

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 Lynn M. McChlery** minister of Eaglesham Parish Church for this month’s contribution.

Introduction

It is 10.55am, I am waiting with the church officer to enter the church. I can hear music and the chatter of the gathering congregation. There is a familiar tension in the gut, I am taking deep breaths, feeling warm, and using a centering prayer. I am deeply excited because I know I have something to say, but there is no guarantee it will work and I am very aware of my own inadequacy. My mind is running on specific bits of the service I am not at all sure about. There must be lots of easier ways to live, and anyone who wants this job can have it. At 10.55am, this is my preacher’s perspective.

That is not a bad Sunday morning, it is every Sunday morning. Yet shortly after 12:00 noon there is, usually, the euphoric “high” of post-delivery, feeling drained and energized both at once. A sense that God has been encountered and something of substance has taken place. This is a uniquely privileged calling and I want to do it for the rest of my life. I am looking forward to next week.

What happens in between is, of course, worship and the preaching of the Word. For me, this is the centre of ministry: the hardest work, the greatest responsibility, and the highest joy. I thought it would get easier after 10 years and it doesn’t, or not much. But it does get better.

I wondered whether I could be honest enough to share this as an introduction to my article. While I was wondering, a colleague sent the following:

Alexander Whyte had a young man preaching for him in Edinburgh on one occasion. The young man was getting a real reputation in Edinburgh as a great preacher. He had come to Free St George’s in Edinburgh (as it was then), and he went up into the pulpit full of a sense of what they were all expecting from him, the young luminary. And then something happened, and his mind went a total blank. He made a dreadful mess of the whole thing, forgot what he was going to say . . . and it was a total disaster. He came down the pulpit steps a broken-hearted man. In the vestry he cried to Whyte, ‘What went wrong, sir?’ Whyte said gently to him, ‘Well, laddie, if you had gone up the way you came down, you would have had more chance of coming down the way you went up.’
(Eric Alexander).

That sense of human weakness is perhaps the first vital prerequisite of the effective preacher – effective, that is, in terms of being useful to God. As well as that, there are a few things I know now that I wish I had known 10 years ago, even if I still struggle to put them into practice.

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Things I have discovered (usually the hard way) in 10 years of preaching

It is all about preparation – in all its forms.

In my preparation, the key question I am trying to answer is: what is God saying to these people, at this time, through this text? The more intimately I know God, my congregation, and the text, the better equipped I am to answer this question. And the answer comes in prayer as much as in study. In preparation for preaching I sometimes prayerfully imagine Jesus ascending the pulpit to preach this sermon, or my congregation receiving the letter from Paul. There rarely emerges a clearly defined “answer” at an early stage, but there is usually a sense of the core of God’s message for this week, which will be honed and clarified as preparation develops. The non-negotiable basic of preparation is careful examination of the text with a few good commentaries. However, I have learned that everything is preparation as I listen to God: pastoral visits, reading the newspaper, walking the dog. It is not the first time I have taken “time out” from sermon prep to go on Facebook, to discover a “post” that gives the sermon illustration I have been looking for! So, I do not do all my prep in the study, though I do take about 6-8 hours of study time to prepare each sermon. The key to this is starting early in the week, which allows things to “cook” and connections with real life to emerge that rarely occur to me behind a desk.



A sermon is an act of verbal, not written, communication.

This sounds really obvious but it was not to me. I started by writing a sermon much as I would write an essay: collating notes, structuring, hammering it out on the keyboard, then “reading” it to sound as spontaneous as possible. I still use extensive notes (probably too extensive), I still carefully craft the wording of key points, and I believe structure is essential. However, I am slowly learning that the notes are not the crucial thing: what is crucial is communication with the congregation, and slavish following of notes can be a hindrance, particularly to eye contact. What has really helped me is developing the habit of listening to others’ sermons on the text as well as reading books. This is easy online, and I have my own favourites (John Ortberg, Rob Bell and Tim Keller among others). I listen not because I want to crib their sermons or copy their style, but because I believe they are world class communicators and I have much to learn from them. One day I will pluck up courage to listen to my own sermons. I know I should brave the cringe factor. It will be a painful but illuminating experience.



“Many of our listeners have heard it all before.
They do not want to be told it again, they want to be shown it.”



A story stays in the mind and penetrates the heart more easily than propositional truth.

Stories can be over-used in sermons, but a good one reaches the parts that other communication does not reach. Jesus knew all about this when he spoke in parables: stories that lingered, intriguing people, getting under their skin. Roy Clements described Jesus' parables as being "like stealth bombers, that sneak past our psychological defences and, when we least expect it, drop an explosive charge on our spiritual complacency". (Sting in the Tail). Stories do that, and following the Master in this respect is as essential and challenging as in any other. Finding and filing good stories is a key discipline.

Personal illustrations, like high explosives, are an essential risk.

I think it was Paul Tillich who said, "When God sends a word, He always wraps it in flesh." The preacher's responsibility is to put flesh on it. That means we need integrity between the things we preach in the pulpit and the way we live outside it; we also need to demonstrate in words in the sermon how the message is lived in practice. In my pre-ministry years of sitting in pews listening to sermons, my almost invariable (silent) questions were, "So what?" and "But how?". Many of our listeners have heard it all before. They do not want to be told it again, they want to be shown it. How much of self should the preacher reveal in the pulpit? It is a very personal question and each will answer it differently. There is an appropriate, indeed essential, level of honesty and vulnerability. However the preacher is not a guest on a talk-show and the pulpit is neither a confessional nor a therapy session. I will share my own experience strictly where it illuminates the text, never for sympathy or self-indulgence. I also have a personal rule never to use myself as a good example. It cannot help sounding smug and frankly, in my case, it is asking for trouble. Often it is better if the flesh on the Word is not mine.

The sermon is located within the service.

I find worship particularly effective when the whole service, including prayers and children's talk, flow out of the same text and reinforce the same teaching. That can be quite liberating in terms of sermon preparation as the sermon does not become overloaded with the need to say everything. One thread may beg to be expressed in a prayer of confession; sometimes a hymn springs to mind that expresses another thought more powerfully than a preacher could. The children's talk in particular can give the sermon a kick start. The sermon can say less, but say it better. I also find it very helpful to have a short period for silent reflection immediately following the sermon.



“A few people say something touches them every week, and admiringly attribute it to me. It is not me, it is their expectation being answered by the Holy Spirit.”

Those who have ears to hear will hear – but not necessarily what (you think) you are saying.

It is part of the fertile work of the Holy Spirit that the Word of God communicates itself in ways we never predict. People who come open to hear and respond will hear, by God's grace. I have stopped being surprised when people say “I remember when you said...” and repeat something that has touched them which I am perfectly certain I never said in my life. A few people say something touches them every week, and admiringly attribute it to me. It is not me, it is their expectation being answered by the Holy Spirit. One woman going through a rough time known to me, said recently, “I know you have been tweaking the Sunday sermons for my benefit and I appreciate it”. I genuinely have not; her deep need to hear God sharpens her spiritual ears. It is more humbling when someone gasps, “that was brilliant!” and I wonder which of my carefully-crafted three points was the most insightful, to discover they loved the joke!

Of course, there are those who sit in the pew every week and listen, but never hear – they are sermon-proof. It is a spiritual disability, and I do not know what to do about it.

The structure of the sermon does not have to follow the structure of the text.

Verse by verse exposition certainly has its place, and is probably essential in a closely-argued passage like some Pauline letters. However, the text and the sermon are different literary forms, and the Bible itself of course contains a myriad of literary forms. With ideas gleaned from other preachers I am starting to experiment with different forms of sermon. Part of one of Paul's prison letters can be preached as a dramatic monologue with Paul “discussing” the content with a prison guard. A single verse, “you must be born again”, can be unpacked at length via diary extracts from a person's journey to faith. Psalms and poetry need creative and perhaps visual exposition: they can be ruined by slitting apart the nightingale to find the song. A Gospel story can be told from the viewpoint of one participant. Without losing the centrality of the text, we can find expressive ways of preaching it that yield new insights on the familiar.

These are some of the things I wish I had known 10 years ago. I am still becoming a preacher. I am more convinced than ever of the fertile power of the seed of God's Word, blown by the Holy Spirit to plant new life in places I never imagined. Not all my sermons are good. However, there are times that are high and holy: times when the attentiveness of God's people, the incisiveness of the Word, the breath of the Spirit and the words of the preacher combine in something hard to describe, a sense of the numinous, that we are on holy ground, that every word is sacred. Times when I know, without being able to explain, that something very profound is being said and heard, that people are being touched in the soul. It is all out of my hands and I am an instrument, almost incidental. It does not happen often, or usually for long. But in those moments I am fulfilling my highest calling to be a preacher.

