



What are we doing at Evensong?

The Sermon

17 November 2019

Carol Harrison FBA

Daniel 6: 16–28 Matthew 13: 1–9, 18–23

Today I'm not going to practice what I preach. This sermon, as usual, is written out, word for word. What I will say is already fixed. Hopefully, I won't get lost, or lose my train of thought or stumble over my words; but, then again, you won't be on the edge of your seats, wondering what might happen next, caught up the moment, sharing the openness, the excitement and the potential for new and extraordinary things that an extempore address might create. Unless I try very hard I might well lose your attention, sound distant, formal – worse, I might bore your socks off! The choir, who have sat through more sermons than they would care to mention, know exactly what I mean. The sermon is probably the least anticipated and the most criticised bit of any service.

But what if? What if I threw my script away, had a few themes which I had reflected on and prayed about beforehand, looked you in the eye, seized the moment, and addressed you directly, just as if we were having a conversation – which is one of the original meanings of the word 'homily'. What if, instead of being passive listeners, you were able to behave as Christian congregations did in the early Church, and participate and respond? To signal your agreement; to register your disapproval; to groan, moan, sigh or shout for joy; to say Amen, Alleluia and Praise the Lord?

It is a big if, isn't it? It challenges our shared, complicit culture and sensitivities, which are based on long-established practice and presuppositions. I expect that if I tried to do what I have just excitingly described, I would quickly lose confidence and falter; that you would feel acutely embarrassed (or highly amused).

I had similar thoughts as I listened to Bishop Michael Curry's sermon at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle last year, which I'm sure you all remember. As I watched TV and listened to his sermon, I began to smile; the smile quickly grew into a broad grin, and then became chuckles of joy, and incredulity and rejoicing, that something so extraordinary was happening, live, before a global audience and no one could interrupt or stop him. It was a rare moment, made all the more striking because of the context in which it was taking place. A formal occasion, at which everyone had their place in a duly acknowledged hierarchy, stretching from the Queen to David Beckham, accompanied by all the pomp and ceremony and regalia we British are so good at, in an ancient chapel, such as this, hallowed by the language of the prayer book and the glories of the choral tradition.

I think it taught us a lot about the sermon, even ones that aren't extempore.

First of all, it was a moment of pure evangelism: millions listened to his powerful call to discover anew the transforming fire of love, which is given by God, and which unites us to each other and to Him.

Secondly, it was a moment of sincere rhetorical brilliance: Bishop Michael is a practiced preacher and he had prepared carefully. Above all, I think, he had evidently listened: he had listened attentively to the text of Scripture on which he was to preach and to the voice of God, the Holy Spirit, speaking through Scripture's many different voices; he had listened to God in prayer, as he meditated on the text before God, took it to heart, and received what he was to say; finally, he had listened, as it were, to his hearers, his audience, his fellow human beings in the congregation and beyond, and he knew how to express what was in his heart in order to convey it to *their* minds and hearts; to engage them, enthuse them, enable them to comprehend, embrace and act upon it. As classical rhetoricians put it: he knew how to attain the three goals of rhetoric: to teach, to move and to persuade.

It was also a moment of humility, one which was powerfully human and personal: he allowed himself to show emotion, to get carried away, to extemporise; to appeal to and identify with his listeners. We heard the voice of a person, not a primate of the Church, or a preacher hiding behind a script.

Above all, though, it was a moment of inspiration. For Bishop Michael's humility was one which came from self-abandon: he was not relying on himself – how could he? – but on God. He appeared to be genuinely unselfconscious; he had effaced himself, thrown himself upon God and God had caught him and inspired him and spoke through him. What we heard was the voice of the Spirit, able for once to blow where it willed. It certainly blew the cobwebs off those present in Windsor that day.

Despite first impressions, this style of preaching is actually far from being a wild, charismatic moment of anarchic abandon. Rather – most importantly – it is a spiritual discipline: as I have suggested, it depends on, and is the fruit of, prayer and meditation; and it depends on practice – not just the practice of speaking extempore (that can be learned) – but the practice of faith and love; of listening to God and to others; and it is truly charismatic, in that it is a gift, a charism, inspired by God. It is how God unites us with himself and with each other.

Responding to those who asked why we need Scripture, or human teaching and preaching, at all, when God could have presumably simply inspired someone's mind directly, without the need for written or spoken words, Augustine, one of the greatest preachers in the early Church, observes that 'there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other human beings'. He appeals to the common human experience of sharing something we know well with someone who is unfamiliar with it, so that we appreciate it through their eyes; we see it anew, and in the process are brought into a closer bond with them. This, for Augustine, is how communicating the faith works: 'For so great is the power of sympathy' he comments, 'that when people are affected by us as we speak, and we by them as they learn, we dwell in one another and thus both they, as it were, speak in us what they hear, while we, after a fashion, learn in them what we teach.'

Regardless of our culture, our customs, our traditions, habits and expectations, there is a place for such moments. They are the moments when we are truly inspired; when we speak and hear, give and receive in love; they are the moments when we write poetry, dance, compose music, fall in love, make love – and write/preach decent sermons, even if they are read from a script before a passive audience.

For if we listen to God in prayer, meditate on his voice in Scripture, take his words to heart, and humbly listen to each other; then our words, our actions, our relations cannot but be inspired by love – for it is the Gospel of God’s creating, redeeming love, which we are given to preach, and this cannot but inspire delight and love, both in the one who delivers it and in those who hear and receive it. And who knows, we might even find *ourselves* acting uncharacteristically; speaking freely, without fear and without self-consciousness, because love has liberated us. This is not something we acquire, but something we are given: it is the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, which unites us with each other and with Him.