



## Chapter 1

# Between You and Me

The memory is still very fresh, and still fills me with the same feeling of heart-stopping anxiety. I was at the beginning of full-time ministry, faced, as was then common even for assistants, with the task of preaching at least once on Sundays and often at the mid week prayer and Bible study meeting as well. I had done quite a bit of speaking previously, and I had looked forward to the preaching side of ministry. Indeed, from the start I knew that this was the very heart of the work of the Christian minister. But I had no idea how to go about it. Sermons and talks were things that 'just came', and, indeed, so it had been in my case. Usually I had been invited to speak on a subject or, for whatever reason, a subject had proposed itself, and thoughts began, usually slowly, sometimes laboriously, to



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gather around the theme. But that seemed no longer the case, and the old experience of thoughts gathering and forming no longer seemed to work. Saturday evenings were anticipated with increasing foreboding. If confession is good for the soul, I recall one occasion when, by 5:30 p.m. on Sunday nothing had yet 'come', and the 6:30 deadline gave me something of the feeling of a Great War trench awaiting the whistle to go over the top.

Looking back, it took me a surprisingly long time to learn that sermons are not spontaneous or extended intuitions but things to be worked at, and it took even longer to discover how to go about it.

My discoveries along these lines are not, I think, earth-shaking, and, I expect, in no sense novel. I recall my aunts reading aloud the inset in the church magazine with its regular feature of Household Tips – Monday's Washing, Tuesday's Sewing ... and the scorn they heaped, monthly, on the contributor! 'Picture putting that in! That's an old remedy! I remember Grandmother doing that!' You may and probably will pour like scorn on me, but I mean well. I have a feeling that if there are any sitting on Saturday evening looking agonizingly at their Bibles, waiting for the golden words to spring from the page, then I have good news for them.

Don't sit and stare. There's work to be done, and here is one way to go about it.



## Chapter 2

# Work to be done: the Pursuit



Not everyone can be what people call a ‘good preacher’, but no one need be a ‘bad preacher’. That is one of the convictions which drive this little book! When I remarked on what a poor showing a local bishop made on a recent visit, my companion said, ‘Of course, our bishop is not a preacher.’ Maybe not, but he should be! It’s what he spends a great deal of his time doing, but, dear, good man, he had fallen into the mistake of thinking that being a ‘good preacher’ was a matter of ‘gift’ and either you have it or you don’t, and if you don’t there’s nothing you can do about it. Not so! No, indeed!

### **What makes a sermon ‘bad’?**

I am going to venture an opinion here. See if it matches your experience. The majority of (if not, to a degree, all) ‘bad’



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sermons are ‘bad’ because they are muddled. An elderly lady, much prized in our circle, possessed a remarkably loud whisper, and one Sunday evening during the sermon she whispered to her daughter, inadvertently addressing the whole church; ‘What’s he talking about? Is he never going to stop?’ Your heart goes out to her, doesn’t it? You’ve been there too, as, indeed I have. But the point is this: muddle is something that can be sorted out. Some people have a natural capacity for setting a subject out, and there is never any doubt what they have said, or why they have moved on to the next aspect of their subject. And in the end it is all a clear, rounded whole. Their minds work in distinct ‘points’ with precise subdivisions. For most of us that sort of thing is a matter of hard work and detailed preparation. That is exactly my point. ‘Good’ preaching, in the sense of being plain and unmistakable in the pulpit, is something that can be achieved. Once we have seen it as a target to aim at, it becomes a target we can hit, a step in the right direction to being an acceptable preacher.

### **Sermons and Essays**

And here’s something else to consider. Another sort of sermon which ‘loses’ its listeners is the written essay more or less read out in the pulpit. My first senior minister used to take a fully written manuscript into the pulpit, because, as he would say, without it he became ‘diffuse’. But his largish Bible also served him as a sort of interim filing system, an ‘in-tray’ of letters to be answered, book references to be looked up, helpful cuttings, jottings for future use – amounting to quite a large bulk of extraneous material. Another addition would not be noticed, nor indeed its absence missed! On two occasions he got into

the pulpit and, leaf as he would through his Bible, the vital pages were still at home, not there amongst the almost archaeological layers of interleaving! Diffuse or not, he turned out to be a much better preacher!

We will return to this matter later, but the point is this: unlike the muddled, or ‘ball-of-wool’, sermon, the essay-sermon is very well prepared indeed, and very orderly, but it is of the essence of an essay to pass imperceptibly from one point to the next. We were taught at school to end each paragraph of our essays in such a way that it prepared for the next paragraph. This made for a coherent flow of thought – on paper (where an essay belongs) – but as a spoken exercise it leaves the hearer behind, wondering, How did we get here? For preaching is a speaker-hearer relationship, and the preacher has to learn to give the hearer space to listen. A man said to his fast-talking minister: ‘Vicar, you must learn to go more slowly. I am a slow listener.’ Up to a point we all are slow listeners! In a sermon there have to be pauses, repetitions. Movement from one aspect of the topic to the next has to be ‘flagged up’. The essay type of preaching can, then, for the hearer, fall into the category of the muddled. But, again, this is a matter which will concern us in more detail later on.

### **How to think of a Sermon**

A sermon is like baking a cake. There is, first of all, the objective. It is a madeira cake, or a sponge cake or a fruit cake – or whatever. Then there is the gathering of all the ingredients – not any old ingredients but the ingredients essential to producing that particular cake. You need fruit for a fruit cake but it would be out of place for a plain madeira cake. You need jam for a sponge cake but not



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for a currant scone. And finally the ingredients have to be put together in the proper order – look at any cookery book and you will see this insistence on proper order: it is the section headed ‘Method’, how to put the ingredients together. Should we pursue the illustration further? The period in the oven is you in your study, sweating over the huge responsibility that is yours!

But, enough! A sermon is also like dressing a shop window. When we first lived in a remote village, the window of the village shop was just an extension of the stockroom. Everything the shop had on offer was there! In fact, there was so much in the window that no one ever bothered looking in it; there was so much to see that the passer-by saw nothing. Contrast window dressers who know their business! They put into the window what they are, at that moment, setting out to sell, and if they include other things besides (so that the window has an eye-catching variety) they position them in such a way as to lead the eye step by step to the central feature. Sermons are equally selective. Maybe we would not wish to put it this way, but a really important question is ‘What are we intending to sell?’ Bible in hand, we have a stockroom full of the most amazing collection of goods to offer – real bargains too! So what shall we put in the window this Sunday morning or evening, this Wednesday ‘mid-week sabbath’? Everything must lead the eye to that central truth. There must be no doubt what is on offer. The extraordinary Calvin Coolidge, the silent, or at the most, monosyllabic President of the United States, returning from church, was asked by his wife what the sermon was about. He replied, ‘Sin.’ ‘Well,’ urged Mrs Coolidge, ‘what did he say about it?’ ‘He was against it,’ said the President.



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Hmm. Well ... yes! But the sermon had made its point, hadn't it? The product for sale was unmistakable, and, to say the least, it had been taken home on appro.

**There is no more arduous task!**

I must beware of making personal experience into a universal truth. The fact is that I find sermon preparation such hard work that I actively 'back off' from starting! Sure, this is not true of everyone. There must be those to whom sermons come more easily. I hope so, but I have a feeling (though it may be no more than a reflection of personal experience) that if preachers are not finding sermon preparation hard work they are not giving their sermons a fair crack of the whip. Of course there are other sides of the picture: it is a privilege of privileges to be driven to such involvement in the Word of God, to be required to buckle down to the precious Scriptures. Yes indeed, but it is also demanding, frequently burdensome, rarely easy – and always, in the event, endlessly delightful! One part inspiration, nine parts perspiration.