

# How I get God in Preaching

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About two Sundays after I was licensed as a lay Reader my sermon notes disappeared under the chair I was sitting on. Being unused to clerical robes, and to all that was entailed in leading a service, I felt far too exposed and too nervous to look for them. It was therefore going to be a case of preaching from memory, or so I hoped. I was never all that good at remembering precise facts, but when the moment came to say something to the tiny congregation in that country church, it was clear that people had not come in the expectation that I would give them information, or that I would simply talk. They had come expecting to hear and understand something. Sermons are often boring because we presume that we have something of our own to say to people, some kind of knowledge couched in a personal anecdote or funny story, but it is not what we think we have to say that matters. It is what is being said in us and through us by God. I 'got God' in preaching in the minute of knowing this profoundly important truth for myself, not only as someone tasked with preaching sermons, but as it pertains to all aspects of Christian ministry.

On that Sunday morning, the people were waiting for an indefinable, perhaps even unacknowledged, wordless truth to be re-ignited in their own heart-thinking place. Like the Anglican solitary, Maggie Ross, you might call this place 'deep mind',<sup>1</sup> or something resembling the 'ground' of a person's being, a space for sensing the sacred. Preachers can only effect this 'epiphany' if they have first encountered the living God in their own heart-thinking place.

Getting God, I discovered, is always a matter of encounter. This is especially true in the context of preaching. It is the preachers' task to communicate God in such a way as to make it possible for their listeners to encounter the Living Word, the abiding Spirit of Jesus Christ,

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, vol.1. (London, DLT, 2014)

in the few minutes given to them to speak, without presuming that their listeners have never encountered him before. We ‘get God’ as preachers when we relinquish the kind of ‘conversion’ agenda which is really about control or power. Instead, we are to facilitate an encounter which is a shared experience, a moment of communion, a three-way conversation between us and between God and God’s people. Furthermore, the one we encounter, as we preach or listen to sermons, is a God we have always known, but perhaps never realised we knew. The preacher must be prepared to be surprised by what she says and ready to let go of any previously worked out rhetorical stratagem if she is to communicate something which rings true to her listeners, something of the God they have always known, but perhaps not known in this particular way.<sup>2</sup>

What, then, does it mean to be an effective communicator? I sense, from having listened to many sermons before I ever had to preach one myself, that many of those who sit through boring or trite sermons on a Sunday morning must be asking themselves this question. They may well have lost contact with the preacher, and whatever she was saying, after the first couple of minutes of trying to identify the thread which she was following, if a thread was being followed at all. On the other hand, they may have been surprised to find themselves captivated by what was said, regardless of the preacher’s lack of rhetorical skills. If the sermon conveyed the deep truth they needed to hear, its meaning will not have been obstructed by the preacher’s personality, insecurities, or issue-driven agenda, to name only three of the obstacles which get in the way of the communication process.

As a preacher, I always know that something is being said through me which is greater than I am. It is also in this moment that, like all preachers who are attuned to their immediate surroundings, I know what it is to ‘hold’ an audience. I have learned that I have to be willing to let go of control and to be surprised if I am going to enter, with my listeners, into the drama of a truth which is known rather than spoken. It is a three-way dialogue. The preacher and people are engaged in a kind of intuitive shared encounter with God. So, as preachers, we ‘get God’ as we learn alongside those to whom we are preaching.

In this respect, we are all absolute beginners. We are trying to learn through the words given to us in the text of the day. This is one of the reasons for the importance of the Greek word for ‘through’, *dia*, as it is deployed by Paul in his letters to the early churches. *Through* the text we learn how to recognise God, rather than arrive at a logical deduction of what God is

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<sup>2</sup> I use both the male and female personal pronoun in order not to stereotype the preacher.

about, either in scripture or in the context of Church, world, or of our individual preconceptions about him. In this sense, the learning is a journey of re-discovery, a different knowing of what, or who, is already known, rather than an objective truth about God which is taught and received as a *prima facie* observation.

I have also found that this kind of intuitive knowing is central to the theological task, in both church and academy. We cannot be theologians unless we have first allowed ourselves to be known by God. Learning means being sufficiently available or, to use a term borrowed from the French philosopher Simone Weil, and deployed in my book, '*disponible*' to the dynamic of God's Spirit.

Truth ... comes with deep listening and from living in such a way as to be available to God who is truth itself, in all our waking moments, as well as in our sleeping ones. Simone Weil describes this availability to God as *disponibilité*, a permanent openness to God and to the unexpected. It is also what Paul meant when he urged his readers to pray at all times. The one who is preaching needs to be open to being surprised by God at all times. If he is to convince others of the truth of what he is saying he must live from within that truth.<sup>3</sup>

Preaching is also pastoral teaching. It is concerned with healing, as well as with addressing the faith questions which people are really asking. As a preacher, I have always sensed that there is a deep pain inside people which is bound up with the truth they are searching for and with their often barely articulated questions in regard to God. Christ's penultimate words from the Cross were a question; 'Why?'. Pain and suffering always embody that question because they always bring a sense of separation, of forsakenness. In our darkest times of loss, failure, rejection or depression we ask that same question; 'why, if there is a God, has he forsaken me?' I have found that I connect with these questions, as they are being asked by the people sitting in the pews, by digging into the fertile compost of my own often troubled life experience. But I also know that the preacher is only tasked with connecting, and not with attempting an answer, which would not only be presumptuous, but is not what the people need. In my own particular journey into God, I have learned that all human suffering, as well as the suffering of creation, returns us sooner or later to the question, 'Why?' It is in this sense that the search for healing, as part of the preaching task, is integral to the search for meaning and truth, so it can never be a purely intellectual, or objective one.

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<sup>3</sup>Lorraine Cavanagh, *Waiting on the Word: Preaching Sermons that Connect People with God* (London, DLT 2017) p.22

The preaching task, especially when it concerns healing, is to meet people in the ‘why?’ question which is lodged in the heart. Preaching ultimately shapes the questions we ask with our intellect. As a preacher, I know that my task is not to parade theological knowledge, but to stand alongside those who are aching for a response to this question. In this infinitesimal moment of waiting (it is as short as a breath) I know that I am entrusted with the living Word, even if I have little or no knowledge of what it is to be for these particular people until I start speaking.

The preacher may be terrified of the prospect of speaking in public, especially when the surroundings are intimidating, but of this one thing we must be certain, that the sermon is a three-way encounter between God, his people, and the person preaching. It is an ongoing dialogue, reflecting the Trinity, which preachers must sense and ‘go with’ as they are speaking. I only really learned this on the day I lost my preaching notes. I had to trust that whatever I would say would make my listeners know that they were heard in their pain and in their questioning of the Christian faith itself. From that moment I sensed that each person needed to experience healing, not only through what I would say, but in my being entirely who I am, simply and truthfully.

The institutional Church does not help its ministers to do this. We are required to dress or behave in a certain way which can obscure the truth we are trying to convey, and the persons we really are, and constrain the healing which God desires for our listeners. This artificial front, or *figura*, can even alienate them. It can also cling to us. So I have found that in order to preach well, and to connect with people, I must ‘know’ or ‘understand’ them in Christ and not allow that knowing to be obstructed by the *figura* I am required to present. In the same way, I must also allow myself to be ‘known’ by God. In my book, I use a number of examples where Jesus himself meets and heals people through the very fact of his ‘knowing’ them, even if he has not met them before. We preachers need this kind of healing before we can offer it to others through the words we say to them on a Sunday morning.

The word which best fits this kind of knowing, or understanding, is ‘empathy’. Real empathy takes years to develop and only comes with having suffered oneself, and with coming to terms with the effects of that suffering, so I have learned to accept my own woundedness. I am grateful for the difficulties I have experienced in my own life and, at times, would be willing to go through them again for the sake of even one person for whom, in my time as a priest and as a preacher, I have been an agent of freeing or healing as a result of the degree of

empathy which I have had to learn. But there are also pitfalls when it comes to empathetic preaching and ministry. We have to know when it is right to refer to ourselves and our own life experience, and when not. Usually, it is not. Nevertheless, the people listening to the sermon need to sense a common experience, a commonality of suffering, which will make it possible for them to hear whatever healing is being offered to them through what we say. My own vulnerability to God and to them, in our three-way conversation, will make it easier for the people to be vulnerable in the hearing of the sermon and so receive its healing. This is the kind of mutual learning which turns a congregation, and the person preaching, into a single worshipping community. Together, we become God's people.

In my time in public ministry, I have found that real worship, as opposed to 'feel good' hymn singing, comes about through deep prayer. Prayer is the genuine desire to meet with God. It is also a habit requiring a degree of discipline, at least to begin with. Habits of regular deep prayer shape our work, especially the work of preparing sermons. I have found that the more time I spend letting go of preconceptions of God and outworn habits of prayer, the easier it becomes to 'let go' of God (in order to know and be known more deeply by God) and of my own desire to shape and control 'my' sermon. Prayer teaches me to let go of the sermon as well, so that it is no longer 'mine'. This does not mean that the sermon becomes 'extempore' in the way that word is often misunderstood. It simply becomes part of the 'letting go and letting be' which is the continuum of my own particular way of being with God. This has taught me to see preaching, as with any other gift a person may have in regard to worship, as part of the energised continuum of being together in God with those we are called to serve.