



Last November, our principal Emma Ineson posted a request on Facebook for any preaching tips alumni and other friends could share for an Intro to Preaching module she was about to teach. The post generated much discussion as well as requests for a copy of the information shared. Here is an edited compilation of the tips shared, in case any may be helpful to you. The tips shared come from alumni and friends and should not be attributed directly to Trinity. Thanks to everyone who contributed, and may we spark one another toward continued growth and development as preachers of the Word of God.

Preparation

Michael Ramsey (I think) said the [preacher] studies with great depth not that he may be erudite but that he may be simple.

Pray continually in preparation, before you preach, and afterwards once it's done. Engage your emotions and fall in love with the scripture... enable your congregation to fall in love with it too.

I remember someone saying to me 'pick a fight with the Bible and let it win'.

Remember it's God speaking through you, the pressure is not all yours. Invite Him in. Keep it simple and use testimonies.

At one stage in my ministry I felt I was preaching in a vacuum—my own bubble perhaps, as I had no idea what the lives of those who listened to me looked like the rest of the week. So I began going to work with them—occasionally requesting to be able to shadow them for most of a day at their work. It gave me a very different perspective: how could what was said on Sunday be biblically relevant/helpful/challenging/supportive for them during their coming week? It certainly impacted how I preached.

Know the text and its context well, so that whatever you say is properly grounded. (Oh, and don't waffle pointlessly. Less is very often more.)

Two top tips—Always ask the question of yourself as you prepare, so what does any of this mean for the real lives of those listening? It can be a brilliant exposition, superb teaching, but I suggest it must always have the life application in it. The other top tip from me: can you write on a post-it note, the ONE thing you want each of your listeners to remember when you have finished?

Whenever possible, read the passage you're preaching on well ahead, pray and live with it for a few days. Listen to what God may be saying to you about the passage and how to preach it.

Live with the text as long as you can before you prepare the sermon. Take it through daily life and see where it springs alive and what bits of your day to day speak to the text. I carry the text printed out with me and doodle / jot notes before I study the text. My sermon notes are often pictures rather than words, although sometimes my sermons are poems and I write word-for-word.

Communicate with other people involved in the service (song choices, prayers, etc) as people are more likely to walk out singing the songs than reciting the sermon, so think holistically in your prep.

Always remember you are as much part of the congregation as anyone else. You are a listener as well as a speaker.

Apparently JRR Tolkien wrote a letter to his son who was in the war and they discussed preaching. Tolkien thought that the best sermons had the right balance between 'art', 'virtue', and 'knowledge'—too much art and the sermon is too 'flowery'. Too much 'knowledge' and it becomes a lecture, and if you can't trust the speaker then there is really no point. I got that from a lecture on preaching that Tim Keller did at Oakhall years ago—I think it is still online somewhere.

Always remember it's about Monday's meaning not Sunday's feeling, it's about wisdom not just about knowledge, it's about God's Spirit not your passions, and if preparing it hasn't brought you to your knees before God you need to pray it through more.

Listen to sermons, listen to Ted talks.

I always start (ahead of time as much as I can) by writing out the passage(s), I often end up preaching on the bit that I thought "I never noticed that before" or "it says what!"

Know your learning style as it affects how you recall your sermon. I'm a visual learner so work best by diagrams, yet most people who teach preaching get students to write the sermon in full.

We preach what God has done first, not what we must do; preaching is demanding because it requires both analysis and empathy; and a sermon is a creative act, so we must create space for creativity.

Pray, read the scripture, pray again. Pray a bit more. Be you. God is using you and your personality to speak to the congregation. Keep to the point, be relevant, allow people the opportunity to be changed in some way. Keep it simple (average reading age in UK is 9). Don't be long and boring—it's a congregation not a theology lecture!

Start praying about each particular sermon a few weeks beforehand... this requires good organization but it makes a huge difference to live with a text and listen to God speak through it over time. Keep a journal because God is always speaking and don't read your Bible just for sermons, read it just because Jesus loves you too.

The final sermon prep is looking at those faces in front of you.

Be a triple listener: to the text, to the Holy Spirit, to the congregation. It's only then that you will be a good talker!

A lot of prayer, an open Bible and a desire to hear what God is saying in terms of encouragement, challenge, and even rebuke. Allowing the message to shape us before we seek to speak to others.

You can only share what you know yourself so get into his word personally as well as for preparation.

One of my MDR targets was to listen to 12 different people preach over the year. I did this mostly by listening to people online or downloading transcripts—I even listened to one or two in person (a rare opportunity for a jobbing preacher). I deliberately chose as wide a range of people as possible (definitely not just big churches), including people from a variety of traditions. I then pinched all the good ideas (content, style, structure, tricks, etc.) and mercilessly said things like 'That'll never work for me' or 'I can't believe they said that', which made me feel much better too.

Remember it is not only your thought/words, and the Spirit will do what it will do.

Also, don't be afraid to be creative—write your own parables, preach 'in character', interview people from the congregation whose perspective or experience differs from your own, try preaching from a script if you usually use notes or notes if you usually use a script.

I have asked a starter question on FB and incorporated the answers into the sermon the following Sunday.

Have a couple of people in mind from your congregation, from different backgrounds and of different academic abilities.

I always prepare my sermon on a Monday, drawing out the themes, adding context / then it marinates and sits with me for the week, allowing me time to work in current affairs or adapt it. Means I'm not last minute but still up to date... mostly!

What does the Spirit want me to share with this congregation?

Spend just as much, if not more time in prayer and listening for God as you do in exegesis and hermeneutics.

Find your own voice in preaching, mimicking someone else's never works. I can add one from Pope Francis Joy of the Gospel—in preaching you are trying to bring people into the presence of God not anything else!

Print out the passage in large type. Carry it with you for a week asking people you meet what they think. Learn it by heart on Friday. On Saturday find out how artists have depicted the passage. On Sunday at the appropriate time in the service stand up and begin speaking.

Your relationship with God will come through your preaching. Please remember, therefore, that it's all dependant on what He's up to.

I ask myself where is Jesus in this passage and how can I help people to see him, his way, and his love for them and others whom they will meet this week.

Know that you are called to preach in season and out of season. Sometimes it's not easy but know that God is still at work.

Content

Ron Jackson's head-heart-hands is a great thing. Engage the head, move the heart and then challenge the hands. I always look for what the text is telling me to do (the command) and what God has done to make it possible for me to fulfil the commandment (God's provision). Got it from a Zack Eswine book.

Head, heart and hands—something to think about, something to change the heart and something practical to take away.

Set the tension well at the beginning by always asking yourself the question: 'Why should someone bother to listen to this sermon?'

Ask the question, "So what?" Does this have to do with what I do on Monday, Tuesday, etc at work and at school. Give people tools they can use in their discipleship.

Teach what you've been taught by the text, not what you think you know about it.

All good preaching is incarnational, building bridges between worlds.

Preaching is like going on a bus journey—you are the driver and you need to make sure everyone is on the bus with you as you leave the station. You know the destination, and you take them there on the bus and then let them off at the end. The introduction and conclusion are just as important as the body of the sermon.

Preach only the message you've begun to work out in your own life.

See your task as twofold: to feed people for today, but also, week by week, to build up a deposit of biblical wisdom and insight in people, such that they are able to see more clearly the backdrop of the biblical story against which we are called to live out our lives and according to whose script we are called to improvise faithfully.

Let the sermon woo your listeners into wanting more of the Bible and to be more active in their own pursuit of what riches the text holds; the sermon need not explain everything but rather invite the listener in. It's a chat-up line or first date, not the whole relationship.

I am not a preacher, but here's what I enjoy in a sermon. Begin with a story. Introduce a challenge. Wherever you wander, always come back to Jesus.

We preach best what we need to hear most. (Luther?)

All stories are good stories—you need to be a good storyteller. And watch 'Greg Davies—Back of my mum's head' stand-up.

Pray for the infilling of the Holy Spirit before you start.

As a listener, I would say preachers need to learn how to end their sermons, rather than taking ten minutes to "come in to land".

In terms of application: how does this passage of scripture speak to 4 key relationships: with God, others, self, and creation?

People are all very different and receive sermons in very different ways, so I don't think a 'perfect sermon' exists. (The same sermon will be loved by one and hated by another.) Preach with variety to connect with the variety of people in God's creation.

As a new Reader and new preacher (!) I would say breathe, tell stories relevant to the congregation to make things come alive (as Jesus did), and always preach for your congregation to help them connect to God.

If you can't summarise the big idea of your sermon in a single sentence with minimal punctuation then it is very unlikely that what you say will take root in the lives of those you preach to. (This sentence is too long btw.)

A preaching professor of mine said the the best sermons have a good beginning and a good ending, and the two are close together.

Don't let your learning 'show' too much. But make sure it is there. Ignorance is not bliss!

Only go on for as long as you're good enough to go on for. And know yourself well enough to know how long that is. All else is vanity.

Don't try and say everything there is to say about the passage/topic, pick a point and stick to it - if you follow the lectionary it will be round again in 3 years and you'll have to think of something different to say anyway!

Check with the family member before using them in an illustration... it can be hard for adults and unbearable for children. My children report that some of their friends' parents pay them £1 every time they're used as a sermon illustration. The downside of going to a school where lots of the children have ministers/vicars as a parent.

One point—that's all people take away—so one point, well made.

Plagiarising relentlessly from YouTube clips!

As someone who usually sits through a sermon with a two-year-old the things that punch through are when you are passionate about what you say, and I can see that it is making a difference in your own life.

Bill Hybels: Work out what the one thing is you want people to know? And what's the one thing you want people to do?

Go with honesty, preach to yourself not just the congregation.

Strive for profound simplicity that is faithful to the text. It's so rewarding when (as happened to me after a service one time) a parishioner comes up afterward, shakes your hand, and says with some surprise, "I actually understood that."

I write the message in one sentence in the top right-hand corner of my notes. If I can't summarise my message in one pithy sentence then the message is too long. I think of a father who is too poorly to attend church. He asks his daughter what the preacher said. She should be able to repeat exactly what's in my top right-hand corner.

I love: 'preach out of your current account, not your deposit account'. I don't know where the quote comes from!

Sometimes, even when you've been working on a sermon through the week, God gives you a better idea on Sunday morning! Then it's scary but fruitful to work out how his idea and your work fit together.

Don't be a smart ass, wrestle with the text and leave your hobby-horses at home.

Finish not by just praying but by waiting on God—giving some time and space for people to engage with the Holy Spirit, and for him to work in your hearers, doing what he wants to do—get out of the way and give him space and time to speak/act before moving things on.

I find humour helps put people at ease, especially when it involves laughing at myself.

Quote scripture a lot.

Only qualified to comment as an ordinary member of a congregation but... the sermons I (still, sometimes years later) remember used stories and/or humour plus a clear message that could, in the end, be summarised in one phrase. (eg: 'Nothing can separate you from God'.) However mature as Christians your congregation is, we still need to be reminded of the basics, often. Also, I wish people would mention work and current affairs more often and relate the sermon directly to them. I once heard an evangelist say he had only three sermons: "Come to Jesus, come closer to Jesus and come back to Jesus" and that sounds about right to me.

Whatever you preach has to go through your own heart first. If it doesn't, it will be dead and lifeless when you speak it out to others.

Delivery

Don't try to ape someone else's style—have heard that way too often—and if you are writing it out, write it as you would say it, not like an essay. So, with repetition and new paragraphs for breaks. It makes it easier to follow. Also, think about your body language—a massive proportion of our communication comes via our body language so work at that too—use your whole self when you preach: body, mind and spirit.

Find your own voice and your own style. Keep the main thing the main thing. Don't allow tangent thoughts or spontaneous asides to interrupt, unless you can be certain of returning confidently to where you left off.

Might sound a bit obvious but make sure your listeners can hear what you're saying!

It is so important... put some kind of check in place that the sound levels are good and especially that the loop system is working, a hearing-aid user briefed to signal to you or the sound desk, especially if you are using a different mic from the service leader. Don't exclude those who are already on the edges.

My tip would be to close the windows, so if the Spirit comes in power whilst you preach the risk of someone falling to their death is minimised.

Always preach in language that would make sense on EastEnders or Coronation Street (unless you're in a University or Cathedral).

My preaching has improved so much since I started rehearsing at least 3 or 4 times before I deliver it.

Check your flies are done up before you stand up in front of everyone!

Don't fold your notes horizontally.

It takes around 90 seconds for your adrenaline levels to stabilise once you begin public speaking. Breathe deeply beforehand to slow your heartbeat. Have a glass/bottle of water handy. Where possible stand in the pulpit before the service and practice your introduction quietly. Make sure you understand the microphone you're using, and ensure you've had a good sound check. For example if it's a clip-on mic and you are wearing a dress with no belt it makes it tricky. Arrive at the venue in plenty of time to suss out what's what. Take a friend/partner along if you can to stand with you at the end. Don't underestimate the amount of energy you spend when you preach. A friend helps you recharge your batteries.

Keep it simple and memorise it...

Heart to heart—don't get too heady or complexly theological or rhetorically clever! That's rarely where people are at. Get off your notes as soon as you are confident to. Be a deep and contemplative reader and prayer and silence-seeker generally, and it will leak....

Communicate effectively. Read up on, pay attention to and learn good communication skills.

Preaching should not always be didactic; if you can get the congregation involved then try to do so.

Don't get stuck in the pulpit or behind a lectern. Come out from behind the safety barrier and engage with the congregation.

Be yourself. Find out how you preach. Once you are in that space, you can then look for advice on how to improve.

Don't read to your notes, preach to the congregation.

The best sermon is no good if it can't be heard, so speak clearly and use the sound system well. If you are asked for notes by Sign Language Interpreters please respond quickly, graciously and positively. Remember—without them, a sermon remains just words that some people won't ever hear!

This one seems random but we recently had new heating put in our church which has made a difference. One week it didn't work and we went back to being freezing and I suddenly realised that people find it hard to concentrate when it's cold, so reflect that in both length/content and repetition if you preach in a cold church building.

'I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.' - Maya Angelou

Don't speak exactly as you would in conversation. Speak more slowly and clearly, use pauses. Give people a chance to chew over what you are saying.

Print your notes in large font on A5 paper (or A4 Landscape with two columns, cut down the middle) so they fit inside your Bible. That way you are not tied to the lectern but can wander without losing your notes yet also retain the key symbolism that you are holding the Bible and regularly looking down at it. The notes only cover one side of the open Bible, meaning I can easily refer to the text either that is on the other page or simply shift them over. My training incumbent used to do this and I have found it a really helpful way of unobtrusively staying close to both the text and your notes with a minimum of distracting movement.

Be confident that what you are saying is interesting and compelling, because if you don't believe that no-one else will!

Where possible, preach without notes. Your body and face language speaks volumes.

As volume increases, speed needs to decrease. The louder you have to be to make yourself heard, the slower you'll need to go. The worst sermon going is one that people cannot hear or is so mumbled they can't understand!

Afterward

Continue the habit of asking people to feed back on your sermons, not just for college. I meet with someone as a preaching coach—I love preaching so allow myself the luxury and discipline of investing in developing my preaching.

Also be aware that no matter how life-giving preaching is it can also be exhausting so be kind to yourself after a preach and always try to seek God's opinion of 'how it went' before getting others' feedback (even if it means grabbing 5 minutes in the vestry after a service before coffee).

After preaching, the curate asked the vicar, "Will it do?" "Will it do what?" replied the vicar.

When members of the congregation say 'Lovely sermon, vicar' at the door, don't respond with 'Thank you', instead ask 'What did you think was useful about it?'

Book and resource recommendations

This Preaching Life by Barbara Brown Taylor—really helped affirm having own style and living with text.

Tim Keller's book *Preaching* is an excellent general overview and encouraging!

Andy Stanley's book is the best one I've read—*Communicating for a Change*. Preaching with transformation in mind.

Preaching Matters—Jonathan Lamb. It's good.

Long time ago I learned so much from the writings of Methodist preacher WE Sangster. Anything he wrote about preaching is gold dust. Perhaps my top tip from him was to use shorter sentences with fewer clauses. And shorter Saxon words rather than longer Latin ones.

If you think you are an established preacher and don't need to read any books on the subject then something is very wrong, as having a teachable spirit is one of the most important aspects of preaching.

http://storage.ted.com/tedx/manuals/tedx_speaker_guide.pdf

<http://churchleaders.com/pastors/preaching-teaching/291216-7-tedtalks-will-make-better-preacher.html>

<http://www.psephizo.com/.../the-most-important-thing-in.../>

<http://www.psephizo.com/preac.../why-is-preaching-so-hard-2/>

<http://www.psephizo.com/preach.../preaching-as-creative-act/>

<http://www.psephizo.com/category/preaching-2/>

GarnettandSimpson.co.uk: Once you have worked out the central message from your passage this structure is helpful: A, E, I, O, U. ATTENTION: get people's attention with a good related opener. EMPATHY: People need to be bothered enough to listen to you. Describe the problem your passage addresses. Maybe use a story or describe a situation. INSPIRATION: unpack your passage of scripture. This is your main section. OPTIONS: describe the possible responses to the challenge/message. U/YOU: nail it and call out a response. Another one from GarnettandSimpson: one to use to make sure your message is heard and received by people who are wired in different ways - left hand/right hand side of the brain stuff. You need to FOAM your message! FACTS: stick in some indisputable facts/stats to back up assertions—evidence. Quote OPINIONS of others, to evidence this isn't just your strongly held belief. ANECDOTES: illustrate it with stories. METAPHOR: Jesus used this device a lot to appeal to the imagination.