

**Archbishop Stephen today gave the keynote address at the College of Preachers conference at York St John University.**

How do I write a sermon?

Well, yes, sometimes I sit at a desk typing on a keyboard, putting words on a screen.

And sometimes I even write words on a page, more often than not that's when I'm writing a sermon on a train journey or in the back of the car.

But for me, mostly, and for a very long time, I write my sermons on the move. I pace about my study and about the house and out into the garden muttering ideas under my breath and then dictating them into a Dictaphone and more recently using the dictation app on my iPhone. I hear and taste the words in my mouth before they land on the page. But although I think that helps to bring words to life and saves my text from becoming an essay I read out, I think the main reason I write my sermons this way is that I am better able to think and meditate and ponder when I'm moving.

It was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who said

"I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs."

Which brings me to pilgrimage. I know I'm a slow learner, but it has taken me 3/4 of a lifetime to discover that the stillness and solitude I crave can only be found when I walked. When I stop, I cease to pray. My spiritual life only seems to work with my legs. Hence, in recent years my annual retreat is a pilgrimage. And my preferred method of writing sermons is to walk and talk.

Much of this is to do with personality. I'm not saying that you must copy my method of sermon preparation. But I do wonder whether many of us might be liberated in our preaching if we got up from the desk and stepped out of the study and started talking to ourselves and talking to God as we wrestled with the scriptures before us, the challenges of our world and found what we were called to say from the pulpit that week.

So, you won't be surprised to hear that I'm one of those preachers who doesn't like being trapped inside pulpits that much. I don't tend to walk around while I'm actually preaching - though there is nothing wrong with that - but I do like to sway and to step from side to side and most of all to be close to the people I'm addressing, alongside them like we're walking together.

And since preaching as pilgrimage is the title of this conference. I not only commend perambulation as a method for sermon preparation, but also wonder whether pilgrimage might help us understand more clearly what a sermon is for?

Too many preachers in my experiences think of preaching as teaching. Now please don't misunderstand me, of course there is an important element of teaching in every sermon. But I've never believed this is the main purpose of a sermon on a Sunday morning. After all, we know from every other experience of helping people learn, that one person standing up and delivering a monologue – however witty and compelling – is not the best way of teaching people. As the Americans put it: just because you've said it, doesn't mean people have heard it.

If you want to teach people things, then your first concern must be to create a learning environment, and this requires a context where people can ask questions and where some real engagement and conversation can take place. (Hence the success of courses like Alpha, Emmaus and Pilgrim, which both proclaim and teach the Christian faith in a context of fellowship, conversation and dialogue). Teaching will usually include input from the front. But it must be more than that. So, the sermon on a Sunday morning can't simply be teaching.

This is where the notion of pilgrimage helps. A pilgrimage is a journey to a holy place. It is a journey made for a purpose, to deepen one's relationship with God and to walk in the footsteps all those who have sought and followed God before us, to bring to God particular needs and cares, to arrive at a place where God has been known and experienced to be real and evidently present, a thin place. And yet, paradoxically, we also know that although a pilgrimage requires a destination, all the important things happened on the road. Travelling well, is as important as arriving.

The liturgy of the Church is also a journey, and for myself I like those liturgies which involve actual movement from font to altar.

In Eucharistic worship, the central and defining act of worship for the Christian Church, we arrive as a place of intimate communion with God, and all that precedes and prepares for this Holy Communion is, like the journey of the Emmaus road that we read about in scripture, leading and pointing towards God where the words of the liturgy, and of course here I'm thinking particularly about the words of the sermon, bring us to that place where words are left behind and we enjoy the intimate communion with Christ, the word made flesh, in the living bread of his sacramental presence with us. Therefore, the sermon cannot be the climax of the liturgy. But it is the most significant way marker, pointing to Jesus, showing the way, clearing out the mess and removing the obstacles, yes, explaining what it means so there are clear elements of teaching, but taking us by the hand to the steps of the altar that is itself a foreshadowing of the banquet of heaven. Good preaching, therefore, leads beyond itself and is a journey and preparation and pilgrimage towards the holy place and communion with the holy one.

Borrowing a word from scripture, I call this sort of preaching paraclesis. The same word that Jesus uses to for the Spirit in John's gospel. It is preaching that is building, comforting, consoling and strengthening the faithful and advocating for the Christian faith. It is preaching as pilgrimage – that tells a story and paints a picture of what our life in Christ can be, relating it directly to the challenges and circumstances of that particular congregation in that particular place in that particular time, and flowing from the source and wellspring of our life in Christ which is the weekly diet of scripture upon which the sermon is based, and leading people and preparing people for their participation around the table, where they will receive the word which is the living bread from heaven, Jesus himself.

This kind of preaching is both art and craft (it is vitally important that preachers learn the craft of public speaking and the tricks of the trade that go with it) and is a category of speaking and encouraging and commending which is different from but related to those other vital ministries of proclamation and teaching. It will inspire and motivate. But it will also carefully apply the lessons and insights from scripture into the context of that congregation's everyday life and everyday faith, a bit like Jesus walking with Cleopas and his companion, pointing, inviting, listening and explaining. Â

My concern, if I could be so presumptuous, is that many preachers haven't quite worked out this is the purpose of the sermon and how it is part, but not the conclusion or even the highlight, of the worship and liturgical assembly of the church, how it flows from the scriptures and leads to the altar, and then â€œvitalyâ€ out from the altar into the world, so that the faith we celebrate and explore on Sunday shapes and informs the lives we lead on Monday, or should we say our pilgrimage though life from Monday onwards, relating the life of faith to our missionary discipleship in the world each day, for the other powerful relevance of pilgrimage is as a motif for the whole of life, our journey to God.

In the 1960s, a Japanese theologian called Kosuke Koyama, wrote a book, *Three Mile an Hour God* (SCM Press). He observed that the average speed that human beings walk is three miles per hour. He also observed that Jesus walked everywhere. At three miles per hour. Love has a speed, Koyama says, and that speed is slow. That speed is gentle. That speed is tender.

Rebecca Solnit, a more secular pilgrim, makes a similar observation in her fantastic book *Wunderlust* â€œlike walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought!â€

So, my final thought in thinking about preaching and pilgrimage is that we too should slow down a bit. There should be spaces in our liturgy. Time after the sermon to pause and reflect. And definitely time after communion. We should prize brevity, or better still stop worrying about the length of sermons and be more concerned about the pace.Â

Have we slowed down to God's pace? Have we left spaces in between the words for the Holy Spirit to flow in and out? Â For as with music, it isn't just the notes that conjure up the beauty, but the spaces in between then. And not only is a moment of silence the oldest oratorical trick in the book to reign in a congregation whose attention might be wandering, I have always believed it wise to remember that when we preach there are two reasons why people may stop listening.Â

First, because you've turned them off. Your preaching simply isn't connecting. And I guess we've all had this experience.Â

But, secondly, because we've turned them on. Something we have said has done something in them and is leading them on an interior journey towards God. And the Holy Spirit is saying something in them through the words that we have uttered. And, yes, they may now no longer be listening to the rest of your sermon, but they are on a journey and your words have been instrumental. They were steps on a journey.

One last thing. Someone once said that they didn't remember sermons, they remembered preachers.

This is a hugely significant observation. We may remember the sermon itself for a few hours, and possibly even a few days, but most of us will remember very few sermons for much longer than this. But we do remember the preachers who delivered them.

Somehow, they themselves became the living embodiment of the words they shared with us about how we live and understand the Christian faith. We remember how it felt when they spoke to us, even if we now forget the words themselves.Â

The Holy Spirit used their words to enable us to persevere and continue in the Christian faith and led us to the living Word, which is Christ himself.

Which also means that the gift of the preacher flows from and is rooted in their own life in Christ, their own submission to the will of God, their own deep reading of the scriptures and their watchfulness in prayer. Or should we say their own pilgrimage, their own walk with God.Â

Nothing is more important than this for spirit filled paraclesis preaching. As Lancelot Andrewes wrote several centuries ago-

âLet the preacher labour to be heard intelligently, willingly and obediently. And let him not doubt that he will accomplish this rather by the piety of his prayers than by the eloquence of his speech. By praying for himself, and those who he is to address, let him be their beadsman before he becomes their teacher; and approaching God with devotion, let him first raise to him a thirsting heart before he speaks of him with his tongue; that he may speak what he hath been taught and pour out what hath been poured in.â

And because preaching Â with words upon the Word leads to the silence of the Living Word itself, let me finish with a story from the Desert Fathers about a great preacher and teacher and about his impact and about a place beyond words, the place our preaching leads to â

*Three Fathers used to go and visit blessed Anthony every year, and two of them used to discuss their thoughts and the salvation of their souls with him, but the third always remained silent and did not ask him anything. After a long time, Abba Anthony said to him: âYou often come here to see me, but you never ask anything.â And the other replied, âIt is enough just to see you Father.â*

I love preaching. And I love the silence after the music ends. I even love the creative process of preparing the sermon, pacing around my study or stomping around the garden, or talking to myself while I'm driving the car, composing the sermon in my head. When I preach it people often say - because they've seen there are no notes â oh, it's wonderful that youâre preaching straight from the heart. Which I am. Though the sermon without notes, preached over and over again in my head before it is delivered out loud, takes more preparation than the ones that are written down, which are - of course - Â just as much from the heart. It's just that my heart and my head work best with my feet. They are pilgrims.

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- [iLancelot Andrewes, Bishop of Winchester, from âA Caution before preaching after the example of St Fulgentiusâ in Preces Privatae, 1648](https://www.archbishopofyork.org/speaking-and-writing/sermons/preaching-pilgrimage)

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