

July 2010 – labour and liberation

Preaching through books of the Bible, Sunday by Sunday, takes a lot of discipline, time and hard work. It is a labouring that readily drops down the priority list as other tasks clamour for attention. In today's world giving our best energies to the preaching task often appears either to be a poor investment or an impractical distraction.

Now I am not going to deny the labour. It is hard work, very hard work.

But there is another side to this story. When preaching through the books of the Bible (a kind of *lectio continua*, if you like) is the basic and settled habit, something else happens alongside the labour. It is liberating! Preachers experience a freedom on so many fronts. Here are a few which come to mind:

the freedom to be restricted to biblical truth

One of the most profound lines I know is the one from the hymn which says, "Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free". This is a paradox of the Christian life: freedom in captivity. There is a liberation which comes from being enslaved to Christ.

Something of this is true for the preacher with the Bible as well. No wasted energy wondering about what to preach next Sunday . . . ever. Again and again, week after week, it is the Bible and the Jesus found in its pages. No shortage of ideas! It becomes like trying to empty an ocean with a bucket. As that old Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan, once expressed it, "It is a great thing to come under the magnificent tyranny of the Gospel".

the freedom to address sensitive pastoral issues

Every biblical preacher I know has a story about preaching on divorce on their way through a series on the Sermon on the Mount . . . and feeling free to do so because it is the next passage . . . but also discovering God's sense of timing as the topic proves to be so relevant to that congregation in that very week. Nobody feels "got at". There are no rubber-neckers in the congregation, twisting and turning to see who is squirming in their seats.

No! It is the next passage in the series and so we deal with the topic fully and faithfully, regardless of how sensitive it is - and people receive it openly. There are many sensitive pastoral issues in the life of the church and it is remarkable how regularly the Bible raises them and how often God's timing is perfect. It is about trusting a sovereign God to be able to set the agenda for his church as they work their way through his word systematically.

the freedom to cripple our hobby horses

The persistent flaw in the preaching ministries of those committed to topical preaching is that they will revert, again and again and usually unknowingly, to a handful of favourite topics and themes. A careful audit will reveal this to be the case. Their minds and hearts cannot hold any more than four or five of these themes at one time. And God's people will never progress into maturity on the back of a few of their pastors' hobby horses, no matter how biblically accurate they may be.

It is preaching the whole counsel of God which enables God's hobby horses to thrive, while crippling our own. As a young pastor preaching through the Bible I well remember being stunned by the frequency with which three words, all beginning with the letter "h", kept surfacing in the Bible. Everywhere, it seemed. Surely - here were some of God's hobby horses . . . holiness, humility, hope . . . and I preached them with all the passion I could muster.

the freedom from unnecessary counseling

Oh, there is a necessary counseling in the ministry of the pastor/preacher. Lives are becoming more complicated, just as dysfunction seems to be becoming more sophisticated. The simple attentive care of a resident shepherd can reach far further than most people realize. However so can their faithful, systematic, and care-full biblical preaching. So much

counseling can be done during the course of the sermon. Surely every faithful biblical preacher has had someone at the door say to them, "I don't need to keep that appointment with you this week." God addressed the issues in the course of your message.

Let's keep the counseling time for those who need it. Many an ill-disciplined pastor has their time saturated with people with problems of their own making who in their own hearts know how to put things right. A bit of trust and obey for there is no other way could go a long way. And let's allow that wider orbit of pastoral care with the masses to take place, particularly among the relatively hassle-free, through the best systematic biblical preaching. As a teenager I remember hearing Kiwi JO Sanders preach to a packed church on the God of the New Opportunity and how to move on from failure. It was classic "Oo." his unique brand of expository topical preaching. He counseled more people in that 30min than he could have counseled 1on1 over a month. The many hours in sermon preparation actually proved to be a wise and strategic use of his time.

the freedom to be personally restored

This is a special one for me. I find that sermon preparation is often a devotional experience. Furthermore I have had times of feeling spent and drained and burned-out, but I've stuck at the calling to preach and to prepare well - and in the course of my study I have experienced God's restoration. It happened one week in Haggai 1. Another time it happened when I was preaching through Colossian 1.28-29. A further time I was in 2 Timothy 4. It is precious. Preparing for preaching gets you into the word of the living God for hours at a time and, if we are diligent in what can become the merely routine, God will and does draw near to do a surprising and gracious work in our lives.

Preaching is tiring but, as George Whitefield used to say, it is also a strange restorative. I was once involved in de-briefing a returned missionary. He was exhausted and listless. I felt prompted to urge him to take up the offer of an interim pastorate and focus his efforts, during the six months, on preaching systematically . and even unspectacularly . through books of the Bible - and just see what happens. Sometime later he testified to me about how he felt strangely restored during those weeks.

the freedom to be faithful, rather than successful

There is a tremendous burden on pastors to be able to supply visible and measurable signs of progress and success. It is the way our world is wired and it is hard to resist. It is as if the only permissible seasons in the life of a pastor and a local church are spring and summer. We struggle to have a theology of autumn and winter and to describe what legitimate ministry looks like in these seasons. The call to preach is a call, first and foremost, to be faithful. Let's order those job descriptions properly: God's is about growth and ours is about faithfulness. The liberation which enters our lives when we see this is immense. We still do our best and we still pray our hardest . but the responsibility for fruit and growth and results lies with God.

the freedom to be prophetic

There is a prophetic teaching ministry which gains its force and sharpness by remaining faithful to opening God's word carefully and honestly, allowing the edge to be felt and the blindspot to be exposed wherever and whenever God wishes. This is much to be preferred to the self-proclaimed prophet who markets their speaking on the basis of their own words and testimonies. We give up on the exposition of the word of God too quickly and miss the opportunity to be subverted and overwhelmed by a prophetic word.

So it may be hard work. It is hard work. To preach is to labour. But alongside this labouring there is some liberating going on . a liberation which makes the call to preach a privileged calling - one to savour and to consider precious.

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