

A typical Methodist sermon lasts 20 minutes. What do Methodists believe about preaching?

A man once remarked to a friend that he had been attending the same church for thirty years and in all that time he frankly could not remember a single sermon that he had heard preached there. His friend replied “I have been married for thirty years and in all that time I cannot really remember in detail a single one of the many meals which my wife has cooked – but I have the distinct impression that without them I’d have starved to death long ago.”

That, I think, is how Methodists see preaching. It is being fed spiritually week by week with the words and thoughts of God as revealed in scripture. In a busy fast paced world where we are bombarded with so many dubious values and ideas, it is a precious opportunity to tune in to eternal realities and reshape our thinking in the light of what God has said.

In church I hate it when, in the course of a special service, a minister gets up and says “Now don’t worry! I’m not going to preach a sermon.” The implication is that this is a special favour and we are somehow being spared some sort of unpleasant ordeal. When this happens I immediately feel disappointed. I have come to church to worship God and for me the central part of that is to focus on what He may be saying to me through his Word. As the preacher unpacks a text or passage of scripture what new insight or emphasis might there be for me this Sunday? Might there be a fresh encouragement, challenge or rebuke? Might God be calling me in some new way?

Methodists have always given a special place to preaching. John Wesley and his supporters preached in the open air to people who had lost all contact with church. Early Methodist chapels were called “preaching houses”. People attended the parish church for the sacraments (baptism and communion) and went to the Methodist chapel for the preaching. Methodist worship was characterised by lively singing and even more lively preaching. John Wesley is estimated to have travelled over 250,000 miles and preached 45,000 sermons in his lifetime – imagine that! When most of his Anglican colleagues were still asleep he would preach his first sermon of the day at 5 a.m. to ordinary people on their way to work on farms or in mines. To such gatherings he preached in simple and very direct language. The sermons of his that we can read today were much more scholarly and written with a view to publication. We cannot imagine them making much impression on the labouring masses!

John Wesley recruited preachers from among his converts and sent them out into itinerant ministry under his direction. Most were lay people. At first they stayed only six or eight weeks before moving on. Wesley feared that by that time (after preaching every morning and evening) they would have exhausted their range of sermon material! This eventually was extended to a three year term of service. Some of his preachers were unable, because of family and other responsibilities, to travel and they remained in employment in their own neighbourhoods and were known as “local” rather than “itinerant” preachers.

In a letter to Alexander Mather, one of his longest serving travelling preachers he wrote *“Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing*

but God and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth."

Methodism, then, has always recognised that God calls both lay and ordained people to preach His word. Both groups today have to undergo study and training before being recognised as preachers. Ordained ministers can spend time each week as part of their work studying scripture and preparing for worship. Local preachers may not always have so much time to give to study but they speak with a reality born of seeking to be a Christian in a secular work place. It is worth saying that without the dedicated ministry of local preachers many of our smaller churches could not operate..

What then for the future of preaching? There are some who say that preaching has had its day – that in the modern world of rapid sound bites and powerpoint presentations the place of the twenty minute sermon has to be questioned. But no-one who has been present to witness the Holy Spirit take hold of a meeting as God's word is proclaimed would ever say this. The truth is that God still speaks powerfully to his people through the anointed preaching of men and women today. Nothing contains the weight and carries the punch of a Spirit filled preacher delivering a message from God's word. It's just not the same when preachers give us their own ideas and attach them to a verse or a passage. It may be an intelligent interesting address but it can never carry the authority of a message from God. John Stott wrote *"We should be praying that God will raise up a new generation of Christian communicators who are determined to relate God's unchanging Word to our ever changing world, who refuse to sacrifice truth to relevance or relevance to truth but who resolve instead in equal measure to be faithful to scripture and pertinent to today."*

Now there's a challenge to every Methodist preacher, lay or ordained! Perhaps what we need is a recovery of confidence in the power of biblical preaching. William Sangster, one of Methodism's greatest twentieth century leaders wrote *"Commissioned of God to teach the Word! A witness of the eternal gospel! Could any work be more high and holy? To this supreme task God sent his only begotten Son! Is it possible to imagine a work comparable in importance with that?"*

And by the way, if God has used any of this to strike a chord with you why not think about joining with others on Thursday nights at Edgehill to go through the "Faith and Worship" course for local preaching! You never know where it might lead!