

Esther 7.1-6, 9-10; 9.20-22    The triumph of Mordecai  
 Psalm 124    The Lord is on our side  
 James 5.12-20    Commands for the faithful  
 Mark 9.38-50    Stumbling blocks

*Open our minds, O Lord, to hear  
 and to understand your Word, and  
 open our hearts to do your will.  
 We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.*

Today is my 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. I had planned



to share a big Black Forest cake at morning tea.

### **Hold 20 secs, then slide off**

That's off, of course, but I'm being given a present later with one of my favourite hymns. A great hymn can be a powerful sermon, and I have been looking back on my life lately, and thinking about past sermons and preaching styles.

My first few years of sermon-giving, in the 1950s and 60s, were as a young Methodist lay preacher. Methodists then had no lectionary, and we were sent to a different church each Sunday, so we could choose our own topic and preach the same sermon over and over. Because I was young, I was often the guest preacher at Sunday School anniversaries. One Sunday I gave the same sermon six times – from 8am to 7.15 pm. Next day, I needed a day off work to recover.

Some scholars claim the age of the sermon is over. But we know from experience that a good sermon can deepen our commitment to God. So, what is a good sermon? Many people judge sermons simply by their length. If the preacher goes on for 15 minutes they begin to look at their watches, after 20 minutes they conspicuously shake their watches, after 30 minutes they might wave them in the air. But, in some churches, people feel cheated if the preacher stops after 45 minutes, and a good hour is good.

Today's *Connections* has a link to a Youtube clip by



Meaning and Message

the late John Stott, who tells us that the job of every preacher is to relate the ancient text to the modern world – to convey both the meaning and the message, the message for today. That's the point of the cartoon in *Connections*.

### Slide off

The Scriptures are so rich that the preacher can convey the meaning and a relevant message in several ways, which we can illustrate from today's readings – the triumph of Mordecai, James' commands for the faithful, and Jesus' teaching about stumbling blocks to faith.

### Strap under speaker's image

#### 1 Evangelical

1. Many of the sermons recorded in the New Testament are **Evangelical**, they call for conversions, personal commitments to God, for an awakening or a re-awakening of faith. The apostles were the first missionaries.

The large congregations of the 50s and 60s included many people who were there for social reasons. So most sermons were evangelical. But even then, the great Sydney preacher Alan Walker was telling Methodists *we need to get out of the church to preach the Gospel*. He wrote the Christmas and Easter editorials in the Sydney Morning Herald for more than 25 years. He led a two-year Mission to the Nation, with almost all the meetings in public halls, or outdoors. On the final Day of Witness in Sydney 20 preaching stands were set up all around the city, with the approval of the City Council. My stand was outside Customs House.

Today's congregations are generally older, smaller and more committed than those of the 50s and 60s. So sermon styles are more varied. But, sadly, most churches do no more than open their doors at set times and say *All welcome!* They just wait for the people to come to them.

An Evangelical sermon could come from any of today's passages: from the Old Testament -- *Triumph in the mercy of God!* Epistle -- *The power of prayer*. Gospel -- *stumbling blocks in your life*. We could end any type of sermon with an evangelical appeal, as some preachers do, believing that at least some of their hearers have not fully committed their lives to God.

### replace strap with

#### 2 Expository

2. In Sydney's Anglican churches, we most commonly hear **Expository** sermons. The preacher explores a passage of Scripture in its historical and Biblical contexts, explains difficult words

and ideas, and applies the key message to the congregation's spiritual needs, as he sees them. Without the application, an expository sermon becomes irrelevant

We might explore any of today's passages in that way – for example, the collection of Jesus' sayings in today's Gospel compels us to think about our demons or society's demons, and about stumbling blocks to faith, and about what is meant by being salted with fire.

In an age when few church-goers read the Bible for themselves, expository sermons open up the chosen passages, exploring their meaning at the time they were written and their application in today's very different cultural context.

The danger is that expository sermons can become little more than mini Bible studies, and if we follow a lectionary, we are in danger of hearing many sermons on a few selected passages over the years, without seeing their place in the overarching Biblical story of the fall of humankind and its redemption. It's good that we go beyond the lectionary from time to time.

**replace strap with**

### 3 Textual

3. Or the preacher may simply take a verse from one of the day's Bible passages and make that the sermon **text**. Or he could choose one of his favourite texts, like John 3.16 *God so loved the world . . .* or Philippians 4.7 *the peace of God which passes all understanding . . .* or a petition from the Lord's prayer.

This was the favourite sermon style when I was young, but it's still popular, as I find during Covid by going online to watch services from various churches.

Today we might take a few words from Esther, perhaps *let my life be given me . . .* what is true life?; or a verse from James' letter, perhaps *the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective . . .*; or a verse from today's Gospel, perhaps *whoever is not against us is for us . . .* a plea for religious inclusivism.

Again the preacher needs to be careful not to stretch the text beyond its meaning, in context, or simply use it as a peg on which to hang their own ideas and prejudices.

**Replace strap with**

### 4 Thematic

4. a fourth style is to take a **theme**, one suggested by one of the passages, or one of the great themes of Scripture, like faith or hope or love, or the grace of God . . .

So, in today's passage from the Book of Esther, we might find the theme of the outsider, or of just retribution, *as you sow, so shall you reap*. James's letter suggests the theme of enduring suffering, or the power of prayer; and the Gospel reading offers a number of themes -- stumbling blocks to faith in our own lives, avoiding putting stumbling blocks in the way of other people, or the rewards of doing good to others.

This is a thematic sermon, it's a sermon about sermons. Some themes may be too broad or too controversial to deal with in 15 minutes or even an hour or more – significant themes like the authority of the Bible, the meaning of the Atonement or human sexuality and the church . . . so we are rarely challenged to think about them. That's why we need parish Bible studies and quiet days.

replace strap with

## 5 Topical

5. Some preachers deliver **topical** sermons, inspired by current events, like the Covid epidemic, or the Olympic Games, or a natural disaster, or the death of some notable person, or even a movie or a TV show. This was Billy Graham's style – proclaiming that, however serious our social problems or personal issues, the answer is found in Jesus.

Topical sermons attract immediate attention, just as an illustration does, or a joke, but they run the risk of taking over from the message – people remember the illustration or the joke but forget the application, like recalling an ad on TV, but forgetting what the ad was for, to use an illustration!

Jesus' preaching was often topical; inspired by the needs of the people who crowded around him; by his opponents' questions, or by current events, like news of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with the blood of their sacrifices; by the majesty of the temple; by the routines of peasant life, and more.

As far as we know Jesus never told a joke, but some of his stories and his illustrations can make us smile, like the image of a man trying to take a speck of dust out of someone else's eye when he can hardly see because of the great log in his own eye, or someone straining a tiny gnat out of his food and then swallowing a whole camel.

Now to two other types of sermon, which are less common, but can be very powerful –

replace strap with

## 6 Devotional

6. **Devotional** sermons are more like meditations than addresses – the preacher may reflect on a core element of faith, like God's love, or God's grace; or on the meaning of Jesus'

resurrection, or the barriers to belief. Our Good Friday liturgy is like a devotional sermon on the tangibles of the sacrifice -- the cross, the nails, the robe, the crown of thorns . . .

Devotional sermons may include multiple voices and include periods of prayer, silent or spoken. Or music. They may consist only of Bible readings, or meditations from one or more of the great Christian mystics, like Anselm of Canterbury, or Julian of Norwich or Thomas Merton. They are more about sharing faith, sharing faith experiences, than about teaching or exhortation.

Any of today's passages could inspire a devotional sermon – enemies of faith, from Esther; *what is truth?* from James; life's stumbling blocks, from the Gospel.

**replace strap with**

## 7 Allegorical

7. Then, there are **allegorical** sermons – sermons which are like parables, extended analogies.

The whole book of Esther could be an extended allegory, like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Esther is one of the two books in the Bible which do not mention God, yet the storyteller is clear that our God is the sovereign God of history, despite any appearance to the contrary.

Christians can see much of the Old Testament as an allegory, pointing to Christ in veiled images. Moses, Jonah, and Melchizedek are Christ-like figures. The flood prefigures baptism, Jacob's ladder symbolises the coming reunion between heaven and earth through Christ, and so on.

An allegorical sermon dwells on this symbolism, and other types of sermons may include elements of allegory, just as Jesus did in some of his parables. But his disciples often did not get the point.

**Strap off**

Whatever the style, a true sermon is more than a lecture, more than information, it is a call to action, to greater commitment to the will of God. However well it is composed and delivered, it will fail unless the congregation practices active listening – following the argument, praying for the preacher, reflecting on the Scripture, and applying its lessons to their own lives.

Many churches put all their sermons on their website, so that the congregation can read the text or listen to the sermon again. Sadly, we only keep some of them. During Covid, we are recording every service, but only the most recent stay online. That's sad, too, because the Covid lockdown gives us the opportunity to spend more time revisiting past sermons and reading the Bible for ourselves. One of our parishioners says she is now reading the Bible for an hour or more every day, and finding new riches. For her, the curse of Covid has become a blessing.

Some kind people will encourage the preacher by saying afterwards, *I enjoyed that sermon* or *Thank you, that was interesting*. But an effective sermon must be more than enjoyable, more than just interesting. It should increase knowledge, change perceptions, challenge behaviours . . . as the hearers listen, and understand and respond. As James urges us, elsewhere in his letter, we need to *be doers of the word and not hearers only*.

### **New strap**



*A good sermon is when a man of God, controlled by the Spirit of God, preaches the Word of God, for the glory of God, to transform listeners into the likeness of God – Bruce Alvord.*

A great modern missionary, Bruce Alvord, writes that *a good sermon is when a man of God, controlled by the Spirit of God, preaches the Word of God, for the glory of God, to transform listeners into the likeness of God*. That's a challenge for us all.

### **Strap off**

*Lord, help us to hear your voice through the voice of the preacher, sharing your truth and your life.*

SLIDES




These two pix in RH corner of speaker's image?

Meaning and Message

- 1 Evangelical
- 2 Expository
- 3 Textual
- 4 Thematic
- 5 Topical
- 6 Devotional
- 7 Allegorical

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This image below the speaker's image ?



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## For Connections



TODAY'S ADDRESS : a sermon about sermons

Seven styles of sermon.

- |               |               |
|---------------|---------------|
| 1 Evangelical | 5 Topical     |
| 2 Expository  | 6 Devotional  |
| 3 Textual     | 7 Allegorical |
| 4 Thematic    |               |

The Revd John Stott <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q9DtIP8dGw>

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