

Churchman

EDITORIAL

The Hardest Job of All

I was ordained deacon fifty years ago this year. In the time since then, I have carried some heavy responsibilities, including principal of a theological college and archbishop in a metropolitan diocese. But, in God's providence, I have never done the hardest job of all.

That is, I have never been the chief minister of a church.

It has always been the most demanding ministerial position and it is now becoming even harder. This is particularly the case if the minister sees that preaching is central to the role of pastor. Of course, the minister is not the head of the Church; that role belongs to the Lord. Of course, the minister is not the chief Pastor, that role is also Christ's. But the minister is a servant of the Head of the church and a pastor in obedience to the chief Pastor. And integral to the pastoral role is the teaching of God's word to which we may add the ministry of the sacraments as visible words and the ministry of prayer through which the Holy Spirit brings life through our feeble efforts.

There are a large variety of tasks and obligations which fill the life of the ordinary minister, from planning small groups to chairing meetings to putting the coffee cups away at the end of the day. In some churches, especially ones with teams, the vicar is nowadays more akin to a manager than to a minister. And there are many relationships which are formed and must be tended. But it is preaching which concerns me, for here the minister stands and publicly confesses the faith which is his faith for all to hear. Here is the test and the business of ministry at its most obvious.

If this is not done well, little else can flourish.

And here is the problem. For it is very hard to preach well over many years in the same place to the same group of people. It is relatively easy to be the well-known platform preacher, or the itinerant who comes, sees and conquers. But real preaching is usually done in churches of less than one hundred adults, with stable congregations, Sunday by Sunday by Sunday, for years on end.

This is a task requiring intellectual and spiritual resources of the very highest order. Amidst all the demands of a church, not least a small to medium church, the pastor must find time to take an ancient text, written in foreign languages, to wrestle with its meaning, to interpret it, to get ready to explain it, and to think of how to relate it to the actual people in the congregation. There is also the task of personal submission, for it is no good preaching from a text to which you have not yourself submitted. But then, the true pastor will wish to see the people of God also submit to the word of God so that the Lord may truly rule his church.

One of the chief improvements in contemporary church life is that in the last few decades there has been a distinct swing towards expository preaching. Expository preaching involves the preacher taking a passage of Scripture rather than a single text or theme, and giving sustained attention to explaining the unfolding of the passage in its context. Often this is done with passages taken consecutively Sunday by Sunday until a whole biblical book is treated. Of course, that is not the pattern everywhere, and some have tried it and then adopted other methods. But, if we expect Christian people to read the Scriptures consecutively day by day, it is surely a good thing that proper reading accompanied by the summons to faith and obedience is modelled from the pulpit.

In itself, expository preaching demands significant preparation. It is always easier simply to preach on a single text or a theme. Context then matters little, and the accidental phrasing of a group of words may be taken to mean anything the preacher wants them to mean. It is far simpler to achieve than the whole business of researching a biblical book, understanding the narrative or flow of the argument and exegeting the words and phrases. This requires no ordinary skills.

But much more is required to fulfil the task adequately. We are accustomed to speak of the “application” of sermons. The absence of such “applications” means that the sermon sounds more like a lecture than a preaching of the word. But I wonder whether this is altogether a good expression. It seems to suggest that we can interpret a text and then search around for an application to be added to it to make it relevant. In my experience, there was a time when the application of every sermon was, “Come to Jesus in order to be saved.” In my world, this is no longer the case; instead the constant application, no matter what part of Scripture is being expounded, is “Be assured of God’s love, because Jesus died for you on the cross.” Both exhortations are central to the gospel and powerful; but constant repetition in the absence of the riches available throughout

Scripture trivialises what should be glorious and starves the people of God of their proper food.

The word of God is always relevant; we do not have to make it relevant with an “application.” It may be better to ask ourselves, in our private reading as well as in our public preaching, what is the *implication* of the text rather than the application. What do we need to draw from it in order to help us see where the path of faith and obedience lies, what the Lord is saying to us. And, rather than to speak of “application,” we should surely think in categories such as exhortation, encouragement and edification (1 Corinthians 14:3). Surely this is what the Scriptures offer us in our private reading; then surely that is what they offer us in the public reading and preaching. However, the task of seeking, seeing and drawing out the implications with appropriate exhortation requires considerable skill, thought, prayer and resource.

Contrast preaching with lecturing in a seminary. The technical skills of the lecturer need to be of a high order and based on a research and learning. Not surprisingly, our seminaries are staffed with people who have worked at PhD level and have specialised in their subject. In fact it is not uncommon for such specialists to be expert in merely part of the Bible such as the Gospels or Prophetic literature.

It is obviously a highly demanding ministry. But, in a key way, lecturing is not as difficult as preaching. The lecturer speaks to different classes year by year, holds the attention of the students by reminding them that they will be examined on the subject and does not need high levels of presentational skill. Nor do they normally give as much sustained attention to encouragement, exhortation and edification.

Indeed, my own habits as a lecturer and an itinerant preacher make me aware of how difficult preaching over a period in the same church must be in comparison. For, like it or not, we all develop habits of presentation (three points all beginning with the letter “p”), and habits of thought (“Let me mention again how western individualism is alien to the gospel”) and habits of anecdote (“Have I ever told you about the time when...”), which would require constant development in intellect and godliness to refresh and renew.

Parish preachers do not have any of the luxuries of the academic. In the time allotted—say 20–25 minutes—the aim is to expound a passage of the Bible and draw out its implications. In order to do so, they cannot be an intellectual specialist. The preacher must find resources in the entire curriculum of the seminary. Each passage has to be treated in its immediate context, in its canonical context, in the light of the catholic tradition of

interpretation and in a way which addresses the modern culture as well as local conditions. In short, the sermon must be shaped by exegesis, biblical theology, doctrine, church history and philosophy. The preacher's learning needs to encompass these fields and draw them together to create a single verbal expression of limited duration.

Furthermore, the listeners cannot be aware of the elements which have gone into the dish set before them. The sermon is a unified whole, in the service of the text and drawing forth its meaning and implications so that the Lord of the church may rule it with his word. And this to be done week in, week out over a ministry which may well last many years in the same place.

Consider, for example, the role of doctrine in preaching.

By "doctrine" I understand the message of Scripture taken as a whole. The study of doctrine seeks to answer the question, "What does the Bible teach?" It assumes that Scripture is a unity and that the fundamental interpretative principle is that Scripture interprets Scripture. That being so, doctrine creates an integrated whole in which the different topics are seen to interlock; the doctrine of sin and the doctrine of salvation and the doctrine of the Spirit's work cannot be treated as though they are independent of one another. Naturally, the study of doctrine will include the study of historical theology so that the witness of those who have read the Bible before us is given its due. Likewise, we need to hear the voices of those contemporary with us as they refine and explain both the Scriptures and culture.

Although we often create different disciplines called ethics and apologetics and pastoral theology in a seminary curriculum, these too could be called "doctrine" in that they are dedicated to exploring and integrating the teaching of Scripture in a particular field and are not (or should not) be done without reference to the larger narrative which constitutes doctrine proper.

Now think of how this should operate in preaching. It is true that a passage is chosen and expounded with the implications drawn out by way of exhortation, encouragement, rebuke and edification. But no passage stands in isolation. It is part of the canon, and Scripture interprets Scripture. Doctrine, with all the learning at its disposal, provides a shorthand way of giving the passage its canonical context. Thus the mention of "God" at any point does not mean any God or any variation which we may wish to invent. Consciously or not, the preacher is using the teaching of the whole Bible to illumine the teaching of any part of it. The God of Genesis 1 is the triune God revealed finally to us in the New Testament. And the witness

of the catholic tradition of our church assures us that this is the case. The same thing could be said about the doctrine of sin, where the Reformed testimony (as expressed in the 39 Articles) should save the preacher from expounding the text to semi-pelagian effect.

Of course, it is also the case that the individual passages of Scripture play a reciprocal role with the doctrine of the whole. For doctrine cannot swamp the voice of the specific text, but must be subtle enough to incorporate it in its account of the teaching of Scripture. However, any reading of the Bible, whether by an individual or a church which does not take the doctrine found in Scripture as a whole into account is bound to become a misreading. And any preaching of the Bible which neglects the major ethical and apologetic implications of what we are reading is likely to end up as repetitious and trivial.

That is why I have suggested that the task of the preacher is the hardest of all. But this is not intended to discourage, only to encourage good habits for our denominations and for pastors themselves. For this is not an age when we can accept a laity poorly educated in the ways of the Lord. We are increasingly faced with an ignorant and hostile context. Our Christian brothers and sisters need far more by way of Christian education than we have been accustomed to give them, indeed far more than preaching on its own can provide. But good preaching remains foundational to the educational efforts of the churches.

What does this mean?

First, for the churches: there can be no substitute for the best possible selection and education of those who will occupy the highly responsible role of pastor.

It is startling, and depressing, to observe the differences which are emerging between the formal education of school teachers and the education of clergy. In the western context known to me, we expect that a history teacher at a secondary school level will be at least a university graduate, with a 3–4 year degree, with a speciality in history, and a further education degree lasting up to two years, making six years training in all. In other contexts, the length of time may be four years full-time study.

The analogy is not exact, of course, since teaching teenagers is not the same as teaching adults. On the other hand, the task of the preacher has inbuilt difficulties which are well beyond those experienced by the school teacher, not least the business of speaking to the same audience over a lengthy period of time. Furthermore, the hostility to the faith now experienced and the loss of clerical authority so evident, makes this a calling which can easily daunt. Why then is our education less rigorous?

I remember a conversation with a faculty member of one of our well-known theological institutions. My question was, how did the life of the college demonstrate that it was dedicated to the task of preparing preachers? Smiling at my ignorance, he likened the College to a local church where all the members are gifted but in different ways, and he assured me that the role of the institution was to help people develop their gifting whatever they were. It did not exist merely to help train preachers. I guess that the results bore out his conviction.

Unless a seminary is geared to producing preachers, it is failing in its task. I have spoken of academics as those in a different role to the parish clergy. However, it is also true that unless the faculty are themselves preachers and pastors, they will hardly be able to shape the lives of the future pastors effectively. The pastoral role is more than preaching. Not least, it involves personal godliness and submission to the will of the Lord. It calls on us to show the capacity to manage our family well. It requires leadership and self-sacrifice and personal care and hospitality. But the capacity to preach lies at its heart. And preaching demands high order skills in presentation and in content.

It can hardly be effective without an education in the Bible—its languages, its structure and its books, its narrative, its topics, the history of interpretation in word and deed, in philosophy, and in the implication of all this for men and women in the modern world. Such an education is not cheap in time or money. Properly done, it will be more demanding than virtually any other degree on offer. It will not automatically produce preachers, any more than a degree in education guarantees to produce teachers. But we can hardly do without it. The failure to provide will produce a generation of nice clergy wickedly prey to every wind of doctrine. And we need faculty able and keen to do this themselves.

Second, for the pastors: there can be no substitute for taking on the responsibility for continued self-education and renewal. The best education in the world will be to no avail without the active participation of pastors in their own ongoing formation. Here is where a journal such as *Churchman* fits in, with articles designed to challenge, inform and stimulate and reviews of books to guide reading. We would be alarmed if a doctor we consulted about our health was lazy and ineffectual in keeping up with medical knowledge; so too for those in the clerical office. We too need to keep up to date on scholarship. Unfortunately, however, there is such an experience as discouragement, and there is also the sin of clerical laziness.

Indeed, the pastor needs to commit to constant learning by listening, observing, reading and thinking. We pastors are professional talkers and we sometimes come to believe that we have the right to speak and the wisdom always to speak well. In fact, as James says, in a marvellously paradoxical phrase, we should be “quick to hear” (1:19). There are some things which you will only learn at the bedside of a dying person. There is some anguish you will only feel in listening to a parent whose child has abandoned the faith in word and deed. There are truths which you will only learn by reading the great authors. There are moments when a teenager will help you see what is happening all around you. As the proverbial warning has it, woe to the pastor who is, “invisible during the week and incomprehensible on Sunday.”

There is no substitute, however, for constant interaction with God’s word. We approach it with our hearts set to faith and obedience and our lives manifesting the godliness to which we are summoned. But this does not stop us puzzling over it, arguing with it, agonising over it. Our familiarity with Scripture cannot exempt us from being rebuked and challenged by it and trying to see why the law and the gospel actually make a better story than the one with which the secular world has imbued us. The Bible is not an easy book; any thought that we have tamed it suggests that we have stopped reading it in any meaningful way. It has shaped our culture but it is not at the beck and call of our culture, less so now than ever.

If the congregation comes to church knowing already what the vicar is going to say and how it will be said, no matter what the Bible reading is, this suggests that the personal task of seeking the Lord has been abandoned and that the pastor is not feeding the sheep.

The vicar has the hardest job in the world. It can only be done by those who, like Jacob, struggle with the Lord and bear the marks of the struggle in their person.

In the end, great preaching is a product of great faith.

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