

Parish of Esher  
Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

## SERMON

Third Sunday before Lent, 17 February 2019  
9am Sung Communion, St George's, West End  
10.30am Parish Communion, Christ Church, Esher  
Jeremiah 17.5-10; Psalm 1; Luke 6.17-26

Ven. David Gerrard

In the Name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Matthew 4.12. Jesus came into Galilee and began to preach.

One of the few good things about a vacancy between rectors is that one hears more different preachers than usual. In the last nine months we have had 17 different preachers while in previous years there have been only three or four while in small country parishes they only hear the rector from one year to the next.

Preaching, teaching, expounding the scriptures, proclaiming the good news, is a very ancient activity. Jonah and Nehemiah and Isaiah all preached, while in Ecclesiastes the narrator is called simply 'The preacher'.

St. John the Baptist preached and Jesus began his ministry by preaching in Galilee. The followers of Jesus also preached. St. Paul wrote that Jesus anointed him to preach the Gospel and throughout the whole history of Christianity designated, and undesignated, people have preached. Sermons have varied greatly. The great preachers among them John Donne and John Wesley or a Billy Graham preached to huge crowds often in the open air with sermons that often lasted for an hour or more. Other preachers have spoken to a handful. I remember in my second parish as a curate we had a very small evensong congregation of six to eight people but the vicar insisted there should be a sermon so one evening I delivered mine to find afterwards one of the tiny congregation was an Archbishop.

Sermons can be infinitely forgettable or they can live on in our memories for years. They can, and have, changed lives, converted people, or led them to a new faith or a new life.

They can be simple, just words spoken and heard, or they can use visual aids or screens with words or films on them. We often think these are new trends but John Donne preached his last hour long sermon just before his death from the pulpit of St. Paul's cathedral wrapped in his winding sheet, his burial garment. I remember going to one sermon in Wandsworth which the preacher enlivened by walking up and down the church throwing sweets to the children. Popular of course but I doubt if anyone remembered the theme of the sermon. St. Francis of Assisi sent out his first friars to preach to the unconverted and told them, "Preach with everything at your disposal. If all else fails, use words."

Sermons exist in most religions. The Buddha preached as do Jewish rabbis and Muslim Imams. If we think their importance is diminishing we should remember the effect of Bishop David Curry's sermon at Harry and Meghan's wedding in Windsor Castle Chapel, or, less happily, the frequent accusations that the sermons of fundamentalist Islamic preachers have turned young Muslims into terrorists and so they have been refused visas or sent to prison. There was a headline in last week's paper about Africa's wealthiest preacher, a millionaire on fraud charges who encouraged his followers to show their devotion by eating live snakes and drinking petrol. Most preachers are poor, in wealth if not in content, although I do have a couple of Jewish friends who went to a friend's funeral in Long Island New York and heard an excellent sermon from the rabbi. They told their hosts how good he was, and were told that the congregation hoped he would stay as the Rabbi but although he was paid £400,000 a year, he wanted more and they were negotiating with his agent! I knew I was doing something wrong, although even I have preached in several cathedrals and been flown to America a couple of times by private plane to preach at a wedding and a funeral.

Preachers can be of any age or background. Two of the best sermons I have heard in recent years were given by a young woman in a small country church and by a 94 year old retired Bishop in Worcester Cathedral.

Sermons now form an important part of most church services. Catholics did not used to have many nor were they important, but now all their services even in small early morning masses have a sermon.

Sermons are one of the most commonly noted parts of our services. In my experience people care more about the sermon than any other parts of the service - with the possible exception of the hymns.

Being a preacher, a teacher, implies a common agreement on the importance of what is being taught and the right of the preacher to expound it. The context of preaching has for many centuries been that of a common belief in the truths of the Christian religion. It is difficult to define what makes a good sermon or a good preacher. In any congregation one person's excellent address is another's boring monologue. There are a few useful guidelines. Preachers should not talk about themselves too much, nor should they assume that they know more than members of the congregations and patronise them. I have very rarely preached without finding some member of those listening who knew far more about the theme than I did. I will give one comment on preaching by Madame de Sevigne who wrote to her beloved daughter in April 1671. "How can we love God when one never hears about him? The other day we heard the Abbe de Montmor. I have never heard such a good sermon from such a young man. He made the sign of the cross, spoke his text, did not scold us, did not call us names. He bade us not to fear death, for it was the only route we had for rebirth with Christ, and we agreed. We were all pleased. He is daring. He is modest. He is learned. He is devout. In fact I am extremely pleased with him" Most preachers would settle for that, but we all need to pursue our own way to find the truth, incorporate it, and be its advocate. Preachers are better advocates the more they have struggled with the faith and especially the Scriptures.

What remains true is that preaching is rarely effective unless there is close congruence between the words of the preacher and the actions of the preacher. Like the priest in Canterbury Tales before we preach the gospel we should follow it ourselves. I find the sermons of others chastening but well worth reading. My especial favourites are those of the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth, a mighty theological intellect, but who spoke simply Sunday by Sunday to prisoners in Zurich gaol, and of John Donne probably

the finest preacher in the English language. In a sermon of his in 1618 he reminded us of the care with which preachers should speak. "God speaks to us in a limited, in a diligent form. Let us not speak of him slackly, suddenly, unadvisedly, extemporally, occasionally, indiligently."

The responsibility does not just rest with the preacher. Congregations should listen carefully and patiently, and comment and correct and care about the words of the preacher.

Congregations that do listen, engage, disagree, are prepared to change are a preacher's delight. I remember an old gentleman who used to worship for many years in Christ Church, and I asked him about a forthcoming sermon. "Will it upset people he asked?" "I think it might." "Then you must preach it," he said.

Perhaps the best summary of the purpose of preaching came from one of the greatest of Christian teachers and preachers, Saint Augustine of Hippo. Some sixteenth centuries ago he wrote, "The purpose of preaching in docere, delectare, fletare, to teach, to delight, to move". May it always be so.

"Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scripture to be written for our learning: grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and the comfort of thy holy Word, we may ever embrace, and hold fast the blessed hope of our everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. "