

‘Preaching Trouble’

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I preached my first sermon when I was nineteen years old. I don’t remember much about it, except that it was on Hebrews 12.1-2 and was probably pretty terrible. It was in a preaching class run by the Vicar: we had a basic lecture on theory - and then each of us - there were 12 in the class - preached a sermon and the others critiqued it. We did it twice over, 24 sermons spread over twelve Tuesday evenings. It was an incredibly rich feast on the Word of God, and awakened in me a passion that has driven my life ever since.

Back in that first class, I learned something which still shapes my preaching. The sermon is the place where God’s word and our world connect. It’s so simple, but when I hear (or preach) a sermon that doesn’t seem to work, it’s usually because that connection is missing. We’ve all heard sermons that are full of excellently detailed exegetical work, but never make the leap to real life. And we’ve probably heard just as many that do a great job of exploring the state of our world, but never get round to engaging with the text. Those sermons fail.

They fail, because they miss that essential connection between God’s word and our world. It’s a connection that is rooted in the incarnation, in God’s decision not just to prod our world from a safe distance, but to enter into it in all its messiness. Christ is the ultimate expression of the inherent connection between God’s world and our world. Preaching is an echo, the rebound of God’s voice into every corner of our lives. It’s not that we create the connections in our sermons, but that we uncover them, so that everyone can see them - and hopefully, having seen the connections we have uncovered they will go home ready to do some uncovering of their own.

So how do you make the connections? And which connections do you include? Sometimes they are obvious - the rare occasions when the lectionary hands you the gift of the very reading you would have chosen to speak about an issue that is splashed all over the newspapers or running underground in your congregation. But more often, it’s not so clear. And one of the things I have learned to do, is to look for trouble.

Trouble in the text

Trouble comes in many forms. Sometimes it’s in the text. Every Sunday we have three readings and a psalm to choose from when it comes time to preach. My general policy is to look for the most problematic text, the one about which the hearers are most likely to say, ‘What’s that about?’ or ‘I don’t agree with that’ or ‘How did that get into the Bible?’

When we work through the readings set by the lectionary, one will often jump out as being more problematic than the others. What do you do when you read a text that has Jesus telling a would-be follower to sell all he has and give his money to the poor (*Luke 18.22*), when your church is struggling and you can’t afford to turn anyone off, and you know that your hearers are too busy paying off their mortgages and car loans to consider selling anything to help provide for the poor? Or when you preach in a context where most people assume the church’s primary role is to uphold family values, and you read a text like Mark 3.31-35, where it seems that Jesus is to all intents and purposes disowning his family?

It’s best, in my experience, to tackle these sorts of issues head on. At least some of our hearers will be thinking about the questions and challenges raised by the text, so they already have a vested interest in listening. And they need to hear that there are more options than just discounting or marginalizing scripture when you don’t agree with it, even though that’s the easiest way to deal with troublesome passages. Our preaching can model of ways to read and interpret scripture and example of how to uncover those life-giving connections between God’s word and our world even in the most unlikely places, so that when they come across these texts on their own, they have at least some of the tools they need to find meaning and connections for themselves. And so when it came to preaching on Luke 12.49-56, I began this way:

There are times when the last thing we want to hear on Sunday morning is the gospel. We come here, many of us, for a moment of peace stolen from the middle of our busy lives. What we get are words of war. We come here looking for encouragement; and what we get is as like as not to turn us round and send us straight back out the door. We come for grace and what we get is trouble.

And it’s all Jesus’ fault. Because what we hear in today’s gospel are fighting words, and Jesus is right there in the middle of the fight.

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, is how the story books traditionally pictured him, blue eyed and blonde headed, surrounded by laughing children, but the Jesus we meet in this Gospel is more like a Palestinian gunman or an Israeli soldier.

For this is war he declares. It might not be a war of guns and bombs, but it is war nevertheless, a war against evil and corruption and complacency.

Sometimes a text is problematic because of the day it falls on. I remember being scheduled to preach on a Sunday when we had baptisms - and the designated gospel was Mark 6.14, John the Baptist's head on a plate. I had two choices. Preach on one of the other readings, and pretend we hadn't just heard a gory story totally at odds with most people's vision of a baptism as a sentimental family event. Or face the problem squarely and preach on the Gospel. And so I began the sermon this way:

When I was little, I had a special book. It was a big book, about this big, and this thick, and it was full of stories. It was my children's Bible. Maybe you had one too. You used to be able to find them in dentists and doctor's waiting rooms as well. I have fond memories of these books, not just because they were good at filling in that awful waiting time before medical appointments but because they were full of all the blood and gore which I generally didn't get to see or hear about.

After all, when was the last time you saw a bloody battle on Play School or someone killed with a stone on Sesame Street or an all consuming flood on Romper Room.

Even though those bible story books censored what we might call some of the more 'adult' stories, there was still a more than adequate supply of blood and guts for your average bloodthirsty little kid... David and Goliath, Daniel and the Lion's Den, Noah's Ark, and so on.

There are times when the Bible seems to be full of gratuitous violence. Hardly the good example we would want to set for our children. Today's gospel reading is one of those.

From there I talked about the reality of evil in the world, linking it to the threefold renunciation of evil in the baptism liturgy, and then the costliness of discipleship that may open us up as victims of evil, just as it did for John the Baptist.

Another type of trouble in a text comes when you discover that a couple of verses have mysteriously been left out of the lectionary reading. A gap in the verses, or between two weeks of supposedly sequential readings, all too often signals that the omitted verses are 'too hot to handle.' All the more reason to preach on them in the context of the whole passage. So we miss the woes of Matthew 11 and Luke 10, the troubling words about women in 1 Timothy 2, and the violent imprecation of the end of Psalm 137, which only makes it into the lectionary as an alternative reading (Proper 22). But if we avoid these in church, what happens when people come across them at home? Once again, it may open up unexpected connections if we preach on these words that no one seems to want to speak, and invites our hearers to risk voicing their own unspeakable words in the context of their faith.

Trouble in the world

That's trouble in the text. But there can also be trouble around us in our world that simply demands to be addressed in the sermon. Not long ago, by the time Saturday evening came around, I had written two-thirds of a fairly competent sermon on the Gospel for the day, focusing on Jesus' challenge to his disciples to give up their possessions in order to follow him. It's certainly a troublesome enough passage, and so, under my usual criteria, a good choice for a sermon. But something was wrong. It had been a week of crises, both in the parish, with a death and some kids getting in trouble, and internationally, with the terrible events in Beslan. I watched the news, and then went back downstairs to write - and found myself beginning a whole different sermon. It was a sermon of lament, drawing on the ugly richness of the lament psalms, including the verses left out of the prescribed Psalm 139. And in it, I voiced the pain I could hear in my parishioners, the pain I could hear in the world - not in order to help my hearers 'get over it,' but to help them to bring their own pain to God. And so I wrote, in concluding the sermon.

The psalms of lament give voice to our pain. Some of the words are so ugly that the prayer book leaves them out of our regular Sunday readings. It happened today in our psalm. But we need those words. We need to know how to talk to God when we are angry, when we are heartbroken, when we are hopeless. We need to know that we can be honest with God even when the words we want to speak almost curdle our blood.

We might need to say those words to survive...

I suspect that there is no real answer to suffering. There are no nice neat arguments that will make sense of it all, no easy responses to make pain go away. I don't know why God allows it to happen. I don't know why God won't just make it go away. But I do know that God can take our anger. I don't know that God can bear our grief. And so I join with the mothers in Beslan, and the villagers in arfur, and the people we love here in Swedesboro, and with Christ our Savior, hanging on a cross, praying the words of lament: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?'

Preaching trouble is not easy. It requires us to come to terms with our own pain, our own doubts, and our own helplessness. But it is this sort of struggle, this voice of authenticity, that gives our hearers permission to engage with their own struggles in the context of their faith. It is this sort of preaching that opens our eyes to the intimate connections between God's word and our world, and invites us into a fuller and deeper relationship with our Saviour.