

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 the **Rev Dr Marjory A McLean** Minister of Abernyte linked with Inchtute and Kinnaird linked with Longforgan Parish Churches for this article, adapted from a chapter in the book of essays “Speaking from the Heart” (Shoving Leopard, 2010). Building on the advice on preaching contained in previous articles in this web-based collection, this piece places preaching in its context of public worship.

Worship, spirituality and entertainment

It would be a brave and pushy preacher who asked the members of their congregation whether and how they prayed and worshipped God in private. How many answers would they receive? Some would tell them that is none of their business, minister or not. Some would argue that is what ministers are there to do, and people who go to church a lot, and not a job for ordinary people. Some would say they would not presume to do it, and do not have such a high conceit of their own religion. Some would admit they do not know what they should do, what they should say, how long they should go on, what they could include, whether they can say what they think. Some would also confess they are afraid to try, and some would blurt out that the thought of something so intimate embarrasses them. Most, when pressed, would say no-one has ever told them what to do.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

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Some would say they prayed, but their prayers would entirely be prayers for others, a list of names of family and loved ones, with the occasional addition of someone in particular distress; someone for whom prayers were promised. There would be though no wrestling with demons or conscience, no weeping over the frustrations of life, no pouring out of anger or bitterness, no railing against ill-treatment in relationships or injustice in daily work, no struggling to overcome terrible guilt and break through to new beginnings, no reluctant realisation of a completely new direction in which to walk or work or worship. Most, you see, would tell you no-one has ever told them what to do.

Sunday by Sunday many of them go to their church to do all the things they do not do day by day. Somehow, in the company of dozens of people with different lives, different families, different pressures and different griefs, they must turn their own lives, families, pressures and griefs over in their hearts, dare to ask what their feelings long to ask, disentangle the knots they know God will see more simply, and find peace from whatever torments them. With 167 hours in the week when they might have taken the chance to feel themselves alone with God to concentrate on their own souls, they have waited until everyone is gathered together because they do not know how to pray and worship alone. They turn their minds to the One who loves them more than anyone has loved them, but only in a crowd where the words are the words of a group, shared words, words in common. They are not the unique words of anyone who this week has survived something no-one else in church could understand, or done something so unforgettable that his spirit alone is darkened by it. So they worship to the extent that they can do so in common with everybody else around them; but they never worship alone and never address what is most personal and individual.

What tremendous responsibility lies upon those who decide what will fill the Sunday hour of public prayer. They will be to blame if those in their pastoral care are left with terrible and wonderful things unspoken before God in that hour and in their daily lives. They will be to blame if nothing echoes in the souls of the faithful. They will be to blame whenever an act of worship is not actually an act of worship, for then the people's need will be left entirely unmet.

Worship versus entertainment

They, the ministers and other preachers of the Church, are to blame when the Sunday service becomes an exercise in entertainment and enticement in the face of the competition surrounding the life of the Church. No doubt the sheer amount of competition presses in on the Church in a way unknown to a previous generation, for in our generation honesty has broken out and there remains almost no pretence in our secular culture that space should be left for Christian worship and Sabbath peace.

Little girls are torn between Sunday School and Pony Club. Little boys find football practice takes place at 11 o'clock each term-time Sunday. Adults with working weeks of 70 hours need time at home in the quietness Sunday morning offers. Much of the competition harming the Church comes in the form of slick and professional entertainment that far exceeds anything the local congregation can muster. Few Church choirs would produce anything a 15-year-old would prefer to the content of her MP3 player. Few sermons would be as attractive to a young adult as twenty minutes surfing the net. Most Church interiors cannot compete with the virtual worlds of electronic gaming. The Church is foolish to try to compete directly in a battle where she does not stand a chance of winning. When she tries, she steps into the world of entertainment and loses her soul.





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Inch by inch, hymn by hymn, a Sunday morning ecclesiastical entertainment can push aside real worship, push aside the chance for men, women and children to encounter the sense of the presence of God and the sense of being able to ponder the most unexpected and irregular and unique and personal things. When the performance of the music - or let us face it when the performers of the music - are the object of attention, where is worship? When the children's address is memorable only for its cookery lesson or conjuring trick or witty punch-line or revelation about life in the manse, do these little ones learn to toddle towards God somehow? When it is the substance of the preaching and not the language that is simple, and the great tangle of each person's home and work and passions and problems and fears and tentative hopes are bypassed by a message that does not begin to touch any of them, can those who hear the thin words truly bring everything to God and feel entirely known by Him?

All the preachers need to do - the phrase is intentionally ironic in tone - all they need to do is offer what the slick, smooth world of entertainment will never provide: the practice of the presence of God, a glimpse of the divine, an experience of the holy. Discharging that terrible responsibility, to express other people's worship and find the words to represent their innermost needs and feelings, is the hardest challenge for every minister. Finding words that can be rightly addressed to God stretches the spiritual resources of everyone who composes public prayer. The man or woman who voices the praises and sorrows and intercessions of others exposes with utter transparency their own relationship with God. When that relationship sounds shallow and disappointing to someone in the congregation, the minister has failed that worshipper, failed to deepen an encounter with the divine, failed to develop that member's devotion and faith.

The things we try to tell God...

One kind of preacher constantly tells God things He certainly already knows, most commonly what a lovely day it is today as we gather for worship. There is nothing anyone could say in prayer that is not already known to the Father; true; but this small-talk cannot possibly be appropriate. Often, too, God appears to be treated as requiring instruction. Prayers of thanksgiving become rather like cheerful news bulletins, full of items both the congregation and the Almighty already know perfectly well. If God is particularly unfortunate, this leader will go beyond mere





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fact and preach a little sermon, handing up orders for what is expected in the week to come. The intelligent worshipper who had come to church with an open heart, willing to think about something in a new way, is at best bored, at worst irritated, and certainly not improved, or intrigued, or provoked, or changed in the slightest.

Another type of minister declines to address God directly at all, or only so apologetically that contact seems scarcely to have been attempted let alone achieved. This may come about by the unfailing use of the Ecclesiastical Subjunctive, a little-studied, but widespread grammatical offence in which prayer is always expressed, as if conditionally. 'We would praise you; we would ask for . . .; we would bring X in prayer: Would you? When would you? Will you not? Why don't you get on with it then? Or it may 'just' be done the other way. We just want to praise you; we just ask; or even (combining both techniques) we would just pray for X. What, only just? Is nothing more merited? Are you praying merely? Do you have no boldness, no ambition? The Church member who is resolved to deepen his own prayers, who truly has the rare courage to try to come closer to his God, will be left empty by the kind of public worship cursed by false modesty, that seems to avoid frankness at all costs and with every word.

And the things we try to tell the people...

Two more ministers each miss the ears of their congregation with words too high or too low. The first minister has read somewhere that it matters terribly that preaching should not be shallow or empty, and he has mistaken depth for sophistication. His theological 'lectures' have a rhetorical construction (and length) of which Cicero would be proud, and few corners of postmodernist thought are left unexplored. Quotations, liberally scattered through the text, come from books he is confident few of the congregation have read. The congregation, each feeling a little like Winnie the Pooh stuck in Rabbit's front door and having improving books read to one end of him by Christopher Robin, suspect this must be good for them and greatly admire the minister's learning. One lady can see no connection between anything she hears and her inability to sleep since her husband went to Camp Bastion with the RAF. One man turns over in his mind the affair that ended his marriage and does not know how to find peace, and his thoughts are never broken into by the wash of sound coming from the direction of the pulpit. One younger adult wonders what the minister would say to the character in Eastenders who has just discovered she has cancer, and decides it would probably be too hard to understand.



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The second minister, who has sat through a few of the other's sermons before she was herself ordained last year, has read somewhere that it matters terribly that preaching should not be inaccessible to ordinary people, and has mistaken clarity for simplicity. Her virtually-identical sermons week by week stress how easily every part of life will fall sweetly into place once a commitment has been made to a few religious propositions, how complete will be the sense of forgiveness, how quickly fears will be relieved, and how pleasant it will be to live a life blessed by God with the extra blessing only believers can expect. One Sunday some familiar visitors arrive from her former congregation. The lady who cannot sleep, the pilot's wife, now begins to wonder whether her faith is inadequate and blameworthy, for she knows she will no more sleep tonight than any other night. The divorced man wishes it were so simple to assume that God forgives him and move on, but suspects there are others whose forgiveness he may also need before the knot in his stomach untangles. The Eastenders fan imagines his favourite character here this morning, and decides she would just feel angry.

Another minister pretends to address God and uses the opportunity to preach at the people without admitting to it. Intercessions become social comment, while supplication is replaced by arbitrary moralising. The genuinely pious member will feel that God is being ignored, treated as if God was not listening, treated as if we had nothing to say for the Divine to hear; and that feeling comes on top of the infuriating feeling of being manipulated in a vulnerable moment.

Another minister is afraid to talk about difficult things, and certainly afraid to preach on passages in the Bible that deal with hard subjects like death and failure and sex and doubt and loneliness. The Gospels and a few selected passages in Old Testament history provide a safe diet of morality tales and warm re-assurance of God's approval of nice moral people. The lectionary is roundly avoided, along with half the books of the Bible. The dirty, scary things are left at the church door as people come in, much as they are left at the door of the bowling club and the evening class. They can be picked up again at the beginning of the new week, but they are not nice enough to bring up in church. The struggler and sufferer whose life frightens them goes away from church with their fears intact.

Another minister manages to reach the opposite extreme somehow; and far from asking too little in worship raises expectations to incredible heights. Irrational demands for incredible and unreasonable stunts on God's part take the breath away. Orders are put in for particular weather at a particular time, usually for particular local function and rarely for drought-stricken countries in general, oddly enough. People of faith are expected to bypass the NHS and achieve a speed of recovery for which there is no discernable good reason. Those attending are required to find the experience spectacular and supernatural in every regard, or else they are not real believers at all. The genuinely reflective worshipper feels uncomfortable that God is being asked for magic tricks, and is not prepared to behave that way in his own life of prayer.





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The need for lamentation

Sometimes the most poignant omission of all is a minister's avoidance of lamentation in worship. If most of the population do not regard themselves as part of the Church, it may be largely because most of the population have fears and griefs for which there is no trite remedy, but they are faced by a Church that is too often too cheery. In these days when horrible problems remain unresolved despite everything, an only-triumphant Church does not give space and time to those who know in the core of their soul that they have not won through. A Church whose praise band can play any triumphant psalm six times without stopping, and even sits down by the rivers of Babylon with a happy catchy tune, may never allow anyone to use the rest of the Psalter to shout at God, demand an answer, or weep. Offering silence, when too many would offer a shallow answer, can make a safe space for an angry spirit who needs to be met in the worst of the storm and not only when all is calm and bright.

There are leaders in the Church who are big enough and strong enough to do the one thing that is needful, to enable the worship of God by those in their care and to open the way for men, women and children to be honest in their depths. Like children approaching Jesus without fear, they say what they know is on their people's minds and say it to God without evasion, or circumlocution, or pretended apology. They use words that all can hear and comprehend, but they give their hearers ideas they have never before thought. They pose questions without knowing what the answers must be, and speak in joy and sorrow with equal candour. They pray as if they know they might be changed by it, but never as if they think they will change God.

What is needed, desperately needed

If they are as fortunate and thoughtful as this, men and women longing to do the right thing will find the worship of their congregation has a structure and order that can bear the weight of everything the human soul needs to pour into their devotion to God. Their public worship provides the shape for their private prayer and thought, and the pattern and substance of the Sunday service sustains the reflection and spirituality of the coming week. It is adequate for complicated lives, and gives permission to leave none of the complexity behind when the soul presents itself



in private prayer. These people can bring themselves to a sense of the presence of God, as if in their imaginations they have approached some special place, or moment. In their minds they know that God will be in every instant as close to them as their own breathing; but in their hearts they know too that their humanity prevents them from remembering that without a special effort, a special remembrance, and so that special place, special moment.

They can use the language they have heard in church to try to adore God who they know is beyond all language, but they know it is still worth trying. They learn the discipline of setting aside for a moment their flawed self-centredness, and contemplate something far beyond their own condition. They can ponder their own greatest needs and regrets, confessing what is wrong and looking at themselves courageously. They can confidently ask for the forgiveness and empowerment that promises the lost need not stay lost, and not feel they are conceited or presumptuous in doing so. They can probably forgive themselves when their mental health would otherwise fail under some burden of guilt too heavy to carry through ordinary living. They can summon up the courage to consider their onward journey, and to discover possibilities they had not found in any other place.

Unexpected opportunities may open because there is faith enough to entertain the challenges, and humility enough to acknowledge God-given talent. They can rejoice in the goodness of other people's lives without envy, mourn what hurts in another with sincerely shared pain, and ask for blessing of them without prescription and direction.

Or as the kind of parish minister who makes the Church a good place said to a school service many years ago: "say thank you, say sorry, say please."

Into their hands people will entrust the most intimate spiritual exercises. The new widow who comes to the 'Blue Christmas' service early in Advent, to spend an hour in quiet contemplation because the Nativity Play and Watchnight Service would crush her this year, is able to worship in her raw state. The couple standing stricken by the new grave of their soldier son on a windless November morning will find presence in two minutes' silence and live on the strength of it until next year, though they do not know how. That soldier's mates, with heads bowed at the Drumhead ceremony in Camp Bastion, will listen with painful intensity to a padre whom they would not expect to see smile during it. A pregnant woman who could not be more happy or excited, but feels the enormity of the challenge of motherhood ahead, may have some very direct petitions to make to God, and really needs to be able to do so without pussyfooting about as if her prayer were an unfortunate imposition that wastes Heaven's time. A teenager soon to leave home has many decisions to make about the style of life to choose, and whether to go all out for personal success or to dedicate time and emotion to other people; and so he needs to have a conscience that is alive and challenged.

None of these people needs to be an intellectual. All they need, all they want, is for the experience of life to include the experience of spiritual life.

Are our services acts of worship?

Speaking from the heart can be purchased from Amazon, and Cornerstone Bookshop, Edinburgh
www.cornerstonebooks.org.uk

This resource is an initiative of the Church of Scotland, Mission and Discipleship Council, Resourcing Worship Team. Any queries or suggestions should be directed to the Resourcing Worship Team via email: mandd@cofscotland.org.uk

