



## Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

# The ministry of preaching

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### 1 Corinthians 2:4

“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power,”

I am glad that once a year we at Wesley Mission take time to affirm the ministry of preaching, which gives me the further opportunity of preaching on the theme. I do this not only because it is one of my personal passions, but also because from the earliest days preaching has been:

- The primary way ‘in worship’ that the good news has been declared
- A supreme pattern of ministry which began in the early New Testament church and
- continues today
- Changing things by God-inspired ‘powerful words’.

In my study at home, I have a 13 volume set of books entitled Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching which includes sermons and articles from more than 90 huge personalities from the history of the Christian Church. It is not a series that I pull material from to use again—for great preaching is nearly always dull if replicated by another. The series is helpful to me because it recognises the combination of matters that always need to be understood in preaching and continued from age to age.

These are that the word is spoken, it has a setting or context where it is spoken (this is both geographical and cultural), and there is always a listener. Good preaching always takes this bundle of matters into consideration and, therefore, becomes relevant preaching.

Text: 1 Corinthians 2:4

“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power ...”

Throughout my ministry, I have witnessed the ebb and flow of people’s attitudes to preaching and it could be generally said to have been more a downhill journey than a positive one, though there have been indications in recent years of a resurgence of preaching across the whole church. However, it is too early to make a judgement on this. It has been affected by a number of issues:

- The confidence or lack thereof in the gospel itself.
- The real challenge of other forms of communication.
- The Church’s lack of commitment to promote it.

Paul wrote these words to the Corinthian Christians as part of a broader section which declares in greater detail the nature of ministry as related to the work of the Holy Spirit. It clearly points to Jesus Christ as the wisdom of God. Paul recalled that he arrived in Corinth “with great fear and trembling” (v.3). This tells us something about the way a reputation had

built up about Corinth as a city. It may also point to Paul's vulnerability in offering the good news in such a context.

David Prior described the first five verses in Chapter 2 as "the perfect touchstone for all preaching". There are searching questions to be found here for every man or woman who is taking seriously the call to be a preacher, as well as for those who are maintaining a ministry across the years.

The searching questions are:

- Is our preaching genuine proclamation?
- Do we obscure our proclamation with lofty words?
- Does our preaching demonstrate the power of the Spirit?

W E Sangster was undoubtedly one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century and visited us here in Sydney at Central Methodist Mission, before it became Wesley Mission. Just two years before he died, so prematurely, he gave the Fondren Lectures at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. The lectures brought together papers he had delivered for the Congregational Church and the Churches of Christ. These lectures were drawn together and published in a book entitled *Power in Preaching*. He took seven major themes, of which I propose to take three, though what I shall say is not a replication of his book.

If we are to be effective leaders with a ministry of preaching, then we will:

### **Believe in it**

Preachers are called by God and at the heart of the message is a sense of delivering words which lie beyond the preacher himself or herself.

- We must treat very seriously the question 'Do I believe in preaching?'
- That same question is profoundly related to a further question: 'How deep is my belief?'
- Both questions raise issues for the mature preacher regarding the continuing nature of our belief.

If we are serious about 'believing in preaching' as preachers, we would need to be committed to being the kind of person who is steeped in the Word of God, open to the Spirit's nourishment in our lives and daily confirming our call as integral to the nature of our discipleship.

Such an understanding leads to the shaping of some key words which, for the preacher, define our experience, character and openness. Such words are:-

- Calling—this is not firstly about the development of skills or the harnessing of an intellectual framework
- Faithfulness—this helps us to see preaching as a prayerful response to God
- Discipline—as preachers we sit under the word, within the authority of the church and empowered by the Holy Spirit
- Character—this is where the work of the Spirit of God is seen and demonstrated in our lives

Sangster painted a picture of people who retain faith in the message but with little confidence in preaching. The result for him was that they "tend to put the major stress on other aspects ... sometimes openly disparaging the service of the pulpit. Preaching, they argue, does little

or nothing. The few people who come to worship know it all already.” Whether the preaching is good or bad makes no difference because it is chiefly forgotten by people by the time they go home.

“Power has gone out of preaching when those whose task it is to preach have come to doubt the worth of it themselves.”

A preacher does not speak on their own authority. These are not “a few thoughts I had last week”. When the preacher climbs the pulpit steps or walks out onto a platform such as we have here in the Wesley Theatre, they preach because they have been summoned by Almighty God and believe that what they are doing is only happening because they have made a response to him.

The looming question in the minds of people listening to a preacher is not ‘How good is he or her?’ nor is it ‘How shall I respond?’ but more nearly ‘What kind of God is the preacher conveying to me?’

We will grasp the gospel more fully as preachers when we see our ministry as that of calling people to discipleship. An Australian writer, Graham Johnston, makes a careful distinction between ‘followership’ and ‘discipleship’.

“Followership and discipleship are not the same thing. If people respond to the gospel out of fear, followership may be all one can expect. As people come to know God for who he is, a proper reverence will grow out of an understanding of God’s character, his majesty, holiness and power.” (see Proverbs 1:7)

### **Work at it**

These words sit uncomfortably with some and I might say especially with Protestants. Human effort is decried by such people when related to ministry. However, it is important to recognise that preaching is at its best—hard work. We must remind ourselves that preaching does not involve a reliance on the Holy Spirit which in some mysterious way discounts study, discipline and time given to the calling which God has made upon our lives.

In his marvellous book *I Believe in Preaching*, John R W Stott gives an outstanding historical sketch in about fifty pages of the glory of preaching, which traces a journey from the earliest days of the New Testament to our own day.

In the introduction to this book, he confessed “communication frustration” for he knew that preaching was far more than just having a message burning within. His confession is summed up when he writes, “And seldom if ever do I leave the pulpit without a sense of partial failure, a mood of penitence, a cry to God for forgiveness, and a resolve to look to him for grace to do better in the future.”

Let me reflect upon what ‘working at it’ means in practice for the preacher:

- It means a theological acknowledgement that the Holy Spirit does not dispense with our effort.
- Preaching must be given a place of priority with all who are called to such ministry.
- We have to learn to imagine, journey and even think with God.

I have often considered it true that you can tell a preacher’s ministry by the books on their shelves. Whilst classics exist, our preaching must be contemporary and bang up to date, when it comes to application.

We need to be a reading, thinking and exploring of ideas kind of person if we are to be a preacher:

- The place of prayer is combined with reading
- The exploration of different perspectives
- The willingness to be challenged intellectually.

There is a lovely old story which Stott and many others tell of an Anglican clergyman who was lazy. He had long ago given up the bother of preparing his sermons. He had considerable native intelligence and fluency of speech, and he thought of his congregation as simple. So he got by pretty well with his unprepared sermons. Yet in order to live with his conscience, he took a vow that he would always preach extempore and put his trust in the Holy Spirit.

Everything was fine until one day, a few minutes before the morning service began, who should walk in the church and find a seat but the Bishop, enjoying a Sunday off. The minister was embarrassed. He had managed for years to bluff his comparatively uneducated congregation, but he was much less sure of his ability to hoodwink the Bishop.

So he went over to welcome his unexpected visitor and, in an endeavor to forestall his criticism, told him of the solemn vow he had taken to always preach sermons without notes. The Bishop seemed to understand and the service began. Half way through the sermon, the Bishop got up and walked out. After the service, a scribbled note from the Bishop was left for the preacher: "I absolve you from your vow!"

Leslie Weatherhead was an outstanding preacher and, in the Church of England newspaper shortly after his death, a personal appreciation of his ministry was printed. It explored the secret of his extraordinary preaching ministry. The writer concluded, "I must have asked him about this about twenty times, and always he replied, 'Preparation'."

### **Make it practical**

The third and final thought is built upon the fact that much preaching often feels 'up in the air'. The people don't know what the preacher is trying to say and sometimes wonder whether the preacher himself or herself actually knows!

Clarity in preaching is essential. There are many words relating to the preacher's calling and are helpful in giving instruction regarding the nature of the preaching ministry.

Personally, I return on a regular basis to the word 'commission'. It is a good biblical word and it takes us right back to the heart of the Old Testament, as well as having rich New Testament links. It is essentially about the setting aside of our lives by God for his work—and this is what God does to preachers when they offer themselves to him. Our call is not our own work—it is a work of God within us.

Our calling is distinctive and God has used an enormous range of people in this ministry, chiefly because through ordinary people shaped by ordinary experience he is able to deliver an extraordinary message of practical Christianity.

We are called to offer a message of love. William Barclay, the Scottish scholar and preacher, told the story of a man who left a certain congregation. Asked why, he referred to the preacher, who had a talent for denunciation. "I was tired," said the man, "of getting handfuls of gravel flung in my face every Sunday." It is the love of Christ which compels us and commissions each of our lives.

All good preaching is relevant preaching. It is heard by those who listen through their own experience and the application of the gospel is unique to every hearer.

I was introduced to Richard Baxter by my church history lecturer in college. I shall forever be in his debt. Baxter's ministry in Kidderminster was one of the great stories of the church at that time. He was one of the prolific writers in the English language who, though in the main stream of Protestant thought, was refused a bishopric, joined the 'ejected' and became their chief protagonist. He wrote a book on Christian ministry called *The Reformed Pastor* that will stand the test of time. His serious complaint is worthy of our reflection.

"I marvel how I can preach ... slightly and coldly, how I can let men alone in their sins, and that I do not go to them and beseech them for the Lord's sake to repent, however they take it, and whatever pains or trouble it should cost me. I seldom come out of the pulpit but my conscience smites me that I have been no more serious or fervent. It accuses me ... 'Should we not weep over such a people, and should not our tears interrupt our words? Should we not cry aloud and show them our transgressions and entreat and beseech them as for life and death?'"

Preachers with cold hearts will never warm and awaken their hearers. It doesn't just involve learning skills, taking courses or concerning ourselves with the length of time we preach—it is delivering a message from the deep places of our hearts.

Before I came to Australia, for a number of years I marked entries for The Times newspaper's 'Preacher of the Year'. I was paid the princely sum of a pound for each entry I marked. I was always uneasy to think someone would be thought of as a Preacher of the Year, for preaching is never a competition—it is a work of grace.

The renowned preacher, G Campbell Morgan, contested, "The supreme work of the Christian minister is the work of preaching. This is a day in which one of our great perils is that of doing a thousand little things to the neglect of one thing, which is preaching."

Eli Stanley Jones from the United Methodist Church was a notable missionary preacher to the Indian sub-continent and people often said that listening to him was like trying to drink from a fire hydrant. This hyper energetic preacher delivered thousands of sermons and always pressed himself to the limit, even to the detriment of his own health.

Jones was once preaching on Hebrews 9:26—"But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself."—and commented, "All history moved on to this climactic moment when we saw God sacrificing himself on a cross. This was the climax of history and the climax of revelation ... this is the climax; this is the Voice, all else is echo ... So my contact as a Christian missionary ... has led me more and more to the cross."

All God-centred preaching flows from and to the cross.