

Chapter 1 – Preach the Word

There is no shortage of sermons, particularly in the African context where many of us minister. There are sermons everywhere. Sermons in church, sermons on TV, sermons on the radio, sermons on street corners and buses. There is a lot of preaching going on. But what is being said?

There is a lot of preaching going on but at the same time there doesn't seem to be a corresponding amount of life change – repentance and faith and obedience. In countries with high percentages of professing Christians and church goers there are still very high rates of corruption, immorality and, sadly, even genocide. Churches are often infected with the cancers of division, unforgiveness, discrimination, power struggles and pride. The lives of Christians and their non-Christian contemporaries are often indistinguishable.

While the church in Africa is growing at a fairly high rate compared to many other parts of the world, that rate is slowing and as a proportion of the total population (taking population increase into account) it may actually be declining in some places. Church attendance is certainly reducing in large cities and a new generation open to atheism and other religions is emerging.

So is it time to give up on preaching? Is there something else that we need to grow churches and change lives? Certainly many are turning to other things:

- Perhaps, it is said, it is good music and lighting that will draw people in, bring us into the presence of God and to a place of 'anointing'?

- Perhaps it is signs and wonders and ‘deliverance ministry’ that will draw people to Christ and be the greatest manifestation of the Spirit’s power in our gatherings?
- Perhaps it is social transformation, serving the physical needs of our community and ‘being Christ to people’ that should be the main thing for the Church?
- Perhaps it is having the right structures and business plans and church growth strategies that will make things really take off?

At iServe Africa, we don’t think it is time to give up on preaching and Word ministry. Why? Because the Bible makes clear that this has always been the primary means of God revealing himself, the primary means of His gathering and growing His people, that it was the primary work of Jesus and the apostles, and that it is the primary work of the pastor.

So we’re going to spend a good bit of time now looking at these things from the Bible so we can all see them there for ourselves.

THE PRIORITY FOR JESUS

Let’s look at the four Gospels in turn. First, Matthew...

Matthew is particularly concerned to show us Jesus as the Great Teacher. The structure of his Gospel is arranged around five great teaching blocks (probably meant to parallel the five books of the Law) each concluding with a phrase like “when Jesus finished teaching...”

- Matt. 1-4: the arrival of the king – the kingdom at hand
- 1. Matt. 5-7 (the king teaching – membership of the kingdom & living in the kingdom)
 - Matt. 8-9: the king healing – a foretaste of the kingdom
- 2. Matt. 10 (the king sends out the 12 – proclaiming the kingdom)
 - Matt. 11-12: the king rejected by his people
- 3. Matt. 13 (parables of the kingdom)
 - Matt. 14-17: the king rejected and accepted
- 4. Matt. 18 (the gospel kingdom)

Matt. 19-22: the king goes to Jerusalem – how to enter the kingdom
5. Matt. 23-25 (the coming of the kingdom)
Matt. 26-28: the king is crowned and the kingdom is inaugurated

Looking at the middle teaching block (Mat. 13), perhaps the climax of the book, and particularly looking at the first parable (Matt. 13:1-23) that dominates the block, we find some very interesting things.

First, notice *the vital importance of the Word*. What is the ‘seed’ in the parable? Is it a financial gift we need to send to the Man of God? Is it our talents or good works? No. Jesus makes it very clear – the ‘seed’ is the ‘word’ (Matt. 13:19, 20, 22, 23). The Sower sowing seed is the Preacher preaching the Word.

And look at the results:

As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matt. 13:23)

For a farmer (and there were probably many of them listening to this parable) even thirtyfold is a massive yield. You would be asking yourself, “Where can I get seed like that?!” This is the punchline of the parable: this seed is incredible. It might be often rejected but when it goes in it has massive power. And what exactly is the seed? Not any old word but ‘The Word of the Kingdom’ (Matt. 13:19); that is the Word about the King, the king greater than Solomon (Matt. 12:42), the long awaited King whom the Apostles are privileged to see (Matt. 13:16-17), the one who is the ‘secret of the kingdom’ (Matt. 13:11) – King Jesus.

The only means of bringing real fruit, real growth, a real harvest, is by preaching the Word of Christ. Sometimes it will not be received well, sometimes it will bounce off of hard ground, sometimes it may

seem to fail but the problem is not the seed, the problem is not the message. The Word is very very powerful.

The application for us is pretty obvious. Sow the Seed. Preach the Word. That is the priority. That is the great mission strategy.

But actually this parable is not really about us. The Sower in the parable is not us. It is first and foremost Jesus.

Even if we didn't have the clue from the next parable (Matt. 13:37) we would have plenty of reason from the story itself and the surrounding stories to think that the Sower is the Son of Man. The parable of the Sower is largely an explanation of what has been going on in Jesus ministry. In the previous chapter the religious leaders have rejected his ministry in the strongest possible terms (Matt. 12:24). Many of the people are just following him for his healings and miracles and have no lasting faith (Matt. 5:24-25; 8:18-22; 27:22-25). Only his few chosen disciples have been given ears and eyes so that can receive the Word (Matt. 11:25-27; 13:11-17). So when Jesus talks about the Sower and the different soils he is talking primarily about the different reactions to *his own* preaching.

Jesus is the Great Sower, the preacher greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon (Matt. 12:41-42). He is the long-awaited Second Adam, who enters a cursed world of rocky, scorched earth full of thorns and thistles, where Satan lurks – the world under the curse of Genesis 3 – and into this barren world he brings life and blessing and an abundant harvest (Matt. 13:3-8).

This is the good news. We have a Sower God. He is not the 'hard man, reaping where he did not sow' (Matt. 25:24), demanding, taxing, sucking the life out of his world. No. He is a giver – a God who is showering the world with grace. And he is not a God who sits up in heaven in comfort while we work but a God who becomes man, gets his hands and feet dirty, sweats and labours as he strides through the

fields sowing, while we (the soil) just lie there passive. That is the gospel of the grace of Christ. He gives life, we receive.

So let's not miss the main point of Matthew 13. The preacher in view here is not us but Jesus himself. He depicts himself first and foremost as The Sower, striding through the earth sowing the Word. That is his priority – to bring life through his Word.

Turning to Mark...

Mark starts his gospel story in a very exciting way with a fast moving account of John the Baptism (the end-time Elijah), Jesus' baptism, *immediately* seeing heaven opened, *immediately* driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, preaching, calling the first disciples who *immediately* leave and follow him, *immediately* calling some more... Already in these fast moving verses Mark has taken time to describe John's preaching (Mark 1:4, 7-8) and Jesus' proclamation (1:14-15).

Now Jesus goes to Capernaum, not primarily for an exorcism session but to *teach* in the synagogue (Mark 1:21). It is Jesus' *teaching* that the congregation are astonished at (Mark 1:22). The incident with the man with an unclean spirit is more of a distraction than the main event. It is like an unruly child misbehaving at the back of a class and the teacher shouting, "Be quiet!" and then carrying on teaching. The silencing of the demon just underlines the authority of Jesus' amazing *teaching* (Mark 1:27).

Then something very surprising happens which demonstrates very clearly where Jesus' priorities lie. As the Sabbath day ends and the people are free to move and work "they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons" (Mark 1:32). (Notice in passing that he didn't go around advertising a healing ministry or going out on well-publicised crusades but people came to him while he was just resting in Simon Peter's house.) "And the whole city was gathered at the door" (Mark 1:33). This is massive fame. And massive success – he

heals all these different diseases – TB, healed; paralysis, healed; blindness, healed; cancer, healed.

Then we get to the really surprising bit: “And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed” (Mark 1:35). Before anyone could see him, he slipped away. Was it to pray for more power to return to the village and continue the great healing ministry? Let’s read on...

Simon and friends have to really search to find Jesus – presumably he’s gone some way away – and when they find him they say, “Everyone is looking for you!” (Mark 1:37). In effect they are saying, “What are you doing?! Why have you gone? Last night was amazing. This could be the most amazing healing ministry the world has ever seen. We could build a clinic and put up a sign saying ‘Jesus of Nazareth Healing Centre’ and people would come from all of Israel. You could heal millions. There’s no time to lose. Come back.”

And how does Jesus respond?

Let us go to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is what I came for (Mark 1:38).

What a powerful statement of Jesus’ priority.

Turning to Luke’s Gospel...

At Luke 4 where we find what Jesus’ mission was *not* and then a very clear statement of what it *was*.

The temptations in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13) work on a number of levels at the same time. Most importantly this story is giving us ‘certainty’ (cf. Luke 1:4) about the perfect righteousness of Christ. He is the Second Adam who, unlike the first Adam, resists the temptation of the Serpent. He is the Perfect Israel in the wilderness

who, unlike the first Israel who failed repeatedly, passes the tests. He is the Innocent One who will take the place of sinners like us (cf. Luke 23:4, 14-15, 22, 25, 41).

Another important way that the temptations work is in showing us what Jesus' ministry will *not* be (in preparation for what it will be from v14 onwards). Satan is throwing temptations at Jesus with the specific aim of diverting him from his key mission (cf. Mark 8:32-33). But Jesus resists and shows that his ministry:

1. Will not be about turning rocks into bread – he could turn Mount Kenya into a mountain of food and feed all the hungry of the world but he doesn't do that.
2. Will not be about being the 'Big Man' – not about power and riches – he is the king who has come not to be served but to serve – he will have nowhere to lay his head and die without even clothes.
3. Will not be about performing flashy miracles – not doing great faith stunts. When Jesus does do miracles it's often in a closed room or he takes someone aside, away from the crowd.

So what is Jesus' ministry going to be all about? In verses 14 to 21 we find Jesus empowered by the Spirit (v14) to preach (v15) from the Scriptures (v17-20) a Christ-centred sermon (v21)! (That's a pattern that we're going to see again and again.)

Of course the main reason Luke records the Nazareth sermon for us is so that we would see who Jesus is.

And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. (Luke 4:20-21)

It's an amazing scene. Full of tension. All eyes on Jesus. You could hear a pin drop. And the tension is broken as Jesus reveals that Isaiah

61 was written *for him* – it was the script waiting 600 years for the actor to come and read it – and now here he is, saying the things the Christ would say when he comes.

So the big point here is that Jesus is the great promised Messiah. The long-awaited one is finally here.

But there is also a very important statement of the Messiah's *mission* at this point:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19)*

Looking at the verbs here we find three out of four are about proclamation. The other – releasing the oppressed [crushed] – happens at the other end of Luke's narrative, paradoxically through Jesus being bound and crushed (Luke 23:25; Isaiah 53:5).

Why this emphasis on preaching? Well there are many reasons but the key one is found in verse 19, or rather what is *not* in verse 19:

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:19)

The strange thing is that Jesus doesn't continue the quotation from Isaiah to the end of the sentence: "...and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isaiah 61:2). Why is that? Because the day of vengeance, which the Jewish people expected to be at exactly the same moment as the time of favour, turns out to be separate future day. It is yet to come. Jesus is saying, "There is wrath coming but *today is the day of salvation* – I have come to seek and to save the lost, I'm going to die,

I came to give my life as a ransom for many – repent and believe in me and you will escape captivity and spiritual oppression and enter my kingdom.”

This is not a message that can be communicated by a miracle. It is about deep spiritual and eternal realities. No amount of economic renewal or healings will touch this deep problem. The good news is that God is showing his sovereign favour to the spiritually poor, enslaved and blind, rescuing them from captivity through the death of the innocent one in their place. The very nature of that gospel demands that it be *preached*.

Turning to John’s Gospel...

John has a lot to say about words. We could look at the way Jesus is the ‘Word of God’, making the Father known by words (John 1:1, 18; 17:8, 26). We could look at how, again and again, Jesus performs a sign and then explains it through *words* to point people to a deeper meaning in himself and his mission (e.g. John 5). We could look at how Jesus gathers his sheep by his *voice* (John 10:3, 16, 27). But let’s zoom in on chapter 6.

Here is a very obvious test and proof of Jesus’ priorities. Jesus feeds the crowd so full they can eat no more. They want to make him king (John 6:15). But Jesus doesn’t want to be their sort of king. He withdraws. The crowd chases after him and then comes the great twist:

Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labour for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. (John 6:26-27)

Again we see that Jesus' ministry is not about feeding the world physically, it is not about being a worldly king, it is not about doing flashy miracles. It is about giving himself as the bread of life (John 6:35) – his flesh broken and blood poured out as the great Passover sacrifice (cf. John 1:29; 13:1; 19:29, 36). And how, in practice, is someone to feed and drink and receive this bread of life?

The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. (John 6:63)

Just as Isaiah prophesied in a passage very similar to John 6, we are to make our ears into mouths and feed and be satisfied, listen and live (Isaiah 55:2-3). It is through Jesus' words that he is communicating life, communicating his very self to his people. That's why John Chapter 6 is 20% sign, 80% sermon. That's why Jesus' priority is preaching.

THE PRIORITY FOR THE APOSTLES

Now let's look briefly at the ministry of the apostles commissioned by Jesus, first in Matthew's Gospel and then the Book of Acts.

In Matthew there are actually two times when the apostles are sent out by Jesus and it's very interesting to compare them:

Matthew 10:1-15

- 12 disciples
- Disciples given authority to cast out unclean spirits and heal every disease
- To ethnic Israel not to Gentiles
- Proclaim, 'Kingdom of heaven is at hand', proclaim peace
- Heal sick, raise dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons
- Give without pay; take no money, bag, extra clothing, sandals or staff

Matthew 28:16-20

- 11 disciples
- All authority given to Jesus
- All nations
- Make disciples, baptising, teaching them to observe all Jesus has commanded
- "I am with you always to the end of the age"

Is Matthew 10:1-15 a pattern for our mission today? Well, there are lots of details in this first commission that, if we were giving a talk on mission, we might usefully apply to our evangelism but then we're unlikely to apply lots of the other details – e.g. the command not to go to the Gentiles or the prohibition of sandals or staffs. So we're actually being selective – picking the bits we want to apply. And if we're honest, raising the dead (v8) and healing *every* disease and affliction (v1) do not feature highly most of our contemporary mission efforts.

Matthew 10:1-15 is not *our* commission – it was a commission to the twelve disciples. And even for them it was not a commission for all time but for a particular season. Even within Matthew's Gospel you can see their commission changing to the one given at Matthew 28.

There, in what we know as the Great Commission we see something quite different to the earlier sending out of the disciples. For a start there are only 11 of them now, a reminder that we are the other side of the betrayal and Cross. The Kingdom that was 'at hand' has now been inaugurated as the King was crowned and enthroned at Golgotha (cf. Matt. 27:11, 28-29, 37, 42) and then raised in power to the right hand of the Father. Whereas in Matthew 10 Jesus gave authority to his disciples, in Matthew 28 it is Jesus who is given all authority. The emphasis now is not on the signs of the at-hand Kingdom (healings, raisings from the dead, exorcism) but instead all the emphasis is on proclamation, discipling and teaching.

The emphasis is all on
proclamation,
discipling, teaching.

Whereas the earlier mission was to Israel and clearly for a limited time, this new mission is to all nations and is 'to the end of the age' – meaning that this great commission sets the agenda not only for the apostles but for us and every disciple until the return of Christ.

Turning to Acts...

The book of Acts is largely the story of how the apostles start to carry out the Great Commission. Certainly there are signs and wonders accompanying the birth of this great new gospel age but these are not the focus of the apostles' ministry. When the lame man is raised in the Temple courts (Acts 3:1-10) Peter is desperate to turn the attention of the crowd away from the miracle towards the gospel of the Holy and Righteous One, the Author of Life who suffered in fulfilment of prophecy for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 3:11-26).

In Acts 6 we see, perhaps most clearly, where the apostles' priority lay.

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables." (Acts 6:2)

It is not that serving on tables is not important. It is given to seriously spiritual guys (v3) – the best of the best. It is not an 'anyone will do' thing. And the word for 'service' of tables (v2) is the same as 'service' of the word (v4). So let's not talk about pastoring and preaching as 'the ministry' – we are all in ministry! Serving on tables, care of the poor and needy in the church, is very important. But there is still a priority:

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:4)

The big problem at the beginning of this chapter is that this great task will be neglected. The church is attacked in Acts 4 through persecution, and in Acts 5 by financial deceit and more persecution but now in Acts 6 is an even more dangerous threat to the very life of the church – distraction from Word ministry. The Job Description for

the apostles was to be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). Cease to preach Christ and they had simply failed. Even for the non-apostles it seems that preaching the Word was hugely important (Acts 6:8-7:53; 8:4-8; 8:35). Without the Word and prayer the church will crumble and the nations will remain lost. Conversely, when the ministry of Word and prayer is prioritised and strategies are put in place to ensure that this main thing remains the main thing the church is built:

...the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7)

Now finally, let's come to the present day pastor.

THE PRIORITY FOR THE PASTOR

There are two key places in the New Testament where we see the transition from the apostolic age to the post-apostolic age - or to put it more simply, the handover from the Apostles to the pastors who will come after them. These places are Acts 20 (Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders) and Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus. These are crucial for showing us what was not unique to the Apostles - or in other words for seeing what is the core ministry for all church leaders for all time. We'll look at them in more detail later in the course but for now let's just notice simply the priority of preaching.

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:32)

Just as the Apostles were devoted to the Word (Acts 6:4), so the elders are given to God and given to the Word (Acts 20:32). That is

what they are to safeguard and that is what will safeguard them. It is all they need and all their churches will need.

In a culture like ours which rates images and music and action very highly and puts a relatively low value on words, it is worth underlining that what the elders are committed to and what builds people them and their flocks is the *Word*. Not acrobatics or flashing lights or miracles or huge PA systems. The Word.

And it is specifically the Word of *Grace* - the message that we are the worst of sinners but Christ died instead of us to take our punishment and rose again to clothe us in his righteousness.

- That is what will really build people up – not the puffing up of motivational speaking.
- That is what will give people a true lasting inheritance – not the false promises of the prosperity gospel.
- That is what will lead to sanctification – not the carrots and sticks of moralism.

Turning to 1 Timothy 3:1-7...

This is actually a very surprising passage. If we were to give a talk on 'how to know if you should be a pastor' would it look much like this?

- There is no mention of a 'call' to pastoral ministry (the only calling in the letter is the one to eternal life – 1 Tim. 6:12 – the calling for all Christians).
- It's ok to *desire* to be a pastor (v1). Just because you want to do something doesn't mean it's unspiritual! God gives us desires.
- Most of the qualifications for leadership in the church are about character and lifestyle (v2-7).
- These are qualifications by which the *church* can discern whether someone who desires to be a pastor is indeed fit for the job.
- Significantly the only competence that the pastor needs is to be able to teach (v2). This is going to be his primary activity.

Turning to 2 Timothy 4:1-5...

As Paul gets to the end of his earthly life and the task of passing on his ministry becomes most urgent he gives this incredibly strong charge:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: (v1)

Could he make it any stronger?! This is in the presence of the Creator God. This is in the presence of the one with eyes of fire, voice like roaring waters, double-edged sword coming out of his mouth, face like the sun in full strength, the one before whom the apostle John fell as though dead (Rev. 1:12-17). And *by his appearing...* He is coming soon. There is a Judgement Day. There is a tsunami of wrath coming on the earth. We are not to be playing games on Sunday morning. There is eternity at stake. So...

preach the word (v2)

Could the priority be any clearer? Preach the Word. The pastor-elder is not primarily a manager or marketer or motivator but a preacher.

But surely, we might say, things were simpler then? Surely in our postmodern multi-media context things are different? Now there is Youtube and Facebook and huge self-help sections in the bookshops? Surely there are more distractions now? Surely the televangelists have discredited preaching? Surely people were happier to sit and listen to sound preaching in Timothy's days? How does the passage continue?

be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but

having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (2 Tim. 4:2-4)

It was no different then. There have *always* been many challenges to the priority of faithful Bible preaching.

THE CHALLENGES

Hopefully we've made the case from the Scriptures that the priority is to preach the Word. Perhaps you're easily convinced of that. Perhaps we seem to have laboured the point. But the reason for

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going through the Bible evidence in some detail is that in reality it is very hard to keep the main thing the main thing. We might know that Word ministry is our first priority but on the ground, in the rough

and tumble of church life, it is very rarely kept as central and primary.

Looking at your own church or ministry...

- The schedule. Does the way that you or the senior minister spend your time reflect the priority of preaching? Is there sizeable time dedicated (and used) for study, reading, prayer and preparation?
- The accounts. Does the way that money is spent and resources allocated (staffing, buildings) reflect the priority of Word ministry?
- The gathering. When we gather for services or events or meetings what is the main focus? And what about the youth service and Sunday School and on missions and in discipleship? Is the preaching and teaching of the Word central?
- The plans. Looking at the strategic plans, goals, visions, and at week by week planning, is the mission of preaching the gospel the clear priority?

We are very aware that the challenges are real and many...

There are always more phonecalls to take and emails to respond to.

There is always a problem to be sorted out.

There is always a visit to make.

There is always a pile of administrative tasks to be done.

There is always something else demanding our time.

Then there are all the expectations...

The expectations of the congregation.

The expectations of the world, media, civic officials, unbelievers.

The expectations of the church council, eldership, PCC, bishop.

Your own expectations.

In the light of all this it takes a lot of discipline to set aside eight or ten or twelve hours to work on a sermon or a Bible study. We will only do this if we are *absolutely convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt* that preaching is the primary task. That's why we need to spend time reminding ourselves from the Scriptures that it really *really* is.

A few more questions to close this chapter:

WHAT IS OUR MOTIVATION?

Are we seeking power or seeking to serve? Are we wanting to climb the career ladder, sit behind a big desk, control people and budgets and agendas or are we seeing to be 'servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God' (1 Cor. 4:1)? Are we seeking to please men and meet their expectations (for our own glory) or are we seeking to please God and meet people's deepest spiritual needs (for God's glory)? When allocating our time and resources, whose priorities and expectations are we driven by?