

Preaching - chapter by Jonny Baker

Throwing a Hand Grenade in the Fruit Bowl

Something Has Got To Change

Since I was asked to write this chapter on preaching I have been asking a lot of people when the last sermon was that really inspired or challenged or changed them. The responses have been interesting. A lot of the people have pulled a face and laughed as if to say 'are you serious?' - it's as though they can't even imagine the possibility of being inspired or hearing a brilliant sermon. Others have remembered a transforming preach but a typical answer has been that it was one or two years ago. In a recent debate in the UK on introducing a law against inciting religious hatred the Guardian newspaper published a cartoon of an angry woman pointing at a vicar and saying to a policeman 'his sermons have made me hate church officer'. It made me laugh but like so much good humour/art it's funny because it is making something visible that is hidden.

I assume that most people buying and reading this book will be preachers or have some vested interest in preaching. From the preacher's end of things it is often frustrating as well. We have all had the experience of chewing over the theme or the biblical text, crafting a sermon to bring God's word to the congregation, and yet when we stand up to preach, eyes gradually glaze over and we can see minds almost drifting out of the room. There are always one or two enthusiastic listeners taking it all in, but a large percentage just look blank. What's particularly frustrating about this is that we as the preacher have got fired up about the passage and have a sense of God wanting to speak but still people are not getting it. There seems to be a kind of disconnect, a communication breakdown.

Something has got to change. Maybe it's time to think the unthinkable. For too long we have behaved like the 'well adjusted' courtiers in the famous story of the Emperor's New Clothes saying nothing, propping up the status quo, smiling politely with our vested interests in tact (whether as preachers or as listeners), or simply too embarrassed to say anything. Allow me to be the antisocial brat (as Marshall McLuhan puts it in his retelling of the story) - the Emperor 'ain't got nothin' on!ⁱⁱ. Preaching is invariably dull. It is boring. People are sick of three point sermons beginning with P. People aren't listening. People don't want to be preached at. They don't want to be told what to think. Like so many other areas of church life we're stuck in a time warp. It isn't working. Maybe it's time for a rethink.

Thinking Creatively About Preaching

We need some creative thinking about preaching. There are several myths and several blocks to creative thinking. These are a couple of each:

Myth one is that creative thinking is a mystical gift that some people have and others don't. This is simply untrue. We are all made in the image of God and we all have this gift. It can lie dormant particularly if we don't exercise it like an unused muscle but step one to being creative will be recovering the belief that we are all creative.

Myth two is what Edward de Bono calls the logic of hindsightⁱⁱ – whenever anyone comes up with an idea very little attention is paid to how they came up with it because it looks obvious in hindsight. The problem is that whilst an idea may be logical in hindsight it is invisible in foresight. So we need to pay attention to the processes of coming up with creative ideas.

Block one is ‘the right way’. When it comes to preaching there is no right way – there are lots of ways. New ideas can be threatening of course. But the more ideas we have the richer we will be for it. Part of the skill of learning to think creatively is learning to detach your ego from the process. You don’t have to be right.

Block two is the habit our brains have for thinking along familiar tracks. We think in patterns and it can be hard for us to think along different routes. We need to be provoked or whacked on the side of the headⁱⁱⁱ to learn the art of seeing sideways.

People often come up with creative ideas when they are provoked. So if we want to be creative we need to deliberately come up with provocations or interruptions into our routine to knock us off track and into a different way of thinking. De Bono has devised several provocations. One is ‘Escape’ – in this method you look at some feature that you normally take for granted in a situation and then drop it or cancel it^{iv}. If we want to think creatively about church then it might be worth trying this by dropping out priests, worship leaders, choirs, church buildings, house groups, alpha, the prayer book, singing or whatever. The point about this isn’t that you have to get rid of that thing forever – but it will force you to think in different directions even if you reintroduce what you have dropped out. (Be warned though I did hear of a church that gave up its choir for lent and never had them back!). I want to apply this to thinking about preaching – let’s drop sermons. Preaching is a sacred cow so let’s slay it.

Route One – Slaying A Sacred Cow

Ok – so no preaching! This immediately raises several questions. What is preaching for? What other ways can we achieve that? What are we going to do instead? What about preaching is good that we need to find other ways to do? What about preaching is it that we’ll be glad to see the back of and never have back?

Mike Riddell suggests that ‘The purpose of the sermon is to unleash the power of scripture in a way that leads to personal and corporate encounter with God.’ (p119 God’s Home Page). I like that. I’d add that it should open up the possibility of transformation which maybe is implicit in his definition. One other goal of preaching/teaching is education – enabling people to learn.

There are actually stacks of ways we can do those things that don’t involve preaching. I am involved in an alternative worship community Grace in West London. Alternative worship has lots of insights and clues to offer the wider church I think on creative approaches to liturgy and worship. One of those is the treating of the whole worship service as the text rather than just the sermon. Another is the involvement of the wider community in engaging with that text from planning through to the service. We recently had a couple of services looking at Psalms. The planning of the services involved a few weeks of discussing and reading Psalms – planning is generally quite a chaotic experience. Anyone is welcome to come and contribute and the process tends to start

with brainstorming ideas and letting the theme or the text inspire and challenge us – any random tangents are explored, with often the craziest ideas leading to some wonderful things. The end result of this process of wrestling with the scriptures was a series of two services on the Psalms. In the first we had identified about 10 different themes such as praise, lament, anger, despair, storytelling. Then the whole text of the psalms was printed out at different places/stations in the church along with activities or small rituals that related to the psalm and connected it with contemporary experience. These ranged from an online confession, post it notes of thanks, wrapping your self in a duvet to read psalm 91. The service involved a corporate reading of a couple of psalms sandwiched around time to walk round and pray and interact with all of the stations that had been set up. It was a powerful service, engaging with a lot of bible text. For the second service people were invited to create their own psalm using any media they liked and the service consisted of those being read/shown/performed. Not everyone created a psalm but a lot did. The results were stunning and in a range of media – VJed psalms, rewrites of existing psalms that related to an urban context and so on. Artists' gifts came to the fore. Some of it was actually great contextual theology.

The same material could have been approached by asking one person to preach on Psalms for us, but so much was gained by everyone wrestling with the text rather than just the preacher. The culture we live in is shaped by consumption. All of life seems to be distilled through this lens including church. It's very easy for people to come to worship to consume God. As leaders we get trapped in a provider-client relationship with the congregation. They sit and passively consume what is taught or provided for them. One of the keys to breaking this is looking for ways to empower people to move from being consumers to producers – i.e. creative involvement, using their gifts to contribute and create.

This issue is further problematised by the notion of priest/leader/preacher as expert and/or the mediator of God's word to the people. We should look to move to the hermeneutic of the congregation – i.e. the people as the interpreters and co-authors rather than the one or two experts. I don't want to overstate this. Communities do need gifts of expertise – but the way that these gifts are brought to bear could shift. One of the gifts a preacher can bring is their theological expertise – it is invaluable to have people who know the scriptures and theological takes on things and have put the leg work in in terms of reading and research. But these can be brought as one of many gifts to the community who then need to work out how they might be communicated or discovered by the congregation in the worship, liturgy, group discussion, ritual, artistic interpretations of the text and so on. This is no different to the way a musician or photographer or DJ or liturgist might offer their gifts to the community. It can sometimes feel a risk to open up who can contribute in this way – we're immediately losing some control. But in the gospels it is actually often (and pretty much exclusively) those with no power or those who are outside of the 'religious' community who have the most profound insights about the nature of the kingdom (such as the Samaritan woman in John 4). There is an implicit belief that God is at work in the world beyond the boundaries that the religious community has constructed where the Spirit leads people to creative discoveries and encounters with God and other people. If we took this seriously then we could let go of some of our fear and experience some of the energy and creativity that the Spirit brings to the community.

Education has changed a lot in the last twenty years, recognizing that people have various learning styles. The emphasis is on teaching people to think and discover for themselves rather than learning facts. This notion is captured in the old proverb 'give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day, teach him how to fish and he'll eat forever'. There is also plenty of research that shows that a talking head is actually a very ineffective means of communication. People retain only a very small percentage of information communicated in this way, and they know that if it is facts they are after, a quick visit to google will probably suffice anyway. Preaching it seems is stuck in the old school. The questions we should be asking are how can we help people to think, theologise, discover and learn – not what doctrine/information can we impart this week.

One of things I realized several years ago was that I had a lot of friends who had been Christians a while and were drifting out of churches. Sermons were the thing they most complained about. I know that for me one of the times I got the most out of the bible was when I had a sermon to prepare because it made me study it in depth. I figured that these people needed to do something like that. So I started a group called 'nuggets'. We met in a pub and everyone had to deliver a 'nugget', (as well as drink plenty of beer). Now a nugget was an insight on a passage in the bible – it could be anything. But being a competitive bunch, people wanted to deliver impressive nuggets. The unspoken thing was that the more original and surprising the better. And a good nugget generally had a build up, the delivery and then basking in the oohs and aahs as people were wowed by it. This was the most fantastic time of learning for the whole group – the group had shifted from being passive bored listeners to active producers – learning and making discoveries in the process. We were often the noisiest group in the pub. The one qualified theologian in the group actually invariably delivered the best nugget and I think he enjoyed it so much more than preaching.

I was chatting with someone recently about preaching and they said that in their church they always preached for a response. By this they meant that the conclusion to the sermon always created space for people to respond to God. I know that these situations can be manipulated and there is plenty of bad practice around. But at heart this expectation is a good one and in line with the goal that preaching should unleash an encounter with God. We also live in a culture now where people want experience – they are up for encounter with God, they want to be touched, moved, changed. This is actually a very big turn around from the British stereotype of the stiff upper lip (thank God) - the unforgiveable sin these days is boring people. One of the most wonderful discoveries I have made in the last ten years is the power of ritual to open up encounter with God. In Grace we invariably create some sort of ritual for people to respond to the theme or the text that we have explored in the service. Usually the rituals are inclusive and can be taken on a number of levels – this creates enough space for people to respond to God and for the Spirit to touch people where they are at. The rituals might be old ones such as lighting a candle, burning incense, anointing with oil, eating bread and drinking wine, or they might be new ones such as putting a footprint in sand, writing a pledge, walking a labyrinth. These embodied responses seem to open up a window for transformation and encounter. And you can facilitate the responses and encounter even if you have dropped the sermon.

I recently came across the web site for a café church in Australia. On the web site they describe how they have employed various artists over the last few years. They refer

back to the days when churches might have employed someone to sculpt or create pictures in stained glass and see this what they are doing as the equivalent. One of the kinds of art they have created is digital art – what they describe as contemporary stained glass windows in motion. Rick Founds was employed to create a flash animation that linked in with the theme of the lectionary for a whole year. Members of the community and further afield could subscribe to an e-mail list and get sent the animations – one each week. Several are available to download from the web site. I love the imagination of that community – the willingness to invest in artists and creative communication. Maybe dropping preaching could give us a chance to let the artists in our midst loose? Art can do so many things. It can be pleasureable, beautiful, and challenging. But it also has the ability to shatter settled reality, to evoke grief, to make things visible, to open up new imaginative possibilities and worlds. Allow me another couple of McLuhan quotes: ‘the mind of the artist is always the point of maximal sensitivity and resourcefulness in expressing altered realities in the common culture’^v and ‘the art of remaking the world eternally new is achieved by careful and delicate dislocation of ordinary perceptions’^{vi}. In times of change the gift of the artist/prophet is invaluable to the Christian community.

Our ‘escape’ provocation has led us on a brief journey where we have discovered new ideas, broken the passivity engendered by preaching, moved from the cult of the expert to the gifts of the people, moved from the preacher as the interpreter to the congregation as the interpreters engaging with the bible, let loose the artists in our midst, rediscovered ritual, remembered that the goals are learning, encounter with God and transformation and that preaching may be one gift or art among many that can lead us to that place. Having made this journey, for route two of our rethink about preaching I want to reintroduce preaching and suggest a few ideas for remixing it.

This ‘escape’ may seem contrived and of course it is. But it may also not be such a bad idea in practice. And it is certainly possible – maybe try it for 6 months. At Grace we very rarely have anyone preach. In fact I can’t think of a single sermon as such in the last three years.

Route Two – Remixing The Sermon

Sampling changed the way music was made. A sampler enables you to take a sample of music from a track – a drum loop or a riff say. Various samples can then be woven together to make a track on a computer. DJs and producers create and remix music tracks in this way. They take some elements (samples) of an old track – maybe a break beat or a riff and then add in some samples or loops from other places as well as create some original new parts to create a whole fresh sound – referencing the old but also completely reinventing it and giving it their own unique twist. In this way the tradition if you like of jazz is reinvented and carried forward and given a new creative edge. This provides one of the best metaphors for me for thinking about the art of preaching. We have a history of over 2000 years of the Christian faith, the scriptures, the resources of theology and biblical studies, insights from the world church, sermons preached, the arts, as well as access to what is happening in contemporary culture in music, literature, film, blogs and the media. Where preaching is stuck in a rut we can take a leaf out of the DJs book and sample and remix the tradition fusing it with contemporary culture to come up with some fresh inspiring and original sermons. Bruegemman puts it this way – ‘it (proclamation) is rather a place where people come to receive new

materials, or old materials freshly voiced, that will fund feed nurture nourish legitimate and authorize a counterimagination of the world^{vii}. As well as the negative experiences that I began the chapter with I have also been built up, challenged, moved to encounter God, to repent, laughed and wept, had the rug pulled from under my feet, and made new discoveries about God and what it means to follow Jesus all through listening to people who have crafted the art of preaching in this way.

Maybe a starting point for remixing is letting go of the old fixed ways of doing things. I want to end up just with a few ideas for preaching – these are not solutions, just some things I have discovered that you can add to your mix.

Get creative – learn to think outside the box. I've said plenty about this in the previous section but surprise people, come at things sideways, don't let them know where you are headed, draw them in, intrigue them, find resources outside your area to fund your and their imagination.

Stop being a lone ranger. Don't do all the preaching. Get in a team of people that want to communicate and dream ideas and creative ways of communicating and widen that group as much as you can.

Preach less often. Too many preachers trapped in the role of the provider/expert find themselves preaching too often. It's no surprise they lose their edge and don't have fresh things to say. In the previous church I was in I did preach but I said to the vicar I would preach three or four times a year so that I could be fresh and put plenty of effort into making those sermons really good.

Move from a deductive to an inductive approach^{viii}. Deductive tells people what you are going to preach on, does so via a series of rational logical points, and deduces a conclusion. This is fine for certain types of audience but they have to be highly motivated to listen. What often happens is that you have shown your hand in the introduction so the congregation know what you are going to say and switch off. In contrast an inductive approach starts where people are at and from that life experience or illustrations takes people on a journey to where you want to lead them. When you get there the conclusion is induced – it's obvious. A classic example of this kind of communication is where Nathan the prophet is tasked with confronting David about his adultery – he starts with a story about a someone stealing a sheep. David is drawn right in to the story and Nathan turns it on its head when he says – it's you!

Use storytelling. People love good stories. Weave them into your sermons or make the whole sermon a story or a series of interwoven stories. One technique I picked up from the comedian Ben Elton is what I call freeze framing. He starts telling one or more stories and then stops/freezes frames them at a point of suspense only to return to them later. People love this – it keeps their interest and intrigues them as they want to know the outcome.

Watch good communicators/comedians. I went to see Eddie Izzard at Hammersmith Apollo a few years ago. He spoke without notes for an hour and three quarters and then came back for a half hour encore and people still wanted more!

Arouse curiosity. The old school of preaching is very much about the banking concept of education^{ix} – telling people what to think. Move from that to trying to get people to think. Ask questions rather than give answers. Jesus was a master of this. He spoke in parables and did not explain them. I love the translation in ‘the Message’ of Jesus’ answer when he was asked why he spoke in parables – ‘to create readiness, to nudge the people towards receptive insight’^x i.e. get them curious, get under their skin, get them thinking because they have got hard hearts to get through to. Sometimes to do that you have to hide meaning. We tell parables and insist on explaining them. Try telling a parable and not explaining it.

Create space for artists to communicate and not just as illustration for your sermons, Use contemporary art forms as well as classic ones.

Create space for dialogue and interaction. One of the Greek words for preaching is actually our equivalent of dialogue. Get people into small groups to discuss and feedback. At the end of every sermon create a space for questions, disagreement and comments. Rather than one talking head have two people present different takes on the same material.

Preach for a response but don’t control it. I think preaching should open up the possibility of encounter with God but combine it with ritual that is open so that you don’t try and control the response too much. Let God do what God wants to do.

Accept that some people don’t need to hear any more sermons. Many of the people who like preaching are those who have been Christians for a short while. They are hungry to learn and grow in their faith. On the other hand there are other people around who have heard literally hundreds of sermons. They probably don’t need or want to hear any more for a while. Instead of worrying about how to please them try and think how to nudge them into doing more with their faith. Maybe they should start a new expression of church at the coffee shop on a Sunday morning for people who don’t like sermons?

Let prophets, evangelists and apostles as well as pastors and teachers preach. I think the comfortable option in letting people preach (and lead) is identifying those with pastoral and teaching gifts. Look for those who have more of a prophetic, evangelistic or apostolic edge. They are likely to see things differently and bring a different maybe more uncomfortable challenge.

Spend as much time on the communication as the content. My experience is that when people prepare sermons they work hard on the content and then put it into shape fairly quickly. I think how you say it is as important as the content. Try preparing a sermon well in advance. Then once you have worked out what to say meet with some others and see how creative you can be with the way you want to say it.

Don’t have sermons every week. Preaching is not sacrosanct. It’s one way of communicating. Do something different for a change.

Use cultural signposts. Jesus did this all the time. His metaphors and symbols for the kingdom were things like salt and yeast and shepherds. His stories were agricultural.

They used signposts from the culture. The equivalent for us is using the stuff of culture and life – films, songs, media, art and so on. To do this you need to be immersed in ‘the real world’ rather than the Christian subculture.

Try a few short sermons – it’s surprising what you can say. When slam poetry kicked off the early nights consisted of anyone being able to perform for three minutes. People would do the most amazing things. Introduce slam preaching. I was once asked to preach three 60 second sermons for the BBC. At first I thought it was a joke but by the time I had done it I was thinking why do people need 30 minutes?

I explained my approach for this chapter on preaching to a friend on the phone and it made him laugh. He said it sounded like I was putting a hand grenade in the fruit bowl - the chapter’s not meant to be that destructive! But now you know what inspired the chapter heading. But I hope that it might at least have provoked or sparked you or given you a whack on the side of the head.

ⁱ Marshall McLuhan – The Medium is The Message p88

ⁱⁱ Edward De Bono – Teach Your Child How To Think p16

ⁱⁱⁱ This phrase comes from the book by Roger Von Oeach called ‘A Whack on the Side of the Head’ that looks at creative thinking.

^{iv} Edward de Bono - Teach Your Child How To Think p196

^v Marshall McLuhan – ‘The Book of Probes’ p525

^{vi} Marshall McLuhan – ‘The Book of Probes’ p510

^{vii} Walter Bruegemann – The Bible and Postmodern Imagination p20

^{viii} A good book on this is Inductive Preaching by Ralph and Greg Lewis

^{ix} Freire coined the concept of the banking model of education in his book ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’. It’s a model where the teacher is depositing information and skills in much the same way as you deposit in a bank.

^x Matthew 13