

EDITORIAL – THE TYRANNY OF PREACHING!

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Am I the only minister who regrets the failure of the French Revolution to establish a ten day week? As it is Sundays come round every seventh day, with the result that every seven days many, if not most, of us have to have two new sermons to deliver. Whereas for members of our congregations Bank Holidays are a bonus, for us they can be a menace - the working week is reduced, yet we are expected to produce the same quantity of goods (i.e. sermons) at the end of the week, as well as cope with all the other demands of ministry that come our way. How much easier life would have been if we had had nine days to prepare for the tenth - and how much longer our five weeks of annual holiday would then have been!

Perhaps not surprisingly Donald Coggan, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, has described the task of being a minister of the word a "joyful tyranny". The production of sermons on a regular basis is hard work. "Preaching is a tyranny", says Coggan, "Sunday comes round with an inexorable regularity and makes demands which must needs be met". However, he reminds us that the tyranny of preaching involves more than simply producing something to fill in the required twenty minute or so sermon slot in the service. Preaching is also a tyranny in the sense that "we know that we must not offer to the Lord a second-rate offering; only the best we can produce will do. I think of the demands which this makes on a man's freshness and devotion and reading and thinking and praying. A tyranny indeed".

But, thank God, it is also, declares Coggan, "a joyful tyranny - who would be without it who has been called and commissioned? I suppose a mother finds the care of her family in the early years demanding and tyrannical. But deprive her of her brood and you have the epitome of bereavement and misery". How true that is! Sermon preparation is a demanding business - but the delivery itself is so very rewarding. It is a high privilege to be a minister of the word.

Whilst acknowledging the very real privilege of the minister's call, the fact remains that fulfilling that calling can be burdensome. There are times when the load needs to be lightened.

In some churches that load can be lightened by sharing the preaching with others. Larger churches may have more than one minister. Alternatively there may be lay-people who have trained as Readers or lay-preachers, who are keen and willing to help. However, there are occasions when it is not easy to share the load. What then?

One possibility is to preach an old sermon. There is no reason why a well-prepared sermon need be restricted to one outing. I have, for instance, a well-travelled sermon on Rev 21 which has been preached well over thirty times - in places as varied as Bristol and Brixton, Budapest and Kiev! I also have sermons which have been preached on more than one occasion in one particular church. True, the sermons have normally undergone certain adjustments - often major revamping - not least because the immediate context changed.

At one stage in my ministry when I was a solo pastor, I used to preach two old sermons on the first Sunday after I returned from my summer holiday. These were not any old sermons. Two or three weeks before going on holiday I would circulate a list of all the sermons I had preached in the past year. I headed the list with these words: "To my loving critics" and wrote, "I would be most grateful if you would list in order of preference the four sermons you would most like to hear again. From these I will select the two that come 'top of the pops' and preach them on the Sunday I am back from holiday". This was often a salutary experience - not least because to my chagrin I discovered that to many of my people my sermons titles (together with their texts) meant very little.

This 'preaching again' can be a positive experience. Jack Robinson, a gifted Southern Baptist preacher, who used to repeat his sermons on the first two Sundays after his vacation, listed the following advantages: "For one thing, the preacher can mull over the results of the poll while on vacation and while planning his future pulpit schedule. Also it gives the pulpiteer an opportunity to get back from the vacation trip and into the entire church program with its enormous load of responsibilities before having to spend the long tedious hours of writing out a discourse.

"Of what value us all this to the congregation? Generally speaking, attentiveness on the part of the congregation will result. Throughout the year, people especially helped by a particular message will try to remember it to include it among their choices in the future.

"Above all, such a plan lets the church membership know that fine preaching is the result of laborious effort on the pastor's part. The man in the pew will become aware of a constant desire on the minister's part to improve his preaching and to meet the varied needs of his people."

Preaching can be limited. In my tradition generally a sermon is not a sermon unless twenty minutes have elapsed. However, there are times when they can be shortened - and are welcomed for their brevity!

As I look at my present preaching plan I see that the year ends with a Guest Service on Boxing Day entitled "Thank God for 1999". On that occasion my sermon will be no more than five minutes in length. Much of the service will be given over to four-minute 'testimonies' in which a wide range of people will be telling us why they are grateful to God for the year that is past. Who those people will be, I do not yet know. What I do know is that their contributions will be eagerly listened to - and will lighten my preaching load after a busy Christmas!

Last year, when on the last Sunday morning of the year we thanked God for 1998, we had a most moving service. A number of people gave 'testimonies', each linked to a verse of Scripture. One, for instance, spoke of the joy she experienced at her daughter's wedding, another of the strength received in bereavement; one person spoke of faith discovered, another of faith renewed; one spoke of their call to missionary service, another looked back over the fifty years which had passed since his ordination; while I on the basis of James 1.2-4 encouraged the congregation in the briefest of sermons to "Thank God - even for troubles!".

What has all this to do with *Ministry Today*? First, *Ministry Today* is a forum for the sharing of experiences - things that worked, and also perhaps things which did not. Second, *Ministry Today* aims to provide a stimulus to the mind and heart, which in turn will hopefully bless the minds and hearts of those who have to listen to many of us. So, happy reading!