Use filing systems, write things down, think ahead. Follow the Christian Year. Preach in series. Do thorough background work. As Alexander Whyte used to say: "thicken your exhortation with doctrine". Make use of the wisdom of the ages (but without sheer plagiarism and not as a substitute for your own hard work). Charles Spurgeon admitted:

"I am the biggest thief in England but I defy any man to catch me at it!"

However, as John Oman pointed out in "Concerning the Ministry":

"there is a difference between finding a nugget and appropriating a bar of gold."

In some sense, there is nothing absolutely new and original and all preaching is out of the overflow of acquired experience, but as Oman says:

"what girds your loins or feeds your lamp, or widens your vision, or can be put into your treasure because it has stimulated your mind and inspired your heart, and your own thought and feeling have found for it a place in the whole circle of your experience, is truly yours."

MacLennan urges preachers to work hard at the content and style of our sermons. He advises writing out the sermon. Be enthused more by the material than by the expression of the material. Learn good style by sitting at the feet of good stylists. In this regard, he quotes Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (called "Q") who said: prefer the concrete word to the abstract, the direct word to circumlocution, the short to the long, and write accurately, persuasively and to be understood. Leslie Weatherhead said:

"We cannot work too hard to make our sermons simple, direct, unambiguous, piercing the crust of indifference and the armour of hostility."

MacLennan reminds us that we have the greatest story ever to tell and the greatest Master Workman to help us to tell it.

MacLennan finally devotes a whole chapter of his book, "A Preacher's Primer", to the thought that the preacher is a **Spiritual Athlete**. He urges us to keep physically, mentally and spiritually fit and look after "the temple of the Holy Spirit". Do not burn the candle at both ends. Regulate our outward life for the sake of our inward communion with God. We need to recharge the batteries before expending energy so begin with private devotions. Pick a master of faith, one "far ben with God" as we say in Scotland, and follow him/her studiously as their pupil. Latch on to the spiritual maturity of others. Hobbies, play, recreation is absolutely vital. Relax and live a balanced life. Take holidays and waste time a little. Yes waste time a little! What workaholics call "wasted time from work" is what sane people call "quality time with self, others and God"! Come to Church on Sunday fit, fresh, enthused and firing on all cylinders. The best material can be wasted by poor delivery. Just as important as wonderful content is tip top presentation of it. We need both! Too often preachers arrive in the pulpit shattered by the efforts of the week. Always remember that the pulpit is the priority. Be careful therefore about Saturday nights. Charles Spurgeon used to lie low on Saturday storing energy for Sunday. He also used to preach himself dry on Sunday so that he also lay low on Monday recovering. MacLennan quotes the case of a surgeon (p109):

"He played regularly...Almost without exception he retired early on the night preceding a day of several operations. He considered it a matter of plain duty to offer his best to his patients, and religiously took preventive measures against fatigue."

MacLennan adds (p110):

"It is remarkable how the tiredness of a congregation mounts in direct ratio to the weariness of the preacher."

Alexander Whyte was a spiritual athlete. One Sunday someone went to his vestry to thank him for a wonderful sermon. They said:

"It went to my heart, as if you had come straight from the Audience-chamber."

Whyte quietly replied:

"And perhaps I did."

Dr. Donald Coggan, one time Archbishop of Canterbury writes in "Stewards of Grace" that preachers are artists and should prepare themselves accordingly. We should therefore (a) study the literature of our art, namely the Bible, books of sermons and books about preaching; (b) learn by doing i.e. learn to preach by preaching; and (c) study the lives and works of the masters of the art i.e. our predecessors (just as sculptors would study Michaelangelo). Coggan states (p30):

"In no 'art' are artist and art so closely united as in the art of preaching."

He quotes as a concrete example Charles Simeon saying that his greatness lay in the man himself (p32):

"the quality of his preaching was but a reflection of the quality of the man himself."

(He rose at 4am, lit his fire, and devoted the first four hours of his day to communion with God)!

The making of the sermon was secondary and derivative to the making of the preacher. Coggan also says that Simeon had a clear aim which was:

“to humble the sinner, to exalt the Saviour, to promote holiness.”

Thirdly he had a wide range of themes. He refused to be pigeon-holed under one label. Simeon said:

“The truth is NOT IN THE MIDDLE, and NOT IN ONE EXTREME;  
BUT IN BOTH EXTREMES.”

For over fifty years Simeon was content to steep himself in the great Biblical themes and to preach them. He emphasised both personal salvation and corporate aspects of the Christian life. He also had structure to his sermons for, sadly, too many sermons are “without form and void”!

Henry Sloane Coffin once criticised a sermon for giving “a maximum of heat and a minimum of light”. Richard Niebuhr famously satyred a type of preaching as:

“A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”

Some preaching can be boiled down to: “be good and make people happy”. Donald Coggan reminds us that preachers are trustees of God’s Good News, not man’s good views. We have a particular message to proclaim, specific Good News, and we are TRUSTEES of it:

“We were allowed of God to be put in trust with the Gospel” (–IThess.2.4)

“O Timothy, guard the deposit” (ITim.6.20)

God and ourselves are in fact co-trustees. So we cannot just preach what we like. We have a given boundary set for us. Like Paul we deliver to others what we have received ourselves and “woe is me if I preach not the Gospel” (ICor.16.9). Having said that, the grace of God is boundless and gives infinite scope:

“His (the preacher’s) task is to hold up the jewel of God’s truth to catch as many lights as may be.” (p47)

When we speak about “the whole counsel of God”, Coggan says, it is like a child trying to scoop up the Atlantic Ocean with his spade and bucket. Such a Gospel demands of its preachers study, and enquiring mind, intellectual honesty and integrity.

Coggan goes on to say that preachers are INTERPRETERS of the Gospel trying to make it understood by “the man in the street”. We should therefore learn to use simple words and phrases but not resort to “throwing slang about” nor “wrapping the pearl of great price in a newspaper.” Don’t make great things small nor holy things common. Language matters! “Edify the mind; don’t just tickle the ear” as Henry Compton the Bishop of London (1675-1713) used to say. Remember that the Bible is an oriental and ancient book whose imagery is strange and unfamiliar. Before giving the bread to the disciples, break it! The word of God never comes to people in a vacuum so learn to communicate to people of our age on their terms. Translate the language of Scripture into today’s terminology. To be a good translator and interpreter one has to have a thorough knowledge of both languages.

The preacher is also a man or woman of God, says Coggan. Everyone cannot preach. There is a difference between an essay and a sermon and the difference is not wholly in the subject matter. The preacher is (p71):

“a man of God, standing between Divine grace and human need and, by means of the spoken word, linking the two.”

The man or woman of God should therefore be both humble and honoured by the calling:

“The preacher must learn to give his personality unreservedly to the God who gave it to him and then to receive it back enhanced and enriched. He must learn to magnify his OFFICE (Rom.11.13) but never to magnify HIMSELF, lest in so doing he obscure men’s vision of the Christ whom He preaches.” (p73)

Biblical humility is not underestimation of yourself but an accurate estimation of God’s gifts. We have God-confidence rather than self-confidence. Moses spent the first 40 years in luxury learning

how great he was. Moses spent the next 40 years shepherding, learning how small he was; and Moses spent the last 40 years leading God's people learning how great God is. God wants Abrams (people of faith) and Moses (people of self discipline and self-renunciation).

God wants preachers to prepare themselves by cultivating faith in Him and by working very hard to overcome personal limitations. We must be as professional as the great pianist, Paderewski, who used to say:

“If I miss my practice one day, I know it;  
If I miss it two days, the experts know;  
If I miss it three days, my audience knows it.”

We can also go off the rails by over-working. I confess to making the basic mistake of equating dedication with over-work. I aimed at maximum work rather than optimum work. I thought that if I was not fatigued I must be holding back something from God's service. Since then I have come to value health and fitness for God's service and my duty to be fit and fresh in order to make the most of His gift of creativity. Coggan says we can fail because we (p78):

“become so obsessed with one's work as to be unfit to fulfil it.”

Father Paul Bull adds: “The sins of good people come chiefly from exhaustion”.

It is interesting to note that when Elijah was at the end of his tether after \mount Carmel (IKings 18,19) the answer was sleep and food.

John Calvin condemns most of us by saying:

“Oh what deep-seated malice against God is this, that I will do anything  
and everything but to go to Him and remain with Him in secret prayer!”

When painting his masterpieces, Leonardo Da Vinci used to pause between his brush strokes.

Often he spent hours just staring at the painting before adding one or two touches. He used to say:

“The longer I pause the better I paint”.

Jesus went up hillsides in between miracles! Moses sermons were usually better when he had been up the mountain with God beforehand. Augustine said:

“He whose life is lightening-bright, His words are like a thunder-clap”

Coggan says that preachers are not so much witty, learned nor eloquent, as holy.

Someone summed it all up:

“Some men prepare their sermons; other men prepare themselves”  
and both are necessary and continuous processes.

Pope Paul VI in his book “The Priest” makes some interesting points and gives some quotable quotes e.g. (p12):

“the first prerequisite of preaching well is to live well,  
to employ in ourselves that truth we desire to communicate to others.”

He reminds us that God's grace and power are there to enable us. God sends us and His world awaits us. We will be squeezed in the tensions between God and His world but do not be afraid.

“It is not a life for cowards and opportunists.

It is made for love and sacrifice.” (p15)

What he says in general terms about the priesthood also applies to preaching in particular. Love is the key thing. Love is more than an emotion; it requires our whole beings. Love understands and does not judge. It enters into the hearts and minds of others. It seeks them out and gets to know them. Love for others is a continuous stress – this is our calling. Authority comes with a towel round your waist. Give yourself for others. God will renew us. Remember whose you are and whom you serve. Live for God alone.

He goes on to point out that it is difficult to reach out to others but it is our calling. In those we preach to we will meet (p31)

“people bound from morning till night, burning with the fever of their own works, satisfied with their own machines, fascinated with their own discoveries...souls who do not and cannot concentrate, souls with no awareness of the spiritual aspects of things, ready to question all, even to turn against the word leading them to God.”

There is so much secularism, false freedoms and materialism and (p31):

“You will discover that the world of evil and error is not weak, disorganised, sporadic, limited to isolated individuals. This world is strong, organised, powerful, conscious of its strength. The blasphemy against the name of God has become scientific, logical, willed. Atheism is well organised. It penetrates even among our good people, still so simple and religious and so Christian.”

We need courage. The same world that tries to crucify us is the same world that is crying out to us for help.

“Your priesthood is not to be modelled on your skills but on the needs of others.” (p33)

We need to be “inexhaustible fountains”. Our lives are closely watched so imitate Christ. People want more than rules and regulations; they want spirit and grace.

It is a difficult and delicate balancing act but we have to resist the world’s lures while loving it and influencing it for good. (p50):

“know how to immunize yourself against the contamination of the times. At the same time you must love this giant paradoxical world.”

Pope Paul says that we are called and fitted – fitted not for our own benefit but for the sake of others. We can become the vehicle of the grace of God. We receive the grace of God along with the people as well as being the channel of that grace. (p54):

“The Lord called you because He needs your services, because He wants to need your services.”

Learn to think like Christ.

He cautions us to beware of overactivity, of emptying our inner life and being preoccupied with means at the expense of ends. We need prayer and meditation as well as hard work, inner silence as well as external activity. He admits that: (p119)

“To gather oneself spiritually is harder than to exercise an external ministry.”

We need to be spiritual athletes with the dynamism of Paul. We will only be so with prayer and training.

Paul VI gives a rousing pep talk, saying things like: (p160f):

“The Lord has called me, baptized me, given me a thousand gifts... the Lord came to me and whispered, ‘You will be my priest.’ He has made me an instrument, He has wished to live in me..you will preach in my name. I will give you inner fire. You may speak poorly but you will utter truth.”

God has chosen to communicate through the spoken word so go and preach. Faith depends upon hearing. He quotes Augustine (p167) who was always dissatisfied with the way he worded divine truths:

“There is no better work in today’s world than to preach ‘with a living voice’ the message of Christ. Preaching is still the most fitting way for a restoration of Christian life; and authentic preaching leads souls to Christ ... Your preaching cannot but be good, successful, because we believe in the intrinsic virtue of the word of God.”

George McLeod (of Govan and Iona fame) in his book “Speaking the Truth in Love” gives a lovely illustration about the importance of preparing the preacher as well as the sermon. One Sunday evening an actor and an old minister were together in a house. The actor recited the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm so splendidly that the little company applauded his achievement. Then the old minister recited it in his own more quiet way, and there was no applause at all. “There lies the difference,” mused the actor. “I know the psalm: he knows the Shepherd.”

The Lambeth Conference of 1948 had a wonderful prayer for preachers:

“Almighty God, give us grace to be not only hearers but doers of thy holy word, not only to admire but to obey thy doctrine, not only to profess but to practice thy religion, not only to love but to live thy gospel. So grant that what we learn of thy glory we may receive into our hearts and show forth in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

D.T.Niles in his book “The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant” says that our call is not only to preach but to be preachers. We are not performers but witnesses and we must belong to the same world as our hearers just as Father Damien shared leprosy with his leper congregation. Our job (and every Christian’s job) is to witness and proclaim (p22): “Actually, there is only one witness to Christ and that is the witness

of the Holy Spirit. The witness of Christians is but a witness to His witness.”

Professional preachers have a particular place within the wider preaching of the whole Body of Christ. The general call to preach and the particular call of professionals is to share in the continuing ministry of Jesus. He says (p27):

“The calling of the preacher is the calling to be a servant...  
...all true preaching is evangelistic preaching, preaching both to the believer and to the unbeliever (and often both are the same person whether one is preaching to the Christians or to the non-Christians).”

The whole life of the Church is involved in evangelism and

“Preaching is but one instrument in a great orchestra.” (p30).

By what authority do we do this? D.T. Niles replies (p32):

“Their authority lies not in the fact that Jesus has entered their lives but in the fact that they have entered His. The crux of the difficulty is here that the preacher thinks of himself as taking Jesus to those who know Him not, when the truth is that it is Jesus who is taking the preacher to bear witness to Him. The preacher is the gift, Jesus is the giver.”

He amplifies this (p82):

“It is Jesus who is the giver and the preacher who is the gift. He sends us... He does not send us alone. He comes with us to work through us those works of power which are His witness that we are His witnesses.”

The Holy Spirit gives us authority, enabling power and the compulsion to preach. Niles makes another profound point related to this (p33):

“having lost confidence in the ways in which we used to state the necessity for evangelism, we have now ceased to believe in that necessity. We still believe that it is necessary for us to evangelise, but we do not believe that it is necessary for them to be evangelised. When our preaching does not convert we are concerned that we have failed, but there is little sense of loss concerning those who will not hear and believe.”

D.T.Niles stresses that preachers are servants. Jesus saw His own ministry in terms of being the suffering servant. Servant means obedience, being owned by the Master and having no possibility of escape. (p50):

“It is not possible to preach Jesus Christ as Lord unless the preacher can also witness to having been made a servant to others through Jesus; nor is it possible to be a servant to others except as part of one’s testimony to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The two facts belong together...  
...”For it is not merely to the service of preaching that one is called, but rather to be servant to those to whom one preaches. Indeed, the accent falls not on any particular service that one is able or is enabled to render, but rather on one’s own status as a servant. It is damnably easy to serve... but it is not so easy to be a servant.”

There is a big difference between serving and being a servant. Civil servants sometimes lose the plot and forget that they are servants of the people. Instead they can end up serving the institution. Niles says, preachers should serve and not empire-build.

Preachers are under-shepherds to the Good Shepherd and we should love the master and love His sheep. We love and serve others but it is to Jesus alone that we have to give account. Paul calls us mere “peddlers of God’s word” (2Cor.2.17) if, as preachers, we are not servants of God and close to the people we preach to. Bonhoeffer, in “Letters and Papers from Prison” (p166,169) said that Christians are not called to be religious but to be fully human:

“It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world. This is METANOIA. It is not in the first instance bothering about one’s own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up in the way of Christ, into the Messianic event, and thus fulfilling Isaiah 53.”

(p63) “The love of the Master for men has made us their servants, and there is no release for us from that love. He suffers for them and we suffer with Him. We participate in “the powerlessness of God” in the world.”

The first duty of servants of Jesus is to love our fellow servants and to share in our Master’s love for them. We cannot live with Jesus without loving. Jesus helps us to love. Love and service are inseparable –

“Go forth into the world to love the Lord and serve the people;  
to love the people and serve the Lord.”

Niles articulates this further (p72):

“The love of the brethren, the preaching of the Gospel, one’s own share in the Gospel’s blessing: all three belong together as one circle of truth each dependent on and each productive of the other two. And from this circle of truth no preacher may seek to escape. The true status of the preacher is that he is servant, the real secret of the servant is that he is friend. He is called to work with his Master and not just for Him. He is engaged with other servants with whom he must work. And all the servants together are invited to share in the counsels of the whole enterprise, to draw from the strength of their Master’s own service and each to find sustenance for his own ministry from the friendship of his fellows.”

He explains this further (p82-83):

“The Church is called to witness; that is why there are preachers. Preachers are called to be servants; that is why the Church exists in the world as a servant-community. The servants are bound together in a common love which is the basis of the Church’s fellowship. The KOINONIA is the KOINONIA of those engaged in DIAKONIA, the

DIAKONIA is the DIAKONIA of those engaged in MARTURIA, the MARTURIA is the MARTURIA of the KOINONIA. All three – MARTURIA, DIAKONIA, KOINONIA: witness, service, fellowship – belong together in one reality of existence, and where any one of them is missing or defective, the other two will be missing or defective also.” ...“When we speak of the Church’s call to witness, its challenge to service and its constitution as a fellowship, we are speaking not about three sets of activities in which Christians must engage but rather of an inclusive reality of which God is the author, the sustainer, and the perfecter... That is why we must add LEITOURGIA to the list i.e. service rendered to a king. LEITOURGIA is these three in their doxology... The preacher preaches because God has declared that Jesus Christ is Lord... The servant serves because God has loved the world and given His Son.. The fellowship happens because Jesus loves His friends.. Glory is rendered because God has shone in our hearts.”

Herbert H Farmer wrote the preaching classic “The Servant of the Word”. In it he says that God enters into personal relationships with people through other people. Human existence is all about relationships with God and other people. We are related to God in our neighbour and related to our neighbour in God. Preaching therefore becomes very important because it is the channel through which God encounters human beings through human beings. God does give us free will so that although we cannot escape God’s direct encounters we can reject Him. We can only be truly free to accept or reject God’s loving advances if we understand what is going on and we cannot understand God’s loving encounters of us without preachers explaining things.

Speech is very powerful. The tongue is mighty. When we find ourselves in a strange country and unable to speak the language, then we discover how vital speech is to our daily lives. Speech is the communication of will to will. Speech informs, conveys meaning, signals, claims attention, responses and even claims our very selves (p54-5):

“Speech is superior to all other means of communication in that it unites, or can unite, in a maximal form what we have called will, claim and reasoned meaning, and so can be, as nothing else can, the medium of personal relationship.”

Niles progresses his argument, pointing out that if speech is vital for relationships, then it is vital for God’s saving work among people – because God insists on saving people in a personal way. Speech is the medium through which God’s will directly confronts our will claiming us and sharing Himself with us. Good preaching leaves people thinking that the sermon was “just for them”. Conversational style preaching, rather than formal oratory, promotes the I-Thou encounter of us by God. Conversely, reading your script, being too literary, over-using quotations and the lack of the personal pronoun “you” which gives direct encounter, all minimise or muffle the impression of direct personal relationship.

All of this has a bearing on the preparation of the preacher. D. T. Niles says we must be honest and not twist texts nor con people into agreement. We have also to beware of excessive emotionalism. Beware of too much subjectivity i.e. focussing on our own feelings about God rather than focussing on God. He considers it preaching’s chief task to convey truth till others with free will so see it that they can do no other than respond to it. Preachers should also preach with authority – people want and need trustworthy guidance, and the very relevatory nature of Christianity requires it. The Christian should not sound a hesitant note in a world of increasing sects and dogmatisms, but the authority should not override people and their free will. Even God does not do that. We have to respect the individual and have the humility which comes from remembering that we are fellow

sinners. Salvation by high pressure salesmanship to the point of deceit is not a service but an abuse of others. If God resists the temptation, so too must we.

Niles says that if God's saving approach is always through persons in relationship or, more generally, through history which is the sphere of persons in relationship, then preaching is essentially a pastoral activity. Stay close to your people and you will know what to preach and who to preach it claims Niles. Furthermore it is only in staying close to people that we grow personally, for God speaks to us through others too. The pastoral tie is why congregations prefer "our own man/woman" to "the guest preacher" no matter how good or bad they are. Our preaching is sometimes limited by our character and pastoral relationships, e.g.

"I cannot hear what you say, because what you are shouts too loudly."

The preacher is responsible for his/her whole life ministry. On the other hand, relationships have responsibilities on all partners and the congregation, the hearers also have a responsibility for the effectiveness of sermons. Preaching is an act of the Church. Congregations can waste the best of sermons or make something out of the worst of sermons.

Illion T. Jones in his book "Principles and Practice of Preaching" gives some very practical advice regarding the preparation of the preacher including the following. Work very hard, have regular hours for study, systematise the work, keep to the schedule, delegate and learn to say no. Promote your personal health of body, mind and soul (cf. ICor.6.19-20). Healthy personalities and healthy preaching go together. If Jesus needed to recharge His batteries, how much more do we? Remember that it is God's work, God's ministry, God's responsibility, God's worry: the buck does not stop with us but with God.

"One of the hardest things we ministers have to learn is to let God carry His share of the load." (p57)

Preachers sometimes jest to their congregations that they have to practice what we preach! The truth is that we preachers have to practice what we preach! A U.S. army general said:

"laymen do not want their pastor to come down to their level of morals, but to draw them up to his...Folk do not expect the preacher to be an angel and the like to discover that he has his share of human weakness, but they look to him to set a standard of conduct which down in their hearts they long to attain." (p58)

G.W.Pepper said:

"It is impossible to exaggerate the weight which the man in the pew attaches to the integrity of the preacher."

W.L.Sperry:

"Preaching can survive countless honest errors: it cannot stand insincerity."

St.Francis:

"Unless you preach everywhere you go, there is no use to go anywhere to preach."

Jones says that preachers must know, and be seen to know, what we are talking about. It must be first hand experience. If the preacher is unmoved we are unlikely to move our hearers. Speak not as people who possess a faith, but as people possessed by their faith.

It is also essential, says Jones, to have a strong sense of call – to feel not that we have chosen the ministry but that God has chosen us, conscripted us. Samuel Moffett said to his five sons, all of whom ultimately went into the ministry:

"Don't become a minister if you can possibly help it."

Illion T Jones urges all preachers to enjoy preaching (p66):

"After a person has heard the call to preach, committed himself to it for life,

and entrusted the outcome to God, he ought to enjoy preaching.”

He quotes from “Today” Sept. 1933:

“Work done grudgingly is servitude.

Work done willingly is service.

Work done lovingly is a sacrament.”

Speaking of joy and satisfaction in preaching, my father, George Noble, who is also a preacher, always kept prominent in his study this quotation from John Ruskin:

“The greatest reward for man’s labour is not what he gets for it  
but what he becomes by it.”

While at Princeton Theological Seminary I was given some life-changing lectures on preaching from a practicing preacher – Rev Dr Bryant Kirkland, minister of New York’s big 5<sup>th</sup> Ave Presbyterian Church. He reassured us student preachers that society will always need men and women of God, sensitive, spiritual people able to articulate God’s Word to His people. He urged us to be professional, knowing our job, our people and their problems.

One of the most important things he said was that the making of the minister is the making of the person. He asked, how long does it take to make a sermon and answered himself: a lifetime! We need to be learning and growing in every direction with an interest in everything.

Halford E Luccock wrote “In The Minister’s Workshop” that the preacher must be prepared as well as his preaching. He warns preachers to beware of becoming like a cobbler without shoes or a baker who starves to death when we let maximum demands upon us pressure us into minimum spiritual life. He compares ministers to Sisyphus rolling heavy stones up to the top of hills only to have them roll down again forcing us to begin again (p19):

“The wearing down of the spirit through repeated effort which seems to have  
the pall of a comparative futility over it, is something the preacher must be  
ready to meet.”

As well as our own weaknesses we have to work in a world which is often crazy and wicked, so the priority, says Luccock, is to be fit and fresh in ourselves and in tune with God and all the riches of His grace.

Luccock warns preachers to beware of preoccupation with technique at the expense of content. He says (p28):

“Every preacher should be a pair of brothers, Moses and Aaron – Moses  
with the message of God in his heart and mind, Aaron with the skills of speech.”

He amplifies this (p30):

“What a preacher brings to a people is a personal intensity which results  
from being possessed by a Person and a gospel, an available reserve of  
sheer intensity of perception and emotion. What shall it profit a man to  
gain a whole world of method and lose his own intensity of grasp and giving?”

The prelude to William Macgregor’s book, “The Making of a Preacher” has a lovely appreciation of Macgregor by another of Scotland’s greatest ever preachers, Arthur J Gossip. Gossip asks and answers the question: What made W M Macgregor such a great preacher. His answers include: (1) his sermons were literature in themselves, (2) his ability to draw upon his vast reading, (3) his preaching from the heart, (4) his keeping the justice and love of God together, (4) his speaking from first hand experience, (6) his obvious knowledge of what other people were going through, and (7) he walked with God. Dr. Gossip sums up Macgregor beautifully:

“This man was a preacher because he had heard incredibly good news  
which he could not keep to himself, but had to speak; because he knew  
Christ intimately, and exulted in this Friend of his of whom he was

immeasurably proud. Not seldom during a sermon his face would break into a smile...it was sheer pride in the Gospel that he was preaching, and in the Christ he was proclaiming, and in the wonderful God he was seeking to reveal.” (p13)

According to W.M.Macgregor in “For Christ and the Kingdom”, the definition of a bad minister is (p14):

“a man [or woman] ceaselessly engaged in the working of guilds and societies, a tiresomely busy creature, with an unslackening flow of thin chatter, and with scarcely a touch of the eternal, always in motion yet never getting anywhere.”

Conversely, he defines the ideal minister as a scribe, teacher and interpreter making the Word of God living and real; a prophet and priest (p15):

“A Christian minister must imperatively be a priest in temper – one with his fellows, sharing their joys and fears, their hopes and sorrows and confusions, so that on their behalf he can present these before God; and, on the other side, he must be intimate with God, so that from the Divine Presence he can speak to men.”

As Macgregor says, this is where the authority comes from (not from an ordination service). The minister, by virtue of the office, is admitted into people’s homes and innermost hearts. He/she is trusted, respected and looked to for a lead. No wonder ministers fall in love with their people and places. He testifies that the ministry is so varied that it stretches the minister in all directions and is never dull. For better or for worse a minister can leave a big mark on the people and affect the community long after they have gone.

William Macgregor himself has his own thoughts on what made an ideal preacher. He thought he should be “a man amongst men”, sympathetic with people in their infirmities, God’s channel through and through, (not just formally) and at home with God. He sums it up as being like Jesus.

W M Macgregor’s other book on preaching spells out, as its title says, “The Making of a Preacher”. He says it happens through knowledge of God:

“What a preacher most requires is not the cultivation of fluency and professional dexterities of the surface, but qualities of character, the gift of inward understanding, and, in particular, the personal knowledge of God.” (p32)

When we know God well, we shall be radiant like Moses. St.Paul prayed for his Galatian friends (4.19) that “Christ be formed in them”. Macgregor quotes Milton (on poets) applying it to preachers: “a pure mind in a pure body”, “ought himself to be a true poem”. We should be living, transparent epistles. Augustine put it:

“In order to his being obediently listened to, the life of the teacher is of greater weight than any splendour of diction.”

How can anyone speak about things which he does not know? Personal experience is very important. Emerson said of Seneca:

“His thoughts are excellent, if only he had the right to utter them.”

Put another way, there is the famous saying:

“I cannot hear a word of what you are saying for who you are.”

Personality can be a prism through which truth is conveyed but it can also deflect from the truth.

As well as knowing God, we must also know men and women. We need to know both the Bible and daily life if we are to relate the one to the other. To get into other people’s lives we need love, imagination and empathy. Love identifies with others. Jesus is our model in this regard. Jesus knew so much and could talk with unique authority but He was so patient, accommodating and

forgiving, making allowances for people's slowness. He preached with both authority and tenderness.

The good preacher, says Macgregor, will read a lot. The working minister's mind is always in danger of suffering, like soil, from being relentlessly over-cropped. There is the danger of the minister's voice, careless thinking, slovenly phrasing and tired presentation. George Whitefield the great Methodist preacher said: "I use market language". It is more than that though. Reading enlarges our whole outlook says Macgregor (p58):

"It is not the number but the quality of the books which matters, and the way in which you use them."

More than that, reading inspires us. Emerson said:

"books set the sails of my windmill spinning."

Bacon advised that we "chew and digest" the writings of God-intoxicated people. The Bible itself is of course the most powerful example of inspired writing which inspires and transforms lives.

In "For Christ and the Kingdom", Macgregor says that the ministry is such a big challenge and responsibility that John Ruskin used to say that anyone who took it on, must either have inordinate conceit or extraordinary ignorance. There is a third possibility of course – that God calls and we humbly respond in the faith that whom He calls He also fits. John Ruskin also makes an interesting comparison between professions (p26):

"The soldier's profession is to defend the nation, the pastor's to teach it, the physician's to keep it in health, the lawyer's to enforce justice in it; and the duty of all these men [and women] is, ON DUE OCCASION, to die for the nation. The soldier is bound to die rather than forsake his post in battle, the pastor rather than teach falsehood, the physician rather than desert it in plague, the lawyer rather than countenance injustice."

Macgregor points out that since the work of the ministry is so varied, it is easy for us to excuse our failures in one area by stressing how busy we were in other areas. Preparing sermons involves a lot of invisible hard work so it is tempting to turn to lots more obviously achievable goals, to feel that we have done something. Macgregor quotes someone as saying:

"It is a pity, dear fellow, that he is at his best every day but Sunday."

The ancient form of the congregational "Call" in the Scottish Church was:

"We do heartily invite, call and entreat you to undertake the office of a pastor among us and the charge of our souls."

Macgregor says that what really makes a minister is his/her humbly accepting the call of God. In doing so, we acknowledge God's rule and give willing obedience (unlike a stubborn mule). We have to keep reminding ourselves (p32 "For Christ and the Kingdom"):

"The people are not there for me, but by the appointment of God I am there for them."

We should cultivate the compassionate eyes of Jesus and truly value the Word of God. The minister, like the congregation, breathes in and out; IN, bringing the needs of the world to God and OUT, bringing the grace of God to the needs of the people. We need to know both the needs of the people and the gracious God whose grace is sufficient for all their needs.

Macgregor suggests that no amount of training will make a good minister unless he/she begins with a knowledge and love of people and God. Ministers, he says, need to know both books and people. Preachers have to speak from both the head and the heart and speak logically, sincerely, passionately and theologically. The latter requires humility, openness and the ability to enter into the skin of the writers. Pascal said: "The heart has reasons of which mere reasoning knows nothing".

Hazlitt said that a person may be able to translate a word into ten languages and still not know what the word means in any language. What people want to hear are words of eternal life translated into the language of the “man in the street”. Macgregor offers this parable (p54):

“In his eagerness for scientific or absolute truth a man may become like a tortoise, so securely enclosed in his armour of special learning as scarcely to touch the common life of men at all. Through holes for his feet which allow him to walk, and for his head that he may eat, he ‘leaks out on to the exterior world,’ but otherwise he remains secluded and apart. Unfortunately there are theologians and even ministers of this tortoise kind, resolute in their desire for truth, but essentially outsiders as regards the living interests of men.”

The preparation of the preacher requires lectures, academic study, practical experience and personal tuition. The preacher has to sit under the truth not above it, under the Bible, not imposing but discerning. Sitting above we learn nothing that we did not already know; sitting under we make all kind of new discoveries all the time.

The preacher’s character is a vital part of his or her preaching. Macgregor makes the astute observation (p70):

“In calling for the sacrifice of self the Lord Jesus did not demand the obliteration of self; and a true disciple will so cultivate his own character as to secure that he has a self worth sacrificing.”

If we are to be good examples and practice what we preach, we need to keep the channels between us and God open. Like all Christians, preachers need prayer and a close relationship with God (p78):

“the cowl does not make the monk; and the most regular and dignified ordination may leave a man exactly where it found him...The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and is discovered through dwelling with God, not through talking about Him.”

Wordsworth said that there is a “wise passiveness”. Leonardo da Vinci often used to pause in front of his canvass when painting. He used to say that the longer he paused, the more telling were his brush strokes when he resumed. The Holy Spirit fashions and makes the preacher.

Dr Denny talks of ministers who are “less the shepherds than the pet lambs of their congregations”. It is truly sad when “the hungry sheep look up and are not fed”. Hermas in the second century wrote about what some preachers can become:

“Empty himself, he gives empty answers to empty people.”

Faber gives the antidote:

“Deep theology is the best fuel of devotion; it readily catches fire, and once kindled it burns long.”

What Augustine Birrell says of Hazlitt applies also to preaching:

“for him poetry was no mere ‘stretched metre of an antique song’, it was food for the mind, matter for the heart, something that helped him to go on living, thinking, loving, even hating.”

Macgregor: “For Christ and the Kingdom” (p96):

“when he speaks it is not from books or from some remote yesterday but from himself and from today. The truth which has become the possession of his soul is uttered by him with a personal signature.”

Macgregor’s final thought on the preparation of the preacher is to say that the preparation must fit the goal of our ministry which is the salvation of the hearer. Beware the mere hireling who does not really care for the sheep. Beware of the person who only cares for his own sheep, the empire

builder. Our aim is to build the Kingdom of God in our area. The congregation is meant to be a foretaste of heaven, “a colony of heaven”, the Kingdom of God in miniature. We can’t force belief but we can work towards the writing of God’s law in their hearts (Jer.31.31). The Gospel is not defended but proclaimed. Preaching is of necessity evangelistic. Macgregor says we should learn to preach with a “grand severity” (p119) meaning with awe and wonder showing the majesty of God.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon gives some wonderful advice on the preparation of the preacher in his classic book “Lectures to my Students”. He begins by saying that every workman keeps his tools in good repair, so we shall accomplish most when we are in the best spiritual condition. He stresses from the outset that preachers must be saved people for if the salt be unsavoury how can it savour others! A graceless pastor is “a blind man elected professor of optics” or “a blind navigator”. Many a tailor goes in rags. Preachers have to be advanced disciples, mature in the faith, examples, “the choicest of God’s choice”, the pick of the bunch, the elite corps. We must be strong physically, mentally and spiritually. When we fall, he says, we should not open our lips again until our repentance is as notorious as our sin. We need vigorous piety because the ministry is so assailed with temptation. He says the worst temptation is “ministerialism” ie. becoming ministers to the exclusion of ourselves as human beings. He warns that Satan is particularly out to get those who would be leaders in the army against him. He will seek to smite the shepherds so that he may scatter the sheep.

Spurgeon continues stressing that our characters must be developed because actions speak louder than words. Preachers are watched by a thousand eagle eyes so we have to be careful about every minute detail of our lives. We cannot afford to run great risks through little things. Even in our recreations we remain preachers.

He says that a strong sense of call is an essential and as well as that we need to cultivate the following abilities (p30):

“..ability to edify, and aptness to teach, is not enough...  
Sound judgment and solid experience must instruct you;  
gentle manners and loving affections must sway you; firmness  
and courage must be manifest; and tenderness and sympathy must  
not be lacking....You must be fitted to lead, prepared to endure,  
and able to persevere. In grace you should be head and shoulders  
above the rest of the people, able to be their father and counsellor.”

Preachers should be people of prayer more than most. Pray without ceasing; live in a spirit of prayer. If we become lax in private devotion our people will suffer as well as ourselves. Spurgeon says (p43):

“All our libraries and studies are mere emptiness compared with our closets.”

Prayer is the best form of preparation...better than commentaries, theologies etc. – just ask any famous preacher.

“We not only ought to pray more, but we MUST.

The fact is, the secret of all ministerial success lies in  
prevalence at the mercy seat.” (p49)

“Think not to be a messenger of grace to others till you have  
seen the God of grace for yourselves, and had the word from his mouth.” (p50)

Spurgeon forewarns preachers that we will probably suffer fits of depression. Why? Because we are mortal, suffer ill health, the counselling work ministers do, the loneliness of high office, overwork, sitting too long, worry, lack of exercise. He might also have added: when output exceeds input! The most likely times for depression, he predicts are: the hour of greatest success, before any

great achievement, in the middle of a long stretch of work, after a crushing blow and when troubles multiply. Rest time is not wasted time he says and he also points out that many great preachers have had to carry a secret cross.

Preachers, according to C H Spurgeon, must train and strive to be real people, with no airs and graces, humble people who exude humanity as well as divinity, ambassadors of God, able to mix with all (like Jesus), and be the sort of person whom children like to gather round.

Spurgeon has one chapter heading which I have not seen anywhere else – “To Workers with Slender Apparatus”! It is full of essential advice for all of us, such as:

A good quality library is indispensable. Master the books you have. Think as well as read. Borrow judiciously. The Bible is to a preacher like a sling was to David – be experts on it. Know the Bible, both the letter and the spirit of it. Keep your eyes open for nature is an open book. Study yourself. Read other people. Learn from experienced saints. Learn from the sincerely seeking soul. Be much at death-beds.

Charles Spurgeon, in another chapter, reminds us that fundamentally and ultimately we depend on being spiritually quickened by the Holy Spirit. Otherwise no amount of technique or advice will help us. He says (p187):

“We are not the passive communicators of infallibility, but the honest teachers of such things as we have learned, so far as we have been able to grasp them.”

Fortunately for us the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of knowledge, wisdom, discernment, inspiration, holiness and harvests. He blows where He wills. Like a glider pilot (my illustration) learn to discern the updraughts. The skill comes with prayer and practice. The skill goes with insensitivity, dishonesty, lack of grace, pride, laziness and neglect of private prayer.

He has much more to say on the preparation of the preacher in every sense. For instance he says that we must progress mentally by study and retaining what we learn; improve our speech technique and style; grow morally in terms of self-control, humility, zeal, integrity and honesty; pay attention to detail; spiritually mature in terms of self awareness, being full of the Holy Spirit, conformed to God’s will, dwelling in Christ. He exhorts us to be mighty in deed as well as word, dedicated and hard working.

Be positive, says Spurgeon. We have a definite message to proclaim, so be positive and passionate about it. Be sincere and bold and unashamed. It was said of Martin Luther that no one doubted that he believed what he said. People said of him:

“He spoke with thunder, for there was lightening in his faith. The man preached all over, for his entire nature believed.” (p225)

I like Spurgeon’s analogies (p225):

“if the truth be in thee it will flow out of thine entire being as the perfume streams from every bough of the sandal-wood tree; it will drive thee onward as the trade-wind speeds the ships, filling all their sails; it will consume thy whole nature with its energy as the forest fire burns up all the trees of the wood. Truth has not fully given thee her friendship till all thy doings are marked with her seal.”

He cautions that friendship with the truth will involve big sacrifices.

John Nettleship in his book “Tend the flock of God” also has interesting things to say about preparing the preacher. His main point is to think of ourselves as shepherd of the flock of God. Preaching has a big pastoral streak. Ezekiel said “I sat where they sat” Don’t preach at people but

preach from inside people's shoes. Learn to know the people very well and be able to address their real concerns. Ministers have a trinity of roles: preachers, teachers and pastors. Developing one of these aspects enriches the others too. All three require us to understand, know and love people (p49):

“The really great leaders of men have not usually been men of outstanding originality or independence of outlook. Rather, they are men who have had the capacity for insight into the needs, concerns, hopes and ideals of the people they were called to lead.”

On (p34), Nettleship writes:

“[The preacher's] starting point again and again will be the situation in which his people find themselves, the problems which confront them in daily living, and the questions they all ask at times about the fundamental truths of the Christian faith.”

He quotes an educationalist who said to a group of teachers (but it also applies to ministers):

“Always remember, you are not teaching history or geography, or mathematics; you are teaching John, and Harry, and Mary!”

When a visitor commented on how good the sermon was; a regular worshipper explained:

“Yes. You see, behind every sermon our minister preaches, there is forty years of Christian living.”

In this regard, Nettleship quotes Phillips Brooks (p51):

“If ever in your ministry the souls of those committed to your care grow dull before you, and you doubt whether they have any such value that you should give your life for them, go out and work for them; and as you work their value shall grow clear to you. Go and try and save a soul, and you will see how well worth it is saving, how capable it is of the most complete salvation.”

Nettleship adds (p51):

“This is the vision and faith which saves one from despair in the ministry, and it is the source of the patience so necessary for any kind of leadership but in none more so than in leadership of things of the spirit.”

John Oman in “Concerning the Ministry” writes about the kind of preachers we need. He says that ministers need order and good method in their work but also we need to be creatively inspired. We need to learn to work through the uninspired times and establish good habits. He quotes an old, wise doctor who said (p17):

“Practice is very fine and necessary, but only if you know what you are practising. Otherwise it is mere blinding routine.”

We each have to develop our own best method of working. Oman recalls (p20):

“An old Scottish professor used to say that there were three qualifications for the ministry – the grace of God, knowledge of the Scriptures in the sacred tongues, and gumption.”

We need, and God gives, wisdom, practical discernment, prayer, hard work and love.

Oman adds a cautionary note (p22):

“Your bow should always be ready for bending, but it will lose its elasticity if it is always bent.”

In other words, “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” and a worn out, inefficient one too. Gladstone the Prime Minister was a hard worker but he could throw off the burden in between. It is a battle but it is a battle we must win. Even Jesus had to take times out.

Preachers must love people and be seen to be so. Unfortunately an official religious relationship is much easier to cultivate than a truly human one. When we become “life-understanders” then we can become life-changers. Oman reminds us (p28):

“You do not have to prove but to manifest the existence of God.”

Oman says that preachers are prophets of the people to the people. Love the people, spend time with the people – have time for everyone; watch the people, learn from them. Inspiration sometimes comes in quiet, reflective solitude but it also comes in busy, pressurised times. Pressure is not always bad nor does it need to mean a drop in quality (p41):

“Your work as a preacher has more to do with character than with genius; and character, though it is also born in solitude, comes to strength by buffeting life’s troubled sea... You will help no one to victory if you yourself shun the battle.”

Beware of spending more time arranging your books than reading them. Beware of flurry i.e. the preoccupation with lesser things(distractions). Beware also of worry and trying to carry God-sized loads for it is a denial of your ministry and the trust in God which you preach.

“The supreme device of Satan is to confuse busyness with business and to make self-importance wear the aspect of humble service... you forget that doing many things is not doing much.” (p42)

Oman concludes these points by writing (p46):

“What makes Christianity attractive in the ordinary church-goer is just humanity, cheerful patience, a humility which neither asserts itself nor defers too much to human judgment, kindness, consideration, self-forgetfulness, sympathy, understanding. And the spring of no man’s ministry ever fails or runs dry in which these shine.”

Oman points out that preaching is not the supreme communication – living what you preach is! He exhorts preachers to be “living epistles” of Christ whose life and teaching complemented each other. Beware of being, as Paul says, sounding brass or clanging cymbals. He writes:

“You are not limited in God’s truth, but only in yourselves.”

Personal quality counts. The prophets had weight; as did Paul. The world is full of lightweight people; it desperately needs people of substance. A reporter said of Sir Edward Grey:

“when Grey says it, even the most commonplace utterance seems to carry weight...It is not his position, it is not his reputation, it is not his ability, it is somehow just the man himself.” (p69)

Like Grey, cultivate moral growth and don’t worry about what other people think of you. Also like Grey, learn to be still, quiet, reflective and perceptive. Noise and bustle diminish personal weight. Personal weight is a gift from God. Isaiah, for example, had personal weight: and may it also be said of us -

“He was a prophet who judged what is expedient by what is right, and not a politician who judged right by what is expedient.” (p74)

His weight and power lay not in his natural human capacities but in his faith in God. Have God-confidence rather than self-confidence.

Oman counsels preachers to cultivate zeal but beware of misdirected zeal. He also cautions that:

“the only true authority is God’s truth itself and its own witness to itself”

so don’t just tell people to swallow truth; rather encourage them to chew it and digest it for themselves. He explains (p86):

“The right fixity of conviction is not in remaining always the same.

It is truth, not your conviction of it, that is unchanging.”

Our convictions will change but throughout there should be the deeper consistency of seeking only to know God’s truth – just as a sail boat takes many different tacks to progress to its intended goal.

Like yachtsmen, preachers need to learn to change tack so as to sail through life's variety changing moods. There is a time for the same and a time for the different. People said to Socrates: "You are always saying the same thing." Socrates replied:

"If I am asked what is twice two, am I not always to say the same thing?"

Paul and Socrates could repeat themselves and people not mind. This is partly because they preached the same message to different people in different ways (e.g. passionate feelings to the Galatians, measured reason to the Romans). So, use a variety of moods and styles to respond to life's variety. Let the variety spring not from your own feelings at the time but from the nature of the material and the type of people you are addressing.

Oman says that preachers should believe what they say and say it with sincerity and conviction and that will cover a multitude of mistakes.

Oman further advises preachers (p92):

"Never complain and never explain. More particularly, never do it from the pulpit, where no one has a chance of replying. But, also, never do it by letter, which, too, is the coward's refuge. It will never do any good, and the plainest words can be twisted to a quite opposite meaning. If you must deal with anything wrong between you and another person, take the advice of the Master, to have it out between you and him alone."

When you have indignation (fully justified even) do not rush into the pulpit any more than you would rush in to the press. Remember...

"The Goths used to discuss their plans, first, when they were drunk that they might not lack boldness, and again when they were sober, that their boldness should be qualified by prudence." (p92)

Be very careful about criticising verbally or in print.

The preparation of the preacher has a lot to do with cultivating proper fervour. We can do this by musing on the Word and works of God until the fire burns. It helps to be aware that God is in this place. Fervour arises more from the emotions than the intellect. Donne remarked: "It seemed as though her very body spoke." Garrick speaks of the actor delivering his fables as if they were truth, and the preacher delivering his truths as if they were fables! Preach with fire in the belly! The passion is important as well as the precision in what we say. Fervour cannot be artificially induced by techniques or devices but it can be hindered by bad habits and practices.

Oman says that the true order is: have something worth saying, then express it in a style fitted to convey its meaning, then utter it in such a way that you convey the content, the feeling and the significance of it. He says it is important to be aware of yourself and improve techniques but it is far more important to forget yourself in your subject and in your audience. In perfecting the art, work from the spirit outward and not from the voice inwards.

The main thing about style, says Oman, is that it has to be your own unique style:

"The very first quality of a style is that it is your own, a true expression of yourself, the fitting vehicle of your particular way of thinking and feeling." (p120)

Style however is not so important as having something worth saying. In "Hamlet", the queen says to Polonius: "More matter, less art". There's a motto for preachers!

Keep studying. Soak in material. Keep good company. Soak in life through the experience of others. That is why pastoral work is so vital for preaching work.

Preparation of the preacher is deeper than gathering materials which might be handy in writing sermons. We have to gain first hand experience and knowledge and absorb it into the very fibre of

our being and then we deliver not sermons but whole being passionate convictions. Pulpiters give talks on topics; preachers proclaim the Good News from the depths of their beings whole heartedly. Dip into the pot of human knowledge – don't just take other people's material as they left it, but work on it till it becomes your own. The best material is drawn from experience but our own experience is too limited so we need to draw on the experience of the rest of the human race. Even ignorant people can teach us something about ignorance! (p156):

“The more people differ from you probably the more they have to teach you”

The preparation of the preacher is helped by meeting real people in their real live situations. Conversation can teach all those involved in it. We can also widen our access to other people's experience through reading, films, television, radio etc. There is a world of experience out there! The Bible supremely is our book full of people's experience of God and life. Of course, as Oman points out (p164):

“Width of reading is little use without breadth of mind.”

You will find it a general rule that great speakers are omnivorous readers and gatherers of people's experience from wherever they can glean it. Oman says (p166):

“Inspiration comes largely from keeping company with the inspired;”

Read poetry, biographies, newspapers etc. remembering that human life is the preacher's job!

This chapter itself has been a walk down the path of wisdom of the ages “in company with the inspired”. Each generation has to travel further than previous generations down the road of collective experience. We should learn from the past and be able to stand on their shoulders. My main motivation in writing this book is the passionate desire to pass on the baton, which I inherited and have added to by my own experience, to those who come after me, in the hope that they will take preaching to new heights.

The main point of this particular chapter is to stress that the preparation of the preacher himself or herself is vitally important along with the preparation of the sermon and the preparation of the hearers.

#### **4. PREPARING THE CONGREGATION**

It is important to prepare the preacher as well as preparing the sermon. However it is also important to prepare the congregation (and I don't mean supplying them with sweets with sticky papers)! Good communication requires good broadcasting and good reception, eloquent speaking and attentive listening. God inspires the preacher and God also inspires the hearers in a sort of pintzer movement. Preparing the hearers is not only God's work; it is also the work of the hearers themselves and the work of the preacher and others who want to promote the best possible communication.

When people decide to go to a football match or a concert they do a lot to prepare themselves beforehand. For example, they get all dressed up for the occasion, they talk themselves into a state of excitement, they spend a lot of money buying tickets, they go with friends, and they are quite knowledgeable about the coming event. Those staging the event also work hard at preparing their respective audiences. They advertise the event, they decorate the venue, they spend money getting the best performers to come, they warm up the crowd beforehand etc. Worshipers also prepare themselves for worship by dressing up, travelling, psyching themselves up,

praying beforehand and so on. Churches also try to be warm, bright, comfortable, friendly, welcoming, with attractive and appropriate music and décor etc. The preacher works hard to make it worth coming to. Sadly it often happens that the preparations for the football match or concert put the Church to shame! We individually and corporately as worshippers have a responsibility to prepare ourselves and others for worship.

The whole act of worship helps make the sermon a better moment of communication; and the sermon helps enrich the whole act of worship. The sermon must be seen in its worship context. Some people see the sermon as the climax of public worship services; others see the sermon as just one of the vital elements of the whole package of worship. Either way it is true that the sermon and the rest of the worship service help prepare for each other. Good preachers can preach brilliant sermons but not really communicate because the hearers have blockages in their lives which prevent their hearing. Wonderfully prepared individual Christians and corporate congregations can suffer because ill prepared preachers deliver poor sermons. However if everyone plays their part and prepares themselves as they should then God has unblocked pipes through which to breathe new life.

Our preparation is not confined to the day of the service. We prepare all through our lives. We enter Church this Sunday in the light of all our past experiences and the knowledge we have gained over the years. All our past is very present in every existential experience and we carry it into any future experience.

There is also a trinity of good preaching, good teaching and good pastoral work. Each has a vital role to play in the preparation of people for the other two. As a minister I see myself as a preacher, teacher, pastor. The preaching benefits when the hearers are well taught and people who have experienced healing, tender loving care and the grace of God. When people experience the grace of God they are keen to worship. Why should they possibly be keen before they experience it?

In the narrowest sense of preparing the congregation, we do it by our opening sentences in the sermon. Depending on how we start off the sermon, people quickly discern the content to come, the tone, the attitude of the preacher, whether it will be humorous, intellectual, boring, emotional, surprising, comforting, challenging, predictable, exciting, interesting...or not! Choose your opening words carefully! They carry disproportionate weight in preparing the hearers!

Remember that a congregation is more than merely the sum of its parts. You speak differently to them as a whole than you would to each of them one by one. I often think that I speak differently to a pew of people on a Sunday than I do to a queue of people for a bus on a Monday and yet they might well be the very same people! Crowds more than individuals are quicker to laugh or cry, are more receptive and responsive. However they are also more irresponsible, quick to feel but slow to decide. Phillips Brooks in "Lectures On Preaching" (p186) says:

“We [preachers] are like lawyers pleading before a jury which in the first place feels itself under no compulsion to decide at all; and in the second place, if it decides as we are urging it, must change its life, break off its habits, and make new ones, which it does not like to contemplate.”

The preparation of the congregation includes its relationship with the preacher perhaps over many years. It is a very powerful thing when the same person addresses the same people at the same time and place, week in week out over years. The people come with definite expectations (good or ill) borne out of their past experiences.

Every congregation is different every time – even if it is the same people as last week - just as the restless sea is never the same from one moment to another. I am always struck at funeral services with the thought that those attending are a unique combination of people – the family and friends of the deceased – and they will never again all sit down together in exactly that constituency.

Every congregation has its classic types of people including “pillars of the Church” and even better “propellers of the Kirk”, the habitual attenders, the deaf, the receptive, earnest seekers, those “far ben with God” as we say in Scotland, strangers representing the wider Church and world. In Jesus words, the sower of the Word of God faces stony, thorny, shallow and fertile ground. Someone else (who is unknown) put it very well in terms of bones! There are wishbones who spend all their time wishing someone else would do the work; jawbones who do all the talking but very little else; knucklebones who knock everything that anybody else tries to do; and most valuable of all the backbones who get under the loads and actually do the work. We have to minister to all types! The sermon has to prepare all of them for more service. Phillips Brooks likens the preacher and the congregation to a rider and horse, saying that whether the minister feels the congregation or not, it feels him for often the horse is more sensitive to the rider than the rider to the horse. The preacher can help prepare the congregation but often the congregation does more to prepare the preacher. It certainly works both ways. It helps very much if they both have a healthy respect for each other. Furthermore God is preparing both the preacher and the hearers. Brooks puts it graphically (p216):

“It is like a rope by which one ship draws another out into the sea. The rope is not always tight between them, and all the while the tide on which they float is carrying them both. So it is not mere leading and following.”

People come into Church prepared or otherwise for worship and the hearing of God’s Word depending on their prevailing attitudes, postures, outlooks and convictions. Today many people in our congregations are fatalistic, think science can solve everything, are bigots, cowards, sceptics, doubters, paranoid, confused, numb, grieving, with guilt complexes, with mixed up priorities. Some have “Churchianity” rather than Christianity, and many are ignorant about the Bible and doctrine. Some

are very sentimental preferring feelings to truths. More positively, many come to public worship out of private prayer, with deep Christian convictions and considerable Christian knowledge, eager to listen for a Word from their Lord, and willing to obey. Phillips Brooks says (p241):

“there is in every man’s heart, if you could only trust it, a power of appreciating genuine spiritual truth; of being moved into unselfish gratitude by the love of God. Continually he who trusts it finds it there...”

He urges us to be like Christopher Columbus and launch out for a whole new world, not sticking to home bases...(p241)...

“The minister who succeeds is the minister who in the midst of a sordid age trusts the heart of man who is the child of God, and knows that it is not all sordid, and boldly speaks to it of God his Father as if he expected an answer.”

The preacher’s assumptions can go a very long way to preparing the congregation. For example, if we assume that they are good or bad givers we can little by little squeeze them into that mould! Keep assuming they are good givers, address them as such and even just for the sake of argument, just so as they can listen to the rest of what you are saying, they adopt the role. If you do it often enough and sincerely enough it is amazing how it becomes self-fulfilling. Similarly children behave well or badly depending on whether they are thought to be, and addressed as, “we monsters” or “little angels”. This subliminal level can be as important as conscious levels when it comes to preparing people – just ask any advertising agency! Jesus expected much from very humble people and did not hesitate to give them rich spiritual food. Jesus didn’t just treat people as He found them (for He found them in some terrible messes); rather He treated them as they could be and often His high opinion of them raised them up till it became true of them. Impulsive Peter for example, became a rock. Boyd Carpenter’s biographer said of him (McComb: Preaching in Theory and Practice p133):

“His attitude was essentially winning and persuasive, - that of an ambassador for Christ bearing glad tidings rather than a Hebrew prophet denouncing judgment.”

Dr J H Jowett said that all preaching should sound the wooing note.

Phillips Brooks in “Lectures On Preaching” (p257) says:

“If we could see how precious the human soul is as Christ saw it, our ministry would approach the effectiveness of Christ’s.”

To illustrate this he quotes a man:

““I am not convinced by what you say. I am not sure that I cannot answer every one of your arguments,” said a man with whom a preacher had been pleading, “but one thing which I confess I cannot understand. It puzzles me, and makes me feel a power in what you say. It is why you should care enough for me to take all this trouble, and to labour with me as if you cared for my soul.””

Brooks closes his great book on preaching with these last words: (p281):

“May the souls of men be always more precious to you as you come always nearer to Christ, and see them more perfectly as He does.”

In preparing the congregation it is important to know just where they are at – what their hopes and fears, questions and attitudes are. Many people, for example, come to worship feeling a sense of futility and meaninglessness about life. They have lost heart and nerve – largely because they have lost God and the ability to see things in the light of eternity. We help them prepare for worship and a life of discipleship by awakening them to awe and wonder and a sense of the numinous, in particular the fact that there is divine purpose in history. Look away from self to God, lift eyes up from the horizontal to the vertical dimension of life. Many others have a longing for security in an unsafe world. They fear that the whole fabric of life is disintegrating and they hesitate to marry or bring children into such a world. The antidote to this and the ideal preparation is to remind them of the providence of God and His past mercies. James S Stewart in “Heralds of God” (p12) says:

“The Church needs men who, knowing the world around them, and knowing the Christ above them and within, will set the trumpet of the Gospel to their lips, and proclaim His sovereignty and all-sufficiency.”

Stewart felt that his age had a tension between disillusionment and hope, between escapism and realism and between scepticism and faith. I have a feeling that that is a good description of every age. The preparation of the congregation will therefore include nurturing people’s faith, hope and realism.

Ronal Falconer writes in “Message, Media, Mission” (p129):

“Truth to tell, many congregations have become pathetic groups of one-day-a-week Christians, coming along Sunday by Sunday, often battered and limp from the stresses and strains of modern living, hoping vaguely for some kind of spiritual shot-in-the-arm which will buck them up and help them to struggle through another week of turmoil. They come to get; they do not come to give, except the faithful few who know what it is all about, the Remnant in every congregation in the land, who must be helped to fulfil their true function and destiny.”

Falconer continues by saying that often people are Biblically illiterate both inside and outside the Church so we have to reach ever outwards to them till they become fully functioning members of the Body of Christ, till they themselves become the Word of God to the world i.e. living sermons. Our congregations, says Falconer, need to see the necessity for mission. He writes (p133):

“Their problem, church-wise, is that they tend to be completely happy, coming along, Sunday by Sunday to have their batteries recharged for the exhausting and stress-filled life which awaits them from Monday at least to Friday. They judge their minister

and their congregation largely by their abilities to recharge them. And that is not enough from people of their potential. THEY THEMSELVES should be leading...and when they do just that, The advance of Christ's Kingdom is easily discernible. Ultimately Their minister has the task of activating them."

Donald Soper, who is famous for his outdoor preaching at Hyde Park's Speakers' Corner in London, says in his book on preaching, "The Advocacy of the Gospel" that hearers of any given sermon are more heterogeneous than ever. John Wesley didn't have to face the social, racial and religious variety of people in a modern day congregation. He points out that we preach today in a more secular context with less Sabbath observance or following of the Christian Year. Hearers often have less Bible background than previous generations and so miss many references and allusions. He makes some interesting observations such as – people are more conscious of life than preoccupied with death; and a widespread sense of guilt has been replaced by a sense of doubt. People have lost a sense of need and are more sales resistant. Often they are inoculated from further doses of Christianity by getting little shots of it when young. He points out that today there is plenty of interest in religion but little concern for real commitment. He says there is a lack of basic ideology, of spiritual values, spiritual power and authority. There is a lot of truth in all this but the main point I am making is that we have to "travel to Dublin" from where people are presently at. We prepare the congregation to travel to better positions by gradually, drip by drip preaching of the Gospel. All the previous sermons help prepare the individual hearer and the congregation for the next sermon.

Samuel McComb in "Preaching in Theory and Practice" says that hearers often find it hard to concentrate because their minds are full of distractions. It is indeed hard to suddenly think theologically. They often do not want to hear what the preacher is saying. So, we have to make the sermon too interesting to ignore! How? Pick an interesting subject i.e. one which is of passionate interest to them and use variety in our presentation and delivery. McComb quotes C H Spurgeon on this point (p125):

"Cultivate the surprise power, leap into your subject, let your first sentences have something striking in them, vary your speed, dash like lightning, move calmly like the flowing river, use the bass notes, the clarion notes, be controversial, be dramatic, have variety, that is what human nature craves."

McComb quotes a lawyer who told him what he wanted in a sermon (p129):

"When I listen to a sermon I want to be taken out of myself. I want to be lost in the ideal. Not commonplaces, not such things as I can get in newspapers and magazines, but something I can strive after and feel happy in so doing; - that is what I want."

If we deal with living issues in a living way we will grab the attention of the hearers and prepare the soil for the seed of God's Word.

We also have to weld together corporately the collection of individual hearers who start off individual and self-centred. How? It would help if they sat closer together. Community singing binds people together. Preach passionately till they forget self-consciousness and find themselves together following Jesus with eyes only for Him. Unity comes from looking outwards together to Jesus the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith”. The Church should have even greater corporateness than the local bowling club. (Sadly it doesn’t always)! The congregation is the Body of Christ for its community; it is “a little colony of heaven” on earth; and it is a corporate preacher itself. George McLeod in “Speaking the Truth in Love” (p100) says:

“Do we, in preaching, often see the congregation so, as a corporate and divinely gathered unit of God’s purpose? Do we see them, as scripturally we are bound to do, as kings and priests unto God? To whom do we direct our sermons?...do we often speak to individual souls “essentially related” WHOSE FULLEST WITNESS CAN ALONE BE CORPORATE?”

McLeod adds that we will get nowhere until we do. He explains that in Govan he had been preaching only to individuals as individuals (p101):

“Our Communion Roll contained hundreds of earnest Christians individually, but we hardly reflected a conscious unity. As a fellowship conscious of a common task and an immediate field of evangelism at our very doors, we were frankly listless.”

McLeod reminds us that God so loved the WORLD, not just the Church and not just individuals. Both the preacher and the congregation need to come with this outlook.

David H C Read in “the Communication of the Gospel” says that there is a widening gulf between the thought and language of people in the Church core and non-Churched people i.e. between believers and non-believers. We preach to both constituencies. It is not easy for we live in a paradoxical age (p13):

“The ability of men and women to understand one another, to commune, to share intimate experience, seems to have shrunk almost proportionately to the expansion of the physical means of communication.”

He compares Chaucer’s pilgrims mixing happily with modern passengers on an underground railway! It is not only the preacher who has an uphill struggle – so too has the poet – but in the preacher’s case it really is a matter of eternal life and death. Paul asks, how they shall hear without a preacher (Rom.10.14). Read is adamant that preachers should not simply discern what people want and give them it. On the other hand they should not present the Gospel as an authoritarian “diktat” having no concern for the hearers.

Read reminds preachers that it is easy to blame the hearers when preaching doesn’t seem to work, but it could also be the fault of the broadcasters as well as the receivers! Thinking about the hearers though, Read says there is (p25):

“a strange, illogical mixture of belief, unbelief, half-belief, rationalism and superstition. A man will say that he does not

believe in God, and yet will admit to the occasional use of prayer; another who never attends church will profess belief in the divinity of Christ; another will confess to regular church-going, but deny the major articles in the Christian creed; and a great number of our contemporaries are revealed as strongly desiring that their children shall be taught in schools the religion in which they themselves have ceased to believe.”

He says that the convinced anti-Christian is a rare phenomenon. After all our efforts we still have mass apathy rather than great enthusiasm or huge hostility! He says that it is not about better organisation, nor about finding points of contact with people outside the Church, for the problem remains in spite of our missions, invitations, broadcasts, campaigns etc. Read says the problem is within the Church itself. Many attenders are puzzled and confused with little or no real faith. The minister marches on while the people are left behind, with their faith being corroded by the swirling currents of scepticism and doubt...(p27):

“the major problem confronting the Church today is not the content of the Gospel, nor the machinery of evangelism, but the point of contact between the message we know to be both true and relevant, and the people to whom for the most part it is only partly true and almost wholly irrelevant.”

He writes a whole book on the problem but for the purposes of this book we are only concerned with what will prepare the congregation to receive the Word of God through preaching. In that regard he does have some helpful things to say e.g. (p44):

“We are not faced with a generation of intellectual sceptics, nor even of consistent materialists, but with the bewildered, distracted, uncertain men and women, conditioned to respond to scientific demonstrations, suspicious of obvious propaganda, and unable to see much meaning in our religious propositions.”

Today they might say: “I know what you mean and I can accept it with my mind but it doesn't switch me on.”

Read insists that the only way to go is the way of incarnation i.e. feeling the pressures, bewilderment and apathy of our present generation. We are not objective observers of our age but fellow sufferers and strugglers. We have to beware of being old-fashioned and of being trendy, and also beware of being middle-class and remote. Beware of being pigeon-holed into spiritual matters only and of being too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. We are in the world to risk and adventure like Jesus. People try to be the Church triumphant on earth while still enmeshed in the struggles. Read says that, like it or not, the Church is involved – by her very nature and her commission. The Body of Christ has to be where the Head is. So preach not as God's messenger passing on a message from God on high to the sinners on the floor level, but preach as one sinner who has been encountered by the grace of God passing on good news to fellow sinners.

Speak from heart to heart, from life to life. (p63):

“Sad though it may sometimes seem to us in our dreams of the ideal sermon, conceived in quietness and delivered without complications, it remains an axiom of Christian preaching that the road from study to pulpit runs through a living, demanding, interrupting manse; out into the noisy street, in and out of houses and hospitals, farms and factories, buses, trains, cinemas; through ringing telephones and stacks of letters and minutes; up between rows of puzzled people to the place where you are called to preach. It cannot be otherwise. For the living Word there is no by-pass Road from study to pulpit.”

This necessity arises from being in the real world and also from the very nature of the Word of God which is not a static body of objective truth but dynamic, live encounter with the living God. The main function of any words is to facilitate relationships and the words of the sermon are God’s way of relating to His people. Both preachers and people need to understand this or else we have no hope of communication.

Read identifies three constituencies of hearers: (1) the faithful (2) the theologically and biblically illiterate and (3) the person who never comes to Church. Traditionally in Scotland it was the practice to preach to the saints in the morning and the sinners in the evening; to give meat to the former and milk to the latter. Today we tend to address all simultaneously as “forgiven-sinners” at various stages of development who require a mixture of milk and meat. However we have to worry most about those who do not hear sermons at all, who are not at “the theological starting line” to use Read’s phrase. He warns us not to package the great mysteries of life – such as grace, salvation, atonement, God, love – into over-simplified pills ready to swallow! There has to be some mystery left and people have to question and discuss and seek after answers in order to find for themselves.

He encourages all preachers to speak to the needs of the people who are listening. Know them and their community life by experience; reflect their language; be direct, realistic and ruthlessly honest. Don’t say anything you would not be prepared to defend when you step down from “six foot above contradiction”. Reflect the ignorance and doubts as well as the certainties of the committed.

To prepare the congregation for preaching, Read says that we have to educate them out of some deep-seated misconceptions such as – preaching is the minister’s exclusive job; corporate worship is not essential; religion is a private matter; and a congregation is just a collection of relative strangers. Preaching is a fundamental function of the corporate Church and something we are all engaged in. It is not enough to worship God alone up a hill. Religion is not a private compartment of our lives but something which permeates every aspect of life and is to do with our brothers and sisters and neighbours. Congregations are more than the sum of many strangers. There is a vital cycle, says Read: a living fellowship needs true preaching and true preaching needs real fellowship. So the revival of preaching and the revival of Church consciousness go hand in hand. Read explains (p95):

“This surely is what is meant by ‘the context of the Church’.  
It is not simply that the Church supplies the background, supports the preacher, fills the pews; but that a man called to declare the Word of God is working in close harmony with a body of men and women who are seeking truly to be the Body of Christ, His instrument for the recreation of the world – beginning where they are. It is as one of this vital fellowship that the preacher will declare the Word, and when he specifically seeks contact with the pagan world they are his information-service, his co-workers, his bridge-head. Preaching, to be effective in our world, must break with the tradition of the ‘solo performer’ and be constantly related to the Christian community in action.”

So, having some idea of what preaching is and why we preach, and having both the preacher and the congregation well prepared, we are ready to begin the preparation of the sermon.

## 5. ACCUMULATING MATERIAL

Having sorted out a few of the basic questions regarding preaching, let’s get started! This immediately raises another of the fundamental questions, namely: HOW? How do we begin?

It should come as no surprise that there is no one simple blueprint formula answer to that question. We have seen already that we prepare the preacher and the hearers as well as the sermon. God may inspire in a flash of insight out of the blue but more often it involves hard work.

It is advisable not to have to invent the wheel every week and also advisable not to leave ourselves with only seven days to create a masterpiece. We are not God and we take longer to create! So, long before we begin the specific creation of the sermon, there is the more general preparation which is on-going and has been going on for many years.

Jimmy Tarbuck, a famous comedian, said that for twenty years he told jokes but eventually he became a comedian! At first he learned each joke and consciously perfected how to tell it to best effect, but in time (twenty years he thought) he had all his jokes and techniques so much part of his blood stream that he became a comedian through and through. We do the same with driving cars or dancing or whatever. We start thinking consciously about every movement but eventually we can do it with our eyes shut! (Well maybe not in the case of driving)! If we become comedians we go around with comedian’s eyes and ears, seeing and hearing the funny side of life everywhere we turn. Similarly we hear of the artist’s eye – the ability, the natural but cultivated talent for seeing more than other people see when looking at ordinary things. In the same way preachers have an eye or an instinct for material.

Sermons also benefit from years and years of experience. We should learn from the past and build on past experience. It is inefficient and negligent to come to Christmas each year as if we had never thought of it before. So it makes sense to accumulate materials on a long term basis which can be drawn on when needed.

Everyone has to work out their own techniques for gathering, storing and recalling material. However it can be of help to learn from the past experience of others, so I offer my own methods in that spirit. The following sermon starting points and resources are all helpful at different times and in different ways so they are not set out in any order of priority.

## 1. Personal Notebooks

Ever since I was sixteen I have kept a personal notebook. It is not a diary in the sense of I did this or that today, but rather a collection of any little gems of inspiration of my own or of others, which I have gathered. It is a little treasure chest of inspirational sayings, poems, articles, quotes etc. It also traces my own thoughts since I was a teenager. It is amazing to read your own thoughts from all through your own life. Inspirations are gifts from heaven like snowflakes – if you don't catch them quick and freeze them in cold storage you will find they just quickly melt away. Everywhere I go I carry pen and paper i.e. in every jacket pocket, in the car, in the toilet even! Many a good sermon starts in the toilet! And many a bad one ends there! If a thought comes to me, if the artist's eye or comedian's perception or preacher's instinct receives an inspiration from God then I believe I have a duty to gratefully and instantly write it down. "Speak Lord for Thy servant heareth" is a whole way of life, a permanent posture. Often this causes short term inconvenience as when the "Word from the Lord" comes in the middle of the night in the darkness and you have to get up to write it down. Often it distracts from what you are doing and upsets your schedule. But in the long term it is worth it. It saves so much time head scratching trying to manufacture inspiration. I would go farther than argue from convenience and efficiency and say that surely it is our duty to scribble down what God is generously providing on a plate for free! Why should God have to give things twice?

## 2. My Own Sermons

We can further say that if God gives a Word of inspiration, why should it only be used once, like disposable nappies or razor blades? Preachers have nightmares about people recognising "an old sermon" and they go to great lengths to keep up perpetual originality. Meanwhile congregations very often like familiarity e.g. the Lord's Prayer, Psalm 23 at funerals, favourite hymns etc. Peter Marshall, the Chaplain to the White House used to get requests from his congregation for favourite sermons which he had preached! From another angle we might reassure preachers that most of their congregations will quickly forget what they have said so there is little danger of "being found out" anyway. But the main point is that real, quality material can stand multiple usage and indeed improves with use. We watch films over and over and we re-read favourite books and poems. Shakespeare's plays and Mozart's music are still going strong! I would go so far as to say that it is literally a sin to throw away priceless gems of inspiration and even more so when it is God's Word. Imagine if Beethoven had thrown out his manuscripts after the first concerts! Having kept priceless treasures it is then a sin to bury the talents, lock them away, let them gather dust on a shelf or just clog up the computer.

I therefore keep every sermon, talk, broadcast tape, article etc. The sermons are filed as full manuscripts from 1 upwards in the chronological sequence in which they were born. I have about one arcadia file for every fifty sermons. Other people might prefer to do all their sermon writing and storage on computer discs. That makes its own sense. However I like to write with a pen when composing and I also like to keep the original manuscript which I used in the pulpit. If perchance you are wondering why I prefer creative writing with an old fashioned ballpoint pen, it may be connected to the fact that I started preaching before computers became household luxuries far less necessities! There is more seriously another reason: when you put ink to paper it does not delete so easily as pressing a button on the keyboard, so it focuses the mind! I write

better with that slight pressure. (I began with a typewriter which meant that any corrections involved retyping the whole sheet)!

My sermons are all indexed. For further details on how I keep track of all the material see chapter 15 on Keeping Records.

### 3. Books of Sermons and Sermon Tapes

I have a collection of books of sermons. See the list in the Bibliography at the end of this book. I also have a collection of famous preachers on tape. It makes sense to surround oneself with “so great a cloud of witnesses” as Hebrews 12 says and benefit from the wisdom of others. We ought to stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. The books and tapes not only furnish ideas, in varying degrees of rawness or refinement, they also inspire me. They give material for the sermons and motivation for the preacher. The tapes can be even more three dimensionally inspirational than the books! They also give suggestions for topics, both good and bad examples of preaching technique and wonderful illustrations.

It is wrong to simply read extracts verbatim. That is plagiarism and laziness. The job of every preacher is to translate often timeless things into current language – current meaning specific to this particular congregation this coming Sunday!

### 4. Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics

I must confess that every day, after reading the Bible, I read a little from Karl Barth’s “Church Dogmatics”. He is my favourite theologian. As a preacher I need to be nourished on the Bible, Bible commentaries and theology. (Noe there is a trinity to conjure with)!

One day I found myself alone with the world famous theologian Professor Tom Torrance.

Although we are both Scottish, it happened to be in the U.S.A. I knew that this was a chance in a lifetime and that my window of opportunity would only be a couple of minutes, so I went up to him, introduced myself and asked my jugular question:

“Professor Torrance, I am a young student about to begin a lifetime in the parish ministry, God willing. What advice would you give to me (and by implication to others in the same situation)?”

He replied instantly:

“Read Karl Barth’s “Church Dogmatics” and Kittel’s New Testament.”

So I have got myself the full set of 14 volumes of “Church Dogmatics” and I am slowly working my way through them – not in the original German of course; they have conveniently been translated into English by, guess who, Professor Torrance! It will take me most of my preaching lifetime to read them (since I am reading about one page per day). How on earth did he manage to translate them!

His brother, Professor James Torrance, was my teacher when I studied a Systematic Theology honours degree course in Aberdeen. It is only thanks to his wonderful teaching that I feel able to decode the complexities of Karl Barth’s concentrated writing! James Torrance, as a young man, had gone over to Germany to study directly under Karl Barth. He went with very little German language but managed to learn the language incredibly quickly and on top of the normal German vocabulary he also learned the theological jargon of Karl Barth straight from the horses mouth! So thanks to Tom I am trying to climb the mountain and thanks to James I am managing, slowly but surely. Thanks of course to Karl for there being a mountain worth climbing!

I see it as being the very essence of a preacher's task to connect two worlds – the Bible and Life. It is the preacher's job to bring The Good News to bear on real people's real situations and needs. By extension, it is also the preacher's duty and essential function to connect the rarified world of theology, of Tom, James, Karl etc. with the ordinary, down to earth, routine daily life realities of parishioners. I object to the phrases "ivory tower", when referring to theology and "trivia", when referring to daily life. These are two precious realms which ought to be inseparable but which need preachers to link them. People need theological interpretation of their lives (and theologians have to keep infusing doses of reality into their academic speculations sometimes)! Theological interpretation of life is very necessary and precious. People might say that they have no time for theology but if it is done well they can be enjoying it long before they know that that is what they are doing. It is a bit like people saying they do not like classical music, but when pushed concede that they like certain T.V. theme tunes or classic pieces used in popular advertisements on T.V. People do want to know where God is in their lives and where they might fit into God's scheme of things. They are interested in theodicy (i.e. why they have their recurring back ache when there is supposed to be a nice God looking after them). They are wanting someone to tell them why their pet rabbit died even after they asked God to heal it. The questions are not unpopular but too often in the past the preaching has not brought Good News to bear and it has caused preaching, theology and the Church to then be dismissed as irrelevant. Too often it has been irrelevant but it shouldn't be. On the contrary there is nothing more important than addressing the real questions and real needs of real people. I love re-presenting Karl Barth's material in one to one conversations as well as in pulpits. You can end up with a conversation between old Mrs. Smith and Karl Barth except that she doesn't know it and he is now dead! But the Word from the Lord continues on! Hallelujah!

#### 5. All the Books in My Study

In a sense I have lots of already accumulated material in the form of the books in my study. (I don't just read Karl Barth)! Indeed the whole world is your oyster with public libraries and internet access! However all the books in the world are not readily to hand in my study (but nearly half of them, perhaps!). I am a meticulous person so I have every book in its exact place. Every time I remove a book I return it to its precise place. Over time, it means that I get to know where every one of thousands of books are! So, when I am sitting at the desk and trying to recall something which I have read before, I can often get it by thinking logically through my categories and indexes and then using my photographic memory when I get close to what I am looking for. The system is far from perfect, or should I say the system is all right but the operator is far from perfect! Nevertheless it does aid recall to have the whole room designed very logically and be in effect a memory MACROchip. Someone once said that knowledge does not have to be stored in our head; knowledge is knowing where to find the answer.

#### 6. My Illustrations Collection

Within my personal library is a small section of books which are particularly good for illustrations. I keep them together on the same shelf for easy access. Each book is already read and marked by my own marking system using red and blue pens, vertical and horizontal lines and asterisks. Everyone has to work out their own method but my method guides me to the book, the chapter, the page and the line I am looking for (on a good day)!

I also cut out illustrations from magazines, newspapers or from leaflets and I download material from the internet. All this material is then stored in a box file sectioned from A – Z according to topic. It gives me instant access to lots of material on a given topic.

Collections of material need pruning regularly or else you have to buy or find ever larger houses to live in! The great beauty of collections of material is that you build them up incrementally and as you use them you get to know them – they become part of your bloodstream. You are then not only helped with an isolated illustration on any one week but more than that, you gradually acquire a body of knowledge which becomes part of you. It also means that you do not start to invent the wheel from scratch each week. In other words collections of material give you a head start in preparation.

#### 7. Sermon Cooker

A sermon cooker is simply four boxes (like four cooker rings) with four sermons being worked upon. They will be at different stages of readiness. As you prepare one sermon there are necessarily scraps which cannot be included but which you do not want to just throw away. They are potentially the start of other sermons or even a series of sermons. So, as you cook your main dish for this coming Sunday, keep any left-over material to put in the melting pots for future meals.

#### 8. Files Based on the Church Year

I keep a set of files of material for each of the special Sundays in the Christian year e.g. Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost etc. Coming up to these Sundays I can get a head start in preparation by checking what I did on previous years and seeing what gaps I have not yet covered. Previous material can evoke new thoughts and sometimes I happily find some previously unused material in the file. All year long I keep putting material in the respective files to be examined when the time comes round. These files work exactly like those in 6 above except that they are arranged topically from A to Z while these are arranged according to special Sundays.

#### 9. Worship File

I have two worship files in fact: Worship Theory and Worship Material. They are fairly self-explanatory. When it comes to writing a particular sermon it is the Material file which can be most of help. It contains specific worship items – prayers, hymns, poems, drama sketches, readings etc. It contains copies of material which I have experienced elsewhere and found helpful. Worship leaders always have their antennae up and are not averse to “reappropriating” good ideas and material...well it is God’s material after all and it is for His glory!

#### 10. My Brain

Last but not least there is my own brain! Sometimes it comes up with thoughts which surprise me and which cannot be traced to any of the above systems! We are all walking computers and filing systems!

More than that, we are poets and mystics! We can be directly inspired by God. Thoughts can be implanted by the Heavenly Sower and the voice from on high can whisper our name. Samuel says: “Speak Lord for your servant is listening”.

Professor Loder of Princeton Theological Seminary, in his inaugural lecture outlined how the process works i.e. how the brain comes up with something:

Stage 1: You have a problem you are trying to solve (e.g. I need a sermon for Sunday!) Stage 2: You scratch your head and try to think hard. You go round and round till you are nearly exhausted. So you take a break. At this point your conscious mind switches off but not your sub-conscious. It is a case of out of sight but not out of mind. You go and take a bath. Stage 3:

You are in your bath, minding your own business, when all of a sudden you shout “Eureka! I’ve got it!” Stage 4: Immediately there is a release of tension and you feel happier. Stage 5: Now you rush through to your desk (clothed in the bath towel hopefully) and begin to integrate your new insight into your own understanding of the world and into that long sought for sermon for Sunday. Hopefully on Sunday the worshippers will have their Eureka moments in the pews!

Illion T Jones in his book on preaching, “Principles and Practice of Preaching” chapter XIII gives some good advice in this respect. He points out that a sermon a week is a big task, so regular, systematic Bible study is vitally important. So too is Life study. So we should build up a reservoir of material from newspapers, magazines, books, watching TV, radio, social gatherings, visits, conversations, meetings....anywhere and everywhere. We accumulate material from our own experience of life but also from other people’s experiences. We need therefore to develop the ability to learn from our own experiences and keep close to other people so we can learn from theirs. Reading gives us access to far wider sources of experience. Read every kind of thing. Wider still, soak in everything from every source you can! And keep a notebook or pen and paper close to hand always.

## **6 THE CHRISTIAN YEAR**

Some members of the Christian Church have never heard of such a thing as the Christian Year. Other sections of the Church follow the Lectionary very rigidly. Probably most are aware of it and follow it to varying degrees. It is certainly well worth being aware of and following to some extent.

The main advantage of following the Christian Year and the Lectionary is that it gives you objectivity and stretches you beyond your own favourite themes and content. It gives width, ensuring that you preach from the whole Bible, not just your own few select bits. Perhaps the main disadvantage is that it can cause you to preach on something fairly obscure when some major world news event has just happened e.g. you are due to preach on Song of Solomon when war has just been declared. (Okay, that is a bit extreme, but you get the idea). I have noticed the paradox that those most attached to a fixed Year Plan and the Lectionary are very good at wangling in any currently relevant matters; while those who most advocate freedom from artificially imposed structures end up sometimes in quite inflexible styles and content! Personally I see the Lectionary and the Christian Year as wonderful servants but bad masters. I try to get both the objective width and balance and also have room for spontaneity and late alterations. It is all about common sense and maintaining balance. If you begin from the structured viewpoint you have to work at creative spontaneity; if you begin with carte blanche you have to be ever vigilant that you are not being too narrow and subjective in what you preach.

Observing the Christian Year saves us time and effort wondering what to preach. It also keeps us in tune with the rest of the world-wide Church. More than that, it keeps us in company with the saints down through all the ages. The use of a lectionary goes back as far as the Early Church and even the synagogue before that. Andrew Blackwood in “The Preparation of Sermons” argues that using a lectionary encourages preaching from the Bible; it helps with long range planning of sermons especially series of sermons; it gives a well-rounded succession of sermons and helps the preacher to deal with all the fundamental matters and deal with them proportionately.

David Steel devotes a whole book to this subject, “Preaching through the Year”. In the introduction he advocates following the Christian Year and using a lectionary in a flexible and

sensible way, because it saves time wondering what to preach; it objectifies the choice of topic saving the congregations from an excess of the preacher's favourite themes and passages; it is systematic and avoids omissions; and it keeps us in line with the world-wide Church and the Church down the centuries. The fact that all the major religions make use of regular occasions in the year for special observances suggests that there is something fundamentally human going on. Steel acknowledges that we have to keep a balance between (a) the aim of having an ordered scheme of preaching and (b) freedom for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He points out that this balance is accommodated in the lectionary because only half the year is prescribed as special Sundays.

The Christian Year runs basically as follows. It begins with ADVENT meaning Christ's Coming to us ("Ad" + "Venire" in Latin meaning literally to come to).

There are 4 Sundays of Advent, and then comes Christmas. The main theme of Advent is the promise of God's coming and the main theme of Christmas is that

God has come. Advent includes Bible Sunday (the Word of God coming to us in written form as well as in the flesh) and the Second Coming (for the One who did come, and comes daily is the One who will come again). Strictly speaking the Wise Men are supposed to be kept till Epiphany. We could preach on things like preparing for Christ's coming into our lives; God's comings; expectancy and waiting on God. Christmas is all about the Incarnation of God in our world and lives.

CHRISTMAS lasts for 12 days and nights from Christmas Eve to Epiphany Eve on January 5<sup>th</sup>. On Christmas Day the world remembers and celebrates the Incarnation - the fact that God took on Himself human flesh and was born in a stable in Bethlehem as the baby, Jesus. Christmas includes St. Stephen's Day (Dec. 26<sup>th</sup>) in memory of Stephen the first Christian martyr.

Christmas is followed 12 days later, on January 6<sup>th</sup>, by EPIPHANY (from the Greek word EPIPHAEIA meaning "manifestation", "appearance" or "showing forth"). It is about the revelation of God's gift of Himself to us. It commemorates the showing of the infant Jesus to the Wise Men (who were the first Gentiles to worship Him and as such represent the wider world). While Christmas shows the humanity of Jesus (wetting His nappies etc), Epiphany reminds us that Christ is Divine. Since the earliest centuries of the Christian Church the three traditional manifestations have been (a) the Birth of Christ and the adoration of the Magi, (b) the Baptism of Christ when the Holy Spirit descended upon Him, and (c) the first miracle at Cana when He changed the water into wine. Epiphany is also a period for remembering other revelations of God on earth such as Jesus calling disciples to help Him; healing the sick in body and mind; and being transfigured on the mountain. Epiphany connects Christmas and Lent and since Easter is a moveable feast, Epiphany can last anything from four to nine Sundays.

LENT, (an Old English word meaning "the spring") begins in springtime with Ash Wednesday (the 46<sup>th</sup> day before Easter). It consists of the 40 weekdays and 6 Sundays from Ash Wednesday to Palm Sunday inclusive. The fifth Sunday is called Passion Sunday or Low Sunday. (By the way, we say Sundays OF Advent but Sundays IN Lent). Originally Lent was a period of preparation for Easter baptism. The forty weekdays of Lent represent the period which Jesus spent in the wilderness. The traditional themes of Lent are: Temptation, Repentance, Sin, Forgiveness and the Passion or Suffering of our Lord.

Then comes, as a sub-season of Lent, Palm Sunday, Holy Week, including Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, then Easter Sunday. Traditionally preaching follows the pattern of events of the original Holy Week. "Maunday" comes from the Latin word MANDATUM or commandment which occurs in John 13.34 - "A new commandment I give you, that you love

one another”. The Gospels, Acts and the Epistles give a disproportionate amount of space to covering this one week – so should not we in our preaching?

Traditional Holy Week preaching would follow this sort of pattern:

Palm Sunday – The Triumphal Entry and Jesus coming to us.

Monday – Jesus Cursing the barren Fig Tree on returning from Bethany to Jerusalem and the Cleansing of the Temple

Tuesday – Jesus foretells the destruction of Jerusalem, describes the Last Judgment, gives parables of the Two Sons, the Wicked Husbandman, the Marriage Supper, the Ten Virgins and the Talents.

Wednesday – Jesus in Bethany is anointed with oil and Judas bargains with the chief priests.

Maundy Thursday – Jesus returns to Jerusalem, washes the disciples feet, the Last Supper, the Last Discourse (John 14-16) Gethsemane, Betrayal and Arrest.

Good Friday – Jesus is tried before Caiaphas, Pilate, Herod, Pilate again, scourged, mocked, condemned to death, led out to Calvary, Crucified (9am), Dies (3pm), removed from Cross and buried in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb.

The EASTER cycle is the 40 days from Easter Sunday till Ascension Sunday. Easter is a movable feast and all other movable feasts are dependent upon it. Easter Sunday is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox, March 21<sup>st</sup>. Preaching focuses on the many resurrection appearances and on the meaning of resurrection in our own lives. No Resurrection, no Christianity, and nothing to preach! The period of Resurrection appearances comes to a climax in the Ascension, 40 days after appearing to Mary in the garden. The Ascension celebrates the fact that the Crucified, and now Risen, Christ Jesus, is the King of Glory and Lord of all times and places. We preach on resurrection as a fact of life even more than dwelling on the details of each resurrection appearance. Having said that, there are twelve resurrection appearances we can preach on – to Mary in the Garden, to the other women, to Cleopas and friend on the road to Emmaeus, to Simon Peter, to the Disciples (without Thomas), to the Disciples (with Thomas), to the Seven Disciples by the Sea of Galilee, to more than Five Hundred, to James, to the Eleven giving them the Great Commission, to the Disciples on Olivet i.e. the Ascension, to Saul on the road to Damascus.

50 days after Easter is PENTECOST. The word PENTECOST means fiftieth. It was an Old Testament, Jewish festival celebrated 50 days after the Passover. It was also called the Feast of Weeks and was a Jewish thanksgiving for the first fruits of the wheat harvest (Ex.34.22). Later, Christians also associated it with the incident when the Spirit came upon the seventy elders of Israel who were to help Moses lead the people through the wilderness years (Num11.24). Pentecost is also called Whitsunday. It was a popular day in the Early Church for catechumens (enquirers) to make profession of faith and be confirmed. Often they wore white, hence “white-Sunday”. Pentecost was the day when the Holy Spirit came dramatically upon the disciples and starting with Peter’s bold sermon after which 3,000 souls were added to their number, the Church came alive. Changed lives went outwards changing the whole world. Preaching focuses on the Holy Spirit, fruits of the Spirit, speaking in tongues, the birth of the Church, obedience to Christ’s command and the fulfilment of Christ’s promise to send His Holy Spirit.

The biggest part of the Christian Year is the season of Pentecost, or the season of Trinity as some prefer to call it, or even Kingdomtide, and it comprises 24 to 29 Sundays depending on the date of Easter. The Sunday following Pentecost is always Trinity Sunday. This long season can be broken down as follows: 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> Sundays we remember God speaks through the prophets; 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Sundays we remember God speaks through the Church; 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday we recall the communion of saints; 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Sundays we consider the Church in mission; 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> we meditate on the forgiveness of sins and 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> we rejoice in the life everlasting. Preaching on

the doctrine of the Trinity is not easy in only one sermon, and not much easier over three! David Steel in "Preaching through the Year" (p116) gives a cautionary word of advice:

"You should not dazzle your congregation with the extent of your knowledge. They won't be dazzled. They will be dazed. Or they will doze."

All Saints Day, November 1<sup>st</sup>, is a day to commemorate those who have lived and died in the faith and to celebrate the communion of saints. "Saint" in this case is not just a select band of particularly holy people of outstanding devotion and achievement but in the New Testament sense of the mixed bag of all the believers. The Church is not "just a couple of auld wifies crowding in" as someone disparagingly commented. It is the biggest family, ever! The Church spans the globe, stretches back through history for thousands of years, comes in many varieties and is not broken by time, nor history, nor even death. The Church visible works away while those who are going on before us are the saints going marching into Heaven. As we run our lap of life's relay race, the fellowship of all the saints surrounds us and supports us from the grandstand! It is important to have this wider, mystical vision if we as preachers and our congregations are not to perish. It is a good day to preach on the Church militant and triumphant, the Body of Christ and the Communion of Saints.

Remembrance Sunday is not officially and strictly part of the Christian Year but no Year Plan would be complete without it. The same applies to Christian Aid Week and Harvest Thanksgiving and a few others (see below).

The various seasons each have their own liturgical symbols and colours e.g. Advent and Lent are purple/violet; Good Friday is black; Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and Ascension use white; Pentecost is red; and the other Sundays are green.

We can also see the whole year in a Trinitarian way in the sense that every Sunday we think about the Trinitarian God in His oneness but also in terms of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, distinguishable but not separable. Advent is the advent of God the Son, Pentecost is the coming of the Holy Spirit and the other times we think particularly of God the Father.

Apart from this basic Christian Year the preacher is under considerable pressure from different angles to designate other Sundays in special terms. For example there are seasons and Special Sundays to do with aspects of the Church's work e.g. Christian Education Sunday, Communication Sunday, Church and Nation Sunday, Mission Sunday, Social Responsibility Sunday etc. There are cultural special Sundays such as Remembrance Sunday, Harvest Sunday, Aids Awareness Sunday, Prisoners' Week Sunday, Sea Sunday. There are Communion and Baptism Sundays; the ordination of Elders and Admission of New Members Sundays. There are special Sundays in the life of the congregation e.g. Dedication Service including Boys' and Girls' Brigade enrolments and Guild enrolment; Cradle Roll service; Annual Thanksgiving service with Sunday School prizegiving etc. Charities can call for special services as at Christian Aid Week or for the Scottish Bible Society. There are special theme Sundays e.g. Bible Sunday or Prayer Sunday. The time of year can also claim Sundays e.g. New Year Sunday or Last Sunday of the Year. As you can see it is easy to end up with more special Sundays than there are weeks in the year! It is also psychologically asking too much to designate all 52 Sundays of the year as special Sundays. It becomes all icing and no cake. Congregations need "ordinary" Sundays to make the context and contrast for "special" Sundays. Clearly then the preacher must plan the year in order to give a balanced diet. Of course, even after planning it, life keeps throwing in the unexpected, and our plans have to be flexible. Still it is essential for flexibility to have some structure on which to base it. Everyone has to work it

out for themselves, and it is not exactly the same every year, but for what it is worth here is one of my typical Year Plans:

## YEAR PLANNER

1<sup>st</sup> Sun of Advent

2<sup>nd</sup> “ “ “

3<sup>rd</sup> “ “ “ (Lessons/Carols)

4<sup>th</sup> “ “ “ (All age Nativity)

Christmas Eve

Christmas Day

Last Sun of Year

New Year

Epiphany

Christian Unity

Church and Nation

Communication

Baptism

Ordination of Elders

Admission of New Members

Communion

1<sup>st</sup> Sun in Lent

2<sup>nd</sup> “ “

3<sup>rd</sup> “ “

4<sup>th</sup> Sun in Lent

5<sup>th</sup> “ “ (Passion Sunday)

Palm Sunday

Holy Week – Mon, Tues, Wed,  
Maunday Thurs, Good Friday

Easter Sunday

Resurrection

Christian Aid

Church/General Assembly

Ascension

Pentecost

Trinity

Annual Thanksgiving Service

Communion

Holidays

Bible

Prayer

Christian Service

Stewardship

Harvest Thanksgiving

Annual Dedication Service

Mission

Communion

All Saints

Remembrance

Christian Education

Baptism

## Ministry

This is the basic cake but on top of all this we can add several layers. Over the course of a year there ought to be a wide diversity of types of services and sermons including – apologetical, theological, doxological, psychological, educational, ethical, life-situational, evangelical, pastoral, devotional, social, and eschatological. (For fuller details of these see chapter 8). A good chef serves a varied fair not just “the chef’s special” every time.

We should cover the main aspects of congregational life: worship, Christian education, mission, service, fellowship and stewardship.

We should also deal with the questions people are really asking, such as:-

- Do you have to go to Church to be a Christian?
- How do you know God personally?
- How do you discern God’s will?
- Why do people suffer?
- Is the World getting better or worse?
- What does the Bible say about.....?
- How can I believe?
- How can I cope?
- What is the purpose of life?
- Did God make us or did we make God?
- Does God care about me?

Where possible, we can fit in series such as The Lord’s Prayer; the Apostles’ Creed; The Elements of Public Worship; Christian Lifestyle; Expectations of Church Members; Bible; Prayer; Bible Commands; Bible Characters etc.

There are also a large number of essential themes to cover, including themes such as –

Authority Atonement Anger Advent Angels Anxiety Ascension Agape  
Ashamed Anniversaries Ambition Amorality Addiction Age Aids Art  
Baptism Bible Body of Christ Being a Christian Beliefs Birth Bullying  
Commitment Corporate Living Confession Crossroads Communion Change  
Creation Crises C. Education Crunch Moments Confrontation Call of God Church  
Christians Conversion Cross Crucifixion Christian Lifestyle Christmas  
Communication Christian Aid Courage Christ-likeness Confirmation Culture  
Doubts Dare to Dream Demons Devil Drugs Doing Nothing Dedication Debt Death  
Discipleship Depression Disasters Different Decline Disappointment  
Doing Good Doctrine Divine Encounter  
Eternal Life Empty God Enemies Encountering God Experiencing God Election Evil  
Ecumenism Environment Easter Elders Epiphany Emptiness  
Forgiveness Feelings Forsakenness Fellowship Fear Failure Father’s Day Farewells  
Future Free Will Freedom Faith Family Life Family of God Foolishness Friendship of god  
Facing Things Faith and Works Forgetfulness  
God God’s Love God Guided Tours Gospel in a Nutshell Gambling Guilt  
Grief Good Shepherd Growth God of History God’s Guidance Giving/Getting Getting out  
of Bit Gifts God’s Will Grace Graciously Receiving Golden Rule Genetics Good Friday  
Gossiping the Gospel Good News General Elections  
Healing Hope Happiness Heaven/Hell Hospitality Holidays/Holy Days Harvest History  
Holiness Human-Divine House of God Hesitancy Heroes  
Homes/Homelessness Hallmarks of Church Hedging Bets Holy Spirit Humility

Human Predicaments Holy Mountains Hupomone  
 Identity Insecurity Integrity Images of Christians Incarnation Indifference Image of God  
 Important Thing Injustice Intimacy Israel Idolatry  
 Joy Judge Not Journey of Faith Jonah Judas Judgment Justice Jesus  
 Knowing god Kingdom of God Koinonia Kenosis  
 Love Lord's Prayer Lord's Supper Last Sun of Year Learning Launch Out Loving Enemies  
 Lent Light of the World Life Abundant Love Neighbour Lamenting Leisure Loneliness  
 Life After Death Listening to God/Others  
 Ministry Mother's Day Most Important Thing Mary Missionaries Mission Marriage  
 Morality Mountains Money Meaning of Life Militancy Master Majesty of God  
 Magnanimity Miracles Materialism  
 New Year New Life Nature Nehemiah No False Gods Not Strangers  
 Obedience Ordination Open-mindedness Overcoming Opposition Ordinary  
 Providence Purpose of Life Personal Faith Peter Peace Pluck it out Projection Palm Sunday  
 Puppy Parable Psalms Prisoners'Week Passover Prayer Pentecost Pilgrimage Pentecost  
 Praise Prophets/Prophecy Passion Sunday  
 Progress Power of God Presence of God Philosophies of Life Poor Priorities Persecution  
 Pastoral Care Personifying the Gospel  
 Questions  
 Redemption Repentance Right/Wrong Reconciliation Room for God Rich Resurrection  
 Reverence Relevance Remembrance Romance Re-Dedication Relationships Refugees  
 Service Suffering Single-minded Obedience Success Stealing Second Coming Spiritual  
 Death Scottishness Saints Songs of Praise Sin Sleep Self-sacrifice Stewardship Society  
 Shame Strength Social Responsibility Sharing Sabbath Sermons Stuck in Rut Silence  
 Standards Simplicity Sea Sunday Sunday School Summer Mission Spirituality Self-Love  
 Sectarianism  
 Talents Temptation Toughness Trips Abroad Terrorism Trust God Trinity Thinking Day  
 Thanksgiving Time Tragedies Trapped Total Commitment Teamwork Them v Us  
 Theotokos  
 Unemployment United Nations Untouchables Upside Downs Unity  
 Victory Valuing People Valentine's Day Values Victims/Villains  
 Worship Wisdom Worry Watch World Cup War Ways to God Wanting God World and  
 Church World Mission Where is God? Waiting on God Word of God  
 Xenophobia  
 Youth  
 Zeal

The Year Planner can be used descriptively as well as prescriptively. We begin by planning ahead but life is never so neat as have all our plans work out perfectly. We then can go back to the plan and check out what actually we have covered and what we have omitted. This is a vital exercise if we are to preach a full, rounded Gospel and not miss out important messages. To this end we might write out the plan something like this:

Date	Occasion	Title	Theme	Type
31 Aug	Prayer	"God Has His Problems Too!"	Prayer	Devotional
7 Sept	Bible	"Scotland: Land of the Book"	Bible	Educational
14 Sept		"The Secret of Hope"	Hope	Pastoral
21 Sept	Stewardship	"Christian Stewardship"	Stewardship	Apologetical
28 Sept	Harvest	"Say Grace"	Harvest	Doxological
5 Oct	Dedication	"D-E-D-I-C-A-T-I-O-N"	Dedication	All-age worship
etc.	etc.	etc.	etc.	etc.

## **7. WHAT TO PREACH**

Every sermon is quite a miracle! You sit down with a blank sheet of paper and probably a matching blank mind! Somehow the divine word is communicated to the human congregation via a very human “earthen vessel” to use Paul’s phrase. What is even more amazing is to be part of this weekly, nay daily, miracle, year in year out! Often the Sunday sermon hangs over a preacher like an invisible Damacles sword evoking moans of self pity. However, in saner moments, preachers will concede that it is the highlight of their ministry to be engaged in creative writing in a joint production with God Himself! You cannot get a greater privilege and pleasure than that. Imagine, God and me as co-writers! I can’t wait to hear it myself!

The short answer then to what to preach is – whatever God tells you to preach. However it is not as simple as that. Occasionally God’s inspiration is almost as clear as having a voice from the sky dictating notes, but not usually (unfortunately)! I have written a number of sermons in one go without leaving my seat. It is a wonderful feeling – maybe a bit like a recording artist getting the take first time. Usually however there is a lot of thinking, praying and keeping the antennae alert for inspiration.

So, fundamentally it is God’s Word, His message. What to preach is really His choice. But since He prefers to work in co-operation with human agency, it means that preachers have to agonise over many questions, one of the most important being the fundamental, starting question: what to preach? The question really means: what does God want me to preach? Note it is not: what do I want to preach? Neither is it: what ought I to preach? as if there was some floating wisdom out there which could inform me on what would constitute appropriate subjects. Nor is it what do the congregation want to hear? No, the key question is: what does God want preached?

We can go further and say that what God wants is not a general matter but a specific one. The question is: what does God want specifically preached by me this coming Sunday to this specific congregation. At first glance the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount look like statements of general principles which we apply at our own discretion to our own unique circumstances. However, they are not general principles. God does not work in general terms loving humankind in general ways and speaking in generalities. “God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love” as Augustine said. God’s style is to be very specific, particular and personal. He looks me in the eye and heart and says: Do not steal, do not look lustfully, do not even think those thoughts of revenge. He knows the contexts, He knows my circumstances and so do I. I know exactly what He is talking about! Sermons are not general communications en masse. God speaks to each of us personally. The whole of the communication is not the preacher’s words. God speaks through the preacher, through the sermon, through the Ten Commandments and He speaks a very personal message. God says to Noah: “Build an ark”; to Abram: “Leave home..this week”; to the paralysed man: “Right now, take up your bed and walk”; to Zacchaeus: “Go out now and give back your ill-gotten gains to those poor folk standing outside your gate”.

So any sermon will not do; any old sermon will not do either. What specifically does God want me to preach to this specific congregation this particular week? The hard work now begins in earnest. It does not begin from scratch today because I am supposed to have a long-standing relationship with God, such that I can “read His mind”, have a fair idea about what He likes and dislikes, be receptive to His promptings and have some appreciation of how he ticks. It also helps if I have a long-running relationship with the congregation and know them quite intimately. Thirdly it helps if I know about local, national and international events of this week and other weeks. It helps to know what might be on God’s mind and the minds of the congregation this particular week. There is therefore general knowledge of God, life, the people, the Bible but it has to find a specific focus in any one week.

Having said all of the above, for the purposes of this book I have to talk a bit in generalities. There are general “tricks of the trade” even when the trade is making specific sermons! So, let’s go to the heart of the matter. The Good News or Gospel is at core the same for all generations. What changes is the style of presentation . It is also true that you cannot preach the whole Gospel in every sermon, so you have to be selective and specific which brings us back to the question: what to preach *this* time?

Early Christian preaching, in a nutshell, consisted of five main messages. The KERUGMA (literally herald’s announcement) or content of the Good News was:

1. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament.
2. Jesus is the Messiah ushering in the Kingdom of God.
3. Jesus is Risen, alive and we can know Him personally.
4. Jesus will return suddenly in the Second Coming.
5. Jesus is the only Saviour saving us from sin and for eternal life.

William Barclay, in “Communicating the Gospel” (p48) summarises the Kerugma in his own words:

“The new age has dawned; God has acted directly in the life and the death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. All this is the fulfilment of prophecy and the very conception of prophecy implies a plan and a purpose which are being steadily worked out in the world. This Jesus who lived and died and rose again will come again; he will come to the individual heart, and in the end he will triumph over all the world. There comes the demand for repentance, for a new attitude to life and to living, and the promise of forgiveness for the past and strength for the future. And finally there comes the threat that, if a man will not accept life, then he has accepted death.”

If I were to put the Kerugma in my own words it would be something like this:

- |     |                        |   |   |
|-----|------------------------|---|---|
| 1.  | God/Jesus Is           | - | Thank you God/Jesus for Yourself                              |
| 2.  | “ Loves me/us -        | “ | “ Loving me/us  |
| 3.  | “ Creates “ -          | “ | “ Life  |
| 4.  | “ Provides “ -         | “ | “ Sustaining me/us  |
| 5.  | “ Redeems “ -          | “ | “ Forgiving me/us   |
| 6.  | “ Resurrects “ -       | “ | “ New Beginnings  |
| 7.  | “ Shares “ -           | “ | “ Sharing in our lives; and for letting us share in your life |
| 8.  | “ Calls “ -            | “ | “ Working in and through us                                   |
| 9.  | “ Enables “ -          | “ | “ Making us able to live for you                              |
| 10. | “ Gives Eternal Life - | “ | “ Heaven and the Life to Come                                 |

The eternally relevant Good News at core can also be put this way:

#### The 10 Most Important Facts of Life

1. I am very imperfect.
2. God loves me personally.
3. God loves me knowing my imperfection.
4. God loves me totally, unconditionally, freely.
5. God loves me not because I am lovely, but because He is loving.
6. God loves me as if there was only me to love.
7. God loves me with a love that will never let me go.

8. God loves me to death.
9. Nothing I can do will ever make Him stop loving me.
10. God is love.

At some time, maybe not this Sunday, but at some time, and more than only once, it is surely appropriate to preach on the following:

- Explain public worship
- The essence of personal and congregational life: worship, Christian education, mission, service, fellowship, stewardship
- Baptism
- Communion
- The Creeds and things we believe
- The Lord's Prayer
- The Bible
- Prayer
- Expectations on Members:
  - 1) Attend Church weekly
  - 2) Read the Bible daily
  - 3) Pray continuously
  - 4) Witness to others
  - 5) Do good
  - 6) Love enemies
  - 7) Give sacrificially
  - 8) Offer talents
  - 9) Give more time
  - 10) Engage in adult Christian education
  - 11) Partake of communion frequently
  - 12) Discuss feelings with the minister, elder, fellow members

(These are what you might call the 12 Disciplines of discipleship).

This list is not exhaustive but it gives a flavour of things to preach on. It is also important to give God's Word to specific questions which people are asking e.g.

#### Questions People Ask

Do you have to go to Church to be a Christian?

How do you know God personally?

How do you know God's will?

Why do people suffer?

Is the world getting better or worse?

What does the Bible say about.....?

How can I believe?

What is the purpose of life?

Did God make us or did we make God?

Does God care about me?

Ronal Selby Wright has a famous series of books entitled "Asking them Questions". They are excellent for both their answers and even for just the list of questions. He invited his Bible Class to ask anything they wanted and he got famous theologians to come and try to answer the questions.

What to preach can also be greatly influenced by which Sunday it is on which you are preaching. Here are some special Sundays in a typical year:

New Year, Epiphany, Christian Unity, Church and Nation, Baptism, Communion, Lent, Palm Sunday, Easter Day, Resurrection, Confirmation, Communion, Christian Aid, Church: General Assembly, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity, Annual Thanksgiving, Sunday School/Cradle Roll, Bible, Prayer, Sea Sunday, Social Responsibility, Stewardship, Ordination of Elders, Annual Dedication Service, Harvest Thanksgiving, Mission, All Saints, Remembrance, Prisoners Week, Education, Ministry, Aids Awareness, Advent, Advent Communion, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Last Sunday of the Year. For fuller details see chapter 6 on “The Christian Year”.

What to preach also includes special themes which one would have to preach on from time to time. My own A-Z index of special themes includes the following:

A – Authority, Atonement, Asking, Andrew, Angels, Anger, Advent, Anxiety, Agape  
B – Baptism, Beliefs, Being a Christian, Body of Christ, Bible Books, Bible Characters  
C – Creation, Commitment, Cross, Confirmation, Christian Lifestyle, Christmas.....  
(For a fuller list see chapter 6 on “The Christian Year”).

James S Stewart in his wonderful book, “A Faith to Proclaim” tells us what to preach in his list of chapter headings: “Proclaiming the Incarnation...Forgiveness...the Cross...the Resurrection...Christ”. It is hard to better that summary!

If we were to summarise to the point of only one word, the word would be “**CHRIST**”. We preach Christ crucified and risen, says Paul. We preach God incarnate in flesh and blood. The Good News is that God is with us and for us. God not only came to Bethlehem at a specific time and place in history but He comes to us, to me, here and now, right where I am! He will also come again in the form of the Second Coming, the great Parousia. We preach Jesus the God-man; Jesus our Divine Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, Judge and Jesus our Brother, fellow sufferer, Representative and Head. We proclaim the Holy, Eternal, Almighty God who came to Earth and comes to us; and we point to the Man who ascended to Heaven still bearing the scars and nail prints of His human life. Jesus of Nazareth and Heaven is both fully human and fully divine. He is the living bridge between Heaven and Earth, the One with a foot in both camps at the same time. He is Lord of time and eternity, Heaven and Earth, things visible and things invisible. He is what man means by “God” and what God means by “man”. We preach Jesus, not ideas, generalities, theories, abstractions. We preach God, not ideas about God. Emil Brunner in “Man in Revolt” (p494) says:

“Faith in Jesus Christ is not an interpretation of the world, but it is participation in an event: in something which has happened, which is happening, and which is going to happen.”

We are preaching facts of history. The Incarnation is not a theological theory it is an event in history. Jesus’ Kingdom is Heavenly but it is also “down to earth”, literally. His Kingdom is very much to do with daily life and social concerns, indeed every aspect of our lives.

Christian preaching is sharing the Good News that Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. He is the long awaited Messiah. His arrival is “the Day of the Lord” so often mentioned in the Old Testament. The eschatological hopes were all fulfilled in Jesus’ coming and Incarnation.

People who walk in darkness need desperately to see a great light. Jesus is The Light of the world – the ONLY light. If we think we detect light from anywhere else it will only be true if they are reflecting His light, like “cats eyes” in the road reflect car headlights. No one and nothing has light in itself; they can at best reflect Jesus’ light. People need to meet Jesus. Not just hear about Him but be encountered by Him. Preaching can be used by Jesus to encounter people. It will only do that when we preach Jesus.

When Jesus incarnates in our life, He has an absolute claim upon us. He demands a full and glad surrender. The only response acceptable is humble repentance and acceptance of His love and

grace. The word that comes to mind is “real”. The real God meets real people in the reality of our present life and demands real turning to Him. Preaching therefore cannot be worthy of the name preaching unless it is very real.

Preaching is not about God encountering us, it IS God encountering us. God is part of the event. And we are part of the event too. It is very real and very live. Preaching is not theological speculation and debate; it is God and us rubbing up against each other, a battle of wills, a head to head confrontation, a wooing and wowing, a meeting of minds and a melting of hearts. So preaching is about God, about us and about God and us, Jesus and me. He and we and us as an item and us as the Christian Church and the wider world are all subjects that matter in preaching. Our union with Christ and through Him others is the stuff of preaching – not just talking about it but actually being the very means of conjoining us. How offensive it is then when preaching is the very cause of disunity.

We preach that “Jesus is Lord”. Early Christians were fed to lions and martyred for saying this. Our creed can also be reduced to these three words. The Greek word for Lord is KURIOS and it meant ten things no less, each of which are true of Jesus. It meant “sir” (the normal word of respect); “Dear sir” (at the beginning of a letter); the “owner” of a vineyard; the “master” as opposed to the slaves; “father” or “head of the house”; a “commander” or “magistrate” (one who can make executive decisions); a woman’s “legal guardian” (for she had no legal rights herself); the standard title for “the Roman Emperor”; the standard title for all the ancient “gods and goddesses”; and in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) KURIOS always translates “Jehovah” or “Yahweh” (the name of God Himself).

When considering what to preach, one of the obvious answers is – the **BIBLE**. Preaching is supposed to be Bible based. The Word spoken is the same message as the Word written. If we are to preach Christ, then the Bible is our source material. For thousands of years, going back to the synagogues and temple of the Old Testament Jews, and for the two millennia of the Christian Church – across all the denominations, and round the world – worship services have consisted of reading the Holy Scriptures and then preaching from the passages just read.

We can approach the Bible, like any book, in many different ways. For example we can read it a work of literature, a historical document, a liturgical instrument, material to be studied for an exam, a devotional aid, the Word of God no less, a source of inspiration. It is a book, indeed a whole library of books, showing God’s dealings with human beings and therefore revealing: God, human beings, life, me, my neighbour.

William Barclay in his book “Communicating the Gospel” (chapter IV) says that our attitude to the Bible can only be expressed in a series of paradoxes:

- 1 The Bible must be open to all, but it is dangerous to be so.
- 2 The Bible is the “supreme rule of faith and life”, yet faith is prior to the Bible.
- 3 The Bible is accessible to the simplest mind, yet is beyond the deepest study.
- 4 The Bible is the inspired Word of God but it is open to translation and interpretation.

Barclay points out that God has always accompanied His Bible with prophets, priests and teachers to guide people’s reading and interpretation. Jesus guided His disciples with regard to their Holy Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament). So, the Bible can only be properly read within the context of the Church. Preachers have to guide people in their Bible reading. William Barclay makes four very important points for preachers in this regard. (1) The interpretation of Scripture cannot be based solely on the judgment of the individual person (2Pet.1.20). (2) No interpreter (or preacher) can reasonably disregard the accumulated scholarship and wisdom of the Church. (3) There cannot be in the Church a complete individualism in the interpretation of Scripture. (4) The danger of

tradition is that it may become, and at times did become, a substitute for the Bible. We do not have space here to discuss Roman Catholic and Protestant understandings of tradition but basically Barclay argues that tradition has its place but it should be kept in its place.

Herbert H Farmer in “The Servant of the Word” (chapter 5) makes a very important point with regard to what to preach. He says that we must preach BOTH personal salvation and communal, social salvation. Often it is assumed they are polar opposites and the respective goals of very different denominations. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is concerned both for individuals and for the wider society.

Preachers must preach a balanced Gospel, not just our own favourite bits. Richard Corbett, a Scottish minister, wrote in “Ministers’ Forum” (Oct. 2002):

“Over the long run, for our people’s spiritual well-being, we must give due weight to anything Jesus thought important enough to mention.”

So he did a statistical survey of the four Gospels to see what Jesus Himself preached on. He came up with some interesting results. Over the four Gospels Jesus speaks 262 times. In ascending order of frequency, Jesus mentions the following matters – (and in brackets I put the number of times): Justice/fairness (5 times); women (7); war and peace (14); Hell or divine judgment (17); the poor/needy (18); sexual relationships (20); His Second Coming (20); money/wealth (28); discipleship (29); Satan/demons (38); faith (40); His own death (42); pleasing/obeying God (46); prays or mentions prayer (47); the Kingdom of God/Heaven (49); sin/repentance (55); quotes Scripture (59); says something about Himself (64); mentions God (82). It is a very interesting exercise to check back over our own sermons and discover what we have been preaching most about! It is also a salutary lesson to discover what we have not been preaching about!! In my own case I must confess to not yet preaching specifically on – aids, alcohol, abortion, crime, debt, disarmament, depression, the environment, genetics, homelessness, persecution, refugees, sectarianism. I have of course made passing references to these matters but not focussed a whole sermon and service on them. You can see, as I noticed myself, that these are all important matters to people today and they are all social matters. In chapter 8 we consider different types of preaching. I am obviously weakest at social preaching. I need to work at that. You can see how profitable it is to study what Jesus preached and what we preach and compare the difference!

When it comes to considering what to preach, one of the most important things is: **THE INCARNATION** of Jesus and how we as disciples must incarnate our love too.

We preach it as a fact of history, **THE** fact of history. All of history is divided into B.C. (before Christ was born in Bethlehem) and A.D. (Anno Domine – since Christ was born). We preach it as a real life event. We also preach it theologically as we try to explain the meaning and significance of the event. We preach it pastorally as a role model for all our discipleship.

The incarnation of the eternal God into space and time, flesh and blood, is the most amazing thing ever and the best Good News for us ever! It rewrites all previous understandings of God. It reveals God, it reveals perfect human life, it reveals sin, it reveals forgiveness, reconciliation, and salvation. The incarnation is not only about the birth of Jesus. It also includes His whole life, death and resurrection. No birth would have meant no death and no resurrection, therefore no Good News, no Church, no salvation and life to come. James S Stewart in “A Faith to Proclaim” (p22) says:

“In Christ, crucified and risen, the unique divine event has happened; the final truth of god has been written into history, and the absolute has been given in terms of time.”

The Incarnation of Jesus was the fulfilment of history, time, all the past and the fulfilment of the Old Testament and the world’s hopes. It was also the ushering in and beginning of the Messianic Age, the Day of the Lord, the Kingdom of God, the future, eternal life. The present of Jesus in its

double meaning – “the present moment” and “a gift” – was an ending and a beginning, the last day of the old dispensation and the first day of the new one. When Christ incarnates into our personal lives, Paul points out that it is the end of the old self and the beginning of a new self. We die to self and live in Christ. In Christ Heaven is already here. He is the Kingdom of Heaven in person. His coming into the world and His coming into my life is the dawn of the first day of the rest of our eternal life. This eschatological dimension is essential in truly understanding The Incarnation.

When considering what to preach, another one of the most important subjects is **FORGIVENESS**. Psychologists tell us that we all go around carrying psychological suitcases, and the biggest suitcase is labelled “guilt”. Everyone carries around guilts, some needlessly, some disproportionately, but many quite legitimately. In grief for example there are always “if onlys”, regrets and therefore guilt. Often they are not realistic, we are not guilty, it is not our fault that our loved one died. But someone who murdered their mother has genuine, legitimate grief guilt! Without going so extreme, it is still true that “all we like sheep have gone astray” (Isa.53.6) and “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves” (1Jn.1.8). Preaching has a role to play in naming and shaming sins and guilts but even more, preaching is God’s way of telling us that He loves us and forgives us and wants us to be reconciled once again to Himself. Preaching conveys the peace of sins forgiven and is therefore an instrument of healing, part of God’s ministry. Preaching is “too nice” when it fails to declare the passion of sin and the peace of forgiveness. We must proclaim both the judgment and mercy of God. Even His harshest judgment is part of His love and mercy. He loves us enough to care about our faults, to say something to us about them, to confront our behaviour and challenge us to repent and change. He loves us enough to take the judgment and punishment Himself on our behalf. The wages of sin is death and He dies our death for us so that we might enjoy new life and be “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven”. The sermon IS God judging us and expressing His love for us and offering us forgiveness and a whole new start. Preaching holds a mirror up to the chaos of the world and our personal lives. Preaching shows us the God standard, namely Jesus. We may be “as good as so and so” or “no worse than the rest” but it is not the Jones’s we have to keep up with! Jesus is our standard and so we all cringe in the guilt that comes from the self-awareness that we are not very Christ-like. When Peter, who had just denied his Lord, looked into Jesus eyes, his heart melted and all he could do was “weep bitterly”. Judas Iscariot went and hung himself. Guilt is a terrible abyss. Preaching lets people look into Jesus eyes; or put the other way round, preaching involves Jesus looking right into and through us. Just as we read many books but the Bible uniquely reads us; so we look into many people’s eyes and we come to our own assessments about them, but Jesus uniquely looks right into our deepest soul. However, Jesus our Judge is also the One who loves us so much as to lay down His life for us. What really melts us is the realisation that we not only offend against the Judge of all the Earth but even worse, we break a Father’s loving heart. It is not so much about breaking holy rules but more about breaking a loving heart. Preach the Prodigal Son’s discovery of this truth! It was when his father was busy hugging him, not listening to a word of his pre-prepared confession speech, that he realised for the first time the total and unconditional love which he had hurt. Karl Barth wrote:

“Sin scorches us when it comes under the light of forgiveness, not before.”

P.T.Forsyth in “Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind” (p38) says:

“As a race, we are not even stray sheep, or wandering prodigals merely; we are rebels taken with weapons in our hands.”

Preaching also conveys the eyes of Jesus when He looked at Peter and said “feed my sheep” – I still want you to be my disciple. If our preaching can touch these nerves then the “dead” would truly come to life, “dry bones” would come together and build a mighty army!

James S Stewart in “A Faith to Proclaim” stresses that forgiveness is not only necessary but possible. Forgiveness does not mean letting off nor does it mean that the clock can be turned back and the event never happen and all the consequences be erased. Even God cannot do that for us! Most important of all says Stewart is to understand that

“forgiveness is not the remission of a penalty; it is the restoration of a relationship.” (p62)

It is a miracle but it can and does happen. Preach it! Even as we preach it the healing and restoration of the relationship is taking place. We have no right to preach it unless we have experienced it. We preach as sinners who have been forgiven, and know it, to other sinners who have been forgiven, but who may not yet believe it. I remember sitting in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland as a man pleaded to be accepted as a minister. His problem was that he had murdered his own mother. His case was that He was truly repentant and he wanted a second chance. He was definitely not the “goodest” person around but when it came to preaching the Gospel of God’s forgiveness and second chances he was uniquely well placed to proclaim it with conviction! The Assembly accepted him. The Apostles had no problem knowing what to preach (Jn.1.1-2):

“We write to you about the Word of life...We have heard it, and we have seen it with our eyes; yes we have seen it, and our hands have touched it. When this life became visible, we saw it; so we speak of it and tell you about the eternal life which was with the Father and was made known to us.”

People have real problems accepting God’s acceptance of us. Grace is so alien to our way of thinking. We wonder if it is God being “soft”. In our way of operating the order is: I do you a wrong.....I say sorry.....you consider my apology.....you say okay, I forgive you. God’s order of operating is so different: long before I say sorry, long before I sin, long before I was even born, 2,000 years ago in fact, He forgave me.....once I realise that, I discover what my sin has been, I become moved to repentance, I say sorry and I accept the longstanding offer of forgiveness. The Prodigal Son’s Father forgave him long before he came back over the horizon. It was his unconditional love which taught the boy the extent of his sin and caused him to truly be ashamed and repent. I cannot think of a better example of what to preach than this Good News and no one is more eloquent at preaching it than Paul Tillich in his sermon in “The Shaking of the Foundations” (p161-2):

“Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying:

‘You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*’

If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but *acceptance*.”

God's free grace does not come cheaply – it cost the life and death of Jesus. The great symbol and means of grace is the **CROSS**. It stands for human sin and divine forgiveness. God took the instrument of man's inhumanity to man and the devil's supreme achievement and made it the very means whereby he redeemed the world including me. God broke the vicious cycle of tit-for-tat by returning love for hate. Forgiveness is the only cure which can turn evil into good. So we preach forgiveness of sins. It is a mystery beyond our understanding but not beyond our experiencing. We do not have to earn it, deserve it, achieve it, negotiate it nor buy it, only accept it. Preaching can be used by God to help people accept it and also to understand it a little.

The Cross of Jesus stands on top of Calvary Hill and sits astride all our theological routes. It casts its long shadow over every form of Christianity and it sparkles like a diamond with many facets when the light of the Risen Christ is refracted from its prism. At one specific time and place God revealed what is true every moment of every day through the whole of human history, namely that we hurt and crucify Him and yet He loves us totally and unconditionally, and that He forgives us and wants to embrace us. Abelard in the twelfth century said that it was like looking at a fallen tree trunk: when you see the rings of the tree at the end of the trunk, you know that is a bi-section and that the rings traverse all the way up the trunk. In the same way we would say that a photograph is just a snapshot at one moment in time but it reveals say a relationship of affection which has been true for many years. So the Cross is a bisection or snapshot of God's eternal love for us.

The very shape of the Cross tells us what it is about. It shows us that God is very down to earth and rooted amongst us. When we feel crucified and wonder if God cares, the Cross reminds us that God is the one on the Cross in the middle. The lateral extension of the cross beam shows us God with His open arms outstretched to embrace the entire width of humanity. The vertical dimension of the Cross points us to the truth that it is God Himself who died on Calvary and who is daily cut to the heart by our sin.

The Cross straddles our journey of life individually, corporately and collectively – i.e. our personal lives, our intimate life with others in the family or small groups, and in our congregational, national and global relationships. At every level, and many times over, we are confronted by the Cross of Jesus. He punctuates our tortuous journeys of life with His crossroad crunch, decision moments. We can turn back in retreat, or drift sideways up unprofitable side-alleys or we can follow Jesus forward into a future of crucifixions and resurrections but a future in which the best is always yet to come. The Cross stands like a mighty colossus astride the entrance to the harbour of peace; it stands like a lighthouse piercing the darkness of our stormy depths. The Cross is a one way signpost pointing the way to salvation and the only Saviour. It stands as a mighty two-edged sword with which God champions the poor and weak against the "principalities and powers"; and it stands as the original red Cross as a beacon of hope for all those who desire healing and wholeness.

Some views of the atonement seem to amount to God giving us a little cameo of sacrificial love to inspire us to greater efforts in our little subjective inner struggle between good and bad impulses. That is not the New Testament! Jesus was physically taken and dumped on the Cross and wilfully nailed to it. It is not just some metaphor to describe some inner turmoil which He was feeling. The New Testament proclaims that there is a cosmic, objective, much bigger than us, external conflict between God and "wicked spiritual forces". We are pawns caught up in a cosmic chess match. Perhaps more accurately we could say we are children caught in the battle for our affections in a running struggle between our Heavenly Father and the mother of all evils. There is more truth than is often realised in the everyday comments such as – "there are gremlins in the works"; "what the devil got into you?"; "that is evil"; "he's got a bad spirit in him"; "sometimes I feel life is like trying to climb a steep hill with someone at the top rolling down marbles to trip you up"!

The Cross is the climax of God's self-revelation. "Greater love has no one than that they lay down their life for others" (John 15.13). There we see God dying for us! What more could God do to demonstrate His love for us? James S Stewart in "A Faith to Proclaim" (p82) writes:

"The death of Christ gives me the very heart of the eternal, because it is not words at all, not even sublime prophetic utterance: it is an act, God's act, against which I can batter all my doubts to pieces. We preach Christ crucified, God's truth revealed."

The Cross not only reveals God's love; it is also an objective transaction in which God atoned for, dealt with, the sin of the world (including my sin). Bishop Gustaf Aulen in "Christus Victor" (p20f) speaks of the Cross as the battleground where God decisively defeated the powers of darkness. It is where God annihilated, exterminated, obliterated evil and sin. It is the ultimate weed killing exercise. Human beings, myself included, conspired by a multitude of everyday sins to crucify God. Demonic agencies, or "principalities and powers" were mightily at work and latching on to human weakness and wickedness. Jesus Himself chose voluntarily and freely to take up His...our...Cross because He considered it the only way to redeem the human race. Greater love has no God than that He self-sacrifice Himself in love for others. P.T. Forsyth in "The Glorious Gospel" (p6) writes:

"The holiness of Christ was the one thing damnatory to the Satanic power. And it was His death which consummated that holiness. It was His death, therefore, that was Satan's fatal doom"

Jesus put His foot down, exercised His divine authority and power and disarmed the principalities and powers (Col. 2.15). Jesus unites Himself and identifies Himself with the human race in our difficulties. We in turn are united to Jesus death and Resurrection. Jesus is our Head, Representative and Champion taking our failures, shame and misery and transfuses His strength, purity, peace and life into us. Calvin calls this "the Wonderful Exchange", the true substitution.

Salvation is now through Jesus. P.T.Forsyth in "The Glorious Gospel" (p7) says:

"The world's awful need is less than Christ's awful victory. And the devils we meet were all fore-damned in the Satan He ruined. The wickedness of the world is, after all, 'a bull in a net', a chained Beast kicking himself to death."

J.S.Stewart thinks of the Cross and Resurrection as D-Day and the Second Coming as V-Day, so that we live in the time between the times. Jesus conquered for us the last and most powerful enemy, death.

Jews saw the Cross as a scandal and the Greeks saw it as foolishness but the disciples saw it differently. They saw it as the eternal will of God. The sacrifice of Jesus was not a human offering up to heaven but rather God self-sacrificing Himself for us. IN Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself (2Cor.5.19). God does punish sin, but He freely and graciously chooses to bear the cost Himself.

It is not that the Cross is all bad news and the Resurrection is the Good News. There is Good News in the Cross itself, as we have seen. However the Resurrection is the core of the Gospel. We see the Cross and the Life of Jesus only through the prism of the Resurrection. We are not really interested in first century Middle Eastern carpenters for their own sake. We are only interested in Jesus of Nazareth because He rose from the dead. We look back through the window of the Resurrection. Once we discover that there really has been someone come back from the dead to tell us, we start to enquire about his death and life etc. It was the Resurrection which transformed the shattered band of disciples into world changers. Their message to the world was that they were witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus. The Church then and now is made up of people who have seen the Risen Christ. The New Testament was only written because of the Resurrection. The

Resurrection is always seen as a mighty, decisive act of God on the scale of the creation of the world. It cannot be over-hyped. It was and is proclaimed as a fact, an historical, unique, once and for all event, a literal, physical, life in a body after it had been dead for days. It is also a fact in our lives as well as in Jesus life. Resurrection is something we experience and live out. It is a daily dying to self and rising to new life in Christ, a daily process of dying to our old self and rising to a new self. Every congregation should be a community founded by the Resurrection of Jesus and a community of resurrecting people or perhaps people being resurrected. The Cross is only bad news without the Resurrection. The ending colours the whole drama. It is the Easter Day Resurrection which makes Good Friday good.

We must preach the **RESURRECTION** of Jesus not as a parable, myth, doctrine, theory, belief, concept or whatever, but as a real reality historically for Jesus and currently in our own personal lives. Kierkegaard puts it beautifully in his Journals, 343:

“The moment I take Christianity as a doctrine and so indulge my cleverness or profundity or my eloquence or my imaginative powers in depicting it, people are very pleased; I am looked upon as a serious Christian. The moment I begin to express existentially what I say, and Consequently bring Christianity into reality, it is just as though I had Exploded existence – the scandal is there at once.”

That is what happened to Paul in Athens (Acts 17.16f). So long as he spoke intellectually and philosophically the Greeks loved it. They liked abstract thought and intellectual debate. However, as soon as Paul changed tactic and began to proclaim the Resurrection as a possible reality in their daily life, they immediately aborted the conversation. Fortunately some believed.

We preach Christ crucified and risen – “the divine parabola” as Brunner calls it in “the Mediator” (p561), adding: “the message of Easter IS the Christian message, and the Christian Church is the Church of the Resurrection.” (p563). Karl Barth in “Credo” (p98) writes:

“Christian faith is not to be understood as idealism that has succeeded in discovering light in darkness...*Resurrexit* means – Jesus is conqueror...  
*God* in Christ.”

Jesus is not merely a great teacher, prophet, historical figure whose influence lives on and who deserves our admiration and respect as we lay wreaths at His tomb and honour his memory at Jesus Suppers (like Burns Suppers). Burns is dead but Jesus is gloriously alive and kicking! Jesus is encountering each of us, here and now, claiming our total surrender and commitment to Him, today and every day, in every aspect of our lives!

Resurrection is both event and process. THE Resurrection of Jesus 2,000 years ago and our daily resurrection life in Christ both mean victory over evil. The Love of God conquers human and demonic hate. The Life of Christ and our life in Christ bounces back triumphantly from both death in the grave and the thousands of daily deaths throughout life. Death is only penultimate. It is not just a case of enduring but more than that, Jesus conquered evil and death and in Him we do too:

“The resurrection is not just a personal survival: it is a cosmic victory.”

(James S. Stewart: “A Faith to Proclaim” p122). It is obvious then that our lives as preachers must match up to the words we proclaim!

Another facet of the priceless diamond of the Resurrection is the fact that Christ being alive and well is able to be with us – whoever we are wherever we are. He walks the Emmaeus Way with us as well as with Cleopas and his friend. He appears to doubting Thomases, guilt-ridden Peters, grieving Marys and frightened disciples. He, the Bread of Life is present at our breakfasts and is the host at His communion services. The “communion” is both human and divine; it is fellowship with each other and with our God. He builds up the Body of Christ, the Church. He binds us together in His love, He unites us together and constitutes us as His people. We belong to His

family; we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have no salvation and no life apart from Him and the other members of the Body, the Vine, the Living Building whose cornerstone is Jesus. The KOINONIA or fellowship comes in sharing Jesus' life together. Only in Him can we live and move and have our being. Detached from Him we are like fish out of water. And we can only have Jesus if we mix with Jesus' people. He is never to be found apart from them. There is no Robinson Crusoe Christianity. On our own we lose our glow like a coal taken out of the fire, but with Jesus and His disciple band we are rekindled like a coal restored to the fire. I John 4 reminds us that we cannot love God whom we have not seen if we do not love our brothers and sisters whom we do see. The vertical and horizontal dimensions of life are inextricably connected and they connect in Christ.

The Resurrection of Jesus corresponds to the day of Creation for on that day God re-created the world. It was a cosmic event. Jesus is the new Adam, the start of a new humanity. Jesus is the first of the redeemed human race. He is like a climber pioneering the way up the sheer rock face from the depths of hell to the mountain top of heaven. Tied to Him, we follow in His hand holds and foot holds and gradually get there.

The Resurrection means also that we have a mission to tell others the Good News and to draw others into the Kingdom of God until at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. God uses us to be fishers of men, missionaries, witnesses to draw everyone into His fellowship. Just as Mary and Cleopas ran to tell the other disciples, so we have an inner compulsion to try to persuade everyone that Jesus is not dead but gloriously alive! Of course we cannot hope to succeed in convincing others if we are not convinced ourselves and if we do not share the thrill of Mary and Cleopas in every fibre of our being. People are convinced by the witnesses eyes and attitude as much as by the content of their report. Christianity is an infection caught as much as it is something taught. The passionate teacher is even more influential and memorable than the subjects taught.

James S Stewart, in "A Faith to Proclaim" (p136), poses a very pertinent question:

"The effectiveness or otherwise of our proclamation depends ultimately upon the answer to one question: Have we ourselves allowed the truth of it – the exhilarating, shattering, redeeming truth – to penetrate into every nook and cranny of our being?"

Many people suggest that it is high time that we Christians stop being diffident, apologetic and defensive about our faith. We should carry the fight. Yes there are difficulties in believing e.g. the problem of suffering, but there are even greater difficulties in not believing or in believing in something else e.g. the problem of good. Other people suggest that we need a stronger social emphasis. Faith should show itself in good deeds. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is social dynamite. Beliefs are important but even more so is what we do about them, how we put them into action. Still others emphasise feelings both in worship and in our Christian service to god and the world. Others emphasise the importance of being Christians. The most important thing is not what we say, nor what we think; not even what we do, but what we are. Someone once gave a preacher the biggest put-down imaginable by saying:

"I cannot hear a word you are saying for what you are."

Actually THE most important thing is what God is, but clearly there is wisdom in saying that all the above is true and integrated. What it all boils down to is this. Our most basic need and the most important thing is our relationship with Jesus our God. The Christian life is a life lived intertwined with the life of Christ. **CHRIST** is the centre of Christianity – the only centre of it. Christianity is Christ. Christians are "Christ-ones". Christianity is not a belief system, a philosophy, an ideal nor a blueprint of how to live your life; it is Jesus. Dr. John Mackay of Princeton wrote in "Theology Today", (April 1946 p9):

"It is not enough that I hear the Word of God and obey it. It is necessary

that the Word of God become incarnate in my flesh in a spiritual sense, that Christ be formed in me, revealed in me, and not simply to me....What we need, in a word, within the Christian Church, if the Church is to match this hour, is Christians who are utterly Christian....”

The most important thing of all is a living relationship with Jesus. This is shown by the fact that Jesus often put Himself at the centre of His own message. He said “Follow me” not “follow my teaching”. He said “I am the Truth” not “seek truth” nor “let me point you to the truth”. He repeatedly said: “You have heard.....but I say to you”. Paul expresses it beautifully from the disciple’s point of view:

“For me to live is Christ”; “I live, yet not I, it is Christ who lives in me”.

Down through Church history what has sustained disciples in every age is their personal relationship with the living, dynamic Jesus. In the catacombs of Rome we find inscriptions of Jesus. John Wesley sang: “Jesus lover of my soul”. Dr. T.W.Manson in “The Church’s Ministry” (p75) says:

“What the Church possesses is not immunity from sin and error  
but the abiding presence of Him who is the way, the truth, and the life.  
She is promised not safety but victory.”

This is not sentimental slush, wishful thinking, wild imagining and an illusion. This is a direct consequence of the fact of the Resurrection. Jesus is our centre and source, our beginning and end, our be all and end all because He is not dead but gloriously alive. He is not 2,000 years away but here, now, for real. His presence with us is challenging as well as comforting. It is not easy living with perfection. We do not enjoy the all-seeing God look right through us. His presence requires us to make heroic choices and hard decisions. A Devon man said to a sailor who had served with Sir Francis Drake:

“You have not made much out of all these years.”

He replied:

“No, I’ve not made much. I’ve been cold, hungry, shipwrecked,  
desperately frightened often: But I’ve been with the greatest Captain  
who ever sailed the seas!”

Following Jesus can involve “Blood, sweat and tears”, as Winston Churchill said. People do not pay that kind of price for a fancy idea, only for a personal commitment to the one they love. If we are ever to experience revival in the Church it will be when we rediscover and recapture a close personal relationship with Jesus. No amount of Church restructuring nor any amount of human resources can compensate for the lack of a deep personal relationship with Jesus. Individually and together as families, groups and congregations we need to invest a lot of time and effort into living closer and longer with Jesus until His will becomes our will, His characteristics become ours, till by osmosis we become more and more Christlike, “chips off the old bloke”. Emil Brunner like to point out that the Church is “militant” not with its neighbours but in the sense of single-minded determination to focus on Christ. The militancy is in disciplining ourselves so that we reject temptation and grow and mature in our discipleship day by day.

James S Stewart in “A Faith to Proclaim” says (p143) that our basic need is

“a rediscovery of Christianity as *a vital relationship to a living Christ*.

There is nothing so fundamental as this....our own life should be intertwined with the life of Jesus....The indispensable centre of Christianity is Christ;”

Stewart quotes Karl Barth’s “Credo” (p159):

“Christianity does not exist for a moment or in any respect apart from Christ.”

Stewart stresses that Christianity is not

“a compendium of ethical advice, an ideology, a philosophy of life,  
an amalgam of certain specialized virtues....” (p144)

But rather it is discipleship of Christ Jesus (p144):

“we have a living, eternally present Lord to set out hearts on fire,  
to love and to be loved by for ever.”

He goes on to quote Dr. John Mackay of Princeton Theological Seminary who wrote in “Theology Today” (April 1946 p9):

“It is not enough that I hear the Word of God and obey it. It is necessary that the Word of God become incarnate in my flesh in a spiritual sense, that Christ be formed in me, revealed *in* me, and not simply *to* me....  
....What we need, in a word, within the Christian Church, if the Church is to match this hour, is Christians who are utterly Christian, in whom the full potentiality of spiritual life becomes manifest.”

If you need further evidence for all this, says James Stewart, then remember that Jesus Himself says “Follow me” (Mark 2.14) and “I am the Truth” (John 14.6). Look at the early apostles like Paul who analysed himself saying: “For me, to live is Christ” (Phil.1.21) and “I live, yet not I, Christ lives in me” (Gal.2.20). Study the whole of Church history and discover that the lives of great Christians all echo Charles Wesley’s song: “Jesus lover of my soul”.

James S Stewart says that if we recapture this close personal relationship with Jesus then everything would be revitalised – worship, witness, service, unity etc. Nothing – no amount of Church restructuring or new programmes of action - can make up for the absence of this personal closeness to Jesus. He says that when individuals and congregations are close to Jesus they are brave, strong and at peace. Then he answers his own question: how can we rediscover such a Jesus-centred faith? Preachers can preach much more about Jesus and congregations can focus much more closely on this Jesus whom preachers keep speaking about. My own testimony is that when I was a child I went to Church as soon as I could walk to it. I went twice per Sunday to services (morning and evening) plus an afternoon Sunday School. At home we had family worship and bed-time Bible stories. One night, after reading a Bible story, my father said to my sister Audrey and myself:

“You see this Jesus you have heard so much about.....don’t you think that it is time that you gave your whole life to Him?”

I remember thinking,

“Oh is that what you do next? I had not thought about that, but now that you mention it, it does seem the right thing to do.”

So my sister and I said: “Yes”. We have been Christians (brother and sister in Christ) ever since. We needed the preaching of the Word and we needed the challenge to respond to it, and for over half a century we have been thanking Jesus that we have been so blessed as to have got it. Now my life is dedicated to preaching the Word and challenging others to respond to Jesus. And I don’t preach truths, I preach Jesus.

This chapter might have been better entitled “WHO to preach” rather than “what to preach”! However, what to preach comes directly from the answer to who to preach. We preach Christ crucified and risen, who forgives us and loves us and calls us to forgive and love one another.

## **8 TYPES OF SERMONS**

There are many types of sermons and so there should be. It would not go down very well if we went to a reputable restaurant and the chef just kept serving up the same “chef’s special” every

single time! We have a duty to God and to the people to give plenty of variety in the diets of worship. It is wickedly selfish and arrogant to indulge in only one or two favourite ways of preaching and it is mind-numbingly boring and soul destroying to hear the same sermon content over and over again ad nauseum. Surely we can do better than that. We have a lavish God who gives us so many varieties of everything – for example every single day three new varieties of fish are discovered – so it is keeping in God’s character to have a vast variety of ways to communicate the Word of God. God is not boring (but some of His preachers are)! The Word of God proclaimed should be exciting, stimulating, creative, fresh and varied. It is hard to achieve the other things without variety. On the other hand it is not variety for its own sake. Above all there should be substantial content but it then has to be given justice in the delivery. Good delivery cannot compensate for bad content but good content can be murdered by bad delivery!

The various types of sermons can be categorised in different ways. We could categorise them by their *subject matter* e.g. Atonement, Body of Christ, Call of God, Doubts, Ecumenism etc. They could also be categorised by the different *clientele* e.g. mission to the unbelievers, nurture for the believers, old people, youths, Orange Lodges, children etc. Then again, they could be categorised by different *occasions* e.g. weddings, funerals, all age worship, open air, end of school term, ecumenical, in war or in the context of particular historic moments etc. Sermons could also be categorised by different types of *presentations* e.g. ex tempore preaching or reading every word of the script or stages in between. They can also be categorised by the *number of points* which they make e.g. one point sermons, two point sermons and so on for as many points as you please! It is important to remember that all the categories are not hard and fast but very fluid, running into each other.

Sermons can also be categorised by the different kinds of *psychological approaches* used. Three psychologies at least are at work – God’s, the preacher’s and the hearer’s. They can each have their own agendas, mind-sets and idiosyncracies. The psychological interaction is vitally important. It partly explains why some sermons grip some people but not others. Carl Jung the famous psychologist discerned four basic types of people: intellectual, feeling, sensing and intuiting people. He added that each of us has all four components within our make-up but we will have our favourite one. In other words there are head people and heart people, those who relate to the world through the five senses and those who back hunches. We all do each of those but we do have our favourite ways of operating. If so, then sermons ought to broadcast on these four channels both sequentially and even simultaneously. I would also like to add some other channels such as will and imagination. Here is a selection of some psychological methods, remembering of course that they are not hard and fast but run into each other.

**Authoritative** sermons - The prophets preached saying “Thus says the Lord..” It is a bit like the children’s game: Simon Says: “Do this...do that”. Preachers are heralds putting the trumpet to their lips and proclaiming the Gospel to the world, unapologetically and unashamedly. If it truly is the Word of God and if we truly are ambassadors of Christ, then we are entitled to speak with a note of authority. The authority belongs to God of course, not to us.

**Persuasive** sermons – These are more a case of “try it” rather than “do it”. The preacher argues the case. The preacher sees him/herself not so much as a teacher in a classroom but more as a lawyer in a court trying to persuade the jury of their case. Even better is to see it as a lover trying to persuade the one they love to do something in their own best interests. Love can reach further than logic and it can help the loved ones to want to be persuaded and convinced. There is a “wooing note” in preaching. Let the people see that you the preacher care as well as the fact that God cares.

**Co-operative** sermons – These might be described as “let’s try it together” sermons. The pulpit may be physically “six feet above contradiction” but try to get on the same level as the hearers. Broadcast on their wavelength. Show them that you bleed too. Share with them the worry, confusion, doubts and failures. “Stand in their shoes till your feet hurt” as someone put it. Use “we” a lot. (There is nothing worse than sermons which suffer from “I”-strain)! Make it a common experience and joint quest for the truth. Draw them into a kind of detective story as we seek to make sense of life.

**Subversive** sermons – I suppose we could characterise them as “have you ever thought of trying this” sort of sermons. They are more tricky than the other types and therefore should be used more sparingly. In fact they require a particular type of congregation. It often involves playing the role of devil’s advocate. This can backfire with people who take everything you say at face value! Irony requires a select audience. I once (and only once) tried this line. The hymn before the sermon I went and sat in the front pew. After the hymn I began a monologue from the pew: “Oh well, I suppose I had better get up into the pulpit and preach again. I don’t really feel like it though, not this week. Well it’s been a bad week. How can anyone expect a minister to preach week in week out for years and years and never have a bad day when they just can’t face it?” I was exploring motivations and thought this would be a creative way of introducing the subject. However it backfired. I realised this when an old lady going out shook my hand sympathetically and said: “I’m sorry to hear you are not feeling so well, Mr. Noble”! Maybe I will try it again sometime, somewhere else.

Remember that the same sermon can include more than one psychological approach.

Sermons can also be categorised according to different *structures and types of outlines*:

1. **INDUCTIVE** sermons – build up a case from particular points. They test out observations, theories and hypotheses. For example they might try to persuade us that since the Lord was David’s shepherd, and has been millions of people’s shepherd, then it is reasonable to assume that He will also be our shepherd; or since He proved Himself to be our shepherd in the past, he will be again in the future. You can also theoretically do it in reverse and disprove something (but I would not recommend spending a sermon disproving when you could spend it positively proclaiming and proving something).
2. **DEDUCTIVE** sermons – move from the known to the new and unknown. In the Sherlock Holmes style, they predict that if x and y are the case then z is bound to follow. For example, if we die to the old self and live to the new self it is safe to assume that God has come into our life and turned us around for it is not something we can do by ourselves.
3. **SKY-ROCKET** sermons – take off with multiple applications from one point. Jesus Christ is Risen today means that we can rise, death is not the last word, love does conquer hate, we become witnesses, He is with us etc., etc.
4. **THEMATIC** sermons – like symphonies keep returning to the main theme, or in preaching terms the text. We may be grief-stricken like Mary but Jesus turns to us; we may have had our doubts like Thomas, but again Jesus turns to the one who needs Him; we may be confused like Cleopas but Jesus comes and turns our life around and we may be as guilty as Peter but Jesus still comes and comes again.
5. **HEGELIAN** sermons – present a thesis, then its antithesis, followed by a synthesis. Jesus is Human, Jesus is Divine, Jesus the God-Man. God is in Heaven, God is on Earth, God can be both.

6. **MULTI-FACETED DIAMOND** sermons – present the many, often equally valid aspects of a truth. For example, Jesus is Lord means that he is our Creator, Judge, King, Teacher, Saviour, Lover, God. Discipleship of Jesus means learning at the Master’s feet, walking with Him into the market places, carrying crosses, dying deaths and bouncing back time and time again. W.E. Sangster writes at length on this in his book “The Craft of Sermon Construction”. He says that an uncut gem can look very rough but a cut one very beautiful. Cutting a precious stone after it has been split is a very skilful task. It is called “faceting” i.e. cutting faces on it so that its beauty may be better seen (p88):  
 “the preacher’s task is to make the truth beautiful by his craftsmanship”  
 (Hence the title of Sangster’s whole book on preaching).  
  
 Sangster says that when a lapidary cuts a stone he/she always does it to a pattern. Similarly the preacher also cuts to a pattern. Faceting may be by origins – “the causes are...”; by consequences – “the results of this are...”; by implications – “this requires that...”; by concrete instances – “this is shown by...”; by eliminating false likenesses – “this is not this or that...”; by the means to an end – “this is the way to...”.
7. **ALLEGORICAL** sermons – follow a story line in which every point has its parallel, parabolic meaning. (These sermons are very rare). For example the four soils in the Parable of the Sower could be preached as four types of responses to the sowing of God’s Word. We could, like Bunyan’s “Pilgrim’s Progress, which is an allegorical book, preach that life is a spiritual journey with ups and downs, joys and sorrows, forks in the road and cross-road moments requiring decisions.
8. **FOX HUNTING** sermons – ask “Is it this? No? Then, is it this?” Where is happiness to be found, asks Ecclesiastes. Is it in wealth, no...in learning, no ...in achievements, no...in pleasure, no...in fame, no. It is to be found only in Jesus.
9. **REBUTTAL** sermons – spend their time refuting false claims. (It is philosophically easier to knock down arguments than to build them up). It is often claimed that Christianity is irrelevant nowadays. Is it? Maybe it is secular materialism, individualism and apathy which are not so helpful in modern stressful living and for fitting us for eternity! People would cheer from the pews if the preacher came back off the ropes fighting!
10. **DEVIL’S ADVOCATE** sermons – boldly go where many fear to tread, thinking the unthinkable from the other side of the divide. Paul did it when he said: “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished....But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead...”  
 (ICor.15.14f.RSV)
11. **QUESTIONING** sermons – dare to ask awkward questions challenging long held beliefs e.g. “Do we reap what we sow?”; “Is it really more blessed to give than to receive? I remember preaching a sermon in which the first four minutes consisted solely of one question after another!
12. **PARABOLIC** sermons – were good enough for Jesus, so they are good enough for us! Use metaphor, analogy, illustrative story, mental pictures, something seemingly simple in order to convey something more complicated. The week we got our first ever puppy I couldn’t get any work done. I was becoming very perplexed about the sermon and the lack of preparation when it suddenly hit me that the puppy was the sermon and my time with it the preparation, so that Sunday I preached “The Parable of the Puppy”!

13. **LADDER** sermons – build up the case step by step. Jesus might return very soon, Jesus probably will return soon, the signs are there for Him to return soon, He ought to come quickly, He will be coming soon.
14. **CLASSIFICATION** sermons – like to systematise and organise material. In the parable of the Sower, the four soils represent four types of people. There are 3 ways to overcome temptation. Four roads to God: the Emmaus Road, the Jericho Road, the Damascus Road and the Jerusalem Road. Classification can also be by addressing different constituents e.g. youth, adults, elderly people; or by enlarging areas of application e.g. individuals, society, the world; or by explaining different ways in which a situation can be met.
15. **WHO, WHY, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, HOW** sermons – These words give plenty of material on any subject.
16. **SURPRISE** sermons – lead up to a big surprise when the preacher, like a magician, pulls out a metaphorical rabbit from the hat. “Got ya’ folks”! e.g. “...and the sinner in question is none other than YOU!” “Forgetfulness is one of God’s most endearing qualities!”
17. **ARGUMENT** sermons – leading from the lesser to the greater: “Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will your Father in Heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” (Matt.7.11)

Remember that the material should invite the divisions, NOT the divisions imposing artificial straightjackets on the material.

Sermons can also be categorised according to their **Styles**. The following styles can be distinguished but once again they are not hard and fast categories. There is much overlapping. Any given sermon will have its own unique combination of styles like its fingerprint, DNA code or safe co-ordinates. There are some interesting combinations. It is a bit like a chef using familiar, or not so familiar ingredients in many dishes and surprising you with what he can combine to great effect! Each preacher should be aware of his or her own favourite styles and try to widen to include mastery of them all as far as possible. Good preachers also get to know their congregations, where possible, and they will learn what styles the people prefer. That does not mean, of course, that you always give people what they want, for that would be a recipe for all ice cream and no spinach! It should be fairly obvious that all the following facets of the diamond of preaching have their part to play in fully rounded communication.

## 1. **EXPOSITORY** PREACHING.

This is not just one of the optional ingredients, but one of the compulsory ones. Expository preaching is not the only way to preach (for not even Jesus always preached this way), but it is one of the main ways and every sermon must have some aspect of exposition to it. Preaching is Bible based or it is not preaching. This does not mean that it is all about literalist interpretations and proof texting in a fundamentalist way but it is the Bible which should be being preached and the God of the Bible being pointed to. The sermon should be soaked in scripture, saturated with it like a water-filled sponge. Preaching should explain what the Bible passage meant originally and also what it means now (which is not always the same thing). Preachers are servants not only of God and His people but also of His Word. H.H.Farmer wrote a very famous book on preaching entitled “The Servant of the Word”. We must be careful to sit humbly under God’s Word listening to what it is saying rather than sitting above it as its judge

and jury reading in what we want to hear. We must use it not abuse it. The Bible is our source book both for content and for authority. We preach off the Bible not off the top of our heads; we preach God's Word, not our word.

Basically we try in expository preaching to relate life to the Bible and the Bible to life. We should, like good football teams, cover the whole width of the pitch both of life and the Bible. Yes preaching has a wide remit! It is certainly not "limited" to and by the Bible, as some suppose. On the contrary, through the looking glass of the Bible the whole rich and varied world opens up. The possibilities are endless. That is why we can preach several thousand sermons in a lifetime! At the end of a sustained ministry, the people should know a lot more about the Bible, and through it life, than they did at the start.

Long ago in Scotland it was normal for there to be two sermons – the long one (over an hour) and the shorter one (20-30 minutes). The shorter one came first and immediately followed the Bible readings. It was meant to elaborate and explain the readings. Ayr Old Parish Church, for example, still has the higher and lower pulpits which were commonly used. The higher pulpit for the minister giving the longer sermon and the lower pulpit for the Assistant Minister giving the shorter expository explanation of the Bible readings.

Expository preaching usually focuses on a text in the form of a sentence but the text could be a paragraph, a chapter or a book. You could even preach series of sermons on Bible portions such as: The Ten Commandments, The Beatitudes, The Lord's Prayer, The Parables or Jesus' Seven Words from the Cross. Whichever it is, there are advantages in expository preaching and also dangers. The advantages include the fact that people get the Bible's messages (God's Word) rather than the preacher's hobby-horses; there can be a degree of systematisation and planning as you follow the Scripture's leading; and there is the full range of the Bible's great variety (which is greater than any one preacher's range). Preacher and people can journey together into the world of the Bible and learn together. Put simply and succinctly, expository preaching honours the Scriptures. The dangers include: seeming to be dealing with the past rather than the contemporary world; getting bogged down in ancient issues which are not so relevant now; emphasising the Bible even more than God and the readers/hearers which can even develop into bibliolatry.

Charles Spurgeon the great preacher gives several good pieces of advice about expository preaching in his famous book "Lectures to my Students":

"A sermon, moreover, comes with far greater power to the consciences of the hearers when it is plainly the very word of God – not a lecture about the Scripture, but Scripture itself opened up and enforced." (p73)  
...."All revealed truth in harmonious proportion must be your theme" (p75)  
...."Our great master theme is the good news from heaven; the tidings of mercy through the atoning death of Jesus, mercy to the chief of sinners upon their believing in Jesus." (p75)  
...."Of all I would wish to say this is the sum: my brethren, preach CHRIST, always and evermore. He is the whole gospel. His person, offices, and work must be our one great, all-comprehending theme....  
Man's fall, his need of a new birth, forgiveness through an atonement, And salvation as the result of faith, these are our battle-axe and weapons of war." (p79)

Spurgeon also wisely advised preachers not to grab texts but let the texts grab them! They select themselves when the preacher is captivated by them. Indeed we can also put the same point the other way round and say that the text will not grab the attention of the hearers if it has not first grabbed the imagination of the preacher.

Henry Sloane Coffin in “What To Preach”, insists that we are first and foremost expository preachers trying to comprehensively teach the Bible. He asks why preachers seek novelty when there is so much ignorance of the contents and meaning of the Bible. Our job, he says, is to interpret life by the Bible. He adds that preaching from the Bible preserves the preacher and the hearers from subjective preaching, helps long range planning and gives variety to preaching. On the other hand, he acknowledges the dangers of expository preaching include – seeming to be dealing with the past rather than with the present life of God in the world, getting side-tracked, a lack of directness and problems with certain Bible passages.

## 2. DEVOTIONAL PREACHING

Preaching is part of an act of worship. It is a spiritual experience. It is not just a talk and certainly not a lecture. It is much more than an intellectual exercise. It stirs the imagination moves the feelings and rouses the will. Preaching gives people vision lest they perish without it. It lets them see themselves, see life in a new perspective and above all helps them to see the otherwise invisible God. God communicates through preaching. He inspires the preacher but just as importantly, or maybe even more importantly, He inspires the hearers. God has “spiritual intercourse” with the whole being of each human being listening and with the body of people together. He builds up both the corporate Body of Christ and the individual believer. Preaching is a very spiritual matter and in this regard it is hard to put into prosaic words. Somehow through human preaching using human words and images, God speaks His divine Word and encounters souls. THE Fisher of Men hooks us, preacher and people alike. We are swept off our feet and smitten with the love of God – His love for us and our love for Him. He woos and wows us. We are bowled over, putty in the Potter’s hands. Beyond words and trivial imagery, God and His congregation are caught up in spiritual communion of souls. The end result is that we come away from worship with a glow on our faces and a glow in our hearts like Moses had when he came down Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments after having been up the mountain with God. Like Moses, like young lovers, we radiate!

Obviously all sermons should be devotional. However there is also a devotional type and style of sermon to be distinguished from other types and styles. Devotional sermons deal with matters such as prayer, forgiving others, true worship, subduing the flesh, holiness. They may use poetry, hymns and parables; paint detailed word pictures; focus on images like God as our Shepherd or Jesus the Light of the world. Phillips Brooks the great American preacher in one sermon uses 15 visual images, 7 auditory, 8 motor and 2 tactile ones. More than that , Dr. A.V.G.Allen analysed the secret of his success as follows:

“He (Brooks) first opened his soul to the influence of the truth which was to constitute his message, devising the most forcible method in order to make it appeal to his own heart. He studied its effects upon himself before studying how to reach his congregation.”

Devotional sermons are designed to deepen the spiritual life, to comfort and inspire us. Most people are fighting hard battles, struggling with doubts, fears, insecurities, temptations, inadequacies. They need their chins raised from their chests and their eyes lifted to wider horizons, and above all to see Jesus. When the lost sheep see the Good Shepherd then everyone can rejoice – the Shepherd, the sheep and everybody else. Alexander Whyte, a great Scottish preacher, wrote to a fellow minister who had asked his advice:

“Look into your own sinful heart, and back into your own sinful life, and around on the world full of sin and misery, and open your New Testament, and make application of Christ to yourself and your people;”

### 3. PASTORAL PREACHING

Often, though not always, the preacher is the pastor of a congregation. If so, there is a tremendous advantage over the visiting preacher. Sermons from within a close personal and pastoral relationship have dangers of course but on the whole have the potential to be the most effective sermons. When trying to relate the Bible to life, the better the preacher knows the particular lives and corporate life of the hearers the greater the advantage. Preaching is from the heart to the heart as well as from head to head. Most people are fighting hard battles on a daily basis – wrestling with fear, doubt, insecurity, temptation, guilt, lack of knowledge, limited resources, uncertainty etc. – and the poor lambs need a word from the Good Shepherd to keep them going.

When visiting, look out for spiritual needs, people's hurts and questions, doubts and fears. Have the pastoral antennae always primed. In other words, be sensitive. Feel as well as think. We can also glean answers as well as questions, inspiring examples as well as desperate needs. Of course we must be very careful when quoting pastoral matters from the pulpit not to break confidentiality or hearts. It is natural for humans in a particular problem to want to know how other people, contemporary or Biblical characters, got on in similar circumstances.

It is vitally important for the minister to visit as well as study and to learn from the visits. If we do we will have an inexhaustible supply of material for sermons. The most important thing in a sermon is not the subject under discussion but the object of the discourse – the person listening. Rule number one in any form of broadcasting is that all communication is for the benefit of the hearer. Ask the hearer (directly or perhaps more indirectly) what their real needs are. Ask people who know the hearer to shed light on their needs, both real and perceived. There is a time for Moses to go alone up the mountain to be with God; but there is also time for Moses to walk with his people through the dark valley and share the moments of triumph and despair.

The pastoral dimension is not only about individuals but also about the whole, corporate congregation. Moses led the Israelites as a people. God brought them up out of Egypt, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, always as a corporate body, not as a collection of individuals. Pastoral concern and preaching therefore deals a lot with the Church, the Body of Christ. Pastoral preaching names corporate faults; promotes KOINONIA (fellowship); encourages social reconciliation and mutual acceptance and love as God has loved us. Pastoral preaching is concerned about how we live harmoniously together in true shalom as brothers and sisters in Christ and so be a witness to the world. Pastoral preaching promotes ever widening embrace of those sections of society and isolated individuals whom others by-pass and it seeks to celebrate and extend the diversity within the unity of the fellowship. This is an important point: we try to build up the unity of God's people and also at the same time stretch the diversity. These things are not mutually exclusive opposites but part of the same health and wholeness. In the same way we grow up from childhood to adulthood growing both as individuals with our own idiosyncracies (i.e. diversity) and at the same time grow increasingly into playing a full part in society (i.e. unity). An important part of pastoral preaching is also to encourage people to embrace change.

Pastoral preaching also has other dimensions such as thinking of others outwith our congregation, beyond our parish, overseas, of different beliefs. Obviously then, ecumenical matters and world mission matters can come under pastoral preaching.

Above all else, pastoral preaching should help us to see another facet of the diamond which is God, namely His pastoral nature. I nearly said "streak" but God does not have streaks! The whole of

God is in His total essence pastoral. Grace, mercy, love are not bits of God. All of God is love. God is wholly gracious. You can describe anything you like about God in terms of His core aspect, love. Then you discover that His core aspect is also grace..and mercy and so on. In fact all of God's attributes are each and all His core attribute (for He has no peripheral attributes). God is seamlessly one. This is also the model for pastoral preaching. We do not give out a master checklist of pastoral virtues which all disciples try to attain. Rather, all the virtues intertwine and grow together in a fully rounded character as we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and try to be more and more like Him.

Ministers often complain that people do not come rushing up to them with their troubles. If so, then perhaps the minister ought to ask questions about his/her own preaching. If we preach pastorally and if we preach well, then people should begin to get the idea that here is someone interested in people and their everyday problems and that here is someone who seems to know a thing or two about what goes on in people's minds. Sooner or later the thought occurs: he might be able to help ME. There are always people with problems and always people willing to talk about their problems...to the right person. People don't confide just because you put a label on your office door saying "pastor", but the needs are so great that if you are half decent you should get some trade! Carl Jung the psychologist said:

"There is nothing finer than a neurotic's intuition."

Ministers win people's confidence by the way they preach. The preaching can convey that the preacher/pastor is human, approachable and will accept me with my problems. Beyond that, it is even more desirable that the potential client think that in coming to the minister they are also coming to God and heavenly resources. Pastoral preaching and ministry is not just something done by human agents but fundamentally is done by God Himself through human agents.

Remember that the pastoral sermon is limited in a couple of ways. It can only deal with personal problems in a general way, a bit like a radio doctor. Also, the wrong person is doing all the talking; the client does not get a word in! However pastoral preaching is well worth doing because it prepares the way for pastoral work to follow. No minister has the right to preach pastoral sermons unless they are prepared for the follow-on personal conversations, visits and man-hours which they involve. Pastoral preaching can reassure people that they are not unique and alone with their particular problem. It can help people to see the constructive possibilities in every experience and to see where God might be in it all. Above all it can address people who are struggling on their own inadequate resources and nudge them towards turning to others and God. Pastoral preaching reminds people that the living, dynamic God is eager to mightily work in and through us, enabling us to receive and more than that to be channels of His grace to the needs of other people too. All this the preacher must proclaim with a conviction born of personal experience. So preaching is pastoral care en masse or group therapy and it can lead to private counselling and well worth doing both as a means to the end and as an end in itself.

Some preachers focus on the Bible and in their expository preaching almost forget the real needs of real people. Other people focus on people's needs and nearly forget the Bible. We need both, together! In God's name we lovingly embrace people with two outstretched hands – the Bible and pastoral concern for their lives. We approach them as both preacher and pastor, as Jesus was and is. The Word became flesh and it always has to be so, as David Read says in "Preaching About the Needs of Real People" (p25):

"a sermon must reveal that the preacher is not just some kind of authority on theology and ethics, but a human being engaged like other members of the church in the daily task of being a true disciple, and subject to the trials and temptations that afflict them."

This does not require us to betray confidences either. Jesus was not always quoting case studies He had recently been involved in; but His sermons did come out of real life nonetheless. In other words, He gave them real life but not real lives. Real life stories can be used but should be used sparingly. It helps if time and distance have elapsed and if confidentiality can be guaranteed. Of course you might ask for and receive permission from a person to quote their case. It can be appropriate to quote stories from your own experience but it is very easy to overdo this line. Be honest in relating details – don't succumb to the temptation to bend the story slightly towards making it a more perfect illustration than it really is.

All of us at some time, and most people on any given Sunday, are fighting hard battles with fear, doubt, temptation, lack of knowledge, inadequacies and the like, and they need comforting sermons. Cultivate the shepherd's compassion for his flock and convey the Good Shepherd's love to His flock.

#### 4. **ETHICAL** PREACHING

People face moral choices and dilemmas all the time. It is the very stuff of daily life. Rightly they turn to God, the Bible, the Church and the preacher for help. Ethical preaching tries to help. Note that it is trying to help them to solve their own dilemmas and make their own choices. It is not dictating to people and it is not pushing "one party line". People are not three year old children whose morality consists of doing what daddy says and doing it for the one simple reason, 'cos daddy says so!' People are often immature, but for the purposes of preaching the preacher has to assume the best in people and treat them all as if they were mature adults in the faith. Ethical preaching must respect people and take seriously the complexity of their dilemmas as well as be anxious to preserve Christian standards and promote Christ's teaching.

Ethical preaching is concerned with the practical outworking of people's faith. Faith is not an abstract thing. It is not the theory before the practice. Faith is a dynamic, active, practical, down to earth matter. Theory and practice are inseparable like two sides of a coin – distinguishable but not separable. Prophets and Apostles alike were strong on ethical preaching. They proclaimed that sound faith issues in good works like good trees produce good fruit. People need to hear what God likes and dislikes and why. They need to hear what God expects from them. Even mature adults need guidance regarding God's will.

One crucial point is this: it is NOT that "good" and "right" float about in their own autonomous orbit and, conveniently, God who knows everything can point us in their direction. Rather it is the case that God is Himself the definition of what is "good" and "right". It is good and right and our duty to live to please Him. What He wants is what we must do. If He says: "go jump in the harbour" then the right thing for us to do at that moment is to go and jump in the harbour! God defines good and bad, right and wrong. These things have no independent existence. God's will is right and right is God's will. Not everyone accepts this; our culture certainly does not like this; but that makes no difference to the truth of it. It is God's world after all. The primary function therefore of ethical preaching must be to help people to discern God's will for them here and now. Note that it is not simply God's will, in the abstract, but God's specific will for them and for them in the present circumstance. God's will can vary from time to time and circumstance to circumstance even for the same individual. God is a free, autonomous agent who makes His own choices and is free to change policies. However we can also say that God is not self-contradictory nor capricious nor inconsistent so as we get to know Him and His personality we can get to know His ways with some growing degree of predictability. The important point here is that truth is not a set of statements but a person. Jesus claimed "I am the truth". We tend to limit truth to sets of propositions, but Jesus showed that the truth became visible, tangible, incarnate and personified in

Himself. So we strive in life not so much to “get things right” as to “be conformed to His will” and “become more and more Christlike”. It is a bit like saying that marriage is an ontological existence rather than the achievement of certain skills and standards. Put another way, the ethics of discipleship are all about being in tune with Jesus rather than about passing Christian entrance exams and meeting certain high standards and being good. In Christian ethics it is who you know that counts, not what you can do on your own merit! Here is where the Kingdom of God rubs against the kingdoms of this world.

There is a great lack of preaching on ethics. This is particularly sad in an age when there are more ethical problems than ever before. Technology today is running ahead of the human race’s capacity to control it. We are like children with access to razor blades and matches. We can “play God” with regard to the production of life but since we are not God, we end up with an abortion culture, genetic experiments which make even atheists wince, and we grope around in the dark for some cure all, magic solution guidelines. The problem is that the technology is sometimes more advanced than the operators.

Why are there so few ethical sermons? Maybe preachers think that it is up to the Holy Spirit to influence individuals privately. Maybe they assume that people themselves know what is good and right and only need a little persuasion to go and do it. Maybe it is because the preacher does not want to spoon-feed people and thinks that it is up to each person to go away and apply the sermon to their own circumstance. I am not sure about these reasons but I do know that ethical preaching takes a lot of courage. Every congregation is a mixed bag and when you even mention emotive topics you get sparks flying. As soon as you say anything significant you have won friends and made enemies. I remember a headmaster banning my school assembly because I was going to address the subject of abortion. I showed him my notes and the fact that I was going to give 16 reasons for and 16 reasons against and get the pupils to think about it. His reply was to the effect that the topic itself was too hot to handle regardless of what I might say. Many ministers find that their discretion gets the better of their valour. It is not about how tactful you are it is about how sensitive the people are.

The prophets, the Apostles and above all Jesus preached ethical sermons...a lot. (Mind you they did become martyrs and He did get crucified)! If Christian preachers fail to preach ethical sermons then people will go to spiritualists, psychiatrists or indeed anyone who might help address their ethical concerns. When preaching we have to steer a course between being too general and vague on the one hand and being too particular and definite on the other. We must say meaningful things but we have also to leave room for people to think for themselves. Ethical preaching includes both the setting forth of ideals and also ways of attaining ideals. Basically we are saying that the Christian ethic is to be increasingly Christlike and to be Christlike we need Christ Himself to give us wisdom, courage and strength. Ethical preaching, like all varieties of preaching, has to be Christ-centred, not man-centred. Otherwise it is not worthy of the name preaching.

Henry Sloane Coffin in “What to Preach” suggests examples of ethical preaching e.g. “The Christian Management of Life” including feelings, time, money; “A Christian’s Use of His Possessions” including health, work, talents, faults, influence; “Life’s Successive Stages”; “The Christian at Home, Work, Play, in Church, as a Citizen”; “The Christian Ideal of Marriage”; “Christian Families”; “Christians as Producers, Consumers, Owners, Investors, Employers, Employees” etc.

It is important to emphasise that no one can fulfil Christ’s difficult moral demands without the living, risen Christ actively and dynamically helping them to do so. We cannot love our enemies, forgive seventy times seven and go second miles without divine help. Who was it who said: “to err

is human, to forgive divine”? One of the greatest current heresies is the belief that you can distil the ethical teaching of Jesus and practice it without worshipping Him as God.

Roughly speaking, ethical preaching consists of protesting against current wrongs or promoting current good practice; outlining good Christian behaviour and practice; and reminding people to strive to be better only with God’s help, not in their own strength. Hope in God, in the living God, in Jesus is the unique Christian message.

## 5. SOCIAL PREACHING

When people say “social Gospel” it often is with a sneer, and sometimes rightly so, but there is good and proper social preaching. The bad kind is when the sermon can be reduced to “be nice”! It sometimes is nothing more than the articulation of the heresy of works righteousness, namely be good and you will deserve to get to heaven. Christianity is not a human system of practical principles for daily life and nor is the Church just a club of like-minded individuals who try to do good occasionally.

So what is proper social preaching? For one thing it is reminding people that there is such a thing as society, the corporate body, the family, the state, the people of God, other people than self. Nowadays, especially in our culture, this is a difficult argument to get across. We live in an individual rather than a social age. It is now radical teaching to suggest that the corporate body is more than the sum of its parts. It is mind-boggling to suggest that God is not one autonomous individual with a capital “I” but actually a trinity, a family, a community of three in one, one in three: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They sigh that they do not understand the finer points of theology like the doctrine of the trinity. The truth is, they do not understand the simpler points of the word “community”! People don’t seem to notice the difference between corporate and collective. (Collective is a gathering of random individuals any one of whom may go missing without any significant loss; corporate is an integrated group where if one is missing it makes a lot of difference e.g. it may be the goalkeeper from the team, the conductor of the orchestra or the mother of the home).

Social preaching points out that the Church can only be understood in corporate terms e.g. as a flock, an army, a living building, a family etc. The whole Old Testament is concerned with the society of Israel, the New Testament with the Church, the New Israel. God relates to us together as team players. And the Church is called to go out into the whole world – this one small global village – not just to reach individuals but also to change society.

A lot of preaching is individual to the exclusion of the corporate; all about personal salvation to the exclusion of social reform. This is cultural not Biblical. Yes each person must be “born again” but so too must the whole world. Our families, our staff at work, our social circle, our political leaders, our nation, our global village – they all need to be “born again”. There is no point in drying an alcoholic out and then putting him right back into the bar. There is no point in “converting” a sinner and then leaving him in exactly the same environment with the same temptations and the same outcomes.

The New Testament could have said a lot more about corporate transformation but the writers like Paul lived in the full expectation that Jesus would return any minute. So the priority was to get individuals into the lifeboats before the ship sank rather than discuss redecorating the ship for the long term. Jesus may indeed come any moment, but it is also wise to prepare for the eventuality of His continued delay. Arguably the reason for His delay is to give us time to preach social sermons to get the world to prepare the way of the Lord!

It is fundamental to the Gospel that we are our brothers' keepers and that we should love our neighbours. Note the spelling is "brothers'" (plural) and "neighbours" (plural) – something conveniently overlooked.

Historically and in other parts of the world today such as in south America with its Liberation theology, preachers have stood up and preached boldly against social wrongs such as slavery, exploitation of the poor, corruption in high places, dictatorships, human right abuses. Often they have been martyred for their trouble. Social preaching can be on more mundane matters but it doesn't take long for the preacher with an analytical eye and a sense of justice to end up crossing swords with vested interests who fight back. Maybe this explains the reluctance of ministers to preach social sermons! Jesus bit the bullet and preached social sermons in word and deed when He tore a strip off the hypocritical Pharisees and cleansed the Temple of the corrupt money-changers. He challenged views on adultery, Sabbath observance, women, children, foreigners, paying taxes, being a good citizen, neighbour, spouse, family person etc.

Clearly, the Gospel does not merely have social implications; it is social in its very essence. God who is in His innermost being community, created a universe of abundant, inter-related worlds including global village Earth. He created a society, a community of diverse but integrated life forms, central to which is mankind. Man is a creature which exists in a unique way. All other creatures have many species e.g. three different kinds of fish are discovered every day! But there is only one species of man. This one species of man comes in two forms: male and female. Man is fundamentally a male-female combination being. When this male-female man reproduces, the offspring comes from the very genetic essence of the distinguishable but not separable partners. The result is a trinity: man-woman-baby, distinguishable but not separable; three persons in one unity; one family, community, society of three corporate members. In this respect man is said by the Bible to be "in the image of God" for God is three in one and one in three. The glorious, mind-boggling Gospel is that the human and the Divine may be grafted together. The human does not become Divine (as some religions suggest) but in some way God unites many human beings to Himself. The Bible offers the metaphors of a vine with many branches or a body with many parts. For all the diversity and variety and individuality there is a fundamental unity in Jesus the Vine and the Head of the Body. He is in Himself Son of God and Son of Man, the God-Man. We can do no more here than make these bold assertions but the point is that social is the very essence of God, creation, the Church, our life and therefore of Christian preaching!

Robert McCracken in "The Making of the Sermon" says that social preaching should do two things: combat specific social evils such as corruption and gambling and draw out the social implications of the Gospel. He points out that the New Testament sees Jesus as supreme in both public and private life so that He must not be expelled from politics, economics, industry, science, art, education or anywhere. Our faith has to do with the whole of life. He goes on to make the very pertinent point that people regard Christianity as irrelevant to the problems of everyday existence because Christians have had so little to say about the dominant social forces in economic and political life. Ministers are not politicians, nor economists, but they should speak on such areas from theological, Biblical, pastoral, moral and spiritual angles. Then their ministry will become very prophetic and very relevant.

The Christian preacher tries to stimulate the social conscience into working out the implications of the Gospel. He/she does not so much deliver ready made, pre-packed conclusions as awaken everyone to think and pray and take personal and corporate moral responsibility. There are times when we try to help people come to their own conclusions but there are also times when we have to give specific inputs in the form of guidance and advice. The world is full of the blind leading the blind. Preachers can do better than that. We can point people to Christ and specific Biblical material and give definite leads. On the occasions when preachers call a spade a spade, and even

just by awakening thought in those who prefer not to think, the preacher will make enemies and be hurt by them. That comes with the job.

## 6. PSYCHOLOGICAL PREACHING

I honestly believe that this is God's world and it spins His way. God makes the rules and if we do things His way it is easier than if we try things our way. We also find that common sense, scientific discovery, psychological insight, theological reflection and artistic awareness and indeed wisdom in every area of life are all connected. Life has a unity under God and is not in watertight compartments each with their own very different rules of engagement. For example we cannot say that evolution is right for scientists to believe while creationism is right for theologians to believe. What is right and wrong will be right and wrong whatever they believe. It is incumbent on both scientists and theologians to find out what is in fact the case. Both have to be true to the given; both have to be open-minded; both have to suppress prejudices; both have to listen to God and His world. (It is also worth remembering that the same person may be both a theologian and a scientist).

Following on from the above, there should be no "no-go areas" for the preacher and sermons. We can learn something of God and His world in every area of life. The wisdom of science, law, medicine, the arts etc. are all there as rich resources to be tapped. So we can have for example psychological preaching. We need it because people are psychological creatures. Perhaps our deepest level as humans is the theological level but not far from that is the psychological level. When you scratch people's surfaces, and ask searching questions such as: "why did you do that?"; "where are you coming from?"; "what is motivating you and making you tick?"; "what is in it for you?" and "what are you hoping to achieve?"...the answers are usually psychological and theological. So, real preaching which deals with real people's real lives and issues will necessarily be psychological and theological preaching.

So what does psychological preaching look like? I have an interesting example of it in my study in the form of a book by Dr.Sydney Sharman entitled "Psychiatry, the Ten Commandments and You". (Yes I know psychiatry and psychology are different disciplines but for the purposes of illustrating my point it makes no difference) Dr. Sharman was a practising psychiatrist and his whole book is written on the premise that good psychiatric advice is simultaneously good theological advice. For instance, he points out that the fourth Commandment is to keep the Sabbath holy. Many people in their folly choose to break the Sabbath. Then, surprise, surprise, they over-work and end up fatigued physically, psychologically and spiritually. They go to the doctor who advises them that the latest scientific knowledge is that we should all take at least one day a week off – and try to make it the same day each week. Make it a built in habit and try to keep it sacrosanct from interruptions!

Dr. Sharman has interesting things to say about modern false gods like money, power, status, self-image etc. all causing us to take our eye off God and apart from any Biblical punishment which they may incur, they certainly take a toll on our health and relationships and quality of life here and now. Common sense, psychiatric sense, psychological sense and theological sense are all the same sense. This is the case because it is the same God and the same us who are involved.

Psychology is a new science but psychological insight is as old as the hills. The supreme psychological source book is the Bible. It shows us life in its many facets and is perennially up to date. The Bible is full of applied psychology. For example, read Proverbs for psychological wisdom such as –

“To have knowledge, you must first have reverence for the Lord. Stupid people have no respect for wisdom and refuse to learn.” (Prov.1.7)

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart....Never let yourself think that you are wiser than you are....wisdom is more valuable than jewels;” (Prov.3.5,7,15)

“The more you talk, the more likely you are to sin.!” (Prov.10.19)

“Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword, but wisely spoken words can heal (Prov.12.18)

“Better to eat a dry crust of bread with peace of mind than to have a banquet in a house full of trouble.” (Prov.17.1)

“It is better to be patient than powerful. It is better to win control over yourself than over whole cities.” (Prov.16.32)

“Remembering wrongs can break up a friendship...The start of an argument is like the first break in a dam; stop it before it goes any further.” (Prov.17.9,14)

“Being cheerful keeps you healthy. It is slow death to be gloomy all the time.” (Prov. 17.22).

Other parts of the Bible are also full of both ancient Biblical wisdom and modern scientific wisdom, which are one and the same wisdom of God:

“Take one day at a time” (Matt.6.34)

“Ask and you will receive” (Matt.7.7)

“Do to others what you would like others to do to you” (Matt.7.12)

“Love one another” (John15.17)

“Remember the gathering of yourselves together” (Heb.10.25)

“We have many parts in the one body” (Rom.12.4)

“I do not understand what I do; for I don’t do what I would like to do, but instead I do what I hate.” (Rom.7.15)

“Get rid of your old self....put on the new self” (Eph.4.22)

If you want to see an example of rationalisation, look at Elijah after Mount Carmel (IKings19.10) – the defence mechanism is at work and he is making an alibi do duty for self-blame. If you want a case of repression see IISamuel 11.2-12.7; or a case of self-acceptance see Genesis 32.24ff. The soundest, shrewdest psychology is to be found in the Bible.

Preaching has to be psychological preaching if Phillips Brooks is right in saying that preaching is “truth through personality”. Both the preacher and the hearer have their psychologies as do whole congregations! It is surely essential for good preaching that the preacher know himself/herself and know the people he/she is preaching to.

Samuel McComb in “Preaching in Theory and Practice” picks out several vital psychological elements which affect preaching. First of all he points out that our sub-conscious is either a deadly enemy or our best friend. It can imprison us in fears or release us to do great things. The preacher can win over his sub-conscious into being a friend if he convinces himself that he speaks not on his own behalf but only as an ambassador of Christ. It helps too if we trust God to help us as He has promised. Prayer too puts us psychologically at ease. He quotes the case of Mr Bucke who achieved considerable fame as a preacher by his dependence on the richness of his subconsciousness: (p101-2)

“He was at his best when he took a subject and let it lay hold of his soul, and then, having selected a few clear lines of thought, let himself go. Then he would speak in a kind of rapture, like one falling into a trance and having his eyes open. The mind was detached from the circumstances of the moment. The subconscious mind was yielding up its stores of memory and illustration. Then he would fling out choice and witty sentences, the full force of which he did not himself realize at the moment. The strange part of the matter was this: he was afterwards depressed and almost despairing, complaining that he had made a mess of it and talked like a fool. The truth was that he

was so much the rapt speaker that he had no power to measure what he had said or how he had said it; and yet he had uttered sentences of great power, flung out imagery, striking and suggestive, and now and again a piece of real wit.”

Samuel McComb goes on to give a beautiful and succinct explanation of how we should harness the power of the subconscious: (p104)

“when we choose a subject and allow our minds to work on it for a little, we should then turn away from conscious thinking about it for a space, hand it over to the subconscious activity and let it undergo a process of gestation. Without our being aware of it, ideas, sentiments, similes, illustrations will gather round it, and when we sit down to the work of writing the sermon we shall find our task greatly lightened. When the sermon is finished it should be worked into the very texture of the mind, so that it may become part of our subconscious activity. The best method for accomplishing this is, after the completion of the sermon and after revision and several careful readings, to relax the body, close the eyes, quiet the mind and recall very gently the main lines of thought and especially the links of connection, repeating them over and over again. When you stand in the pulpit you will be astonished and delighted at the ease and freedom which will characterize your speech.”

I personally would add, do the above last thing at night on Saturday and you will sleep on the sermon overnight giving it seven hours to seep in to your subconscious.

The subconscious is not only the preacher’s friend but also the hearer’s friend too. A sermon ought to go deeper than an initial conscious thought at the time of hearing. It should capture the mind to the extent that it filters down into the subconscious where it can be chewed over for days to weeks or even years! We are still analysing and chewing over Jesus’ parables over two thousand years or at least since our own childhood!

Returning to McComb again (p105-6):

“as you stand up to deliver your message...get rid of all bodily tension....As the preacher’s whole being is thus free from strain, not only will the subconscious give up its treasures, but the mind will be sensitive to the impressions coming from the congregation, and that subtle interchange of thought and feeling between speaker and hearers so vital to real preaching will be sustained and developed. It is under these conditions that inspired moments visit the preacher. Then it is that there are “uprushes from the subliminal” which carry the preacher, as the saying goes, beyond himself, that is, beyond his ordinary, normal self, and impress the hearer with the fact that he is listening to an inspired utterance. Then it is that he lets himself go, yet has himself under control; personality meets personality, soul mingles with soul, and for the moment preacher and audience are fused into absolute unity of feeling. One of the reasons of the decadence of pulpit influence today is the great infrequency of such an experience.”

(What makes these quotes even more amazing is the fact that they were written in 1926)!

McComb also directs our attention to another psychological factor – the will, both of the preacher and the hearers. Preachers should preach with a will i.e. be totally focussed, passionate, persuasive, convinced and convincing. They speak as converts with the enthusiasm of new converts. They speak with purpose, to change lives. They go to it with a will. McComb (p108-9)

“Your words must not only transmit thoughts, they must convey emotional energy. For genuine preaching is, at bottom, a struggle of will with will. Unless the will of the hearer is carried, the sermon is a failure...The sermon must be a deed as well as a word. The preacher must *will* the good of those to whom he speaks.”

The third psychological factor which McComb focusses on is the imagination.(p109-110):

“Imagination is the faculty by which we are able to visualize the invisible, to present it in such a concrete form that men feel it as reality. The imagination sees. Out of material stored in the mind it creates a living world. By its forces the Parthenon is no longer a ruin and the Greeks yet live. The

imagination gives atmosphere and stimulates individual ideas...imagination clothes facts with living scenes...It is only through the imagination that the emotions can be stirred....“Not our logical, but our imaginative faculty is king over us,” says Carlyle...Take the subtlest or the most sublime thought, present it in pictorial form, or in the guise of a striking illustration, and even the untrained, average man will understand and feel.”

Even ancient Horace in “Ars Poetica” knew this:

“The business of the drama must appear  
In action or description. What we hear  
With slower passion to the heart proceeds  
Than when an audience views the very deeds.”

All great dramatists, story tellers, poets, speakers and preachers have most connected psychologically with their hearers when they have flooded them with pictures and images and illustrations. Jesus used parables and left us with indelible images. Preachers should therefore try to amass as many illustrations and parables as possible. Even more importantly they should learn to think parabolically at all times. It is a whole modus operandum, a mind-set, a weltanschauung (an attitude, philosophy of life, lifestyle). Train yourself by hard work and practice to the point where you naturally think and speak in parables, pictures and illustrations. If you really want to you can. Steep your mind in poetry, drama, literature, television etc. Comedians collect jokes from everywhere till they get past retelling jokes and become comedians in their very beings. Preachers collect images, pictures, parables and illustrations till they become preachers who can only preach visually because it is in their bloodstream.`

Emotions are also vital psychological ingredients in preaching sermons and listening to them. Heart speaks to heart very profoundly. Feelings should not be neglected as they often are in our over intellectualised preaching. Of course we have to beware of both extremes – being over-sentimental and over-intellectual, (being too hot and too cold). While being aware of the dangers, we should nonetheless give people warmth as well as light. Cicero, in ancient times wisely said:

“It is not possible for the hearer to grieve or hate or fear or be moved to commiseration unless the emotions which the speaker wishes to communicate are deeply impressed upon himself and stamped on his own bosom with characters of fire.”

Dr. A.V.G. Allen, writing of Phillips Brooks, said:

“He first opened his soul to the influence of the truth which was to constitute his message, devising the most forcible method in order to make it appeal to his own heart. He studied its effects upon himself before studying how to reach his congregation.”

Lack of emotion looks like you don't care; so why should they. On the other hand, false emotion can easily be seen through. Getting it right is absolutely vital because people are to be reached on the emotional wavelength. Great orators touch people till they laugh and cry and feel all sorts of feelings. Preaching tries to touch people not just give out sentences.

Having said all of the above, we should not forget how important the intellect is. On the face of it, preaching is one person talking to other people. Words are communicated from one mind to many minds. It is fundamentally an intellectual exercise. All the above comments were trying to say that as well as the intellect, we need to engage the speaker and the hearer's emotions, will, imagination and subconscious too. In the end we need to engage all of them! The intellect has the key role in controlling the others. Without intellectual restraint each of the others can easily run away with itself into excess. On the other hand the others keep the intellect from being dry, dusty, boring and lifeless!

We should not be ashamed of our intellectual capacity. Sermons ought to stretch us in all directions including intellectually. I like it when someone or something “blows my mind” or “boggles” it. God blessed human beings in a unique way when he gave us brains and minds with the capacity for autonomous thinking. We are not necessarily restricted to our herd mentality or peer group pressure. We can think for ourselves and stand up as individuals or as sub-groups against the majority. My grievance with the worship I have been brought up in is not that it is too intellectual (as critics often say) but that it is all too often bereft of substantial intellectual meat.

When considering any preaching but particularly when thinking about psychological preaching, it is important to see the exercise from both the preacher’s point of view and also the hearer’s viewpoint. The best preachers develop a sixth sense of awareness of “where their hearers are at”. The best congregations come having prepared themselves to listen carefully for God’s communication through the human words of the sermon. It is not easy for either party. W. E. Sangster sums it up in “The Craft of Sermon Construction” (p106):

“Progress’ in the sermon...is not just progress in the unfolding of his [the preacher’s] ideas to his satisfaction, or even the satisfaction of the intellectuals...it is the progress of as large a body of the people as he can get to move at all, and at as swift a pace as is possible with so heterogeneous a crowd. That requires the skilful blending of idea and feeling. He is driving two horses. It is no small part of his skill to see that they keep together.”

## 7. EVANGELICAL PREACHING

This is preaching for a verdict. Jesus said: “I will make you fishers of men!” (Mark 1.17). The aim is to help facilitate a live encounter between God and the hearer and the hope is that this will result in total commitment to Jesus as God. It is not just about disseminating ideas or promoting virtues or exhorting to greater efforts. Preaching aims to make a real difference in people’s lives. It aims at total surrender to Christ and complete transformation of lives and society. Touching the intellect, stirring the imagination and moving the emotions alone is not enough. Preaching has to reach the will and change the will and so make a difference in the life of the hearer. In turn, changed lives change the world, or at least the world around them. John the Baptist’s ministry can be summarised as “repent and be baptised”. This is not a bad summary of modern preaching also, if we take repent as dealing with negatives and baptise as dealing with positives in peoples’ lives. The word for repent in New Testament Greek is METANOIA which literally means to turn around. New converts were/are people who, while still standing on the same spot, in the same circumstances, turn around 180 degrees and now face in the opposite direction. Instead of looking glumly at their own shadow, they turn to face the sun of God’s love. We either bask in the radiant glow of God’s love or we turn round and see only our own shadow. Therein lies the fundamental choice of life and death and it affects our eternal destiny too! This latter fact adds to the urgency with which we engage in evangelistic preaching (and other kinds too).

Evangelical preaching hopes and prays that God will use it to encounter individual souls and corporate bodies. Through it, God straddles the road on which we are travelling. He stops us in our tracks. He imposes a crossroad or a Cross-road to be more precise. He takes the initiative and by His Holy Spirit he opens our eyes to see what He has done for us and the world in Jesus. He forces us to make a choice. He does not force His way into our affections – even God does not try to force love. But he does reveal His love for us and so challenges us to respond and to respond favourably. Selfless, sacrificial AGAPE love looks for total love and commitment in response. We stand at the moment of decision. We can go forward following Jesus, turn back and go our own disobedient way, or get lost up side alleys. The cross road leading to the way of the Cross, and leading to the death of the old self and the resurrection of a new self, beckons. It is the same moment described in

the Bible when God said to Abram: “Set out from Haran” or Noah: “Build my ark”. It is the same moment as when Jesus said to each disciple in turn: “Follow me”. The hosts of Heaven, the angels and the communion of saints watch with baited breath, wondering will they, won’t they? As each disciple follows they cheer and rejoice over every sinner who repents and every lost sheep found and every prodigal son returned. Only God converts, turns people around and causes them, like Nicodemus to be “born again” but God uses preaching to do this. All preaching has an evangelical element and aim to it but some sermons are more overtly evangelical than others.

Henry Sloane Coffin, the great American preacher, says in “What to Preach” that it is a good tip to write at the top of the sermon notes what the aim of the sermon is. What response and action are you looking for in the hearers? He says that the best sermons have specific, definite aims. He counsels preachers to preach with urgency and expect big things to happen. It is important to nurture those who are already disciples but it is also vital to make new disciples. He adds with irrefutable logic that preaching to the un-churched will probably require preaching out-with the church buildings and, or, inviting them in to special services.

In the same book, Henry Sloane Coffin points up some of the common mistakes in evangelical preaching such as –

- Do not preach a negative ethic as if discipleship was all about NOT doing things.
- Do not preach with an obsolete theology
- Do not be vague. Spell out what “accepting Christ” entails and costs.
- Do not be too individualistic. We preach the salvation of individual souls and of society and the world. There is corporate salvation too.

He then proceeds to suggest how we should preach evangelically:

- Set clearly before people the stark alternatives. Show them their very real and serious choice...their life and death choice – just as Elijah did at Mount Carmel (I Kings 18) and Moses did at Mounts Ebal and Gerizim (Deuteronomy 27-30).
- Show the results of sin.
- Show the prospects for redeemed life in Christ.
- Share the vision of a Christian world – what could happen if more people bow the knee at the name of Jesus.
- Remember that people differ widely in what they respond to.
- Remember that it is the Holy Spirit working silently upon the hearers who does the work, not you the preacher.

I would personally stress that our mental image of what we think is happening is vitally important. As preachers we are not addressing donkeys and offering sticks and carrots. We are not nagging wives haranguing drunken souls up to bed. We are not headmasters lambasting naughty schoolchildren at assembly for letting God and ourselves down. We are God’s channels for conveying to others that He loves them. We are the go-betweens passing on messages from God that he really loves people and wants to marry them for the rest of their lives now and in eternity. Our mental image will greatly colour how we preach!

The essence of the inter-action between God and through us preachers, the hearers is love encountering the loved one. There is confrontation here but it is loving confrontation. It is about relationships rather than tasks. It is about ontological matters rather than assenting to creeds. It is about whether or not people are wedded to God through thick and thin rather than whether they are morally upright and behave up to a certain standard. God, in love, pushes for a verdict. His Yes looks for a yes from us human beings. It is a wooing process.

We as preachers stand as witnesses. We ourselves have stood outside the fold and been lost sheep. Now we are sheepdogs set apart for the holy ministry of helping to round up the Good Shepherd's other lost sheep! All evangelists were themselves once sinners in need of evangelization.

There is a measure called the Engel Scale which runs from minus ten to plus ten. Minus ten is where we all start spiritually. It is the most primitive, baby stage of vague awareness that there is more to life than meets the eye. By minus nine we are beginning to flesh out the vague notions. By minus eight we are developing superstitions and theories. Evangelism, in the narrower definition of the word, is often seen as moving from minus one to plus one, flicking the switch from off to on, spiritually. The Engel Scale shows that much leads up to the switch moment, and much follows from it as we seek to grow in faith and mature into plus ten Christians. Evangelism in the wider definition is about moving people on from minus ten to minus nine and so on until they become plus one. But it does not stop there (as many people seem to assume). Evangelism continues to move people on to grow into plus two, plus three and so on. We can put the same point in a slightly different way by saying that congregational life is all about a series of concentric circles. There are the core people in the middle, the attenders round them, the lapsed members around them, then the non-churched outside them. Evangelism is the attempt to get outsiders to come in, lapsed to attend, attenders to become core members. Only at certain times and in certain circumstances are people ripe for nudging in a circle (and they only come in one circle at a time usually). Each time the Engel Scale can be a measure of the process. It is not an exact science of course. We also have to bear in mind that any congregation listening to a sermon is a mixed bag of all sorts of people at all sorts of different stages. Fortunately it is more God's problem than ours. We, as preachers, have to just preach evangelical sermons and let God work out the ripening process in each case. The main point here for preachers to bear in mind is that evangelism is not exclusively about "getting people saved" switching them from sinner to saint in the time it takes to raise a hand in the air. Evangelism is an on-going process at ever stage of spiritual development. It is concerned with all stages of growth. It is about getting people to move on in the faith.

Today we have true pagans, who never learned from their mother's knee about God and who think Jesus is a swear word. Such non-churched people will probably draw us out of our Church sanctuaries (pun intended). The Church of Scotland came up with a lovely phrase: "the Church without walls". Someone wisely said:

"The problem with the Church today is that we are too often sitting on the premises when we should be going into all the world standing on the promises!"

Then there are those who will come in to church buildings but only occasionally and with considerable reservations – "people of the porch" (who are in but not quite in) to use Donald Soper's evocative phrase which he uses in "The Advocacy of the Gospel".

Most people in church are on the roll but do not attend. Most attenders just attend one service on a Sunday but nothing else all week. Finally, most core church folk fail to go outwards from the church "into all the world making disciples" as Jesus commanded. They see evangelism as getting outsiders to come in rather than as getting the insiders to reach ever outwards. Everyone needs their faith aroused and deepened. There is no constituency which does not need evangelical preaching. It is never the case: "Good sermon today Reverend for those folk who need to hear it". EVERYONE needs evangelical preaching AT ALL TIMES!

Those who are most ripe will most feel a sense of sin and guilt as they hear evangelical preaching. They may thank you for that or they may hate you for it. Sometimes when we hold up a mirror or say what only a best friend can say, the friendship is cemented, sometimes ended. But it is a necessary function in the total work of preaching. Preach the grace of God whether or not independent and proud people cling to works righteousness. Preach the forgiveness of God whether or not self-righteous people are ready to admit to sin or are willing to confess and repent. Preach

the total sovereignty of God and the need for a total surrender of personal sovereignty whether or not self-willed people are prepared to obey Him or not. Create the awareness of God's love and mercy and of our sinfulness and great need of His grace. Create the appetite for salvation by puncturing our pride, self-righteousness and self-will. Remember always of course that this is the work of the Holy Spirit working in both the preacher and in the hearer. Remember also that preaching has to be evangelical because God is evangelical, always reaching out to people, trying to win them over to love Him.

Remember however that conversion is a beginning, not the end, and not an end in itself.

## 8. APOLOGETICAL PREACHING

Apologetical preaching is basically explaining the faith. It has nothing to do with giving apologies in the modern sense of the word! Mind you some sermons ought to come with an apology in that sense! Alan Richardson in "A Dictionary of Christian Theology" (p12) points out:

"The Greek word *apologia* means a defence, the reply to the speech of the prosecution (cf. Acts 26.2; IPet.3.15). Apologists are Christian thinkers who are ready to defend their faith when it comes under attack, and they must do so in the thought forms of their day....the Church's apologetic task is a never-ending one, because thought forms change from age to age."

Apologetics generally and apologetic preaching tries to convey the Christian faith to various types of people including heretics, children, genuine seekers, sceptics, agnostics, people of other faiths, governments who might persecute and not least to fragile Christians who might easily lose faith. This was in fact the background to the writing of the New Testament. At first it was not written because it was more an oral age than a literary one and what was the point of writing if Jesus would return soon and there be no posterity to write to? The early Christians needed the faith set down so that new converts could be won and new members could learn about it; heretics could be shown to be wrong; the Roman authorities could be reassured that the Christians were good citizens really; children could be brought up in the faith; and preachers would be able to proclaim the full range of the Gospel to nurture the people in their faith. Jesus was always very patient with honest doubters. The best example is His resurrection appearance especially for doubting Thomas (John 20). People are full of doubts and questions and they are entitled to ask. They are also entitled to get answers. I hesitated to say "entitled" when all is of grace in the Kingdom of God but on second thoughts people are entitled by Jesus' invitation "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." (Matt.7.7).

People have some strange ideas about what Christians believe so help set things straight. People have also to be helped in regard to matters which the Bible and Church people take for granted e.g. the existence of God and the validity of prayer. For many people these are not self evident. It is part of the Church's duty and therefore part of the preacher's job to make the faith intelligible, credible and reasonable. The Gospel has to be communicated which includes elucidation and interpretation. Preaching is primarily proclamation but apologetical preaching tries to show the reasonableness of what is being proclaimed and seeks to promote a better understanding of Christian beliefs. It sometimes turns out that the god which the atheist does not believe in is a god we would not believe in either. But if the atheist could see God as we see Him, then maybe he/she would not remain an atheist for long.

Sometimes the Christians themselves have a very weak and ignorant faith and often they end up with strange ideas and a poor caricature of Christianity. Often decades later they struggle to cope

with life on the basis of an infantile belief system which began and ended practically with Sunday School. We have hoardes of nominal members and relatively few who attend any form of adult Christian education far less good quality education. As James S Stewart the great preacher used to say, they face forest fires of temptation armed only with water pistols! (and maybe only half full at that!).

Apologetical preaching is not all cerebral and intellectual. It should also engender vision for without vision or with a false vision, people perish. It should also try to straighten out emotions, the imagination and the will. Faith is a whole being thing not simply an academic, intellectual thing. That is one of the first mistakes which apologetical preaching has to try to correct. Apologetics therefore addressed the whole being. "Eureka" always precedes formal proof, so apologetical preaching tries to help people have their eyes and minds and hearts opened but rational, intellectual and systematic explanations have to largely wait till the whole being comes to the eureka moments and has an awakened desire to learn more. A.D. Lindsay, addressing ministers on their pulpit work, said:

"You are arguing, and you should not argue; you should witness."

## 9. THEOLOGICAL PREACHING

Once people are interested, awakened, asking, seeking, knocking, then there is need for nurture in the faith. People need substance, content, input, feeding. Babies in the faith begin with milk but, in time, progress to meat. We all need teaching – good, sound, understandable, inspiring teaching. We need systematic, thorough, rigorous, widespread and full explanations. We need theological sermons because we are rational beings. The English word theology comes from two Greek words: "*Theos*" (God) and "*logos*" (study of). Theological preaching therefore sets out Christian beliefs about God and His dealings with the world, in particular with each one of us. It interprets God, life, ourselves. It answers the most basic human questions and addresses our live issues. It is important that preachers answer the questions which the people are really asking, not the questions which, truth be told, are just the preacher's hang-ups. People want more than running commentaries on current affairs and more than repeated mantras and exhortations. They want to know what to believe and why. They want to know if they can trust God.

All preaching must be theocentric (God-centred) and since God revealed Himself supremely in Christ Jesus, it must be Christocentric (Christ-centred). Otherwise it is not Christian preaching. Such theological preaching is absolutely vital. People need God. We are rational beings and we need rational explanations even of the greatest mysteries of all. Without theology, that is without ordered thinking, we are all at sea drowning in subjective speculations. The Reformers used to say: "doctrines must be preached practically and duties doctrinally".

Certainly our practical daily living needs to be informed and guided by sound theology. Good practice depends on sound theory. We have to have an understanding and interpretation of what we are trying to do in life. Without the ordered thinking of theology we cannot have intellectual self-respect nor the respect of others. People often cry "give us practical sermons, not theology" but nothing is so practical as doctrine of the right kind presented in the right way.

Basically doctrines are human tentative and provisional attempts to rationalise our experiences of God. What people want to know is things like: Is there a God? Who is He? What is He like? Does He love me? How do I know? How can I relate to Him? What difference to my life will God make? Why do people suffer? Is there justice? Who am I? How am I related to God and other people? What is the purpose of life generally and in my case in particular? Is death the end? What can I hope for?

We get too many sermons which turn out to be the maximum of heat and the minimum of light. Hamlet's mother addressing Polonius speaks for many a bored congregation when she says: "More matter, with less art". Christopher Morley's advice about writing equally applies to preaching:

"True writing [or preaching] must have the power to set fire to that damp sponge called the brain."

Cults do not encourage free thinking, but orthodox Christian churches do, or at least, should. Public worship is supposed to make us think. Worshippers need to understand the Bible writers' situations and what they were trying to say; and also they need to understand our own age. The Bible has to be seen to be addressing current issues in modern daily life. It is amazing that a book from over two thousand years ago is the best window through which to view our contemporary world! It is a living instrument in the hands of a living God who is engaged in live communication with real people in live situations today!

Preachers have to be extra vigilant when preaching doctrinal sermons that they do not lapse into theological jargon nor preach doctrines as things in themselves (in vacuo). It is not a theological lecture and jargon is a real switch-off at any time. Show doctrine as answers to our questions and descriptions of our experiences. Jesus used lots of parables, illustrations and simple vocabulary. Give people doctrine in picture form rather than as prepositional statements. Henry James said:

"What is merely stated is never really presented."

It is so easy to state, so hard to present. Halford E. Luccock in his book "In the Minister's Workshop" (p33) writes:

"to PRESENT a truth, a persuasion, a warning, or an appeal; to sharpen its form so that it can etch itself on the mind; to give it the mobility of surprise, so that it gets past the guards which the minds of a congregation raise; to breathe into words the very breath of life so that they become a living soul – that is so difficult as to deserve the toil of years."

Henry Sloane Coffin the famous American preacher in his book: "What to Preach" says that preachers should keep the highways of thought in good repair because they are the roads of communication between God and us. Coffin elaborates specific things which preachers ought to preach, including: (1) Main Doctrines such as – God, Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Man, Sin, Salvation, Future; (2) the Results of the Christian Faith – new life, cleansing, release, power, fruitfulness, buoyancy, adventure; (3) Answers to Cynic's Questions – What difference does it make in my life if I believe? How will it affect my decisions, ordeals, obligations, manners, resources and appreciations? What difference does Christianity make to the world? What if the Christian Faith was untenable? (4) Explore the lives of people who were mastered by a mighty faith. (5) Give the Christian attitude to and interpretation of life's happenings, including – success, failure, wealth, poverty, pain, temptation, death, opportunities, burdens and pleasures. (6) The providence of God and the Freedom of Human Beings. (7) The Cross is the supreme subject of doctrinal preaching. (I would expand that to include the whole Incarnation, Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus). Preaching the Cross would include things like: The Factors which Nailed Jesus to the Cross; Why Did Jesus go to Calvary?; Doctrinal Results of the Cross such as forgiveness, new life in Christ, victory over death.

W.E.Sangster in "Power in Preaching" urges preachers not to deal in trifles and marginal matters (as many do because it is easier, safer, more fashionable and new is preferred to true). He reminds preachers that we have a specific message to proclaim and doctrines to declare. He describes doctrines as the roots from which actions grow. He cautions that doctrinal preaching is not easy but encourages preachers to persevere because deep down people really want it. It is difficult to simplify complex matters but contrary to popular opinion, people are desperately hungry for an understanding of their faith (p42):

"Here, then, is the preacher's task: to preach about God, to show man his

own real nature, to expose sin, to announce the way of salvation, to stagger people with the truth of the incarnation, to hold up in a hundred ways the wonder of the atonement, to tell of the work of the Holy Spirit, and to proclaim all the refinements of grace. These are the foundation truths which sustain people in great trouble.”

He says we need more “teaching-preaching”.

## 10. LIFE-SITUATIONAL PREACHING

Life-situational preaching is also one of the more compulsory elements! Every sermon surely must relate to the real, daily life of the hearers. The point of preaching is to relate the Bible and Life. We can start at the Bible end or the Life end but by the time we are finished, the one should have brought light to bear on the other. Life-situational preaching is one strand of the rope of *every* sermon. We have to meet people exactly where they are at (just as Jesus did). Otherwise we miss them, there is little or no communication and the whole exercise is a waste of time. And that is more serious than we might think. It means that the hungry sheep look up and are not fed. It means that infinitely valuable souls are malnourished and have to face all the rigours of this life with inadequate resources. It also has eternal ramifications.

Preaching works hard to be conformed to what God would want to be communicated. In that sense it can be, and often is, God’s Word. The other major concern is that it match the hearer’s real needs and big questions. If it achieves that, then it is reasonable to assume that it is what God was trying to say through us, and so is God’s Word. Life-situational preaching diagnoses the life we currently live and even more importantly gives answers as well as raising questions. Artists, poets, comedians, philosophers all diagnose contemporary life in their own ways. The preacher needs to cultivate something of each of those perspectives plus the preacher’s own eye. Ideally the preacher’s eye view of the world will be as close as possible to the God’s eye view of it and therefore true to the reality of the actual life-situation. The preacher’s own personal opinions are not significant, nor relevant; and they can even be positively unhelpful when they amount to a mixed bag of prejudices and biases. In the same way as a scientist would play down his or her own subjective factors and let the experiment speak for itself and try to have a professional, objective analysis, so the minister is striving to give a Word other than his/her own word. The preacher launches out into the current affairs and tides of contemporary life always looking to the biblical revelation and the mind and spirit of Christ as points of reference. H. E. Fosdick wrote in Harper’s Magazine (July 1928):

“Those men and women in front of you are nearly all facing problems....

A problem in nearly every pew. Face them! Face them one by one!

Start your sermon by sketching the problem. It is not a theoretical problem.

It is practical, living, urgent. That is where people want your help....

Bring preaching close to life. That is the urgent need today. Nothing so much as this would make the pulpit powerful once more.”

No matter what type of preaching we are using, always bring preaching close to the lives of the hearers.

To help make sermons more truly life-situational, some ministers go into their empty church and imaginatively look around the congregation; others go into the empty church, switch on the pulpit light, then sit in the pew looking up to the pulpit, thinking imaginatively from inside the hearers’ heads. Still others sit in the study imaginatively preaching to the individuals in the congregation, revising the sermon accordingly. Preachers ought to be good pastors so that they can get to know the hearers well. Learn to “walk in their moccasins”; “stand in their shoes until your feet hurt”. Walk through the neighbourhood, frequent the places they frequent, listen to some of their music,

watch some of their T.V. In other words do your research into Life as well as research into the Bible.

There are some inherent dangers in life-situational preaching which are worth noting. It can end up that the people become more important than God! Instead of vertical, God-centred preaching it can degenerate into horizontal man-centred preaching. When preaching God's grace is sufficient for our needs, we should focus on God's grace more than on our needs. Life-situational preaching need not, but can, become Christian coated naval gazing, with more comfort than challenge, psychology more than theology, with a morbid fascination with our own problems. Having said that, the dangers are there to be overcome.

The New Testament shows us how to preach in a life-situational way: Matthew 9 v 36:

“As Jesus saw the crowds, His heart was filled with pity for them,  
because they were worried and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Note the steps: (1) Jesus saw clearly, (2) He entered sympathetically into their experience, and (3) He spoke out of that understanding. Preaching starts where people live and shares in their experiences and addresses their needs. Put another way, preaching is not talking about subjects but sharing good news with people in need. A theological student once went into the pulpit of a new church to him and discovered a little framed card with the pertinent question:

“What are you trying to do to these people?”

We should not be dangling them over the flames of hell for twenty minutes, then dropping them! We should not be answering the questions they are not asking. We should not be toying with minor themes and trivia like “a hippopotamus chasing a pea” (as Conrad once described Henry James the novelist). We are trying to convey a word from the gracious God who is sufficient for all their needs.

Dr. J.H.Oldham in “The Christian Newsletter” (Feb.1941), writes:

“What I am concerned about is a new approach, - that instead of starting out with Christian doctrine as something fixed and settled, that needs only to be taught and applied, we should begin at the other end, and set out ourselves patiently to learn what are the real needs of men today and at what point and in what way the Gospel has something to say that those addressed recognize to be relevant.”

This wisdom is echoed by Halford E. Luccock “In the Minister's Workshop” (p54):

“The only way to true greatness in the pulpit, as in all other realms,  
is the paradoxical way of making oneself the servant of a particular task.”

Luccock quotes an anonymous source who said:

“Always get hold of a doctrine at its preaching end.”

If someone objects: “Suppose you can't find a preaching end to a doctrine?” Luccock replies: “Then it isn't an essential doctrine.”

A great sermon, says Luccock, is like the star of Bethlehem – it illumines, it guides the traveller, it points to Jesus and real experience. So often the star of a great truth is visible but it does not reach the stable and interpret the experience there – not so much a shining star as a poor twinkle!

Halford E. Luccock in his book, “In the Minister's Workshop” (p60f) beautifully sums up the benefits of life-situational preaching as follows:

- It sharpens the evangelical point, making specific, direct appeal to identifiable situations.
- It meets people at the point of their needs
- It reminds ministers and congregations that people do have pressing needs
- It saves preachers from vague generalities
- It gives variety
- Like Jesus, it gives priority to individuals and individual situations

- It keeps the minister rooted in real life.

We have to stand in people's shoes till our feet hurt as someone once put it! James Denny the great New Testament scholar wrote in a letter:

“When I was a minister one of the things I felt most constantly was the amount of sorrow there is of every description under apparently placid surfaces often; and I many a time regret that the kind of situation I now have [as an academic professor] tends to put this out of mind, and wish I had a congregation again – not that I have any morbid interest in pains or griefs, but just not to be so far away from what is too terribly real to so many.”

Beware of drawing on an empty well! Soak in life in all its fullness. Feel the highs and lows. Know what you are talking about when you speak of life.

## 11. DOXOLOGICAL PREACHING

“Doxa” in New Testament Greek means glory. In modern English I would suggest it means “wow!” It is the moment we see a sunrise or sunset and stop to gasp “wow, look at that!” I remember I and other feeling that way on seeing our first glimpse of the Grand Canyon. It is the primitive first pangs of worship. It is raw worship before being refined in the theological reflection process. Arguably it is pure worship, although theologians would like to think that more refined and sophisticated worship is even higher and purer. Which is the purer sugar: raw sugar in the cane or white granules in a bag? Doxological worship certainly comes before theological worship; it is the raw material which we later meditate about. Doxological preaching is on the gut level rather than the higher echelons of the brain. Whether heart or mind or imagination or a combination of these, it tends to be strong but as yet inarticulate. Oh that more of our Sunday preaching would reach the gut level. Interestingly in the Old Testament the chief inner organ of the body was not the heart (as in our culture) but the bowels! The bowels were the seat of emotions and the core of a being. It always loses something when we try to explain strong passions in physiological terms, but the main point here is that preaching should “shiver our timbers”, “make the hair on the back of our necks stand stiff”, “strum our heart strings”, “tickle us” etc. I cannot think of a better single word to convey all this than “wow!” All this is contained in the word “doxa” and doxological preaching. Love it or hate it, powerful preaching should hit the target and make its mark.

Another way of looking at doxological preaching is given by my former professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, James E. Loder. His inaugural lecture and basis of much of his work was the five steps we go through to learn something new. He said we begin in stage one with a problem. Stage two is to think about it and chew it over until we give up consciously (but only consciously). What we do is push it to the back of our minds, into the sub-conscious. It is out of sight but not out of mind. Stage three sees us sitting in the bath and then, all of a sudden, shouting out “Eureka!” It is the moment of great insight. Stage four is the great relief at solving a niggling problem and the huge wave of released energy and satisfaction which follows. Stage five is to integrate the new data into our total body of knowledge. Doxological preaching would be preaching which corresponded to the “eureka” moment. Different people are at different stages and for different people different things constitute a “eureka” moment, but we all do have them and preaching ought to promote them. Surely preaching ought to open blind eyes to see new things and deaf ears to hear new sounds! Sermons have been life changing, pivotal experiences, “eureka” moments all through history. Why go to hear sermons if they do not do this? Psalm 73 is a good example of this. The Psalmist has a problem in that his lifelong beliefs no longer seem to stand up to the present facts of life. He was brought up to believe that God looks after those who are good and faithful. Now he sees the wicked prosper and the innocent suffer. He wrestles with this problem till he despairs. Eventually he goes into the temple. Suddenly he makes sense of it all. He is much relieved and he

goes on his way rejoicing. Life is still the same but he has changed now that he has experienced his “eureka” moment. Oh that we could leave all our customers so satisfied!

## 12. ESCHATALOGICAL PREACHING

Eschatology has to do with the end of time, history and the world; the Parousia – the Second Coming of Jesus; and the beginning of eternity. The creeds mention this:

“..He ascended into Heaven....From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead....I believe in the life everlasting.” (The Apostle’s Creed)

“And He shall come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead, whose Kingdom shall have no end” (The Nicene Creed)

The Early Church’s Kerugma also included this so it is a vital element of our Christian faith and a large part of the Good News which we have to offer the world. Much of Jesus’ own preaching had to do with the future and the realisation of His Kingdom. To some extent the Kingdom of God was ushered in by Jesus Himself during His earthly ministry but He pointed out that it would not be a completed process till His Second Coming when one day “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and confess Him Lord”.

Eschatological preaching is *not* “pie in the sky when you die” as one cynic put it. It is about our eternal future but it is also about today for the future starts here today. We can enter the Kingdom of God here and now. By the Kingdom of God we mean wherever God’s rule is acknowledged and obeyed; where “Thy will be done” is both prayed for and worked for. The big divide is not death but our orientation. Death will not turn sinners into saints nor saints into sinners. How we are at death will continue after death. The crucial thing is to accept God’s rule in our lives before we die. Those who are in Christ will continue to be in Christ when death comes. The time to fix the roof is before the storm comes. Do it now. There is this evangelical and urgent note in eschatological preaching. There is also the pastoral note of comfort that “nothing can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus”.

The danger with eschatological preaching is that it becomes too heavenly minded to be any earthly use. However there is no need for it to turn out that way. The future is relevant to today. Planning is very much part of today’s workload. Heavenly mindedness is not day-dreaming but seeing today in perspective. Just as it is wrong to live in the past, so it is wrong to live in the future. However, on the other hand, we have little grasp of the present if we do not see it as the consequence of the past and the cause of the future. Today is the tomorrow we worried about yesterday and today is the yesterday we shall worry about tomorrow!

As with the other types of preaching, eschatological preaching is both one thread in a strong rope, one element of any sermon; and also the subject matter of particular sermons such as sermons on Heaven, Hell, the Second Coming, Eternity, The Fulfilment of the Kingdom of God, Life After Death etc.

## 13. EDUCATIONAL PREACHING

Preaching is not teaching as some people tend to assume. However preaching should teach to some extent. It is one of the ingredients in the stew. In some sermons the educational aspect might be the dominant one and some sermons might be about Christian education. There can also be sermons on the subject of epistemology i.e. the study of how we know anything. How do we know God exists, what he is like, what He does etc.? Educational sermons might include subjects like: Things We Should All Know, *The Facts of Life*, *How Can We Know God?*, *Proverbs*. I once preached a

sermon about sermons – looking at what we mean by the Word of God and considering how the human words of a preacher are connected with the divine Word of God.

It is important to gradually increase a congregation's knowledge and educate them in the faith. Too many Christians face tough lives with less than a Sunday School level faith. How many people regularly, daily, nurture their faith and educate themselves? Sermons on a Sunday are not lectures nor can they make up for the lack of Christian education by those who do not attend Bible Studies nor engage in daily devotions. On the other hand it is impossible to preach without some imparting of education. We give Biblical background or we give theological insight and we analyse modern life. Hopefully we also inspire people to go and engage more in Christian education. Some preachers preach series of sermons in the course of which they go into great detail and thus hope to educate the congregation to a greater depth.

There is much overlap between proclamation preaching and education. They are not identical but the boundary between them is very grey and hard to define. My professor of Systematic Theology, Prof. James Torrance, always finished his lectures with a short prayer. The lectures were always so inspiring and finished on such a doxological high note they just had to climax in prayer. On the other hand preaching which really captivates the soul surely must result in a passionate desire to find out more. It is very hard to draw a line between Jesus' preaching and Jesus' teaching. Finding the line is not really the issue. The point is that preachers of good sermons should and do educate their congregations to some extent.

#### 14. INTELLECTUAL PREACHING

Good preaching should affect the intellect, the emotions, the imagination and the will. Good preaching both in style and in content should be intellectual, emotional, imaginative and engage the will.

Unfortunately the word "intellectual" is often seen as a bad word today. It suggests boring, dry as dust, obscure and difficult material conveyed by a swotty, head in the clouds, academic figure who is detached from every day realities. This is an unfair and unhelpful caricature. It is a sign of the ignorance of our age that intellectual becomes a bad word and can be so readily dismissed. In the best sense of the word, preachers ought to be intellectual and "know their stuff", the material preached ought to be intellectually sound and of substance, meat not milk as Paul says, and the congregation ought to be intellectually stimulated. When mind communicates with mind something hard to explain but something truly wonderful happens. Certainly the people are not bored!

Intellectual preaching feeds the mind making people think. It makes the rational appeal, gives the logical explanation, answers questions and objections and gives counter arguments. In times past there was perhaps too much intellectual content devoid of emotion and imagination. I don't really know if that is a fair criticism but I have noticed myself in this age and generation that we are very far from the danger of over-emphasising the intellectual element! Too often we get milk...watered down!

The intellectual style and content has to be inter-woven with a balance of emotional, imaginative and will-engaging content and style. But it is just as important as the others.

Today people seem to think that faith and intellect are opposites. They speak of blind faith as distinct from reasoned arguments, as if we know some things for certain then fill in the gaps with blind leaps of faith. The truth is that we have few certainties in this life – even the cleverest scientists, nay, especially the cleverest ones, say that all we can say is: this is what we believe at present from our best researches so far. It is only ignorant pub-level arguers who claim the high

ground of absolute certainty. Believers also concede that belief is one side of the coin and doubt the other. We too have evolving beliefs and growing faith. Static is not dynamic; it is dead! Having said that, it can be further argued that in some of the most important aspects of life, belief is an even more scientific and appropriate way of knowing things than studying facts. When it comes to knowing that somebody loves us, for example, how do we prove it and know it? The bare facts are not enough. Sometimes the facts can mislead us (as when dad forces us to do our homework)! Somehow we believe we are loved. Indeed we *know* we are loved. Faith should not be blind. It should be the best way of knowing certain things. Trust in God or anyone is not about crossing fingers and just hoping for the best; it is about a courtship during which we grow in knowledge of the other – a knowledge which is hard to define, explain or convince others but a knowledge which is very substantial.

Preaching has to try to articulate what we believe. We need to hear the preacher set out intellectually and systematically, logically and plausibly what we believe. It is a basic psychological need. We do not always want or need original material. Sometimes we want to hear familiar things (such as Psalm 23 at a funeral) and like children hearing a familiar bedtime story, we need to hear the Good News again. We need to hear good arguments for what we have long believed but find hard to articulate ourselves – the sort of things people have in mind when they say: “I wish the minister was here to explain it”.

Preaching not only tries to explain it to ourselves but also to others, including our children. It tries to persuade both sceptics and genuine enquirers. These all want intellectual arguments and reasons. They will not believe unless, like doubting Thomas, they see the logic with their own minds. So intellectual preaching might include topics like: What Christians Believe, Five Proofs for the Existence of God, The Word of God, The Trinity, Why Belief in a Baby in a Manger Makes Sense etc.

## 15. EMOTIONAL PREACHING

The complement to intellectual preaching is emotional preaching. We need a balance of both intellect and emotion, head and heart. Different types of people favour one over the other. Both types are in any congregation. Each of us is a combination of the two elements. To be totally convinced of something we need to be persuaded both in our head and in our heart. It has to sound right and also feel right. There is a very vital place for emotion in life and in preaching. Emotionalism is something else. Too often church services are intellectually shallow and emotionally damp squibs. Sometimes services sell their souls to a cheap, superficial emotionalism faking spiritual orgasm! True emotional preaching is when someone speaks from the heart to the hearts of the hearers; when they speak with empathy for other people’s feelings; and when they speak with passion and zeal.

It is great to hear someone speaking on their chosen subject. Even if the subject holds no interest for us, we can be held spellbound by their passion for their subject. I met a man passionate about nuts and bolts. He was reading *the* bible on nuts and bolts and he was trying to persuade me how riveting it was! I warmed to his evangelical zeal. He nearly got me reading his bible. I wanted him to read mine. Christianity is an infection – a glorious infection – more caught than taught!

The heart needs winning over just as much as the head. People hurt with broken hearts probably more than with sore heads. The Gospel is Good News for the brokenhearted. It is news of joy, peace, hope, love, belonging, acceptance, grace, forgiveness, new starts, life in all its abundance – all things to warm the heart. Emotional preaching might include things like: The Love that Will

Not Let Us Go, Forgiveness, Our Sin and God's Cure, No More Guilt, New Beginnings, Agape Love.

## 16. IMAGINATIVE PREACHING

Preaching is not worthy of the name preaching unless it stirs the imagination by its style and content. People are not moved to change their mind, far less their lives, if they do not see some new vision, savour some new possibility, feel swept along and roused. Great writers, orators and preachers are great because they have been able to open inner eyes to see things analysed with perceptive, diagnostic, x-ray eyes. Like artists, preachers can paint verbal masterpieces, stroke by stroke, layer by layer, building up a picture in people's minds. Like famous poets, preachers can give words colour and meaning and arrange them in surprising combinations to tickle the ear, touch the heart and transform our previous understandings of the world. Like prophets, preachers can strip away the false veneers of our society and call a spade a spade like no one else dares. In all sorts of ways, preaching is about opening the mind's eye and stretching the boundaries; helping people to see, hear, feel, taste, touch reality better; showing reality as it actually is and showing possibilities of how things can be. If faith is "hindsight in advance", as someone astutely observed, then imagination clearly plays a big part in faith. When Jesus told a lame man to pick up his mat and walk, we don't know how Jesus did it but it is pretty obvious that the man must have made an imaginative leap before making his "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind" action and speech! He must have pictured himself walking just before he started to. People who lift sports trophies testify that before and during the tournament they imaginatively picture themselves holding the cup aloft as the winner. I think the buzz word for it is imaging. Preaching images all sorts of possibilities. Altered personal perceptions and images can turn losers into winners. Broken, dispirited lives can be turned around miraculously when they really begin to imagine themselves "safe in the arms of Jesus", "hand in hand with the man (indeed God) from Galilee". Lives change when they imaginatively see themselves as the lost sheep now found and brought home on the Good Shepherd's shoulders. Beyond that, changed lives go on to change the world as the early disciples did.

Imaginative preaching is the only kind of preaching there is. I know what you are thinking! I have heard sermons like that too! But they are not preaching. Unimaginative preaching is a sin - an abuse of the congregation, a crime against humanity. Jesus was always appealing to the imagination by painting word pictures or telling parables. Sometimes He painted one detailed picture with increasing detail as in the portrait of the Sower and sometimes he flicked up a whole series of mental slides in relatively quick succession as in the successive scenes in the Good Samaritan story. The parables are like short films in our minds. The Bible also leaves plenty room for our imaginations to fill in missing details e.g. what did Jesus write on the ground when the woman caught in adultery was brought to Him? What was going through Jesus' mind when He was on trial before Pilate?

Imaginative preaching not only gives the congregation imaginative material, it also stimulates the hearers to use their own imagination. As well as giving masterpiece pictures or mental slide shows, it also gives whiteboards and encourages people to try drawing their own thoughts and conclusions for themselves. This is a very risky but exciting aspect of preaching. It reflects God's audacious exercise, (I nearly said experiment but God doesn't need to guess), in giving us, His creatures, abilities to think and decide and co-operate with Him or reject His opportunities. God gives us daily bread but He also teaches us how to bake. God gives us answers but He also lets us ask questions. God proclaims His Good News, and offers us Jesus the Bread of Life, but He also gives us time to chew it over, and even space to distance from Jesus, but gradually He trains us to conform to His will and relate to Him as Jesus. Preaching is vital in all of this. Preaching is one of

the main instruments which God uses to awaken our imaginations and through them our dormant souls.

Imaginative preaching stimulates and provokes the heart and soul as well as mind, indeed the whole being. It sweeps us off our feet, it blows away the cobwebs of disuse and death; and it carries us far beyond words. Real communication is much more than words. We are talking about communication between the Creator of the universe and tiny specs of dust on one planet. How could words be enough? How else could the two communicate except by God blowing our minds and stretching our imagination? On Sunday it is not simply “our modern new vicar says outrageous things”, but God Himself inspires both the preaching and the hearing in a pincer movement, in which He succeeds (not always but often!) in catching us up to heaven like Elijah until our faces glow like Moses as we come back down to earth! Now there is something to imagine – a whole congregation of worshippers like that! The community wouldn’t know what hit it! They would then have to use their imagination to try to understand, and before you know it, you have mission!

There are all kinds of imaginative sermons. One I particularly like is by Rev. Dow, a Scottish minister. He preached it as dialogue between the Prodigal Son and his Granny the morning after the home-coming party the night before! I preached a Palm Sunday sermon from the donkey’s point of view, entitled “Be an Ass for Jesus!” other possible sermons might be: If Jesus was Standing Right Here Just Now; Five Minutes After The Funeral; Heaven; Our Resurrection; “If Christ be not risen...”; “What if Christ is risen?” Imagine.

## 17. WILL-FULL PREACHING

Last, but by no means least, preaching in both content and style must reach the will. Unless it does reach the will, and reach it to some effect, then preaching is impoverished and shrunk down to mere intellectual titivation, emotional tickling, imaginative flights of fancy and altogether of little earthly use. Only when it reaches as far as the will, is the Word of God communicated and incarnate in our lives. Ultimately preaching is meant to change lives and help changed lives to change the world around them. God is passionate and serious about the whole business, so the preachers, the preaching and the people should be too. There is urgency too as millions of lemmings rush down to the wide exits neglecting the narrow, steep climb of cross bearing and as millions of fools build their lives on shifting sand.

Preaching is from God’s will to our will. The ultimate tug of war in this life is between Almighty God and little old me. No it is not fair odds; but that has never stopped everyone from asserting “my will be done” rather than “Thy will be done”. One Sunday I began the service with this call to worship:

“One day, at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow.

Come now and beat the rush!”

The tug of WAR between our sinful, wilful selves and God is far from over, though ultimately a foregone conclusion. Preaching proclaims the winner in advance! Preaching urges people to surrender, no less, to God’s sovereignty and love. Surrender is the operative word because we are strong willed creatures. We not only wander astray like sheep or make naïve, youthful mistakes, we wilfully attack God to the death as full-blooded enemies. Either we crucify Him or He captures our soul. Even the surrender is not about passive wafting of limp white flags as we stand still, but the active death of the old self and the painful resurrection and birth of a new self to take St.Paul’s picture of it. Daily discipleship in the Master’s “school of hard knocks” is no sinecure. God wants rigorous spiritual athletes not self indulgent wimps. I sometimes wonder if we have lost so many men in the Church because we have been conveying the message that the Christian life is soft and effeminate with nothing for macho males. There was nothing soft about Paul!

Preaching is not giving nice talks on interesting subjects then going home for a cup of tea.

Preaching is the call of God, as William Merrill put it in his hymn:

“Rise up, O men (and women) of God!

Have done with lesser things;

Give heart and soul and mind and strength

To serve the King of Kings.”

Preach with fire in the belly, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, until the hearers become like Cleopas and his friend whose “hearts burned within them” when they were in the company of Jesus.

Too many sermons hover around like helicopters, endlessly going round in circles, skirting round the main points and never landing. Preaching which targets the will of the hearers is more like...I was going to say a missile hitting its target or an eagle swooping down on its prey but the end result would be death! Perhaps the best analogy is a Bridegroom seeking out his Bride across a crowded room. It does happen to have the merit of being Jesus’ own preferred analogy! All this talk of will power can lead to aggressive images. The truth is that the will and passion are those of our loving Heavenly Father God who so wills our eternal happiness and fellowship. Preaching has the privilege and pleasure of conveying to otherwise poor souls God’s dying love and proposal of eternal marriage! In that light, the preacher is the Bridegroom’s Best Man conveying love messages to His Bride and urging her to respond in like love and commitment to Him.

Will preaching asks of the hearer: so what are you going to do about it, then? What difference is it going to make in your life? Will sermons might be :Choose Life; Act Now; Follow Jesus; God’s Great Expectations; Die to Self...Live to Christ; Live a Useful Life.

#### Summary: TYPES OF SERMONS and WHAT TO PREACH

**1 EXPOSITORY** – explaining Bible passages e.g. Parables, Miracles, Characters, Events, Words, Texts, Books of Bible, Questions Jesus Asked etc.

**2 DEVOTIONAL** – enriching spiritual life, comforting, inspiring e.g. Prayer, Spirituality, Love, Humility, Fruits of the Spirit, Characteristics of Christ, Peace, Hope, Faith etc.

**3 PASTORAL** – counselling en masse e.g. Caring for Others, Showing Love, Healing, Coping with Worry, Doubt, Guilt, Fear, Suffering, Death, Loneliness, etc.

**4 ETHICAL** – moral matters e.g. Right and Wrong, Decision Making, God’s Will, The Golden Rule, Sin, Being Good, Abortion, Euthanasia, Work, Stewardship, etc.

**5 SOCIAL** – what the Gospel says about today’s social issues e.g. Gambling, Debt, Prejudice, Class, Economics, Justice, Politics, the Media, Church and State, Poverty

**6 PSYCHOLOGICAL** – dealing with what makes us tick e.g. handling limitations, failure, pride, ambition, stress, joy, acceptance, belonging, identity, grief, repression

**7 EVANGELICAL** – encouraging crossroad decisions, fishing for souls, harvesting e.g. Encountered by God, Total Commitment, Saying Yes to Jesus, Call of God etc.

**8 APOLOGETICAL** – witnessing and explaining the Christian Faith e.g. What Christians Believe and Why the Believe It, Christian Practices, Christian Festivals etc.

**9 THEOLOGICAL** – Christian doctrines e.g. Trinity, Incarnation, Baptism, Sin, Communion, Church, Kingdom of God, Salvation, Eternal Life, Atonement, Grace etc

**10 LIFE-SITUATIONAL** – addressing real people’s real needs in everyday terms e.g. What to do when life caves in, Living Together, Daily Survival, The Big News

**11 DOXOLOGICAL** – promoting the wow feeling, conveying sunsets to the blind, letting hearts burn with adoration e.g. The Glory of God, The Presence of God, etc.

**12 ESCHATALOGICAL** – seeing time in the context of eternity, looking to the future e.g. Heaven and Hell, Second Coming, The Kingdom of God Now and Then

**13 EDUCATIONAL** – teaching about God, Life, Ourselves and Others e.g. Things We Should All Know, *The Facts of Life*, How can we Know God, Proverbs, etc.

**14 INTELLECTUAL** – *feeding the mind, making people think, the rational appeal, the logical explanation, answering questions, objections and counter arguments e.g.*

*Five Proofs for the Existence of God, Logos: The Word of God, The Trinity etc.*

**15 EMOTIONAL** – *speaking from the heart to the heart, with feeling, emotion and passion e.g. God’s Love, Hurt, Forgiveness; Our Sin, Guilt, Repentance, New Start*

**16 IMAGINATIVE** – opening inner eyes, showing mental slides, painting mental masterpieces, provoking the mind beyond words, sweeping us off our feet e.g. If Jesus Was Standing here Now..., Five Minutes after the Funeral, Heaven, Our Resurrection

**17 WILL** – asking: so what are we going to do about it? Getting down to brass tacks: what difference will it make? e.g. Choose Life, Act Now, Follow Jesus, Die to the Old Self, Live to the New Self, Living a Useful life etc.

## **9. SERMON CONSTRUCTION**

This chapter is about how to write a sermon. In many ways there is not much to be said for each person has to work out their own methods. There are many legitimate methods of “skinning a rabbit”. Variety of method is a good thing in itself. Different topics require different constructions. As with the construction of buildings there are many shapes and sizes and each has to be designed according to its particular specifications. Furthermore our society is too obsessed with how to do things – there are books and gurus pontificating on everything from how to grow rhubarb to how to open a sardine tin! You don’t have to teach a fish to swim nor a bird to fly and you don’t have to

teach young lovers how to kiss (or if you do there are problems). Don't be so obsessed with technique; just get on with it! Well that is perhaps a little over stated but the main point is: prayerfully prepare the preacher and the sermon will flow. However even the most natural things can be improved with a little care and attention to detail and technique.

Personally I sit down with a blank sheet of paper and a cheap pen and pray for inspiration. Then I start writing and miracle upon miracles I end up every week with a sermon! It is a private weekly miracle which only God and I know (and you now). Although I am a very analytical person, I really draw a blank when trying to explain technically just how the sermon was constructed. I am really amazed myself at how little I have to say on sermon construction. I have no discernible pattern of construction. So I shall briefly say what little I have to say on sermon construction and then pass on pearls of wisdom from greater preachers than I.

I like to write a full verbatim sermon on six sides of A5 paper. I use a blue medium point Bic pen rather than my computer BECAUSE it has a delete facility. I usually write the whole sermon in one continuous attempt with usually less than five corrections. It just flows out seamlessly! Yes it is a miracle and it is nearly as direct as divine dictation. When I start I do not know the next sentence far less the middle or the end. In writing it I am fascinated to see how it unfolds. I am dying to discover what happens next! It is like watching a drama unfold. It is as if I was the hearer of the sermon on Sunday! It is quite a thrill. Of course there might have been years of preparation leading up to the start of writing the sermon. Some sermon ideas have hovered about in my head and in my files for years before they suddenly come in to land.

A large part of my method of working is the preparation of the preacher. You will notice that that chapter of this book is the longest one and much longer than this one. I really do believe that the preparing of the preacher is more important than the construction of the sermon. When the creative writer is ready, then inspiration and method come easily. When the writer is not ready, no amount of technique compensates for the unreadiness. Over a lifetime be open to life, the Bible, God's Holy Spirit...be open minded, fertile soil, receptive, observant, analytical, prayerful, well read, widely and deeply experienced, wise and the construction of the sermon will largely look after itself. Having said that, it is also good to improve our techniques and methods of working. While everyone has to evolve their own ways, it is also helpful to learn from some of the past masters.

Variety of constructions is important because you have to keep the congregation's interest fresh. Predictable content in predictable packaging is the definition of boring preaching. Variety is also demanded by the diverse topics and types of sermons. (See the chapter on types of sermons).

Personally I prefer the seamless garment type of sermon which shows no obvious number of points or division of material rather than stressing each point in clear terms so that people can later recite what the three points were. I prefer the oneness to the threeness in my trinities! Preaching is not teaching. Unity of theme is the key to simple profundity. Stick to the point and give them it in ever increasing layers; or put another way, hold up the one diamond and slowly revolve it to reveal the multiple facets. Good sermon construction is like good refereeing – the better they are the less you notice them.

Both my head and my files hold large quantities of quotes, anecdotes, jokes, parables, sound bites, catch phrases, statistics, illustrations, examples with which to help preach the particular message. I am amazed how things come flooding back into my mind when I am focussed on the particular point of this week's sermon. What I cannot recall mentally, I can research methodically through my files. Often the hardest thing about a sermon is getting what it will be all about. Once you know what it is about, it is amazing how everything that week seems to illustrate the point. It is a bit like when you return from holiday in Jamaica, you seem to hear an awful lot more about Jamaica that

week than you ever did before! Once your antennae are up you amass a remarkable amount of data! It is good technique to get the topic of the sermon very quickly so that you can have the maximum time to pick up data and also be able to mull over it both consciously and sub-consciously. Incubation is an important secret in writing rapid seamless sermons.

In constructing a sermon, just as in constructing buildings, for all the variety there are some absolute and unchanging elements. For example it is always essential to paint word pictures and show mental slides, for we live in a visual age. It is also a must to address the intellect, imagination, emotion and will of the hearers. Preachers always have to both comfort and challenge. We have to articulate the Bible and real life situations and show how they shed light on each other. The preacher must always be like John the Baptist making Jesus increase and ourselves decrease. We and our sermons are only signposts pointing to Jesus; He is the One signified. The sermon must glorify God and edify the hearer but do nothing for the preacher's personal reputation. Good sermon constructions, like good architecture, move the hearer or seer but do not focus your attention on the preacher or architect.

Having said all I want to say, let me point you to the wisdom of past masters on the subject of sermon construction.

Phillips Brooks is one such past master. In his famous book: "Lectures on Preaching" he also says that preparing the preacher is even more important than preparing the sermon. He explains that this is because the preacher cannot be separated from his preaching like the artist can be separated from his or her painting or the author from their novel. (p109):

"Whatever is in the sermon must be in the preacher first; clearness, logicalness, vivacity, earnestness, sweetness..."

He begins with some general advice which will have a bearing on construction. He says that a sermon is not a work of art contemplating eternal beauty but rather a practical tool (p110):

"A sermon exists in and for its purpose. That purpose is the persuading and moving of men's souls."

Brooks says that it is a fault for the preacher to push him or herself forward too much, continually talking about themselves. On the other hand it is equally bad to have no personal input at all.

He says preachers should sometimes, like St. Paul, be willing to say that the following is just my own opinion and not claim divine approval for everything we say.

He sums up preaching as trying to bring Christ to people and people to Christ. He also urges preachers to appeal to the soul, the conscience and the practical instinct.

Be contemporaneous but don't sound like an amateur, opinionated politician or economist.

He points out that the making of a sermon involves a trinity: the preacher, the material and the congregation – and these elements, like the sea, are never exactly the same. Every preacher has to cultivate his or her own style, and always be improving upon it. This is mostly done by cultivating the preacher, he says. Brooks' method of sermon construction is as follows:

1. Select a topic. Three things influence the choice – the preacher's inclinations, the context of the preacher's other preaching and the needs (not wants) of the people.
2. Special preparation – bring together all kinds of material on the topic. He gives a warning (p158-9)

"They [the congregation] know the difference between a sermon that

has been crammed, and a sermon which has been thought long before..  
..The sermon is truth and man together; it is the truth brought through the man. The personal element is essential. Now the truth which the preacher has gathered on Friday for the sermon which he preaches on Sunday has come across the man, but it has not come through the man. It has never been wrought into his experience....If it is true, it is a book's truth, not a man's truth that we get. It does not make a full, real sermon."

So the preacher must always be accumulating – not so much collecting for sermons as always seeking truth, and out of the truth sermons will emerge.

3. Pick a Text. Brooks says that texts are good but they should not be allowed to rule. He points out that for twelve centuries texts were not widely used but for the next six centuries they have been. Leading people into the heart and spirit of the Bible is more important than single texts. Texts should always be windows through which we see into the heart of Scripture and therefore God. We should never abuse texts.
4. Perfect your Style. It is good to write other things than sermons to learn to become eloquent and a good writer. He notes (p175):  
"Some men are made for manuscripts, and some for the open platform"  
adding that it is good to be able to use both methods as and when appropriate. He says that it is important to "feel your hearers" (p172), "make truth clear to the understanding" and "glorious to the imagination" (p175). He profoundly and poetically says that preachers have to love truth and make it as beautiful as they can. He adds that we should preach with enthusiasm for it is the breath of life.

James S Stewart is another master craftsman of sermons. In his classic book: "Heralds of God" he gives some excellent advice. He stresses two basic points to always remember when beginning to construct a sermon: remember that it is a sermon and not an essay, lecture or speech; and always have a definite aim.

His practical steps include: letting a particular theme lay hold of you; pray about it until your main objective is clear; set down on paper all the thoughts, suggestions and illustrations which your theme brings to mind; and reduce the chaos to order. In all this spare no pains. The lazy preacher asks the congregation to do what is his task. Stewart adds that we should aim at symmetry of construction and try to get something into people's minds rather than just get something off your own chest. He writes (p124):

"Wrestle with your subject in the study, that there may be clarity in the pulpit."

He quotes Richard Baxter who said:

"What do we have our time and strength for, but to lay both out for God?  
What is a candle made for, but to be burnt?"

He says we can begin with Scripture and relate it to Life or begin with Life and relate it to Scripture but either way we have to relate the two. It is vitally important to gain the hearer's interest whichever way we choose to begin. Variety of methods is a good thing. Cultivate flexibility. Stewart says (p131):

"...do not, therefore, let the bones of the skeleton obtrude themselves unduly. It is the finished building men want to see, not the builder's scaffolding."

Stewart also advises aiming at a cumulative effect by keeping our most telling points till the climax. Remember we are working for a verdict. Sermons are used by God to bring people face to face with Himself in Christ and to elicit a response from them.

JSS favoured brief endings. He recounts (p136):

“Someone once asked Woodrow Wilson how long he took to prepare a ten minute speech. “Two weeks,” was the answer. “How long for a speech lasting one hour?” continued the questioner. “One week,” declared the President. “How long for a two-hour speech?” “I am ready now!””

Stewart wisely points out that all methods and techniques are designed to make a difference in people’s lives (p136):

“You desire your sermon, under God, to make a difference to human lives. You hope that the result may be some vow secretly ratified, some bondage broken, some cross more resolutely shouldered, some song in the night more bravely sung, some area of life more thoroughly surrendered to the sovereignty of Christ.”

When discussing endings, Stewart advises (p137):

“Clinch your message as decisively as you can, and do not hesitate to use the note of direct personal appeal.”

He says that diminuendo is better than crescendo. He points out that often in the greatest literature there is a surge of passion but the last note is quiet and measured, so he advises restraint, quiet, even abrupt endings and letting the last words of appeal have in them the hush that falls when Christ draws near.

In Chapter 4 of “Heralds of God”, James S Stewart throws out good advice like confetti, including the following string of pearls. Like the prophets and Jesus, translate abstract truth into concrete terms for illustration is vital (p142):

“Truth made concrete will find a way past many a door where abstractions knock in vain.”

He adds that the best illustrations are your own ones. Keep a loose-leaf folder of illustrations and don’t overload it. Quotations can be helpful but use them sparingly and avoid cliches. Beware of jargon and purple passages; just be simple and direct. Matthew Arnold said:

“Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.”

Stewart echoes that sentiment (p150):

“It is simple directness, not literary embellishment, that moves the heart of men.”

Prune your language, and remember that simplicity is not shallowness (p152):

“There is a type of preaching which apparently regards it as more important to generate heat than to supply light....’full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’”

Be clear and direct.

When it comes to the choice of texts and subjects, “The Lord will provide” on condition that we sit under the Word and do continuous Bible study. Stewart says to sit under the Bible and let it speak to us and use a private note-book, catching every snowflake of inspiration that falls. We must be honest in our exegesis and not read in our own eisegesis. Avoid the bizarre and sensational and beware of leaving the impression of the preacher’s cleverness rather than the majesty of God. Dr. W.R. Maltby used to say:

“Remember Peniel and wrestle with the great themes, even if they throw you.”

Implant in the hearers’ minds a seed which can go on germinating long after the sermon has been forgotten. In this respect the text can have a lot more power than the sermon. It is important to always preach from Scripture. One, two or even more texts can be used. You can even use contrasting texts. Texts can be a word, a sentence, a passage, a story or a book. Variety is the spice

of life! Aim at comprehensiveness – don't deliberately miss out awkward bits just because you don't fancy the challenge of them. Instead, (p166):

“Use the diversity of the Word of God to widen your own range.”

Stewart cautions the sparing use of sermon series but says that they are good for essential systematic instruction.

John Oman, in “Concerning the Ministry”, chapter 19 gives some good advice on sermon construction. First, he says, keep a handy notebook of inspirations for inspirations cannot be forced and when they do arrive they are like fragile snowflakes which all too quickly melt and disappear forever. Jot every inspiration down as soon as it arrives. Capture the elusive butterflies! Get up in the middle of the night if necessary. Pascal's “Pensees” were just such jottings. It is also important to be able to recall particular inspirations when you need them.

Oman makes an interesting point in passing, saying that our sermons ought to progressively mature as we mature. Our younger material has the advantage of youth speaking to youth, but the products of our maturer years ought to be wiser and more substantial. (Thus Shakespeare could only have written “As you Like it” when young and “King Lear” in later life).

He says that a sermon should have a logical order and a spiritual order (p201):

“there should be a case to win before the intellect and a practical end to be accepted by the conscience.”

He urges preachers to order their thoughts (p202) and:

“be sure that what you say is convincing and not merely ingenious.”

....”you must start with them where they are and gently lure them on.” (p203)

....”you cannot assume, but must create, the interest in your subject...

they have not been wrestling with it all week like you have.” (p204)

Beware of your own prejudices, preoccupations and hobby-horses.

....”Move forward from the intellect to the heart and conscience.”

He quotes the famous “negro” preacher's method (p205):

“First I explains the tex,  
then I presents the argyments,  
then I puts in the rousements.”

That brings to mind the other famous “negro” preaching method:

“First I tells them what I,m gonna tell them;  
then I tells them;  
and finally I tells ‘em what I told ‘em.”

It is not far wrong!

Oman says (p205-6):

“In one way or another, however, you must make plain to your hearers what it is all about, before you either ask them to believe it or to act upon it, or even to proceed with you at all in considering it.....  
.....Again, though you should convince the mind before you have any right to appeal to the heart, it is not necessarily by argument or reasoning at all  
....as it is the truth itself which alone has a right to convince, the most convincing reasoning against error is just to present the highest truth you see as you see it and as it appeals to you. You must not merely ask for belief, but must make it believable by showing it to be true which you do best by presenting truth in its own persuasiveness and leaving it to do the convincing.”

Oman says that the final goal might be to get people to do something, or even better to be something, and this can be done in one of two ways: (1) show how the highest truths touch life in its humblest duties or (2) show how the commonest duties contain the highest truths..

Oman also encourages many methods of sermon construction so long as unity of theme is maintained. Divisions, (whatever number), should be smooth transitions. The Introduction, he says, is the porch by which everyone enters and its character is largely determined by the content of the sermon to follow – so you can't get the right introduction until you know what the whole sermon will be like. The Introduction must really introduce and only introduce (p125):

“An introduction is to create interest, not to satisfy it.”

Avoid what an old woman said of John Owen, namely that he was so long spreading the tablecloth, that she lost her appetite for the meal.

“And even if your subject needs no introduction, your audience does.

If for nothing else, they need a little time to settle down. But also they start the better for being first drawn both towards you and your subject, and they will travel with you more hopefully if they can survey the scene for a little before taking the road.” (p215)

Oman advises that a good introduction is one which suits both the sermon and the hearers. He claims that good introductions achieve four things – deal with initial resistance in hearers; address immediate objections and difficulties; set up context and contrast with other principles and matters in both life and scripture; refresh the commonplace.

Oman thinks that Conclusions are even more difficult than introductions. He observes (p217):

“As the introduction should be like the porch, first in execution but last in conception, the conclusion should be like the spire, last in execution but first in conception.”

Everything builds up to the conclusion. Like a barrister addressing a jury, you should be out from the beginning to win a verdict. Don't just stop, bring things to a climax.

Robert J McCracken in his book on preaching, “The Making of the Sermon” gives a really practical insight into his method of sermon construction. He takes us through a typical week's preparation. I shall summarise it in his own words:

Monday – I need to know my subject and title by Monday morning at the latest. This is for publicity reasons largely but it also allows time for chewing both consciously and sub-consciously over the subject.

Tuesday – I begin to gather material, sifting and systematising it. I assemble my source materials in a large notebook (the texts with a double page each in one half of the book, the subjects with a double page each in the other half). I rarely write a sermon from scratch under the inspiration of the moment. Usually it is a matter of sifting and editing extensive materials which have accumulated over a period of time. This involves a lot of reading and takes a lot of time. I study the text in detail and consult commentaries. After sifting the material, I begin to sketch the outline. After several drafts I start working the source material into the outline. Once outline and general content are decided upon it takes a lot of the pressure off the rest of the week.

Wednesday – I work on the introduction. It is disproportionately important and can take the whole morning. The body of the sermon follows the predetermined outline. It has to be easy, natural, logical and progress the thought. I always write out the conclusion and commit it to memory because last impressions are most important of all and direct eye contact conveys sincerity and conviction. Conclusions, unlike introductions, are often too short. Conclusions ought to be varied.

Sometimes they summarise the main points, sometimes they urge action. Sometimes they show the steps how to do something and sometimes conclusions stir the imagination and rouse the will by showing examples and applications of the central contention of the sermon. McCracken finishes his book by saying (p98):

“Think, then, of the making of the sermon as an art.  
Take the right kind of pride in your craftsmanship.”

In his masterpiece, “The Preparation of Sermons”, Andrew Blackwood claims that no minister can tell how he/she starts a sermon for it is a mystery. He therefore advises that we start, continue and end with prayer, cultivating the upward look and watchful waiting. He has no time for systems for making sermons. He says that the impulse that leads to a sermon can come in various ways e.g. while going about daily life, working in the study, in private devotions or from the Christian Year. Whatever the genesis of the sermon, the time comes to establish the aim and goal. No aim means we get no where. Lay people often feel that ministers fail most here. The aim and purpose guides and retrains the sermon preparation.

Blackwood lists 15 specific pieces of advice for sermon construction (p43):

- “1. Allow abundance of *time* for the sermon to grow.
2. Set up a lofty *goal*, in writing.
3. Choose a *text* in line with the purpose.
4. Embody the purpose in a *conclusion*.
5. Start to *assemble* all sorts of *materials*.
6. Let the whole matter *incubate for a while*.
7. Begin to think about the *topic* of the sermon.
8. Gradually *arrange* the *materials* according to the aim.
9. Begin to think also about *illustrations*.
10. Decide about the *introduction*, or the approach.
11. *Write out* the sermon as a whole, at one sitting.
12. The next day *revise* the manuscript with care.
13. Prepare to *deliver* the message from God.
14. In the pulpit *forget* about the preparation.
15. *Trust God* to bless the preaching of His Word (Isa.55:10,11).”

Blackwood suggests we always use a text and announce it, since we preach from the Bible. This has several advantages, he says. It means that it is a message from God (not us); it encourages the preacher to set up a goal for every sermon; it encourages the minister to pray and work hard; and both preacher and people grow in knowledge and grace. In choosing a text he cautions: begin with your aim; bear in mind the season of the Christian Year; make sure it is a Bible text and that it makes sense; choose a positive rather than a negative text; pick one that appeals to the imagination; use only one text per sermon; use brief texts and choose a variety of texts.

When we work upon a text, he says that we should allow plenty of time to find out what the text meant to the man who wrote it. Then we should gradually formulate the practical message in terms of today. He says that only once you understand the need and the text can you find the sermon.

Blackwood defines a textual sermon as one whose structure corresponds with the order of the parts of the text. He says the advantages of such sermons are the fact that they fix attention on one specific part of Scripture; they are comparatively easy for the preacher to prepare and the hearer to follow and they bring the hearer closer to the heart of the Bible. On the other hand, he points out, this method does not lend itself to every kind of passage; a text may have too many ideas for one sermon; it can lead to artificial sermons lacking human interest and so prove unhelpful. Blackwood

thinks we should choose a text for every sermon but vary the methods of dealing with the text. He says we should deal with the text honestly i.e. know what it means and preach what it says.

He distinguishes an expository sermon from a textual sermon mainly on the grounds of length. An expository sermon, he defines as one which grows out of a Bible passage longer than two or three verses. He says (p64):

“In expository preaching put the emphasis on preaching, not exposition.

Go into the pulpit each time to meet a human need, and not to explain a passage.”

The structure of the sermon follows the structure of the passage. Always preach a sermon, not just give an explanation of a passage. Expository sermons give the Bible its place, follows in the noblest traditions of the Church and feeds both the preacher and the people systematically over the years. On the other hand, many preachers find it difficult, or conversely stringing a succession of unrelated pearls together rather than crafting a necklace becomes a cop out from thorough preparation. Pseudo-expository sermons are unhelpful.

Blackwood believes that preachers can gather material for sermons from just about everywhere.

We observe life and we study the Bible and we try to relate the two.

It is important to organise all the material you gather and be able to recall it either from memory or from your files.

He further advises having the topic (i.e. the name of the sermon or the subject) clearly in view before writing the sermon. Master preachers usually refrain from announcing their topic – it is for their own benefit as a way of organising themselves. Blackwood reckons that topical sermons are the most common type of sermons all through history. He defines topical sermons as those which grow out of life and subjects and he sees topical and textual sermons as complementary. He thinks the advantage of topical sermons is that they allow the minister a wide scope in content and style. On the other hand they can drift away from the Bible and can lack food value. He warns against carelessly giving your own semi-digested views on big topics.

On the specific art of the introduction Blackwood has a lot of good advice to give. He says it is vital to gain attention at the beginning and then hold it to the end. You cannot over-estimate the importance of a good start. What constitutes a good start? He answers: starts which are interesting, short, appropriate to the sermon, friendly, clear and varied from week to week. He lists types of good introductions including: announcing the text and context, a dramatic description, outlining a problem, introducing a topic, giving a direct statement of purpose for the sermon, a quotation, illustration, news item or cartoon, something unusual, a psychological analysis or a life situation. But do not make general statements or try two or more approaches at the same time.

He asks: how does the minister know which way to begin his/her sermon? He answers: by not finalising the starting plan until you have pretty well finished the sermon. He adds that you can write out the sermon from beginning to end once you know the substance, the conclusion and the introduction. Plan to build the porch out of different materials from the rest of the house e.g. if the sermon is mostly exposition, then begin with something else. Usually it is best to begin with something from the here and now. If you do begin with a text it is important to very quickly bring it to the here and now. He quotes John Henry Jowett (minister of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York) who said (p121-2):

“No sermon is ready for preaching, not ready for writing out, until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as crystal.

I find the getting of that sentence the hardest, the most exacting, and

The most fruitful labor in my study.”

The sentence should be clear, simple and short. It should be used in the sermon like a recurring echo or the chorus of a hymn or the melody line in music.

Good structure, he says, calls little attention to itself. Some preachers emphasise their structure to help the hearers follow where they are going. Other preachers hide their tracks. Structure is important in all the fine arts - architecture, painting, music, poetry, drama – and preaching is a fine art too.

In his autobiography, “Harvest of My Years”, Channing Pollock, who taught himself to write plays by reading 200 great plays and making 7,000 pages of notes, writes about play writing advice which also applies to preaching:

“Becoming an author is like becoming a mother. There must be a period of conception, a period of gestation, labour, and labour pains, with eventual delivery....The vitality of a work may depend on how long it was carried in the conscious or the sub conscious mind.”

Ellen Glasgow the novelist, in her autobiography, has this to say about creative writing:

“Just as a child must learn to walk and talk naturally, so even the instinctive writer must acquire the simple first principles of his craft....The assembling of materials, the arrangement of masses, may have a greater effect than the materials themselves....As a beginning author what troubled me most was the lack of an adequate method....Learn the technique of writing, and having learned it thoroughly, try to forget it....Actual writing [is] the hardest work in the world.”

Blackwood says that the marks of good structure are as follows. Most important is unity – preach one sermon at a time (p131):

“Let every sermon be on one subject, one thought, so that you could write it out in one sentence – “This is the thought that I want to impress on the people; this is my clear aim; this is exactly what I wish them to feel; or, this is exactly what I wish them to do.”....Ask yourself in every sermon, “Could the man in the pew tell his wife – or rather in these days, - could the woman in the pew tell her husband in two sentences the central thought of your sermon? If not, why not?””

Secondly have order – have a definite train of thought. Then we need symmetry – not necessarily identical length for each point but at least giving each point the importance it requires. (Phillips Brooks tried to give each point equal length). Finally we need progress – things have to move on and come to a climax. Blackwood adds that we should use a variety of sermon plans. He quotes (p135) John Erskine the novelist:

“I do not care to begin a novel or an article before I have worked it out completely in outline. It is easy to write the first sentence when you know what the last sentence will be.”

Blackwood gives a variety of sermon plans. There is the Deductive sermon in which the preacher deduces things from the text of scripture like a lawyer would base his argument on a constitution. On the other hand there is the Inductive sermon which starts with the hearers and where they are at and gradually leads to Christ. The Life Situation sermon begins with a real life situation and addresses it in the light of God’s Word. Similar to this is the Case Study method where true or hypothetical examples are used to build up the argument or show how the principle in question works out. The thematic sermon, like a symphony, keeps coming back to the same refrain, hammering home the same point. The dramatic sermon resembles a one act play: the scene is set, the characters revealed, they interact, there is a crisis then a resolution all of which draws in the hearers and appeals to their empathy and imagination. The Hegelian sermon has three parts to it: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Last and least in his opinion is the Adverbial sermon which asks the basic questions:

“Who, Why What, When Where and How?” Variety is the spice of sermon life and the preacher cannot achieve variety without observation, thought, craftsmanship and imagination.

We could add to Blackwood’s list of sermon plans e.g. the Ladder sermon which makes a series of logical steps; the Diamond with many facets sermon, the Classification sermon (e.g. four soils); the Parabolic or Analagous sermon (e.g. the Church as a ship); the Fox Hunt sermon (e.g. “Is it this? No! Then, is it that?”); and the Rebuttal sermon, refuting a popular misconception.

Blackwood believes that the conclusion is the most important part of any sermon apart from the text. He says we should start with interest and end with force. Lead the hearer to a very specific point. Conclusions too benefit from variety – no two sermons ought to end in exactly the same fashion. He gives examples of several varieties of endings e.g. direct appeals, practical applications, final summaries, contrasting truths, appeals to the imagination, closing poems, climaxing in an illustration, final punch lines and sound bites. He further advises preachers saying that conclusions ought to be appropriate, simple, brief, accentuate the positive, make everything personal and strike a wooing note. On the other hand he lists things to avoid in conclusions such as: making apologies, humour, new material, distractions, similar conclusions to last week.

In general terms, Blackwood says that the writing of a sermon each week is the preacher’s top priority. Before writing the opening words, have everything ready so that you can pour out the message from beginning to end (preferably without rising from the chair). This method allows you to really enjoy sermon writing. A sermon is made up of parts but it is primarily a whole thing. Before putting pen to paper, he suggests getting up and talking the sermon through as if to an unseen congregation. In other words see if you are full of it (p175):

“Before it can live and move in the souls of the hearers; it must burn and glow in the heart of the preacher.”

W. Somerset Maugham in “The Summing Up” (p181-2) says:

“No professional writer can afford to write when he feels like it. If he waits till he is in the mood, till he has the inspiration,...he waits indefinitely and ends by producing little or nothing.

The professional writer creates the mood,...but he controls and subdues it to his bidding by setting himself regular hours of work.

But in time writing becomes a habit...You cannot write well or much (and I venture the opinion that you cannot write well unless you write much) unless you form a habit.”

Blackwood urges preachers not to seek beauty of words for their own sake but rather be preoccupied with communicating with the congregation and the beauty will follow. Sermons should reach the will of the hearers and move them to action. The preacher stands behind and preaches over an open Bible to show that he/she does not speak in his own authority but as a messenger of the Word. The force, the energy and effectiveness are not his/hers but God’s.

It is interesting to note that the greatest orators in the history of the world – Cicero, Burke, Chatham etc. only gave about twenty great orations in their lifetimes. How then can a humble minister give great orations weekly for a lifetime? The eloquence is not in us but in God’s communication through us. Beecher in his “Yale Lectures on Preaching (p32,226) said:

“Great sermons will come of themselves, when they are worth anything.

Don’t seek them....I do not believe that any man ever made a great sermon who set out to do that thing.”

Blackwood suggests thinking of good sermons rather than great ones – thinking of helping needy people rather than great works of literature or oratory: (p181):

“A good sermon makes men and women eager to do the will of God and then shows them how.”

Phillips Brooks in “Lectures on Preaching” (p151) sums it up:

“Never tolerate any idea of the dignity of a sermon which will keep you from saying anything in it which you ought to say, or which your people ought to hear....The sermons of which nobody speaks, the sermons which come from mind and heart, and go to heart and mind with as little consciousness as possible of tongue and ear, those are the sermons that do the work, that make men better and really sing into their affections.”

Another great craftsman of sermons is the American preacher, Illion T Jones who wrote the masterpiece: “Principles and Practice of Preaching”. His method of constructing sermons began with finding an idea or indeed being found by the idea! Something jumps out at us and takes us hostage! Often it may come from the ordinary things of life. (Congregations can tire of sermons which are too clever anyway). When the idea comes, says Jones, he takes three steps: he decides on the exact truth which the idea contains; he states clearly in a brief sentence and in terms of definite human needs the purpose of the sermon; and thirdly he finds a suitable passage from the Bible on which to base the sermon. He says that if the sermon begins with a Bible text it should come quickly to the needs of the people, and if it begins with a human situation it should go quickly to a truth of the Bible. The aim is to relate the Bible and Life to one another.

Jones says that the custom of using texts, (either verses or passages), is as old as Christianity. He gives eight good reasons for using texts. (1) The Bible is the original source of our knowledge of the Gospel. (2) The New Testament cannot be understood except as the fulfilment of the Old Testament. (3) The Bible contains the truth and the experiential processes by which the truth became known. (4) The Bible offers a wide range of moral, religious and social truths. (5) He quotes Anne Lindbergh:

“Bible stories...are so simple that they are like empty cups for people to fill with their own experiences and drink for their own need.”

(6) The Bible is also a mirror which the preacher holds before each person. (7) It is also the authoritative source of all Christian preaching and teaching. (8) The Bible also provides a variety and inexhaustible supply of interesting ideas for sermons.

He says, when using texts, we should make sure that it is a genuine passage of scripture and properly translated. We should make the truth of the text the theme of the sermon (not just find a convenient text to say what we have already picked as our theme). We should also use the text in its original, natural setting and meaning. He warns us not to abuse texts nor take them out of their context. Nor should we use them to get the hearer’s imaginations going off at tangents and then forget them. He cautions us to beware of Eisegesis rather than Exegesis i.e. reading our own ideas into (“eis”) passages rather than bringing out (“ex”) the real meaning of the text.

Once you have your idea and your text, says Jones, we need to think about the subject of the sermon. The purpose of a subject, he claims, is to define and limit the discussion for the preacher; to focus the attention of the hearer; and to keep both the preacher and the hearer on the track. He distinguishes this from the theme of the sermon which he defines as the gist of the sermon in one sentence. He gives an example: Subject – “Scapegoats”

Topic – “The Modern Practice of Using Scapegoats”

Theme – “You cannot get rid of your sins by making someone a scapegoat”

Title – “Passing the Buck”

Jones thinks the ideal way is to state the subject is to make it the theme and make it co-extensive with the text. Variety is always the spice of life. Beware of Blackwood’s discovery:

“Sermon subjects suffer from sameness, tameness and lameness.”

Jones emphasises that good sermons have good structures. He says that a speech does not just happen; it is designed. Human minds grasp ideas best when they are presented in orderly sequences. Again variety is good. All good writers follow a plot but the outlines of sermons do not have to always be apparent. Outlines help the preacher to develop the thought, keep on track, keep proportions and assures movement or progression of thought. Outlines also help the hearers to understand what the preacher is saying and where he/she is going; they prevent misunderstanding; they give emotional rhythm; and they help the hearers remember what was said.

He goes on in more detail to say that the outline should have unity – unified around the main idea. Thus each point should be a sub-thesis of the main thesis. An outline should have order so each point should be equal in rank or importance. Sermons should be built up step by step, each point taking its place and doing its work on a par with the others. An outline should also have proportion or balance and so all the points should be of a parallel construction. An outline should have movement, so points should be distinct. Material under one point should not be repeated under another point. Each point should deal with one specific aspect of the subject and only one. Finally, he says that an outline should have a climax – both an emotional and an intellectual climax. Needless to say, the climax should come near the end and so the points should be arranged in an ascending scale.

Jones gives some other valuable pieces of advice such as, make the headings of your sermons complete sentences; vary the number of points you use; don't announce sub-points; "don't dangle the skeleton" i.e. don't announce all the points ahead of time because that leaves no room for surprises; make smooth transitions and keep the sermon moving; and seldom use the word "finally"

In chapter seven of "Principles and Practice of Preaching", Illion T Jones gives a very revealing insight into his weekly routine. He assumes that all preachers have accumulated material over the years and keep files of it. He also assumes preachers have a few sermons near the boil (in process of development) at any given time. Thirdly he assumes that preachers do have a weekly schedule. He identifies six distinct stages to the completing of the sermon preparation:

Stage 1 - Get the mind started on the sermon. Pick a text, pick a truth, study the text carefully in its context to be sure it really contains the truth you wish to preach about. Identify the truth, roughly formulate the truth, write down the purpose(s) to be achieved. Be clear what the general subject or idea is. Then commit the sermon to God and to the subconscious (the back burner). Jones is following Graham Wallas' four stages of creative thought:

"conscious preparation, unconscious incubation, flash of illumination, conscious verification."

He points out that relaxation is essential for subconscious work. Jones advises the carrying of a notebook in order to catch every flash of illumination, every "eureka" moment.

Stage 2 - Browse in your library and gather material; then brood over the material. Cross-examine yourself. For example, ask yourself, "what does this mean?" or "so what?"; "who cares?" and "what's the point?" Collect all sorts of material and remember brooding involves both the conscious and the sub-conscious aspects of the mind. It is better to brood for three separate half hours than one long three hour period. It is the number of different times you apply the conscious mind which counts more than the amount of time.

Stage 3 - Settle upon a specific subject, theme and purpose, then make a tentative outline. Nail the subject down, formulate the precise theme. One truth per sermon. Make an outline. Experiment with several outlines. Now invent – put in original material or at least present familiar material in an original way.

Stage 4 - Make a complete, detailed outline of the sermon. Also make an outline of the introduction and the conclusion. Be ruthless in selecting and discarding material. Go over the outline several times, eliminating and rearranging. Talk the outline aloud. Fill in the outline with illustrations and other material.

Stage 5 - Write out the sermon in full at one sitting. Writing is essential because it gives precision, balance, control of length and familiarity. Usually one full writing and a pencil revision is enough. Time spent in writing is time well spent. Jones had all this done by noon on Saturday.

Stage 6 - Give the sermon a final check and prepare yourself to preach it. Read and revise the manuscript. Rethink the sermon in the light of the congregation. Get into the mood of the sermon. Then commit one's self and the sermon to God.

In chapter nine of his book, Jones specifically writes about the construction of introductions and conclusions, because in his opinion they are the weakest and most easily ruined parts of sermons. They in fact carry disproportionate weight for they are the first and last impressions which make or break a sermon.

He says the purposes of the introduction are to arouse the interest of the hearer, be an appetiser for the coming spiritual food, to gain the good will of the hearer by overcoming any reluctance and to let the hearer know what the forthcoming sermon is about. Don't ask the hearer to go on a blind journey – give him a clue as to where we are going. People like gradual approaches e.g. preludes, prefaces and porches. John Oman said:

“...even if your subject needs no introduction, your audience does....”

Someone else said:

“An introduction to a sermon should be just that”

Jones goes on to state five specific parts of an introduction. He likes to start with the text. Then there is the subject or theme. He says that before the end of the introduction people should know what you are going to talk about, but not what you are going to say about it. Preachers, he says, should explain the context of the text or briefly state the theme and then show how the text is fitting. It is also important to indicate the relevance and importance of the subject to contemporary life, saying in effect: “Dear hearer, this is important to you, because...” Most important of all perhaps is to use a variety of interesting and arresting material e.g. an incident from real life or literature; a brief story; an aphorism; a quotation; a news item; a poem; a hymn; a problem or difficulty; a question; a reference to a conversation etc. Of course you can achieve variety partly by shifting the sequence of these five component parts. The importance of a good beginning can hardly be overemphasised. Use shock tactics if necessary, he advises. Give an unexpected twist at the outset. Practice variety! He also counsels preachers to be brief, to the point, specific, concrete and direct. His sequence of preparation is to work out his plan for the sermon, fix his goals, write the introduction then write the rest of the sermon.

Jones thinks that next to introductions, conclusions are the most vital parts of sermons. They are not additions but organic parts of sermons. Conclusions gather up the various ideas and impressions of the message for one final impact on the minds and hearts of the hearers.

The purposes of conclusions, in his opinion are (1) to bring the sermon to an effective close i.e. to stop it in the right way at the right time; (2) to apply the truth to the hearers' lives; (3) to lay the truth on the hearer's consciences and show the hearers what the truth demands of them; (4) to touch people's intellects, wills and emotions and so move the hearers to action, for the preacher is always out for a verdict, a commitment, a choice and an action.

As with introductions, Jones identifies five component parts of conclusions. There needs to be a proper transition tying the conclusion to the body of the sermon, such as a pause, a vocal inflection, a change of pace, a couple of words e.g. “and so”, “therefore”, “so”, “surely then” etc. Make some reference to the truth just unfolded in the sermon – restate the subject in a single, brief, comprehensive sentence, giving a resume. Drive the truth home and clinch it. Use a variety of material to persuade the hearers to accept the truth and to do something about it. Remember also to be personal making each listener feel: “I mean you!” Finish with a strong concluding sentence, usually one of your own rather than a quotation because YOU are speaking directly, and vary it of course.

Jones advises taking plenty of time to carefully prepare the conclusion. He says (p166):

“Before the sermon is put into final form, determine the purpose of the conclusion.

But do not draft it until the body of the sermon is finished.”

Do not use new ideas in the conclusion, just reinforce and bring to a focus what has already been said. Make the conclusion brief and pointed. Make the conclusion positive for it ought to stimulate people to follow their noblest impulses and resolutions (p167):

“Send the people out with the thrill of determination, decision, exaltation, and hope. In effect, every conclusion ought to say to each hearer: ‘Arise, shine; for your light has come.’ (Isa.60.1)”

Jones quotes Clovis G Chappell:

“No man has a right so to preach as to send his hearers away on flat tires.

Every discouraging sermon is a wicked sermon.”

Jones also warns: don’t apologise; don’t use humour; don’t use distracting material; don’t play with you glasses or hankie; don’t look at your watch; don’t lose eye contact with the people (so memorise the conclusion); don’t let anything divert your attention or the attention of the hearers and always know where and how you are going to stop.

Make it the conclusion to the whole sermon, not just a part of it. Vary the types of conclusions.

Both in introductions and conclusions, outwit and surprise anyone who dares to say they know what you are going to say and how you are going to say it!

Samuel McComb in “Preaching in Theory and Practice” also has some wise words on sermon construction. He says, begin early in the week (p38):

“...real sermons are growths not manufactured articles”

The sermon is the first priority after all. (p40):

“The best sermons are those which grow out of a great text or theme that has seized your mind and will not let it go until you have uttered its message.”

Have a cooker of sermons on the boil. Find a suitable text – one which awakens the curiosity of the hearer and gives the sermon the authority of the Bible. It will also help unity and progress. Treat the text with respect for all sound preaching rests on sound exegesis. The text must not be torn from its context but must be illuminated by it. Begin by trying to understand the text, then collect materials on your subject. Do a lot of hard thinking, until the plan of the sermon begins to take shape. Beware of plagiarism and beware also of originality. Do not overuse quotations. Use illustrations, indeed cultivate a parabolic mind. Life and the Bible are full of illustrations.

McComb continues by stressing the need for a good plan and structure for it is the backbone of a sermon. Revise the structure as often as required. The order need not always be obvious. Dr.

Johnson said:

“The divisions not only help the memory of the hearer but direct the judgment of the writer; they supply sources of invention and keep every part in its proper place.”

Remember that a listening audience cannot see the paragraphs and punctuation of a script so they need a little help to keep on the path of thought. Remember also (p71):

“The weaker arguments must precede the stronger, tranquil assertions before moving appeals, a quiet argument before an earnest exhortation.”

In chapter 8 McComb summarises the qualities of an effective sermon, saying it must be a unified whole, convey the accent of conviction, contain an exposition of religious ideas, have clarity of thought and expression, have movement and progress and always keep close to the realities of life.

W. E. Sangster in “The Craft of Sermon Construction” also says (p119)

“It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the beginning of the sermon”

Most people give you their attention at the beginning but you have to hold it. He urges preachers to usually start with a text (but just occasionally do not, just to keep variety, or because on rare occasions there is no one short phrase you can quote). He names four common ways in which texts are used in preaching... (1) pure exposition of the text i.e. making the meaning clear and showing how it relates to the people’s lives, (2) an important subject is suggested by the text, (3) using a text legitimately out of context – getting a twenty first century meaning out of a first century passage and sadly, (4) blatant mishandling of Scripture.

He says the start is determined by the method you are going to employ. If, for example, you are going to employ persuasive argument you might start by saying in effect, “we are going there, come with me”. Always keep some element of surprise. Begin or end with where the people are at, or both. Arguably never lose touch with where they are at. There is a problem in every pew so face them one by one. Grab people’s attention, meet their needs and stay close to where they are at. On the other hand beware of being too humanistic (p132):

“Preaching is never Christian preaching if it does not centre in God and in His disclosure of Himself in Jesus.”

Beware also of over-doing people’s personal problems; you can be too heavy too long. Sangster says that the introduction should be brief, interesting and arresting.

Sangster also quips that every sermon should not only have a subject but also an object, an aim (p136):

“aim to do something quite precise, something that can be written out in a few plain words before the immediate preparation of the sermon begins.”

He says that if you stop the preacher on the way to church he or she should be able to tell you what he/she is trying to do....and if you stop the congregation on the way home, they should be able to tell you what they have done. Everything leads up to the conclusion. Know your conclusion before you start your introduction i.e. know your target before you pull the bow-string. Conclusions, unlike beginnings, are often too short.

There are various kinds of conclusions such as (1) recapitulation (usually used in sermons which argue a case), (2) application (making the theory practical), (3) demonstration (showing how to), (4) illustration (an example) and (5) peroration (“working yourself up “ into a rhetorical flourish. Peroration is a bad thing but the end should be a genuine climax, the high point of the sermon (p149):

“when the conclusion of the whole is reached, it should conclude *the whole*. The relations of the earlier points must be shortly and skilfully tied up with the last one. The people must see that it is a whole.”

Do not announce that you are concluding, except in very rare occasions, and do not introduce new material into a conclusion. Then, having come to the end, stop.

W.E.Sangster has some very interesting points to make regarding sermon preparation. He says that preaching teaches us how to preach. Practice and reflection help us approach closer to perfection.

Like golfers, do your practice on the practice areas and don't practice during the competitive round. Preaching involves both indirect and direct preparation. Indirect preparation refers to all of a preacher's life, daily devotions and systematic study of the Bible and theology (p157):

“The preacher will be that rarest of men – a thinker. He will not be just a wide reader, peddling other people's thoughts. After his devotions, the best hour of his day will be the hour given to sheer thinking:”

Your own thinking is the most valuable thing, he says. Wrestle with God.

Direct preparation includes the preacher choosing a theme, a passage, an analogy, a doctrinal task etc. but sometimes it is the other way round and the material chooses the preacher – part or all of a sermon may come in a flash of inspiration. A facet of the truth sparkles and gleams and captures the imagination. Write it down at once in your notebook lest it melt away like a snowflake. The preacher's notebook he also describes as being like a greenhouse full of thoughts like cuttings or a shipyard with many vessels at various stages of construction or again an incubator containing many eggs. D.L.Moody used large envelopes, one envelope per theme rather than a notebook. (Why not use both)? Allow time for the sub-conscious to work.

He says (p166):

“The chief responsibility is God's and if one keeps open to Him, the ideas will flow in.”

Sangster's advice is to start with plenty of time so you can think around the facet of truth and read around it. Ask, “what is the one thing I want to get across?” Think of the congregation. Consider how best to put it over. Pick a good method. Get enthused. Think about the introduction, conclusion and outline. Then write the whole thing out at one go from beginning to end. Just before writing, pause and pray. On pages 171 to 175 of his book, Sangster shows how he puts all his theory to work.

Writing notes in full is helpful but we should not be tied to a manuscript. We should preach to eyes not to pages. Extempore preaching is enhanced by having a manuscript.

“No conscious memorising; no reading in public; write the message out in full when you can, and then lay the manuscript aside; take notes, if you need them, to the pulpit - as few as possible; lift up your heart to God, look the people in the face, and say the word He has given you to speak.” (p178)

He lists some interesting questions for preachers to ask themselves as they construct sermons, like – Is the subject worthy enough? Does my sermon do it justice? Is there something in it for everyone? Has the aim been achieved? Is the style simple, non-technical and non-Canaanitish (i.e. jargon free)? He advises pruning the script with a pencil and working very hard.

Uniquely among the books I have read, Sangster concludes “The Craft of Sermon Construction” with a chapter entitled: “Mistakes Commonly Made”. He says.... Don't lose faith in preaching – just think what God has done for you through preaching and think of what God has done through history by preaching. Having the Holy Spirit and doing hard work are not mutually exclusive. You preach an old Gospel in new ways, not vice versa! Preaching ought to be interesting, not dull. We bring News, not views. Don't parade your learning. Respect the people you preach to, and more than that, love them.

The very last pages of his tremendous book, give some more practical and positive advice. Be loud and clear and unapologetic. Preach to and for the people (not at, under or over them). Be original; don't steal other people's sermons. You can repeat your own sermons but only if the glow remains. Be yourself; don't imitate or envy other preachers. Prepare your heart even more than your words (p203):

“Preparing to preach is not the same as preparing a sermon.”

This chapter is about how to preach in terms of sermon construction. The next chapter deals with how to preach i.e. it gives practical hints and tips. There is so much we might have included in this book in terms of the art of preaching but the parameters of this one book do not allow it. For example, we do not have space here to go into detail about preaching in other ways than by monologue. There are many ways to preach and each requires its own particular techniques and skills but that I leave to another author. For example, preaching can be done in the open air, at weddings, funerals, school assemblies, in homes for the elderly, on television or radio, on the internet, in literary form, using art, drama, music, dialogue sermons, using audio-visual aids such as powerpoint, slides, CDs, videos etc. There are an incredible number of different ways to preach and yet fundamentally it always comes down to the Word of God being communicated from God to one person through the broad band of communication channels with all their different techniques. We also do not have time or space here to make the point that the spoken word from lips to ears in monologue is sacrosanct. No amount of modern sophisticated techniques will ever replace the fundamental fact that words are what make humans unique among all creatures and God Himself chooses to communicate through written and spoken human words and supremely as The Word made flesh. And when the Word (God Himself) was made flesh, He spoke as preacher and teacher as lips to ears, as one voice to two ears, one at a time, even if He was addressing thousands of pairs of ears one at a time simultaneously in a crowd! (Even world-wide simultaneous broadcasts on multi-media to a thousand million people come down to someone speaking and someone hearing and God communicating His divine Word through human words). It is a wonderful miracle and mystery worth meditating upon – especially by preachers who are essential parts of it. However we cannot dwell further on it here and it is far more eloquently and profoundly dealt with by greater scholars than I. May I particularly recommend Karl Barth in this respect, especially his “Church Dogmatics” volumes and, in more condensed form, in his book: “The Word of God and the Word of Man”.

## **10. HOW TO PREACH: PRACTICAL HINTS AND TIPS ON DELIVERY**

No matter how good a sermon is on paper, it needs to be well delivered. Communication is more about the hearer than it is about the speaker. The only point in speaking is to be heard and understood. We could write a book on the art of hearing but for our present purposes we are concentrating on the art of speaking – speaking the Word of God through human words. We want the hearers to hear the Word of God rather than just the words of the preacher. Very good material can be murdered by bad delivery, and fairly poor material on paper can be brought to life by good delivery. George Whitefield, the famous English Methodist preacher, had scripts which in print seemed very dry but once he spoke he could move people to tears and really set the heather on fire. Preachers have a duty, (and a great pleasure), to work hard at the written material and also to work very hard at their delivery skills. H E Fosdick, the great American preacher, said that throughout his ministry he devoted an hour for every minute of delivery! As in every walk of life, we find that the best practitioners are those who put in the longest hours and hardest work. Yes we need God’s call; yes we need God-given gifts; but God also requires man-hours and hard work on our part.

Charles Spurgeon says in “Lectures To My Students” (p70):

“The true value of a sermon must lie, not in its fashion and manner,

but in the truth which it contains.”

However there is no reason why we cannot perfect **both** content and delivery. Many preachers, I suspect, have real hang-ups about working hard at improving their delivery – strange though that may sound! Perhaps they feel like John the Baptist that “He must increase and I must decrease”. Perhaps they are simply nervous and inhibited. Perhaps they want the content alone to have the power of persuasion rather than their “silver tongue” – for no one wants people to be cajoled into the Kingdom of Heaven.

I should say, at the outset, that delivery is not all about words. Experts believe that in a total communication experience, as one person talks to another, only about 7% is got across by the words. The other 93% of communication includes facial expression, eye contact, word colour, tone, volume, gestures, body language etc. What is heard in preaching is also affected by the décor, lighting, temperature, seating, the occasion, the welcome, the size of the congregation, smells, pictures, sounds, the events of the past week, the general mood of the congregation and of the individual. On an even more subliminal wavelength, the attitude, assumptions and mood of the preacher also affect what is heard. Preaching is theatre in this respect. Worship is drama. The literal, physical context is important (i.e. the building) and so too are the metaphysical aspects (i.e. what is going on in the hearts and minds of the preacher and hearers). So preachers can improve their preaching considerably, without changing a word of their script, if they improved all these other contributory factors!

Some preachers and some congregations like “high Church” atmospheres while others like “low Church” ones. Each to their own, horses for courses. The problem of course is that most congregations are made up of a mixture of people and preferences and it is hard to please all the people all the time. It would however help if more preachers and more congregations thought about these matters. Let me stir the pot a little further and tease with the thought: why should the surroundings always be the same? Why not alter the surroundings all the time to suit different themes and aims? We change the scenery of the set at Harvest by adding a display and at Christmas we have huge trees and gaudy decorations! Why then not have Easter decorations such as a life-sized cross and appropriate accompanying symbols e.g. hammer, nails, dice, crown of thorns, red robe, bowl of water, bread, wine etc.? (I got the local undertaker to make me an old rugged cross and I got a pair of larger than life dice out of a car accessory shop)! Why not play with the dimmer switch or use a spotlight (e.g. on a Christmas star) and explore the possibilities of direct and indirect lighting? On Christmas Eve we dim the lights progressively just before the sermon and switch them all on quickly after the midnight prayer. There is a whole world of bright ideas in this regard, but we can only focus here on the narrower sense of delivery, namely the spoken words of the preacher. So, let us gather some useful hints and tips from some of the great past master preachers.

First, a timely reminder from James S Stewart who says in “Heralds of God” (p104) that we should beware of any person who announces a course on “How to Preach: By One Who Knows” and adds:

“No man knows how to preach. You will have to reckon with this significant, disconcerting fact, that the greatest preachers who have ever lived have confessed themselves poor bunglers to the end, groping after an ideal which eluded them for ever. When you have been preaching for twenty years, you will be beginning to realize how incalculably much there is to learn. There will be days when the Socratic knowledge of your ignorance will desolate and overwhelm you. Even if Providence should spare you to this work for fifty years, your thought will be, as the gloaming closes in around you, ‘If only I could start all over again now!’”

We learn to preach mostly from actually preaching, and the learning on the job – literally in-service training – never ceases! Illion Jones reminds us in the preface to “Principles and Practice of Preaching” that:

“Like all other skills, preaching skill is achieved and retained by hard work, self-discipline, continuous practice, and regular revision of procedures.”

Thorvaldsen the famous sculptor said:

“I must be going downhill, when I find my work equal to my aspirations.”

So beware of “rusting on our laurels” as Walter Winchell used to say!

There are basically four methods of delivery.

(1) **PREACHING WITHOUT NOTES.** Complete impromptu preaching is not to be recommended. Lack of preparation simply spells disaster. However, after thorough preparation and a full written script, we can be free to let the word come impromptu. If lawyers, politicians and broadcasters can speak on their feet, so too can ministers. It is a priceless gift from God but it can be cultivated by us. This has been done throughout the ages by prophets, apostles and Jesus Himself. It is very powerful communication when someone fixes their eyes on you and talks eyeball to eyeball, heart to heart and there is nothing interposed between speaker and hearer. It calls for skill and courage on the part of the preacher. You have to have confidence and you have to know your material very well. Spurgeon used to say that to be able to overflow spontaneously, we have to be very full! Busy preachers do not have very much time to write original material and rehearse it so thoroughly that they can say it without reference to some notes. It can backfire when done badly and it can come across as too “cocky” or self-confident if done “too well”. (Sometimes at funerals I force myself to look down at the Bible when I am reading Psalm 23. I could recite it but I am supposed to be reading it and I don’t want to appear to be too much the “clever-clogs”). On the other hand, we don’t want the congregation spending the sermon time wondering: “will he/she or won’t he/she remember it all?” rather than focussing on what is being said. Many a wedding speech is ruined by over-reaching ambition to speak without notes! Anyway, there are no prizes for succeeding in speaking without notes. It requires very special and rare skills and it necessitates very thorough thinking beforehand. I suspect that very few important speeches are devised entirely while the speaker is on their feet. What is more likely is that there are moments when Ictharus soars skywards off the written notes on an upward draught of eloquent extempore speech for a brief flurry until he is dazzled and falls rapidly back to script again! In “Lectures To My Students” (p132), Charles Spurgeon warns us not to speak off the top of our heads:

“The best method is, in my judgment, that in which the man does not extemporise the matter, but extemporises the words; the language comes to him at the moment, but the theme has been well thought out.”

He adds (p135):

“Spend more time in the study that you may need less time in the pulpit. We are generally longest when we have least to say.”

(2) **PREACHING FROM MEMORY** i.e. write out the sermon in full, memorise it, then preach it exactly as written. This is a very rare style which may suit some people but generally it falls foul of most of the above criticisms. Why spend an incredible amount of time and effort achieving this unnecessary feat? It is even harder than speaking without notes and it ties the preacher in an even tighter straight-jacket. It has the inherent danger of making the preacher more preoccupied with the task of memorising than with the relationship with the congregation which is so essential for good communication. It precludes the preacher responding to the silent congregation’s feedback. Even monologue speaking has a degree of dialogue and inter-action with the audience involved. You can see or at least intuit if they

are interested or bored, understanding or not, agreeing or not. Speakers worth their salt make minor adjustments all the time in this respect.

(3) **PREACHING FROM A MANUSCRIPT.** This has never been very popular, and yet some very famous preachers have preached from full verbatim manuscripts. The skill is to be able to say every word on the script without seeming to be reading. Past masters include Farrar, Edwards, Jowett, Chalmers. I confess that I use a full verbatim manuscript myself and usually stick pretty well to the text of it. However I am master of it and not slave to it. I do allow myself to fly off and on to the perches as the Holy Spirit inspires me. In public speaking there is a spectrum

## **11. CHECKLIST FOR ANALYSING WORSHIP/PREACHING**

Here are two checklists in fact, a longer one and a summary one. They apply to worship in general and preaching in particular. They are useful for analysing other people's worship leading and also for analysing our own efforts. Analysing is not the exclusive domain of the critical worshippers who fill our churches. It is an essential part of our maintaining the highest professional standards. In every walk of life the best people plan, execute then assess...continuously. The quest for perfection is never-ending. Everyone can make up their own analysis sheet since everyone has their own priorities, but here is my checklist for what it is worth. I hope it will stimulate you to make up and use your own one. Even the checklist itself is subject to continuous and never-ending improvement, so treat it as a starting point rather than the definitive, final word on the matter. I shall simply list them in their A5 and A4 formats and then explain them in more detail after that.

### Summary Checklist for Analysing Worship/Preaching.

Service No.:

Date:

Place:

Occasion:

Worship Leader(s):

Overall Effect: Atmosphere Décor Mood (Joyful, Thoughtful...) Participation

Movement Music Symbols Comfort Levels

Modern/Traditional

Formal - Informal

Intimate – Remote

Culture/Context

Intellect Emotion Imagination Will

Language: fluency sensitivity

Body Language

Movement (Progress)

Plot (Connected sequence, pearls on string)

Unity of Theme

Concrete Imagery Parabolic Mental Slides/Paintings

Specific (not just general)

Real

Model of Worship: Sacerdotal Mystic Sacramental Proclamatory Charismatic Liberationist

Experimental

Adoration Confession Assurance of Forgiveness Petition

Thanksgiving Intercession

Milk or Meat  
Human Centred God Centred Jesus Centred  
Omissions

### Checklist for Analysing Worship/Preaching

Service No.:  
Date:  
Time:  
Place:  
Occasion:  
Worship Leader(s)  
Comments about the Congregation: e.g. Number Age range Quiet – Noisy Sitting together or apart Strangers or Well Known  
Overall Effect: Atmosphere Décor Mood (joyful, thoughtful, emotional etc.)  
Mood at start and at finish  
Participation Movement Music Symbols Comfort Levels  
Main Items: Hymns Prayers Talk Readings Sermon Special Items  
The Order of Service  
Sermon: Expository Devotional Pastoral Ethical Social Psychological Evangelical  
Emotional Educational Apologetical Theological Life-situational Doxological  
Eschatological  
Modern – Traditional  
High Church – Low Church  
Liberal – Evangelical – Other  
Formal – Informal  
Intimate – Remote  
Familiar – Unfamiliar  
Abstract – Concrete  
Spectator – Participatory  
Did the style match the worshippers, the building, the occasion?  
Culture/Context Was it relevant? Did it relate the Bible and Life to each other? How was Christ and Culture related? - e.g. Christ v Culture Christ of Culture Christ and Culture Christ above Culture Christ Transforming Culture  
Intellect Emotion Imagination Will What did you come away thinking, feeling, seeing, wanting to do?  
What was expected of the hearers?  
Language: fluency sensitivity  
Body Language  
Movement (Progress)  
Plot (Connected sequence, pearls on string)  
Concrete Imagery Parables Mental Slides/Paintings  
Specific (not just general)  
Real  
Model of Worship: What were the main models of worship?  
Sacerdotal Mystic Sacramental Proclamatory Charismatic  
Liberationist Experimental

Adoration Confession Assurance of Forgiveness Petition

Thanksgiving Intercession

Milk or Meat

Unity of Theme: What was the service about in a nutshell?

Human Centred Jesus Centred God Centred How was God addressed/thought about?

Omissions

Now for a more detailed explanation of the checklist.

I number every service I do for easy reference and as a help when selecting a sermon to preach. I believe strongly, on principle, that sermons are not one-off bridal dresses but Shakespearian plays which are so rich that they can be experienced many times over. Sermons are not one-off expendable rockets but re-usable shuttles. It is bad stewardship to have to invent the wheel twice. Above all, why should God the giver of inspiration, have to duplicate His work and have to tell us everything many times over?

### ***The Overall Effect***

It is important to gauge the overall effect as well as assess each item in detail just as it is important to study the wood as a whole as well as the individual trees. In other words there is the macrocosmic picture as well as the microcosmic picture. In the same way, a thumb can be analysed as part of the hand which is part of the arm which is part of the body (i.e. contextually) and it can also be analysed as consisting of skin, bone and nail (i.e. according to its constituents). Similarly, worship items make up a worship act and individual worshippers become a corporate worshipping body.

The overall effect can be assessed in various ways. For example, what was the general atmosphere like? Some congregations chat a lot before the service starts (and even during its course)! Other congregations sit very quietly. Some atmospheres are monastic while others more like the market place. The atmosphere and the overall effect of the worship is affected by the number of worshippers and the nature of them. We all like to experience a huge football or concert crowd when they are getting excited and we all get a little downhearted when the stadium or concert hall is half empty and the audience lukewarm. It is not all about numbers; it is also about how spirited those who are there are. Nor is it an age thing for some young people can be dead ducks while some old people can be live wires! Different occasions also call for different atmospheres – a funeral as compared with a wedding, Remembrance Sunday or Christmas morning. Sometimes we like fellow worshippers to be serene swans while at other times we would like them to be singing nightingales, thoughtful and wise owls or soaring eagles carried heavenward on flights of spiritual uplift.

The décor contributes to the atmosphere and the overall effect. It feels different sitting in a stained glass cathedral rather than in a bare hall. Some people prefer one while some prefer the other, but certainly they are different. Some cathedrals can be very unholy places and some halls have a wonderful worshipful atmosphere. This is because the décor is only one factor. More important than the external, physical context is the inner hearts and souls of the worshippers. Their mood that morning, their degree of excitement and expectation, and their depths of spirituality all make major contributions to the worship. The worship leader in particular has a big influence on the mood of worship.

If people participate in worship it creates a different effect from passive, spectator worship. Participation can mean responsive prayers, communal singing, reading the Bible reading in your pew Bible or it can mean getting up and leaving your seat and taking communion or reading from

the lectern, drama, worship exercises, testimonies etc. Movement affects people in a way that sitting still does not. Somehow you feel more involved.

Music, both live and recorded, is well known to have a huge contribution to make towards worship moods. Community singing is probably even more conducive of worship than listening to other sing or play instruments. Worship feels very different when it ranges from a frail old organist tentatively and apologetically attempting unsuccessfully to play tracks from crematoria's most obscure and mournful hits to fanfares of trumpets and full pipe organs giving the Hallelujah Chorus or Toccata big licks!

Symbols too can touch and move people and help them to worship. Christmas decorations enhance our celebration of the Incarnation as do harvest displays, palm branches and poppy wreathes at other times of the year.

Moods of course can change from the start of a service to the end of one and indeed they should. What good is it if people go out in the same mood as they came in? Worshipful moods are helped or hindered by where people sit – whether as a holy huddle in a vast cathedral, sitting at the back of the church, under the balcony, behind pillars, at the ends of pews and six feet apart or compactly together at the front in a relatively small arena. Worship is affected by whether the worshippers know each other very well or hardly at all. Usually it enhances worship experience to know your fellow worshippers well. However there are exceptions to this. Some people who know each other well do not like each other and sometimes strangers can bond together surprisingly well and quickly.

Comfort levels are also important. It inhibits worship if people are sitting in very hard pews, behind a large hat, cold, needing to go to the toilet but embarrassed to move!

Churches should be bright and warm and comfortable. Abstract comfort levels are also important. It inhibits worship when you find yourself in an alien atmosphere where obviously everyone else believes things you do not and where others know the ropes while you just get tied in knots with your three hymnbooks, pew Bible, bulletin and pandrops. It also grates when your psychology is out of step with the majority e.g. they are all being clap-happy, extravertly jumping up and down exuding joy while you are introvertly wishing to be a fly on the wall, hiding your lack of coordination and rhythm and feeling blue.

One can measure both the worship service as a whole and the sermon in particular in terms of sliding scales between polar opposites such as –

Modern -----	Traditional
High Church -----	Low Church
Familiar -----	Unfamiliar
Liberal -----	Evangelical
Formal -----	Informal
God addressed intimately ----	God seen as remote
Participatory -----	Spectator
Abstract -----	Concrete Language and Imagery

We can ask some searching questions of both the worship and the sermon itself e.g.

Q. Did the style match the worshippers, the building and the occasion?

This is perhaps best illustrated by bad examples. Imagine a funeral with only four mourners being asked to sing the rousing Easter hymn: "Thine be the Glory!" Think of a wedding in all its grandeur in a leaky, run down old hall. Remember school assemblies with teenage boys whose voices were breaking being forced to sing by the teachers prowling round like prison warders!

Q. Was it milk or meat?

We feed babies milk but adults eat meat. Did the service and the sermon in particular give the congregation something to get their teeth into or was it easy feeding because that is all the worship leader thought they could stomach? Beware of patronising the congregation! Even worse, is to discover that either or both the preacher and the congregation are simply shallow. The sheep look up to be fed spiritual food; woe to the shepherds who do not or can not feed them manna from heaven.

Q. Was it specific and not just general?

Many services and sermons float aimlessly like a wispy cloud on a windless day. They never come down to earth and they do not go anywhere. What is the point? After all is said and done, what does it amount to? Did it not address and focus on something definite?

Q. Was it real?

Worship ought to be thoroughly real. The real, living God is truly here relating to real human beings in real human predicaments. Jesus then and now addresses real lives and real needs and answers real questions. He hated artificiality then and he does still. Worship ought to articulate heart-felt inner longings and it ought to express God's living Word. It is live human-Divine communication.

Q. What was expected of the hearers?

At the end of the sermon and the service as a whole, what was expected of you the hearer. One famous minister in Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, Rev. Dr. Bryant Kirkland said to me that he always liked to finish a sermon by asking the people to go and do something. One day he said to his congregation:

“Today, at the back of the church, on your way out, you will find a family of Vietnamese boat people, refugees; I want you to adopt them and look after them.”

And they did! It will not always be so dramatic, but worship should lead naturally to action. God is not satisfied with mere lip service. Praise should issue in service. We do not have to spell everything out in infinite detail and leave the hearers with no personal discretion; but we can do much more than leave people floating about in generalities and nice feelings but with no idea what to do about them. This is why I like the intimations near the end of the service and under the heading “Response to the Word”. They spell out practical alternatives for those who want to respond practically to the worship.

Q. Was there unity of theme? What was the service about in a nutshell?

Did the service focus on one, easily identifiable theme. Did it stick to the theme and did it develop the theme progressively. Or did it wander about all over the place. Was it a whole bunch of loose pearls or was it a connected necklace with all the pearls connected by a common thread? Too many random items just bamboozles the poor hearers but one theme with variations means that they can wander from the path but find their way back on to it again and it also means that they can go away and develop the theme in their own minds at their own speed and in their own ways making their own applications.

Q. How was Christ and Culture related?

There are roughly five main ways in which Christ and Culture, Church and State, Sacred and Secular, Kingdom of God and kingdoms of men can be related:

1. Christ versus Culture: where the Kingdom of God is seen as diametrically opposed to the kingdoms of this earth. “My ways are not your ways” says

god in Isaiah 55 v 8. More than that, there is friction and conflict between the opposite outlooks.

2. Christ above Culture: where there is not a battle of opposites but a kind of “pax Romana” because Christ rules over our cultural elements. The spiritual always takes precedence over the earthly.
3. Christ and Culture: though they are different things, they can live in harmony and co-operation with mutual respect and complementarity.
4. Christ of Culture: After all isn't this Christ's world? Why then make great play about sacred and secular distinctions?
5. Christ transforming Culture: Christ came into the world to save sinners; so his Church goes into all the world to spread this Good News and to reflect Christ's light in a world of darkness and sin. The aim is not to condemn but to have Christ convert, change, transform culture.

Q. What were the main models of worship? [7 Models]

As a tutor for Scottish Churches Open College I learned about seven such models of worship, from the teaching handbook, written by Eric Stoddart and Elizabeth Templeton.

1. The Sacerdotal Model: which relies heavily on the one person worship leader who controls everything. The person in question must be properly qualified to do the job. They are standing as today's equivalent of the Old Testament priest. Indeed, as worship leader, they are representing Christ THE Worship Leader.
2. The Sacramental Model: God gives us special “means of grace” such as the Lord's Supper and Baptism to help us to worship Him. The bread, wine and water are not special in themselves, nor do they become suddenly or magically something special but they are used by God to really touch us. A wedding ring is just a piece of ordinary metal, and always remains so, but when it is part of a marriage worship service and it conveys, expresses and is tangible proof of both human and divine love it becomes special in that sense. A decorative cross, stained glass, harvest display, two minutes silence at Remembrance, a nativity scene etc. can all be ordinary things which God uses to make us aware of His presence with us and love for us. The Church itself can be such a means of grace.
3. The Mystical Model: It is hard to pin down in precise words, but somehow in worship we glimpse, taste, experience a little of the union we are destined to fully have with God in eternity. The Lord's Supper on Sunday is a foretaste of the ultimate eternal banquet and fellowship in Heaven. Worship is understood in terms of our oneness with God and His people. In practice mystical worship often prefers silence to limited words, or it may soar into speaking in tongues (glossalalia) when normal words fail.
4. The Proclamatory Model: Probably most worshippers use this model most often. It is worship centered around hearing the Word of God. We approach the Word in hymn and prayer; hear the Word through the Bible readings and sermon; and respond to the Word by giving our offerings, praying and singing hymns. Since Old Testament times, God-ordained prophets and priests, preachers and

worship leaders have proclaimed the Good News. Through their human words God has communicated His Divine Word.

5. The Liberationist Model: God is a God of action as well as words. He is known by His mighty deeds. Jesus not only talked big, He backed every claim up with miracles e.g. saying “I am the bread of life” when He had fed 5,000 plus people from one picnic box! So, worship is not confined to Church buildings and fine words but also includes liberation of people from their sins and from their daily problems. God rescued the Israelites from Egypt and He still helps the poor today. Worship is designed to energising us for action.
6. The Charismatic Model: is not confined to Pentecostal churches. There are charismatics across the denominations. It is worship spontaneously guided by the Holy Spirit rather than set in fixed order (by the Holy Spirit). People (ie. anyone not just official worship leaders) are encouraged to participate as and when they feel led by the Spirit. They might clap hands, sing, dance, speak in tongues, give testimonies, have healing etc.
7. Experimental Models: by which I cover all the other many different models of worship. Why should worship be much the same every time? God is a Creator of such diversity, surely we would honour Him (and excite ourselves) by rejoicing in new explorations of forms of worship. Worship should relate to the life of the worshippers which itself is fast changing. Use people’s symbols, music, idioms and stories. Use their language and reflect their life-styles; answer their particular questions and address their specific needs.

Q. How would you analyse the worship psychologically?

Carl Jung the famous psychologist sub-divided people into four rough categories. Truth be told we each have all four aspects to our characters but we have them to varying degrees and one of them will be our favourite wavelength and way of relating to the world around us. His four categories are:

- (1) Reasoning - “head” people who prefer thinking things through
- (2) Feeling – “heart” people who go more by their feelings and emotions
- (3) Intuiting – “hunch” people who back their instincts and inclinations
- (4) Sensing – “touchy-feely” people who relate to the world through their five senses.

Obviously we all have elements of all four, but we each have unique combinations of preferences and we each have our favourite ones. Any act of worship will involve some or all of these to varying degrees so that any act of worship could be analysed in this psychological way. Remember of course that even the same act of worship might be perceived differently psychologically by different people because we are all different.

Q. Was it Human centred, God centred or Jesus centred? How was God addressed and thought about?

Christian worship is only Christian when it is Christ-centred. We worship Christ. We worship the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who has chosen to reveal Himself as Christ Jesus, Baby of Bethlehem, Carpenter of Nazareth, Crucified and Risen. Sadly, worship often fails this test and therefore is at best insignificant and at worst displeasing to God. It is a great sin to offer God unsuitable sacrifices like Cain and it is a great injustice when the hungry sheep look up and are not

fed. Our primary responsibility as worship leaders is to make sure that in word and spirit, content and style, in every way it is Christ filled, Christ saturated, Christ inspired, Christ honouring, Christ centred worship. We are not mere deists or theists, God worshippers. The God we worship is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit God who has revealed Himself once and for all, uniquely as Jesus. This question and test of worship is by far the most important test of any act of worship. This question is different by kind (not just by degree) from all the other questions. The who, why, what, when, where and how of worship is answered in the beginning, middle and end by “Jesus”.

Q. Were there any significant omissions?  
What is left out can be as significant as what is put in!

## ***The Ingredients***

Having thought of the overall effect of worship, the wood if you like, now let’s look at the trees, the detailed picture. We switch from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic level.

### Music and Hymns

Music and Hymns play a vital part in setting and maintaining the worship. Music is involved even before the official start. When does worship start? –is a good discussion. Safe to say, it starts before the call to worship. One of my pet hates is organ playing on Sunday mornings which puts one in mind of the crematorium. We should be rejoicing to go to the House of the Lord. It would be appropriate to be greeted with fanfares of trumpets! Instead we get a tentative tinkling of the keys in supposedly “reverential” musaque! Organists often do better on the way out, playing “uplifting” music to send the people on their way, as they would see it. It is not unknown for the saints to go marching out to the strains of the Hallelujah Chorus or Widor’s Toccata. Why then can’t they rouse them on the way in? I once was reprimanded by a High School headmaster in his office for “rousing the students and getting them so high that they took ages to calm down.” In his considered opinion, it was not “the job of the minister to come into school first thing in the morning and rouse the pupils”. I suggested that given the pupils in question – 300 teenagers, first thing in the morning, who generally approached “boring” school assemblies with the enthusiasm of prisoners attending crochet classes – it could be construed as quite an achievement! Religion is not meant to be the “opium of the people”. Sunday worship ought to rouse us!

There are also questions about both hymns and music such as:

- Q. Did they follow unity of theme (and the same theme as the sermon)?
- Q. Did they complement each other or clash with each other?
- Q. Were they modern or traditional or a mixture?
- Q. Were they well known to the congregation or new to them?
- Q. Did they communicate the Good News or were they poor words?
- Q. Were they too long?

Remember that all church music does not have to be organ music. Was there a range of types of music and types of instruments? Did they complement each other and also add to the overall worship?

### Prayers

Nothing is more worshipful than praying. This is the core miracle of the Christian life – direct access to the living God! We enjoy a foretaste of eternity, communion with God and His people.

We are allowed into the “Holy of Holies” – we are allowed, not second hand through someone else. We are enjoying quality time with Jesus our God - Him Himself, not some appointed underling to represent Him. This is what it is all about for now and for eternity! And it is happening right now! The question of the worship assessment is: well, is it happening? It is hard to define but you know when it clicks and you know when it does not. The “x” factor is what makes any relationship – we talk about the “chemistry” or the “bond” between people – and it is even more true for our divine-human relationship. Nothing beats worshipful fellowship involving God, others and oneself. That trinity is the fundamental building block. So we may ask of the prayers, questions such as:

- Q. Were we communing with God?
- Q. Did the prayers touch the imagination, intellect, emotion and will?
- Q. Was there all the ingredients of Adoration, Confession, Assurance of Forgiveness, Petition, Thanksgiving and Intercession?
- Q. Were the prayers participatory or passively listening to another?
- Q. Were people really praying or just listening to prayers?
- Q. Were the prayers monologues or did they involve multiple voices or were there responsive prayers?
- Q. Were the prayers ad lib or written? Could you tell?
- Q. Were the prayers contemporary or did they represent prayer down the ages?
- Q. Were they general or specific?...formal or informal?...intimate or remote?
- Q. Were they full of jargon or in palatable English?
- Q. Were they full of concrete imagery and imaginative mental pictures?
- Q. Was there an almost tangible devotional quality?
- Q. Did you feel that the person praying at the front was like Moses “face to face with God” and you up the mountain with them?

## Talk

It is good to talk to the children who are there. They appreciate the attention. The adults also like the talk and as minister I feel it gives an extra dimension to the worship. It is good to have a lighter part to a service which otherwise might be very heavy and serious. For that reason I like to have a talk even when there are no children present. It is also a good way of re-iterating the theme of the sermon in another way, usually a simpler way. It is also a celebration of all ages together. There are not too many opportunities for all ages to share in the same experience together. When analysing talks the following questions can be revealing:

- Q. Was it a talk to the children, to the adults or to all ages?
- Q. Was it patronising or did it speak to children as children and adults as adults?
- Q. Was it on the same theme as the rest of the service, particularly the sermon?
- Q. Was there a proper balance of gimmick and serious point?
- Q. Was it participatory?
- Q. Was it story-telling, question and answer, activity or object learning?

## Readings

- Q. Which translation was used?
- Q. Who read? Worship leader? Office-bearer? One of a rota? Members?
- Q. Was there a reading from the Old Testament/ Epistles/ Gospels?
- Q. Were the readings too long or too short or just right?
- Q. Were they read well? With good eye contact? With good word colour?
- Q. Was the reading loud enough? Passionate enough?
- Q. Was it reading or whole being communication?
- Q. Were the passages selected the most appropriate to the theme?

## Special Items

Special items can include for example: choir anthems, drama, movement, dance, dedication of items, new hymns, responsive prayers, slides, powerpoint presentations, presentations of certificates or gifts, silence, clapping, testimony, healing, carrying flags, laying wreaths, nativity plays etc. When analysing any particular act of worship you could ask questions such as:

- Q. What special items were there?
- Q. Were they appropriate?
- Q. Did they fit the theme and help progress the theme?
- Q. Were they well received by the congregation?
- Q. Did they take over the service or did they serve it?
- Q. Did they promote worship?

## The Sermon

- Q. Did it come in the middle with response to the Word to follow or was it the climax and finale which the rest of the service led up to?
- Q. How long was it, not in terms of minutes, but in terms of whether it felt very long or very short or just right?
- Q. Did it feel like a monologue or a dialogue?
- Q. Was it full of parables, illustrations, concrete imagery?
- Q. Was it a Word from the Lord? Or Was it just the preacher's own views?
- Q. Was it loud, clear, easy to understand, interesting, stimulating?
- Q. What type of sermon was it? – Apologetical, Theological, Doxological, Psychological, Educational, Ethical, Life-situational, Evangelical, Pastoral, Devotional, Eschatological, Social?
- Q. Was it part of a series of sermons?
- Q. What was the theme?
- Q. Did it stir the intellect? Arouse the emotions? Capture the imagination? Activate the will? Was it likely to win the soul?
- Q. Did it both comfort and challenge?
- Q. Was it Christ-centred?

We could in fact ask all the questions that we asked of the whole service in both the checklists at the beginning of this chapter.

## **12. KEEPING RECORDS**

It is important to keep records of your sermons and services for several reasons. For one thing it is very convenient to have full records when you need to preach a sermon again. Why should a God-given inspiration be used only once like a disposable razor blade? If it is good material then surely good stewardship demands its maximum use. Do not bury talents nor bury sermons. Do not consign them to wastepaper baskets nor commit them "dust to dust" unopened on bookshelves for eternity!

It is also important to keep records of sermons and orders of services so that you can periodically check that you are not over-preaching some things nor under-preaching other things. A quick check over the past year's services will reveal major omissions and developing hobby-horses. You can then take steps to bring some balance into the worshippers' diets. This will of course also have the advantage of stretching you and your repertoire of dishes. It is a poor chef who only serves up

chef's special dishes. Keeping records of which hymns were sung can help make sure that a wide variety of hymns are used. Otherwise you would be amazed how narrow the repertoire can get.

Keeping records also saves you having to invent the wheel every time. Every year we have Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Harvest etc. Why should busy preachers always have to start from scratch looking for themes, hymns, illustrations, prayers etc.? If we do that it is very likely that the same person under the same pressure looking at the same challenge will come up with much the same answers. You could find yourself looping the loop on a very shallow level. Why not build on previous year's experiences, layer upon layer? Build up a stock of Harvest ideas, hymns, items etc. My Old Testament professor, John Gray, said to us on the first day that we would cover the whole Old Testament in the first year of studies; then, in the second year we would cover the whole O.T. again...in greater depth of course; and if we stayed on for a third year, we would study the whole O.T. in even greater depth. Why not do that with the yearly cycle of preaching?

Keeping records also has the advantage that you can quickly look at what you did on previous occasions and you can often see what you omitted or something you could develop further. The past can be a great help to the future (as any historian will tell you). Anything which can give you a head start is to be welcomed.

So, practically how do I keep my records? Everyone has to work out their own systems because we are all different personalities and we are all in different circumstances. However, for what it is worth, here is a glimpse into my own system.

I keep the following records:

(1) I keep a master list of all my sermons in this form:

<u>Service</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Occasion</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Comments</u>
No. 1	"In the Beginning"	New Year	Begin with God	2 Baptisms

(2) I also keep a list like that for each congregation I have been minister of: e.g.

<u>Rothienorman Parish Church</u>				
24.10.99.	Prayer	Listening to God	No.488	Devotional Prayer
31.10.99.	Harvest	Practical Thanksgiving	No.701	All-Age Participation Harvest
7.11.99.	Communion	Water into Wine	No.366	Expository Communion
17.11.99.	Remembrance	Sacrificial Love	No.451	Theological Service

(3) I also keep a record of each individual service like this:

<u>245. WHERE IS GOD?</u>		<u>EPIPHANY</u>
HYMNS – 15	We Love the Place O God	Genesis 28.10-19
417	God is Always Near Me	Psalms 139.5-12
34	Lord of All Being Throned Afar	John 14.1-6,18-20,25-29
336	Our Blest Redeemer	1 <sup>st</sup> .Prayer: No 245
SGP 101	The God of Heaven is Present	2 <sup>nd</sup> .Prayer: No.245

Preached: St.Andrew's Church, Glasgow 16. 1. 03

(4) There is a list of Special Services and Themes and the numbers of the sermons which I preached on them:

NEW YEAR - Nos. 70, 110, 155, 196, 239, 284, 333 etc.

EPIPHANY - Nos. 71, 111, 334, 416

Etc.

PENTECOST –

TRINITY –

Etc.

CHRISTMAS DAY -

LAST SUNDAY OF YEAR –

Plus THEMES;

AUTHORITY - Nos. 15, 118, 699

BLESSINGS – Nos. 26, 89

CREATION – Nos. 58, 124, 506, 623

DOUBTS – Nos. 45, 79, 146, 408

Etc.

(5) Hymns are recorded by noting the month in which they were sung:

<u>HYMNS</u>	<u>WHEN SUNG</u>	
1	O S Jy A	(i.e. October, September, July, August)
2	J M J F Ap	
3	A D D J	

(6) I keep a record of which sermons I have preached in my own congregation:

### ***FYVIE PARISH CHURCH linked with ROTHENORMAN PARISH CHURCH***

<u>Sermon</u>	<u>Preached</u>
1	F R
2	F
3	F R
4	R

(7) Similarly I keep a record of what I have preached in other congregations:

<u>VENUE</u>	<u>SERMON</u>
NEWARTHILL	1, 3, 8, 22, 45
CLELAND	3, 8, 27,
BEECHGROVE	3, 42, 67, 78

(8) I keep a record of the Home Communion services which I do. (They are usually miniature versions of the communion service the previous Sunday):

Laurencecroft Home 23, 57, 89, 102, 156, 180

Mrs. Smith 23, 89, 156, 180

Mr.& Mrs. Bloggs 23, 57, 102, 180

(9) Baptismal Record:

<b>DATE</b>	<b>PLACE</b>	<b>SERMON</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>ADULT/INF</b>	<b>ADDRESS</b>	<b>COMMENTS</b>
23.1.02	ROTHIE	708	Glen Smith	Inf.	23 High St.	Mum=Memb.

(10) Wedding Record:

<u>DATE</u>	<u>PLACE</u>	<u>BRIDE'S NAME/ADDRESS</u>	<u>GROOM'S NAME/AD</u>	<u>TALK</u>
9.10.99	FYVIE	Elsa Bloggs 21 Castle St.	Bill Jones 5 Main St.	Building Lives

(11) Funeral Record:

<b>DATE</b>	<b>PLACE</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>ADDRESS</b>	<b>UNDERTAKER</b>	<b>COMMENT</b>	<b>TALK</b>
8.1.03	DUNBAR	Mabel Wilson	3 Low Rd.	J.Bald	8 people	Good Shepherd

(12) Record of New Members:

<u>DATE</u>	<u>NAME</u>	<u>ADDRESS</u>	<u>BAPTISM</u>	<u>COMMENT</u>
20. 1. 04	Angela Speirs	2 High St.	No	Baptised in Childhood
20. 1. 04	John Smith	16 Main St.	Yes	

(13) Record of Special Sundays:

### **NEW YEAR**

2000 No. 707 Celebrating the Millennium  
2001 No. 416 In the Beginning  
2002 No. 763 Frontier Crossing

### ***HYMNS***

611 O God our Help in Ages Past      616 At Thy Feet our God and Father  
SGP 90 One More Step                      Etc.

### ***PRAYERS***

No.502      Worship Now p158-9      Cowie p97-98      No.707      Etc.

### ***READINGS***

Genesis 1.1-19      Joshua 1.1-11      Heb.11.39-12.2      Etc.

### ***TALKS***

No. 377 Signposts  
No. 650 Jesus the Way Etc.

### ***SPECIAL MATERIAL***

Call to Worship: "I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year...etc."  
New Year Resolutions  
Thank organist, church officer and those who help all year  
Review of the Year Past – World News...Our Personal Lives...Congregational Life...  
...Members who Died...New Members...

This is repeated for every Special Sunday in the Year. Each Year it gives a head start to preparations, and each year the list of hymns, prayers, etc. grows.

I also keep records of New Elders, Broadcasting, Writing, Church Magazines, Special Worship Items, Tape-Slide Sets, Christian Education Material, Good Videos and other Audio-Visual

Material, New Hymns or Hymns not in our Hymnbooks, Talks, Childrens Addresses, School Classes and Assemblies, Tutoring material, past Year Planners, past Preaching Record Books and Computer Discs...in other words I keep a record of everything, of all the material which I may use again sometime.

As well as the records, I also keep the materials themselves i.e. I have all my sermons, talks, prayers, special worship items etc. I also have books of sermons and books about preaching; children's material, youth programmes, illustrations, tapes of some of my services. I keep everything and I try to record what I have so that I can access what I want relatively easily. That is the theory anyway! The principle is sound but each person has to apply it in their own unique way. If it works it is a good system!

### **BOOKS ABOUT PREACHING**

William Barclay:	Communicating the Gospel
Karl Barth:	Homiletics
Karl Barth:	Church Dogmatics
Karl Barth:	The Word of God and the Word of Man
Karl Barth:	Evangelical Theology: An Introduction
Andrew Blackwood:	The Preparation of the Sermon
Phillips Brookes:	Lectures on Preaching
John Calvin:	Sermons From Job
Henry Sloane Coffin:	The Public Worship of God
Henry Sloane Coffin:	What to Preach
Donald Coggan:	Stewards of Grace
H Grady Davis:	Design for Preaching
David Day:	A Preaching Workbook
Ronald Falconer:	Message, Media, Mission
H H Farmer:	The Servant of the Word
Illion T Jones:	Principles and Practice of Preaching
H E Luccock:	In the Minister's Workshop
W M Macgregor:	For Christ and the Kingdom
W M Macgregor:	The Making of a Preacher
D A MacLennan:	A Preacher's Primer
S McComb:	Preaching in Theory and Practice
Robert J McCracken:	The making of the Sermon
George McLeod:	Speaking the Truth in Love
Paulinus Milner:	The Ministry of the Word
J W W Moeran:	Preaching By Parable
John B Nettleship:	Tend the Flock of God
D T Niles:	The Preacher's Calling to Be Servant
John Oman:	Concerning the Ministry
Pope Paul VI:	The Priest
Ian Pitt-Watson:	A Kind of Folly
David Read:	Preaching About The Needs of Real People
David Read:	The Communication of the Gospel
W E Sangster:	The Craft of Sermon Construction
W E Sangster:	Power in Preaching
C H Spurgeon:	Lectures To My Students
David Steel:	Preaching Through the Year
J S Stewart:	Heralds of God

J S Stewart:	A Faith to Proclaim
Donald Soper:	The Advocacy of the Gospel
Leslie J Tizard:	Preaching: The Art of Communication
James White	A Brief History of Christian Worship

### BOOKS OF SERMONS

John Baillie:	Christian Devotion
Donald Baillie:	Out of Nazareth
Donald Baillie:	To Whom Shall We Go?
Karl Barth:	Deliverance to the Captives
Ernest Best:	From Text to Sermon
Andrew Blackwood:	The Protestant Pulpit
Charles S Duthie:	God in His World
Starr Daily:	Four Ways to God
H H Farmer	The Healing Cross
Harry Emerson Fosdick:	The Man from Nazareth
Harry Emerson Fosdick:	What is Vital in Religion
Harry Emerson Fosdick:	The Secret of Victorious Living
Alfred E Garvie	The Master's Comfort and Hope
Arthur Gossip:	In Christ's Stead
Arthur Gossip:	The Galilean Accent
Arthur Gossip:	From The Edge of the Crowd
Arthur Gossip:	Experience Worketh Hope
G H Knight:	The Master's Questions to His Disciples
Murdo Ewen MacDonald:	The Vitality of Faith
Murdo Ewen MacDonald:	The Call to Obey
W M Macgregor:	Repentance Unto Life
W M Macgregor:	Some of God's Ministries
W M Macgregor:	Jesus Christ the Son of God
H R MacIntosh:	The Highway of God
David M McIntyre:	Christ the Life
David A MacLennan:	Making the Most of Your Best
Peter Marshall:	Mr. Jones, Meet the Master
Peter Marshall:	John Doe, Disciple
David Read:	Sons of Anak
David Read:	I am Persuaded
James Rutherford:	The Seer's House
Paul E Scherer:	For We Have This Treasure
R Leonard Small:	No Other Name
R Leonard Small:	No Uncertain Sound
Pearsall Smith:	The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life
James S Stewart:	The Wind of the Spirit
James S Stewart:	King For Ever
James S Stewart:	Thine is the Kingdom

James S Stewart:	The Strong Name
James S Stewart:	The Gates of New Life
George E Sweazey:	Preaching the Good News
Thomas F Torrance:	The Apocalypse Today
Leslie Weatherhead:	In Quest of a Kingdom
Leslie Weatherhead:	Key Next Door
Warren W Wiersbe:	Treasury of the World's Great Sermons