

october 2010 – the juxtaposing eye

When I first started teaching preaching at Laidlaw College (or, the Bible College of New Zealand, as it was known then) I used to start the session on illustrations by affirming that omnibus volumes of sermon anecdotes are the last refuge of a bankrupt intelligence.

I do not remember where I found that quotation. But I do remember the occasion of a BCNZ Book Sale with a tower containing multiple copies of a book comprising a vast collection of sermon illustrations. I threatened the class that if that tower diminished in size whatsoever through the course of the Sale, I'd fail all of them!

That was the 1990s. Now we are in the 2010s and to the omnibus volumes we must add the multiple websites with legions of sermon illustrations now just a click away for the preacher. Has this technology provided the great leap-forward to assist the preacher with finding illustrations in the midst of their busy world? I do not think so. While I have eliminated the threatening behaviour of the 1990s from my interaction with students, my convictions have not changed at all. Such books and websites be damned! ☺

Why? Illustrations from these sources so often feel inert and tired, stale and predigested. They lack a sense of immediacy. The answer is better found in being prepared to sail through life with a trawling eye. This means making a personal investment in T-W-I-R-L-ing: thinking, watching, inventing, reading and listening. And in this article I want to focus, in particular, on the value of watching. The preacher lives with a camera in their eyes, learning to see everything as a passing parade of potential illustrations.

In Langham Preaching we are trying to nurture movements of biblical preaching in the countries of the majority world. Usually this means working in areas of the world where resources are few and educational levels are low. [NB: I leave later today to help start the work in Cambodia, a prime example of this challenge]. And so this means teaching about illustrations in a world without books or internet sites. To assist this learning I like to go walkabouts with participants in the training. We get up out of our seats, leave the room, and go for a walk. The objective is 'to see the spiritually significant in the utterly ordinary and everyday'. And so in Pakistan it was a fragile plant apparently growing out of a crack in a large slab of concrete. This became a poignant illustration for life as a Christian in a country where the majority culture is so hostile. In Vanuatu it was that tall and slender, coconut-laden palm tree leaning into the prevailing wind. How can that be? This became a picture of the way maturity develops best during hard times. On and on it goes. Compelling, personal and immediate illustrations just start to flow.

It is not the page-turning finger working through books, or the clicking finger working through sites, that we chiefly need with illustrations. It is the juxtaposing eye. It is the capacity to look at something ordinary . and therefore something with which everyone identifies (!) . and see in it something extraordinary. It is an exercise of the imagination that we need to embrace - long before it is an exercise of research.

Far from the majority world, this is the stand-out feature of Rob Bell's *nooma* series of DVDs. Bell has a juxtaposing eye that sees the spiritually significant in the utterly ordinary. He is a master of doing this. The best preachers take time to invest in their imaginations.

As Walter Brueggemann expresses it (with a little overstatement at the end!):

The event of preaching is an event in transformed imagination. Poets, in the moment of preaching, are permitted to perceive and voice the world differently, to dare a new phrase, a new picture, a fresh juxtaposition of matters long known . The deep places in our lives . places of resistance and embrace . are not ultimately reached by instruction . (but only) by stories, by images, by metaphors . +
[*Finally Comes the Poet* 109f]

Or, consider Barbara Brown Taylor, for whom the imagination is

the human ability to form a mental image of something not present to the senses . in the imaginative act, two ideas are struck together and sparks leap through the air between them, revealing familiar notions in a new light. +[*The Preaching Life* , 44-45]

Or, that remarkable little book by Thomas Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon*, in which he urges preachers to start by being attentive to what is:

The imaginative process can be compared to the art of sailing a boat: we cannot make the wind blow, but we can trim the sails and tend the helm. We cannot compel the Spirit to fill our imaginations with wind and fire, but we can practice those disciplines of prayer and thought that will open us to God's revelations. Imaginative theology employs the visionary and integrative capacities of the mind to create theological understanding. It uses the powers of observation to become receptive to the Holy Spirit, who works upon our consciousness through patterns of association and juxtaposition. I will not cheat the congregation by handing them a souvenir from my trip on the river when I can take them along on the voyage and let them feel the current and the water for themselves. [Imagining a Sermon, 14-15, 25-26]

I have reached for Brueggemann, Taylor and Troeger quite intentionally. In my experience the more conservative (theologically) tradition of biblical preaching - with which I identify - can be so impoverished in this area. They tend to construe preaching to be an explanation of the text and not much else, seeing past the benefits which come from juxtaposition and imagination. This is really unfortunate.

Here are ten suggestions on how to progress in this area:

1. In the sermon preparation process keep articulating the big idea or the proposition, but add a prevailing image as well. Include a picture in the sermon that helps listeners see the truth being proclaimed.
2. Contribute and participate in the images that speak and feature on the home page of this www.kiwimadepreaching.wordpress.com site. Here people post images and offer suggestions on the truth which they might illustrate.
3. With all things imaginative, get an early start. The subconscious needs time to be suggestive. Live life with spaces and margins and rest areas. Learn how to lie fallow. Being habitually dependent on Saturday night fevers to create sermons will leave the imagination malnourished.
4. Never lose the flash of insight. Carry a notebook to write them down immediately. otherwise they tend to evaporate. These little seeds so often grow into massive trees.
5. Chat and write. Put the juxtaposing into the tip of your fingers and the tip of your tongues. Such exercises stimulate the imagination and keep it flowing.
6. Never consider it possible to prepare a sermon without a Thesaurus on hand.
7. Muddy the line. just for a moment - between my imagination and the Spirit's illumination. When we preach from a high view of Scripture and Christ, I am convinced that the Spirit drops ideas and images and imaginative thoughts into our minds. The Spirit who illuminates our minds readily does so in an imaginative way.
8. Develop both the critical and the creative. but keep them separate. Galli & Johnson write of the difference between generative thinking and evaluative thinking: Like a tree sprouting buds, leaves, and branches, generative thinking multiplies ideas, images, observations, principles, insights. Like a gardener pruning branches, evaluative thinking severs unwanted growth, useless ideas. Generative thinking adds and multiplies; evaluative thinking subtracts and divides. [Preaching that Connects, 24]
9. Paraphrase old stuff. like prayers (for example, Baillie's *Diary of Private Prayer*) or hymns. Searching to put things in your own words stimulates the imagination.
10. Soak in the writings of people with hyperactive imaginations. like the Max Lucados and the Bill Brysons. Preachers may well walk right past their best illustrations. but not these writers. and nor does Jesus. The parables were not created *ex nihilo*. Jesus was attentive to what was going on around him, observing and imagining and juxtaposing.

Paul Windsor
Associate Director (Langham Preaching)