

**Preaching Women**

*Gender, Power and the Pulpit*

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## **Chapter Two**

### **Finding My Voice**

#### **Learning to Preach**

I think I have felt called to preach for as long as I can remember. Initially, however, I recognized this more as an unfulfillable desire than a call. The theology espoused by my church, and the Christian groups I was part of, was clear that women did not preach. My theology taught me that my yearning was wrong. Being part of a university Christian Union reinforced this view, backing it up with some ostensibly bible-based teaching. Later I spent many a Sunday morning listening to sermons that seemed irrelevant, or demeaning – how many jokes told by preachers are at the expense of women, I wonder.

Living with frustration seemed to be part of female discipleship.

Eventually I became a youth leader. In the group was a young person who was far less tolerant of the idea of a God who both gifts and denies women. Despite the fact that the Church of England did not yet ordain women, she was convinced of her call and determined to pursue it. When she shared this with me, I had a dilemma. It became a greater dilemma when another member of the church told me I needed to correct her – ‘women don’t teach men’. The source of the prohibition was allegedly the Bible, so I decided to turn to it. The most difficult text, from my perspective, seemed to be 1 Timothy 2: 11-15:

‘ Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a

transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.’

It is an apparently difficult passage from a woman’s perspective, unless, as some suggest, the emphasis is on ‘let women learn’ rather than on silence and submission. Silence, anyway, is better interpreted quietness (Keener, 1993).

In the end the passage sent me to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. The story seems to suggest that woman was made to be man’s assistant (Genesis 2:18). Interpretation hangs on the word translated helper – *ezer*. It is used fifteen times in the Hebrew Scriptures, and fourteen times it refers to God, as in Psalm 30:10 ‘O Lord, be my helper’, and Psalm 54:4 ‘surely God is my helper’. The *ezer* was meant to be ‘suitable’. The word translated suitable is *knegedu*, a word not found anywhere else in the Bible. It comes from the root *neged*, which means ‘standing boldly opposite’. In other words God did not make the woman to be man’s maid, but his partner, standing eye to eye with him.

Women seemed to be well hidden in the Bible. Only 1.2% of biblical text is spoken by a woman, and only 49 named women speak, yet they are often surprisingly bold, striding onto the page with ‘heads held high and hearts full of passion’ (Freeman, 2014).

I read Elaine Storkey’s ‘What’s right with feminism?’ (1989) and later Michelle Guinness’ ‘Woman the Full Story’ (2003). There was enough evidence in my studies to change my mind.

Some time later, I became a Reader in the Church of England, and was subsequently ordained.

I loved preaching. Members of the congregation were more than affirming. One of them, a talented dramatist, gave me perhaps one of the most significant gifts anyone can ever give a new preacher. He offered to listen to all my sermons for a period of three years, and to

give me proper, critical feedback. I quickly accepted. His notes on a twenty-minute sermon would run to four and five pages on everything from theological content to pitch, pace and pause. I was learning to become a preacher, and feeling fulfilled.

Yet, despite the generous support, my enthusiasm, and the esteem in which my church held the sermon, I still preached in a way similar to the one with which I was familiar; like the preachers I had heard and occasionally admired. In other words, like a man. I would present a rational argument in a structured way with an introduction, three points beginning with the same letter, and a conclusion. I have since discovered that this is not naturally my way of speaking, although it is neither necessarily masculine, nor wrong.

My underlying assumptions and attitudes were rooted in the patriarchal culture of the day. I would often start with a joke. Sadly, almost all jokes are at someone else's expense, and many of those contained in joke books for preachers are profoundly sexist. I made assumptions about biblical women that were common at the time and in the context – they were almost all weak or sinful. This had the effect, unrealized at the time, of distancing me, as well as other women, from the women in the Bible. It seemed there were few of them, if any, I would want to emulate. And so, even as a woman, the heroes of the faith I presented to my hearers were almost uniquely male. Even when the Virgin Mary got a look in during Advent, the version I presented was Mrs Alexander's meek and mild mother<sup>1</sup> rather than the revolutionary herald of Luke's Gospel.

## **Becoming Aware**

After ordination I preached regularly and was an enthusiastic recruit to the teaching of homiletics when the opportunity arose.

I remained unaware of the underlying patriarchal bias in my own preaching until I was asked, in 2014, to write an article for *The Preacher*, the journal of The College of Preachers, on the subject of women's preaching. Walking through Berkley Square in London after a meeting, the Editor asked me whether I thought women had a different preaching 'voice' from men. After brief thought I indicated that I did. 'Could you write 1800 words on that?' he asked.

That was it. A few moments thought and 1800 words changed my preaching life!

I contacted some women preachers I knew, and some I didn't know but had read. I asked as many students training for ordained ministry in the Church of England as I could (I spent a residential weekend with 60 of them). I read as many books as I could in the short space of time I had available. The research and reading I did for the article disquieted my practice and challenged my perspectives. The most disturbing response I received to the question '*Do Women Preach with a Different Voice?*' was 'I haven't been taught to preach as myself. I've been taught to preach like a man.' It's a comment that has stayed with me, and inspired much of the work I have since done. It is a comment that has inspired this book.

This is the article<sup>2</sup>:

**Do women preach with a different 'voice'?**

'Jesus calls us to be fishers of men,' declaimed the preacher to a somewhat bemused baptism congregation. Being fishers was not an image that sprang immediately to mind, other than perhaps angling by the side of the local lake. But more importantly, what might 'fishing for men' mean to the rather attractive, well dressed woman who was now addressing them? The very fact that the phrase was

lifted from one of the Gospels and repeated by a woman without too much thought caused confusion in the minds of the hearers.

Whether or not women preach with a different voice from men, the fact that the preacher is a woman can mean that the message is heard differently. Dissonance between message and messenger result in hidden meanings being transmitted, as well as what is actually spoken.

The key question for preachers, however, is, 'Is it delivered differently?'

Christianity, from the beginning, has been an incarnated faith. Some will say that it was incarnated in Jesus, God in the form of a man, and that it should therefore continue to be incarnated in men. This is not the place to enter that debate. Suffice it to say that I write from the perspective of a faith incarnated in all, men and women, who seek to follow Christ. Indeed, I would argue that unless the faith is incarnated in women too, it is only presented in part to those around.

There are two interlinked questions about women's preaching: do women preach with a different 'voice' from men? And should we?

Ask a group of sixty or so students training for ordained and licensed ministries, who therefore spend a great deal of time listening to, preparing and evaluating preaching, and the response is a resounding 'yes', though few could articulate the reason for their answer.

A quick literature review yields little fruit, with the vast majority from America, where the history of women preaching is very different. While books about women's ministry through the ages, women in mission and feminist

interpretations of difficult texts abound, there is little that encourages women to develop a style that is true to their sex. Susan Durber published *Preaching Like A Woman* in 2007, some time ago now, in which she argues for a deliberately feminist approach to preaching and presents several of her own sermons. Since then innovative work has been thin on the ground, and some of the writing done on women in ministry has avoided speaking of preaching.

Whether or not women's preaching is in some way distinctive is often addressed with certain trepidation. Feminists seem to suggest that women should consciously preach differently, in order to reclaim space defined and held by men. Conservatives (of both catholic and evangelical persuasion) tend to avoid an answer in the affirmative in case it might challenge the authority of church or Scripture. Perceived differences are therefore more likely to be attributed to personality type than to gender.

Both approaches carry significant risk. If a sermon is about relating Word to world for the present congregation, to what extent might a conscious intent to claim back occupied territory compromise the preacher, the sermon or even the Scripture? And what should be the authority balance between Scripture and feminist critique? On the other hand, denying difference between sexes by attributing all difference to personality smacks of a secular individualism anathema to the community of the church, whilst also ignoring all we know about collective memory and shared experience.

### ***Conscious and Unconscious Difference***

Women do seem to preach with a different voice from men, whether intentionally or otherwise. They communicate differently. Even Elizabeth Aries (Men and Women in Interaction, 1996), who questioned the widely accepted research on this came to the conclusion that while not all women communicated differently from all men, the sexes did exhibit different tendencies); they come to faith differently (Nicola Slee, Women's Faith Development, 2004); their life experience is different. Each of these characteristics will influence the way women preach.

Women's unconscious voice might include a tendency toward narrative rather than apologetic preaching (on average women use 20,000 words a day, while men use only 7,000); greater focus on stories and illustrations from everyday life; vulnerability — but only if women are encouraged to preach authentically, rather than to emulate the preaching of male colleagues or lecturers.

Of course, unconscious communication is not always positive, and the preacher who feels that they are on 'foreign' territory or have no right to be where they are will, at least in part, communicate as much to their hearers. Equally, the woman who from childhood has learnt to win approval by 'girlish' behaviour might unconsciously fall into that when preaching.

It is when women preach consciously as women that they have the most to offer. Durber suggests that women use preaching to reclaim ground (the pulpit) that has traditionally belonged to men. From a feminist perspective such a view has much to recommend it. I believe that there are more important reasons for

women to preach as women. Firstly, women's joint experience is of life in a patriarchal society; as members of the less powerful group. While men are able to preach about marginalisation from an academic perspective, in Britain it is very difficult for a male preacher to preach with authenticity about the experience of being marginalised. For most women preachers, powerlessness will have been lived at one level or another. When the preacher identifies this honestly, the Gospel is more likely to sound real to those in the pew.

### **A Wider Perspective on Scripture**

Secondly, women reading Scripture self-consciously as women should find much material there that is hidden from men readers. Google sermons on David and Bathsheba, for example, and you will likely find many that portray David as weak, in the wrong place at the wrong time, and even Bathsheba as a temptress. Few pick up on the key words 'she was cleansing herself after her period' (2 Samuel 11.4 NRSV). Bathsheba was obeying the religious law when the king called for her because he wanted to have sex with her. Even the story of the death of the child who follows this act is usually told from the man's perspective. Women preachers should be in a position to fully explore stories such as this and gain from them comfort for those who are abused and oppressed. In other ways, the exploration of what is really happening in biblical texts, particularly to those on the edges of the story should encourage women to see their own value to God. The church has too long promoted a Gospel in which men are the heroes and women the ill, weak

or sinful. Preaching that regularly explores events from a liminal perspective should encourage Christians to develop a more enquiring mindset when approaching Scripture.

The problem, of course, is that colleges and courses training people for ministry do not train women as preachers distinct from men. Perhaps the larger problem is that courses on preaching are predominantly taught by men, and the masculine approach is deemed to be the 'norm'. There is a danger of depending on the structure of sermons as communication and slotting preachers into them, instead of recognising and developing the strengths and communication styles of the sexes and exploring ways of using them to full effect in preaching. Again, I do not envisage a dualistic divide, but a spectrum or tendencies and experiences.

### ***Preaching that Speaks to Women (and Men)***

My third point is probably the most contentious. Sermons based on a patriarchal view of spirituality and discipleship tend to focus on masculine weaknesses, while feminine failures are seldom mentioned. Typically, we might hear pride and selfishness denounced and care for others promoted – and many women in the congregation will not feel challenged, because they can point to the number of others they care for.

Margaret Guenther (*Holy Listening*, 1992) says, 'The time I have spent listening to women's stories has convinced me that there are distinctly feminine patterns of sinfulness, and that pride is not women's besetting sin ... even as they

talk of pride they are feeling worthless and powerless'. Saving suggests that 'temptations of woman as woman are not the same as the temptations of man as man'. At any rate, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the widely accepted definition of sin as prideful does not match the experience spiritual directors and theologians have of women.

A sermon addressing these issues might deal quite differently with Romans 12:3 than one approaching the text from a purely androcentric perspective. 'Thinking of oneself with sober judgement,' might mean recognising strengths as well as identifying weaknesses.

Slee (2004) found that the 'majority [of women] offered explicitly relational models of faith ... understanding faith as being in relation with God and/ or the Other'. They are more likely to think of sin as broken relationship rather than specific wrongdoing. In a recent TED<sup>3</sup> talk Rita Pierson spoke of the importance of authentic relationship in order to support development. She was speaking of children, but the same is likely to be true of adults, that we only really learn from those we feel we know and can trust. If preachers hide behind their words rather than reveal something of themselves, hearers are unlikely to detect the authenticity they seek. Paul was able to say 'be imitators of me' because the Christians at Corinth had got to know him. Preaching that appeals to women, and is true to female tendencies, is perhaps more relational than academic (although sound study should stand behind it) taking hearers on a journey through the passage, rather than presenting propositions about it, and including aspects of the preacher's own faith.

Unless preachers, particularly women preachers, get to grips with preaching about the experiences of women, the faith will not be truly embodied for the whole community. While women, I believe, should preach as women they should avoid speaking only to women. The aim should be to image God better by preaching, and hearing, human, gendered sermons rather than androgynous sermons aimed at homogenous congregations. This will benefit both women and men, by allowing them to enter into each others' experience and understanding of God, maybe by opening Scripture differently, and by offering a bigger picture of the One we seek to follow.

Do women preach with a different voice from men? I think so. Should they do so? Yes, for the sake of a holistically incarnated gospel. The next question might be 'should churches and training institutions do anything about it?'

### **Knowing my Place**

The response led to our inaugural conference, Women's Voices, in the Diocese of Chester. It is testament to the desire for such an event that while the first event relied on sponsorship from four organisations, it has since taken on a life and identify of its own.

Re-reading my 2014 article a few years later, I notice my own absence. I present and expound three arguments that support my thesis that women do preach with a different voice. I recruit evidence from published works to support it. I draw a conclusion that scarcely challenges:

Do women preach with a different voice from men? I think so.

Should they do so? Yes, for the sake of a holistically incarnated gospel.

The next question might be ‘should churches and training institutions do anything about it?’

It is as though I am hiding behind the voices of others. Partly, I suspect, I was taught to write in that way from grammar school onwards. But I also detect a fear of stating clearly what I believe, and of acknowledging my own experience. Although I tried to be anonymous in the article, many of the responses to it felt very personal, and although I had not set out to write vulnerably, I felt exposed by dismissive comments such as ‘just the sort of unequal thinking rife in the world of feminism’. I had tried, gently, to adjust what I saw as an imbalance, and was summarily dismissed.

In his book *Inclusivity: a Gospel Mandate* (2015) Diarmuid O’Murchu borrowed the title of an essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (1994) ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ In it the subaltern is not overtly oppressed but is without representative voice. O’Murchu suggests that an oppressive invisibility – subaltern status - can attach to ethnicity, gender, disability and any way of being different from the dominant culture, even though there may be no obvious oppression. In other words, he, and Spivak, are speaking of those to whom nobody listens, or whom nobody sees. Returning briefly to the previous chapter, these are the people who are omitted when preachers submit to the tyranny of relevance.

Subaltern is the name Spivak gave to those who, while not overtly oppressed, have no voice. Yet, she asserted, ‘the oppressed ... *if given the chance* ... can speak.’ (italics mine). How might this happen? Spivak was working in the world of academia. She charged female academics to take seriously their opportunity to critique existing power structures as a means of giving voice for the silenced. In other words, members of subaltern groups who do have a voice should use it to somehow represent those members of the same group who do not. The

same can, and should, be said of other silenced groups (ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, members of disenfranchised communities). This book is about women, and women's preaching, but I believe some of the principles we explore apply equally well to members of other silenced groups.

O'Murchu's thesis is that subaltern status exists in both public and religious spheres. He considers it from the perspective of Christian thinking. The idea of being a Chosen People is oppressive in itself, he says, since being Chosen also bestows privilege and power, and necessitates the existence of the 'not-Chosen'. Christianity's obsession with 'Chosen-ness', he claims, can be traced back to 'Constantine's addiction to patriarchal power.' Chosen-ness is inherent in power structures, no matter who does the choosing. In patriarchal structures it is men who are chosen and women who are not.

Central to my desire to preach as myself, as a woman, is the belief that traditional Christianity has, down the centuries, silenced the voices of women. As members of a subaltern group who have nevertheless been given a voice, I believe the challenge to speak out is apposite. I believe that women preachers should preach as women. It is part of the pursuit of an incarnated, or embodied, Christian faith shared through preaching and teaching. Embodiment simply means denying the Greek philosophy that body is bad and spirit is good, and accepting that we experience life through our whole bodies. What we experience can challenge what we have learnt from church tradition. It is particularly important for women preachers, because the fact of being a female body means being seen and heard differently.

After the re-publication of my article, and the receipt of feedback essentially telling me to be quiet, I identified myself as subaltern, a member of a group that does not contribute to the hegemonic narrative but rather is silenced by it. Realising my place in this group was

important. In preaching, it finally rid me of any tendency to preach *to* the congregation, and prompted me to think in terms of preaching *from* it. , as one of a group often silenced.

In writing ‘Do Women Preach with a Different ‘Voice’?’ and planning the Women’s Voices conference, I had fallen into the ‘rescuer trap’. I had seen the problem, I was going to do something about it, and I was going to help other women. Realising my own subaltern status radically changed this attitude. I had seen the problem. I was going to do something. But from within.

### **Keys to My Development**

My article proposed three ways in which women’s preaching is different from the male norm:

- our experience of life is different, and, being seen as women, we are heard differently;
- if we read the Bible as women, we will see different things in it from male readers;
- women’s faith and women’s sin is distinctive, and preaching as a woman will allow us to speak more directly to women.

In the summary I said women should preach as women ‘for the sake of a holistically incarnated gospel.’

Change does not happen overnight, and the implications of my new perspectives and are taking time to work out. My homiletics education propounded a generic preaching theory, largely based on ‘preacher knows best’. I am working out from this to a new paradigm, based on my own Experience and emerging Position.

A key question all preachers, but particularly women preachers, need to answer concerns the interaction between experience and theological conviction. As a young person my experience of feeling called to preach was subjugated to my theology that God didn’t want women to preach. Now I value experience as a valid means of interrogating theology. I

also regard it as essential to effective preaching. As a preacher I am no longer a proclaimer of dispassionate truth, but a witness of what I have seen God do. I do not need to look only to the authority of tradition or the Church, each of which is inherently sexist; nor do I need to prioritize what biblical studies tutors call ‘commentary work’. Preaching is becoming, to a certain extent, testimony.

Speaking *from* experience has long been valued by preachers such as Tom Long: ‘Before a preacher *says* something a preacher must *see* something. To be a preacher is to be called to be a *witness*, one who sees before speaking, one whose right to speak has been created by what has been seen.’ (1988, 4). Writing of *Preaching Like a Woman* (2007), Susan Durber encourages women preachers to ‘value the truths we forge from our own experience and declare such “situated knowledge” a starting point for interpreting the world.’ Likewise, preaching *for* experience has been valued by writers such as Leonard Sweet: ‘The core issue of preaching is not “getting something said”; it is not even “getting something heard”; it is getting something experienced that can transform your life for God and the gospel.’

But is there such a thing as ‘women’s experience’? and how might it be identified?

I do not want to say, I do not believe, that women are inherently one thing or another, or that we are essentially likely to do this or that, but I am prepared to situate women’s lives in a common sphere dominated by patriarchal narrative in which we are likely to encounter similar problems. Recent initiatives such as the #metoo campaign, Laura Bates’ everyday sexism project and the community art work *Eva’s Call*<sup>4</sup>, a response to the ‘Nevertheless she Persisted’ movement, are testament to that. Similarly, women preachers step into a space, the pulpit, that has been occupied and defined by men for centuries.

My experience is that being a woman affects the way my preaching is heard, and affects the way I read the Bible in preparing to preach. My position is that experience matters

theologically and personally. I, as everyone else, experience life through holistically through body and mind, though I am often judged only on my body. In experiencing the world as it is I have something in common with other women. My responses to that experience are personal, other women respond differently. In preaching from my own experience as a woman I have not only 'common' experience but also my self to share. It is the combination of the two that avoids assumptions that everyone feels as I do, and that all feel the same (essentialism and generalisation).

The three key points from my article (life experience, Bible reading and distinctive spiritual experiences) transitioned into the themes I now work with: embodiment, self and voice.

### *Embodiment*

Embodiment has been in sharp focus through much of my thinking. Lacking the language of feminist practical theology at the time, I wrote in 2014 'from the perspective of a faith incarnated in all, men and women, who seek to follow Christ'. It is a double-edged concept. If a woman consciously ignores or rejects the idea that she is embodied as a woman, she lives, and preaches, a disembodied faith that struggles to be incarnational. Here the Gospel suffers, because it becomes separated from lived faith. When a woman preacher fails to acknowledge or address the fact that her hearers see her in a woman's body, and that means being heard differently, it is the sermon that suffers. Communication is impaired because trying to speak as not a woman, even while obviously being one, poses a barrier to meaning-making. Responding negatively to a woman produces reluctance to listen in some hearers. Women preachers above all have to reject a physical/spiritual dualism in favour of an integrated image of self, because women are seen and heard as women, whether we like it or

not. This should impel us along a journey of faith that embodies the emotional, intellectual and spiritual; all experiences of faith, God, sin are valid and worthy of theological reflection.

I did, however, have to address a common conflict for women preachers. How do we intentionally preach as women, while living, learning and working in patriarchal structures? Somehow this must involve challenging the very norms that have produced us – the Church that called us to preach; the Academy that trains us to preach. Challenging male norms can be costly both personally and professionally. We can never see ourselves as others see us, and have no impression of it without talking to them about it. Someone who is balding (male or female) at the back may not find out unless they are told – we can't see the backs of our own heads. Talking about patriarchal culture is a bit like asking what it is like to breathe air. We can't answer the question because we have no alternative with which to compare it.

Finding my own preaching voice meant becoming self-aware. Reflection, as I have said, is essential to the process, the kind of reflection that involves working with others to strive for understanding, not the kind that involves some kind of navel-gazing that yearns after self-realisation. Encouragement for anyone, let alone women, to become self-aware is absent both from academic homiletics and practical preaching. When women's preaching is discussed, debate focusses around whether or not we should, rather than what we might bring to the proclamation of the word of God. Realising our own embodiment, the fact that we experience and understand life through our bodies as well as mind and emotion, brings into relief both how I comprehend life and faith, and how I am seen as preacher and teacher.

Thinking about embodiment led me to explore Bible passages from the perspective of lived experience, drawing parallels with the lived experience of the text. At the same time, it enabled me to think about how I might be seen by the congregation. This was challenging in some respects, for, in the sermon I shared in the introduction. The sermon highlighted my impression that I might have been ignored because of my identity as a grandparent, risking

my hearers ignoring me for the same reason, perhaps! In this snippet, it is the fact that I am a grandmother that led to some new (to me) thoughts about the Magi's visit to Jesus:

**Snippet 1**

Leaving alone the stories that have grown up around this scene, and the carol that seems to place these wise people at the manger, the fact that Herod orders boys under the age of two to be killed, seems to suggest Jesus was a toddler by this point. These folk from the East arrive not at the cot side of a new-born, but in the home of a toddler. Thinking about this as we spent time with our 18-month-old grandson over Christmas, I wondered whether the early church that was accused of turning the world upside down was simply emulating the example of the toddler Christ. I wonder what happened on this visit. Perhaps Jesus the toddler climbed on the box of frankincense to get something down off the shelf.

*Self*

I decided to value and work with my experience as offering a particular, distinctive vantage point when it came to preaching. This meant consciously exploring how my experience affected my Bible reading and my preparation to preach. The next sermon snippet is an example of experience questioning tradition. I had been given two readings on which to base my sermon. Psalm 91 and Matthew 14: 22-36. The church leader provided a 'sermon brief' advising me of what they would like me to say. As it turned out, the leader was about to leave, and wanted me to encourage the small, elderly and struggling congregation to step up

to the mark and keep the church going. Bearing in mind both my own experience of one of the readings and the situation of my hearers, this is some of what I said:

**Snippet 2:**

I have to admit that I am a bit allergic to the Psalm we had read. When our daughter was lying very ill in intensive care somebody recommended that I read it to her. She and I both found it profoundly unhelpful – here we were being encouraged to believe that we would not fear the terror of the night, that we need not fear pestilence and that God would give his people long life, when it was acutely plain that that coming night would be very testing, that the pestilence was rendering my daughter’s body helpless and that not only might life not be long but that it was possibly not going to outlast the week.

Psalm 91 had been presented to me, both at the time I describe and when it had been given to me as a preaching text (along with the ‘sermon brief’), as a triumphalist song of reassurance. Everything was going to work out as God intended, and we should not worry. The experience of having the Psalm quoted in such a way to me in a time of crisis was, as I said, ‘profoundly unhelpful’. I therefore decided that I could not, with integrity, use it in the same way with a struggling congregation. My own experience invalidated what I was being encouraged to preach.

Integrity as a teacher meant adjusting my homiletics classes to encourage students’ own awareness of self in their preaching, a discomfiting process. Attempts to include the person of the preacher in sermon classes seemed dissonant for two reasons: key texts on

homiletics have traditionally avoided discussion of the preacher as anything other than a conduit who should remain invisible; imbibing this kind of theology, many seem to regard their own absence from the sermon as ‘holy’. Following the unstructured development of my own thinking about self I introduced theological reflection as a method of sermon preparation, perhaps posing a simple question to evoke a shared experience. Just before Advent one year, when the reading for one Sunday was to be Luke 7: 18-30, the story of John the Baptist sending to ask Jesus ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ (v20) a colleague and I began a homiletics session without referencing the text but by asking the question ‘how do you know it’s the one?’ This generated some very personal reflections in some students, leading to new insight into the text. For me, the exercise meant thinking about the question asked by John in a more down-to-earth way than I had previously. This is the beginning of that sermon:

### **Snippet 3**

‘Is this the one?’

I guess you, like me, have spent quite a bit of time on that kind of question in recent weeks. “is this the one?”

We’re encouraged to ask it at this time of year.

In recent weeks I’ve spent quite a lot of time asking a similar question. “is this the one?” I’ve done my research, I’ve talked to other people, I’ve read about it, I’ve thought about it. It has occupied quite a bit of my time. And yes, I am pretty confident that I have chosen the right Lego for my grandson’s Christmas present.

But I won’t know – I won’t really know – until it comes to Christmas Day and he unwraps it and I see his face. And of course I will know then, because six year olds

aren't great at hiding their emotions. Last year when he was five I got a little lecture from him on how grandmas shouldn't really buy grandsons pyjamas for Christmas. I will know. But I don't know yet.

### *Voice*

'Voice' is a major theme both in homiletics and in feminist theology. I have already spoken of it in this chapter. In exegesis we look for the voice of the writer; in homiletics we consider the voice our key instrument; in feminist theology we consider how women's stories have been made unspeakable, how our voice has been suppressed. Nelle Morton spoke of hearing others into speech, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak talked of speaking for the silenced. Women share experience of living in a world where violence against us has reached pandemic proportions (Storkey, 2015), which might engender a 'common language' that transcends difference. Gender-based violence is the 'great unfinished business of our time' (Alyse Nelson, Vital Voices Global Partnership cited in Storkey, 2015). 'It's easy to see the strong, set lines of patriarchy in the public face of the Church. Centuries of male popes, patriarchs, cardinals, archbishops, priests, clergy, elders, overseers and theologians have led the flock, exegeted the Scriptures, written the agendas and preached the sermons.' (Storkey, 2015). It is time to hear other voices, the other half of the story of faith. Personally, I do not seek to speak for all women, nor to only speak from my own experience, thus avoiding both generalisation and essentialism. Rather I try to speak from a recognisably women's perspective and give voice to individual women too, particularly biblical women. Most

importantly for my own practice within homiletics, I am finding ways of speaking for myself and of myself for others.

I defined preaching, above, as engaging the people of God in their shared story. My experience of the Women's Voices conference is that there is among women preachers a communality based on living and working in the same kind of environment. For many of us there is also a commitment to telling the truth and a determination to welcome others into community.

When I was asked to preach one Easter Day from John 20:1-18, I wanted to tell Mary's story, give voice, somehow, to her meeting with the risen Jesus.

#### **Snippet 4**

'It is finished'. That's what Jesus had said just two days ago. 'It is finished.' His life was finished. His work was finished. His mission to the world, to break through human hardness, human pride, human insistence on religion that had little to do with God. 'It is finished.'

And it was. Finished. The expert executioners had already beaten him. They knew, from years of experience, when a person was dead. And this one was definitely finished.

And so, when Mary went to the tomb two days later she went without hope. She went to tend a dead friend. To do the very last thing she could do for the dead one she had followed.

He was gone. Perhaps she began to realise that although to Jesus she was someone, a person worth listening to, a person to walk with, that too was

finished. She was once again the woman from whom demons had been cast out.

The woman who down through history was to be remembered as of ill-repute rather than a woman of courageous faith.

In this sermon I was keen to discuss the death and resurrection of Jesus not in rationalist or triumphalist, or even theological, terms but as an event that changed the experience of a woman who had been close to him. I wanted to move the congregation from observers on the sidelines to participants in the story. Moreover, I was keen, having discovered that many preachers regard the Gospel reading of the day almost incidental at Easter time, to preach the text.

### **Prepared to Preach?**

Reflecting theologically on my experience of preaching, the culture and tradition within which I have developed, has had prophetic potential. It has both disquieted me and challenged me. I have had to become aware, as do most preachers, of my 'power' role, but also of my subaltern role as a woman whose views are dismissable on the basis of gender. I have moved from being a woman privileged with voice, seeking to speak on behalf of silenced others, to being more conscious of my own silencing. I am now absolutely convinced of the value of including myself in my preaching, of preaching like a woman. I realised that in preaching that takes testimony seriously the preacher has to develop the spiritual discipline of noticing, the sensitivity to see God at work in the everyday.

In an attempt to develop this discipline, one Lent I decided that rather than give up something, I would take up something. I committed to taking a photograph everyday of something that spoke to me. Some of the results were poor, but one stands out. As I walked early one morning along the side of my local lake, I heard a flock of geese behind me, heading toward me. Camera in hand, finger on button, listening intently, I knew, even felt, the moment when the geese flew over my head. My repeated clicking resulted in an excellent shot of geese in flight, that I was very pleased with. My aim that Lent had been to learn to notice, and the photograph represents what can be achieved if we notice without our eyes. That's the kind of noticing preachers need to develop.

We need to notice where God is at work, yes. We need to notice what is good and holy. But we also need to notice what is wrong – and tell the truth about it. As women we need to notice what happens to us as we experience life through our bodies, as well as in our minds and hearts.

The basic method of preparing to preach that I now teach students, particularly if they are new to preaching or early in their training starts with 'me'. It encourages the preacher to notice what has been happening to them this week, or when they read the Bible passage, or whatever it might be.

This is the method in brief. It is a step by step approach to a more flexible model that we will come to In Chapter Seven.

<b>Step</b>	<b>Preparatory task</b>
Step 1	<b>Experience and Position</b> (Tradition and Culture) Who am I?

	<p>Where am I?</p> <p>What have I noticed recently?</p> <p>What do I notice in this Bible passage?</p> <p>How do I feel?</p> <p>This stage often highlights contradictions between what the passage appears to say and my own experience or theology. I usually jot down the questions that it raises for me.</p>
Step 2	<p><b>Emerging Themes</b></p> <p>What ideas are emerging?</p> <p>Is there something I need to deal with?</p> <p>What is ‘fallen’ or corrupted here?</p> <p>Where is hope here?</p> <p>What do I believe about them?</p> <p>This stage allows me to focus down on one theme, and helps to challenge my mind goes down a path well-trodden by others but of which I have no experience.</p>
Step 3	<p><b>Research.</b></p> <p>This is the stage where theological reflection might come in. What do culture and tradition say about my theme? How do I answer the questions raised?</p> <p>Now I turn to commentaries to check that the answers I have propose might be right.</p>

Step 4	<p><b>Reflection: Live with it.</b></p> <p>Can I imagine myself saying <i>this</i> to <i>these</i> people on <i>this</i> day?</p> <p>At this stage I might notice the discomfort of inauthenticity if I try to preach something that sounds right but doesn't match my own experience or position.</p>
Step 5	<p><b>Communication.</b></p> <p>How long do I have?</p> <p>How will I say what I have decided to say?</p> <p>How might it be heard?</p> <p>Is anyone excluded?</p> <p>I try to emphasise resonance over relevance, and ensure there are ways into the sermon for my hearers.</p>
Step 6	<p><b>Final check</b></p> <p>Has anything happened to change what I am going to say?</p>

Step 1 not only avoids repetition of traditionally accepted interpretations of a Scripture reading, it also ensures that if 'I' am in the sermon, it is as authentic an 'I' as possible. Theological reflection continues throughout the process, and may need more time at one stage than at others, depending on the sermon.

**Time for Reflection**

This Reflection is based on 'Preaching as Myself', and is a way of exploring your 'self'.

*Who am I?*

1.

At last the secret is out,  
as it always must come in the end,  
WH Auden

The fear of many a preacher must be that the secret might come out. The secret that we are not *quite* who we hope our hearers will imagine us to be. The secret that the person we present in the pulpit is not the only person inhabiting the body the congregation sees before it. My realisation, and subsequent admission in Snippet 1, that people do see me as someone old enough to be a grandmother, freed me to speak of being ignored because of age. But there are other ways in which we hope not to be seen.

You may have done a Myers-Briggs indicator or an Enneagram at some stage, prompting greater self-knowledge in one way or another. Both, and any other personality indicator tool as well, are rooted in the belief that subconsciously there is more to us than meets the eye. Perhaps we shape ourselves, and are shaped, to fit in. As children we want to please others – parents, teachers, peer group. Certain behaviours are affirmed and reinforced by approval, and so we continue to project the kind of person others seem to want us to be. In her book *Women's Voices* (2017), Nancy Lammers Gross explores ways in which women preachers struggle because they feel a lack of permission to speak. She relates the story of 'Cathy', someone who produced a 'masterful' written sermon on Job,

pain and suffering yet delivered it with a smile on her face. She had been trained to smile in order to make others feel good, and this translated into smiling in the pulpit – no matter what the topic of the sermon. *Ask someone to video you preaching, and watch it to see what your body says about your preaching.*

2. Rather like politicians or celebrities we develop an image of ourselves that is our shop window, the person we want others to think we are (and increasingly the person we want to see ourselves as). It's what Goffman (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1990) calls impression management. We arrange our language, our posture and behaviour in ways that will project the person we want to be. When we do that we put the person we don't like into storage, and become a guarded version of ourselves. When we respond to approval and disapproval in this way, we push more and more aspects of ourselves into the store cupboard and try harder and harder to construct the person people like. We might hide things we've done, because of guilt, or things we are because of shame. The more we feel aspects of ourselves are unacceptable, the more prone we might be to depression or outbursts of anger. Telling the truth about ourselves is an important element of Bible reading, and of authentic preaching. Some truths are hard to tell, even to ourselves. I needed to realise that I too am subaltern. I am not researching and working in the area of women's preaching because I can help others, but also because I need the companionship and understanding I am finding. *What image do you try to project to your congregation? What do you try to hide from them? What have been the keys to your own development?*

3. Choose a section from one of your sermons. *What does it say about you? How might you alter it to include a more authentic 'self'?*

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<sup>1</sup> Once in Royal David's City

<sup>2</sup>First published in *The Preacher* (No 154), journal of the College of Preachers.'

<sup>3</sup> TED talks are talks given by influential, expert speakers and can be found at ted.com

<sup>4</sup> Eva's Call was a community piece of art based on experiences of ordinand and ordained women within the Cuddesden community and beyond. It gathered together comments made to them as a form of lament. It can be found online here: <https://artsrcc.wordpress.com/2018/03/02/evas-call/>

