

Geoff's debut in the pulpit did not exactly go to plan. He annoyed the organist when he left out a hymn by mistake; for much of the time his voice was drowned out by a crying baby and his carefully prepared sermon only lasted five minutes. He asked God to take away his nerves but he could feel his heart thumping and his face burning for most of the time. People were kind afterwards but he is not in any hurry to repeat the experience.

He asks.....

### **With a start like that, should I just forget the whole idea of becoming a preacher?**

Geoff, the short answer to your question is a resounding "No". Selwyn Hughes, author of "Every Day with Jesus" had a preaching career that lasted over fifty years and reached hundreds of thousands of people. He described his first experience in the pulpit in this way *"The theme I had chosen was the well-known story of the healing of the ten lepers. I plunged into my sermon with enthusiasm. I raised my voice, waved my arms and delivered my soul on the subject of how sad it was that so many of us receive the blessings of God but so few of us show any real gratitude. After what seemed like an age, I sat down in a bath of perspiration. I looked at my watch. I had taken exactly three minutes."*

Billy Graham did not fare much better when he preached for the first time. At the age of eighteen he brought four prepared sermons into the pulpit with him for his preaching debut and managed to deliver all four in just eight minutes! There now, that should make you feel as if you're in good company! If it can happen to men like that then it should not be a surprise that it happens to lesser mortals like ourselves.

It sounds like they threw you in at the deep end by getting you to take the whole service by yourself. That was unwise and certainly not fair on you. Nowadays we are moving to a place where an aspiring local preacher in training will learn alongside a more experienced colleague. At first you would simply observe. Then, when you felt ready, you might lead in prayer, do readings and perhaps speak to the children. Eventually you would be asked to preach while your tutor or mentor looked after everything else. Afterwards he or she would be there to give you helpful and honest feedback. This sort of learning, based on the passing on of practical experience, is usually of more value than the theory you find in books. Your minister is meant to find you such a helper.

The truth is that everyone has to begin somewhere. Preaching is a gift but it is also a skill. As such it can and must be worked at. When I was given my Local Preacher Certificate it contained the verse from 2 Timothy 2:15 *"Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman who does not need to be ashamed rightly handling the word of truth"*. Every local preacher worth their salt takes that verse very seriously. We have two responsibilities. Firstly we must give ourselves to the serious study of scripture because it is that, and not some ideas or notions of our own, which we are called to preach and secondly we have to begin the task of learning how to get that message across clearly and effectively to those who hear us.

For most people the worst aspect of beginning to preach is self-consciousness. We worry about "how we are doing" and what other people are thinking of us. That is natural but it has to be overcome. We are not in the pulpit to perform or to entertain – we are there to deliver a message from God's word. In that service you took recently you might not have spoken as well as you would

have liked and you may by now have thought of a number of ways you could have done it better but the reality is that the Holy Spirit could have taken one line of that sermon and used it to speak into someone's life. That person will not remember the shape and structure of your message but that line will go round and round in their head and heart bringing comfort or challenge or insight of some kind. In Isaiah 55:11 God says that his word *"will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it"*. That is what makes preaching so exciting and so fulfilling. At the end of the day it is what God says rather than what we say that matters.

This is the real antidote to nerves. As soon as you realise that the power behind a message does not depend on your ability and oratory but on the power of God's word being taken up by God's Spirit and applied to people's lives, then you are freed from worrying about your performance. Yes of course you want to speak well and give your very best but you also know where the real power lies. Your prayer before a service is always that God's voice would be heard – that amid all your words each person might hear His special word for them that day.

They say that the best advice to someone who has fallen off a horse is to get back into the saddle as soon as possible. I think that applies in the field of preaching also. It really does get easier with practice and familiarity. Yes, your first experience was difficult but you will have learned a great deal from it – not least about your utter dependence on God to help and empower you. My guess is that, years from now, you'll look back on that first attempt with fondness and even gratitude and rejoice in how far God has taken you and how He has used you.