

Tina is in her early months of training to become a local preacher. She knows that the congregation is behind her but she is disappointed by the level of reaction and response to her preaching. No-one has been negative but so far the most helpful comment she has received was that she “picked lovely hymns”. It’s not that she is looking for praise or flattery – it’s just that she would love to know whether what she preaches is really coming across.

She asks..... **How do you know if you’re getting through to people?**

I love the story of the visiting preacher shaking hands at the end of the service. A little child, standing nearby, kept calling out things like “Couldn’t hear him behind a tram ticket”, “ We’ll not have him back” and “ Not a proper gospel message”. To cope with the embarrassment a well - intentioned lady spoke up and said “Take no notice of the child, your reverence. He just repeats everything he hears”!

It is, of course, just a story but it does highlight the issue of what a preacher may or may not hear from people at the end of a service. You have probably already discovered that the close of a service finds you in a vulnerable position. You are tired. You have delivered your heart and given of your best in the last hour. You are then shaking hands at the door and are on the receiving end of anything that a member of the congregation may say to you. People’s responses will take different forms.

In the vast majority of cases (unless you are a budding Billy Graham) the response will be fairly banal. You will get a “Good morning”, a polite word of thanks, a remark about the weather, or, as in your case, a comment about your choice of hymns. That is fine. Sometimes people will say that they “really enjoyed” the service. That is, of course, nice to know but it could be either a superficial comment or an indication that they experienced blessing. You have no way of judging.

Very occasionally you may encounter hostility or argument. I once had to be rescued in the car park after a service by the society steward because a man was angered by something I had said in the sermon. I was glad to escape and have not been invited back to that church! In a funny sort of way I drew encouragement from the thought that I least they hadn’t found me dull! At the end of the day we are not in the pulpit to be people pleasers. I love nothing better than delivering a sermon that is full of encouragement and hope but sometimes the name of the game is challenge and direct speaking. We should not shy away from this.

And then there are those precious times when someone says something or looks into your eyes and you know that God has used something in that service to touch that person’s life. You would love to be able to spend time opening up a conversation but there is a queue of people waiting to shake your hand and frustratingly the moment passes. It’s worth all the hours of study and preparation for a reaction like that.

What I’m really saying, in answer to your question ,Tina, is that often, you don’t know what has got across in response to your preaching – and you will simply have to get used to this. As a preacher you have the great privilege of being allowed to speak God’s word into people’s lives. It’s not about you: it’s about God speaking into individual hearts. If you’ve been a channel to make this happen

then that's a wonderful thing but essentially it's a matter between a person and God. You have to be content with that.

It's good to develop the habit, as you drive home after a preaching appointment, of handing the whole service back into God's hands. Being realistic, the vast bulk of what you have said will be soon forgotten but your prayer is that God will take up and use something of what you shared for His purposes.

My take on the Parable of the Sower is that Jesus meant it as an encouragement to preachers like you and me. You will sow the seed of His word. A lot of that seed may fall on the wayside and appear to be wasted and forgotten. Some seed will produce just temporary response – response which will be dissipated by the distractions of life and by competing priorities and ultimately be unproductive. The good news the parable teaches us, however, is that, whatever the wastage, there will always be a fruitful harvest – “a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown”. Our job as preachers is to sow the seed and we can only leave the results to God.

One winter's night in 1850 a young man was on his way to church in Colchester. The snow was so bad that he turned instead into a Primitive Methodist chapel. The minister couldn't make it because of the weather and so, with no notice at all, a lay man from the congregation got up and attempted a sermon on the text “Look unto me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth.” He struggled on for ten minutes and finished by eyeballing the young visitor and saying “Young man, you look miserable and you always will be miserable unless you look to Jesus and be saved”. Talk about direct and to the point! No prizes there for good preaching technique! And yet that night Charles Haddon Spurgeon said it was as if the darkness in his soul vanished and he saw the sun. He went on to lead hundreds of thousands to faith in Christ.

I don't suppose the lay preacher ever knew. His job was to sow the seed. Ours is too.