

## **Anne Sardeson – What shall I do with all the sermons in my head?**

### **Presentation and further reflections.**

I have a question.

Where does preaching fit into the church today?

I need to be honest: I love preaching, and, I am told, I'm quite good at it. However, when I preach in a traditional way (i.e. 15-20 mins or one way talk) I find it uncomfortable.

Recently I have had a new experience (well, over the last 3 years), as I have found myself in the 'pew' nearly as much as in the 'pulpit'. The first thing I learnt was that I had to learn to listen.

The second thing I have learnt was that my heart would sink when I walked into church and saw it laid out for a service that would involve congregational participation – even though as a leader of worship I had often led such services.

The third thing I learnt is that my heart sinking was often as much to do with me as anything else, and so I have encouraged myself to be intrigued by this response, and reflect on it and have started to come to some conclusions that are as much to do with what we expect of church as they are with what goes on in me when I am in 'the pew'.

There is much we could talk about today when we consider preaching:

- We could discuss the theory that sermons are living things – and explore how their life affects the listener as well as the preacher.
- Within that we could talk about the three fold life of the sermon – the before, the during and the after (again, for both preacher and listener).
- We could discuss what happens when we include silence before, during or after a sermon – and whether it really does open things up, or if it is just another way of the preacher exerting power.

- We could, of course, discuss the whole power thing that goes on for the preacher, and the dynamic that that creates with those with whom we have a pastoral relationship.
- We could discuss how people in the pew engage with the sermon, and whether they are more like the visitors to the art gallery in the William Roberts picture (see below)

And indeed, these may enter the discussion, but I want to share my three-fold discomfort with preaching in a traditional sense, and share three stories of recent ways of subverting that tradition and ask you to help me in my consideration of what preaching might be needing to become.

1<sup>st</sup> my discomforts (or concerns about where the Spirit is given space)

#### **I have an ECCLESIASTICAL discomfort:**

- I believe that if the church is the community of the faithful, that whilst in such a community all have their gifts (as we are eloquently told we are hands and feet and noses and ears with our own gifts and roles), I fear that traditional preaching can create a hierarchy in community that is not altogether healthy and can lead to the disempowerment of some and encourage the abuse of power by others. I am not sure that preaching helps to grow a healthy community.

#### **Then and EDUCATIONAL discomfort:**

- because of the nature of church life so often many of us only get our teaching from the preaching that goes on. Put simply – preaching is not a good teaching model. It is one way of teaching that appeals to a very limited number of people and usually depends on one learning style. I also worry that it does not easily encourage inquiry and reflection.

#### **And finally an EVANGELISTIC discomfort:**

- if to be an evangelist is to preach the gospel, then to preach it in a way that does not encourage dialogue and discussion is to declare that the gospel is about certainty and answers – I am not convinced that this is true, and I fear that traditional preaching can all too easily perpetrate a myth, and undermine faith exploration.

2<sup>nd</sup> – three things I've done recently (remember I go to different churches, so you will see the over arching theme I am working on around the Synod!):

1. An all age service: The theme Mary and Martha. We talk about sibling rivalry! Then we prepare to listen to the story: half the congregation are asked to hear the story as Martha, the other half as Mary. After we have listened we share our thoughts on what the story sounded like to us, as Mary and Martha. I talk a little about how Martha gets a raw deal – apparently being told off for being hospitable, and we reflect a little on how we can be distracted from God by things that seem to be important but perhaps aren't really. Then we are invited to go and visit different stations: a play station, where we can make playdoh models of things that are part of everyday lives, and as we make them think about how the ordinary things of our lives help or hinder our closeness to God; a drawing station: where we draw pictures of our houses and reflect on where in our homes we feel close to God; then a prayer station, when we can write or draw on leaf and flower post-its our prayers for the day. Afterward I draw it together in song and prayer, with prayers of confession, thanksgiving, concern and hope. I note that most people go to at least one of the stations.
2. A service with no children present: again, Mary and Martha. I hand out sheets with 4 different images of Mary and Martha on and invite people to look at them in preparation for hearing the story. After we have heard the story I ask people what they see in the pictures and we share for a while. Then we sing, and I preach a fairly traditional sermon, picking up on some of the things we have shared earlier. There is then silence, and people are encouraged to take the pictures home and reflect further on the story.
3. Again, a service with no children present: The bible passage is the Good Samaritan. We hear the story read, and I talk about how the title we give to a story will tell us what it is about, and sometimes this is not helpful with bible stories. Perhaps the story of the Good Samaritan might be about something other than a good man doing nice things. We stop and sing a short chant, then I share a little more of what the story might be about. Then we share in groups (we are sitting café style) in response to what I have said and some questions I have suggested. After our

discussion we share back what we have heard from others round our table. I try not to draw conclusions.

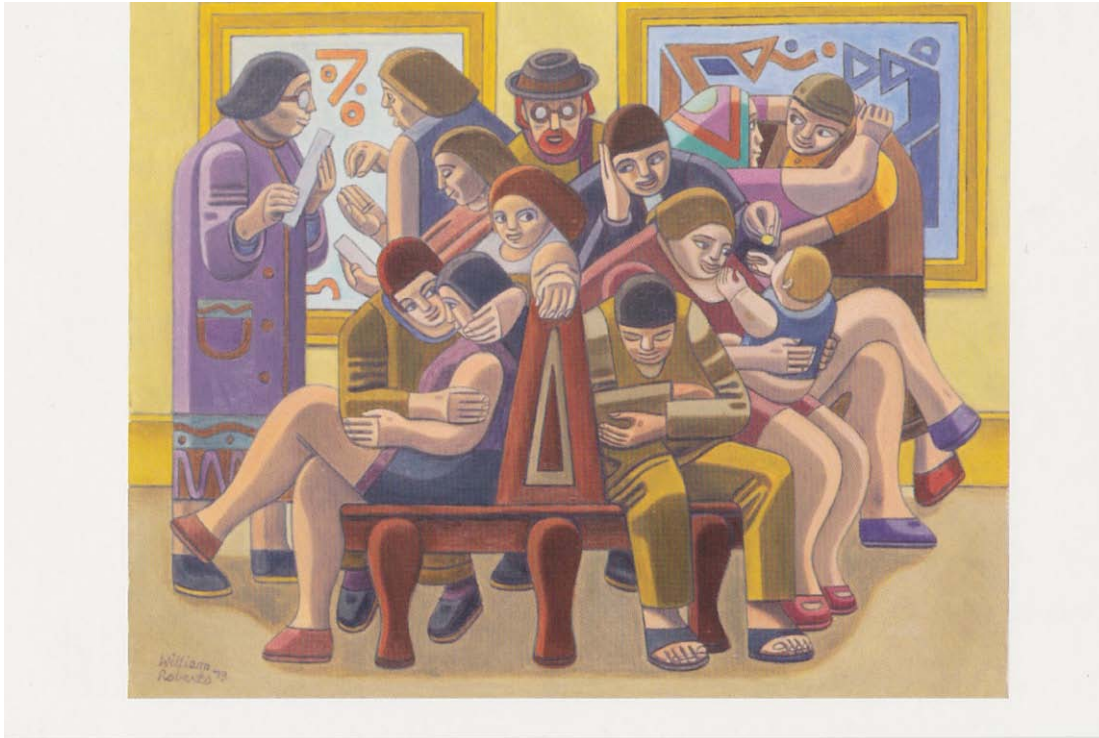
How do these ways of 'preaching' help or hinder my 3 discomforts?

### **Further reflections:**

Learning to listen: As I admit, this is something I needed to do when I moved from the pulpit to the pew, and I wonder how many in our churches need to learn to listen. It is true, as one of the comments observed, sermons are sacramental: something is happening when we preach, but creative ways of encouraging listening are essential for this to be.

Learning to reflect: Perhaps one of the discomforts I have is that too often sermons do are the churches 'spectator sport' – in that people observe them but do not often consider them as something to engage in. I will not stop preaching, but I do want to encourage people to think about how they will reflect on what they hear, and not consider the sermon as a spectator sport and thus as the last word. A sermon can be beautifully crafted, very lyrical, well delivered, but if we are not able to reflect it will do very little to encourage life long spiritual nurturing.

Being creative: I will not stop preaching, but I will not only preach in a traditional manner. I think that the need to involve more of ourselves in our worshipping life and spiritual nurturing is essential, as I believe this is a way of aiding listening and further reflection: Things to look at; things to take away; things to do while we talk and think. We do not all engage in the same way, we need to be creative in our preaching so that we do not only attract those who can engage in one way. We need to engage people so that they are enabled to do "ordinary theology". We need to be careful with rhetorical questions as they often confuse people who otherwise would have much to contribute. We need to help people to connect their stories with the stories in our scriptures. We need to encourage the use of imagination, people do not always use it naturally or easily, and this is particularly true in church. We need to be creative and beware that we do not leave too many in our congregations as the non observant visitors at the art gallery.



William Roberts: The Art Gallery (1973)