

Afflicting The Comfortable

Luke 4:16-30

5th Sunday in Epiphany

5th February 2012

One of the highlights of the wonderful retirement lunch that was held for me last Sunday was a sung tribute, written by Douglas, our own Director of Music, and set to the tune of a well known hymn. I'll read you a couple of verses:

Rev. Turner's on the way
to retirement, so they say;
Forty years is quite a while,
to be preaching with a smile.
Twenty-five of those were here
at St Paul's, our church so dear

Presbyterian preachers go
on forever, don't you know?
Never ceasing from his prayer,
Scripture reading, past'ral care;
George will now preach to the cat,
Poor old Bruiser, 'magine that.¹

Douglas, I promise that I will try preaching to the cat but I rather suspect it might be a lost cause. Not just because he doesn't know his catechism, but I think, just like this congregation, he's beyond redemption! Just joking! Just joking! About the cat, of course!

Now, although I have never given a sermon to a cat, I have preached to other animals before. Believe it or not, I once had a congregation of animals. In fact, it was the very first sermon I ever preached. I was 19 years of age and was asked to take the service at a church near where we lived in Scotland. No problem, I thought. So I composed what, in the innocence of youth, I deemed to be a quite marvellous sermon. The local church which had unsuspectingly invited me to lead their worship was going to be wowed. Big time! Salvation was going to come to them like it had never come before!

At that time, I happened to be working at a hotel in Scotland, the Belleisle Hotel in Ayr, a hotel that happened to have a menagerie or small zoo. As I was preparing the sermon, it suddenly struck me that I could perhaps rehearse the sermon in front of a live audience – a herd of deer that every evening gathered together in a comparatively remote spot on the

grounds. So I climbed up on the fence in front of the poor animals and proceeded to impart to them the true of Word of the Lord – only to look up from my notes several minutes later and find they had all wandered off! Obviously to find pastures new or, maybe, pastors new!

The actual service, the following Sunday, was not without incident either. Not only did I announce the wrong opening hymn and forget the words of the Lord's Prayer but no-one had thought to tell me that the top of the pulpit was not actually attached to its base. So, at one point, reaching out to steady myself, the whole book-board went flying down into the choir beneath, taking my notes with it. All to the amusement of the congregation who trooped out afterwards, trying hard not to smile at my discomfort, dutifully saying, "Nice sermon ... Lovely message ... Very inspiring."

Now, most young ministers try not to be too adventurous in their first sermon. Don't rock the boat ... Don't upset anyone ... Don't make any sweeping statements. But that was not Jesus' approach. In his first sermon, he immediately broke all the rules for beginning preachers. No shrinking violet he. No time spent in building a relationship of trust with his hearers. No attempt to get on the same wavelength. Straightaway, he went on the attack, antagonising and upsetting the people in the synagogue. Says one writer, first he threw the book at the congregation, "then hit them right between the eyes with Isaiah, followed by a jab from First Kings, right to the jaw, then a left hook."²

The congregation was stunned. Initially, they were impressed and marvelled at the young man's eloquent performance. But, shortly, doubt set in. "Isn't this the son of Joseph? He's really no better than the rest of us."³ Then, when they truly realised what Jesus has just said, doubt turned to anger. The gall of this young upstart! The arrogance of this young whippersnapper! We'll teach him a lesson. So they dragged him up to the top of a nearby cliff, intending to get rid of him, but, in the confusion, he managed to make good his escape.

Some first sermon, don't you think? Makes us preachers today look like lily-livered wimps!

What was it, though, that really got people's backs up as they listened to Jesus' first sermon? Was it the way he applied the passage of scripture he read from Isaiah to himself. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has chosen me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to set free the oppressed. This passage of scripture has come true today as you heard it read."⁴ In other words, was it because he implied he was the Messiah that got people upset?

Or, was it the fact that Jesus spoke a dangerous little word that got people so angry? Was it the fact that, after reading the scripture passage, he had the temerity to use the word "Today". Today is the day you have to bring good news to the poor. Today is the day you have to proclaim liberty to the captives. Today is the day you have to give sight to the blind. Today is the day you have to free the oppressed. Yes, today's the day. Today's the day you have to do something about all this. No more procrastination. You need to act and you need to act now.

Yes, maybe the word "today" with its demand for immediate action is what got people so upset with Jesus all these years ago and made them try to throw him off the top of a nearby hill.

Now, during all the long years of my ministry, nobody has ever tried to throw me off a hill because of a sermon I've preached. Not yet anyway. And I'm hoping that, if I can keep my nose clean and stay out of trouble for another week, I should be OK.

However, I have delivered some sermons in the different churches I've served that have got people hot under the collar. I remember preaching what I thought was a rather innocuous sermon on the subject of peace one Remembrance Sunday and thought it was going well until a retired colonel in the congregation threatened me with his silver topped cane, saying the sermon was an affront to the armed forces. There was also a sermon on the subject of capital punishment that drew the ire of a few who called me up later in the day to accuse me of being a bleeding heart. Not to speak of the sermon I preached on the subject of money one day, resulting in a major donor deciding never again to give another cent to the General Fund of the church.

Then, there was the Sunday here at St. Paul's, during a time when different groups and people could just not get on with one another, all going off

at tangents and wanting to do their own thing, and I entitled the sermon, "Join The Team". Well, that really got some people going! And, of course, I can't count the number of sermons over the years that some have complained bitterly had politically NDP leanings or politically Liberal leanings. I am disappointed that no-one has ever accused me of preaching a sermon with pro-Conservative leanings, but there's still time!

Now, do I have any regrets about preaching sermons that have, from time to time, upset people? Yes, I do have regrets, I must confess. But these are regrets for not having preached a greater number of sermons that would have challenged people more vigorously. Not that I ever want to upset people unnecessarily or for no good reason. But I think we have to realise more clearly that one of the most important principles of a good sermon is that it gets under our skin, that it troubles us, that it makes us rethink what we believe and reconsider how we act. Too many sermons these days, my own included, are ho-hum, allowing people to go on their merry way after church saying to themselves, "That was an excellent sermon this morning. I hope Mrs. What's-her-name was listening. Thank goodness it doesn't apply to me."

In his book *Holy Sweat*, Tim Hansel tells of the most controversial sermons he ever heard. A guest preacher at his church, climbed into the pulpit and began, "There are three points to my sermon today." Most people yawned at this point. "Been there. Heard that."

The minister began, "My first point is this. There are approximately two billion people starving to death in the world today." "So what's new?" the people thought, "Tell us something we don't know."

But then the preacher continued, "And now my second point .." Everybody sat up. Only 10 or 15 seconds had passed, and he was already on his second point? Amazing. We'll be out of here in record time this morning. "My second point is that, though there are all these people dying, most of you don't really give a damn!" He paused as gasps and rumblings flowed across the congregation in response to his swear-word.

Then he said, "And my third point is that the real tragedy among Christians today is that so many of you are now more concerned that I said 'damn' than you are that I said two billion people are starving to death."⁵

Then he sat down. The whole sermon had taken less than a minute. And a lot of people were upset. But, said Hansel, though it was a most the most upsetting sermon, it was the most powerful one he had ever heard in a long time.

Now, I want you to bear all this in mind when the time comes for you to call a new minister to St. Paul's. Don't be scared to call a minister who will upset you every so often. Who will make you think. Who will make you reconsider. For a good minister is one that will tell you, not the things you want to hear, but who will tell you the things you need to hear. Would a good doctor tell you that you had heart-burn when she knew you really had heart disease? The same with a minister. It needs to be someone who will speak the truth and, of course, speak the truth in love.

There are many things to keep in mind when you come to considering who will be the 12th minister of St. Paul's. Don't choose someone because you want another George Turner. On the other hand, don't say it has to be someone who is the diametrical opposite. Don't make up your mind it has to be a man. Our Presbyterian Church has many wonderful women ministers. Don't say that it has to be a younger minister just because you have had an older minister previously. Don't say, "What we need is a strong leader." There are some churches in town that thought that and got more than they bargained for! Don't choose the minister that ticks all the boxes and scores high on the points scale of a job evaluation system. But, pray for guidance and go with your gut instinct. Go with what you believe to be God's will. Go with that person you feel God is calling to this congregation.

Above all, go with that minister whom you believe reflects Christ among you. That minister who will, of course, caringly and compassionately comfort the afflicted. But who will also do the reverse, who will have the courage to afflict the comfortable. And respect him or her for that. Love him or her for that. Because when you are being challenged, when you are being moved out of your comfort zone, then there is the greatest potential for positive change. Change that will strengthen this congregation. And change that will empower it in greater and greater ways to serve Christ's kingdom in the days that lie ahead.

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¹ Douglas Schalin, "A Tribute on the Retirement of Rev. George Turner from St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Peterborough" [Tune: Dix; Words DS January 2012

² William Willimon, "Jesus The Preacher", *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Year C, p. 18

³ Luke 4:22

⁴ Luke 4: 18 ff.

⁵ Tim Hansel, *Holy Sweat*, Word Publishing, 1989 cf. Also James T. Garrett, *A Short Sermon*, www.ChristianGlobe.com