

**“It Better Be A Good Sermon!”**

**Preaching on Special Occasions, with the Non-Christian  
Visitor in Mind**

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Final

## **“It Better Be A Good Sermon!”<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Preachers under pressure**

In any sermon, preachers are under pressure: pressure from their own expectations of competence and fruitfulness; pressure from the congregation to say something worthwhile, worthy of their stipend; pressure from their family, lest they cause embarrassment; pressure from colleagues, mentors and bishops: to be faithful to their calling and training; and pressure from God: knowing the gravity of their ministry, that teachers “will be judged more strictly” (Jas 3:1).

However, when a sermon is for a Special Occasion, all these pressures are heightened.<sup>2</sup> There is now an “event”, with even greater expectations from those involved. Weddings, for example, are heightened by the complexities of bringing together two families who may not even know each other. They have innumerable unspoken and often unconscious expectations, as they do all they can to make this a perfect auspicious beginning to a long and happy life together. A funeral is heightened by the shock and numbness of grief and by the idiosyncratic manner every person and family grieves. Like weddings, funerals are made more complex by the tension of honouring both the people involved and the God who gives all good things. A Christmas or Easter service is heightened by the cultural festivities associated with these holy days. These festivities have taken on a life of their own, so that they now compete with the very meaning of the original celebrations. Whether it be the opening or closing of a building, an Anzac Dawn Service or a Bushfire Memorial Service, Special Occasions bring unique complexities and pressures.

Special Occasions put pressure on minimising the role of the preacher. The sermon is often crowded out by ceremony and music. It may be just one of a number of speeches, whose message may or may not be consistent with the gospel’s message of salvation by faith. Many people work hard for a Special Occasion. There are many agendas. The occasions are often long looked-forward-to, and can be expensive. The preacher has to negotiate with other event organisers and stakeholders, who are more

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to the Simeon Association, Brisbane, for providing this title.

<sup>2</sup> This article limits itself to the homiletical aspects of Special Occasions, recognising that others have written helpfully on the pastoral, liturgical and administrative aspects. See, for example, Charles Sherlock (Ed.), *A Pastoral Handbook for Anglicans*, Acorn, Brunswick East, 2001; and the Grove Liturgical Series, Bramcote, UK.

or less sympathetic to the gospel's truths. Everyone wants this Special Occasion to be special, but there are many different personal and cultural measures of what will in fact make it special! For some, it will be the dignity and beauty of the ceremony. For others, it will be the music. For some, it will be the pastoral sensitivity and effectiveness - to what extent were individuals honoured or cared for, or a work recognised? For others, it will be the depth and challenge of the sermon. Yet even what constitutes depth and challenge will differ.

So the preacher is under pressure. Their's is the capacity to mar an important occasion with a fizzer of a sermon, or simply with an untoward word or phrase. Their's is the capacity to bore and tire. Yet their's is also the capacity to lift the occasion to one which is indeed special, memorable and spiritually significant, because God's voice is heard. Their's is the role to be regarded as a fundamentalist dinosaur when they demur from "*Ave Maria*" or "*All I Want To Do Is Kiss You*". But their's is also the role to lift a sentimental, anthropocentric, smorgasbord of an occasion into well-ordered worship, where God's name is glorified, and where a group, both as a group and as individuals, meet with the living God and have a transformative spiritual experience. But making such calls is risky. It puts even more pressure on the preacher. So, if we're going to have a sermon, "It better be a good sermon!"

### **What is a Special Occasion?**

Just what is a Special Occasion? I am not referring here to those occasions specifically organised for those who aren't yet Christians, designed to explain or serve as an apologetic for the gospel. These times are probably best thought of as evangelistic or pre-evangelistic events. They have their own specific aims and guiding principles. They require a particular set of skills in terms of organization, promotion, communication and follow-up. And, of course, they have their own complexities and sensitivities which preachers need to be alert to and trained in.<sup>3</sup>

Nor am I referring to those invitations often given to Christian leaders "to say a word or a prayer" at civil celebrations, such as the opening of a school or the dedication of a monument. At such celebrations the leader is a guest, and needs to be sensitive to the prerogatives of the host's hospitality.<sup>4</sup>

Rather, I am referring to those occasions organised by Christians that are in essence times of Christian worship, but which have some unique focus setting them apart from the regular worship of the community. For some "extra-ordinary" reason, God's

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, John C. Chapman, "Preaching that converts the world" in Keith Weller (Ed.), *Please! No More Boring Sermons*, Acorn, Brunswick East, Victoria, 2007, pp. 125-137; John C. Chapman, *Setting Hearts on Fire: A Guide to Giving Evangelistic Talks*, Matthias, Sydney, 1999; Craig Loscalzo, *Evangelistic Preaching that Connects*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove, 1995; Ken Gaskell, *Open-Air Evangelism Today*, Grove, Bramcote, 1997; Roger Standing, *Preaching for the Unchurched in an Entertainment Culture*, Grove, Bramcote, 2002; and Lee Strobel, *What Jesus Would Say*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to exempt or neuter the visitor from their identity as a Christian preacher and leader. Using the wisdom of Joseph and Daniel, they are called to "make the most of every opportunity" (Col 4:2), like all believers.

people have gathered to worship Him, to hear from Him and to commit themselves afresh to serving Him. Christmas and Easter celebrations; baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals; welcomes and farewells; openings, anniversaries and closings, of buildings, events and meetings, all constitute Special Occasions.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes these occur at the usual meeting times of the church community. Often, however, they are at different times, and may even be off-site. Sometimes they are congregationally based, but at other times may be attended by members of a number of congregations.

Non-Christian visitors are frequently invited to Special Occasions. Indeed, such occasions usually provide great evangelistic opportunity. Nonetheless, they are fundamentally Christian occasions, with the church offering hospitality at its public worship. Obviously our love for the visitor means we should do all we can to welcome them. Obviously, too, our burning desire to see people saved means that we long for visitors to hear the good news and be converted. But these desires must not lead us away from the primary purpose of the gathering: that we are here, as God's people, to worship God, in the context of the Special Occasion. Keeping this focus becomes increasingly difficult as the percentage of outsiders grows, such as at a church school's Speech Day, an Anzac Day service, or Carols in the Park. In these circumstances organisers may want to reconsider the aims of the occasion - is it better to think of it as an occasion where the gospel is commended, or even as an evangelistic event? Numerous events are not as successful as they could be because organisers and preachers have not thought carefully enough about the nature of the event, its purpose and those attending. Mixed purposes often work at cross-purpose.

### **The particular pressure of visitors on the preacher**

Most preachers are highly alert to the presence of visitors. Sometimes the preacher has been advised by congregational members of the spiritual condition of those visiting, but usually the preacher is unaware of their knowledge or experience. Are they totally ignorant of the Christian faith, as some international students are? Or have they had some experience through church schooling or religious education? Are they seeking to know more, interested and attracted to the faith? Or are they hurt, opposed or simply apathetic to the gospel? Some visitors may be attending under sufferance, as a duty. Others may be genuinely neutral to the Christian aspects of the occasion. Preachers feel the pressure to be faithful to the needs of visitors: to present the gospel, or at least disabuse some misconceptions visitors may have. Most visitors do not want their presence to take the focus off the occasion. Rather, while appreciating acknowledgement and some reasonable accommodation, they expect to "overhear" a community at worship. Some even want anonymity, giving them time and space to consider the Christian faith. Indeed, often the preacher feels a greater pressure from a

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<sup>5</sup> I am all too well aware of the difficulty of defining "Special Occasions". In this context I am seeking chiefly to differentiate them from the regular worship of the congregation. Sometimes these occasions have been called "Pastoral Services", as in *A Prayer Book for Australia* (Broughton Books, Alexandria, NSW, 1995) and other books of common prayer. However, the category is broader than those named there. I have deliberately included Christmas, Easter and other festivals in the church's year, recognising that while many of these services are part of "regular worship", they share a number of features with other Special Occasions, due to our Christendom heritage.

visitor's friends and relatives, who are thinking, if not saying to the preacher, "It better be a good sermon!" They only add to all the other voices in the preacher's ear. How should preachers respond?

## **Responding to pressure**

### *Prayer*

The gravity of preaching should send preachers to their knees. Prayer puts preaching in perspective. Prayer reminds the preacher that preaching is a spiritual work. While requiring reason, passion and persuasion, preaching is not successful by these means. Rather, these tools are only made effective when first there is a movement of the Spirit in the listener's heart. Only the Spirit can lift the veil over people's hearts (2 Cor 3:14). Just as the Spirit of God has transformed the preacher, so God has promised to call out and transform his people. This should give great encouragement and confidence to the preacher. God is at work in the preacher's audience. God does not waste his energies. Of course, preachers do not necessarily see the fruits of their work at first. Indeed, some of this work may be to bring judgment (2 Cor 2:15-16; Acts 13:46; 18:6). But just as listeners have to accept the gospel by faith, so preachers have to accept by faith that God's word will not return void (Is 55:10). That conviction is only strengthened in prayer as the Holy Spirit ministers to the preacher, helping in their weakness (Rom 8:26).

### *Knowledge*

Knowledge also puts preaching in perspective. A sound theological foundation, constantly refreshed, is essential for any preacher. It reminds the preacher that this is God's message, God's ministry, and that the preacher will be judged on their faithfulness to the task of bringing that message clearly (Ez 33-34; Acts 20:26-27; 2 Cor 5:20). The response to that message, good or ill, is a response primarily to God (Lk 10:16). This knowledge keeps the messenger from boasting when the response is positive. It also prevents the preacher from over-personalising, or, even worse, adapting the message when the response is negative, though naturally the ambassador grieves with their master when this occurs. All preachers get sloppy or unbalanced in their thinking. Regularly putting oneself under the ministry of the word maintains focus, encourages and corrects.

### *Training, fellowship and self-evaluation*

The wisdom and experience of those who have gone before is invaluable. Preachers should be well trained in the discipline of homiletics, build on it and pass it on to the next generation.<sup>6</sup> An ongoing aspect of training is regularly meeting with and learning from other practitioners. So too is regular evaluation, as a good understanding of one's abilities and limitations is essential for any preacher. Good self-understanding includes an ability to assess one's own expectations and how one manages under the pressures of Special Occasions. Pressure will be reduced when the preacher learns to live with themselves, and helps others learn to live with them as they prepare, deliver and review sermons. Self-understanding also includes the ability to work to one's capacity. Preachers who undertake too many responsibilities will only be doing

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<sup>6</sup> For a more extended discussion, see Adrian Lane, "Training the Trainers of Tomorrow's Preachers: Towards a Transferable Homiletical Pedagogy" in *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society*, 9:2 (September 2009), 16-34.

themselves and the church of God a disservice, as will those preachers who are poorly disciplined or lazy.

This book is designed to encourage preachers to optimise the extraordinary opportunities afforded by Special Occasions for ministry to Christians and non-Christians alike. Many preachers have substantial experience in this area. However, the ministry potential provided by such occasions means that it is worth reflecting on them very intentionally, so that the preacher's contribution is as effective and strategic as possible.<sup>7</sup>

The book is first and foremost a call to prayer: that God would use Special Occasions for his glory, by growing his kingdom, and empowering faithful and fruitful preaching. Secondly, the book aims to help preachers think theologically, with the Scriptures as authoritative. Thirdly, it seeks to enhance the training of preachers by addressing some of the theoretical and practical aspects of Special Occasions, the nature of particular audiences, and by providing some model sermons.

Experienced homileticians and practitioners working all around Australia have contributed. Naturally every occasion is different, every congregation is different, and every preacher is different. Yet God and his word remains the same. The preacher's task under the Spirit of God is to bring the pertinent aspect of the word of God for that congregation on that occasion. The contributors will, of course, have different approaches to the preaching task, since preaching is a creative, spiritual work. However, all are enthusiastically committed to making best use of the opportunities currently available through Special Occasions. The following principles are offered to stimulate this thinking and lay some foundations.

### **Some key principles**

*Respect and speak to the occasion.*

A Special Occasion is a special occasion. Make it special. Make it different, unique and memorable. Make it a worthwhile occasion, one that people are glad they took the trouble to attend. This has implications not just for the sermon, but also for the preacher's dress, presentation and bearing. Keep the focus on the particularity of the event. Keep asking, "What makes this event special?" A wedding is a time to pray for and celebrate a marriage, rather than an evangelistic meeting. A Remembrance Day service is an occasion to thank God for those who served in war, rather than a time to comment on foreign policy. Hopefully there will be evangelistic and ethical elements at both, but this is not their focus. Some preachers are so alert to the public nature of Special Occasions that they soft-peddle the Christian message and may even be defensive or apologetic. Others, also alert to the public nature of the Special

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, although Special Occasions take much of a preacher's time and energy, presenting such significant pastoral and evangelistic opportunities, little has been written for the Australian context. Two notable exceptions are *How to Speak at Special Events*, Sarah Buckle-Dykes (Ed.), Fearn, Scotland, 2007, and Keith Rayner, "Occasional Preaching" in Weller, *op. cit.*, pp.117-123. For an overview from a North American perspective, see Scott M. Gibson, *Preaching for Special Services*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2001.

Occasion use the occasion to so focus on the gospel message that the core nature of the event is overshadowed. The congregation and its visitors have gathered for this event. Respect the event and speak to the occasion. In turn, this will lead to a respect for the church and the preacher.

*Know your audience.*

Do your homework! Standard questions for a Special Occasion are, “Who will be attending?”, “Why are they coming?”, “What are they expecting?” and “What has been their experience of church?” A standard question I ask relatives when planning a funeral is, “Are there any skeletons in the closet that I, as a preacher, should be aware of?” On one occasion relatives noted the serious alcoholism of a much-loved public figure. This issue was well known to a number of listeners and was, in fact, the cause of death. It was named in a gentle and sensitive manner, and dealt with positively and constructively. No longer was it “the elephant in the corner”, edged around, with a brooding power. However, at another funeral I attended one of the speakers made unfortunate remarks about the deceased’s previous marriage, apparently unaware of the presence of the deceased’s former wife and their children. In addition to being rude and unloving, this cast an embarrassing pall over the funeral and did not work towards any sense of reconciliation or closure.

*Recognise that the occasion is a gathering of the people of God in common worship, and as such will build the kingdom of God.*

Some preachers view Special Occasions a little off-handedly, or even as a nuisance. Special Occasions do take time and are usually an addition to the “core business” of the regular weekly ministry of the word in its various forms: sermons, Bible Studies and pastoral conversations. Special Occasions put pressure on an already busy schedule. But they also provide timely pastoral opportunities, where there is an open “readiness-to-learn”.

A baptism or confirmation service is the perfect occasion to speak about salvation and Christian discipleship. Careful teaching about marriage at a wedding will help foster godly attitudes to singleness and marriage, and will strengthen marriages in a congregation. A funeral is an obvious occasion to teach Christian truths about suffering, faith and resurrection. A Christmas carol service is a natural context to speak about the incarnation, Christ’s kingship and the gentile mission. A local government service, praying for and recognising council representatives and staff is an ideal time to speak about the role of government.

As God calls out and builds his people, each listener is at a different stage of understanding and maturity. But whenever God’s people meet to worship Him and hear from his word, they will be edified. Pray that the Holy Spirit would use the occasion, and especially the sermon, to build his church and minister to each believer as each has need. Preachers will always come under pressure to minimise the theocentric and ecclesial nature of the gathering and focus on the anthropocentric and individual. They will often be asked to drop the sermon, include some liturgy from another group, such as the Freemasons, or to include inappropriate music. Gracious strategies and responses need to be thought through beforehand.

*Public worship: Recognise outsiders and make the most of every opportunity.*

Having recognised that Special Occasions are meetings of the people of God, for their up-building, it is also important for preachers to recognise their public nature. Paul urges the Colossian Christians to be wise in the way they act towards outsiders, “making the most of every opportunity” (Col 4:5). Paul urges the Colossians to “let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col 4:6).

Applying these principles to Special Occasions will mean graciously welcoming visitors and being sensitive to them. In the sermon, clarity will be key, with no unexplained jargon. Illustrations and applications will need to be chosen carefully, to avoid misunderstanding. This is the principle in 1 Corinthians 14:23. If an unbeliever comes into a church where everybody is speaking in a tongue, he will simply think, “you are out of your mind.” If, on the other hand, there is intelligible prophecy, he will indeed “be convinced he is a sinner” (v. 24).

Sensitivity will not mean watering down the gospel or backing away from its exclusive and life-demanding claims. Such an approach lacks integrity and is not faithful to Christ’s call for the putting to death of self. Visitors will be expecting the congregation and the occasion to be authentic and will usually respect this authenticity. Indeed, authenticity in our current culture is generally viewed as attractive and compelling, even if it is “different”. If visitors later discover their experience was not authentic, or only “half-baked”, they may feel deceived, or even cheated. Those Christians who have prayed and worked hard to bring their friends and relatives will be looking forward to the preacher making the most of the opportunity by ensuring that the core truths of the gospel are salting the sermon. Therefore, after preparing the sermon with a focus on the occasion, I have found it helpful to review it, checking off whether these truths are in fact included: God’s creation and rule, sin, Christ’s atoning death and resurrection as Lord, and His return as Judge and Re-creator of a saved people. Of course, these central truths will be more or less present depending on the occasion. Usually they can be included unobtrusively in some measure without being unfaithful to the inherent nature of the event.

Any sense of exclusion on the part of visitors must solely come from the gospel. Often before a person becomes a Christian a sense of otherness, or exclusion to the benefits of the kingdom community is felt. This is related to the growing awareness of sin. Indeed, in the process of becoming a Christian some non-Christians can be quite antagonistic. The preacher has to learn to live with this antipathy: as noted already, it is in fact opposition to the master.

### *Preach the Word!*

This leads us to our next key principle: Preach the word! It may seem surfeit to make this point but our natural inclination and temptation is to regard the gospel as foolishness. The more special the occasion, the more foolish the message of the cross appears. In the pomp and ceremony of a state funeral or a service for the beginning of the Legal Year, to preach that everyone will face judgment and that “all” one needs to do to escape this judgment is to put one’s faith in Jesus as Lord, can seem trite and simplistic.<sup>8</sup> It is certainly unsophisticated – and certainly doesn’t require sophistry. But this is the gospel message. It is exactly the reverse of the world’s thinking. It does

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<sup>8</sup> Rom 10:9



indeed seem foolish, but “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27).

It is only through the word that people are saved and built up. There is no other way (Rom 10:13-17; 1 Cor 15:1-2; Jas 1:18, 21). As this word is preached, it will be acting powerfully, convicting and convincing, drawing people to God, redeeming and sanctifying them. It will bear fruit (Is 55:11; Mk 4:26-29).

Furthermore, God has a word for every occasion – however tragic, areligious or complex it may at first appear. I remember ministering at the opening of an underground gold mine, feeling thoroughly ill-equipped: who was I to speak to these worldly-wise men who had worked all over the globe in the toughest and most isolated conditions? It would have been easy to withdraw or be platitudinous. But after prayer and consideration I realised that God had much to say into this context. I have never had such an appreciative response from any group. They were so grateful to know that God was indeed interested in them and their work. Preach the word!

*Be well prepared: with a full text.*

Special Occasions require time and thought. Whereas a preacher may be forgiven by a supportive congregation for an “off” day on a regular Sunday, expectations at Special Occasions are higher. Timing is usually tighter. The occasion is probably being recorded. The media may be present, or a media release planned.

Such occasions call for a well-prepared full oral text, or at least a text that is as comprehensive as possible, depending on the occasion and the preacher’s experience and style.<sup>9</sup> This enables preachers to consider carefully their words, ensuring that the sermon is clear, crisp and engaging. Not a word will be wasted. Nothing important will be forgotten in the anxiety and busyness of the occasion. While the preacher does not have to adhere legalistically to the text, the preacher will know its length and be familiar with it for engaging delivery. Naturally, it will be adaptable to the particularities of the occasion, as the Spirit leads.

A comprehensive, well-rehearsed text allows the preacher to focus on the occasion and the sermon’s delivery. It communicates to the audience that the preacher takes this occasion seriously and will usually engender a similar response from listeners. Copies or sections of the text can be given to participants and the media afterwards. Many participants at Special Occasions are so nervous, upset or distracted by the occasion that they do not have the energy to focus on the sermon. However, the occasion is important and memorable to them, and they commonly revisit it in more relaxed circumstances, often with family and friends. The preacher will frequently be surprised at the longer-term reach of the sermon, in print, audio-visual and electronic form.

*Express empathy: identify feelings and speak to them.*

Empathy is the ability to understand the feelings associated with a particular situation. Common feelings on Special Occasions are anxiety, delight, thankfulness, excitement, anticipation, relief, confusion, helplessness, tiredness, sadness, fear, anger and envy.

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<sup>9</sup> For a more extended discussion, see Adrian Lane, “The sound of preaching: orality and the use of an oral text in oral format” in Weller, *op.cit.*, pp. 53-66.

Empathy does not presume identification or agreement with such feelings – just a recognition and understanding of them. When preaching, it is not enough to have empathy. Rather, empathy must be expressed. Empathy needs to be expressed so that the listener is helped to identify their own feelings and make helpful connections between their feelings and the word of God. At a recent wedding, close relatives of the couple were experiencing a traumatic divorce, some considered the couple too young, some were grieving the “loss” of a child or sibling, some were homosexuals, some were from other religious backgrounds, and many were sceptical about marriage, choosing instead *de facto* relationships. Others were excited and expectant. I sought to identify these perspectives and their associated feelings in order to indicate acknowledgment and respect, and to demonstrate that God Himself was alert, sensitive and interested in the circumstances and feelings of the listeners.<sup>10</sup>

Some preachers have difficulty identifying their own feelings and the feelings of others at Special Occasions. This is an important matter to address. If not, it leads to a sense of disconnection between the audience and the preacher, and therefore a sense of disconnection between the audience and God. Preachers need to work hard at identifying their own feelings and the range of feelings in their audience on Special Occasions and ensure that the sermon helpfully responds to such. This is not just pastoral care for the audience - understanding one’s own feelings is essential if preachers are to care pastorally for themselves.

*Identify the issues and speak to them.*

A common criticism of preaching is that it is too pietistic and does not relate to the worlds of the listeners. Some preachers respond that this is the task of the listener: to relate the word of God to their world. However, such a view usually masks an inherent intellectual and pastoral laziness on the part of preachers in wrestling with the implications of scripture for the contemporary context. Special Occasions cry out for this integration. Listeners are longing to hear a word from God.

After the death of a child, or a local tragedy, such as a bushfire, where is God? At a special service for the chronically ill, does God know our pain and exasperation? At a gathering of emergency service workers, who are constantly dealing with trauma and the underbelly issues of society, is there any help or protection from God? If a listener has a child serving in the Armed Forces, or a relative killed or traumatised in a war he or she didn’t condone, won’t they be acutely interested in what the preacher has to say at the Anzac or Remembrance Day service? And could God really have anything to do with cricket or football at the annual club service?

Even if the preacher has yet to come to a final mind on an issue, it is helpful pastorally to name the issues and respond as fully as possible, making the connections between them and the Scriptures. This models a God who knows and loves His world, enjoys it, and is intimately interested in it, sharing its pain. It also models a God who has something to say to our questions, ignorance or apathy. It teaches God’s mind on the plethora of issues we wrestle with daily. It gives Christians responses to the

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<sup>10</sup> See Adrian Lane, “United with Christ: Sharing His Attitude”, in Keith Weller and Adrian Lane (Eds), *Better Be A Good Sermon*, Acorn, Melbourne, 2011.

questions they are constantly asked by non-Christians; and it will also ensure an engaging variety amongst sermons.<sup>11</sup>

#### *One main point*

It is much easier for listeners if the preacher can respond to the pertinent feelings and issues with one main point or theme. Some questions are unanswerable, and the preacher must not be simplistic or naive. All of us, as created beings, have to learn to live with ambiguity and unknowing, trusting our Heavenly Father. But to the extent that the preacher can move to an integrating resolution, the sermon will have a memorable gospel-reflecting unity.<sup>12</sup> Otherwise it will not be as effective, remaining a soup-pot of ideas, lacking connection. This has implications for the listeners' understanding of God.

#### *Love your listeners.*

Expressing empathy and speaking to the pertinent feelings and issues will nonetheless remain clinical unless accompanied by genuine love (Rom 12:9; 1 Cor 16:14). This is where ministry differs from professionalism, where demonstrations of love are minimised. Love is “the most excellent way” (1 Cor 12:31). Preachers must love their listeners, lest they become harsh, impatient or judgmental. The audience that knows their preacher loves them will pay greater attention.

Loving one's listeners will often mean a deliberate decision to love. Sometimes at Special Occasions there is an underlying grumpiness or irritability, provoked by some aspect of the arrangements. The preacher may simply be stressed or distracted by the occasion's complexity. Death is always an interruption. Rather than seeing the Special Occasion as an incursion on a crowded schedule, preachers have to trust God that all things work together for good and that the Holy Spirit will equip for the good works they have been called to do.

As preachers love their listeners there will be a place for noting points of identification. However, preachers must not pretend to identify. Such inauthenticity will be obvious, sabotaging the message. Appropriate identification will indicate a common background, experience or commitment and will especially help with illustration and application.

#### *Be part of the bigger process.*

A wonderfully liberating consequence of a Reformed view of salvation is that the preacher knows they are simply one part of God's sovereign purposes. A person's salvation or discipleship does not depend on the preacher. God in his mercy will raise

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<sup>11</sup> For one helpful way forward when preaching in circumstances of evil and tragedy, see Hugh Begbie's discussion of a “retrieval ethic” in “God and War”, in Weller and Lane (*ibid*). See also the sermon in that volume by Bishop Tom Frame given at the Bali Bombing Memorial Service.

<sup>12</sup> See Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form, Expanded Edition*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2002, especially pp. 74-79; Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, Second Edition*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2001, Chapters 2 and 4; and John R.W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1982, pp. 224-227.

up his instruments to effect his purposes, regardless of our obedience or competency. Of course, preachers are commanded to be faithful, working hard at their vocation, running the race to win the prize (1 Cor 9:24), seeking the higher gifts (1 Cor 12:31). Nonetheless, recognising that God has promised to call out and mature his elect takes enormous pressure off the preacher and an undue focus. Just as your preaching sows or harvests, other preachers will also sow or harvest. They will benefit from your ministry, just as you will benefit from theirs. What a joy to be a contributor as God grows his church!

Preachers should not feel that every sermon has to thoroughly cover all aspects of the gospel message, as though any sermon could! Rather, the sermon should invite further inquiry and facilitate conversation between listeners, so that congregational members can minister to each other and the visitor.

Look forward to the word doing its work and expect that time will need to be set aside for those wanting to explore further. Congregations have been built on baptismal interviews after young parents have invited friends to baptisms. Many have started coming to church, or returned, after attending a funeral, and new congregations have been established in a community through Christmas or Easter services.

*Be prayerful and supportive of other preachers.*

On Special Occasions preachers often have other preachers listening to their sermons. Preachers do not always find it easy to listen to others' sermons. Typically, a listening preacher will consider their own understanding of the text and how they would have preached it on this occasion. Some preachers are even competitive, perhaps reflecting an underlying lack of self-respect and confidence in God's love, acceptance and equipping. My own experience has been that whenever I have humbly asked God to minister to me through another's sermon, this prayer has invariably been answered, irrespective of the "quality" of the sermon, and often to my shame! A preacher needs to know that other preachers in the congregation are listening humbly, praying and supporting, not listening critically, eager to spot the first "mistake". Preachers at Special Occasions have enough pressures on them without the additional pressure of collegial critique. The Scriptures call on us to "honour one another above yourselves" (Rom 12:10). Such honouring is a crown to the kingdom, and will only help the Special Occasion bring glory to God.