

PREACH THE GOSPEL AT ALL TIMES AND, IF NECESSARY, USE WORDS

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Communicating the Gospel. That's what this lecture is about and that's what Willie Barclay excelled at. Books tumbled out of him. Audiences and lecture theatres were held by his words. He reads easily, but what comes over is not a relaxed, nonchalant facility with his material but a passion and fascination about his message and a driving need to tell you about it. You are drawn into his world and he carries you through it effortlessly.

I never knew Professor Barclay and I have only a vague memory of him as a flickering talking head shown as part of a documentary about something else. But reading his books, I hear the sharp original of sermons I've heard all my life. So **that's** where they came from! Anchoring the message in his hearers' experience, opening up layers of meaning in the biblical passage and sharing, always sharing his own delight in the Gospel. It's a simple and a demanding template.

But good communication is always a mix of message and of audience. And **we** have to communicate the Gospel in a world radically different from Barclay's. His teaching was carried along on the crest of the high water mark in the 1950s of church attendance and acceptance of Christian culture. He was expanding from a shared base of knowledge of the Bible, even though his mission was often to correct some of that knowledge. By the end of his time, that base was crumbling, but he was able to press on with an enthusiastic following of people who shared his assumptions.

Today's context is different. Knowledge of Bible stories is patchy. It's said that university lecturers cannot assume that their students know the parable of the Good Samaritan. The credibility of institutional religion is low. More people than we like to admit believe their lives have been damaged by the church. Stories of abuse in Christian institutions cast their shadow over our attempts to portray the Gospel message of love and care. Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, Israel Palestine are not only conflicts made intractable by the atavistic fears that religious faith can unleash, they are also known to be a pale imitation of the mayhem that religion has caused in the past. Cap it all with the destruction of the World Trade Centre and it's not surprising that a senior church leader claimed recently that, for many people in public life, the default position is that religion is bad for you.

So we tread carefully and thoughtfully in communicating the Gospel to today's world. We often need to establish credibility with our listeners. We cannot assume that they know what a life of faith – any faith – is like. We know that they are unlikely to know what we're talking about, or to have a distorted expectation of what it might be. Yet as we acknowledge God's love in our own lives, it is natural to want to share that love more widely and to carry it outside the cosy world of our Christian familiars. How we do that is the challenge.

At first glance, my title is a strange one to choose for a lecture in honour of someone remembered for his writing and his speaking. Indeed, the church is one of the principal incubators today of the art of public speaking. Done well, it is an art that can lift debate and shape ideas to everyone's benefit. I remember well the launch of a campaign on an aspect of poverty. The politician, who gave his presentation first, was impressive in his passion and his volume but the content of his talk was riddled with clichés and party slogans. The representative of the social development charity smothered her audience with figures. The churchman spoke simply, vividly, with imagery and illustration and touched minds and hearts. We are wordsmiths and that's a skill to be valued.

That's one of the connections between my work with the church and other parts of my life. I used to lecture in psychology and my subject was the question of how children learned their first language. Learning to speak, learning to communicate and making the link between these two processes were the themes that dominated my professional life. Teasing out the signalling value of speech, once it was embedded in other clues to meaning, was the adventure that young children were embarked on and the adventure that we shadowed as researchers.

So I've always been sensitive to the link between words and action, the message and its context, in my understanding of the Christian faith. The beauty of well-loved verses that you learn in Sunday School, the vivid power of the parables to explain and yet to intrigue, the continual movement from a concrete world of specific reference and mundane clarity to a world of ineffability that has its own truth and a borrowed logic – all of this is a feast for the linguist in me. Yet the power of the incarnational claim that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us puts all that in its place and embeds it in the warm, sweaty reality of human fears and longings, of love and betrayal, of lives discarded and lives transformed. Christ is risen and we meet him today in friends and strangers who are making their way in today's world. Our new Moderator Designate, Alan McDonald speaks about having a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other – understanding both is needed to communicate the Gospel.

This evening's title is attributed to St Francis and it stands in the long line of quotations and illustrations that call the church to task for wallowing in words and neglecting the importance of acting out the consequences of the very Gospel message that the words point to. Edwin Muir's succinct jibe that "the word made flesh here is made word again" is part of that tradition, as is the series of cartoons in Iona Abbey, lampooning the comfortable, sanitised Christianity that hides the cross behind a vase of flowers and is presided over by a preacher complacently producing words, words, words.

Preach the Gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words. It reminds us of the need to anchor our words in action. It recognises the mission possibility of action in itself. It also raises the question of how you move from action to exposition, particularly in a world where Christians have no monopoly on Christian action. Whether that is because our society is post-Christian or because Christian ethics taps into a seam of simple goodness can be debated at length. The point is that there is no one-way mapping from action to belief. At the same time, we cannot expect people to understand about the God we

believe in if that belief is not mirrored in our actions. And lurking behind it all is the question of how you talk about faith in a world of vague spirituality.

My year as Moderator was full of people who were preaching the Gospel in action. On Presbytery visits, I asked to see people in their day jobs and get an impression of the kind of community in which the church was set. On behalf of the church, and generally in the company of a minister who was familiar with the organisation, I was able to visit schools and hospitals, of course, but also local industries, or research facilities or community projects where people were being cared for, sometimes out of a Christian conviction, sometimes not. Their work was fundamental to the preaching of the Gospel because, as John Robinson said, people will never find a gracious God unless they meet a gracious neighbour. Gracious neighbourliness was there in plenty and it's with gracious neighbourliness that we start.

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

WOMEN OFFENDERS

I was in prison and you visited me. Not an easy exercise if your mother is in prison a long way from home. Not easy if you have to take the children with you and there's nothing to hold their attention or make the visit a pleasant occasion. That's why Cornton Vale, the principal women's prison in Scotland, set up the St Margaret Family Centre. Keeping the family together and keeping the bond between mother and child is a priority in the Cornton Vale approach to women prisoners. They have other initiatives in this vein. The Independent Living Unit makes it possible in very special circumstances for children to stay with their mothers as they complete their sentence. There is a scheme called "Storybook Mums" to enable mothers to record stories for their children and keep a link going while they are in prison. I was very touched that they asked me to open the Centre, a year ago, with its bright play area and other quiet rooms, just beside the chapel. There were some beautiful paintings associated with St Margaret on the walls that had been done by one of the women prisoners.

I'd visited Cornton Vale early in the year and had been impressed by the Governor, Sue Brooks, and her staff. For a long time, people have been saying, "Of course, women are different" and have taken the attitude that, because the methods used with men will be inappropriate, that is an excuse not to try harder to find ways of dealing with women that might work better. By contrast, the approach being used in Cornton Vale is that of making a special effort to specify exactly why women are different and, therefore, how their offending can be addressed in its own terms.

Women do commit serious crimes. Currently, there are sixteen serving life sentences and there is an indication that the incidence of violent crime is increasing. But overall, most are kept there because of drugs offences, other kinds of theft, shoplifting and crimes of dishonesty. And it has been estimated that some 400 women each year are imprisoned for a few days for not paying fines.

But what is striking is that women entering prison are a special group of very damaged people. Listen to the statistics and let them sink in: on admission, 90% have a problem with drug dependency, 80% have a history of mental health problems (twice the figure for men) and over 60% have a history of physical or sexual abuse. If prison is going to have any positive impact on them, it has to take account of these circumstances. But one of the more poignant features of women offenders is that many of them have lives that are in such a mess that they turn to prison as an opportunity to find some safety in their lives or to help them break their drug habit.

There is plenty of opportunity in that story to preach the Gospel in action. Visiting and offering support to the women is just the start. Asking questions about alternatives to custodial sentences, setting up safe places where women can address their drug habit, supporting the families of prisoners, trying to find ways to integrate them back into society, all of these are ways to care for those who live in the shadows of society, those to whom Jesus paid special attention.

In this, we would be going with the grain of informed public opinion. In April, the Scottish Executive held a debate in Parliament on women offenders, which went into the details of the profile of their offending, the need to come up with a more humane and effective sentencing policy, initiatives on mentoring and safe houses and generally the importance of making progress on this matter in a society that claims to be decent. There was agreement across the parties on the matters raised, which gives us a key platform from which to make a difference. Shortly after, I hosted a dinner in the Parliament, as Moderator, for various people with responsibilities in the area of women offenders, who were able to lay out an agenda for further action.

This kind of thing happens a lot. You start having a care for the immediate needs of people at the edge and before long, you find yourself involved in political action that scrutinises the way they are treated and how their circumstances can be bettered. It's natural and, in a democracy like our own, it could be seen as part of our responsibility as citizens to make this transition. Perhaps this is the moment for moving from action to words, spurred on by those who urge the church to speak out on matters of injustice.

SPEAKING OUT

And speak out it does, although not necessarily in the way people expect. The outraged brigade does still exist and the press love them. They can spin their column inches round a throw away burst of anger and unfocussed disapproval in such a way as to portray the church and the Christian message as out of touch and impotent, often leaving a trail of hurt and disappointment in their wake. We should remember the comment of Robert Runcie in his enthronement address as Archbishop of Canterbury:

The cry is 'The Church must give a firm lead'. Yes, it must – a firm lead against rigid thinking, a judging temper of mind, the disposition to oversimplify the difficult and complex problems. If the Church gives Jesus Christ's sort of lead, it will not be popular. It may even be despised for failing to grasp the power which

is offered to it in the confusions and fears of our contemporaries. But it will be a Church not only close to the mind of Jesus, it will find itself constantly pushing back the frontiers of the possible.

We are dealing with precious children of God, complex in their dignity, often bruised by life, looking for a way through the moral maze. Measured comment and tailored criticism is more likely to change things.

Nowadays, there is seldom a social cause that the church promotes on its own. It isn't the sole voice of the nation's conscience, if it ever was. In recent years, the church has spoken out on debt, (both international and domestic), global poverty, warfare, the arms trade, care for creation, asylum seekers, homelessness, and each of these are causes that have been well supported by church members. But they're also causes that have attracted and been driven by armies of activists who have no Christian motivation and would not thank you for assuming that they have. The church's voice may be there but it is generally one line in the harmony produced by many people who are just as offended as we are by the way people's lives are treated as if they were dispensable, who care intimately about the delicate balance and beauty of nature, who see through the shabby compromises that self interest proposes.

So how does the church's voice fit in to that conversation? It does have a distinctive contribution to make. At a simple level, the church is a large network of people and so it can still spread news of an issue more readily than many organisations. The day before opening the centre at Cornton Vale, I'd been attending a seminar about domestic violence, hosted by Inverclyde Council and attended by representatives of the various departments that had a concern about this matter – education, police, housing, young people, social work, women's aid. They were quite clear about how the church could help. They had a copy of the Church and Nation report on Domestic Violence and they wanted to see it read and discussed through the church, confident that this kind of exposure would help people to understand. Talking about the hidden parts of our common life and about how it can be transformed is itself action and is a natural extension of the care for the poor, the stranger and the one in prison that we are called on to show.

The church can also still lend credibility to an issue. I remember meeting a representative of Shelter, the homelessness charity, just after an Assembly when we had offered a report, using material from Shelter itself. I admitted that we had pinched their material but he said "When the church says these things, people listen. When we say it, they comment 'They would say that, wouldn't they'" Our independence is a precious bonus and it's valuable to our partners in addressing social issues.

But, most revealingly, the church can and does provide a theological underpinning to the causes it engages with. Perhaps the best known is Jubilee 2000. There was plenty of impotent rage in the world of economic development in the 1990s as the relentless attrition of the burden of international debt wore away at countries that had embarked on independence with such high hopes. I remember being at a meeting in London in the

early 90s where Martin Dent proposed that the debt should be cancelled in accordance with the Jubilee principle. We didn't take it seriously; it seemed to be so much fantasy. Yet that ancient mainstay against the capacity of injustice to run away with itself uncontrollably caught people's imagination. We have entered the 21st century with progress being made and the principle of debt cancellation being taken seriously on the world stage. And it's a development that needed that theological analysis to lift it from being special pleading to being a matter of justice. And, it is hoped that, as a result of that preaching of the Gospel through action, children will be educated and old people will be fed.

Another idea that is now commonplace but has Judeo-Christian origins is stewardship of creation. It's similar to the notion of sustainable development, yet it's more general. Sustainable development appeals to the idea that we should ensure that the earth can support generations to come, which is an important principle, though it has within it a certain self-centredness, extended principally to our own offspring. Seeing ourselves as stewards of creation, however, again lifts the discussion onto another plane, one of divine responsibility and dimensions of eternity. For many people touched by the wrenching beauty of the created world and pained by its neglect and destruction, this offers them a language in which to pin down the environmental challenge, which has more room for manoeuvre than worrying about emissions trading and petrol prices.

Preach the Gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words. Reaching towards the needy in society soon leads us into political action with other people of good will. Though we may do this in response to God's love for us and out of our Christian conviction, we will meet others whose motivation comes from other places. In collaboration with them, it may be that we can offer the cause the wisdom of centuries of Christian revelation and so help to articulate better the challenges of injustice and personal pain. It's an offering that arises from their needs, not from our wish to turn faithfulness in action into a more conventional preaching opportunity.

CHAPLAINCY

Preach the Gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words. The idea that you're selling out if you don't Christianise your caring and your loving action in words dies hard. One area of the church's work that fascinates me is that of chaplaincy. Some years ago, I presented some radio programmes that spoke to a prison chaplain, a chaplain in a large general hospital, a community mental health chaplain and the chaplain to those working in the offices of a city council. This led on to the opportunity to take part in conferences on healthcare chaplaincy, at the point at which new guidelines were being introduced by the Scottish Executive.

In many ways, chaplains are at the front line of the church's work. The people on their patch have not been filtered through church membership or other signs of interest or commitment to the Christian faith. The vast majority of the people they meet will not have an active religious affiliation. Some will know nothing about religion and care even less. Some will have separated from any religious upbringing they once had. Some may be violently antagonistic to any institutionalised religion because of the deep hurt they

have experienced at its hand. Some will be committed people of faith but not necessarily Christian. They will come across a wide range of ages, covering people who need the comfort zone of traditional Christian worship and language as well as younger people for whom Christian practice is alien and frightening.

Chaplains meet people in very specific places, which are designed for very particular purposes – working, healing, teaching, containing prisoners, preparing to fight a war, maintaining law and order. Each place has its own dramas, its own opportunities for joy, sorrow and stress. On the face of it, they meet only a specific part of a person, yet in all cases it is a significant part of them, and a part that their friends and family might not understand particularly well.

Often, it's a vulnerable part that the chaplain meets, particularly in healthcare, and the guidelines for healthcare chaplaincy are concerned with protecting that vulnerability from the excessive enthusiasms of the chaplain's religious commitment. The bedside is no place for proselytism but knowing how far to go in offering the consolations of a particular religion becomes a matter of delicate judgment on the chaplain's part and jittery anxiety on the part of the hospital authorities. Chaplains themselves, sensitive to the spiritual needs of people from their own religious tradition, are generally anxious to be in a position to extend that care appropriately to others. Increasingly, places that are used for worship are designed so that religious symbols, precious to one community, do not intrude offensively on the worship of others. Yet this basic courtesy is interpreted by people outside the situation as the marginalisation of the chaplain's contribution at difficult times in a person's life. It looks as if the church is being gagged.

This is an important issue but it's one where public debate can often generate more heat than light. Partly, that's because of the nervousness about religion that is around in public life. It also touches on that change in our culture that insists on accountability and has lost the capacity to trust people in positions of responsibility. For our purposes this evening, however, it is also a reflection of the way in which we, as a religious community, treat as inferior any form of mission that is not verbalised. Sitting quietly with someone who's going through a rough time, being available when other people have let them down, listening to them well – all of these are ways of preaching the Gospel, of reflecting Jesus' teaching in our lives, of being a channel for the love that God pours on people in need. Words may be needed later, but not always.

BANGLADESH

If people are anxious about these developments in healthcare chaplaincy out of a fear of the loss of position and falling numbers that we keep hearing about, perhaps it's instructive to look at how the church operates in a country where it really is in a minority.

I had the great privilege earlier this year of visiting Bangladesh. It's an achingly beautiful country, surprisingly fertile, with ancient landscapes. The church there is tiny. It has around 16,000 members in a country of 130million. It's a Muslim country and, although the state is secular, the church has to be careful as it goes about its work. You might expect such a church to turn in on itself and look to its own interests but that's not what

happens. The Church of Bangladesh has a highly impressive Social Development Programme and we had a chance to see some of it in action.

The Programme has been growing and being refined for about fifteen years and is quite extensive in its scope. At its core is the assumption that, to help poor communities to develop, you need to work through the women. So the start of the process is to help the women understand their own position better and see how it can be changed. First, you encourage the women to talk to their husbands about how the chores are divided between them, so that the men could see that, although the women did not have any work that generated income, they were making a contribution to the household.

The next stage was to interest the women in taking out small loans to pay for the materials for various projects like making quilts or baskets – activities that would bring in money and help the village to get on its feet. To do this, they set up credit unions, and to run them, (assisted by the church which became a small bank for the purpose) they had to learn to read and count so that they could keep the accounts.

We visited various villages to see projects in action. In one village, women were sitting on the ground, sewing large, brightly coloured quilts. Others were sorting the cotton for the fillings and others were beating the quilts to distribute the cotton evenly through the bag, prior to sewing. Round a corner, about thirty women had gathered for a consciousness-raising session. There has been lots of socially progressive legislation in Bangladesh, including the elimination of child marriage and dowries, and outlawing of summary divorce. Now, it's a matter of making sure that the women know their rights, and the church is committed to spreading this news.

That was a Muslim village and the church had first got the support of the Imam to carry out its work. Another village was described as a Dalit one and there the women were making baskets. I had a go at this, but I think it had to be redone after I'd gone! On to another village, where a nutrition class was being conducted and where women were being taught how to make soup and to grow vegetables.

Evidence that these programmes are making a difference came in an even more isolated Muslim village, where a hundred women had gathered to meet us. I asked if one of them would like to tell us what the programmes had meant to her. The hands went up without hesitation and one of them grabbed the microphone. She went into detail about the loans she'd had for basket making and poultry farming and how they'd now like to employ people to train them in sewing.

Before this, these women would have been unwilling to be in the company of men, far less leading conversations in this way in front of bishops. And that confidence matters, when you start considering issues like AIDS or trafficking, where women have to learn to stand up for themselves for their own safety. The church in that poor country had been prepared to reach out across differences of culture and religion to transform people's lives. We did ask which religion the women were. There was only a handful of Christians and no-one admitted to being Hindu. All the rest were Muslim. "All blood is red" said

one of them. The women may not have learned much about the Christian bible but they knew about gracious neighbours.

The commitment of the church people we met to the Social Development Programme was huge and it made me wonder again about why people become missionaries. Was the commitment to education and healthcare that led to all these schools and hospitals being built through India and Africa just an afterthought to a Christian conversion programme? Or did all our famous missionaries see this as an integral part of preaching the Gospel? One member of the team was a young British man, on the Church of Scotland payroll, but he chose to describe himself as an environmental scientist, rather than a missionary. He was using his training to help the villagers cope with the problem of arsenic poisoning. Twenty years ago, wells had been dug which had tapped into water contaminated with arsenic. The effects of the poisoning are now being seen and it can lead to cancer. Slowly, the wells are being decontaminated and this is also part of the church's Social Development Programme.

Preach the Gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words.

The Church of Bangladesh did, of course, use plenty of words at the Sunday service in Bollophur. Although the church is small, this is a part of the country where it thrives. We approached the church slowly, in procession, because we were preceded by young women dancing in front of us. It was a bright, sunny day and the church was packed. In fact, the partitions that made up the walls had been opened so that people could spill out and sit outside so that it was, indeed, a Church without Walls.

This was fortunate, because I was having to think fast when it came to the time for the sermon. The evening before, I'd checked with the Bishop. "You just want me to bring greetings tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yes. That'll be fine. Of course, the greetings could have a message in them," he said. "And there's no sermon. And the text for tomorrow is the Lamb of God".

This was at the end of a two week visit to India, so I was prepared to be surprised in this way. I had got used to the point in a programme of dances and speeches when the announcement was made that this was the point everyone had been waiting for – the point at which our distinguished guest would deliver her keynote speech. Everyone, that is, except the distinguished guest who had been told nothing about this in advance.

During the India visit, I developed a facility in "saying a few words" without notice and made it a point of honour to say something different each time. John Miller had commented to me that I would be surprised at how I'd keep pulling memories and ideas and stories out of my past during my year as Moderator. He was right and I was grateful for that during the India visit.

But learning to do off the cuff comments wasn't the real discovery this last year when it came to using words. Leading worship in prayer and offering an address, or a reflection,

or a sermon from the pulpit is something that I was worried about at the start of the year. Not being trained in preaching, I was anxious about people expecting me to take on the same preaching load as my predecessors. But they were patient and gave me the chance to offer a reflection during the service in my own way. Over the year, this became something I looked forward to; the privilege of sharing with others the tremendous range of experiences that the Moderator's year affords; and the opportunity to stretch my understanding of the Christian faith as I reflected on these experiences within the discipline of worship.

I'd been anxious that I didn't speak the language. I understood it well enough. I belong to a university congregation and in my time I've heard sermons from every conceivable kind of preacher. But understanding and speaking are not the same thing. Preaching the Gospel in action is one thing – using words is something else!

What I had to do was find a voice. Find a way of sharing the memories and the ideas that I'd been privileged to experience, but also to share the questions that that threw up about the church, about the possibilities of faith, about what a Christian life is like. I had to find ways to extend an invitation to the people with whom I was sharing worship to join in that adventure from their own starting point. Perhaps it wasn't preaching the Gospel but it was an immense privilege.

And it was an amazing adventure. I didn't do it on my own, of course. I couldn't have managed it without the gentle support and encouragement of Johnston McKay, who fed me ideas, asked me questions, gave me encouragement, showed me sermons he'd preached, floated pieces of poetry my way and always gave me the space to find what I wanted to say and to find the words I wanted to use. Another resource was the many books by Kathy Galloway that I've collected over the years. And a very precious discovery was Walter Brueggemann, whose books of prayers and sermons accompanied me and my chaplains throughout the year.

Speaking a language and finding a voice. Bridging that gap between preaching the Gospel and using words. Making that transition was an important move for me and it's one that more elders should make. I wish we could tap into the wisdom and specialist knowledge that is in the eldership in Scotland and encourage it into finding its distinctive voice, rather than relegating it to counting the collection and writing up the Session minutes.

FINALLY

It's been a great privilege to spend this evening thinking about that saying from St Francis and tracing it through various reflections on the experiences the church has put my way. Thank you for giving me the chance to do that.

And thank you also for unleashing lots of Willie Barclay stories in my direction. Telling people that I was to give this lecture has been the cue for tale after tale about the friend you knew and the legend I was aware of. And one of them adds another twist to the St Francis quotation.

After his daughter was tragically killed in a yachting accident, he honoured a preaching engagement the following Sunday. Nobody remembers what he said. But they remember his courage and his commitment, even in these circumstances, to preaching and to communicating the Gospel.