

moving from text to sermon
making a case for the metaphor of the map

Introduction

I have been looking for a metaphor to help people move from the biblical text to the completed sermon in a way which creates a message that is faithful, clear, and relevant (to use the vocabulary we utilise in Langham Preaching).

Like many others I have used the body image extensively (head-skeleton-flesh-ligaments-heartbeat etc) - but it has some weaknesses. That can be a topic for another time. Then some years ago I stumbled across a book on communication in which the metaphor of a map was used: the city view, the suburbs and the streets. I have been allowing this little spark to fire the imagination as I train preachers in different parts of Asia and the Pacific. So in the Pacific the metaphor tends to be country:island:village, while in Asia it tends to be country:province:city. Either way I have been field-testing my ideas over the past months in Pakistan, India, Thailand, China, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. The training is usually done through a translator and with people with lower levels of education. Explaining the theory always feels a bit heavy, but once I slip into the flow diagrams with people looking over my shoulder as I work with specific passages . well, I reckon I've stumbled upon something that could be useful and worth field-testing a bit more widely. Here we go! And so . for the kiwi-made preaching community . I include here the *theory* behind this metaphor of the map. In fact I include here the exact notes I used last month in India. Maybe we can look at the *praxis* of some worked examples at another time...

Here it is in a nutshell:

Preparing a sermon from the biblical text is like entering a country, taking a journey from state to state within the country, and stopping to spend time in three cities in each state along the way . before noticing where the country fits into the global map and pausing to sing the country's anthem.

- (a) There is the **country-view**. Working with all the ideas from our praying, observing, and understanding we describe the overall theme of the biblical passage. What is this passage about? We write it down as a single sentence and this is our country-view. It will bring *focus* and *boundaries* to the sermon. It is simple. It is concise, and yet it is comprehensive. It describes the big idea of the passage which will become the big idea of the sermon.
[For an example of a country-view, consider any feature article in the newspaper...]



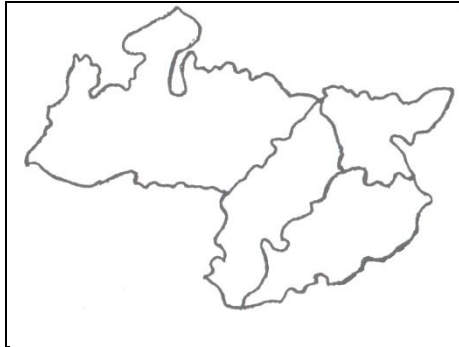
for example, a map of India

- (b) There are the **states**. Working directly from the country-view, the big idea of the passage, we identify the individual states contained within this country-view. These smaller states explain the big idea in more detail. Later they will become the main points in the sermon, providing the sermon with *structure* and *clarity*. There are many states within a country and so it can look a bit like this map:



for example, the states in India

But we cannot preach everything there is to preach in the passage in one sermon. Choices will need to be made. Some states will not be covered and so the map of the sermon will look more like this:



for example, a few states in Central India

- (c) There are the **cities**. Each state contributes something different to the country, just as each main point contributes something different to the big idea. In preparing our sermon we need to visit each of these states and spend time there. When we arrive in a state we visit three cities, the same three cities in every single state: the Explanation City (E) . where we explain what the text is saying in this state; the Illustration City (I) . where we illustrate our explanation of what the text is saying in this state; and the Application City (A) . where we apply to our people what we have explained and illustrated. It is by spending time in each of these cities in each of the states that we decide what will be said in the sermon. This provides the *content* of the sermon.



the cities: **E** (explaining), **I** (illustrating), **A** (applying)

The sermon is about %solid explanation vividly illustrated and powerfully applied.+(Chapell)

When we visit the *Explanation City*, we explain what the biblical text means. Discovering what the text means for us (today) *always* starts with discovering what the text meant for them (in biblical times). The single most important feature of biblical preaching is that we keep coming back to what the text says and we explain it. The biblical passage is not a rock *from* which we dive into the sermon . it is the swimming pool *into* which we dive and swim in the sermon.

When we visit the *Illustration City*, we are looking for comparisons from our own world which will help listeners see what the text is saying more clearly. We become like a photographer, clicking images that we see in the world which we can use later in our preaching. A preacher is like a fisherman who crawls life for illustrations. A bit like Jesus was with the parables, illustrating is about learning to see the spiritually significant in the ordinary and the everyday. We need to exercise our imaginations and never miss the opportunity to say "ah, that reminds me of..."

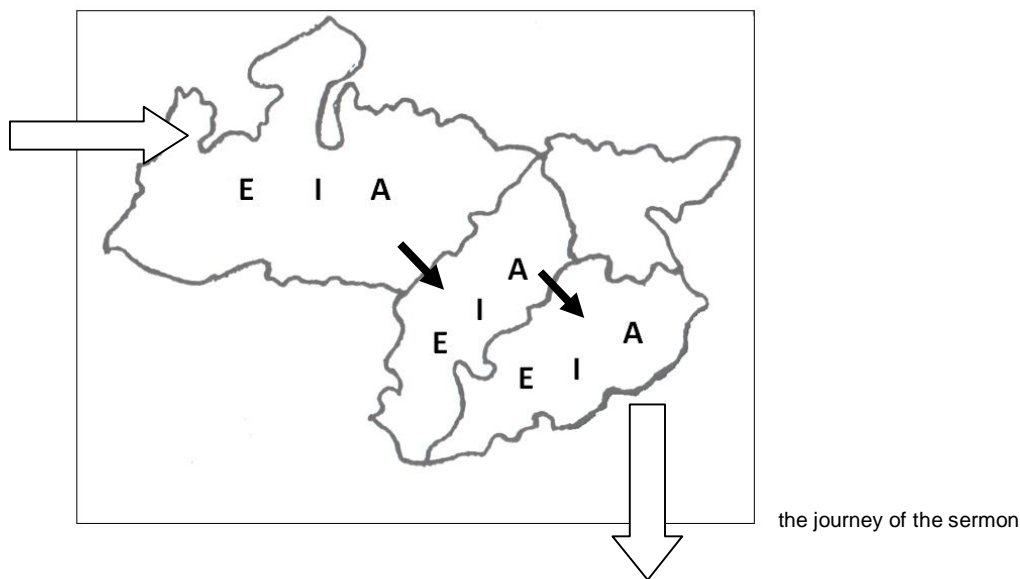
In the *Application City*, the preacher anchors the explanation of the text within the lives of the listeners. Preaching is persuasive speech. We want to see transformation. The text is applied to their lives. We are specific. We are real. With our explanations and our illustrations we are always asking, "so what? what difference does this truth make to my people?"

Something to think about:

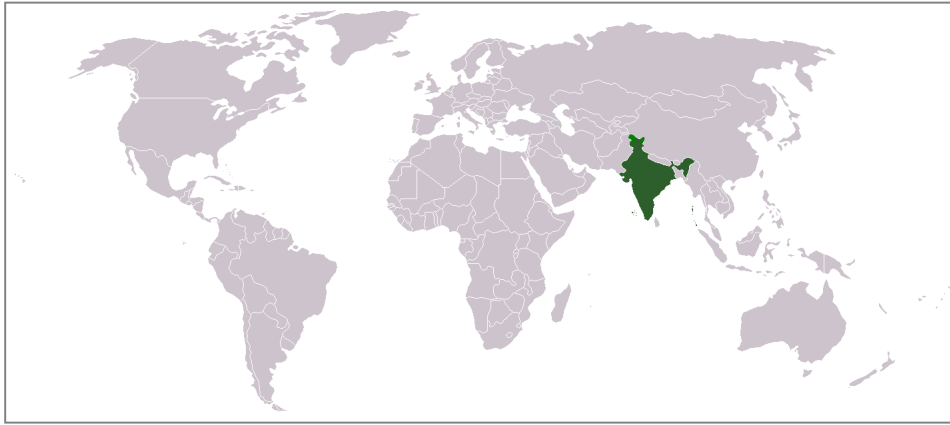
What happens to a sermon when it spends too much time in the Explanation City?

In the Illustration City? In the Application City?

- (d) Let the sermon become **a journey** from state to state, city to city. It must flow. There must be movement. Here we think carefully about the words/phrases to use as we *transition* from one state to another and from one city to another. And we think about what we will say which motivates people to join the journey into the biblical passage (the introduction) and what we will say to conclude our journey in the passage (the conclusion) . realising that this provides the last opportunity for the visit to this country to be both memorable and transformative.



- (e) We place our sermon on this biblical passage . focusing on these states within this country . within the *context* of the total biblical story. We reflect on where our passage fits within the flow of the Bible book in which it is located (like India placed within South Asia). If we are in the Old Testament we think about how the passage has links to the New Testament and finds fulfilment there. If we are in the New Testament take time to consider the heritage of the passage in the Old Testament. We ask how Jesus will be brought into the sermon in a natural and appropriate manner. Our concern is with the *biblical story*, that biblical theology on a way to building a biblical worldview. In this way our little map is seen in light of the big map of the entire world. This is the **global view**. It can be pictured like this:



- (f) When citizens of a country sing their national **anthem** it is usually a time for passion and reverence. Watch the gold medal winner at the Olympic Games as their nation's flag is raised. The heart is stirred. The pulse races. The purpose of life comes into focus. Goals have been achieved and there is a sense of completion.

And so before attention turns to writing out the sermon we take time to look back over our journey through the states and cities of this country and the way it fits into the wider global context. Where is the pulse and purpose in this biblical passage? What is the **big aim** that needs to emerge from the **big idea**? What is the anthem of this passage? Then we make sure that our sermon sings it. [NB . it works well to have the very final words in the spoken sermon to be this anthem]

*The goal is to develop sermons that are faithful, clear and relevant.
The work we do in describing the country-view, visiting the Explanation City
and finding where our passage fits in the global map will help ensure faithfulness.
By identifying the states within the country and carefully journeying
through the sermon we help ensure clarity.
Then by visiting the Illustration and Application Cities and starting and finishing
the journey well we help ensure relevance.
When the completed sermon sings the anthem of the passage
under the power and direction of the Spirit of God,
the people of God will grow further into maturity under the ministry of the Word of God.*

Paul Windsor
Associate Director (Langham Preaching)
February 2011