

Preparing to Preach

1. Feeling the Flesh

Here we spend time studying the details of the text and considering the meaning of those details.

I want to stress as we start that initially, and in the first few steps of this process, we are concentrating *not on the sermon* we are going to preach *but on the text* we are going to preach from. It's very hard for some of us to resist the temptation to be immediately looking for a message, or for three points or whatever, but going down that path too early will lead us into dangerous territory for we may start forming a sermon in our minds before we are really clear as to the meaning and message of the text.

The first few steps are, strictly speaking, all to do with *exegesis* – what someone has described as 'discovering what is there' and ensuring accurate interpretation; only then do we move to focus on *homiletics* – 'displaying what is there' and striving for clear proclamation.

This first stage in which we simply focus on getting to know our chosen text involves six steps.

a. Selection

It's rather stating the obvious but the first thing a preacher has to do is decide which text or passage of Scripture he is going to preach from. Situations and circumstances vary so greatly that it is impossible to give advice here that will address them all. However, wherever and whenever we have the opportunity, we should seek to handle God's Word in a way that is faithful to God's Word and that involves systematic exposition. There will be times when we are given a passage to preach from or a theme to preach on and here, unless we have very good reason to do otherwise, it has always been my practice to accept these as being from the Lord and as perhaps giving me an opportunity to tackle a part of Scripture or a subject that I am not so familiar with.

Often we are asked to preach on a 'one off' basis and may have to choose a 'random' text, but even here there are surprising opportunities for preaching systematically. What I have done when involved in an itinerant ministry is to impose a series on myself so that where I have been free to choose the subject of my choice I have preached through a book or a section of a book in a whole range of places. I myself have worked systematically through it in my preparation and that has kept me more disciplined and closer to the text.

Having identified the passage we are going to preach on, the next step is

b. Gestation

My dictionary describes gestation as "*being carried in the womb between conception and birth*"¹ and that's precisely and accurately what we need to do with the passage of Scripture before we begin the process of seeing it come to life in our preaching.

This is all about becoming intimately familiar with our chosen text. What we need to do, as early as possible, is to immerse ourselves in the passage or, more accurately, let the passage become immersed in and part of us. You may prefer to call this stage meditating or ruminating. This word actually comes from pastoral life and is what cows do - they ruminate - or as we more often describe it, they chew the cud. Hour after hour they wander about or lie around chewing on what they have bitten from the ground until the grass gets into their digestive system.

¹ Readers Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder 1990 London

That's what we need to do at this stage with God's Word, we need to chew it over; over and over until it truly becomes part of us and we know every nuance and emphasis as well as every word of that passage.

Here's how Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, expressed it, "Get saturated with the Gospel. I always find that I can preach best when I can manage to lie asoak in my text. I like to get a text, and find out its meanings and bearings and so on, and then after I have bathed in it, I delight to lie down in it, and let it soak into me"²

Geoffrey Grogan, my former Bible College Principal, speaking about the need to get familiar with the Bible generally says, "Turn off the television and spend several hours each evening with your Bible open, and make a start TODAY. Use a good sturdy Bible, probably with a hard cover, with good marginal references, and any method - marking, taking notes, circling in red ink any marginal reference that seems particularly significant - any method at all that will impress the inspired text on your memory, your imagination and your heart. Get inside the Bible and ask God to enable you to get it inside you. I have a friend who is 95 and whose mind is absolutely stored with poetry. He tells me that he has never deliberately learned a poem in his life, but that he loves poetry so much and has read the same poems so many times that the text of them has become rooted in his mind. Follow his example as far as the Bible is concerned."

In a comment on my preaching blog the other day, someone made this comment, "Very often one has to wade into a text up to one's knees and slosh around a bit before the structure begins to become apparent." That's the same idea.

What we are talking about here is a stage at which we just absorb the text or passage of Scripture into our minds and whole beings. Let me give you some practical advice on this

- i. Know your text as early as possible
As soon as you can, identify the passage and begin to chew it over and meditate on it. This will vary for us in our different situations. If you are in a regular preaching ministry, week by week, working through a section or a book, you will know very quickly what the next passage is to be. When I was in pastoral ministry, I used to make it my practice on my first working day of the week, which was usually Tuesday, just to immerse myself in the text I was to preach on the following Sunday so that for the rest of the week, either consciously or subconsciously, I was chewing it over. Sometimes in my present situation I can know two or three weeks ahead what I am going to be preaching on and it's never too early to start the gestation process. John Stott calls this stage "subconscious incubation".
- ii. Ruminant on it as often as possible
 - read, reread and re-read it again and again
 - record it on a CD or tape, or use a pre-recorded version and play it while driving the car or on your mp3 player as you walk around the house or do the gardening
 - say it out loud to yourself again and again
 - absorb it in any way you can
 - initially be careful not to get too close to the detail
 - get the big picture, feel the flow, sense the rhythm
 - if it's a manageable sized portion, try and memorise it, though you will sometimes find, as Geoff Grogan illustrated from his friend, that you will sometimes find yourself memorising Scripture just by delighting in it and immersing yourself in it
 - do all this in a conscious spirit and attitude of prayer

² Spurgeon C H 1960 All Round Ministry p124 London Banner of Truth

c. Observation

This is when we really begin to get down to some serious work and study the text.

Observation is all about seeing *what is there*, and this involves looking at the words of the text and identifying

- unusual words,
- repeated words or phrases
- theological words
- link words

Let's take a specific example and over the coming months we'll work at it and build a sermon from it so that we're not just talking in the abstract. Let's take Paul's glorious prayer in Ephesians 3v14-21.

Different people will find different ways to do this but I would strongly encourage you to arm yourself with pen and paper and some colour highlighters. Firstly, I would write or type the passage out on one page of paper so that I am actually removing it from the familiar setting of the page of the Bible, and also from the non-inspired structure of verse divisions and numberings. I would then go over it carefully, identifying the key words and phrases – words like "for this reason" (a link phrase), "riches of his glory" "strengthened with power", "inner being" (all interesting expressions and clearly significant) "so that" (another link phrase), "dwell", "that you", "rooted and grounded", "fullness of God" etc. I would use highlighters or some other means of marking and you will need to come up with your own personal system. I circle link words or phrases, and use different colours to highlight what, on first impressions I think are key words and what are words I need to do some research about to make sure I grasp the real meaning and significance. Some of these, like repeated words and link words will have become more obvious to you because, as you have memorised it and spoken it out loud over and over again, you have become aware of these things. You may end up adding others to the list and you may not explore and focus on all the ones you have identified.

I would then write each verse out separately on separate pages of paper, giving me room to work and I would again highlight the key words and expressions etc.

Using your own system, underline, highlight or circle these words as the ones that need special attention, so that you're ready for the fourth step of his process

Having observed, closely studied and seen what's in the text, the next step is

d. Interrogation

If observation is all about seeing what is there, interrogation is about finding out *why it is there*. Here we approach the text like a detective following leads and looking at the evidence in front of us. We need to ask six basic questions of the passage and its contents, though you won't necessarily get answers to all six questions from every passage you interrogate

- who?
 - who is the author?
 - who is speaking and to whom?
 - who are all the people involved in this passage?
 - who are the people to whom this passage applies today
- what?
 - what happened?
 - what ideas are expressed?

- iii. when?
 - when did this take place?
 - what is the historical background and context?
(for example, many of the Psalms of David come alive when read in the light of their historical settings which is often, though not always, given at the head of the Psalm, e.g. Psalm 51; Galatians can only really be understood in the light of the particular circumstances the Galatian Christians were experiencing)
 - who was in power at the time? (e.g. Assyria, Rome)
 - where does this come in the big story-line of the Bible?
- iv. where?
 - where does this take place?
 - what is the geographical setting?
 - what is the background to any places and cities mentioned?
- v. why?
 - why did this happen?
 - what is the purpose of the teaching or event?
- vi. how?
 - how is the truth taught or the event related?
 - what genre of literature is used here?

e. Interpretation

Observation asks 'what is there?' and interrogation 'why is it there?' Interpretation asks '*what does it mean?*' What do these words actually mean? This is absolutely crucial if we are going to be faithful preacher of Gods Word. We want to teach and preach what God has said, and believing in the inspiration and verbal inerrancy of Scripture we come to Scripture confident that we have in front of us God's words.

"If a rich uncle left his huge inheritance to the person named in his will, and you knew that you were that person, you would be very zealous to see that the court interpreted his will in a way consonant with the author's intended meaning. Or if you were desperately sick with a terminal disease, and you heard of a doctor who knew the cure, and he wrote down a health regimen for you, you would do everything in your power to understand what the doctor meant in his health regimen and do whatever the regimen called for. How much more should we....regard the Word of God to be precious and most worthy of study!"³

The task of the preacher at this point is to discover the meaning of words and make sure we explain and apply them correctly, and the correct meaning of the word is the original meaning of the word; what the writer meant not what the reader wants it to mean. Language is a living thing and the meaning of many words has changed over the years. We need to work hard to make sure we know what the author of Scripture had in mind when he wrote the precise words in the passage we are studying.

This is where we need to use what is called the Grammatical-Historical Method. We need to discover the literal meaning so that we can explain what a biblical writer meant, not what his words could mean outside their biblical context. We do this by discerning what the original biblical writers meant through analysing the background and grammatical features of what they said. This will keep us from fanciful interpretations and applications of Scripture.

"if anything in Scripture can mean whatever our imaginations suggest rather than what Scripture determines, then our opinions become as authoritative as the statements of God and we can make the Bible say anything we want. If we allow our imaginations to

³ Tom Steller, Pastor for Missions and Leadership Development, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis 1999

determine biblical meanings, then the water from the rock could represent baptism, or the water from Christ's side, or the water on which Peter walked by faith, or the crystal sea on which the saved will gather, or the fountain that should go in the new sanctuary's foyer. If Scripture does not determine meaning, ultimately Scripture has no meaning"⁴.

Let's take an example in Isaiah 40. The opening word, repeated, is "comfort" but our understanding of that word is very different from its original use. In the famous Bayeux Tapestry which depicts scenes from the Battle of Hastings in 1066, there is a scene where the King is shown prodding one of his soldiers in the rear with his sword and the caption reads, 'The King comforts his soldiers'. A very uncomfortable sort of comfort you might think. However, the word comfort is being used in the old English usage, closer to the original Hebrew, which meant to encourage. Now when we preach on this text we need to make sure we bring that emphasis out rather than the sense of comfort which probably has more to do with tea and sympathy than a sword in your rear!

To do this work of interpretation we are almost certainly going to need some help in the way of tools and resources and every serious Bible student and would-be preacher of God's Word needs to be familiar with these and have ready access to some of them.

- i. we need to use a reliable and accurate Bible translation. This is not the time or place to look in depth at the vast issue of versions of the Bible but if we want to be faithful exegetes and expositors we will take care with the version of Scripture we use in our preaching.
- ii. a good Bible dictionary or encyclopaedia – and there are many to choose from
- iii. a Lexicon, which explains original meaning of words in our English translations, giving the root meanings, examples of where it occurs etc etc
- iv. a Concordance, listing all the places where a particular word is found in Bible

All of these are now available as computer software or even on line and the resources available for the serious Bible student are just boundless.

So, I take the words I have highlighted or am unsure about, the interrogation questions I have identified, and I do my research, making notes and recording findings as I go along.

That brings us to the last step in this initial process of 'Familiarisation with the Flesh of the Text.

f. Contextualisation

It has rightly been said that a text without a context is a pretext. One of the biggest and perhaps most frequent mistakes made by preachers is to fail to clearly set their text in context and no matter how good our study and preparation is, if we fail to preach a passage of Scripture in a way that is faithful to its context, then we do Scripture a great injustice.

Let me illustrate this by looking a number of my favourite suspects in this regard, verses of Scripture that are regularly quoted and applied but strictly out of context – and therefore almost always misapplied.

- a. Revelation 3v20. How many passionate evangelistic appeals have you heard, or dare I say preached, drawing attention to a beseeching Christ standing at the closed door of an unbeliever's heart, seeking entrance? Yet the context has nothing to do with individual evangelism. The context is one of Christ speaking to a church which has become complacent and comfortable and in doing so has excluded him.
- b. Jeremiah 29v11. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard this verse used in a personal testimony of guidance, or seen it on someone's mantelpiece, or written in a greetings card. Yet look at the context. God is speaking to a people in

⁴ Chapell, B 1994 Christ-Centred Preaching Grand Rapids Baker p77

the midst of a time of exile and suffering and is assuring them that there, in the context of hardship and trial, his purposes for them are good.

- c. Genesis 31v49. I have heard this used as a benediction, pronouncing a blessing on people leaving a fellowship or even going overseas. How far removed from the context! Laban, the twister and con-man is using it to the one man who can out-match him in deviousness, Jacob, the 'Delboy' of the Old Testament, and is saying, I won't be able to keep an eye on you but don't forget God will be watching you and you had better watch out and not get up to your old tricks.
- d. Matthew 18v20. Now, here is an interesting example. I believe there is a truth in this verse that applies whenever God's people come together, but note the actual context of the promise we all too often and all too glibly quote. The promise of the Lord is that when the congregation of believers meet for the express purpose of exercising biblical church discipline, then they have the assurance of his presence with them.

We could list many more such examples, I am sure, but the point is made. We must take great care to ensure that the meaning and application we get from a biblical passage is the correct and intended one.

That means that we have to contextualise – or set in context - the text or passage we are preaching from and every text or passage of Scripture has at least four contexts we need to be aware of.

- a. The historical contexts: Gen 31:49; Jer.29v11;
We need to become familiar with the chronology of events, with what is going on at that time. You see, if we take care to do that we will be much less likely to make a mistake with the application of Laban's veiled threat or God's specific promise to the exiles. We mustn't, for example, apply to ourselves or others promises that God has made to specific people and at specific times.
- b. The Literary context:
Here there are two factors we need to consider
 - i. the position of the text. Every passage of Scripture has three positional contexts – the chapter where it comes, the book of which it is a part, and the Bible as a whole. In our interpreting and application of any one text or passage we must be faithful to each of those three contexts and we will never correctly understand a passage unless we take them into account. Think again of the promise of Jesus in Matthew 18 that we looked at, and the plea of Christ in Revelation 3. Here is a golden rule – never try and understand a passage without being familiar with at least the chapter before and the chapter after.
 - ii. the genre of the text. What sort of literature is this? Is it prose, poetry, parable, prophecy? If we don't take that into account we will be in danger of all sorts of fanciful interpretations and applications. I remember some years ago coming across an exposition of the parable of the Good Samaritan that had evidently neglected all the rules of interpretation and exegesis and had resulted in an amazing, but frankly farcical, application. Because he had ignored the fact that this was a parable, teaching one main lesson, and we are not supposed to spiritualise or look for significance in every detail of the story, this preacher ended up saying that the Good Samaritan represented Jesus, the man was the sinner, the robbers were the devil and his agents, the oil was the Holy Spirit, the ass the church, the inn was Christian fellowship and the two coins baptism and the Lord's Supper.
Another preacher even went so far as to suggest that the four legs of the donkey represented the four Gospels. Ludicrous we rightly say. But that's where we can end up if we don't carefully contextualise the passage of Scripture.
- c. The cultural context

So much of the Bible is birthed in a culture far removed from ours both in space and time and we need to put more work in to becoming familiar with the original cultural context from which they arose.

One of the enriching and thrilling things I find when teaching and preaching in Africa is that I can use biblical illustrations so freely and with very little explanation because they know their Bibles well and their cultures are much closer to those of the biblical story than ours. Many Scriptures come alive and have greater force when we take time to discover the cultural significance and meaning behind them so we need to find out what we can about the culture of the people and place where the text is located. A good example of this is Revelation 3v14ff and the letter to the Church in Laodicea. So many of the allusions and references there are powerfully specific to local features of life in Laodicea that if we don't take them into account in our preparation and preaching we will rob our sermon of much power.

e. The Redemptive context

One of the biggest and most important questions we must ask of any passage we are working on is, where does this fit into the big redemptive story-line of the Bible; at what stage in the revelation and plan of salvation does this come and what does it teach us about Jesus? You see, whatever the immediate message of any one text or passage of Scripture, it is part of a great whole, the Bible, of which the over-riding message can, I believe, be summed up in the words of 2 Corinthians v19, "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself". On more than one occasion Jesus taught his disciples that all of the Old Testament, or example, was about him.⁵ The question I must ask myself, of every individual passage of the Bible, is what does this contribute to, and how does it link to, that great theme. If I fail to make and demonstrate that link I will be in danger of simply moralising.

⁵ Lk.24v27; v44