

The background of the cover is a photograph of a scenic landscape. A paved road curves through a dense forest of evergreen trees. In the distance, a large mountain peak is visible, partially covered in snow. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The overall mood is peaceful and majestic.

# PREACHING THAT TOUCHES AND CHANGES LIVES

HENRY F. MULINDWA

<http://www.kangnam.ac.kr>



PREACHING  
THAT TOUCHES  
AND CHANGES  
LIVES

Today's preacher's handbook

**HENRY F. MULINDWA**

B.Ph. BST, MA. Educ. Mgt., MA. Theo  
PhD.

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## **PREACHING THAT TOUCHES AND CHANGES LIVES**

### **Introduction**

Who would like to be vexed by a dull homily/sermon that has nothing to do with his/her life? Who wants to be castigated and beaten down every time he/she goes to church? Sermons that do not encourage, comfort, give hope as well as challenge congregants, are not worth the time listening to. No wonder many Christians are staying home on Sunday.

After years of listening to homilies and sermons, and after a decade of doing the preaching myself, I find that most homilies/sermons are, more often than not, dull, dry and ineffective. Despite the fact that preaching is the primary duty of a pastor, many pastors do not seem to take it in that regard. Moreover, pastors of the Word are overworked, far stretched with administrative and social burdens so much so that they hardly have enough time to study, prepare and deliver to their congregations, sermons that touch and change lives. Something has got to be done to give preaching its rightful place in the church. Preaching should be done right so that it achieves the goal and purpose Jesus intended when he commanded his disciples to preach to the entire world and make disciples (Acts 1:8). Preaching should make the Word of God touch the minds and hearts of the world so that people live their lives according to the Word.

Good preaching should touch the three **Hs** of a person. Touch a person's **H**ead by appealing to a person's reason and imagination. Preaching should touch a person's **H**eart, captivating it and creating a passion within that heart so much so that a person loves and cherishes the Word of God. Preaching should also touch the **H**ands of a believer, spurring him/her into action; making him/her choose to live according to the message of the gospel and be truly excited and be burning with zeal to share it with others in real human deeds. Preaching that

does not realize these goals together is barren, blunt, stale, sterile, and incompetent. It can neither change lives nor produce disciples. It becomes as useless as a used *Kleenex* soft tissue.

## 1. WHAT IS PREACHING AND PREACHING WHAT?

*Preaching*, like *love*, is a word widely misused today. Politicians are said to *preach* what they do not practice, abortionists and anti abortionists are also said to *preach* to the public. Karl Marx *preached* the economic revolution and the racist Boers in South Africa *preached* Apartheid. That is *preaching* gone astray or used wrongly.

*Preaching* is a proclamation of God's Word as it has been revealed. It is not a proclamation of a theory or the discussion of a doubt, as Morgan Campbell says<sup>1</sup>. Through preaching, a preacher uses the Bible to talk to people about themselves not about "once upon a time" stories. He is not talking to them about the Bible because that would be lecturing about the Bible, not preaching to change lives. When a preacher brings biblical stories like Judas' betrayal or Peter's denial (which are truly historical stories), his purpose should not be to tell us about this history but to use the stories as examples to guide us against betrayal or denial of Jesus in our daily lives and in our own way.

Old Testament prophets were heralds of God's Word, calling upon people to change their lives. Jesus too preached to improve lives of the poor and dejected, the despised women and children, the discriminated lepers and sinners, rich tax collectors and ordinary folks. He commissioned his apostles and disciples to preach and change lives. He was fundamentally a successful preacher because, two millennia down the road, his preaching and teaching is still pretty delicious and spreading to all the ends of the earth like wild bush fire. Yes, it is true, the church has been preaching since the Ascension (Mark 16:19-20).

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<sup>1</sup> Morgan G Campbell. *Preaching*. 1974

Therefore, preaching to touch and change lives is a vital and central ministry of the church, without which the church loses bearing. Without good preaching, the church loses its engine, the driving force that enables it to do whatever else it does. Preaching brings life back to the church, revives it and reforms it. In a similar manner, without good preachers the engine of the church loses gas. Once a car runs out of fuel it goes nowhere. Occupants get stuck. The disabled car sadly becomes a danger to other road users.

Preaching is a public proclamation of God's Word. It is directed to an audience with a view of persuading that audience to act and live according to the message brought to them by the preacher, the caller or the teacher to the assembly; the *qòheleth*. Preaching is about God and God's presence among us and in the world. Preaching is giving the Bible a human voice and meaning in the context of real life as lived here and now. In the words of J.I Parker, preaching is defined as, "the event of God bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction from Himself through the words of a spokesperson<sup>2</sup>. Jesus left a mission to the church, that is: to make disciples and to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). Preaching is definitely the primary means for the propagation of the gospel. It is an indispensable necessity to this mission and for the growth of the church. A church without preaching is like a theatre without performers or a football stadium without players; redundant and soon to collapse. Therefore, however much modern life makes preaching more challenging, it does not make it less necessary. For diocesan development organizations to invest so much in social development without any investment in preaching, as is often the case, is to put one's money where one's mouth is not. It is a distortion of priorities indeed.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Vines and Shaddix in, *Power in the pulpit: how to prepare and deliver expository sermon*. Chicago: Moody, 1990. p.26

Preaching God’s Word ought to lead to knowledge of God, love of God and trust in God through Jesus Christ. Once one has that faith and trust in God, one necessarily feels a personal obligation to try to change one’s life and strive to live according to God’s Word. Faith first and then good behavior and good works follow just as night follows day. A true Christian cannot have one and not the other. Preaching should **touch** and **change** lives.

## 2. THE PREACHER

“Preacher”, *qòheleth*, in Hebrew, comes from a Hebrew verb that means “to make a call by word of mouth” or “to teach an assembly”. Usually he does both the call and the teaching of the assembly. So a preacher is a caller and a teacher of an assembly whose major book of reference is the Bible. A true preacher does not preach his own words with the use of some biblical verses. Rather, he uses his words and experience to put across God’s Word from the Scriptures, and God’s action as revealed in real life. He lets the Bible use him (the preacher) to have its message put across to the people. Some people, especially politicians who do not want church leaders to make political comments, are heard quoting, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar...”(Luke 20:25ff). This is using the Bible for one’s own agenda and purpose. You know, even the devil quotes Scriptures; not to do God’s will but for his own agenda.

“A preacher sheds some ordinary light along the way”<sup>3</sup>. He should be like a lit candle in the darkness. His responsibility is not to haul people along the way but to let them see the way and walk it, well-knowing that the way is normally narrow and not paved (Matthew 7:13). He helps them, by making suggestions, to figure out how to walk the treacherous way in accordance with the Scriptures. With persuasion, he ought to enable them make decisions to move on. A Country Music singer sings, “*If you are going through hell, keep going or else you will not get*

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<sup>3</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-centered preaching*, Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005. p.103

*out of there....*” A preacher should give that kind of encouragement, guidance and hope that it is possible to walk through to a better life here and now and hereafter. You know, it is said that a challenge that does not kill you makes you stronger and wise. A candle on display, without light, in the dark, becomes something to crash into. So a preacher who does not light up the way but just displays himself, is as useless as that lightless candle in the darkness; a stumbling thing, so to say.

Canon Law stipulates a pastor’s responsibilities/functions, listed in order of importance, as being: *teaching* (preaching), *sanctifying* (administer sacraments) and *governing* (administration and management) the people of God in his parish<sup>4</sup>. The primary responsibility and duty of a pastor is obviously to preach the Word of God. Therefore, putting anything else before this primary job is like putting the cart before the horse; it is a misplacement of priorities.

### **The changing role of the preacher**

We know that “the turn of the twentieth century especially saw a subtle shift in emphasis from the preaching event to hands-on care of the people and the administration of church programs. At the turn of the twenty-first century, more and more emphasis is being placed on executive leadership, vision casting, and needs-oriented teaching.”<sup>5</sup> Pastor Peter Mead<sup>6</sup> in his blog quotes Colin Marshall and Tony Payne in their book, *The Trellis and the Vine* as suggesting that unfortunately, the role of the pastor has shifted from religious service provider to CEO (*Chief Executive Officer*) in many churches. His major preoccupation is increasingly becoming

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<sup>4</sup> Coriden, Jame, Thomas Green et al, ed. *The Code of Canon Law*. New York: Paulist Press, 1985. Canon 159

<sup>5</sup> Vines and Shaddix, op. cit., p.47.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Mead blog at <http://www/biblicalpreaching.net/author/pmead/> retrieved, July 14, 2010.



administration and management of temporal goods. The priest is deeply involved in bringing power and water to the villages, building roads and bridging streams. He must ensure that children are immunized and that schools are teaching and children are learning. Medical clinics in his parish are his responsibility to oversee and it seems, in the minds of many and probably in his own mind, that he is not priest enough if he undertakes no building project. Yet the apostles, aware that day-to-day secular needs, necessary as they may be, might divert their attention from preaching the gospel, decided to found the ministry of deacons (*servers*) to help with the physical needs of the community. The apostles said, “It is not right for us to neglect the Word of God to serve at table...” (Acts 6:1-4). Today, there is increasingly no preacher who is undividedly and wholly committed to preaching. The ministry has fundamentally changed, to its detriment, unfortunately.

The preacher of the last century was a local community leader, a spiritual director of the congregation, a Bible/Theology expert. He was confident because he knew what he was talking about. And, let us face it, there were not as many learned men and women in his congregation as there are today. In most cases, he was the most enlightened person in his church congregation. He was unchallenged but rather supported by civic leaders in most part. Early missionaries in Uganda were hosted by the local chiefs who donated to them vast areas of land to carry on the ministry. Chiefs mobilized free labor and gave it to the missionaries. Civic leaders truly supported the preacher. The preacher was zealous because he believed what he was teaching about. He was committed because he was not of the world despite his being in the world. He was a living example of what he taught by virtue of his demeanor and actions. Not so much anymore today, to say the truth.

Nowadays in some churches, the preacher is only a visionary leader directing the church community via the weekly team talk. In other churches the preacher has become an entertainer needed to provide some semblance of content in the weekly gathering. The preacher becomes a salesman or a showman instead of being a spokesman. In yet others, the preacher is an overworked slave expected to do the work of the ministry while every other member in the church is satisfied to see the church moving forward without their own contribution in terms of time, talent and treasure.

In traditional churches in Africa (Catholic, Anglican Protestant, Greek Orthodox), a preacher is not even paid but is expected to render service to the church since that is what he vowed to do! He teaches the Christian doctrine to both children and adults, he counsels unstable couples, he talks to troubled youths, he prepares those going to get married, he visits the sick, he administers sacraments, and he buries the dead. He is so embedded in the lives of the people of his community from before birth to death. Sadly, he is too busy to prepare homilies/sermons anymore. His church is crumbling before his own eyes!

Thankfully, there are still some churches where the preacher's major role is to present and apply the Word of God with sensitivity to God, the people, and the times. Indeed, the preacher's task as expositor of God's Word should not change, although the manner, style and environment will always change.

### **3. THE PREACHING CHALLENGE TODAY**

God seems to have got tired and retired! It all seems like God's purpose has disappeared and preaching has instead become obsessed with biblical history when, once upon a time, God

was<sup>7</sup>. Jesus seems to be a figure of history that has nothing to do with our lives now. It is as if God's revelation started in the Old Testament, was totally completed by Jesus Christ and there should be nothing more to say or do but to reflect on that history. In most of our preaching today, God does not seem to be active or revealing himself in nature and in daily lives of the people. Preaching, particularly, good preaching, has taken a down turn. It is crashing nose-down!

“Upon meeting a fellow pastor who was studying his sermon notes, a well-meaning preacher declared, ‘I don’t study to preach. I just get in the pulpit, and the Holy Spirit fills me’. The preacher who was studying his notes asked, ‘What if the Holy Spirit doesn’t fill you?’ the other pastor replied, ‘I just mess around until He does’.”<sup>8</sup> Regrettably, there is plenty of this kind of ‘messaging around’ and not enough good preaching going on in the churches. People thirst and hunger for a well balanced meal of God’s Word and action but there are so few good chefs among preachers today. The church is yearning for renewal. However, no true renewal can take place and take root without renewed preaching. The church needs preaching which guides, comforts, strengthens and encourages people. Preaching should also challenge listeners and call them to action; to internal or spiritual action, moral action and physical action. Preaching has to “rebuke” at times when need be.

### **Preacher as a clown**

In the book, *The Secular City*,<sup>9</sup> Harvey Cox narrates a story of a traveling circus that caught fire.

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<sup>7</sup> David Buttrick, *The preaching of the new and the now*. Louisville: John Knox, 1998. p.1

<sup>8</sup> Jerry Vines & Jim Shaddix, *Op cit.*, p.13

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Joseph Ratzinger, in, *Introduction to Christianity*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.p.39

The manager thereupon sent the clown who was already dressed up and made up for the performance, into the neighboring village to get help. There was danger that the fire would spread across the dry grass fields and engulf the village itself. The clown went into the village and requested the villagers to come quickly to the blazing circus and help put out the fire. But the villagers took the shouts and calls of the clown as simply an excellent piece of advertising, meant to attract as many people as possible to the performance. They applauded the clown and laughed till they cried. The clown tried but in vain to get people to be serious, that this was no stunt, that he was not pretending that there really was a fire. His supplications only increased the laughter. People thought he was playing his part splendidly well until finally the fire engulfed the village. It was too late to help. Both the circus and the village were burnt to the ground.

The preacher of God's Word today is simply not taken seriously since God is not taken seriously either. The preacher is like clown. People are "already familiar with what he is talking about and know that he is just giving a performance that has little or nothing to do with reality. So they can listen to him quite happily without having to be seriously concerned about what he is saying"<sup>10</sup> Should a clown just take off his costume and wash off make-up, speak the secular language and expect people to listen and to come put out the fire? It is not that simple.

Anyone who tries to preach in the world today may feel like a clown. He seems not to understand the world and the world does not seem to understand him either. There is overwhelming "oppressive power of unbelief in the midst of his own will to believe"<sup>11</sup>.

### **New character of contemporary congregations**

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990. p.40

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p.41

Just as society is much more different today than ten years ago, congregations are quite different as well. This has been largely caused by "...advances in science and technology; the widening of individual freedom and lifestyle choices; the mixing of cultures and ethnic groups brought about by immigration and the growing interdependence among peoples"<sup>12</sup> Whereas some of these changes have brought significant benefits to many people and to the church, they have often been accompanied by a loss of the sense of the sacred and sense of mystery.

Unlike the congregations of decades ago, that gave their hearts and ears to their pastor, congregations nowadays tend to have hostility against authority, any authority, especially when the defiance of such authority has no consequence. They question, if not defy, the authority of God, of the Bible, of the Church and of the priest.

For individuals and families there is less and less time available for church today. People's work patterns have greatly changed. Some have to do more than one job and even work on Sunday to make ends meet. Others overwork even though they may have all that they need and plenty of what they want. Values have metamorphosed. Today's people have got so many wants for which they have to work seven days a week. If they do not work on Sunday, they are exhausted from the week's troubles and Sunday is the only time for rest.

In the economically developed world, children have got to attend their sports and practice music, dance and so on. Eventually there is less and less time available for church and its activities. For the few people who still go to church, there is need for a brief homily/sermon because they are going for something else. There is no time. This is true in Ugandan city churches too.

Time is not enough for the pastor either. He might have more than one church to minister to due to the scarcity of pastors. In the case of Uganda, a priest usually has at least ten

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<sup>12</sup> *National Catholic Reporter*, October, 29,2010, vol.47, #1, 'Obstacles to evangelization', p.24

outstations all of which need to have him every Sunday. Some priests do have some side jobs besides preaching. Who does not know how little money the church gets, especially these days. Most churches hardly pay a living wage to their employees! With a pastor so busy, when will he find time to read a book of poetry, fiction, drama, science and politics so as to be relevant?

While the focus of Jesus' preaching was "the Kingdom", it is seldom the substance of our sermons. The Kingdom is vanishing. First of all, "kingdom" presupposes collectivism and being subjected to the rule of a sovereign king. Sadly, monarchism and collectivism are not valued ornaments in most of the modern society where individualism is a virtue. Obviously "the kingdom of God" becomes distasteful.

The church does not live in a vacuum. What happens in society affects the church too. Most of the members of the congregations today have a "remote control-device-in-hand" mentality. They are ready to click away from anything that does not catch their interest in the first few minutes of watching. As the same people come to church, they are in the mode of navigating away from a preacher that does not attract their attention the moment he begins to preach. They may not move out of the church physically but they definitely may not be there. Today, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus seem irrelevant, even for those who claim to be Christians. Preaching to such "hardened" hearts and souls needs a new approach. Today's preacher must put into consideration all these signs, if not facts, of the time (Luke 12:54ff), as he embarks on preparing and delivering sermons that can touch and change lives.

### **Mediocrity and distasteful preaching**

The decline in spiritual life and activity in the church is often preceded by lifeless, formal and barren preaching that does not inspire or poke people into changing their lives and live according to the teaching of the Scriptures. Sadly, the breed of great preachers seems to be on its

way to extinction. That most of today's preaching does not change lives is obvious. Otherwise, with so many Christians why is there so much evil! Corruption, greed, exploitation, robbery, murder all seem to be on the rise and largely committed by baptized Christians.

You have heard sermons that qualify for theological lectures; good, for the theologically learned, but far beneath the expected goal of being life-changing both spiritually and physically. According to figures released in the National Council of Churches, 2010 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, more than half of American adults have changed religious affiliation at least once during their lives<sup>13</sup>. No wonder people wander from church to church in search of sermons that will touch their lives and help them make sense out of what they go through daily. As Amos says, "There is famine in the land" (Amos 8:11f). People are hungry for a well-prepared meal of the Word of God but very few preachers are good chefs. What a disappointment! Yes, you may not blame the sower if the soil is barren. It is known, as the apostle Paul warns that, "Some people will not endure sound doctrine" (2Timothy 4:3-5). But in any case shouldn't the sower take it upon himself to prepare the soil? Whatever the case, the preacher who does shoddy work cannot get off the hook.

Anglican pastor, John Scott, with decades of preaching in his bag, is not shy to state: "The standard of preaching in the modern world is deplorable. There are few great preachers."<sup>14</sup> He believes that this is so because today's preachers have lost confidence in the Word of God, and no longer take the trouble to study it in depth and to proclaim it without fear or favor. Preaching has lost authority. If that is true, it is so because many preachers have lost authority.

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<sup>13</sup> *National Catholic Reporter*, October 15, vol.46,#26, 'The emerging church' p.9,

<sup>14</sup> John Scott, *Between Two Worlds: the Challenge of Preaching Today*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982.p.7

Many preachers, especially Catholic and traditional Protestant ones, sound like -they are commentaries. They give facts, at times in minute details; giving etymologies from Latin, Greek and Hebrew. They tell their congregations what scholars say, which is fine, but stop short of answering the questions in people's minds, "What about us?", and "So what?" Perhaps so much time is spent in the details that there is no time to apply the Word of God to life. You know, we usually kill a laboratory rat by dissecting it. Too much dissecting satisfies the preacher, intellectually, but does not serve the congregation that has not made the study. It is a preacher's job to unpack and catabolize or break down the Word so that it can be ingested to nourish the listeners. Food is useless to the body, however nutritious it may be, unless it is ingested and digested. If the sermon just goes over people's heads, of what benefit is it to them? If it is going to talk about everything from the Readings of the day where do you expect to get all that time from? If the preacher gets the time, as they often do, who will be able to concentrate for two hours and take in all that stuff? Your guess is as good as mine!

There are plenty of sermons that are text-centered and all that the congregation experience is pages being read and turned. Such sermons are like a videographer who just focuses on only one subject all through and there is nothing else to see in the video. Imagine a wedding video that shows only the bride. Unfortunately, sermons that lack something to "see" with the eyes of the mind are in good supply in our churches.

Other sermons on the other hand have "too much to see". They are not focused. They have got so many subjects, just like a videographer that has no focus but puts the lens on whatever comes along. Think of a video of a birthday party where the videographer takes as much time on the birthday child as on the cat in the coach, the insect on the window, the cars



coming in, football on the television and so on! Immediately you watch that kind of video you cannot but be hit by the sheer incompetence of the videographer.

It is also true that there are many preachers who have nothing substantial to give. During my school years we had a preacher who went on rumbling and rattling for an hour talking about unrelated things. In the end, one would not possibly tell what the preaching was all about. Such vexing preaching usually sent to sleep most of the students. Sleeping in a place not designed for comfortable sleep has its consequences of course. Getting off the pew was not uncommon!

Other homilies/sermons are veiled in scholastic obscurity. All one hears are formal words without concrete, figurative and easy-to-understand language. Preachers literally transliterate their philosophy and systematic theology into their homilies. Such joyless sermons sound so detached from reality and not worth another trip to church. That kind of preaching, in Paul Scott Wilson's words, is "more sad, bad, and mad than glad; folks sitting in the pews have to take out their cellular phones to call home during the sermon just to feel better"<sup>15</sup>

There is so much information and distractions out there that most people are not so eager to come running to church at the sound of bells not even at the sound of music. There is a lot of that elsewhere in theatres, studios, stadia, parks and so on.

The mediocre preacher, one who does not invest time, money and interest in his primary job, is a dull and emotionless speaker who has got to be endured every Sunday. "He is the bore of the age...the nightmare that disturbs our Sunday's rest, the incubus that overloads our religion and makes God's service distasteful. We are not forced into church...but we desire not to be

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *The four pages of the sermon: a guide to biblical preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999.p.238

forced to stay away... we desire to leave the house of God, without that anxious longing to escape, which is the common consequence of common sermons”<sup>16</sup>

A newly ordained priest, wondering about what he would preach about, asked a senior pastor, “What should I preach about this Sunday?”The senior pastor answered, “Preach about ten minutes.” You can see that the mind of the senior pastor here is fixed more on “how long to preach for”, but not so much on “what to preach about.”

Preachers today seem to be taught or compelled to keep their messages short and hefty with humor and personal anecdotes. They are called to make church fun with skits and music and awesome media systems. Sermons are general, to avoid hurting anyone. They are about feeling good and about prosperity. The cross is a taboo. Dr. Fabarez<sup>17</sup> wonders whether this modern thinking has changed church goers! In his view, with inadequate preaching by inadequate preachers, such gimmicks have a futile end for the church. Pastors are not entertainers or movie directors neither are they primarily psychologists. They are teachers and preachers of God’s Word with the goal to transform the lives of hearers of that very Word.

Today it is increasingly the trend to preach sermons devoid of God! There is less and less reliance upon God. Such sermons are about *us* and what we can do to have happiness. In some churches many sermons are not about faith but about wealth. It is not “our father” but “our power.” Jesus has become a commodity of trade. Churches spout out like mushrooms, money is made, it is misappropriated and churches collapse just like business corporations do. What a shame to deface the name of the Lord! In other churches, “We hear too little of the beatitudes and too much about judgment and admonition, seemingly always with a focus on sexual

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<sup>16</sup> Trollope, 1857, quoted by John Scott, in, *Between Two Worlds: the challenge of preaching today*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982,p.54

<sup>17</sup> Michael, Fabarez, *Preaching that changes lives*. Eugene: Wipf &Stoc, 1990

behavior.”<sup>18</sup> There is more in sermons about *the church* than the proclamation of the teaching of Jesus Christ about nonviolence, mercy, forgiveness and compassion, share and care.

On the whole, sermons increasingly do not point out signs of God’s work in daily lives but focus on psychological tricks to make us happy or to threaten us into submission. Such kinds of sermons are unfortunate. They do not go out to achieve what sermons are intended to achieve, that is, making God known, believed, trusted and loved as the creator and master of all our lives and the moving force behind all being and non-being, and enabling people to decide to live according to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Relativism and the egalitarian society**

Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI, in his *Introduction to Christianity* puts it that “the new generation views the entire course of history since the triumph of Christianity as a mistake and a failure”<sup>19</sup>. He contends that the nineteenth century, and of course the last century, had seen the formulation of the opinion that religion belongs to the subjective, private realm and should have its place there”<sup>20</sup>. And “in order to be able to get along, we all have to behave now *etsi Deus non daretur* (as if there were no God)”<sup>21</sup>. The economically developed world takes leading role in the drama of denying God’s existence and action in the world.

“We see that today in every place where the deliberate denial of him (God) has become a matter of principle and where his absence is no longer mitigated at all. For at first, when God is left out of the picture, everything apparently goes on as before. Mature

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p.11

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p.13

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.16

decisions and the basic structures of life remain in place, even though they have lost their foundations. But as Nietzsche described it, once the news really reaches the people that ‘God is dead’ and they take it to heart, then everything changes”<sup>22</sup>

Everything changes when people feel free to do whatever they want. It is only later that, awake from their slumber, they realize that instead of having gold they only have a stone as illustrated in this story of “Clever Hans”.

Clever Hans had a lump of gold that was too heavy and cumbersome for him. So he exchanged it successively so as to be more comfortable and free. He exchanged it for a horse, a cow, a pig, a goose and a whetstone, which he finally threw into the water, still without losing much; on the contrary, what he now gained in exchange, so he thought, was the precious gift of complete freedom. How long his intoxication lasted, how somber the moment of awakening from the illusion of his supposed liberation is left to the imagination of the reader.<sup>23</sup>

In another book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI uses the parable of the two brothers or of *the prodigal son*, as it is best known, (Luke 15:11-32), to describe the defiant spirit of relativism. In the action of the young son deciding to take his share and go away from his father’s home, Benedict XVI sees a reflection of the spirit of modern rebellion against God and against God’s law. The son “no longer wants to be subject to any commandment, any authority. He seeks radical freedom. He wants to live only for himself, free of any other claim. He enjoys

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p.17

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p.31

life; he feels that he is completely autonomous”<sup>24</sup> But in the end, it is all gone. The guy who once was completely free is now a slave of the lowest order.

Like the prodigal son, modern relativistic society has, on the whole, decided to leave behind everything it once depended upon. That is, God and Christianity. Society is thirsty for freedom without limits. Time and again people quote the First, the Fourth and Fifth Amendments of the United States Constitution that purportedly give them unlimited right to say and do whatever they want to. This is dissipating ourselves, squandering who we are and denying our own essence. Understanding freedom as a right to do whatever we want is living in a lie because such false autonomy leads to slavery. How many people seek freedom but end up being hooked on addictive drugs, alcohol, sex, gangs and dangerous lifestyles that they could not disentangle themselves from?

The greatest dogma in the relativist world is “*I am the measure for everything*”. The greatest commandment seems to be, “*Thou shall go for property, pleasure and power*”. One’s actions are informed not by the teaching of the gospel but by one’s own experiences, one’s own knowledge, one’s aspirations and desires and one’s own selected influences from particularly selected persons, and/or media. Many of us are victims to this kind of influence.

For most of the secular society today the church is an inconvenient reality and its doctrines bothersome. The pulpit is a symbol of authority against which people who have their own personal opinions and convictions rebel. God is irrelevant and so are preachers. The new shrines are football stadia, theaters, beaches, museums, parks, banks, malls, Parliament, the Capitol and so on. The wealthy no longer build churches for which to be remembered. They build universities, gyms and business towers. Faith has some meaning only if it provides joy and fellowship; some sort of an ecstatic drug! Something is good as long as one gains from it and so

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph, Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, op cit. p.204

long as it works for one. If God does not do what I want Him to do, I divorce Him right away. I am my own idol, I worship myself. I am the centre of my universe, the *Alpha* and the *Omega*, the Beginning and the End.

The egalitarian society, where all are equal and know what they want and go for it any way they choose to, wants freedom without limitations. It is a society where no one wants to be told what to do or how to do it. Whereas the same society accepts authorities in other areas like Medicine, Economics, Engineering, it accepts no master in matters of faith and morality. In this egalitarian society children cannot be told: “that’s wrong, never do it”, since that will *injure* the self esteem of the child! Everything and everyone is great! Most human actions are only considered “different” but not “right” or “wrong”, “good” or “bad”. Parents no longer want to be parents of their children; they want to be best *friends* of their kids instead. Parental power and authority has been eroded by the State and the psychiatrist, the therapist, the expert of today. Children are constantly and consistently taught to *believe* in themselves. In their fragile minds, there is no power superior to their own *ego*. There is no need for God.

Modern society does not see God’s relevancy. With advanced science and technology, we can answer so many questions that lacked answers in the past. We even think that probably this lack of human answers led our ancestors to believe in God as the answer. Karl Marx considered the fundamental questions of life solvable by economic and political means only. He “adopts the primacy of politics and economics, which become the real powers that can bring about salvation.”<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, with his Psychoanalysis, is a celebrated “saint” of human behavior. He apparently answered why we behave the way we do. In his view, fixation and sublimation keep us thinking of God because of our infantile perceptions and our social discontent. Charles Darwin, with his famous theory of evolution is thought to have rendered useless the creation

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<sup>25</sup> Ratzinger, *introduction to Christianity* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990. p.15

stories, so we think, and won for himself the throne of the god of evolution, even when he cannot tell us the origin of species before his “big bang” or the cause of the big bang. Rain can be bombed out of the skies, new creatures and plants can be genetically engineered. Human embryos can be grown as research materials to improve the quality of life for those who can afford such procedures. One does not need to go hunting to be able to eat meat daily. With sophisticated but fast international trade, food can be bought and brought in from all over the world. We can sell off our surplus too. Power lies in the almighty dollar.

With generations loaded with such a mindset, who could feel any need to depend on God’s benevolence for survival? Only gatherers and hunters base their livelihood on chance or call it God. Not us the “dot com” generation. Nonetheless, as Hans Küng, renowned European critical Catholic theologian concludes, “human ultimate questions have neither been solved nor liquidated. God is less dead than ever despite our incapacity to believe”<sup>26</sup> There is need for faith, therefore, there is need for preaching. Good preaching, I mean.

### **The Capitalistic influence**

The capitalistic, modern, once Christian society tends to not be much different from the communists of yesterday. Communists dethroned God and replaced Him with the state where people rule over people, something communists had detested. They removed religion and replaced it with the communist party; threw away ecclesial canons only to replace them with sort of canonical texts like “communist manifestos”. Their creed was “one nation, one people”; their leadership was hierarchical and infallible<sup>27</sup>. It was a mere change of guards, not a fundamental change, where all reality could be explained by economics and politics. Yes, one can say that communism became dehumanizing and the opium of the people. Capitalists thought communists

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<sup>26</sup> Hans Küng, *The Christian challenge*, New York: Doubleday, 1979. p.18

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

were nuts and capitalists tirelessly tasseled against communists until communism collapsed in most of Europe with the big fall of the Berlin Wall at the sunset of the twentieth century.

Unfortunately God was not reinstated as the supreme leader over humanity and nature in a secular capitalistic society. In capitalism, the human being replaced God with himself/herself and arrogantly claimed to be the master over all. A new dogma was issued. It is that everything can be explained through science and technology. Science and technology became the religion of the capitalistic society with a prophecy that people will have a more humanizing and fulfilling life, freedom in abundance and peace will reign. Time is yet to prove these prophecies.

We live longer. Yes, we do, but is it a more meaningful life? Has domination of nature not meant destruction of nature? Is democracy not just a more streamlined control of the poor by the wealthy? When communism collapsed the world got a few more billionaires but more millions of destitute. Does the-so-called *free market economy* not mean *survival for the fittest*, which progress always called *the law of the jungle*? Has capitalism got us out of the jungle as it claims to do? I am neither against the advancement of science and technology nor against democracy and capitalism. I am only trying to point out that these secular ‘religions’ and ‘dogmas’ are yet to deliver what they promised. It is possible they could succeed but it is not likely they will.

### **The Word and the world**

According to Gerald Loughlin, “the story of Jesus is also the story of the church”<sup>28</sup>. That means that the story of Jesus is continued in the life and actions of the church. In order for us to understand this story, is it better to begin from the Word (Scriptures) or from the world (the way people see things today)? Nicholas Lash notes, “In the self-assured world of modernity people

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<sup>28</sup> Gerald Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.82



seek to understand sense from the Scriptures instead of hoping with the aid of the scriptures to make some sense of themselves.”<sup>29</sup> Some preachers teach as if the story of Jesus is out there merely as an object of study; as if it has nothing to do with us personally, when they only tell us what happened millennia ago, what it meant for the ancient people. I am no part of it, just as I study about some people in distant history. If the Word is irrelevant today then what is the point coming to church every weekend just to listen to what the Medians, Philistines, Kushites, and Sunammites did or did not do? What does king Nebuchadnezzar has to do with me anyway?

“Hans Frei follows Karl Barth in advocating a diametrically opposed theology, one that seeks to fit the world into the story of God rather than God into the story of the world.”<sup>30</sup> There are exegetes and preachers who want the Word to say what they want to hear, not necessarily what it says. Similarly the contemporary Christian wants the Word to agree with him/her own views and convictions. That is beginning the story from the world.

For some preachers, in order not to challenge the generally held positions of most of their congregations, opt to avoid passages that are considered controversial in light of our understanding of democracy, liberty and freedom today. They keep the peace by being silent. They in a way abdicate their responsibility of prophesy and leadership. The world dictates how the Word has got to be interpreted and understood. What a sad mess! What a shame!

The world looks for possibilities while the Word states actuality. God’s story does not look for *possibilities* that God spoke, that Jesus lived, died and arose. Rather it states that God spoke, that Jesus lived, died and arose. Taking our own experiences as the foundation for our interpretation”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Gerald, Loughlin, *op. cit.* p.34

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p.34

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p.34

Presentation of the Word presents a danger that God's story would be adulterated or compromised. Yet it should be told as it is to console the world, give it hope and even challenge its values and ideals that actually do not conform to God's story. Theology and preaching should "not look at the world and its *possibilities*, but to the *actuality* of God's story as it is told in the church's Scripture"<sup>32</sup>

If God's Word states actuality how come the world does not instantly see it that way? Perhaps it is because the world is stubborn! God's story is reasonable if we do not use the same criterion we use to determine scientific 'reasonableness'. It could be folly to weigh sugar in miles. It is equally stupid to look for divine reasonableness using just physical measures. "The logic of coming to believe, because it is like learning a language, has little room for argument, but once one has learned to speak the language of faith, argument becomes possible."<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, the modern world wants to begin with reason and argument. It wants to begin from its own story to find sense in God's story. What a wild goose chase!

St. Augustine, in a letter to Honoratus, argues him that to come to truth one begins with belief, faith. This kind of belief comes from listening to stories told by those whom we can trust, then reason about those stories later. Beginning from the world means that we read the Bible as literature rather than as Scripture, as a text of pleasure rather than of edification; as a site for exercise of literacy skill rather than for training in righteousness"<sup>34</sup>

The duty of a preacher is to keep the story going and to try to let us cultivate our character according to the story of God, not one of our own as if we were *our own*. The Bible cannot be put at the same level of any other book as is now the fashion to do. It is far superior.

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<sup>32</sup> [Ibid. p.35](#)

<sup>33</sup> [Ibid. p.92](#)

<sup>34</sup> [Ibid.107](#)

The second Vatican Council asserts that in preaching, “God speaks through men in human fashion.”<sup>35</sup> In cultures where history is kept and transmitted orally, that spoken word is paramount for the continuation of the cultures. The apostolic tradition was kept through preaching words and works of Jesus. It is only through the story that we come to know Jesus Christ; we come to be imbued by that story and it is continually being told and passed on to younger generations. The preacher must use the Jesus’ story to bring people to God.

Imagine the story of your family and how you came to live where you live and be who you are. Stories about what happened before you were born are narrated to you by someone. You believe those stories if you trust the one who tells you the stories. He/she is the authority. From what you get in narrative, you learn, and form values that you cherish. Your attitude depends largely on the story told to you then built up by your own learning and experience. You cannot come to love your family, your family friends unless you learn their story and unless that story is narrated to you by an expert, an authority who is credible and trustworthy.

High definition glasses help us see things more clearly, even see details, which have always been there but we have always missed them. Preaching is like those high definition goggles. We can tell the story of Jesus and live by it only if we have first read it, become a character into it, assimilate it and be part of it. We cannot do any of that unless there are preachers who preach well.

#### **4. PREACHER AS TEACHER AND SPEAKER**

##### **Preacher as teacher**

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<sup>35</sup>Austin, Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996. Dei Verbum #12.

A good teacher breaks down abstract terms into simple, real terms. It is easy to be complicated, you know. Imagine a dad telling his four-year daughter, “Joanne, Jesus is consubstantial with God the Father”! However, to be simple, not simplistic, and to be clear, takes a lot of preparation time. Until the preacher knows the theological concept quite well, he cannot find simple ways to convey the same idea. That is why it is reiterated that a good teacher as well as a good preacher must never cease to study.

To change lives, a preacher must teach his congregation how to listen and benefit from sermons. It is not enough to know how to build a good car when people are not taught how to use it for their benefit. People should learn to use their Bibles, take notes, fight against distractions, be able to retell or review the sermon and be able to take action. Students will not be able to recall, re-tell and even use class knowledge in their lives unless the teacher really helped them to understand the concepts or the subject matter of the lesson taught.

A good teacher uses lots of stories and illustrations to make memorable the point she/he wants to make. Some of the most powerful of such stories are the parables of Jesus. They are so powerful that many people talk about them as if Jesus was talking of historical events. Look at the story of “The good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25ff) or the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19ff) or “The rich fool” (Luke 12:16ff). I have heard so many people using these and other parables as if what the stories say really happened. That fact further proves how powerful Jesus’ stories are.

A preacher is a teacher; and for him to be a good teacher he must have lots of good illustrations that include: true stories, fables, parables, allegories, similes and so on. All of us love stories, therefore anyone who appropriately uses a story will have our undivided attention and through the story, we will remember the lesson for a long time.

On our Ugandan campaign code-named Save Youth From Aids (SYFA), we used to use this illustration as we went around High schools: God gives us many gifts and the best of them all is our own life. So we would wrap a very nice-looking, expensive wine glass and give it to one of the students to unwrap. She/he would ask a few of his/her friends to come and see and admire the gift. Then he/she would begin to play with it with his/her friends. They would throw it up and catch it, just as you would do with a soccer ball. The game becomes interesting and more kids join in. Incidentally and accidentally, one lets go of the expensive wine glass and off it crashes into pieces on the floor before the entire assembly of school kids. They all in unison say, “Oooooooooooooo, noooooooooooooo!” They all miss the wine glass. It is gone and it is done.

With this illustration students understood the dangers of careless and premarital sex. Once the disease enters the body it cannot be gotten out. It is done. Life has no spare parts and so it should not be played around with. The impact was always overwhelming. I still come across students who attended those seminars in the early 2000s and they remind me of the indelible impression and impact that illustration made and left on their lives. Illustrate your sermons.

### **The power of a story**

Once upon a time, a young smart Law student went to a renowned Theology professor, who had written volumes of books on various branches of Theology. She wanted to become a Christian and she asked the professor, “Convert me to Christianity on condition that you teach me all about Christianity while I am standing on my one foot”. The professor angrily threw her out saying, “I have spent all my life teaching but, young lady, you must be crazy to think that I can teach you the entire Christian doctrine in just a few minutes” Then she went to a country pastor and said the same things she had said to the professor. The priest smiled. With pain in his

old body he sat on his wooden chair and said to her “My daughter, never do a hateful thing. Do to others what you would like done to you. This is the whole Christian faith, all the rest is commentary.”

“Once upon a time is no time and every time.”<sup>36</sup> Stories introduce us to other worlds and to our own world. Through stories we hear about ourselves in one way or another. Most of our lives are lived depending on stories although we scarcely acknowledge it. The world we think is so developed and complex tends to make us think that brilliant people have got to think analytically, using propositions to come to valid conclusions. It is smart to conclude that if  $(2+\gamma)=4$ , therefore,  $\gamma=2$ . That is smart, isn't it? We can also seem logical if we say that “all people are kind to children, no matter where children come from. Adolf Hitler was a person. Therefore Adolf Hitler was kind to children no matter where those children came from! It is indeed a logical conclusion but we know so well that it is not true.

Five year old Patrick came back from Sunday school so joyful and jumping. His mom asked him what he had learnt and he said, “How the Israelites crossed the Sea of Reeds”. “Oh, tell me about it,” the mom requested expectantly. Patrick said, “Well it was like this, the Israelites ran away from Egypt but the Egyptian desert forces followed them with tanks and army Jeeps. As they approached the Sea, they were really stuck since they could not cross the Sea without boats. So Moses went on his walkie-talkie, called the Israeli Air Force, who came in and started bombing the Egyptians. Meanwhile submarines came and made a bridge on which the Israelites crossed on dry ground.” He posed and looked at his mother with a smile of accomplishment. The mother was stunned. She curiously asked the little boy, “Is that how the

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<sup>36</sup> William J. Bausche, *Story telling: imagination and faith*. Mystic: Twenty-third Publication, 1984. p.9

teacher taught the story?” He answered, “Well, mom, not exactly, but if I told you what she really said, you couldn’t believe me.”

It is not only the mindset of children that does not believe in miracles anymore; we are all corrupted. Everything must be reasonable within our terms and concepts to be true. We all tend to think in conclusions that flow from premises that can be proven. However, no matter how much we progress scientifically, story-telling cannot be divorced from our daily life. Preachers who really want to be relevant and be understood as they deliver the Word of God should never neglect the power that lies in a good story, well-told.

No one expects a story to a straight question like the question of this lawyer to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29) Jesus, being the excellent teacher he is, grabs the opportunity and turns it into a teaching moment. At the end of the story no one appears puzzled, since Jesus uses characters they know quite well. But all are convinced by the vivid impressions the story of Jesus has created both in their minds and hearts. As Howard Hendricks says, “Human personality is the vehicle of effective teaching”<sup>37</sup> Teaching with stories that reflect real life does not only impart but help others discover. The story of “who is my neighbor” does not end without Jesus giving homework to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

In the like manner, the end and goal of preaching is not just to feed people’s minds and stir up their emotions by touching their hearts but to enable them do something in their own lives and in the community, in accordance with the gospel. The goal of teaching is to teach students skills that will enable them live in society comfortably and usefully. A teacher only points to the way and equips students with what they need to get there. In a similar manner, a preacher’s purpose is to assist people see the way of God and walk toward God.

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<sup>37</sup> Howard, Hendricks. *Teaching to change lives*. Sisters: Multnomah, 1987. p.19

Here is another story by a priest in Dublin, Fr. Jack McArdle, who explains the difference between this life and the next life. It is similar to Plato's "*allegory of the cave*".

"At the bottom of the pond little grubs were crawling around. They wonder what happens to their members who climb up the stem of the lily and never come back. "I wonder what it's like up there." They agree among themselves that the next one who is called to the surface will come back. The next little grub that finds itself drawn to the surface, by nature, crawls up the stem and out on the surface on the lily leaf. It was really bright up there. It had been so dark and murky down below. They won't believe this. Suddenly something begins to happen. The grub begins to open out. The grub spreads out two huge beautiful colored wings and becomes a beautiful dragonfly. It never imagines that this could have happened. It thought it would remain a grub forever. It flew back and forth across the pond. It could see the other grubs in the pond below but they couldn't see it. It realized there was no way it could get back and that they could not recognize such a beautiful creature as ever having been one of them<sup>38</sup>.

### **Preacher as a speaker**

"A company in Chicago went bankrupt only a year after making a two-million dollar profit. The reason: they failed to understand what business they were in. They thought they were in a bobby-pin business instead of the hair care business. When women stopped using bobby pins the company was finished."<sup>39</sup> A preacher is in the business of communication by word of mouth and other non-verbal and expressions that facilitate speech. He has no choice but to be an expert at that if he is ever to have any success as a preacher. If he does not have a natural talent as a speaker, he must cultivate it by learning skills of public speaking that include, planning what to say, saying it in simple sentences, clear and focused ideas, so as to convince, captivate and

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<sup>38</sup>[http://www.frtommylane.com/homilies/funerals.htm#grub\\_becomes\\_dragonfly](http://www.frtommylane.com/homilies/funerals.htm#grub_becomes_dragonfly).Retrieved, September 27,2010

<sup>39</sup> Howard, Hendricks, op. cit. p.69



persuade, the listener with expressive and enthusiastic delivery, using appropriate language for the appropriate occasion. To be a successful speaker one must plan, prepare, practice and present.

### **Power of persuasion**

One of the most important elements of preaching is persuasion. In Acts 13:43, Paul and Barnabas spoke to Christian converts and persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. Trying to convince the Greeks and Jews, Paul got into discussion with them every Sabbath, persuading them to become Christians (Acts 18:4). Paul at Ephesus, “entered the synagogue, and for three months debated boldly with persuasive arguments about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8). Good preaching is not about hell fire and brimstone most of the time. Paul calls upon Timothy to be persistent in proclaiming the Word, to convince (you can only do so through persuasion), encourage, through patience and teaching, (2Timothy 4:2ff); at times reprimand/rebuke if people are going away from the true doctrine. It is not about beating down people, telling them how terrible they are, reminding them of their sins and of God’s wrath every time a preacher opens his mouth.

Preaching is mainly about using God’s Word to give hope and encouragement; to support and guide, and to persuade hearers to change their lives in response to God’s Word. I do not mean to say that preachers should never talk about sin. If we do not see how filthy sin is and how it is the major cause of human suffering, how are we going to resolve to get out of it? It is not right though to always pick on a group of people and rebuke them in the pulpit, and worse, if it is an individual. Some preachers tend to see no good coming from politicians or security organs for instance, yet not all of these people are crooks. Taking politicians, prostitutes, gamblers, addicts, abortionists, gays, new immigrants or any other group of people and always make them a topic

of rebuke is unbecoming of a preacher of God's Word. It sends people away. Yet a preacher, using words of persuasion, should try to break down walls and other barriers that surround hearts, minds and personalities and access people's attention and eventually lead them to personal growth and development as well as communal change. In any case, "every sermon must be prepared and delivered with the intent of persuading people to say yes to the message"<sup>40</sup>

Most of the renowned people in the world are known to have moved their hearers through rhetoric that touched the minds and hearts of people and set them on fire to act accordingly. People like myopic Karl Marx, visionary Abraham Lincoln, and despicable Adolf Hitler had that sugary persuasive tongue that moved the masses to act. The success of such leaders is because what they said resonated with the lives of their audiences. The audiences had all the reasons to act and change or enhance the status quo. Remember Marx rallying dejected workers saying, "Workers of the world unite, for you have nothing to lose except your chains." What a powerful set of words! A preacher is called to employ such techniques in bringing the Word of God to people so that people transform their lives according to this divine Word.

For any homily to be effective it must be simple, clear, concise, forceful, convincing and helpful. A homily, like a good speech, should come more from the heart and the head than from the paper. When you read most of your homily you turn it into a reading and you sound less natural and less original. If a speaker just keeps reading he gives an impression that he has nothing in his heart or his head to share. If a preacher is convinced of nothing how could he convince anybody of anything! If he is convinced of anything he should be able to remember it and give it from his head and heart other than from his written notes. If you cannot remember, yet you prepared, they cannot remember either.

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<sup>40</sup>, [Power in the pulpit. p.26](#)

Haddon Robinson<sup>41</sup> likens preaching to delivering a baby or delivering a missile. In the latter the goal is to hit the target, in the former, it is to get the baby out. It is in the “baby delivering” sermons that preachers tend to confuse expository preaching with exhaustive, exhausting, rapid-fire or overwhelming preaching. Some preaching is like shouting bouts with words flowing like water coming out of a pressurized tube. Such a preacher just wants to get the baby out. You surely have seen such preaching on street corners, on Television and in the church next door perhaps. There is no concentration to hit the target; to deliver a sermon that touches and changes lives. The preacher only wants to get rid of all that he prepared! What a pity! Every preaching should be focused and targeted just as delivering a missile is.

## **5. PREACHING WITH IMAGINATION: USING IMAGES TO MAKE IDEAS VIVID**

A preacher is not a fine artist who expresses himself without words. A preacher paints his pictures and images not by hand but with words. He must therefore know words; plenty of good words and expression. He preaches and teaches by speaking words. They should not be mere words but meaningful words that are geared toward changing lives. He should know how to use them appropriately in all their forms. He can formulate them into stories, songs, poems, rhymes, similes, proverbs, metaphors, allegories, sayings and so on. With words he crafts his concepts into imaginative images. As Sallie McFague writes, “Images feed concepts; concepts discipline images. Images without concepts are blind; concepts without images are sterile”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Biblical preaching*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted by Warren W. Wiersbe, *op cit.* p.41

Here is how George Graham Vest, Missouri Senator for 24 years, used words to win a case as a young lawyer representing in court a man whose dog had been killed by another man.

He addressed the court thus:

“Gentlemen of the jury, the best friend a man has in the world may turn against him and become his enemy. His son or daughter that he has reared with loving care may prove ungrateful. Those who are nearest and dearest to us, those whom we trust with our happiness and our good name may become traitors to their faith. The money that the man has, he may lose. It flies away from him, perhaps when he needs it most. A man’s reputation may be sacrificed in a moment of ill-considered action. The people who are prone to fall on their knees to do us honor when success is with us, may be the first to throw the stone of malice when failure settles its cloud upon our heads.

The one absolutely unselfish friend that man can have in this selfish world, the one that never deserts him, the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous is his dog. A man’s dog stands by him in prosperity and in poverty, in health and in sickness. He will sleep on the cold ground, where wintry winds blow and the snow drives fiercely, if only he may be near his master’s side. He will kiss the hand that has no food to offer; he will lick the wounds and sores that come in encounter with the roughness of the world. He guards the sleep of his pauper master as if he were a prince. When all other friends desert, he remains. When riches take wings, and reputation falls to pieces, he is as constant in his love as the sun in its journey through the heavens.

If fortune drives the master forth an outcast in the world, friendless and homeless, the faithful dog asks no higher privilege than that of accompanying him, to guard him against danger, to fight against his enemies. And when the last scene of all comes, and death takes his master in its embrace and his body is laid away in the cold ground, no matter if all other friends pursue their way, there by the graveside will the noble dog be found, his head between his paws, his eyes sad, but open in alert watchfulness, faithful and true even in death<sup>43</sup>

In 2Samuel 17, king David had been deposed by his own son, Absalom. David was in hiding in the wilderness. Absalom had to find a way to neutralize any threat that might come from his father and his father's supporters. So Absalom turned to Ahithophel for counsel. Here is what the counselor said to Absalom:

“Please let me choose twelve thousand men, and be off in pursuit of David tonight. If I come upon him when he is weary and discouraged, I shall cause him panic. When all the people with him flee, I shall strike down the king alone. Then I can bring back the rest of the people to you, as a bride returns to her husband. It is the death of only one man you are seeking; then all the people will be at peace”

(2Samuel 17:1-3).

Absalom and his advisers liked the plan, and if they had followed it, it might probably have worked. However, Absalom wanted to have a second opinion from another counselor, Hushai (who supported deposed David, though silently or else he would be executed). Hushai, with his masterly of dressing up his ideas into images and pictures said this and won over the mind of Absalom that made him change the plan of action, and thus saved David and his forces. He said:

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<sup>43</sup> George Kaitholil, *You can be an effective speaker*, Bandura: Better Yourself Books, 1996. p.112.

“This time Ahithophel has not given good counsel... You know that your father and his men are warriors, and that they are as fierce as a bear in the wild robed of her cubs. Moreover, since your father is skilled in warfare, he will not spend the night with the people. Even now he lies hidden in one of the caves or in some other place. And if some of our soldiers should fall at first attack, whoever hears of it will say ‘Absalom’s followers have been slaughtered’. Then even the brave man with the heart of a lion will lose courage. For all Israel knows that your father is a warrior and that those who are with him are brave.

This is what I counsel: let all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba, who are as numerous as the sands by the sea, be called up for combat; and go with them yourself. We can then attack him wherever we find him, settling down upon him as dew alights on the ground. None shall survive, neither he nor any of his followers. And if he retires into a city, all Israel shall bring ropes to that city and we can drag it into the gorge, so that not even a pebble of it can be found” (2Samuel 17:7-13).

Everybody hailed Hushai’s counsel. Why? Look at the images he imposes on the mind of Absalom and all his supporters present. Ahithophel may have a point and his plan might even be better than Hushai’s but Ahithophel’s ideas are dry without any meat on them. They are not enticing; they are not seductive enough.

President Obama, while talking about the ailing American economy during the mid-term elections campaign in 2010, used a metaphor of a bogged down car. He said that the other political party had driven the car (the economy) into a ditch. When his, President Obama’s, party came into office, they struggled to dig out the car. “After pushing and shoveling, sweating and

having our boots dirty, having dug out the car and put it back to the road, the other party now wants us to hand them the keys. Why should we do that? They do not know how to drive”, Obama said. You cannot speak like this if you are not observant to what is going on daily. And when you speak like this, listeners listen and get it.

The late Dr. Adrian K. Ddungu, bishop of Masaka, while talking to a group of young people about protecting themselves from HIV/AIDS said, “If we tell our young people that condoms will protect them from Aids, they will get that sense of security and be on the loose. Which dad can give his child a bike that he pretty knows has no breaks? Or, let’s take what our friends tell us that condoms protect up to 90%. Now imagine there are 100 plates of a seemingly delicious meal. If they tell you that you are free to take a plate of food and eat but with a caution that one of those plates of food has a deadly poison in it and that you cannot tell with your eyes which one is poisonous. There is a probability that 99 of you who would eat would not die of the deadly poison in the food; only one person is likely to pick the bad meal”. The bishop paused, looked at the mentally defeated but smiling youth and asked them, “Who would take the risk?”. None was willing even though the probability to take a poisonous meal was only 1%. They easily and vividly got the message.

In the sermon of the plough, delivered on January 18, 1548 in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London by Latimer, anyone who had ears had to listen because of the imaginative pictures Latimer used. He said,

“And now I would ask you a strange question; who is the most diligent bishop and prelate in all England; that passes all the rest in doing his office? I see you listening and hearkening that I should name him. There is one that passes all the other, and is the most diligent prelate and preacher in all England.... I will tell you, it is the Devil. He is

the most diligent preacher of all others; he is never out of his diocese; he is never from his cure; you shall never find him unoccupied; he is ever in his parish; he keeps residence at all times; you shall never find him out of the way; call for him when you will, he is ever at home. He is the most diligent preacher in all the realm; he is ever at his plough; no lording or loitering can hinder him; he is ever applying his business....<sup>44</sup>

This persuasive speaker and preacher tells us how persuasive the devil can be. The devil does not come to us with chains and guns and threaten us that he is going to arrest us. He sweet-talks us into his designs; he tantalizes us with seductive words and stuff. See how the devil in his genius played on the psychology of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). This is what preachers need to learn if they do not have it naturally. It is a quality that is indispensable from the preaching activity or else preaching will not be productive. What a waste of time that would be!

## **6. ESSENTIAL SKILLS OF A GOOD PREACHER**

Legendary soccer players like Pele of Brazil or Diego Maradona of Argentina are known by almost half the population of soccer-crazy Uganda. Like basketballer, Michael Jordan, Olympic swimmer, Michael Philips, Tennis player Serena Williams, golfer, Tiger Woods, singers like Paul Kafeero, Serene Dion, and other highly talented people, make what they do seem so easy. Well it isn't. Gifted as they may be, they spend hours and hours in training and practice. Practice makes perfect, but only if one practices the right way.

There are preachers who have a natural ability to preach effectively, no doubt about it. But if the church were to depend on those exceptionally talented preachers, like Fulton Sheen, Billy Graham, Adrian Ddungu, Anatoli Wasswa, Peter Bakka and a few others, who are exceptionally rare, the mission of Christ would be in jeopardy since nature is not so generous

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<sup>44</sup> John Scott, *op cit.* p.27



about producing such geniuses in substantial numbers. The need for more good preachers calls for teaching and learning of skills for preaching just as bakers, doctors, drivers, teachers, tailors, lawyers , mechanics and others learn their professional skills. Here are some skills any preacher can learn and significantly improve his preaching skills and practice.

### **Personal life**

First and foremost, the personal life of the preacher speaks volumes. Don't actions speak louder than words? Can the preacher speak as Paul that, "Imitate me as I also imitate Christ?" (1Corinthians 11:1). Attention to the preacher's personal holiness is vital for him to be instrumental in changing lives of others with his sermons. What he preaches to others he must listen to himself and adhere to it as well. Paul told Timothy, "Attend to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in both tasks..."(1Timothy 4:16). Personal discipline in word, deed and temperament is instrumental in the preaching ministry. A preacher has got to be a model of Christian maturity, avoiding all deeds that are opposed to the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:19ff). "Do as I tell you and not as I do", is an ugly example. Preaching without observing what one preaches only brings opposition to Christ. Unfortunately, most of the people a preacher speaks to know that they are often morally weak but they do not tolerate a preacher's moral weaknesses ever. So a preacher must keep that at the forefront of his mind while attempting to preach.

Self elevation, thirst for praise and recognition, power and pride, are some of the vices that hinder preaching from changing lives. Fame and faith do not usually cook in the same pot. It is very easy for the people to find out that this preacher is a self seeker, looking for his own benefit. He is not a messenger of the Word of God. With such attitude, no matter how wonderfully a message may be molded, it will fall on rocky, impervious ground and will not bear

fruit. Unconverted preachers are a disservice to the message of God and to the church. It is therefore imperative for a preacher to have discipline both spiritually and physically.

How can you tell others to not to be possessed by things when you always ride in posh expensive cars yourself, live in mansions, go to the best hotels and relate only with the rich? You may surely not be possessed by these luxuries but you will labor in vain to convince any of those already scandalized. These things may not be a hindrance for your personal faith and Christian growth but may send a negative signal to your congregants. As Paul says, some things may be lawful but not beneficial for building faith (1Corinthians 10:23ff). Avoid giving offense (verse 32). I am only reiterating what St. Paul teaches and I do not personally claim to have reached where St. Paul would love to see every preacher.

How can you preach to others to be moderate when you are an alcoholic or out of shape due to poor nutrition? The Greeks knew and the Romans said, “*Mens sana in corpore sano*”, “a healthy mind in a healthy body.” Physical fitness is not an option, it is a must. Eating right or *feeding* as opposed to just *eating*, taking in what may not even be good for your health, must be given priority. Enough rest and relaxation is necessary but it should not be a license to laziness. Some people are busy and tired for doing nothing substantial! If you cannot find time for physical fitness, you will have to find time for physical illness, low energy levels, stress and at times depression. Yes, even those who are active get sick, but who knows, it could be worse if they never kept themselves physically fit when healthy! A schedule has got to be drawn and parishioners should know it and the pastor should follow it.

Regular medical check-up help in detecting some illnesses before it is too late. I am a small guy whom one could not possibly suspect to have high bad cholesterol. Such as diseases of the rich and fat, so I thought. However, when I went for a thorough medical check-up, the doctor

couldn't believe what he saw and I couldn't imagine what he told me! Knowing my problem quite early saved my life. Some people do not know that their eye sight is poor. A friend who went to see an oculist and got eye glasses was surprised to find out how much he missed seeing without those glasses. All along he had been so short-sighted but didn't know.

Days-off and retreats are necessary tools for both physical and spiritual refuel. Visiting others and see how they do gives you new insights. The Baganda have a saying that *he who does not leave his/her home always sings old songs* (because he/she does not go out to hear new releases). A priest who never leaves his station for a long time runs out of examples and out of topics to preach about. As we travel we get new insights and new experiences that we can use to make God's Word more clear in the minds and lives of our congregants.

Sincerity is an asset in the preaching ministry. We all know that contemporary media are like sniff dogs. They sniff around preachers to see what inconsistencies they would find. They are doing their job as they ought to do, no doubt about it. Society expects the highest integrity from the preachers no matter it may not have that kind of integrity itself. Yes, if you are supposed to lead others you ought not to be blind. As Spurgeon says, "A graceless pastor is a blind man elected to a professorship of optics, philosophizing upon light and vision... while he himself is absolutely in the dark!"<sup>45</sup> He who proclaims the gospel must have embraced it himself. Preachers are not like teachers, who may teach about topics they do not care about. The group that Jesus was constantly at loggerheads with in the gospels is that of the Pharisees and Scribes. They did not practice what they demanded others to do (Luke 11:46)

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted by John Scott, *op.cit.* p.262

## **A tireless ardent student**

Any workman, good at his trade, will do his job efficiently and effectively, that is, in less time and with good accomplishment, if he has the right tools for the job. No wonder, a bad workman always blames his tools! Try to fix a bolt without a wheel spanner or remove a car tire with improvised tools. It will take you longer, the job might not be done right and chances for injuries are heightened. A workman, keen at doing his job right with ease, always keeps a well-stocked toolbox with a variety of tools for any possible need that may arise. The more different tools he has the more tasks he is more likely to perform successfully.

A preacher must be prepared intellectually and socially to perform the tasks the ministry of preaching requires of him. Asked about what he could do different if he had a chance to re-organize his preaching ministry, Billy Graham said that he would study three times much more than he had done. Another preacher said that if one has three years to serve as a preacher, he would spend two studying and only one preaching. This is the wisdom of preachers who realized how vital studying is for any preacher to be effective.

While the second Vatican Council was deliberating about seminary training, it directed that students “should be trained for the ministry of the Word so that they gain an ever increasing understanding of the revealed Word of God, making it their own by meditation, and giving it expression in their speech and in their lives”<sup>46</sup> The Council decreed that one could not be admitted on the road to priestly training and ordination, hence, becoming an official preacher, without having obtained what is considered the minimum higher education training in his country<sup>47</sup>. In Uganda, one must have at least a bachelor’s degree. It further stated that seminary students “should receive a most careful training in holy Scripture, which should be the soul, as it

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<sup>46</sup> Decree of the training of priests, *Optatam Totius (OP)*, 28 October 1965, #3

<sup>47</sup> OP #13

were, of all theology.”<sup>48</sup> This shows how vital formal education is in the life of a preacher for the benefit of the Mission of Christ entrusted to the Church, from the apostles to today.

Certainly, there are a few great preachers who had minimal formal education. Most of the apostles fall in this category but who can deny the effect of their preaching? However, no one could ever know the degree of effectiveness such preachers would have attained had they had more formal education, more different tools in their toolbox. Therefore formal education remains paramount for preachers of the Word today.

A Biblical preacher must be a life-long student of the scriptures, an alert student of the contemporary world and a keen observer of society with particular emphasis to his congregation. He must be committed to get as much education as he possibly can if good preaching is his purpose. He must read, study, analyze, pray, reflect and live a life that is in line with what he preaches.

While other professionals normally pay attention to their particular area of professionalism and interest, a preacher’s area of interest is the whole. He has to teach people from all walks of life: the poor and the rich, the learned and the illiterate, the believers and the atheists; people of all ages and abilities; of all nationalities and backgrounds. What he says must make sense to this diverse audience. This is no mean challenge; and a preacher who knows it should get serious with study that never ceases. There is no day-off for a serious preacher for he gathers preaching information as he reads the newspaper. In fact he should have more information than the morning paper. He gets material for preaching as he reads a novel, watches TV, walks through the woods, hikes in the mountains, paces the beaches, and watches the kids playing and so on. His area and scope of study has no limits.

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<sup>48</sup> OP #16

It is ironic that while other professionals take a long time to train and perfect their trade, some preachers of the Word of God just learn-by-doing, trial-and-error sort of job. Citing that the apostles were not learned is a lamentable lame reason. The apostles were Jewish and any Jewish boy had to be trained in the *Torah* by age 12. So they had some serious formal training in the Scriptures. Moreover, times have changed. This is the twenty-first century, where people take tour trips to space, where oil is squeezed out of sand and voluminous amounts of information about everything can be accessed by anyone anywhere via the internet.

A preacher who does not study widely and seriously is a danger to the church. John Calvin once said, “None will ever be a good minister of the Word of God unless he is first of all a scholar”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, “No preacher should be satisfied to use only bits and pieces of the intellectual ability with which God has blessed him”<sup>50</sup> A preacher who has studied well is less likely to apply Biblical texts inappropriately. Instead, he is more likely to influence people and lead them to decide to walk the God-way through good teaching. Nonetheless, studying other things without studying the Bible would be like a medical doctor spending most of his/her study time studying about other things other than Medicine. A preacher’s major study is the Bible. As Saint Jerome says, “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” A preacher should study Theology more than anything else.

Unfortunately in Uganda, just like it is in most developing churches, parishes do not have libraries. The preacher has to buy his own books, yet he lives on the generosity of the people he serves; he is not paid. Where he is paid, the stipend is between \$20 and \$40 a month. There is no light in most rectories; and where there is electricity the parish can hardly afford it. There is no internet connectivity; where it is possible, he cannot afford \$35 a month for internet access. Most

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<sup>49</sup> From his commentary on Deut. 5:23ff, quoted by John Scott, *op.cit.* p.180.

<sup>50</sup> Vines and Shaddix. *Op. cit.* p.74.

of his time is spent in social works and social services not in preparing his sermons. What government does in economically developed nations like the United States, the churches tries to do in developing nations like Uganda. You will find priests bridging streams, digging roadways, involved in child immunization, building schools and medical clinics, running them, and the like. Once one leaves the seminary, the possibility of any more formal study is almost non-existent. If the churches in America knew what preachers go through in the poor nations, American churches would have been eager to help with their abundant blessing that is spent extravagantly, in my view. Anyway, with so much time and resources, why do many preachers in the wealthy world still deliver sermons that do not touch and change lives? That will be another study altogether.

### **A critical eye and an alert mind**

Anyone wanting to be a good preacher ought to have a keen sense of observation. He should be a “sensitive observer of life,” as Frank McNulty<sup>51</sup> puts it. He continues to say that “when a preacher has a good eye, his homily will not only speak the divine story, but will also say something about all those human stories. His good eye will help him to see what needs to be seen and then he will know what needs to be said... he will evidence a feel for the pain, joy, doubt, fear, confusion and hope of the people gathered in that congregation. Sometimes the good eye will make it possible to look into the hearts and help the homilist address the concerns he finds there.”<sup>52</sup> Only an observant preacher and a self-propelled student-of-life for life, will use words and be able “to bring an audience to the edge of wonder, grief, anger, confusion, fear, or

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<sup>51</sup> Frank, McNulty, *Preaching Better*. New York: Paulist Press, 1985.p.3.

<sup>52</sup> Frank, McNulty.*Preaching Better*. New York: Paulist Press, 1985. p.4.

discovery.”<sup>53</sup> You can create internal tensions only if you have enough facts that are presented imaginatively and vividly so as to hold the congregation hooked, anticipating the conclusion.

Don't you know of a preacher who quotes the Bible back and forth and really knows it so well? I know of one. He reads no newspapers, watches no TV, and he divorced everything he considers “secular” from his schedule. You cannot believe it, but he did not even know of a murder that had happened in his own town that week. He only heard people praying about it during mass that he asked about it! This preacher is just as extreme as another one who only quotes secular sources during his sermons. He does not seem to have a single memory verse from the Bible. Well, if one only watches movies and reads *Essence Magazine* that is all one is likely to preach about, sadly.

Preachers should preach about God and the gospel of Jesus and relate this Godliness to our daily lives. They should be balanced between the two worlds because even though we are not of the world, we are still in the world. As we preoccupy ourselves with *life after death*, we should not forget *life before death*. The world is not all evil after all, but at the same time it is not the end.

Illustrations stimulate interest and draw listeners into an experience. But they come with observation. The ants are amazing. They build their house, stock it with food; feed their queen and the drones that guard her. They work around the clock without complaining. Each one takes its duty seriously and together they build the most fascinating anthills in the tropics. If Christians lived like that, what a wonderful church there would be! Donald Grey Barnhouse made this illustration while he was driving his children to the funeral of their mother, his wife:

As he drove his children to his wife's funeral Barnhouse stopped at a traffic crossing. Ahead of them was a huge truck. The sun was at such an angle that it cast the

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<sup>53</sup>Bryan, Chapell. *Christ-centered preaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005. p.198.



truck's shadow across the snow-covered field beside it. Dr. Barnhouse pointed to the shadow and spoke to his children: "Look at the shadow of that truck on the field, children. If you had to be run over, would you rather be run over by the truck or by its shadow?" The youngest child responded first, "The shadow. It couldn't hurt anybody." "That is right," said Barnhouse. "And remember, children, Jesus let the truck of death strike him, so that it could never destroy us. Mother lives with Jesus now-only the shadow of death passed over her."<sup>54</sup>

Preachers should have a sense of observation to make preaching sense out of what is around them. However, everything should be done in moderation. Homilies that are overloaded with illustrations damage the credibility of the preacher as hearers take him to only be a story-teller. There is a Television preacher whom I watch when I need a laugh. Her congregation laughs throughout the sermon as she tells one story after another. I wonder what they go back home with as regards the Word of God and its challenge and hope for their lives.

Evangelical blogger and preacher, Peter Mead writes in his blog, "In order to preach so that listeners feel engaged and involved, even though they may sit in silence, the preacher has to know the listeners as well as possible"<sup>55</sup> Yes, the better the preacher gets to know the congregation, its struggles and battles; its deeds and needs, its strains and pains; its tears and fears, its strengths and weaknesses, its opportunities and threats, the more he is likely to preach sermons that are meaningful to that congregation. So he must make himself a life student. He should always be open and be alert to learning.

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted by Bryan Chapell, *Christ-centered preaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005. p.199

<sup>55</sup> <http://biblicalpreaching.net/2010/10/28/preach-the-main-point/> retrieved, March 31, 2010.

An abandoned house with nobody living in it is a shack. It is useless and pretty ugly. But for a keen eye and an alert mind it was once a home, full of life and love. Growing old is a devaluation of what was once beautiful and lovely. A keen mind, however, sees it as wine; the older it grows the better or the bitter it becomes! For a keen mind and eye, even a stopped clock is exact twice a day.

## **Preparation**

Called to preach, called to prepare. No one becomes an effective preacher by chance. It takes time, technique and talent. An effective preacher today cannot just rise from bed and go to the pulpit.<sup>56</sup> Coming into the pulpit unprepared is unpardonable. We all know that cases are won in the chambers not on the court floor. Lawyers prepare their cases before they appear in court to defend their clients. They put in a lot of time for study and research. Smart and good lawyers not only know the judge, as the saying goes but also know the law and how to apply it to a particular case.

Preachers who think they do not have to study to preach but take comfort in messing around in the pulpit until the Holy Spirit comes to their aid, should style up. People are leaving churches because there is a lot of this kind of “messaging around” with the Word of God. Others quote Mark 13:11, of course out of context, that Jesus said, “Do not worry beforehand about what you are to say...” They leave out the first part of the verse that says, “When they lead you away and hand you over...” Surely, a person who has been rounded up and arrested has no time to prepare his/her defense. That is the type Jesus was talking about in the text but not a priest whose main duty is to preach, and yet goes in the pulpit unprepared. That is irresponsibility!

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<sup>56</sup> Dr. T.A Prickett, No Travel Seminar, retrieved from Newburgh Seminary, July 19,2010.

A well-composed song that touches the hearts of hearers usually takes time to be composed and blended with accompaniments. A nice piece of writing also takes time to put together. Likewise, a good homily takes time to prepare before it is delivered. A biblical text has got to be read, studied, reflected upon applied and delivered in appropriate language, tone and style. This requires effort, plenty of time and patience, commitment and dedication.

So a preacher must create that time and schedule it. He should also acquire the necessary tools of the trade and even invent some himself if need be. He can buy books, tapes, write his own poems to be used in preaching, compose his own songs, and write his own skits. Buy CDs, have internet access and use it effectively. Be careful that tools do not become toys. Valuable time may be wasted online, doing other things rather than looking for material for the sermon. This happens to some of us several times, unfortunately!

### **Have a Goal and purpose**

The GPS (Global Positioning System) device will guide you to an address you know but you do not know how to get there. GPS cannot guide you to anywhere if you do not know where you want to go. You must have a purpose that is certain and sure. Going to preach without a goal is like going out to drive without a destination. You take whatever route for no purpose! What a waste! So at the start of the trip to the pulpit, a preacher should ask himself the following questions:

1. What is God's message in the biblical text?
2. What do I want the people to know? (Head)
3. What do I want the people to feel? (Heart)
4. What do I want the people to do? (Hands). The doing may not even be physical.

Let us take an example of the story of Naaman, a Syrian army commander who suffered from leprosy (2Kings 5).

The message is that God's grace is open and available to all of us in ways that may even be least expected. Nonetheless, our pride might prevent us from accessing God's grace. The story can be made clearer by re-telling it, putting it in the present with characters like a Ugandan General in Somalia, an American General, say, in Afghanistan; a letter from the President of the United States to the Afghan President requesting for a favor. Imagine a house maid, prisoner of war, making a suggestion that a commander goes to search for healing among people considered lowly. See how Naaman resists the proposal at first but he is persuaded to go. While in Israel, he expects Elisha to come out, meet him, touch him and heal him. He, Naaman, is a man of significant position and honor so he thought he ought to be treated with more dignity befitting a decorated commander. But Elisha only sends a servant to tell the general to go and take a dip in the Jordan. Naaman is furious. There are bigger rivers in Syria. But his servants persuade and convince him to do as the prophet Elisha had directed, for it was a simple requirement. Again Naaman listens to his servants. A miracle takes place and he is fully healed. He comes to believe in the God of Israel. So the journey to Israel is not only a physical journey for physical healing; it is a spiritual journey for spiritual rebirth.

With such knowledge, a preacher will be able to answer the above questions as he prepares his sermon; and to apply the biblical story to daily lives of people.

### **Have a theme.**

A theme or "the preaching point" should point out what the major point of the homily is. All other points should be geared toward explaining, illustrating and describing the theme, the "preaching point". It should be in the indicative mood, for instance, "The cost of discipleship".

A good sermon must have a central, clear and distinct idea that all other ideas must relate to and support. Haddon W. Robinson, in his, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, calls it “the Big idea”. To come to this central big idea, one asks one’s self, “What point do I want to make or what am I talking about?” Well, taking the selection of David from among his big brothers as an example (1Samuel 16), I may talk about “How God chooses the seemingly lowly.” Once the big idea is identified, the preacher then labors to beef it up, cook it, spice it and serve it to the congregation with fashion and style. The preacher knows that some people in the congregation just came for fun or to pass time, and do not care what meal is prepared. They never pay any attention. Others have a need and are eager to partake of the meal. The big idea should be prepared in such a way that it can even entice the unwilling and make them come back for even more! It should be more direct and personal; a biblical truth applied. For instance, “Turn away from sin and proclaim the gospel”.

The big idea must be drawn from the Bible and or be based on the Bible and then built up, using common language, common perception and concepts, common examples and analogies. It is then related to real life with a purpose of changing lives for the better. The big idea or theme contains the purpose for the sermon.

Simple grammar is necessary for clarity and the imperative mood, second person, singular, the “*you*”, directs the message to the hearer as an individual. The individual call is more likely to drive an individual into action than a more inclusive and diplomatic third person, plural, the “*we*”. I know you might disagree with me here but the truth is that the third person plural, “*we*”, does not really challenge hearers. Some preachers prefer a self-address question and challenge like, “Am I a true disciple of Jesus?” or “Am I evangelizing?” to, “are you...?”.

## **7. SERMON DELIVERY**

Before a meal is served, there is a tedious process of preparation behind it the scene. But if the serving is not done right a would-be delicious meal might be ruined. All the time invested into preparing a sermon comes to fruition in the pulpit. A sermon prepared but undelivered is like a meal prepared but never served. It does not nourish anyone, instead, it wastes resources and time. A sermon undelivered is like composing an email and not hit the SEND button. Delivery is extremely important. It has got to be done right or else all is lost! Nonetheless, it is not natural to stand in front of a group of people and speak naturally.

### **Pray for the sermon**

Pray for the sermon that it may change lives- yours and that of others. Through prayer we meditate upon the sermon and ask God to bless the preacher, the sermon and the hearers such that it changes lives. If we believe in prayer for others why not pray for ourselves and our sermon and its purpose?

There is an online joke that a preacher's 5 year-old daughter noticed that her father always paused and bowed his head for a moment before starting his sermon. One day, she asked him why. "Well, Honey," he began, proud that his daughter was so observant of his messages. "I'm asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon." "How come He doesn't answer it?" she asked.

### **Introducing a sermon**

Audiences have no time for an advertisement or a movie or a Television show that does not catch their attention instantly. They are ready to change to another channel right away. And like it or not, congregations come to church with that same mentality. So the introduction to the

sermon becomes all the more vital. A sermon, like merchandise, should be given a label that is attractive to capture attention. However, it should not be sensational as to compete with the commercial world. By the title of the sermon people will know what is going to be expounded. The introduction opens a window for the listeners to peep into the person of the preacher. Who is he? Is he good-hearted, is he proud and arrogant, is he aware of what is going on? Scott Wilson, in, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* gives some tips for a good introduction.

- 1. Tell a short story that suggests the flip side of the theme.**

If the theme is about God feeding the hungry, one can tell a story where God does not seem to feed the hungry. If the theme is about God caring for people, the story may be about God's apparent aloofness from people. That draws people to listen and find out what happens.

In *The Case for Faith*, lawyer and investigative journalist, Lee Strobel narrates the story of Templeton, a once televangelist, who preached with Billy Graham but left the pulpit and left the church altogether. He even wrote a book entitled, "*Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*." Among other things that he claims led him away from faith in God, was this particular photo from *Life* magazine. It was a picture of a woman in North Africa who was holding in her arms the body of her dead baby and looking up to heaven with the most forlorn expression. There was a drought and starvation as a result. Yet, according to Templeton, all that this woman needed was rain. How could a loving and caring God not bring rain, the only thing that woman needed? With such kind of suffering in the world, how could an intelligent person believe there is a deity who loves? That was Templeton's dilemma.

A story like this one will earn a preacher trust because it corresponds to real life. Such are real questions people ask as they struggle with their faith in God. If the preacher asks the same questions, they know he is their man, he is aware, he understands, he is not myopic! They will be attentive as he preaches because they want to know his conclusion to questions they constantly ask themselves.

In his defense of faith, Lewis Smedes begins his book, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong*, as if he were an atheist. It is a trick of a captivating introduction. He writes, “If you are trying hard to believe in God while a hundred voices inside tell you to stop believing, you are my kind of person....Believing does not come easy for me either....Too many people I care about hurt too much to let believing come easy. People close to me get cancer and die too soon; my prayers do not take away the pain....My friends’ marriages turn into battlefields and their children go through a hundred kind of mini-hells. God does not do many miracles for my crowd”<sup>57</sup>

This kind of introduction attracts total attention because it is about what people truly go through in their lives. They would like to see where he is going, and if he is a preacher, they will sit and listen with eyes wide open, as if to hear with their eyes in case their ears miss some words!

## **2. Start with a not-too-serious experience of the general theme.**

Going to the deep message of the sermon right away may find people’s minds not yet set for it. It is better to begin at a light note to attract interest in the preacher and in what he is going to talk about. Little animal and kids stories work well. Personal

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<sup>57</sup> Lewis Smedes, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong*, Colorado Springs: Water Brook Press, 1998. p.9.



stories too but the preacher should be careful not to use a story in which he is the good guy or the hero. People usually do not like that kind of self-elevation.

A preacher should never use a story of mockery of any person or group of people. He is only allowed to mock himself alone. Some preachers almost always hurl insults on politicians, for example. If this becomes a consistent theme, be sure some people will stop coming to church.

A pastor started his Sunday homily with this joke:

A young boy had just gotten his driving permit. He asked his father, who was a pastor, if they could discuss the use of the car. His father took him to his study room and said to him, "I'll make a deal with you. You bring your grades up, study your Bible a little and get your hair cut and we'll talk about it." After about a month the boy came back and again asked his father if they could discuss the use of the car. They again went to the father's study room where his father said, "Son, I've been real proud of you. You have brought your grades up, you've studied your Bible diligently, but you didn't get your hair cut!" The young man waited a moment and replied, "You know Dad, I've been thinking about that. You know, Samson had long hair, Moses had long hair, Noah had long hair, and even Jesus had long hair..." To which his father replied, "Yes, and they walked everywhere they went!" *Anonymous author*)

### 3. **Begin with the biblical text.**

Exodus 23:9, for instance, "You shall not oppress an alien; you well know how it feels to be an alien, since you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt" Or imagine if you had invited Jesus and on seeing who the guests were he begins to say, "When you have a party, do not invite your relatives and wealthy neighbors..." (Luke

14:7-14). Such introductions excites the imagination of listeners and makes them pay attention because it is not the norm for a guest to talk to a host like this.

**4. Open with a social justice issue.**

It is known that usually there are two opposing sides on any social justice issue and these opposing sides are likely to be in the congregation. This might alienate some people, but beginning from an issue that is known to the congregation would catch their attention. They would be eager to hear what the preacher says about the issue. Issues like corruption may not have opponents and they are safer to begin with than others like abortion, mixed marriages, divorce or gay relationships.

**5. Start with a news item.**

People do not come to church to get the news and probably they have watched it all before coming to church. But as listeners are adjusting to the preacher and to their pew, starting from what they have watched may attract their attention. They are eager to find out what the preacher has to say about the news item or how he is going to use it to make a point about the biblical text he is going to preach on. Papers, magazines, television, movies are all good sources. In all, such stories should not be long and should normally not depict violence that makes people shudder and probably “switch off”. There are many people who chill and shudder when they hear of or see violence. I rarely watch certain TV stations like *BUKEDDE TV* that are so fond of news with horrifying pictures. A preacher must know there are such people in the congregation.

**6. Start with a fictional account.**

If the story is not yours do not pretend it comes from you originally. In case someone has heard it somewhere else before, then the preacher loses credibility right away.

Preaching about how life's challenges test our faith in God, a pastor used this story:

She-lions in Africa have a way of proving which of their cubs are real lions and which ones are just wild cats. What mother lion does is to steal away from the den and come stalking and then jump into the den. Any cub that puts up a fight is a real lion and any that runs away is considered not to be a true lion and it is expelled from the den. As Christians, we prove whether we are true Christians or not when we face trials and tribulation. Not until we face threatening situations are we sure we really have faith in God.

#### 7. **How about a good joke?**

One can begin with a joke as long as that joke is not just for laughs! The joke should have something to do with the sermon. Any joke that ridicules anybody, other than the preacher who makes the joke, is a bad joke. We preach in a multicultural society where people are so sensitive about anything that might be perceived as racist or sexist. Favoring one culture over the other, elevating one ethnic group over the other is dangerous for the mission<sup>58</sup>.

A minister about to preach about being prepared for our inevitable trip to our eternal home used this joke:

“A priest waited in line to have his car filled with gas just before a long holiday weekend. The attendant worked quickly, but there were many cars ahead of him in front of the service station. Finally, the attendant motioned him toward a vacant pump.

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<sup>58</sup>Richard J. Hart, “Preaching to multicultural assemblies” in [The Priest](#), September 2010, p.84.

“Father,” said the young man, “sorry about the delay. It seems as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip.” The priest chuckled, “I know what you mean. It's the same in my business.” (*Anonymous author*).

#### 8. **You can begin with a paradox.**

“Many children of God live as though they were orphans”<sup>59</sup> It is not likely that people ever think about it this way. They know that we are children of God but it is true that we do not seem to be treated the same by God. Some people live as if they have no God that cares about them. People will be alert to see how the preacher deals with such a real question.

#### 9. **Statistics catch attention.**

Only one third of the entire world population has safe running water. The wealth of the three richest people in America is more than all the wealth of the 48 poorest nations of the world. 30% of all marriages end up in divorce in the first five years of marriage. This kind of statistics will surely make people listen.

Haddon Robinson<sup>60</sup> warns against making apologies as an introduction to a sermon. While people feel sorry for you about your unpreparedness they feel cheated for having come because you have told them that you did not prepare well for them. They right away withdraw their attention from an unprepared preacher. Who wouldn't? If you are not prepared, let them find out themselves. At times they never even find out!

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<sup>59</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *op cit.* p.167

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid* p.174

## **Eye contact**

Eye contact is helpful. Authentic and natural eye contact is priceless. Eye contact is worth so much to communicators trying to appear genuine. It should be valued even more by those who actually are genuine and desire to genuinely connect with people.

However, amateur or even seasoned preachers are intimidated by the piercing eyes that are all looking at their every move. Preachers become nervous because of this self-consciousness and tend to act funny if not weird. Some just look over the heads of the congregation without making any meaningful eye contact. Others look in one spot or at one person. Yet others look at the ceiling or just close their eyes as they speak. Some public speaking experts make the analysis here below:

- 1. Too fleeting gives the impression of being untrustworthy.**

It is tempting to just scan your eyes around while really you are just waiting until you can look down at your notes again. Just because people see your eyes doesn't mean you have made eye contact. You give an impression that you are nervous or ill-prepared therefore not fit to come before them. Remember they have given up many things to come to church and they are expecting value for their time.

- 2. Too lingering implies intimacy or intimidation.**

A momentous real eye contact is good but if you look at the same person so many times it becomes embarrassing. Opposite gender folks will start to shuffle uncomfortably while same gender folks may wonder if you want a fight. I suppose the danger here is an unthinking "eye lock" on one person as your mind is elsewhere.

- 3. Too predictable implies eye contact is contrived or secondary.**

Have you listened to a preacher that alternates between their notes, the clock and a fascinating plant over in the corner? It is thoroughly distracting and annoying. It feels like they are looking up from their notes because they are supposed to, but the room might as well be empty because there is no connection with the people (and in time may become empty, God forbid).

**4. Beware of blind spots and find out what they are.**

Preachers tend to unconsciously ignore to make eye contact to some particular areas of the congregation. Some just look at the people who are within 90 degrees from the lectern and those on either sides are ignored. Others tend to get the sides and the choir behind or on the platform, but often fail to make any meaningful eye contact with the front few rows in the middle. Check how you do it. You might be surprised that you would look up to the right side up to 18 times before you look up to the left side of the congregation. So beware of your blind spots to avoid such neglect of part of your congregation.

**5. Do you really need to look down?**

It is amazing how preachers often claim to have their notes simply as a security blanket, but actually they barely look at them (but when filmed discover they are looking down perhaps 70% of the time!) Do you need as many notes as you have? Do you look up as much as you think? When you look up are you making eye contact with people, or just pausing until you can look down again?

## Language, gestures and style

“A speaker who holds the attention of his listeners does not necessarily succeed- but no speaker succeeds unless he does hold their attention”<sup>61</sup> So, careful attention should be given to the introduction as we have seen above. A homily should be written out, in day to day language, rehearsed and be delivered with enthusiasm and some excitement because it is “Good News”.

One can use notes or just preach from memory, if one is that blessed. However, reading the entire sermon to the congregation might exhibit a lack of confidence and conviction. If you cannot remember what you studied how could you expect the congregation to remember anything, yet they usually do not take notes as you preach!

A preacher should use his voice and not try to mimic anyone else. A monotone, high pitched voice is not pleasant to most ears. Gestures and other expressions make the sermon real, if used appropriately. Being motionless may be prayerful for you but you know how easily people get fed up by staring at the same museum statue for quarter an hour.

The church is not a theater and preachers should not become comedians. People know where to go for such entertainment. Lawyers today go for acting lessons because acting skills help them in presenting their cases to court. Although biblical stories can be acted, the time for sacred liturgy should not take that route as the routine, in my view, except only once in a while.

Avoid preaching from one topic to another, from one half ideas to another, one un-ended sentence to another. Preach logically. Paula Abdul, a judge on “*American Idol*” show is a heck of a woman who never completes a sentence while giving her comments or judgment.

Since a preacher should know his audience, his sermon should be long enough to make the point but not too long to send everyone to sleep. We know that young people will focus 100% for five hours without a break on a video game. Movies are getting longer. It is also true

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<sup>61</sup> Michael, Fabarez, op cit. p.100

that some of the popular speakers today speak with good meaty content for 40 minutes to an hour and the younger generation flock to hear them. This means that if something is worth hearing, and if the presentation is engaging, then length of presentation is not the issue many make it out to be. In simple terms, preach well. Better content and better delivery will have people listening better. That said, however, preaching to children, for 30 minutes may be a proof that the preacher does not know the audience. Children cannot sustain attention for speech lasting that long. A children's homily should not go beyond 10 minutes and, a Sunday homily should not go beyond 15 minutes.

### **Be selective.**

You cannot preach about all the Readings. I mean for those who use a Lectionary. The Lectionary gives one Old Testament text, one psalm, a text from the epistles and another text from the gospels. Whereas those who preach using the lectionary are not at liberty to choose whatever text they want to preach on, they can still opt to preach on one or/and the other of the four readings they are given. They also have the advantage of preaching on most of the whole Bible, even on texts that they would otherwise skip.

My concern is that most preachers labor to make the connection among all the readings of Sunday or holiday. Many Seminary professors insist on making the connection among all the readings. If it is a study lecture, that would be fine but this is a homily. Much as the preacher studied the texts and found the connection interesting and intriguing, the congregation did not and usually it does not share the intellectual 'excitement' of the preacher. I mean if the connection is obvious, it is wonderful to make the listeners see it but if it is not why spend so much time on the non-issue? Your big idea can be extracted from just one reading and then developed with a purpose in mind. Trying to say something about every reading makes the



homily not only long but also seemingly disconnected at times. Bringing all those ideas together in a logical manner is possible but it means a lot more study and reflection. My proposal is that for those who can round up all the ideas from all the readings and develop a sermon that is geared to change life, do so without burdening your audience with scholarly connections of the readings. Keep it to yourself and your Bible Study groups and give the congregation what they can take home with them. You cannot possibly say everything you know about all the readings of the day and expect to deliver an effective homily.

### **Let “changing life” be the centre of the sermon**

Change of life means change of attitude, perception and action. In order to lead people to change their lives, a preacher must be prepared to use the sermon to challenge people’s attitudes and ways of life. “A church which sought (only) to be attractive in the eyes of the world would be on the wrong track because her duty is to make Christ’s light shine out”<sup>62</sup> One who aims at pleasing all the people who listen to his sermons is likely to avoid texts that challenge people. A “gospel of immediate gratification” is not a full gospel. Simplistic moral instructions, like “do God’s will and all will be okay with you”, will only lead people away because that is not how life generally is. Preaching should be God-centered, Christ-centered but not people-centered. Transformational elements in the scriptures should usually be presented in good biblical exposition. Sin and salvation must be talked about. This is not a popular topic because people want God who only does what they want Him to do and they are not willing to adhere to His principles. So a preacher should be ready for some hostile ears.

Preach and speak with authority and knowledge if you are to be believed. Mental modesty is no virtue. Preaching with authority and conviction leads people to know it is serious

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<sup>62</sup> Giovanni Maria “Every Christian called to change the world” in [Center for Peace](#), September/October 2010, p.2.

and true. With that in mind they are likely to try to change their lives which is the goal of preaching.

### **Concluding a sermon**

Sermon conclusions should even be more powerful than the introductions because listeners are more likely to remember the conclusion than either the introduction or the body of the sermon. In the last minute of the sermon, “a preacher marshals the thought and emotion of an entire message into an exhortation that makes all that has preceded clear and compelling. A conclusion is a sermon’s destination”<sup>63</sup>. Tell, in one minute, what you came to do, what you want people to take out of all that you have said.

A conclusion may be thunderous, like the one of Martin Luther King Junior in his “I had a dream” speech. It may also be soft, almost quiet, stalking its way to the heart. It can be in form of recapitulation where a preacher gives key points and thoughts. Students are so used to this method of conclusion from their teachers. The preacher can simply sum up the main ideas of the sermon. But all in all, the preacher exhorts people to act, to change lives mentally/spiritually and physically. The whole sermon is a kind of motivation and the conclusion is the final call to action.

Note that using someone else’s words to conclude your preaching may not be a good option. Some use poems or quotations. You should be aware that in spite of the tones of information available, this age has low literary appreciation. What rhymes and is literary superb may mean nothing to most of your congregation. Why should you let someone else conclude your sermon anyway? Use a quotation or poem only if it is the only one that makes your point the best way you yourself cannot. It should be short and memorable or else you will spend the

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<sup>63</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-centered preaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005. p.254

final minute reading, hence losing the final eye contact that is vital when concluding. In any case, if you are to conclude with a poem or quotation, it is better you recite it from memory. That shows how meaningful it is to you such that you were even able to commit it to memory.

Jesus came that we may be saved and have life to its fullness. Therefore a conclusion should bear a ray of hope and encouragement. Even at a funeral of a child or a young person, a preacher should end by giving hope, consolation and encouragement.

### **Mind your dressing**

Dress appropriately so as not to become a distraction and to respect the worship space<sup>64</sup>. As a child, I watched with awe our preacher who wore the latest shoes, blue diamond cufflinks and a golden ring on his finger. All the time he spent preaching I spent admiring stuff I wished I would ever have. Dressing below the standards of most of your congregation is as bad as dressing far above the standards of your congregation. Striking a balance and choosing what is appropriate is usually left to one's judgment and discretion. Silver and golden robes should be retired among a starving population. If you intend to attend the first mass of a newly ordained priest you should leave your most expensive chasuble behind for the sake of courtesy. Bride's maids never dress up better than the bride. Or do they?

### **Evaluation**

A preacher can record his/her sermons and listen to them later so as to evaluate him/herself. People usually give a feedback. However, it should be noted that they normally tell you what they know you would love to hear. So you may not take them so seriously for they tend to be over positive. If they can recall what you said and tell you how it touched them, then for sure

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<sup>64</sup> [Newburgh Seminary, \*No travel seminar\*, by Dr. T.A Prickett. Retrieved on July19, 2010](#)

your sermon made an impact and that shows that it was good. It is advisable to listen to other preachers preach. You learn a lot that helps you to improve your own homilies.

Watch televangelists and visit other churches when on vacation. Sit with the congregation and listen. This helps in to evaluating yourself. A friend preacher or congregant can also help in evaluation. A relative and children is another means of genuine evaluation. If parents can tell you what their children told them about what you preached, it is a very good sign that the children understood your message or not. If children have nothing to tell from your sermon you better change your methods of preaching. Fortunately, once children get the message everybody else gets it.

## **CONCLUSION**

The world has changed so is the preaching environment. Congregations are far more diverse with different needs and demands. The present economic, political and social life has had a huge impact on church life too. No longer can people be told what to do and what not to do. They decide what they want to do or not to do. A preacher can only appeal to them through persuasion. *Dictums* and *anathemas* have no place in the church of today.

Since preachers have a mission to fulfill they have to remain relevant. Therefore, preachers must devise and adopt appropriate ways and develop skills to attract people to come to listen to the Word of God and live according to the teaching of the gospel. Although priests today do more than preaching at their churches, they ought not to overlook their primary job. It is preaching. It is imperative then that preachers should invest heavily in the responsibility of preaching. People are leaving the church because of mediocrity preaching. Anyone who offers himself to be a preacher must be ready to study, to learn, to prepare and to deliver sermons with

conviction and passion. Sermons that do not touch and change lives are as useless as drinking water that does not quench thirst.

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