

Tony is in the early stages of his practical training. He is spending time observing and assisting an experienced local preacher in his circuit. It has been quite a revelation. He is beginning to realise that there is a lot more to taking a service than simply composing a sermon. He confesses that the thing that daunts him the most is leading public prayer.

He asks.....Why is leading in public prayer so difficult?

Good question, Tony – and good observation. You are certainly not alone in finding that while it is natural and normal to pray privately, it is a very different matter leading prayers in church. On your own, you can focus your gaze on God, seek communion with him and freely pour out your thoughts and feelings. What a privilege that is! You can do it silently or you can put it into words. When it comes from the heart those words are often incredibly powerful and eloquent.

Prayer in church is not so easy. Picture the scene. You leave the vestry where you have just stopped to capture a sense of God's presence and head for the pulpit or lectern. You are immediately hit by nerves and a dose of self-consciousness. At the end of the first hymn the congregation settles expectantly for the opening prayer. Suddenly that sense of God's presence deserts you and you find yourself more aware of the human "audience" than of the One to whom the prayer is directed. All too soon you see why it is a good idea to prepare prayers in advance. You admire the preachers who pray "without a note" but you realise that a lot of experience is required to do this without descending into clichés and well-worn predictable phrases.

So how do you go about preparing prayers that are meaningful and fresh? You have various options. First of all you can use a book of printed prayers. (Methodism after all came out of Anglican liturgical worship). There are several good ones on the market and I venture to suggest that almost every minister and several local preachers in Irish Methodism have at least one in their library. These books need to be used sparingly and with great caution. The worst thing of all is to have a prayer read out in such a way that it is painfully obvious to the people that the prayer is "third party". The prayer may be well constructed and thought provoking but it will not hit the spot. No-one will make such a prayer their own. They will listen to you reading it but their thoughts will be all over the place.

Another option is to compose your own prayers in advance and read them out. That way you are preparing prayers that will be meaningful to the congregation in front of you. In your study as you write down what you want to pray in church you are seeking to be led by the Spirit and what you write comes out of a deep place of private worship. Then, when you offer the prayer in church you are seeking to recapture that sense of inspiration and contact with God.

If that is still too mechanical you might want to simply prepare headings for where your prayers are going. That way you can be spontaneous but you have a basic structure of ideas worked out in advance. From your training you already know that prayers have different elements which you employ as the service progresses. There are prayers of praise, adoration and thanksgiving; there is confession – not just of our own sins but the sins of humanity; there is often prayer before the preaching of the Word and there are prayers of intercession. All of this requires careful thought. You should regard such preparation as an act of worship in itself.

Sometimes, of course, you will want to be completely spontaneous. You may have a strong impression that the Lord is leading you in an unexpected way. You sense his anointing on you and you open your mouth in a prayer that could never have been prepared in a study or read from a book with the same effect. Those moments are special. They are however not a reason to avoid the work of preparation.

Can you reuse prayers that you have prepared? My answer is yes, of course – but only if you can find again the original feelings that gave rise to them. You see in all these methods the one thing that really makes a difference is your delivery. Your tone of voice is so very important. If people are to enter into these prayers they need to sense reality. They need to hear that you are in contact with the living God. They need to hear reverence, awe, warmth, sincerity and fervour. You cannot fake this. Without it any prayer will fall flat. With it you can draw people into a place where they feel they are touching God.

Always remember that our prayers are offered to God and not to people. In your classes you will be taught that in worship we pray to the Father in the name of the Son and with the help of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that you cannot ever address the Son or the Spirit directly but is generally important to stick to this formula. It is very irritating and theologically confusing when a preacher slips carelessly in their prayer between the Persons of the Trinity often falling unconsciously into heresies that past generations would have had kittens about! Good preparation will cut this out.

Finally, remember, as the Lord Jesus himself said, we will not be heard for our “many words”. Long ponderous prayers, especially before the children leave for Sunday School, are not helpful. DL Moody wrote “A man (sic) who prays much in private will make short prayers in public.” Ask anyone in the pews – short is good!