

Danny is a new local preacher in training. Over the last few months he has been gaining experience preaching and taking services in his home church and on his circuit. He has found this very fulfilling and is keen to get more experience. In a recent conversation with other members of the class he remarked that deciding on a theme was, for him, the most time consuming and daunting part of a preaching appointment.

He asks..... How does a local preacher or visiting minister decide what to preach about?

I think every local preacher can relate to your question, Danny. Usually when you take a service you are given an entirely free hand. Unless it is Christmas, Easter or some other major time in the church calendar you can fairly well decide on any theme or passage of scripture as your focus. You can come in with a message that will inspire, encourage, comfort, inform or challenge. The choice is left to you – and you have sixty six books from which to choose. No pressure, then! What could be easier!

I imagine that you will start with prayer. You will ask the Lord to direct you to a particular theme or passage. You will be on the look- out for a central truth or idea that you feel God is laying on your heart. You will want to experience a sense of “rightness” about its suitability and an excitement about being able to share it with the congregation – because, of course, if you are not gripped by it then it’s unlikely that anyone else will be. Sometimes inspiration comes easily and early. The sermon comes together with clarity and force; the hymns suggest themselves and the service almost plans itself. Other times, unfortunately, it’s not that easy.

As you pray and reflect you realise that there are certain constraints on your choice. You always need to consider the make-up of your congregation. Where are these particular people on their journey of faith? What are their hopes, fears and needs? Are they starting out on the road of discipleship or are they nearer the end than the beginning? What do you believe God would have you speak into their lives? Ideally you need to know the people to whom you speak and that knowledge will help you in your choice of topic.

Some of the others in last week’s class were arguing for some sort of forward plan or scheme set by the minister in each church. There might be a series on a book or on a topic and each preacher, minister or lay, would be given the subject matter for that Sunday. This would solve your problem completely. You would know well in advance that your task was to tackle a particular passage or theme. It would also have the advantage that the people would have a sense of covering specific prescribed ground over a period of time. I must say that appeals to the teacher in me whereby you know in September what your class will be learning in the coming year. There might be a series of sermons on a New Testament book, maybe a series on Christian disciplines and perhaps another on practical and ethical issues. The people would have a sense of where they were going in any given church year.

For a number of ministers this is the purpose served by the Lectionary. This is a scheme of scripture readings for each Sunday of the year on a three year cycle. It gives an Old Testament passage, a Psalm, an Epistle and a Gospel reading. The preacher can turn to the set passages for the day, focus

in on one and develop their thoughts from that point. The Methodist Newsletter each month carries very useful and thoughtful notes to help in this regard. Such a scheme helps avoid the danger of a minister or local preacher only ever preaching on his or her own favourite parts of scripture and ignoring others. It is designed to take preachers into parts of the Bible they might otherwise find too difficult and challenging.

For ministers who get to preach almost every Sunday the Lectionary certainly has an appeal. Given the many demands on their time, they are not always able to spend ages deciding weeks in advance what to preach on. They read the set passages for the coming Sunday and trust that the Holy Spirit will lead them and give them a message that is fresh and relevant to the lives of their hearers. Many local preachers also happily take up the challenge of using the Lectionary but many others, like you, prefer freedom of choice.

It's not easy but you have to believe that God really does lead and guide you. There is nothing more wonderful for a preacher than the conviction that what they are about to share has been given to them by God for that day and for that people. How you arrive at that place is between you and Him. You pray, you listen, you think and you reflect. It is important also to be a reader – not just of the Bible but of other Christian books also. There are some great writers around these days, men like Tim Keller and Tom Wright, who can get really help you get to grips with biblical material. You read to feed your own soul but often as you do so you sense a prompting that this is something that God would have you share with others.

So there you are, Danny – no easy answer to your question, I'm afraid. At the end of the day it's about trying to be open to God's leading. We can agonise about our choice of sermon and spend ages over it and God can touch a heart that Sunday chiefly through one of the hymns. That keeps us humble and maybe makes us realise that it's not all about us! And when we look back we may even find that God spoke as much to us in the process of our preparation as He did through the words of the finished sermon.