

EDITORIAL

An article in *Leadership* magazine suggests that 'postmodernism will only elevate the importance of Christian preaching... where the truth is proclaimed confidently' in a way which is both interesting, imaginative and interacts with people's lives. Yet the place of preaching in our modern culture is constantly being criticised. The Chambers dictionary defines preaching as 'giving advice in an offensive, tedious or obtrusive manner'. Preachers face the challenge of communicating the good news of Jesus Christ in the most culturally relevant method possible in order to change lives.

First and foremost we must be biblical. Yet, as we immerse ourselves in Scripture we will discover that Scripture communicates primarily by means of story. Expository preaching, which so often stresses the proclamation of propositional truth in order to instruct people, has often neglected the narrative sections of the Bible, which account for seventy-five percent of the Old Testament and the Gospels. The relevance of this to preaching has been grasped by Calvin Miller who points out that 'typical congregations nourished on years of television drama and popular video releases have been groomed to relate to the narrative sermon'.

The fact that people are used to picture and images within a television age implies that if we are to make connections between the biblical text and our world we must use illustrations and stories, not only to keep people's attention, but to earth the application of Scripture in daily living. Propositional statements may be essential for sound exegesis but preaching is more than bare instruction. Preaching is intended to inspire. Stories allow the preacher to make connection between the biblical text and the nitty-gritty happenings of our lives. We need to recapture the attitude of Jesus who 'did not speak to them except in parables'.

If we are truly biblical, then we will also follow the suggestion of writers such as Walter Brueggemann that there is, within the biblical canon, both testimony and counter-testimony to the message of God's grace. The story of the Bible is made up of many individual and corporate stories, some very positive in the way in which they speak of God, and others, with a darker tone, speaking out their own experiences of fearful faith, of experiencing God as hidden, of suffering without seeing any purpose or meaning in the experience. Our interpretation of the Scriptures

must listen to all these voices and allow the voices to speak into the experiences of members of our congregations who often struggle with issues of faith and doubt.

Our preaching will also be personal. Over a century ago Phillip Brooks said that 'a disembodied preacher cannot credibly proclaim the incarnate Christ'. The Psalter is one of the most personal sections of Scripture, where God has revealed himself to us through the everyday experience of his people, as they express their faith as well as their fear and indicate that the difficulties of daily life are part of their own spiritual pilgrimage. Let us remember that there are more Psalms of Lament in the Psalter than there are Psalms of Worship. Obviously the danger of emphasising the personal nature of preaching is that the pulpit becomes an ecclesiastical equivalent to a Ricky Lake show on Channel 4. However, if the preacher is not to become invisible six days of the week and incomprehensible on the seventh then our preaching must be an authentic expression of our own experience of the grace of God.

Thirdly, our preaching will be practical. Scripture is a rich resource of material, which is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was in the first. The teaching of Jesus on issues of wealth and materialism or marriage and divorce are of immense importance to discipleship in our world. As preachers we need to work hard, not only in our understanding how the text of Scripture was interpreted in ancient Israel and the Christian communities of Asia Minor but how it is to be applied to the contemporary situation of Aberdeen, Alloa and Abbeyhill and make our application of Scripture explicit. Haddon Robinson makes this point well when he says that 'early in the sermon, the listeners should realise that the pastor is talking about them – application starts in the introduction not in the conclusion'. Only preaching which is biblical will be authentic but only relevant preaching can be classified as being biblical.

Fourthly, our preaching will be public and prophetic. A visit to Edinburgh will normally include a sightseeing trip down the Royal Mile, the road that leads from Holyrood Palace to Edinburgh Castle. Just below St Giles, the kirk of John Knox, there is the old *merket* cross – the place where people used to meet to gossip, to hear public proclamations, to witness public executions, to buy and sell their goods. Looking east you can almost catch a sight of the Royal Palace. Looking west you can see the back door to the new Scottish Parliament. Looking south you walk a few yards to the Law Courts. Looking north you are face-to-face with the City Chambers. Right in the heart of Edinburgh – old and new – the *merket* cross is positioned at the heart of the city.

One of the dangers of preaching exclusively within faith communities is that we engage in the in-house language of a ghetto that has few lines of communication open to the outside world. David Tracy speaks of the importance of affirming 'the authentically *public* character of *all* theology'. We preach to people who find themselves in the arena of public debate, locally, nationally and even internationally. We have the opportunity, indeed the obligation, to encourage them to see the impact of the truth of the gospel in their daily lives. This will give them the confidence that our talk about God can contribute to what is going on in their world and to the pressing issues of justice facing people in society today.

The Lausanne Covenant challenges churches to be 'deeply rooted in Christ and closely related to their culture'. It's a principle which we readily accept when we send missionaries to work in foreign cultures. They learn the language and customs of the people to whom they will minister and yet, it is a concept which we rarely take on board within our contemporary context. If the church is to communicate the good news of Jesus to our secular society we must make the connections, in our preaching, between the faith we profess and life in the world.

Finally, we must ensure that our preaching is pastoral in motivation. We are called to be vehicles of grace to hurting human beings. The words of Isaiah rush out from Jesus' mouth to our hearts: 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release for captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to let the broken victims go free, to declare the year of the Lord's favour.'

As preachers we are called to maintain a lover's quarrel with the Church. Martin Luther, in characteristic earthiness, said, 'The church is like Noah's ark, were it not for the storm without, we would be overwhelmed by the stench within.' The church, like all of us, is *simil justis et peccator*, simultaneously just and sinful, in the world and of it all at once. It is the fallible, tainted, crumbling, broken, blessed community of Christ's church. Yet it is Christ's church and he loved it so much that he died for it. Despite the way people may mistreat and misrepresent our ministries, if they know that in our preaching we truly love them, then they will be people who will believe in us, stand with us, and hold us close all along the journey.