

Proclaiming

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[0 : 00] Now I'd like for a few minutes this evening to look at the theme of preaching before we celebrate the Lord's Supper together. And it's in the context of what we've been looking at in our evening service with regards to worship. Last week Tom looked at singing as part of our worship and preaching as part of our worship as well. I used to work in the Highlands as an assistant minister with Kenny MacDonald, who some of you will know.

And Kenny had a recurring nightmare, a genuine recurring nightmare. I'm not using that as a figurative speech. He did have a recurring nightmare which was that he woke up on a Sunday morning as a preacher and went to church and nobody was there. That was his recurring nightmare. My recurring nightmare is slightly different. My recurring nightmare as a preacher and as preachers we kind of have recurring nightmares is that people under my watch or people generally think preaching is like the preacher on the famous Mr Bean sketch. I don't know if you've seen that. There's a sketch of Mr Bean in church. You don't ever see the preacher, you just see Mr Bean falling asleep. And all you hear from the preacher is this monotone, yaw, yaw, yaw, yaw, yaw, yaw, all the way through for half an hour.

And it's just about sending him to sleep. Now it's funny, it's a very funny sketch, but it's not a joke. It's a damnable disaster. If preaching has that soporific effect on people. And that's my greatest nightmare, that preaching sends you all to sleep or that generally in our country that preachers have that ability to send everyone to sleep for the few moments we have because that is such a tragedy if that's the case. Now we preach every Sunday here, every morning and every evening. We bookend the day with preaching as part of our worship service. It's not a great section or it's not a great chunk of your week in many ways. It's only an hour in your whole week. But nonetheless it's important because most of us here do it regularly every week. We come together and we have this service. Why? Why do we do that? And why? And the reason we're doing this series is to ask the question why? So that we know more, that we are understanding more and that we change sometimes because we understand more about what we do. And that can be tough. We saw that recently in one of the sermons that change is really tough. It's really difficult to change. Now I come as a living example this evening of someone who has had to change, tonight is the first time in 30 years that I have preached without using my little black notebook. I've preached from this notebook for the last 30 years. It's gone. It's gone forever because Twinlock have gone out of business and there's no longer anywhere where you can buy refills for that particular folder. So now I'm on a bigger one. And it's being printed rather than written. The reality is that my writing is getting so bad and my eyesight's getting worse that I can't read my small notes. So I've had to move to technology. It's a disaster. So I have no idea how long this will be because I had everything gauged on the number of pages of notes before. So if I go on for three and a half hours this evening then you'll all miss the joint service and I'll have to reassess how I do things. But it is important and seriously to study the theme of preaching is hugely humbling and difficult for a preacher to do because you look in Scripture and you look at God's Word and you want to be forgiven. You want to start all over again. You are aware of grace and you believe in that great verse in the Bible which says that the Lord will give back all the years that the locusts have eaten. So preaching is a difficult thing for a preacher to preach and speak about. But we will for a few moments. Can I just say by way of introduction, secondary introduction, it's broader than just the sermon. Okay, we know that from Scripture.

preaching is broader than just this half hour of potentially monologue speaking on a Sunday. There are many different words used in the New Testament for preaching and there's different gifts that people have. It speaks about heralding, proclaiming, counselling, teaching, exhorting, explaining, reasoning, speaking and encouraging. So there's a sense and this is the broader sense by way of introduction. We are all preachers of the Word. We are all responsible for sharing the truth. We are all responsible for telling the gospel. So in that broad sense we are all preachers. But also there are those with specific gifts beyond the sermon, beyond the proclamation. People who can sit down with someone else and open the Scripture one to one, who are great at discipleship, who are great at reasoning from the Bible and who have the gift of teaching and speaking about God's truth. That's a great gift and many people have that. But there's the third layer which is proclamation, which is really what we're looking at this evening as we study this theme of preaching. We read in 2 Timothy that Paul was speaking to this young preacher and saying, you know, preach the Word and preach that good news of the gospel. And there's many examples in the New Testament of this proclamation that goes on. You know, Christ preached, he proclaimed, he declared the truth. Peter did it, Paul did it. It was something that happened in the church. And

I guess the idea in many ways is from 2 Timothy 1, 11 which speaks about heralding the truth, building the gospel. And that comes from the idea of the town crier, the person who came to the centre of the town and he came with a message to the people. He was a man under authority, he had a message from the authorities and it was something he had to pass on. He didn't come to the front and say, look, I've got a couple of good ideas that I want you to think about. Forget what I was told to pass on. He had a specific message and he was under authority to do that. And the proclamation of the truth is similar. Timothy here speaks about it in such a way that it's to be urgent, habitual, relevant, well-prepared, to do it carefully and to do it patiently as we declare and preach the gospel to the gathered congregation.

[7 : 25] No to Mr. Bean's minister. No to that kind of meaningless monologue, monotone monologue that sends everyone to sleep because it's irrelevant and it's boring and it's distant and it's got no significance spiritually in people's lives. That's an unforgivable misery.

So there's over 90, there's nearly 100 different references to preaching and teaching in the New Testament and over 50 of them refer to declaring the truth, declaration, bringing the message to the people. And that really highlights what we do on a Sunday. That's why we preach the gospel and that's the model we're following. I know it's unfashionable.

I know it's out of date. Many people think it's a waste of time. It's culturally alien. It's even marginalised within the church. But we believe it's the foolishness of God.

God has chosen the foolishness of preaching and it's wiser than men's wisdom. So we believe it's the choice of God and it's as it were in using that radical language, the foolishness of God, God's choice. So I want to think about it just for a few minutes about our responsibility and what the Bible is to say. So what I want to say is first it's not a monologue and second it's participatory. So I'm always banging on about this, but I'm going to bang on a little bit more tonight. So it's not a monologue. So here we have Timothy being told by Paul under the inspiration of the Spirit to preach the word, preach the word, herald the word.

Paul, Timothy, you have a message, you have a body of doctrine, you have a tradition that has been handed down. Take that and preach it. And essentially, it says preach the word.

[9 : 24] What does that remind you of? Where does it make you, where do you spring back to? Spring back to John chapter one. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. In other words, we could just simply, we could, he could just say preach Christ. Preach Christ, preach the word. Because ultimately the word that we preach, the living word is the person. It's the person of Jesus Christ. That's what we preach through the Bible as it's given to us. So I'm not preaching my thoughts. I'm not preaching my wisdom or my opinion, but rather everyone who comes to preach the word from here should be, as Peter says in 1 Peter 4 verse 11, if anyone speaks, he should do so as one speaking the very words of God. So we come under authority with the message of Jesus that has been given to us and we pass that on. So we're preaching the person of Christ. And what we're wanting to do is bring Him into the room. We want to bring Christ into our lives through the word, through this good news. It's the most noble of all experiences to bring Christ into our lives. And it should touch on all kinds of noble themes when we're bringing Christ through His word into our lives. We should touch on the dignity of being human, of hope and of beauty and the power of meaningful love. The preaching should touch us at some level at the very core of our beings. It should deal with the heart of betrayal and the glory of grace and forgiveness that is offered, the significance of us being image bearers belonging. It should inspire and it should speak about rescue. It should lift us up.

I think preaching should do that. I know it often falls short and there's lots of different reasons for that. But I was sitting in the house the other night and there was nobody in front of the computer and I happened to put the iPlayer on. And it was the last episode of Roots, of the new version of Roots, a four-part series, which is all about the time of the Civil War in America and black slavery. And it was the most powerful hour. It was floods of tears because it dealt with dignity and humanity and brutality and guilt and all these massive human emotions and it made you proud at certain moments and you made you ashamed at other moments. I think preaching in a much more significant way should do that as it brings Jesus Christ into our lives. When Paul speaks about handling the word of truth correctly in verse 15, we should make sure that we have that word and we handle it well, correctly handling it. The word there is for cutting a straight road. You see that sometimes, maybe particularly in the Highlands where maybe the A9 is cutting through a hillside and they've blasted the rocks on either side. And it's beautiful to see the Tarmac road just sweeping through what was a hillside, cutting a straight path. And it's something that's hugely beautiful to see. And the word of God should cut that truth and bring discovery into our souls face to face with Jesus Christ. So preach the word, so preaching Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. A reading in Thessalonians reminded us of that in first

Thessalonians 1 verse 5, we're reminded that the gospel came to not only in word but in power and in the Holy Spirit. So God comes and in the person of His Spirit chooses to use preaching, breathes life into it and accompanies it. This is one of His favored choices as the word is proclaimed and as the word is passed through. It's active and living in the power of the Holy Spirit. And as we understand God and His choices, we will understand that more clearly and it should lead for us to deep conviction. The word of God came with power of the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. As we're expecting, submissive to the word, in fleshed in Christ we listen with joy and we are moved to change in the power of the Holy Spirit. I'll say a little bit more just about that before we finish. And it's one of the words that we don't hear very often but it's called unction. It's that sense of the power of the Spirit of God with us in our preaching. I think for whatever reason

He's generally missing today. I think He's missing tonight. I think He's missing most Sundays in great measure. I'm not saying it's not there at all. But for whatever reason, we don't see that dovetailing of the word and the Spirit in power as we preach. Keller's got a great book on preaching and he speaks about this and he says, it's an interesting quote. He says, to prepare a sermon, he's speaking about preparing sermons that are good. He said, it requires hours of work. Thank you, Tim. And to be able to craft and present it skillfully takes years of practice. Indeed it does. However, while the difference between a bad sermon and a good sermon is mainly the responsibility of the preacher, the difference between good preaching and great preaching lies mainly in the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the listener as well as the preacher. The message in Philippi came from Paul, but the effect of the sermon on hearts came from the spirit. So good preaching is one thing. Great preaching is when there's this unction and power of the spirit taking the word and applying it. So just in conclusion, I just want to say that my second point, which is not a monologue, but it's participatory. I've said this a lot, haven't I? It's participatory.

It involves the preacher and it involves you all as the people. So I need to take time to prepare a good sermon. And I'm very grateful to you as a congregation for allowing me to have a preaching team, which means that we can all spend time preparing rather than one person having to do a multiplicity of sermons, doing them badly and doing them quickly. I have to prepare in my life and in my heart. I'm a shepherd. It's part of the power comes from being relationally linked to my people, to the community here. That's why there's a danger in simply listening to celebrity preachers online. I'm not saying it's not a good thing to do and every preacher will learn a lot from great preachers. But you have dissolved the link between preacher and people and there's no community at that level and there's no oneness. And I will prepare by preaching different kinds of sermons. We believe in expository preaching, going through books, going through truths. We like the big picture. We like the confidence of going into any part of God's word and allowing that word to speak in the circumstances in which it was written, keeping us from always being on our hobby horses. But we recognize there's all kinds of different parts in the Bible.

[17:17] So there's different types of sermons. There's different types of literature. And sometimes we'll preach on characters. Sometimes there'll be topical themes. We'll preach into the congregational needs. We're preaching into a specific culture. And we know that we will come on any given Sunday and some will be vulnerable. Some will be heavy hearted. Some will be doubting. Some will be bored. Some will sleep because they've lost that sense of having any spiritual significance and they have any spiritual role to play. Some will come doubting their need for Christ.

Some will come rejoicing. But the preacher needs to be prepared. But also therefore, so do we, so do you as hearers. So can I say preaching therefore for you as the congregation is not like it's, you can't compare it to the X factor. In other words, you're not the audience at the X factor listening to a sermon. Nor are you the judges on the X factor, though many of you would maybe like that red button in front of you and go, ah, any specific point so that you could stop the preacher going on. I'm glad you don't have that ability.

And I don't think that's what you think. You are participants in God's foolishness. That's what you are because it's wiser than our wisdom. You're reminded when you come in under the sound of the word that you're not alone, that Christ is visiting you through His word and He is coming into your life and His spirit is speaking to you. So you come to God's house, you come to the gathering of God's people together and you've prayed, Lord, speak to me from your word today. Expose what needs to be exposed. Comfort me what I need comfort. I'm going into this week and I don't know what to do. Guide me some way through your word. Help me, enable me to respond to you. We come seeking to be built up in our faith, spoken to and prepared to go out and mimic what has been preached. Mimic even, told in passages that we read, the preacher, which seems bizarre in many ways. But we mimic one another as we reflect Christ and we seek to worship and be challenged and be changed and be anticipatory and be sensitive and be prayerful in community and seek to be moved with the deep conviction of the Holy Spirit as the word goes out. We bookend Sundays with worship, communal worship together. It's not much of our time, but it's part of our focus for hearing God as the word is declared. It's not the only way. We hope that through the word declared that we spend time with our husbands and wives and our friends and our family and our flatmates and our neighbours who are Christians talking, declaring, speaking, reasoning, encouraging, arguing, the word, preaching. But this is, as it were, the launch pad for us in many ways. And as we do, can we recognise, because it's the word of God and we didn't read this, but the evil one in the parable of the sower will always seek to snatch away. He'll always seek to diffuse the power and the authority of the word. Maybe by making you think you're not participants, that you're simply those who are looking on, that it has no relevance for you, that it's not the living word of God. He will seek to drain out of it its goodness, its significance. He will challenge you not to trust the word of God. He will say, preaching is foolishness. And so it's important for me, in my life, in my ministry, in my walk with God, it's important for you and your ministry and your life and your walk with God to cooperate, to get, we cooperate together. And we're asking and looking for the unction of the Spirit as He takes the truth and applies it to our hearts. So that when people come in, I hope they can say, as Corrie was preaching from it, beginning of Acts this morning, that really these people had been with Jesus, that there's that sense of God in our public worship. So much so that we're confident of bringing others along because we think that others will come in and they'll not be embarrassed, they'll not be weirded out by what happens, but they will sense something genuine, something that is filled with integrity, that is real, and that is meaningful, that they'll look around and amazingly, Mr. Bean won't be there. He'll not be falling asleep. And it won't be this monologue, blah, blah, blah, going on, but people will be interacting and there'll

be a living sense of the presence of God as we come together. It's God's ordained, it's not His only means, but it's God's ordained means of helping us to meet with the Word, to meet with Christ, and that each time we meet, we would be gripped by His grace and leave with that sense of being gripped by Him and by His beauty and seeing His idea at work in our lives, that He will increase and we will decrease. So as we've met with Christ, we hope in His Word, as the Word has preached, I hope we will also now meet Him in the sacrament, and just for a few moments that we will enjoy that feast of remembrance, of reconciliation, of rejoicing, of realignment, and that you'll just meet with Jesus Christ as a Christian at the table in light of who He is and what He's done. Let's put our heads briefly in prayer. Father God, we ask and pray for your help, we pray for your blessing, we thank you for the Lord's Supper, for this tangible physical visual demonstration of your body and blood given for us. We thank you for the living, breathing reality of the

Word. Forgive us when we are desperately, poorly prepared spiritually to preach the Word as ministers, when we professionalize it to such a degree that we expose the folly and stupidity of unprepared hearts, when we are self-reliant and proud and ignorant and arrogant about our gifts, and when we presume on your cooperation when we have acted in independence. And Lord, keep us from simply listening in a passive way, in an entertainment way, in a way that doesn't wrestle with the Word and respond to prayers that we've offered, and listen and be molded and guided and changed and fed and led. Lord, we ask for unction in the preaching and in the lives we live, and that you would be the most, the height of our human experience as we find ourselves in relation with you. May we not be content with lies or with the deceit of the evil one. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.