

We asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly. Each month we will post a new contribution on the Starters for Sunday website. We hope that this resource will assist you to ‘fan into flame the gift of God that is in you...’ 2 Timothy 1:6

We are very grateful to **Reverend Scott McKenna**, Minister of Mayfield Salisbury Parish Church for this month’s contribution.

Introduction

The Scottish preacher, Professor Murdo Ewen Macdonald, said of preaching, ‘If I did not read, I would have nothing to say.’ When I was a minister in training we were told that ‘You can never lead a people further than you have gone yourself.’ In order to lead people spiritually further, to help deepen their relationship with God, broaden their Christian perspective and help them mature in the faith, the Minister of Word and Sacrament must be continually on the road of spiritual growth and development.

Preaching springs from the spiritual life of the preacher, from the preacher’s encounter with the Holy. To feed our spiritual hunger, the minister must read and read and read in order to be nourished and resourced. If the Church is going to have any chance of surviving in a secular and potentially hostile society, the public worship which it offers must be intellectually, philosophically, theologically as well as spiritually competent: worship is not entertainment but neither should it be spiritually dull!

Sermons fail when the preacher has not spent enough time praying, reading, thinking and writing: dull prose in a sermon almost always indicates that the preacher has not read enough, or spent enough time in preparation. Thomas Alva Edison said, ‘Success is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration.’ Preaching, then, if it is to be worthwhile, means that the preacher must pray, read and read, think, and reflect on all that has been read.



The Bible

The Bible is the Word of God: we should expect God to speak to us through it. In approaching the Bible, either for study, personal intimacy with God or for the purposes of preaching, we should do so knowing that, through the written Word, God will lead us.

We approach the Bible as Moses approached the burning bush: it is holy ground and, in prayer, we should prepare ourselves, take off our sandals. It is important to be still, empty and to meditate in silence on the silence of God: Spirit to spirit. We 'take off' all our distractions and preconceptions of the Holy and prepare ourselves to read or, better, listen to God in God's written Word. Learning meditative silence is the best route to squashing the ego. As we read meditatively, God will lead us to a word, an idea, a thought, which will become the core of the sermon.

Preparing to read Scripture meditatively may take 5, 10 or even 30 minutes before we are ready to meet with God in His written Word. The practice of silence will help the preacher in this task. The preacher must make the Scripture a constant companion, an intimate friend with whom there is constant interaction.

Two Approaches to Reading

Reading for preaching can be approached in two ways, whether the lectionary is used or not. Firstly, having decided upon, or received, our theme through the prayerful reading of Scripture, we can search for books, sermons, or articles, on the subject of the sermon. Secondly, we should read books, sermons or articles on subjects of interest which will, in time, be of use in a sermon. Taken together, this approach will provide the preacher with appropriate resources with which to work. While preaching is relational and therefore the content, language, structure and length of the sermon all needing to be tailored to the specific congregation and situation, the need for 'perspiration' is non-negotiable.

Preparation on a sermon should begin not later than the Tuesday before the Sunday on which the sermon is due to be preached. The homiletician, Paul Scott Wilson, says that sermons which are prepared at the last minute are, at best, likely to be informational, while sermons which were started in good time are more likely to be transformational. It is important to let the experience of being with God in Scripture, from that first reading of the Bible for the sermon, to soak into the soul of the preacher, so that the preacher lives with the text all week. The great preacher, Professor James S Stewart, started preparation for a Sunday sermon on the Wednesday of the week preceding the week of the sermon, that is, a full eleven days before the sermon was due to be delivered.

Taken sufficiently seriously, sermon preparation at its best becomes part of the personal formation of the preacher. There is no place for a superficial reading of Scripture in the preparation of the preached Word. The Word must penetrate the heart of the preacher to the extent that, in the pulpit, what the congregation hears, perhaps above all else, is the sincerity of the preacher, the spiritual wrestling of the preacher and the earnestness with which the preacher approaches the Holy. A Minister of Word and Sacrament is a spiritual leader and that personal spirituality should communicate itself, not least in the pulpit. The Minister is set apart to a life of prayer and study and that is what people need to see and hear in public worship.





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Reverend Scott McKenna

Sermon Material

Sermons must be intellectually, pastorally, philosophically, theologically as well as spiritually competent. Material for a sermon should be drawn from biblical commentaries (typically, four: historical (for example, Calvin), textual (verse by verse), of a different theological perspective and spiritual interpretation). It also requires that we draw from Church history, sermons, high quality religious or spiritual writing, non-religious literature, quality newspapers (religious articles, obituaries, articles/letters on economics, war, ethics, politics etc.), the writings of the Church Fathers, poetry, biographies/autobiographies, Jewish midrash and the Talmud, as appropriate. Good practice for the preacher is to visit a decent bookshop every month, if not more than once a month, as well as attending relevant public lectures. In order to be fresh each week, there is no way round this.

Every sermon should, in some way, alight on the Mystery of God and deepen the relationship of God's people with the Holy. Material, then, from whichever source, needs to be handled and moulded to that end. It is essential to read the masters of our art in order to discover and distinguish the secrets of their talent, their approach and method of exposition.

Illustrations need to be relevant to the theme of the sermon. Again, to quote the homiletician, Paul Scott Wilson, an illustration should not be like a kite stuck in the branches of a tree. In other words, however good an illustration maybe, it should not appear in a sermon to which it is not relevant.

In wrestling with Holy Scripture, the preacher needs to interpret the text. Interpretation of Scripture has always called for an informed and balanced judgement. Texts may be interpreted literally, spiritually, allegorically, metaphorically, or as myth. The early Church Fathers as well as the Reformers all wrestled with scriptural interpretation. It is a prayerful wrestling and one in which we need to balance theology and reason with the world as it is.

It is worth noting that high quality reading and quotations in a sermon do not make a sermon. The material, together with the prayerful reading of Scripture, must become part of the consciousness and life of the preacher and become integrated in the sermon.



Preaching begins with God and the preacher's spiritual encounter with the Holy. The Word in God emerges out of the silence of God and the preached word emerges likewise from the silent prayer life of the preacher.

Reverend Scott McKenna

Script or no script/Delivery

As a general statement, the spoken thought, as opposed to the written thought, most frequently sacrifices depth and reality to effect and versatility. The purpose of the sermon is to explore truth, not entertain, or manipulate the emotions. Sermons need to be prepared and delivered with care. A written script, however, should in no way hinder the delivery of a sermon provided the preacher is sufficiently familiar with the script. The more familiar the script is to the preacher, the more the preacher will be able to look at the congregation rather than the script itself. A sermon should never be preached without the preacher first becoming very familiar with the written text. Depth of writing, a deliberate pace of delivery and, above all, sincerity in the preacher are all vital if a script is to be considered a sermon. The preacher should avoid repetition and never labour a point.

The length of a sermon will vary according to each situation. A sermon of reasonable length will be around 20 minutes. In order to avoid being tedious, some preachers opt for brevity, but brevity does not preclude tedium. So much rests on the quality of the material offered as well as the quality of the delivery.

Variety in style

It is perfectly legitimate, if not, essential, that the preacher should vary the style of sermon preached. In other words, over the course of a month or so sermons should vary in emphasis: these different emphases may be pastoral, biblical exposition, theological, historical, or ethical. Many sermons will have all of these components, but it increases the interest of regular listeners if the subject and format together with appropriate delivery vary over the course of several weeks.

Summary

Preaching begins with God and the preacher's spiritual encounter with the Holy. The Word in God emerges out of the silence of God and the preached word emerges likewise from the silent prayer life of the preacher. Into the consciousness, the preacher brings the Bible together with ideas from a whole spectrum of resources and through daily reflection, some of which may be subconscious, the Holy Spirit guides the preacher to the paper and to the preached Word. At its best, a sermon is a form of meditation. The preacher must believe in this task as vital and commit the necessary time and energy to it. Done well, it nourishes the people of God.

This resource is an initiative of the Church of Scotland, Mission and Discipleship Council, Faith Expression Team. Any queries or suggestions should be directed to: Anna Reid, Senior Administrator for the Faith Expression Team. Email: areid@cofscotland.org.uk

