

# Preparing To Preach

## *Some Practical hints*

:

1 **Don't pump out gratuitous statements about God.** Blank allegations that God is loving or merciful can't make much sense floating in middle air. Remember that in reality such statements are actually controversial. The mercy of God is deeply questionable in this world of tsunami and hurricane, AIDS and coronary thrombosis, road accidents, famine, and civil wars. Start with the anguished faith that people are clinging to, with its doubts and fears; and proceed from there to ask whether we can spot mercy and faithfulness in the picture.

2 **Avoid facile statements about the Church.** Even in your local pulpit you aren't facing an audience that doesn't have doubts about the Church. If they aren't divorced themselves, they have family who are, or who are shacked-up, or lapsed, or drunk, or gay, or depressed, or addicted, or unemployed. They live in a climate of dishonour and disruption. We can't speak to them if we're pretending this isn't so, and we don't stop it being so by pretending. *We* can, unfortunately, pretend in the pulpit. *They* can't pretend in the pew. If you have managed to get people to listen, you will engage everything in them that speaks against you. It's only an indifferent audience that lets you get away with untruths. Also remember that the congregation know each other. If you talk about divorce, every divorced person may feel exposed; if you talk about addiction, every wife of a drunk will feel as if everyone is watching her. You may enhance their fears that the Church is judgmental and heartless, simply by forgetting that things that are abstract for you are brilliantly real to your hearers.

3 **Don't attempt to talk like a saint.** If you have to denounce sin, don't do it in your listeners. Have the courage, and the honesty, to do it in yourself. If you have to defend the faith, defend it to yourself. If you describe inability to trust or to believe, say I or we; don't say they or them - which makes your words academic, addressed to people who aren't here to listen - and *never* you - which would separate you disastrously from your congregation. This is much more than good manners: it's a matter of community responsibility, and a matter of truthfulness. Give the congregation the novel experience, if that's what it unfortunately is, of hearing a cleric talk like their own inner dialogue.

4 **Never pursue technical knowledge for more than a short paragraph.** Homiletics is a form of teaching: but it is not lecturing. Get to first base as soon as you can: get to speak personally about attitudes and dispositions, about the personal receiving of truth and the response in faith and love which listening to Christ should evoke. Seek to be practical: talk about the world's need for Christ, and how we can help to meet it.

5 **Always include more good news.** Good news is no news, by and large. Point to the good things which are happening quietly in people's lives, which will never appear in anyone's news-bulletins. You are addressing saints and trainee saints, who cook and wash and worry and pray for each other, who walk miles to comfort one another, and come home tired after working long hours for each other. Never leave them admonished and criticised and downcast, and then intone the fourth-century theology of the Niceo-Constantinopolitan Creed without a word of love and appreciation for them. Tell them how impressed you are by the clear signs that God is with them, that Christ is in them.

6 **Beware of making jokes.** Some priests make a rule that they will crack a joke at the beginning of every homily. That's better than cracking a joke at the end of every homily, but it isn't something everyone can do, and it is seldom much help to the homily. Bad jokes destroy homilies. On the other hand, if there's a good joke that really contributes to the point

your homily makes, that is gold. It is best put in the middle, where its relevance can be appreciated, and where it doesn't interfere with the reflective pause at the end. This is a very personal matter. Equally, stories of pastoral situations you've known have to be carefully used; once again, relevance is all-important. If people think you are getting off on your reminiscences instead of looking after their faith, you've lost it in a big way. Another point is that a story will not sit well after a parable, especially one like the Prodigal Son, where people's narrative imagination is already engaged. If you then start them thinking about a woman you knew in Scunthorpe once upon a time, who had three daughters, you will overload and lose them.

7     **Don't try to save the world in seven minutes** The cardinal sin of new preachers is that they try to deliver the whole deposit of faith and a grand overview of salvation history, the justification of the ways of God to men, and the lives of St Ursula and her ten thousand companions, all in their first homily. If you can make one point well, related firmly to the word of Christ, and give people a clear idea of its relevance to their lives and feelings, you have done all that is wanted. People will come to trust you and to listen to you willingly.

8     **Ask for advice** Find trustworthy people who have no urge to lie to you, and ask for sincere criticism of your appearance, manner, delivery, material, length, breadth, and depth as a preacher. If they are kind enough to say something critical, respect it.

9     Above all, try to **criticise yourself**, and make sure you are putting real preparation into your homilies (no-one else in your parish will enjoy the open-hearted attention of all these people as you do when you stand up to preach. Make sure you don't waste their time). Above all, pray about your preaching, and be scrupulous in eliminating any sense of vanity or self-importance. That is something which will immediately come across to the people, and will disable you as a minister of the word of God.

## Assignment

Open the Missal at the **Thirtieth Sunday of Year One**. Apply the process recommended above - choose a phrase or subject that yields interest: list the areas that provoke questioning; describe your sense of how the congregation will respond to the reading, and how you respond to it; isolate the theme, decide on the message, and then say how your homily will try to address the people.

Repeat the process for the **Thirty-first Sunday of Year One**.

Please treat this assignment as an exercise in sympathy. You have three massive loyalties to observe:

- Firstly, the loyalty to the Word of God
- Secondly, to the teaching and gathering of the Church in the place where you preach.
- Thirdly to the tradition of the Church in Word and Sacrament, which must always be favoured by the Liturgy of the Word celebrated on Sunday.