

Preaching from the Old Testament

by Rt Revd John B Taylor, formerly Bishop of St Albans, and an Old Testament scholar and teacher.

No one is pretending it is easy. In an age of biblically untaught congregations you wonder where to begin, or indeed whether to begin at all. Much safer to stick to the New Testament, with a little homily based on the Gospel for the day, where the personality and words of Jesus are much more listener-friendly. Memories of bloody battles, lists of kings, repetitive words of doom from the prophets, miracles that strain the imagination and a pre-scientific cosmology, they all daunt even the most determined preacher. Best to take the easy way out and stay with what is familiar and less demanding.

Of course, no one can say that the New Testament is exactly a piece of cake, so maybe hard work is required whichever part of Holy Scripture you turn to for inspiration. Too true. And unless you eliminate the Old Testament readings entirely from the lectionary, you and your congregation are going to be faced with it sometimes – and it cries out for explanation. So how do you set about it?

Far be it for me to be prescriptive. All I can do is to say how I try to tackle the challenge of Old Testament preaching. It is a challenge; it *does* take time; there are no short cuts. But it is so worthwhile. I love the Old Testament; I love the Hebrew language; I love the land of the Bible, where I lived for a whole year in my student days; I have a great regard and affection for Jews and for Judaism. That gives me a head start. But I also recognise that the Old Testament was Jesus' Bible and that he met the Father in its words and through its pages, so I owe it to him to try to feed God's people with the same bread that he used.

The starting point...

I would begin with what they have just listened to: the Old Testament reading at the Eucharist or the first lesson at Evensong, or maybe the psalm. If they have listened at all (and how important it is to make sure the Old Testament is read well and with meaning!) the questions will have begun to well up in their minds. What was the writer getting at? Does it have any meaning three thousand years on? What has this to do with Christian worship? I try not to be defensive. I start from the premise that this makes good sense and is not gibberish, that it is the word of God and deserves respect, that if we cannot fully understand it the fault is more likely to be in us than in the text, and that I must use every aid of mind and scholarship to get to grips with what has been written.

I read the passage again and again, in different versions if possible. I look at the Hebrew (all right, you may not be able to do that, but I can only say what I do). I look at such commentaries as I have. I look up cross-references in the margin of my Bible. Anything to get some ideas. I ask questions of the text: why is the story told in this way? Why the omissions, why the repetitions? Why did the writer (or editor) use these words, strung together like this, and not some other way of putting his message across? I look at the connectives -therefore, after these things, nevertheless. I concentrate on the verbs, the words of action: do they tell me anything? I ask if any words are given undue prominence, perhaps by being used more than once. I am looking for clues.

And of course I pray - for eyes to see and ears to hear what God may be saying to me and to my hearers. Sometimes, I admit, nothing comes, and I accept defeat and turn to another passage. After all, my job is to listen to the voice of God and not to wrench a message when I cannot discover one. But persistence and prayer often win.

And then...

The next decision is whether to stick to a single text, maybe a single phrase, or to speak about the whole sweep of a passage. I prefer the latter but never feel hidebound by it. But I will still want to have a text, a pivotal sentence around which the whole passage appears to me to revolve - or maybe an ear-catching phrase which keeps the congregation wondering what is coming next.

I found this when I was wrestling with an unpropitious passage in Hosea 14.1-7, part of the old ASB lectionary. At first sight it was the same old prophetic call on the people of Israel to repent of their sins, and I wondered how this would go down with an audience of students who had no particular affinity with Israel and who were there in a college chapel more for the choral singing than for the preaching of the word. My eye spotted the text 'We will not ride on horses any more'. It proved to be the way in to a simple explanation of how a person can find their way back to God when they have lost touch with him. I stayed with the first four verses of the chapter. The way back to God begins with words: 'take words with you and return to the Lord'. Words of sorrow, words of admission, regrets that are not just felt but articulated, verbalised. Determination too is required: 'take away all iniquity'. Please remove it from me. I repent of my sins, I renounce evil. And we have to get off our high horse (there's the text) and come down from our pride and pretentiousness, no longer relying on ourselves or on anyone else to save us. And our idols too have to go: 'we will never again say 'our gods' to what our own hands have made'.

The verses conclude with the little phrase, 'in you the orphan finds mercy'. As if to say that if God is merciful to those who are fatherless through no fault of their own, then maybe there is hope for those like us who have erred and strayed from his ways like lost sheep but who are now wanting to come home. The last word is God's: 'I will heal their waywardness and love them freely'. So there in Hosea, from the eighth century BC, we have pure Prodigal Son preaching, fit for any Christian pulpit.

Purple passages

I confess to being particularly enamoured of memorable texts, and the Old Testament is rich in them, all the more so because they appear like nuggets of gold in the midst of somewhat dull seams. Archbishop Michael Ramsey's enthronement text in Canterbury Cathedral was long remembered – 'And there went with him a band of men whose hearts God had touched' (*1 Samuel 10.26*). The retirement sermon built around the text 'At the time of the end there shall be the vision' (*Daniel 8.17*). The poignancy of 2 Samuel 14.28 – Absalom dwelt two full years in Jerusalem and saw not the king's face'. Those words that follow on from the giving of the Law on Sinai in Exodus 20.21 – 'Moses went up into the thick darkness where God was'.

There is a risk that the text will get remembered and the sermon forgotten, but that is surely preferable to the all-too-frequent situation where the only memorable part of a sermon is either an illustration (but what did it illustrate?) or a joke which was dragged in to make the introduction more appetizing.

Once the text has been decided upon (or maybe has stood out a mile) how is the content put together? I try to work out, on the basis of the wording of the whole passage, what lessons or insights the section contains. I may have to be sparing with them, because the material may be more than I have time to handle. I am aiming at a maximum of twelve minutes and I know that is asking quite a lot of my audience in the majority of churches. Some of the points I would like to make have to be relegated to allusions rather than being given a paragraph to themselves, or else omitted completely. If the authors of the inspired Scriptures had to cut and be selective, there is no shame in the expositor doing likewise.

Coming together

So far there are only ideas and these need to be shaped and filled out. At this stage, having read and questioned and prayed and thought and culled, I unashamedly allow myself to dream. I dream my way into the pulpit I shall be occupying, dream about the congregation who will be listening to me, imagine what will hold their attention and the language in which the thoughts can best be couched. Only then do I begin to write. It used to be by pen, but now I can manage with a word-processor, which makes it so much easier to rework and revise.

I believe strongly in the importance of the right words. I am not a sufficiently fluent speaker to extemporise, or if I am I know I will waste words and go beyond my time. As a preacher, my stock in trade is to be a wordsmith and I need to exercise my craft with care. So I write down the words, taking care that they are in the language of direct speech, not as in a newspaper article. Because I have no blackboard, no video screen alongside me, my visuals have to be composed of words and sentences. I try to make all my sentences word-pictures, so that people can see in their mind's eye what I am trying to say. I avoid abstractions like the plague, especially words of Latin origin and those ending in -ation. Anglo-Saxon words and phrases are best. I aim for short sentences with the occasional simile. My style is to preach on the lines of the editorial columns in *The Sun* or the *Mirror*, not the *Telegraph* or *The Times*. Long ago I was advised to 'preach as if you have asthma' and to take frequent breaths between short, pithy sentences.

If they listen to the end (and it gets quite easy to notice when their eyes glaze over), I feel I have achieved something. If they end up believing however grudgingly that the Old Testament may have something to say to them, I feel highly satisfied. If they have heard a word from the Lord (even if it was not quite what I intended!) I give thanks to God.