

Pam is never short of an opinion when group discussion takes place. She has very strong convictions when it comes to many of the moral questions facing society today and is known as someone who always speaks her mind. She knows that fools rush in where angels fear to tread but she would very much like to use her role as a local preacher to tackle some of the more difficult ethical issues facing Christians today.

She asks.... Why do we not hear more sermons on controversial topics?

Pam, I remember years ago seeing a poster in what was then the Methodist Youth Department in Aldersgate House. It read "*Confidence – the feeling you have before you really understand the situation*". I've always remembered those words. They remind me that often what seems to be a morally black and white case turns out to be much less simple when real life circumstances are factored in. And there lies the answer to your question. It's not that preachers are afraid of tackling controversial issues. It's not that they are shying away from issues that Christians and others find interesting. It's just that a twenty minute sermon on a Sunday morning cannot hope to do justice to issues that give rise to many conflicting and sincerely held viewpoints.

I can understand your desire to get to grips with what you see as important areas affecting the daily lives of ordinary people but you have to realise that you are not in the pulpit to give your own opinions – you are there to preach God's word. Sometimes that is fairly straightforward. We are to forgive others; we are to speak the truth; we should not steal or harm our neighbour. You would be on safe ground there. The difficulty comes when we try to tackle issues that are more complex and controversial and on which sincere Christians disagree. We will look in vain for definitive biblical guidance on abortion in the case of fatal foetal abnormality, on euthanasia for the terminally ill, on accepting lottery money for a good cause or on the therapeutic use of human embryos. Here the challenge is to seek to apply the principles of scripture to these issues and help people to think things through.

John Stott in his book "I Believe in Preaching" had some useful advice on tackling these sorts of sermons. Firstly he said that we should expound the biblical principles involved. Then we should summarise the alternative applications which faithful Christians make. After that we should indicate our own position but finally we should leave the congregation free to make up its own mind. I think that from this you can see at once the near impossibility of doing justice to any important issue in a twenty minute Sunday morning sermon. I think most preachers would think twice about attempting something of which even John Stott was wary.

You also need to think about those to whom you speak. You simply do not know what painful life experiences are represented in the congregation on any Sunday and what memories will be triggered by your words. Your sincere advocacy of a position, say, on abortion may well be twisting the knife and awakening the most painful of associations for

some who are living with difficult memories. That is not a reason for ignoring an important contemporary issue but it is a call for caution and great sensitivity. I hate to sound patronising but the older you get the more you will realise that all of us as human beings are emotionally fragile. A good preacher respects this and maybe recalls the old nursery rhyme...

*A wise old owl sat in an oak,
The more he heard, the less he spoke;
The less he spoke, the more he heard;
Why aren't we like that wise old bird?*

Having said all that however sometimes Christian people need to know that it's not a case of "anything goes" – that the Church really does have something to say in a society that is on a downward moral slide. There will be those occasions when, in the course of your preaching, you may have to say unpopular things and risk opposition. I remember standing in the New Room in Bristol, a preaching house built by John Wesley and hearing how on one occasion a riot broke out in the congregation when he courageously addressed the evils of the Slave Trade. Being prophetic has always required courage. Just be wise in how you pick your battles and make sure that you are basing what you say on scripture and not just going off on a rant of your own.

Many churches are finding that, rather than sustain a second traditional worship service, it is useful to give Sunday evenings over to an informal teaching and discussion forum which addresses issues and allows for discussion and feedback. Here the speaker is not preaching but rather encouraging people to engage with important issues and think for themselves. Handling such an evening is not easy. Preachers are not used to being challenged from the body of the congregation but healthy discussion at least means that people are listening and reacting and that they will probably go on thinking about the issue in the coming week. Honest disagreement is rarely a bad thing. Methodists are fond of the principle "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity". The big problem facing us today is deciding what is and is not essential when it comes, for example, to issues such as sexual behaviour. It is good to be charitable but it is wrong to condone sin.

Now you see what I mean about a twenty minute sermon!