

WHAT'S A SERMON GOOD FOR?

Mon 2 June 2014



What are we to do about the sermon? Is it time for us to abandon preaching altogether?

Traditionally the proclamation of the Word of God has a central place in the life of Anglican worship. It is based on the notion that when we proclaim the Word of God it takes on a life, a creative life, of its own. Once spoken it will never return to the speaker but will become a life-changing, world-changing force. I often find myself asking 'Are the sermons that we hear in church Sunday by Sunday life changing and world changing.

Is what we preach in the Anglican Church the creative Word of God let loose in the world? Are we preaching God's Word? And by what standards do we judge what is God's Word and what is merely a human aberration?

Added to this we hold tight to the 19 century (and earlier) tradition that clergy are the best educated members of the village and that part of our preaching role is to teach and enlighten you, the illiterate masses, what it means to lead a good Christian life. Perhaps, along the way, we may to open your minds to the world of beauty, literature and art. Such a view ignores the fact that we no longer all live in village communities, that we, the clergy, are no longer the best educated members of our community or even be the best theologically educated members of the community.

Worse still is the notion, still prevalent in the wider Anglican Church, that we are preaching to the heathen masses whose souls must be saved! This idea was understandable in the context of the Methodist reformation of the Church of England or the Moody and Sankey revival of the early 20th century and even in the Billy Graham era when the Word of God was often preached in the market place. But these days, our preaching is confined to the church context where we are, to coin a phrase, preaching to the converted.

Further, we live in a world of 10-second sound bites. The visual media have built two generations of people with ever-shortening attention spans. Our ability to communicate our message are pretty feeble and clumsy compared to the media.

I am a traditionalist in regard to the preparation of sermons. It takes me many hours to prepare a sermon not taking into account the thinking and praying beforehand. It is no wonder that many of my colleagues in full-time ministry turn to internet-based formulas as the basis for their sermons.

I sympathize when I realize that these colleagues are probably working at least 50 hours a week just running a parish before they get to the stage of even thinking about the sermon for

next Sunday. But I do wonder what that has to say about Spirit-driven inspiration and creativity that allows us to preach the Word of God.

At least it is somewhat better than what we are required to do under article 35 of the 39 Articles. This article demands of us that we should read from the first or second book of homilies 'diligently and distinctly, that they may be understood of the people'. I guess that makes us all non-conformists if not actually heretics!

Clergy receive little training in preaching beyond being thrown in at the deep end. Clergy also, by the way, receive no training at all in parish administration, a task which takes up about 75% of their time. There is very little opportunity for preachers to receive any feedback from the people in the pews.

The best we can hope for, given the structure of services in the Anglican Church, is a brief greeting at the church door at the end of the service. There, feedback is often couched in terms of 'Nice sermon Rector' which generally means something like 'I didn't listen to a word you said but I feel in a generous mood today'. Worse is 'I don't want you to preach about that' or 'I don't want you to preach that way' or 'Your preaching bores me to sobs'! Fortunately the last is not often said but you can tell that it is true by the glazed look that comes over people's eyes about a minute into the sermon.

I asked a group of friends recently what they wanted from a sermon. There were as many views as there were people in the group both about the meaning of the Gospel and what sort of preaching was required to deliver the message about it.

I dare say that if I asked each of you the same question you would give me a similarly diverse range of opinions, if you have an opinion at all.

I believe that I and many of those seated in our congregations have a much better chance of this understanding Scripture as the creative Word of God when it is encountered in a dialogical setting rather than this traditional didactic setting that we have come to know as the sermon.

Is the sermon a waste of time, energy and resources? In its current form it probably is but it doesn't have to be that way.

We can learn new forms of presentation and interaction that are more suited to the 21st century and we can certainly learn a great deal from the media that will help us engage better. We can adjust our services to allow a more dialogical and less didactic approach.

Most of all, we can learn from each other, listen to each other, learn how to respond appropriately to each other and become engaged in the task of making the creative Word of God live in our communities.

By The Reverend **Ken Batterham**