

Preparing a Talk

This module is entitled 'Preparing a Talk' as under canon law, only people holding the Bishop's license are actually permitted to preach a 'Sermon'. In practice many of us give talks in the sermon slot, especially in these days when clergy are trying to cover a number of different churches. To be giving a talk, you must be invited by the priest.

What is the point of a talk?

- You are helping people to understand what God might be saying to them, particularly from the scriptures.
- It is more than just explaining the biblical, historical and social background.
- It needs to have a relevance to the hearers in their particular context.
- You should avoid the temptation just to talk about yourself, although it's OK to use personal illustrations so that people know you may have grappled with an issue, or you are just as human as they are.

Most talks are based on a scripture passage, or on a particular theme if the church is going through a series, and this is often decided on by following the Lectionary, or by the incumbent if he has a particular scheme in mind. If that is not the case and you are given a totally free hand – pray for wisdom and revelation! And as you do so, be aware of your church fellowship, where they are in their spiritual journey, and the issues they may be grappling with a present.

As you choose what to talk about, beware of your particular hobby-horse! I had one retired priest in my first parish who continually spoke about the inadequacies of his retirement pension, and how unjust the church was in the house they provided him. Nobody wanted to hear all that yet again! Personally, I also wished they had found him a property in another parish!

On Sundays we often have two or three readings, but don't try to expound them all. Focus on just one – although another passage may also be useful to illustrate or expand the first. During the long weeks after Trinity, we have a choice in the Lectionary between 'Continuous' and 'Related' readings. Personally I have always tended to choose the latter, as then one passage can be used to illustrate another.

Initial Preparation

When you have a talk to prepare, it needs time to read, reflect, and let ideas come to mind. Of course, sometimes there is no way of avoiding your talk preparation being done in a rush the night before, but don't let that become your normal habit.

A good first step is to explore various different versions in Bible Gateway – that way you can call up your passage, and then see it in AV, NIV, Good News, etc. Sometimes a different version brings the passage to life. I tended to do this initial research on a Monday for the following Sunday, which gave me a few days just mulling it over before I started putting pen to paper (or tapping the laptop keys!)

Ideally the passage must be speaking to you before you can help others.

Here are a few questions you might ask yourself of the text:

- Who wrote it?
- When was it written?
- What else was going on then?
- What is either side of it?
- Does the story appear anywhere else in the bible?
- What did it mean to the community who first heard it?
- What does it mean to us?
- What do you notice?
- Where is the good news?
- What does it tell us about God?
- What does it tell us about people?
- How would you feel / think /respond if you were.... (Imagine yourself in the text)
- If this is true then so what? (Something for the 'action' people)
- Does it call me to change?

Work out a definite **AIM** (I then used to place it at the top of the page). The Aim ought to be able to be summarised in just one sentence. And as you define your Aim, think about the **context** – who is likely to be listening – is it for them? Will it make sense? Will it help? The Aim needs to encapsulate the main purpose of your talk – is it to inform, explain, enthuse or inspire, challenge or provoke?

But beware that you never get into the '*this is what they need to hear*' scenario! It is the Spirit of God that convicts people's hearts, that's not our job.

Ensure the talk is appropriate. When I was younger, the evening services often included a challenge to faith – but unfortunately the congregation was entirely made up of older people who had been Christians for many years. Consider the group you will be speaking to – what are their issues and struggles at present?

Now write down all the ideas that have been coming into your mind, even in random order. Start sorting them out, and then throw away everything that is not really along the line of the Aim. You can keep all that for another day!

Keep on thinking: '*what has this passage been saying to me*' and '*how is this piece of scripture going to help this particular group of people, with their particular issues and concerns, in their daily Christian lives?*'

By all means read any commentaries you may have, which will help you understand the passage better, but don't just load all that into your talk! Take only what is relevant and helpful. Also, for such occasions as saints' days and major festivals, you can often find information in Wikipedia or through Google – but do be cautious that not everything you read on the internet is gospel truth! Similarly you can often find good quotes on the internet, but if the quote is attributed to Einstein, Mark Twain or Abraham Lincoln, they are probably fake!

Different people will see totally different things in a single passage, and you may see several yourself – but don't try to get everything in, stick to that one main Aim.

Putting it all together

Any talk needs to have an engaging start point. It might be based on the Biblical text, or on a specific occasion (harvest, Mothering Sunday, etc.), or on a theme (Education Sunday, stewardship, homelessness, something in the news). A story or event involving yourself might make a good start.

A traditional style has been to have perhaps three different points to the talk – sometimes each headed up by a single word, and perhaps with the same initial letter to make them memorable (often beginning with 'P!'). This is fine, but don't force it, and ensure that they all really do dovetail into the one Aim, not take the passage into three different directions.

A preacher once said *'Tell them what you are going to say, then say it, then tell them what you have said'*. That is probably to over-labour the point, but there is no harm in introducing the idea, explaining it, then briefly summarising at the end.

All sermons ought to include some sort of action suggestion as part of the conclusion – this is to help make the point relevant to me in my situation. But recognise that it's easier to have good intentions on a Sunday, that do not always translate into practice on a busy Monday. It's also more realistic to talk about *'loving that difficult person at work'* than *'love everybody'*.

Beware of religious language and pious platitudes, it's something that speakers easily slip into when they are not quite sure how to explain something. And even though most of your listeners could well be people who have been church attenders for many years, there may just be one person who will feel excluded if you keep using religious words and concepts.

How long should my talk be? Most churches have an expectation of how long the talk should be – you would be advised to be shorter rather than longer than those expectations! In general, say what you need to say and then sit down! If it's good and interesting, people will have a longer attention span. The converse is also true.

It's good to end with an open-ended question for reflection, either as the service proceeds, or something to take home and consider later in the day.

Once the talk is written, read it over and ask yourself: *"What am I actually saying?"* and *"How will Mrs Snoggins in back in the pews actually understand this?"*

Delivery

Allow people time to settle before you start. Some speakers like to start with a short prayer, to focus their own attention as much as the congregation's. That's fine, but not essential, as you have already been praying together at the start of the service that God would be speaking to you all.

Some prefer to speak from a full script, others from notes, and a few are able to speak from memory with no notes in front of them. Use the method that suits you best, and don't try to be someone else!

Think about your pace of delivery – some things can be said at full speed, others need the emphasis of speaking slowly, and for others it can be good to repeat a phrase. Also try to vary the volume and tone as much as possible to fit the words you are projecting. This will keep people's attention better than a monotone delivery.

When I was a teenager my parents sent me to private elocution lessons – I expect a rural twang was creeping into my pronunciation! I didn't appreciate it much at the time, but I am now grateful that it did help me in public speaking. Though you may think your speech is fine, what about getting someone with experience in these things (perhaps an actor?) to listen and comment on your voice?

Try to often look directly at the congregation – a bit of eye contact. It will embarrass them (and possibly you) if you hold that eye contact for too long, so let your gaze wander over the people so that they think it is for them. Continually looking down, or continually staring into some far-off spot in the back corner of the ceiling can be a turn-off!

If there is a sound system, don't rely on it too much. Still speak up, and if possible imagine that you are speaking directly to someone who is seated towards the back of the congregation rather than in the front row. Don't say that you will manage without the microphone – I knew one retired army officer who always thrust the mike away when doing the reading, and those using the loop system could no longer hear him! And I had others who really thought they were quite loud enough – but they were not! Remember that you need to speak more slowly as the building gets larger – there's a big difference between a one-to-one conversation at home and speaking in the cathedral!

Whatever you do, try to be warm and welcoming, never talk down to people, or assume prior knowledge, or make those who don't fully agree feel that this is not the place for them.

If you are fortunate enough to have children or young people, do feel free to speak directly to them at some point, but whatever you do, don't speak down to them, patronise them, or embarrass them. Some children are very quick to answer a question, even if you intended it to be rhetorical, but others are acutely embarrassed if you seem to be putting them on the spot.

Many of the points in this section, such as timing, volume, pace, eye contact, etc. are also applicable for those who just delivering an existing liturgy such as Morning Prayer or Evensong.

Quality Control

'How was my talk?' 'That was fine dear!'

I first trained for ministry in Spurgeon's College – the main Baptist college in South London. Every Thursday we all had 'Sermon Class'. One of us was appointed to preach in chapel to the whole college, students and staff. Afterwards two students had been appointed to review the sermon, then other students and staff could comment. It was an excruciating experience, and afterwards you watched your

sermon on video. It was a humbling time, but did help us all to be more aware of what we were saying, how we said it, and what the effect would be on a congregation. For this reason, I would actually recommend that Ministry Leadership Teams actually included the opportunity to review people's talks – in love of course – so that the quality of what we deliver improves.

For those who are involved in a college training for ordination or to be Readers, there is often a system of having members of your congregation complete a review after you have spoken. If this happens to you, don't just give out the review forms to your friends – they will always just say nice things about you! Ask for reviews from people who may disagree with you, people who are very different from you in age, culture and faith.

If you are doing more and more speaking in your church, why not arrange with your incumbent to conduct a review anyway? Create a form that ought to include various elements such as: [\(Also see sample form below.\)](#)

- Did I enjoy the talk?
- What was the main point being made?
- Did it keep my attention?
- Did it all make sense?
- Did I feel it was relevant to me?
- Did I learn anything new today?
- Did it leave me with any questions?
- How was it for volume, clarity, presentation?

Get the reviewers to leave their forms anonymous, and to hand them in to a trusted friend, so they can be truly honest. Sometimes it may feel a bit unkind, but take all the comments into serious consideration, and you will be a better speaker for it.

Get a trusted friend to tell you if you have any distracting habits – I knew someone who continually rolled up his tie from the bottom and then rolled it down again!

The story is told of a visiting vicar standing at the door of a church. As the congregation departed, people were saying things like '*Nice sermon, Vicar*'. He was feeling quite proud of his sermon until one person came out and just said '*Rubbish. Absolute rubbish*'. The Churchwarden saw that the vicar was taken aback, so quickly interrupted '*Don't worry about old Joe, he hasn't got two brain cells to rub together. He only repeats what he hears other people saying*'.

Creative ways

It can get a bit dull if you use the same style and pattern of speaking every time it is your turn. So how about being a bit more creative? Here are a few suggestions:

- Make your point by telling a contemporary story.
- Re-tell the Bible story in the present tense, so we feel as though we were there.
- Invite everyone to imagine that they are actually a character in the story.
- Encourage the use of imagination as to how people may have been feeling.

- Set them a question to ponder – it could be set at any point in time, but perhaps a contemporary issue is best '*what would you do?*'
- Use visual aids, illustrations or video clips on a screen.
- Putting your various headings/points on a screen.
- Putting the Bible verses on a screen.
- Turn your talk into a dialogue between two points of view.
- Play a track of music while people think something through.
- Invite answers to a question or a suggestion – but don't make it too hard as people will be afraid of making a mistake.

It can be an enormous privilege to be part of the process of helping people to understand their faith better, so do take the opportunity to develop your speaking skills if you can, and you will surely find it fulfilling.

Homework – 3 options ... (in order of priority!)

- 1.** If you already give talks regularly, try and look at one you have given and review it critically. Find five things that you think perhaps you could have done better. Send in a note of the context, aim, outline and things you could improve.
- 2.** Prepare a brief outline for a talk on the Gospel for next Sunday – Matthew 13, 31-33 & 44-52. What would be your context, aim, and outline.
- 3.** If you would rather do a critique of someone else's work, I'll cautiously offer a talk I gave on 17th May for an online service. It was used at Goudhurst at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONx5DmUObAY> and at their more traditional service at Kilndown at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yiBFjAxfo0>
In each case the talk starts around 11 minutes into the service.

Previous versions of this course have asked each student to give a talk to the group and then listen to people's comments. You may be thankful that this is not practical on our Zoom meeting! If however you would like to send me something you have done, particularly on-line during lockdown, I'll be happy to give suggestions.

If you would like to learn more about giving a talk, there are several useful booklets from Grove books:

Tanner, M *How to Write a Good Sermon* (Cambridge: Grove R29, 2007)
 Waller, J *How to Prepare and Preach a Sermon* (Cambridge: Grove W182, 2005)
 Leach, J *Responding to Preaching* (Cambridge: Grove W139, 2001)
 How to Preach Strategically (Cambridge: Grove W211, 2012)
 Using Symbol and Action (Cambridge: Grove W148, 2005)

These and other good booklets available on-line at <https://grovebooks.co.uk/>

Stephen Hardy – July 2020

Review Form

As part of a course I am currently undertaking, I am asking for a few people to honestly review the talk I am giving today. Please will you answer the various questions below, anonymously, and return it via: _____

Name of person speaking

Date and location of talk

Did you enjoy the talk?

What was the main point being made?

Did it keep your attention?

Did it all make sense?

Did you feel it was relevant to you?

Did you learn anything new today?

Did it leave you with any questions?

How was it for volume, clarity and presentation?