



5th Sunday after Trinity | Sermon – Revd Canon Stan Evans

What makes a good sermon? Many books and courses have been written on this subject. Some argue that it's vital to use interesting illustrations to make a sermon relevant. Others say sermons should be fun – others say that humour should not be introduced - while others advise including a few jokes and entertaining stories. Most preachers are encouraged to prepare their homilies with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. Others debate whether a preacher should use notes or not use notes; move around, or preach from the pulpit; make use of PowerPoint or avoid it at all costs! Whatever the preacher does he/she will be criticised by someone – either on content or delivery or both. Oh how we long for a kind word. Preparing to preach is a demanding task – although the greatest privilege. Time spent studying God's word week by week and then prayerfully seeking out what God is asking of you to bring to His people. Hours can be taken if we are taking the task seriously. Sadly, the spoken word in this day and age has great competition from the more sophisticated forms of communication. The attention span of the listener is a matter of seconds before demanding a further point to grab their attention.



So the preacher has an almost impossible task – and then within minutes following the end of a service – the teaching is forgotten as many express an opinion which demonstrates that they were deaf to the word. But, that is what we are called to do, and the most important feature of preaching is to remember that Jesus told stories – and to adults. The sacrament of the Word is at the very centre of our Church life together – and as we break the Word by examining and digesting it – we move to the breaking of the Bread. Both sacraments equally important.

Today's reading, though, does not tell us what words Jesus said in the synagogue or how he presented his teaching, but it does make it clear that Jesus preached an excellent sermon, for **people were amazed by his words**. Yet, their initially positive reaction soon changed to antagonism and Jesus' sermon was not received well at all. The people **"took offence at him"**!

The main reason for this seems to be that Jesus was preaching in his home town, Nazareth, where he had lived since childhood and his family were well-known. Even though we might expect this to mean he was received back with warmth and enthusiasm, as a local hero perhaps, their very familiarity with Jesus actually seems to have prejudiced them against him.



Our passage suggests that they knew two things about his background that made them struggle to accept his authority as a teacher. First, they knew what his former trade was: he was a simple carpenter. How could such an uneducated man consider himself a rabbi, they asked? Secondly, they knew something of his birth: in their eyes he was the illegitimate son of Mary, the woman who had got pregnant out of wedlock. Many think that this is why they refer to Jesus as “Mary’s son” and not Joseph’s, for even if Joseph had passed away by this point, the norm was still to address a boy as the son of his father. If this is so, then their words should be understood as something of an insult.

Today’s passage implies that because of these people’s lack of faith, “Jesus could not do any miracles there”. This verse has been the subject of much debate. Was Jesus’ power limited by human stubbornness? Most people think that this is not what the verse is suggesting. They feel it is more that Jesus *chose* not to work many miracles there. To have done so in an environment where people did not believe he was capable of such things would not have been beneficial. The crowd would not have been convinced by his miracles and would probably have explained them away rather than have seen them as evidence of Christ’s divine power.

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Sometimes when we consider how effective teaching is we can focus exclusively upon the skill of the teacher, yet this passage makes it clear that the learning process is a two-way thing. Jesus preached well and yet his message was rejected. Indeed, these verses show Jesus preparing his disciples to expect opposition to the Gospel message. They witnessed Christ's rejection in the synagogue and then, when being sent out immediately afterwards to preach in pairs, were taught how to respond if their preaching was rebuffed (verse 11). We will all face times when what we share about Christ isn't received well and this passage reassures us that, when we do, it isn't necessarily because the message has not been presented adequately: even Jesus' words did not win people around every time.

I remember well a meeting at Spurgeon's Baptist College in south London with Dr Donald Coggan, former Archbishop of York and Canterbury – who was also the Founder of the College of Preachers. He told a wonderful story of how he had been invited to a parish to re-dedicate the church after a re-ordering of the interior. Upon arrival before the service he inspected the work. And he asked – where do I preach the Gospel from?



And they brought me a flimsy wooden stand to preach the Word of God.....it should have been from the Pulpit with His word raised to the highest heaven. And don't preach it from a sheet of paper – read it from the Bible

And what about when we listen to God's word? If the effectiveness of teaching is not just down to the skill of the speaker but also to the attitude of the hearer, and if by not listening faithfully we risk missing out on experiencing all Christ has for us as the Nazarenes did, how can we be better listeners in our services? Well, we can pray for those involved in leading our services and preaching. We can make sure we take our services seriously as an opportunity to meet with God. We can prepare for services by praying for God to speak to us and by taking time afterwards to reflect on what we have heard.

William Barclay said he wished congregations would realise that they “preach far more than half the sermon,” saying that, “in an atmosphere of expectancy the poorest [sermon] can catch fire,” but “in critical coldness or bland indifference, the most Spirit-packed utterance can fall lifeless to the earth.” Let's pray that we may be truly receptive to Christ's words.

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Take our minds, and think through them.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts, and set them on fire with love for thee.

What we know not, teach us.

What we have not, give us.

What we are not, make us.

For Jesus Christ's sake.

Amen