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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

pastoral and personal – which will help us to choose our sermon text. We are now ready for the second stage of preparation.

(2) Meditate on it

If our text is part of a consecutive exposition, or for some other reason has been determined weeks or months in advance, we have the great benefit of a long period of 'subconscious incubation',<sup>12</sup> or what Americans call 'maturation'. Certainly Sunday's text should, at the latest, be chosen by the preceding Monday, so that something of the incubation process can go on. The longer this period, the better. Robert Louis Stevenson once said of himself, 'I... sit a long while silent on my eggs.'<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer made a practice of choosing his text in good time. He would then consider it every day and 'try to sink deeply into it, so as really to hear what it is saying'.<sup>14</sup>

Sooner or later the time for more concentrated preparation arrives. What should the preacher do now? Read the text, re-read it, re-read it, and read it again. Turn it over and over in your mind, like Mary the mother of Jesus who wondered at all the things the shepherds had told her, 'pondering them in her heart'. (Luke 2:18, 19) Probe your text, like a bee with a spring blossom, or like a hummingbird probing a hibiscus flower for its nectar. Worry at it like a dog with a bone. Suck it as a child sucks an orange. Chew it as a cow chews the cud. To these similes Spurgeon adds two more, the worm and the bath. 'It is a great thing to pray one's self into the spirit and marrow of a text; working into it by sacred feeding thereon, even as the worm bores its way into the kernel of the nut.'<sup>15</sup> Again, 'let us, dear brethren, try to get saturated with the gospel. I always find that I can preach best when I can manage to lie asoak in my text. I like to get a text, and find out its meaning and bearings, and so on; and then, after I have bathed in it, I delight to lie down in it, and let it soak into me.'<sup>16</sup>

These vivid metaphors, may not, however, indicate

PREPARING SERMONS

clearly enough what the preacher is actually doing while he meditates on his text. Let me put it in this way. He addresses questions to his text, especially two. First, *what does it mean?* Perhaps better, what *did* it mean when first spoken or written, for E. D. Hirsch is right to emphasize that 'a text means what its author meant.'<sup>17</sup> As we have seen, we cannot avoid the discipline of thinking ourselves back into the text's historical and geographical context, into its cultural milieu, into its words and images, and so into the mind and purpose of its author. What did he mean? What was he intending to affirm or condemn or promise or command?

The second question to ask is *what does it say?* That is, what is its contemporary message? How does it speak to us today? This is a different question. It involves the further 'bridge-building' discipline of relating the ancient Word to the modern world, and translating it into today's cultural terms.

It is essential to keep these two questions both distinct and together. To discover the text's *meaning* is of purely academic interest unless we go on to discern its *message* for today, or (as some theologians prefer to say) its 'significance'. But to search for its contemporary message without first wrestling with its original meaning is to attempt a forbidden short cut. It dishonours God (disregarding his chosen way of revealing himself in particular historical and cultural contexts), it misuses his Word (treating it like an almanac or book of magic spells) and it misleads his people (confusing them about how to interpret Scripture).

As we address our two questions to the text, respecting its meaning and its message, we may well need to turn to a lexicon, concordance or commentary for help. They can save us from misinterpreting the passage, illumine it and stimulate our thinking about it. But they can never be more than aids. They cannot replace our own direct and personal encounter with the text, as we cross-examine it for ourselves and allow it to cross-examine us. Besides, after a few years of Bible study we shall never come to a text as a

complete stranger, but rather approach it in the light of our previous meditation.

All the time we shall be praying, crying humbly to God for illumination by the Spirit of truth. We shall repeat Moses' petition 'I pray you, show me your glory' (Exod. 33:18) and Samuel's 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening' (1 Sam. 3:9, 10) Christian meditation differs from other kinds in being a combination of study and prayer. Some preachers are very diligent students. Their desk is piled high with theological works, and they give their mind to the elucidation of the text. But they hardly if ever pray for light. Others are very diligent in prayer, but hardly ever engage in any serious study. We must not separate what God has joined. Speaking personally, I have always found it helpful to do as much of my sermon preparation as possible on my knees, with the Bible open before me, in prayerful study. This is not because I am a bibliolater and worship the Bible; but because I worship the God of the Bible and desire to humble myself before him and his revelation, and, even while I am giving my mind to the study of the text, to pray earnestly that the eyes of my heart may be enlightened. (Eph. 1:18)

Of this combination of prayer and thought Daniel supplies an excellent Old Testament example. Having 'perceived in the books the number of years' that Jerusalem would lie derelict, he turned his face to the Lord God, 'seeking him by prayer and supplications with fasting and sackcloth and ashes'. Then, while he was still praying, Gabriel came to him and said, 'O Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding . . .' (9:1-3, 20-23) In a subsequent vision a human figure appeared to him, touched him and said to him: 'Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to understand, and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard . . .' (10:1-14) The New Testament equivalent seems to be Paul's word to Timothy: 'Think over what I say, for the Lord will grant you understanding in everything.' (2 Tim. 2:7) In both cases there was on the one hand the

reading of books, serious thought and the setting of the mind to understand, while on the other there was self-humbling in prayer and in confession. It was only in response to both study and petition that the desired insight was given. As R. W. Dale wrote, quoting an old English writer, 'work without prayer is atheism; and prayer without work is presumption.'<sup>18</sup>

It goes without saying that during this period of prayerful study called 'meditation', we are scribbling down, though haphazardly, the thoughts which clarify in our minds. 'How long does this stage last?' I have often been asked. 'As long as it has to' is the only answer I can give. There is no substitute for spending time with the text. Take as long as you need. Go on probing the flower until there is no nectar left. Go on sucking the orange until you have sucked it dry.

I have so far assumed that our study of the text will be private and individual. There is also a place for corporate sermon preparation, however, and Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has described to me his experiment in Madras Diocese (South India), when he was Bishop:<sup>19</sup>

'Once a month clergy from a group of pastorates gathered either for half a day or for a full day.' They began with 'thorough exegetical study of the passages prescribed for the Sunday in question'. This was done both in plenary session and in groups, four or five groups being asked to prepare a sermon outline each for the Sundays of the ensuing month. 'The outlines would then be submitted to the plenary for comment, criticism and discussion.' Usually, the sermon texts would be chosen from the lectionary published by the Church of South India. 'On some occasions, however, especially when something of over-riding importance was happening in the life of the Church or in the life of the nation . . . the groups would be asked to consider what the proper Christian response to the situation should be, and what passages of Scripture would be appropriate for the worship of the Sunday in question.' Bishop Newbigin's final comment was that, although 'in the end each one had to go home and prepare his own

sermons', yet 'these exercises helped to ensure that there was more meat in them than would otherwise have been the case.'

### (3) Isolate the Dominant Thought

As we continue to meditate by prayer and study, and jot down a miscellany of ideas, we should be looking for our text's dominant thought. Indeed, we should persevere in meditation until it emerges and clarifies. Why so?

First, because every text has a main theme. If, as we argued in Chapter Three, God speaks through what he has spoken, then it is essential to ask ourselves 'What is he saying? Where does his emphasis lie?' I am not denying that there may be several legitimate ways of handling a text, and several different lessons to learn from it; what I am asserting, however, is that every text has an overriding thrust. We need the integrity to discern this and to resist the temptation to give the text a twist or stress of our own.

For example, it would surely be permissible to teach from the Parable of the Good Samaritan that true love always expresses itself in sacrificial and constructive service. Yet the main thrust of Jesus' story is the shocking fact that a despised Samaritan outsider did what the two religious Jews were unwilling to do. It would therefore be impossible to expound the parable accurately without stressing this racial point and its implied criticism of all religion which, however orthodox, is yet bogus because loveless. Again, it would be possible to teach several truths from Romans 5:8, 'But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.' We could preach on the sin of man or the death of Christ or the love of God, for all three are mentioned in this verse. Yet the text's dominant thought is that Christ's death for sinners like us is 'God's own proof of his love towards us' (NEB). So a sermon on Roman 5:8 would have to be on 'how God proves his love', and would also have to relate the objective proof through Christ (his cross, v. 8) with the subjective

experience through the Holy Spirit (in our hearts, v. 5).

Then there is a second reason why we should look for each text's dominant thought, namely that one of the chief ways in which a sermon differs from a lecture is that it aims to convey only one major message. Students are expected to take copious notes during lectures, and to revise them afterwards. On this assumption the lecturer feels free to be discursive, to cover a wide territory, and even to digress. Indeed, the eccentric digressions of an absent-minded professor constitute one of the chief delights of listening to him; otherwise one might just as well cull his material direct from books. A sermon is quite different, however. It is true that in some congregations note-taking goes on, while in others duplicated summaries and cassette recordings are made available. Each is valuable as an aide-mémoire. Yet this provision is exceptional. It can also prove harmful if people stop listening to the sermon because they intend on some later occasion to study the notes or play back the cassette. For the sermon, as a living word from God to his people, should make its impact on them then and there. They will not remember the details. We should not expect to do so. But they should remember the dominant thought, because all the sermon's details have been marshalled to help them grasp its message and feel its power.

The masters of sermon craft all seem to be agreed on this matter. In olden days the dominant thought was usually called 'the proposition', and preachers laboured to clarify it. 'I think that every sermon', said Charles Simeon, 'should have like a telescope but one object in the field.'<sup>20</sup> Here is his account of his own method in his Preface to *Horae Homileticae*:

It may perhaps be not unusual to point out the manner in which these discourses are formed. As soon as the subject is chosen, the first enquiry is, *What is the principal scope and meaning of the text?* (I BEG EVERY YOUNG MINISTER ESPECIALLY TO REMEMBER THIS.)<sup>21</sup>



When a text's principal meaning has been discerned, Simeon continues, the next step is to express it in 'a categorical proposition'; to do this is '*the great secret* of all composition for the pulpit'.<sup>22</sup> In an anonymous article in the *Christian Observer* in December 1821, Simeon emphasized the practical importance of this method for fixing a truth in people's memories:

Reduce your text to a simple proposition, and lay that down as the warp; and then make use of the text itself as the woof; illustrating the main idea by the various terms in which it is contained. Screw the word into the minds of your hearers. A screw is the strongest of all mechanical powers . . . when it has turned a few times, scarcely any power can pull it out.<sup>23</sup>

Richard Baxter also wrote, 'screw the truth into their minds'.<sup>24</sup>

J. H. Jowett went further:

I have a conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching . . . until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as a crystal. I find the getting of that sentence is the hardest, the most exacting and the most fruitful labour in my study . . . I do not think any sermon ought to be preached, or even written, until that sentence has emerged, clear and lucid as a cloudless moon.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Professor Ian Pitt-Watson declares, 'Every sermon should be ruthlessly unitary in its theme. "This is the first and great commandment!"'<sup>26</sup>

Once the text has yielded its secret and the principal sermon theme has been clarified, ideally the whole service should be built round it. Although doubtless the opening worship can express penitence and praise in more general terms, and although the intercessions should embrace many concerns for the world, the Church and the needy, yet even in these sections of the service it is helpful to begin

to draw the minds and hearts of the congregation towards the theme and to prepare them to receive it. Certainly the two lessons should be relevant, together with the hymn expressing our prayer before the sermon and the hymn expressing our response after it. We should not be afraid of simplicity and repetition. This is a further lesson we can learn from the Black experience in the United States. Dr. Henry Mitchell draws an interesting parallel between the Negro spiritual and 'the slow rate characteristic of the Black preaching style':

The Black-culture sermon is the homiletical twin brother to the spiritual. In the case of the sung culture, a whole song can be formed on a very small word base. Haunting choruses are built on as few as four words: 'Remember me, O Lord, remember me.' Where a white-culture hymn has long stanzas full of words delivered at a fairly rapid rate, a Black spiritual might simply say slowly, 'Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.' The slow rate of Black preaching, as well as the repetition, is the natural pattern of Black speaking and singing, neither of which is prone to depend on great numbers of words in a brief utterance.<sup>27</sup>

So then, in our sermon preparation, we must not try to by-pass the discipline of waiting patiently for the dominant thought to disclose itself. We have to be ready to pray and think ourselves deep into the text, even under it, until we give up all pretensions of being its master or manipulator, and become instead its humble and obedient servant. Then there will be no danger of unscrupulous text-twisting. On the contrary, the Word of God will dominate our mind, set fire to our hearts, control the development of our exposition and later leave a lasting impression on the congregation.