

Re - Imagining Preaching as Process Part 1

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Reading Krish Kandiah thoughtful article relating to effective preaching under the title 'Reimagining Biblical Preaching' got me thinking that perhaps effective preaching needs to be 're-imagined' in our minds as less of an event at which the preacher performs and more as a process in which the preacher participates. If we could begin to think about preaching this way we might do a great service to the church of Christ.

The process or image I have in mind is that of a three way conversation initiated by the Holy Spirit. bringing preacher, congregation and scripture together in order to hear and understand and interpret the purposes of God for his people at a given time.

How we discern the authenticity and application of this conversation is at the crux of Dr Kandiah's reflection. This I think is one of the great challenges facing the church today as we seek to communicate in a world where the media or medium has the potential to become the message and indeed re -image the message. There is an interesting discussion to follow through here, perhaps not in this article, but there is a need to reflect on the image the preacher or communicator presents, through their image and lifestyle. All this will impact on those who are decoding and receiving and participating in the meaning of the message.

Encouraging preachers and Christian broadcasters, publisher and the Christian public to be accountable and reflective and to evaluate what they hear see and endorse, must surely become an essential understanding of what it means to exercise the Spirit's gift of discernment. The suggestion that too many of us who claim to be Christian have an increasing diminishing understanding of Scripture is no doubt alarming and makes the idea of evaluation all the more essential.

Krish's vision of engaging people at a deeper level with the scripture certainly seems to me to be an exciting prospect. If Bible Fresh helps to do this I'm all for it. Finding ways to re-engage the church with a new confidence in the scripture that is not condescending or dismissive of those with different views must surely be a key objective in the whole notion of mission and cultural engagement. I notice that the Bishop of London has been applauding the work that is being established through the Mellitus College. This is a new theological educational experiment centred around training in the local church. The Bishop of Chelmsford comments 'The establishment of St Mellitus College is an exciting development for Chelmsford Diocese. It offers us new opportunities to develop theological and ministerial education to assist us in the mission of the Gospel in our time.' If we could have more theologically literate church members we might also have ministers and pastors being challenged to 'up their game' when it comes to preaching.

From the point of view of those of us in the Church of Scotland the very thing the Bishop of London has helped establish, we once had in the Church of Scotland. It was called St Colm's College. Unfortunately we closed it about ten years ago, purely for financial reasons, and many still mourn its passing. Perhaps this new initiative in London will help inspire a revival of such a college again Scotland.

In reply to those reading who have doubts about the need to evaluate the effectiveness of preaching. I'm aware that the whole area of evaluation brings before us all kinds of moral issues including honesty and integrity.

Christians often find difficulty when it comes to evaluating the work of their Church or indeed the preaching of their minister. Most people are reluctant to cause hurt and injury, so they accept less than the best. This view was borne out in research carried out by Mark Greene in an article published a number of years ago entitled, 'Is Anyone Listening [1]' he draws attention to the plight of preaching.

In this unique survey Greene, reveals that 84% of the people polled, commented explicitly on the relevance and application of sermons, 47% said that the preaching was marked by a lack of relevance, depth, or challenge. They also commented that there was no methodology that allowed them feedback as members of a congregation. Greene concludes that British preachers have inherited a method which begins with the biblical text and works outwards to the people, with no mechanism for feedback.[2]

The question arises, is it right to evaluate preaching using the communication standards of the world? There are those who believe preaching is the domain of the Holy Spirit and cannot be measured by the standards of the world. Certainly, the Apostle Paul speak of himself as one who came to the Corinthians with much trepidation and he refers to preaching as foolishness in the eyes of the world.

There is much for us to consider when we begin to discuss evaluation of [Christian communication. Pierre Babin, commenting on the core of Christian communication refers to it as a gift.

For Christians, communication is not just a simple psychological movement inherent in human nature. It is a gift. It is not discovered or invented., but received. It is certainly possible to learn about communication in books and in sessions involving group dynamics, but this does not take us beyond the level of human functioning. Christian communication may be based on observable psychological and social phenomena, but it ultimately goes back to an ?elsewhere,??It is from God that the Christian receives a certain gift of communication, and that gift is both revelation and an original impulse.[3] .

It seems to me that there is an important principle of accountability that runs through the whole of the scriptures. Cain is accountable for Abel, the prophets will be held accountable for the message they bring. In Corinthians we are told that our work will be tested to see if it will with stand the test of fire. [4] The danger is when we begin to evaluate the delivery and message of another we might well do so out of conceit or pride. Evaluating the sermon must never be done out of a sense of competition but rather in a spirit which seeks to encourage the preacher to fulfil his/her calling. Paul warns the Corinthians to be careful that they do not judge another?s work. He uses the analogy of the seeds being planted and watered by various preachers, He emphasises that it is God who gives the increase.[5] There is a balance to be struck. It seems to me that we need to recognise that preaching is most certainly a gift from God but it is a skill which we can hone and refine. We need to be continually evaluating our performance so that we can be better informed as preachers and teachers. Daniel Aleshire , is quoted in Learning Preaching, he suggests that the most helpful way to evaluate preaching is to use what he calls formative evaluation.

Formative evaluation? has a way of getting issues into the open, helping persons identify directions, and providing counsel rather than judgement.[6]

It must be possible to work out a theory of evaluation that involves preacher, faith community and scripture engaging with the interactive power of the Holy Spirit to enable each to listen to on another. When this does happen preaching becomes the most dynamic expression of the word of God for the people of God at any given moment. In the next post I think I?ll make an attempt at analysing the role that each participant plays in the conversation. I?d be glad to hear your comments and perhaps suggestions.

[1] Greene, Mark, (1997) ? Is Anyone Listening?, A.N.V.L., Vol.14, No4 p285

[2] ibid. p294

[3] Babin, Pierre, (1991)The New era in Christian Communication, Fortress Press, Minneapolis

[4] ibid. ! Cornithians 3. 11-15

[5] GoodNews Bible, (1971) 1Corinthians , 3.5ff, Bible society Collins

[6] Wardlaw, D.M.(ed.) (1989) Learning Preaching, understanding and participating in the process, Academy of Homiletics, Lincoln, Illinois.

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