

Do you have your pencils at the ready? How to be a great preacher... You're right, it isn't possible to give three magic clues that will make you a great preacher. This paper is only going to outline one clue for you, one key to being a great preacher. But there is a prior question we must address: why do you want to be a great preacher?

In fact, why do we want to preach at all? Why not discuss? Or possibly, we should hold dialogues. Or should we use drama or dance? I've run out of alliteration on the letter 'd' but why not use music or movies or mystically meditate? There are so many ways in which we can minister to people – why do we want to preach? Would we not get further in today's society by giving people the 'experience' of God, showing signs and wonders, creating a spiritual environment.

The way in which we minister reflects our theology. It doesn't reflect it perfectly because sometimes we haven't thought out our theology consistently. Sometimes we have thought it out consistently but we haven't got the will to put it into effect. However, in general you can understand what people believe about God by the way in which they conduct their public meetings. What the Hare Krishnas believe about God is clear from their chanting, bead-counting, vegetarian lifestyle. It is quite different from the Muslim way of conducting public meetings because the Muslims have a different theology. Likewise, it is very different to the Greek Orthodox public gatherings. Preaching is an expression of theology. To choose to preach rather than to dance or to chant is to make a statement about God.

This is not to say that Christians cannot be involved in anything other than preaching. Even the activity of preaching itself may be enhanced by drama or discussion or dancing. However, there is a difference between enhancing preaching by other activities and using other activities as alternatives to preaching. Having preaching as the chief activity says something about our view of God. If our view of God is that 'it' is a force, then our appropriate activity and ministry will be to experience the force and to tune our existence to its power. If our view of God is of the great inscrutable spirit, then we will sit in silence, seeking to fathom the unfathomable in the mysteries of unknowing. If our view of God is that of rationality and reasonableness, a first principle from which all other things can be deduced, then we will enter into intellectual enquiry, discussion and debate.

But the Bible teaches us that God is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth who is three persons in one God. As the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, he is not to be found in this world, although his work as the creator may be seen. Because he is the almighty creator of the universe, he is one to whom I am responsible as well as being the one on whom I depend. But because he is the personal God, he is known to me only in as much as he reveals himself to me. Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 2 from the analogy of human personality. It is only the spirit within a person who knows the person and so it is only the Spirit within God who knows God. It is only as that spirit seeks to make himself known that anybody can come to know that person. God, as Jesus pointed out in Matthew 11, reveals himself to whom he chooses. It may not be to the wise, but to the babes of this world. If God is an idea, then rationalism is the way to find him. If God is an object, then empiricism may be able to understand him. But if God is personal, then revelation from him

is a pre-requisite to our knowledge.

How does God reveal himself? The Scriptures say he has revealed himself in creation, in the history of Israel and in the person of Jesus. He has revealed himself in creation only in that we can see that he exists and is powerful (Romans 1:18f). He reveals himself in the history of Israel in that in many and various ways he spoke by the prophets to our forefathers (Hebrews 1:1). But he reveals himself specifically and explicitly in the person of Jesus for in these last days, he has spoken by his Son (Hebrews 1:2, John 1:1-18). The revelation of God in creation can be seen by people in any and every age. The revelation of God in history can be seen only in as much as we look at that history, recorded for us by God's inspired word. It is the inspired word of the prophets and the apostles that make known to us God's actions in history. And they are not only described but also interpreted for us. This word of God is imbued with all his power. It is by God's word that he created the world (Psalm 33:6f, Genesis 1:1f, John 1:1-4) and by his word that he has reserved it for destruction (2 Peter 3:5-7 Hebrews 4:12-13). His word is an active and living word that can affect the lives of people (Hebrews 4:12-13).

When we read the prologue to John's gospel we tend to think immediately of Jesus. However, until Jesus is introduced in v14 when "the word becomes flesh", everything that is said about the "word" could be said about the Scriptures. It is by God's word that the universe was created and it is his word which is the light and life of men. We do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). And because this is the word of our almighty creator, judge and ruler, it is not the word to argue with and disobey, but to hear, to understand and to implement. Thus God's word to mankind, the word of the gospel – that Jesus is the Christ, crucified for our sins and risen for our justification – requires people to repent.

The knowledge of God comes **from God moving towards man** – not vice versa. Revelation starts from the heart and mind of God and results in our understanding. It does not start from our search and enquiry and result in our discovery. The Christian minister, therefore, is one that declares what God is saying. In that declaration he is calling upon people to hear and understand in order that they might repent in obedience. We are not debaters, nor those who show wisdom or miraculous signs. We are the preachers of the cross, for it is the word of the cross, the folly of what we preach, that leads to men's salvation. The faithful minister must devote himself to the public reading, teaching and preaching of the Scriptures and to the exemplification of the changed life that comes from such devotion to the Scriptures (1 Timothy 4).

But does not God act now? Most certainly he acts by his Spirit, changing people as they hear the word of God. He acts in response to our prayers to him, for he hears what we say and in his generosity is more willing to give than we are to ask. But he does not act in revealing himself to us apart from in creation and in his word. His special revelation has taken place in the prophets of old and in his Son. People come to know God as they come to know the historical Jesus.

But what has all this to do with being a great preacher? Being a great preacher is not about technique, but about confidence. It is the confidence that God is speaking through his word to the hearer. Without this confidence that God is speaking, we can never preach to others. Without the doctrine of revelation, there can be no preaching. It is the commitment to the doctrine of Scriptures that is the prerequisite key for all great preachers. It is the failure to believe in the

word of God that leaves our churches so lamentably short of preachers and so rich in counsellors, musicians, mystics, singers, dramatists, dancers and yoga classes!