

Make a house a home *Some thoughts on preaching which hits home*

We are preparing to move house again soon (2 miles across the other side of Oxford). As we prepare for the process of transporting all our possessions from one house to another my thoughts turned to what makes a house a home? The bare structure and location of a property only becomes home when it feels lived in and starts to reflect the personality of its inhabitants.

The same could be said to be true of preaching. Many sermons which I listen to show evidence of structure, design and effort. But they often don't feel lived in. They lack the warmth and personality which only comes when the preacher has inhabited the text for themselves and taken it home.

What are some of the errors which sermons make? You can probably think of more, but these few thoughts came to mind.

Pegs

When you first move into your new house boxes get emptied and mounds of clothing, books etc. await proper 'filing away'. Should someone come to visit the chances are their coat will need to be draped over a chair or put on the bed. Hopefully, in time, pegs will appear upon which you may hang your coat.

In a similar way, many sermons which I hear offer nowhere to 'hang your hat' so to speak. There is content, but it lacks pegs. Without this attention to structure, the hearer can struggle to navigate their way through the sermon. Without pegs it is unlikely that hearers will be able remember salient points of the sermon for the week ahead.

Rhetoric gets a bad name today. But the later Greek sophists (Isocrates. Cicero etc.) believed Rhetoric to be the ability to speak with such clarity that the audience would be persuaded. Philosophers think clearly. Rhetoricians think clearly out loud. Preachers should be doing the same. This will in part be reflected by careful attention to the structure and form of the sermon.

Personality

It takes time for a house to become a home. Over time the inhabitants will begin to stamp their own personality on their property – hanging curtains, arranging flowers, decorating to taste etc.

Many sermons I hear lack personality. Phillip Brooks' now famous comment that preaching is "communication of truth through personality" is exactly right. Obviously we don't want the sermon to be littered with personal anecdotes and stories. It is not supposed to be a talk about them. However, congregations listen when they can see that for the preacher the message has hit home personally.

They have been moved by the message they are preaching. They have made the connections as to how it applies to their own life.

Punch

Sermons which hit home are those which apply pertinently and pointedly to today's world. They are illustrated in real life.

Too many sermons I hear leave me only in the world of the text. Now, of course, this is not the worst problem, there are equally many messages that never take me to the world of the text and only start in the world of today. I guess the former may be the weakness of evangelical expository preaching; the latter is the weakness of liberal preaching.

John Stott has regularly repeated the need to engage in "double listening" – Hearing the voice of the text; hearing the voice of the world.

When you move into a new house you are inclined to think: however did they live with that wallpaper? How come they didn't modernise the bathroom suite etc. But of course, it is very difficult to see your environment and culture from the fresh perspective of an outsider.

As preachers we need to retain the fresh "eyes" of an outsider, someone who has not spent the whole week labouring over the text, and who can see the difficult punchy questions which might need addressing.

At home in the sermon

By this expression I don't at all mean that preaching should be psychologically therapeutic, only comforting and devotional. What I think I mean is that I expect preaching to give me pegs (to help me recall and apply the bible to my life in the week ahead); personality (so I feel that the preacher has met with God in his preparation); punch (I see the issue with a freshness and pertinence for the week ahead).

21st June 2009

Preachers should let the bible do the talking!

As I write this blog I am sitting in front of the TV watching the European Team Championships in Leiria Portugal. Some good performances by Brits, particularly the 4 x 400metre relay team, and Wayne Chambers, of course.

At the end of a busy 6 days in Wycliffe, I do feel a bit like I have come to the end of a marathon. But isn't Christian ministry supposed to be exhausting and energy expending? It requires discipline, self control and a focus on the end game: *Every*

athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (1 Cor 9:25)

But there is also the caution that success will only be awarded to those who do God's work in God's way: *An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. (2 Tim 2:5).*

This blog is not intended to be purely about preaching. But, as I reflect on the last 6 days, it has renewed my conviction that the hope for the future of the Church lies in its preachers.

Monday to Friday this week the students received a sermon from Vaughan Roberts of St Ebbe's Oxford on Daniel 6. I preached on James 4 and gave them a lecture on the Nooma teacher Rob Bell and considered the power of ancient rhetoric. Archie Coates of Holy Trinity Brompton preached on the subject of 'joy' from Philippians 4 and we had two full days of teaching from Greg Haslam of Westminster Chapel which were under girded by his conviction that faithful expository preaching should be carried out with a sense of expectation that God will act when his word is preached, and we should look for divine activity from the Holy Spirit in bible-preaching churches.

On Saturday 20th June we had the inaugural conference of the Wycliffe School of Preaching, with Greg as well as seminars from Wycliffe Tutors, Michael Green, Justin Hardin and Peter Walker. About 40 delegates from the Oxfordshire area came for a stimulating and challenging day on the subject of Evangelistic Preaching.

Too much happened over these last 6 days to attempt to summarise them in a blog.

However these three convictions were reinforced for me:

Preachers must let the bible speak

Healthy congregations do not gather primarily to see the preacher display his oratory or rhetoric. For sure, Paul warned that a time would come men and women would gather around them preachers who would titillate their itching ears, giving soothing and comforting words. But this will do congregations no good.

In this passage in 2 Tim 4 there is a warning to congregations. But there is also a warning to preachers: have we heard from God in his word before we dare to stand before the congregation? This requires patient, careful listening to the Bible in all its fullness.

Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me. (Job 38:2-3)

Job was castigated because he seemed to assume that he knew more than God and could presume to tell God how he should act. Preachers must not be guilty of this sin.

Preachers must let the bible loose

Apologetics is a key part of Pauline preaching and an important part of our preaching training. We should be able to give compelling reasons for the hope that we have (1 Peter 3:15). However, the preacher's job is not to defend the bible but to preach the bible

Spurgeon's comment on this matter is well known. "Scripture is like a lion. Whoever heard of defending a lion? Just turn it loose; it will defend itself."

I have learnt so much from Dick Lucas' preaching over the years. Most significant for me was the way in which Dick would preach a passage in such a way that whenever I came to read that passage again I understood what it meant and means.

Yes, it is good to learn how to speak articulately, to formulate messages memorably and illustrate and apply the message engagingly (see blog "Make a House a Home" below). All this is needed. But the central task in all this is to "let the bible loose" so that people are confronted by the living God through his living word. It takes time and self-deflecting effort to ensure that the preacher does not stand as a mediator between the living God and God's people. His job is to let God do his work through his word.

Preachers must let the bible convert

By this I don't just mean the first challenge of coming to faith. I also mean that the bible should ongoingly be converting attitudes, emotions and outlooks. The bible should be confronting and dealing with sin in the life of the preacher and in the life of the congregation.

At the end of 1 Thessalonians Paul prays:

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thess 5:23)

The context of this prayer is significant:

19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies. 21 Test all things; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thess 5:19-22)

I take it that to be "sanctified through and through" (NIV) is a work of Word and Spirit. I also think that J. I. Packer was right when he said, "The only proof of past conversion is present convertedness. If my preaching is faithfully biblical then over and over again I should be being persuaded by my preaching: "Yes Lord, if I was hearing this for the first time, I would hungrily grasp it for myself!"

There is so much more to preaching than these three things, but I am convinced that preaching is not less than letting the bible speak; letting the bible loose; and letting the bible convert and this is a great place to start!