

Candour

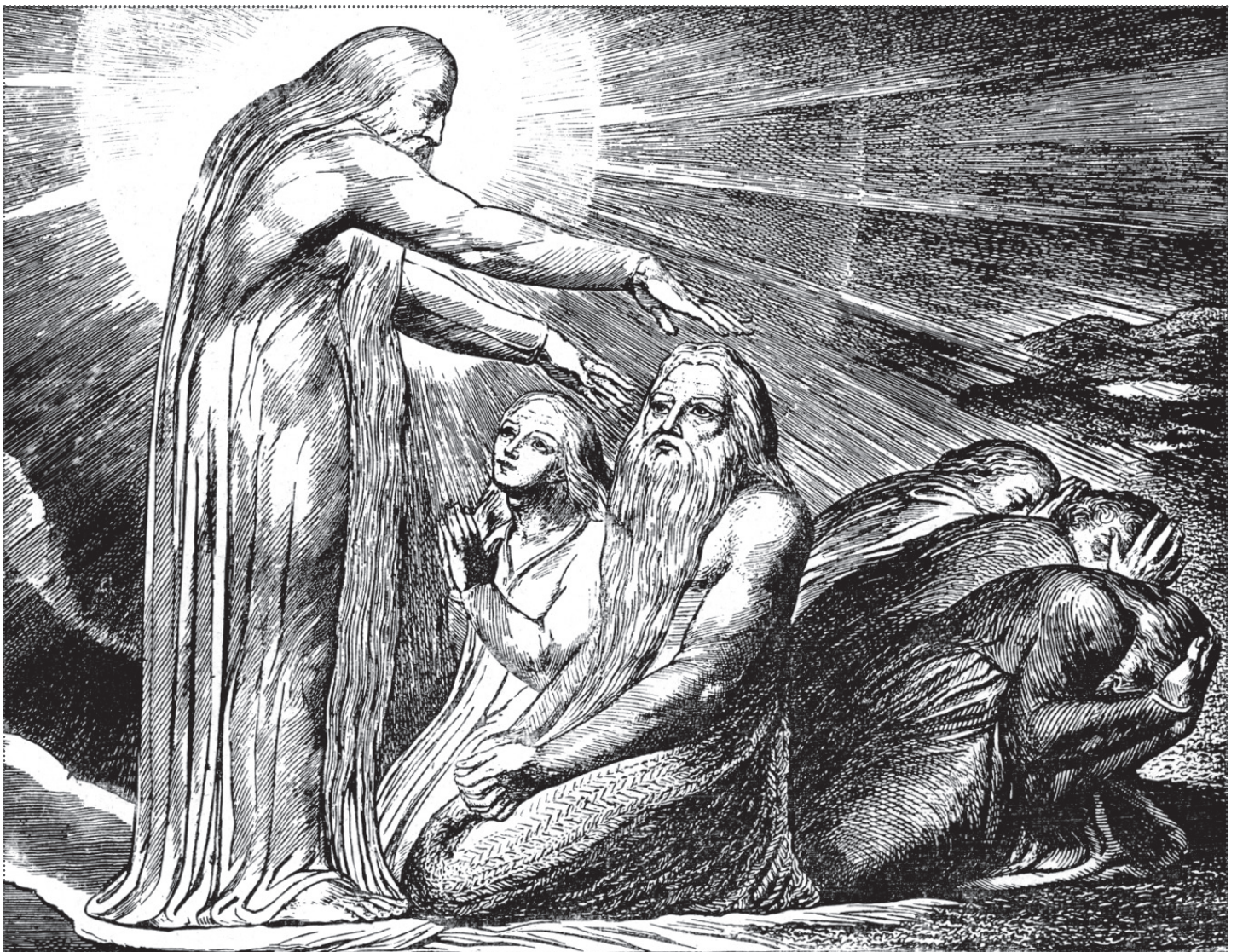


Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand

NEWS AND VIEWS FOR MINISTERS

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Preacher and Poet



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Contents

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Contributions

We welcome responses to published articles. If you would like to write a piece replying to any of this month's featured articles, please contact:

The editor on (04) 801-6000 or candour@presbyterian.org.nz

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The theme will be:
Downward Mobility.

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I had heard of thee by the hearing
of the ear; but now mine eye seeth
thee (Job 42:5)

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Howard Carter 3

LETTER

Response to last month's guest editorial 4
Richard Dawson

ESSAYS

Is preaching poetry or poetry preaching? 6
Susan Jones

The enduring power of metaphors 8
Mary-Jane Konings

Preaching needs the ambiguity of poetry 10
Malcolm Gordon

The lilt of the imagination 12
Hilary Smith

AES column 16
Martin Baker



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I think preachers can readily identify with the wonderful lyrics of Bob Dylan's *All Along the Watchtower*. We share a sense that when you stand up on a Sunday morning to invite people to encounter God in a way that will bring transformation, that really all we have are our words. Maybe these days the red guitar is replaced by the accompanying hum of a data projector and images on a screen, but the hope is that with what we say and how we convey it, we will draw people to encounter truth.

It can be a hard road being a preacher. I have had two experiences this week that have illustrated that to me yet again.

The first was with a student wrestling with continuing to be part of their church. While there have been many issues, the struggle this week was the preaching. Here is what I was told: "Forty five minutes. No images and very few illustrations or connections with real life. It was great exegesis and theology...but I just couldn't listen to it, I found myself losing attention and falling asleep". Here is a young person who wants to learn but who finds presentation and style a barrier. As a student they are listening to teachers all the time, both good and not so good, but who are trained to communicate.

Just before I got up to preach on Sunday, the person leading the service recounted that they had been to a communication seminar that week and went on to tell the congregation that "you only retain a small amount of what you hear. You've probably forgotten most of the sermon I preached last week". He went on to explain, "You remember a larger percentage of what you see and the key thing with preaching or speaking is giving people mental images and pictures that they can peg what you are saying onto". After the Bible reading I got up to speak hoping that I could peg up a few mental images for people.

All I got is a red guitar

Three chords

And the truth

All I got is a red guitar

The rest is up to you

(Bob Dylan *All Along the Watchtower*)

I believe in preaching, I believe in the power of the spoken word. I do, however, wonder sometimes if we haven't picked up Calvin's emphasis on the gift of teaching and have in our minds the metaphor of "preacher as lecturer", as simply conveying information in a logical manner. In this edition of *Candour* the metaphor of preacher as poet is explored; articles allow us to examine the craft of preaching and wordsmithing and how we communicate.

I'm not suggesting we should preach in rhyming couplets or limericks – the challenge is like poets – how can we capture life and insights and significant truth in such a way that it will connect with people's hearts and souls? Poems like parables harness the power of metaphor and story. Cadence, rhythm, repetition and length of sentences are tools from poetry at our disposal. Listen to Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a dream" speech and pick up the way in which repetition and rhythm, make his powerful, content rich points, sing.

Mind you, it is also good to remember that it's not all about the preacher. I remember asking someone who had studied the Welsh revival of the early 20th century about the reasons that the

revival seemed to die out. One of the reasons he gave was that preachers started to believe that people were responding because of their oratory abilities, and nothing kills the work of the Spirit as much as when we think it's about us and our ability.

Paul tells the Church in Corinth that he was sent to preach the gospel, but not with "wisdom and eloquence" (NIV), lest the cross be emptied of its power. I made a decision to follow Christ at a church family camp, and I always maintain that the person who spoke was the most boring preacher I'd ever heard (I was 15 at the time, he has probably improved somewhat since then), but the Spirit of God moved in me and as he gave an altar call, I responded. That is the hope we have as preachers: that God's Spirit is at work in the lives of our hearers often, in a grace filled way, despite us.

Still I believe we who are called to preach are called to use what we have to faithfully and faith-filled-ly (passionately) proclaim the gospel and expound the Scriptures. Using the gifts and talents we have been given and the hard grafting skills we learn, so that people may hear, respond and be transformed.

I believe in content, in the hard yards of exegesis and hermeneutics, wrestling with what was said so long ago and how it connects with our world and the lives of our congregations. I don't believe in dumbing down our message to communicate, but rather in smartening up how we communicate. Hopefully the articles in this edition of *Candour* there will be some reflection and insights that will aid us in developing the art of preaching.

Rev Richard Dawson penned this response to last month's guest editorial about Kupu Whakapono. Responses to articles featured in Candour are welcome, and can be sent to candour@presbyterian.org.nz - Editor

Lloyd Geering is and has been a great teacher and leader in our time. But he does not represent the faith of the Church, at least not in his latest offering in *Candour*. He is mistaken about the Church's understanding of our formulations of faith, mistaken about the usefulness of confessions in the modern era, mistaken about the findings of modern scholarship, and, most of all, mistaken about the nature of truth.

The Church, since its inception, has known the danger of worshipping words as if they were truth itself rather than mirrors of the truth. St Paul, in his reflection on wisdom, rejected those clever and skilled in rhetoric and logic in favour of those who choose to accept the words of Christ and trust in them. Paul clearly was not impressed with those who could use words impressively.

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Cor 1)

No lesser person than the great theologian Augustine knew intimately the danger of allowing words to replace the reality of Christ. For him, nothing that "body and soul" could be or do could replace the truth of God in Godself. No activity of humankind and especially the activity of our minds could contain the truth of God or otherwise completely express it.

"For he, too, has a true [real] soul who has not a great soul; since the essence of body and soul is not the essence of the truth [reality] itself; as is the Trinity, one God, alone, great, true, truthful, the truth. (St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 8,2)

Recognising this, the Church has never regarded its creeds as absolute statements. So the suggestion that since Schleiermacher theologians have abandoned an absolutist conception of revelation thus rendering creeds obsolete, misrepresents the mainstream of theological opinion. The Church has not abandoned Confessions and Creeds but has continued using and, indeed, creating them, as a central part of its worship and its mission in the world. Many new confessions have arisen since the age of Schleiermacher.

Perhaps more disturbing than this misrepresentation of history, however, is Professor Geering's inconsistency around the issue of truth. He would have us believe that the laying down of some key truth statements which can define some agreed directions for Christian discourse is now superseded by a new approach to truth that doesn't require such guidance. It should be patently clear, however, that Lloyd uses the discourse of an old empiricism to make such claims.

The old empiricism proclaimed that the pursuit of truth begins with an assumption of doubt concerning any claim to knowledge. Doubt could be overcome only by a repeatable experience (repeated experiments which garnered the same result). But this never properly explained why scientists persisted, sometimes for years, with theories that could not be sustained in this way. It never explained how theories such as Einstein's theory of relativity could arise and persist for many years prior to their being experimentally verified. How is it that theories like these maintained such power within the scientific community when they did not allow for, or were not open to, experimental investigation?

The fact is that scientists as much as anyone else rely on a faith-based approach to the discovery of truth. Such faith arises in the vicinity of truth as it brings together, not experimentally but aesthetically, a pleasing coincidence of observations which, though sub-experimental, powerfully hint at what is, in fact, the case. Michael Polanyi called this "tacit thinking" and made the case in his ground-breaking book *Science, Faith and Society* that old empiricist views "failed to recognise the role which personal commitments play in the practice of science".

He reworked much of this material for the Gifford Lecture series of 1951-2, entitled *Personal Knowledge* in which he showed that scientific method did not yield truth mechanically. All knowing, he showed, no matter how formalised, relies upon personal commitments... He gives the example of Copernicus, who declared that, contrary to our experience, the Earth revolves around the Sun. He claims that Copernicus arrived at the Earth's true relation to the Sun not as a consequence of following a method, but via "the greater intellectual satisfaction he derived from the celestial panorama as seen from the Sun instead of the Earth."

So science as a search for truth is not fueled by an underlying philosophy of doubt, but by one of beauty and though we may need to test our *descriptions* (our formulations) of the truth we don't hypothesise by doubt – we hypothesise always "in faith". Even Lloyd's hypotheses are, indeed, faith statements. That there is no heaven and will be no new earth is clearly a faith statement made on the basis of a confessional discourse which proceeds, as he admits, from the heritage of 19th century German liberalism.

That the Bible cannot be treated as representing the truth about God, a further claim of Lloyd's, is also a faith statement. A whole variety of societies from Jews to Asians to Greeks and Arabs and Nordic peoples over at least 4,000 years saw and have treated the Bible as containing a beautiful truth about all things – that they were created by a loving God in order to reflect that same love in their very existence. Furthermore, that this God did not create and desert creation – but that love meant a personal commitment to what was made, which has been represented for all time and eternity in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This represents the uniquely Christian contribution to this history of faith. This Jesus is God, the living God, in the act of being personally committed to creation. In many ways it takes a greater leap of faith (in a far less logical direction) to deny that the Bible contains a beautiful central truth about God and creation than it does to confess it. Yet this is the direction Lloyd would have us take.

For the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, the adoption of the Kupu Whakapono will represent not a false step, but a step coherent with the greater stream of Christian faith. It won't be a perfect step. It can't be because we will forever be perfecting our formulations in regard to the God we worship. Words, as such, are simply never enough. In many ways it will be a step back in that we will once again identify ourselves with that great stream of faith which has flowed from the Temple of Christ's sacrifice ever since that day of the Cross outside a city wall. In doing so, however, we will inevitably move forward because to step into that stream is to take advantage of the great tide of God's will and working within the Church. It is not a tide of doubt, but one of beauty and belief. Come, join us in the water...

Is preaching poetry or poetry preaching?

Susan Jones, Timaru Presbyterian, South Canterbury

In Scripture the prophets are gruff and challenging but poetical in their pronouncements. They have had the benefit of an editor to smooth their words and balance their cadences! For myself I certainly find a well balanced sentence easier to listen to and absorb, though too much smoothness about the rhetoric and I begin to distrust the sincerity of the speaker. Much polish sometimes suggests that too much of a barrier has been carefully erected between me and the speaker. (On occasions I have been the speaker erecting such a barrier so I know the feeling from both sides.)

I only rarely describe myself as a poet - that's something to do with self-confidence or Southern training against self advertisement! I have written poems, however, welcoming the opportunity to allude to content rather than slavishly explain it (sometimes to death). I've become braver at using them as part of a sermon or as a waiata (song) after it.

In a poem, you hope the reader gets the allusion, but you seldom know if they do, since the poem usually wafts off into middle earth without any reference from the reader/hearer back to the writer. Story also employs the same understated method. The apparent post-modern liking for story may suggest that the way poetry and story-telling get their point across without the same need to explain and delineate or lecture is welcome in these times of concentrated, focused text and twitter messaging. If we can leave out the vowels in words, why can't we leave out conjunctions in sermons!

Often story and poetry allow for a number of meanings to come out of the words. The variety of people in front of the wordsmith come to the shared experience with a variety of backgrounds. Words which allow for creative width of meaning may allow all to be more satisfied than a more linear didactic approach. Would that mean we welcomed a greater variety of people into our churches?

On the other hand, there are times when preaching needs to be direct. When it is a teaching tool, precision of words and terms is important. The right information needs to be given out and received with as little distortion as possible on the way. In such preaching, a poetical attitude aids the process indirectly in, for example, simple attention to the rhythm of a sentence. Particular words are chosen to put the emphasis on the right word or the most useful word for people to get the point.

The preacher with the poetic ear (or eye) will weed out repetitious use of words unless they serve the argument. They will keep sentences short and punchy – where that is the mood of the sermon – or lengthen them so they glide swan-like across our consciousness. They will employ images and metaphors that illustrate explanations to capture the imagination and help lecture-type material to go home to heart as well as head.

Each to their own, however. Extemporaneous preaching, with ad libs peppered throughout, convey urgency, sincerity and connection. Listeners forgive or don't even notice multiple use of words and awkward sentences because the speaker's passion is communicating something over and above word choice and arrangement. On a bad week, poring over a script, carefully crafted for balance, imagery and rhythm, can produce a stilted result that soothes the reader asleep in seconds!

Few of us can switch from one style to another mid-sermon. Though, once I listened to a retiring University orator speak at an Otago graduation, deeply enjoying his use of words and his clever, amusing argument. Then, I saw him hesitate as he turned a page. With only a slight check he continued with vocabulary only a little less rich, sentences only a little less well-constructed. He finished the speech soon after, sitting down to well-deserved applause. I later asked someone who had been on the platform if he had lost the last few pages of his speech – he had. The final two pages were not there when he confidently turned to his penultimate page. What a nightmare! Yet the literary skill of the man was great enough that most would not have noticed the difference. I doubt whether I could have coped as well. In ministry we are often asked for the on the spot prayer or devotion or few words, but not in front of thousands in a town hall.

As we preach to our congregations year in and year out, lectionary cycle after cycle, we owe them – and God – the best we can do, given the exigencies of the job. If we use a contemporary style, speak to powerpoint images, use a full script, or ad lib from brief notes or mind maps, we need to remember the main point. The main point is how Jesus Christ helps us reach our fullest human potential. We preach and poet to make this Good News accessible to those who might otherwise miss it. We proclaim Jesus Christ, redeemer of humanity. What a sentence I have just written! What a responsibility. It requires our best preaching, our best poetry. God help us in that task.

The poem which accompanies this article is for free use in ministry situations where they might help people cope with the recent disasters of mine explosions and earthquakes.

We're here.

Shocked, we heard the breaking news,
The numbers made little sense
and yet too much sense.
Almost two rugby teams!

We watched tears flow down
television screens, heard interviews,
sixty a day by the mayor alone,
felt strain, tension, and waited...

Suddenly we were all experts
on the shape of coal mines,
composition of gases, rescue options
and the whereabouts of miners' tags.

Then, a big bang of super heated gas
brought it all to nothing, The end.
Hope extinguished. Abruptly final.
So abruptly, God saw his son killed.

Bells toll for twenty nine men,
Candles flicker, light in darkness.
Love pours into banks, flowers lie,
Letters support, texts donate \$3.

New Zealand mourns by small rituals
white armband on black jersey;
flags half-mast, draping an empty Council chair.
Just like Jesus, they lie in the dark tomb

We aim to be candles in this darkness,
signs of hope. For out of darkness,
Christ brought the possibility of new life
for twenty nine New Zealand families and their families
and their families and their families...all our families.

Susan Jones

The enduring power of metaphors

Mary-Jane Konings, Timaru Presbyterian, South Canterbury

As preachers, part of our task is to communicate metaphors that speak to the eternal truths of life. Talking about truth isn't politically correct in our postmodern context, but metaphors have a marvelous ability to transcend discourse and speak into people's worlds. Sometimes the metaphors jump right off the pages of scripture. In other cases, the metaphor emerges in a conversation, or after late night wrestling with an issue.

This language needs to be more than clever emotional rhetoric, but metaphors that are driven by, or articulate a new way of seeing the world, emerge from theological reflection. The creative energy for uncovering fresh metaphors often comes from tensions, miscommunications, and the clash of different perspectives.

A classic clash is when Scripture meets our culture. You will know as well as I do the feeling of cringing at particular lectionary readings – although we may well cringe at different readings! At least there are four to choose from each week... and if you don't follow the lectionary, you may avoid this difficult encounter altogether.

That would be a pity, I think. Part of our prophetic ministry is redescribing or reimagining the world.¹ Brueggemann is an Old Testament scholar with a keen eye for where his work impacts pastoral ministry and the pulpit. In order for us to truly function in a prophetic ministry, we have to find ways of allowing the Scripture to impact us. I am fairly accomplished at avoiding this – the lectionary is one way of forcing me to at least look at a variety of passages weekly. A second discipline is our weekly staff Bible study. A third is my personal study. In each case, there is a need to engage with or encounter Scripture.

The creative energy for uncovering fresh metaphors often comes from tensions, miscommunications, and the clash of different perspectives."

Congregations can be safe places for us to explore the impact of different metaphors on our world views, or as Brueggemann puts it, "to practice a different rhetoric."²

I write a Kids Friendly call to worship each week. They are based on the lectionary psalm and can be found at <http://calltoworship.blogspot.com/>. Time allowing, I like to play with the metaphors found in the psalms, and see what they might look like to New Zealand children in 2011. Sometimes I write calls that reflect our local landscape. Naming the Hunter Hills and the Waitaki River both helps to anchor our sense of belonging, and brings a fresh way of looking and hearing to the Psalms for our older members. At other times, it is simply expressing the same idea using different words, for example Ps 124 is reexpressed on August 21.

Writing this blog is one discipline I follow to explore the metaphors from Scripture for the children that I work with week by week. Rather than explaining to urban kids what a snare is, I look for another way to communicate the idea.

¹ Prophets: Voices of Alternative Imagination, Walter Brueggemann, Block Course BIBX 412 Auckland 2005

² Prophets: Voices of Alternative Imagination, Walter Brueggemann, Block Course BIBX 412 Auckland 2005

Barbara Brown Taylor has a wonderful chapter on imagination in *The Preaching life*.³ There are all sorts of ways to put this imagination to work, both within the traditional preaching format, and out. Sometimes we need help to break out of our traditional thinking patterns, to see differently, to hear differently because the familiar pattern of worship has lulled us into a sense of complacency. Metaphors can be used within preaching to paint word pictures; they can be developed more fully in a drama, or poem, or displayed as images or symbols. For example, we've used copious quantities of blue material laid out on the floor of the church to help our parish council visualise crossing the Jordan into the promised land. We asked them to place themselves where they were in the journey of becoming one parish. They found it helpful to use a more intuitive process to see not only where they were, but also to see the other members of council placed themselves.

So – what are the criteria? Will any metaphor do? For me, a good metaphor is one that helps me think outside the box. A metaphor often works because it juxtaposes two dissimilar ideas in a way that creates new and energising ways of looking at things. It is broad enough to communicate to a wide variety of people, and yet pointed enough to create “aha” moments. Great metaphors connect with both cognitive and emotional centers, and release energy to change things. Useful metaphors both connect with people where they are, and help them to have insight.

Unhelpful metaphors constrain our thinking. They are restrictive rather than springboards, they disempower and drain energy. Sometimes metaphors that are pushed too literally have the same effect. Sometimes unhelpful metaphors are the comfortable ones that allow us to sit with the status quo. If you have to explain a metaphor, it loses the ability to impact people.

Creating and using metaphors wisely is more than simply clever use of language. It requires a certain flexibility of worldviews, an inner vision, and an ability to discern both our context and our congregation. Sitting with the Old Testament prophets is a useful training ground that can help prepare us to recognise useful phrases and images that bear repeating in other situations. Sometimes making the image more concrete, using elements you can see and touch, brings a shift in perspective and understanding.

Finally, metaphors need to be critiqued. This kind of language is not liner or prescriptive. It is not direct communication, but rather a story with which people engage at all sorts of levels, and the message they come away with may well not be the one you intended. As preachers, part of our challenge is to model asking and answering the “Where is God in this” question? When people discover the answers to that question for themselves, the insight stays with them.

3 Taylor, Barbara Brown, 'The Preaching Life,' Cowley Publications, Massachusetts 193

Christian Young Person and Family Worker

A Christian Young Person and Family worker is sought for the beautiful coastal town of Kaikoura. This will be a full time position. The successful candidate will be part of the staff of, and working with, St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Kaikoura, which has a clear missional vision. Remuneration will be commensurate with skills and experience.



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Preaching needs the ambiguity of poetry

Malcolm Gordon, St Paul's Katikati, Kaimi

At the centre of Scripture is a collection of poems. This is not insignificant. All of them have lost their musical settings; most of them (for most of us) have lost their original lyrical elegance and clever wordplay. Yet they still retain one crucial element: the ability to voice the core of our being, and to testify to the core of God's.

Much preaching these days seems to have become a slave to the science of application. "What does it *mean*?" and "What am I suppose to *do* with that?" are questions I hear commonly in my parish, and questions I constantly feel bound to address. And it is a science, make no mistake. The answers are expected to be precise, concrete and practical. I have also noticed a disquieting trend that once we know what a passage *does* mean (usually requiring a particular moral stance or behaviour), we are satisfied to leave it unexamined for evermore, having apparently ticked it off; satisfying its requirements for understanding and comprehension. It's a little like maths at school, you just have to show you *could* use it, but you don't *have* to once you're in the real world!

Preaching has moved closer to a scientific discourse in its pursuit of evidence, reasoned argument and plausible conclusions. Perhaps it has succumbed to the seductive notion of being "credible" which seems a far cry from talk of foolishness and stumbling blocks. It risks becoming a conversation *about* faith, rather than the living conversation *of* faith, carried out by faithful (and sometimes faithless) people.

Science abhors ambiguity, and yet ambiguity is one of the hallmarks of human existence. It is also evidenced in the life of faith, as sincere followers of Christ grapple with the ramifications of discipleship in diverse ways. One of my history lecturers used to talk about the *fallacy of the single cause*; the idea that something had happened for one reason and one reason alone, and once that reason was understood the case could be closed, shut off to all other interpretations. We have to be careful that our preaching doesn't buy into a similar illusion: that once a case is cracked, it will stay that way.

Preaching needs the ambiguity of poetry. A scientific approach to preaching specialises in telling us what is right. It addresses the mind. It satisfies our curiosity about interesting and tricky passages and points of doctrine. But we are not moved by what is right. We are, in fact, moved by the things that *move* us. We are changed when we are compelled, when our whole being is brought into contact with who God is, and transformation becomes unavoidable and irresistible.

As long as the discourse of faith is limited to the world of the rational, it will be at the mercy of the overarching narrative of that world: skepticism, a desire for proof and a demand for practical (and profitable) outcomes. For the same logic that states "God is lavishly generous toward us, let's join him in being lavishly generous to our community and our world" is susceptible to the equally logical argument: "But what's the point, the problem is too big, and my resources aren't like God's, they are finite and meagre, so I won't bother at all".

Logical faith leads us into habitual inconsistency, where we are almost too smart for our own good, reasoning and counter-reasoning our way into a lukewarm following of Christ. But ambiguity disarms the mind, displacing it from ruling the roost. And while the mind puzzles over the poetic paradoxes of following Jesus (dying in order to live, losing so one might gain etc), it seems to free the heart, the soul and the gut to be drawn up and involved in the conversation. It's like a Trojan horse that slips past our well constructed mental defenses, to our softer emotional and spiritual underbelly, which is not quite so cynical, not so worldly wise and ready with its kill-all phrase, "I've heard this before", "I know this one already".

Poetry, unlike science, is written to be read and re-read, voiced and voiced again. It doesn't grow stale with continued use, it becomes richer. Our preaching needs to embrace and incorporate the poetic. It needs language which goes beyond what makes sense, which refuses to speak only to the mind (which has wrongfully assumed all power and authority in our lives), and speaks to

people as whole beings, people with fears and feelings, as well as reason and rationality; people with bodily frailties and gut feelings, as well as well thought-out belief systems and ideologies. We may feel we are putting things in perspective by drawing uncertain people back to an objective sense of reality and faith, devoid of the influence of fluctuating emotions, but we may be, quite unintentionally, trivialising their lives. The Psalms remind us God has an ear for the cries of our hearts, however unreasonable or unpalatable.

Perhaps we have avoided the poetic aspect of preaching because we are wary of its potential to manipulate. We are familiar with the stories of preachers who have painted a verbal heaven while constructing an actual hell for susceptible people. We don't want to abuse our role, we don't want to take advantage, and these are noble reasons. If they were the only ones, we could perhaps justify an unpoetic preaching life.

But what if we *prefer* the language of science to the language of poetry? What if we like the precise, analytical approach because it gives us more control than the seemingly dangerous, definitely ambiguous language of poetry? What if we have already decided the style we like, the one that offers us the greatest level of control, and have simply bolstered the argument for it by citing dangerous exponents of emotional scheming?

“Much preaching these days seems to have become a slave to the science of application. “What does it *mean*?” and “What am I suppose to *do* with that?”

And we can see why we would make such a choice. Ambiguity can make people uncomfortable. Ambiguity can get the preacher in trouble.

I had an experience of this just a few weeks ago, preaching on the difficult text of Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. I chose to use the language of *repentance* to speak of Jesus' about-turn from refusing to heal the woman's daughter because she wasn't part of God's chosen people, to seemingly conceding defeat and granting the woman's wish. To speak of Jesus repenting was provocative; it immediately created an emotional response as well as a mental one. It created a reaction I had not foreseen and had to work hard to understand. I began to realise it was also the wording of a poet. A poet uses words to open up new worlds, using the tools of the old one. A poet can take an everyday garden-trowl-of-a-word, and dig right into our hearts and lay them bare.

Poetic ambiguity affords *us* less control, but what if it affords *God* more freedom? Is poetry precisely the tool which would allow God's Spirit to move more powerfully amongst us, with broader scope to touch and transform? What if we were to release God from the confines of our own comprehension, and embrace mystery and reclaim awe in our practice of faith? Poetry is the language of marveling, mystery and awe. In the sci-fi film, *Contact*, a scientist, witnessing first-hand the marvels of space declares, “They should've sent a poet”.

If we are going to address people as whole creatures, we must engage them poetically. Rhythm and rhyme, alliteration, allusion and analogy, parable and poem need to be given voice instead of a singular devotion to reason and application, which may be *part* of our preaching, but must never claim to be the whole. This may require us to become more comfortable with our own and other's discomfort, more robust in the face of misunderstandings (even dangerous ones) and a little more trusting that God's Spirit is the whole of God's transformative work in our people's lives, while we are only ever a part. God is made known, yet is still a mystery. God has come down to walk amongst us, yet awe and bewilderment are still among the only worthy responses. Poetic preaching is the language to speak of these things, a word that is both from this place and points beyond it, that draws us out of this world and into God's.

The Lilt of the Imagination

Hilary Smith, St Andrews Stoke, Nelson/Marlborough

Love brought me here. My husband Clive and I met in the heavens... on an aeroplane flying from London to Nice in France. Clive is from New Zealand. We married last year and New Zealand is our home. Having served as a minister in Scotland for nearly fifteen years, as well as leading quiet days and retreats using the poetry, prayers and insights of Celtic Christianity and spirituality, I am now minister of St. Andrew's Church in Stoke, Nelson.

My early life was suffused with the reciting of poetry in our family home. We enjoyed everything from Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* (The Song of the Gaels), to the King James Bible; from the poems of Robert Burns to many others besides.

My family were coast people – fisher folk – from the North East of Scotland. Their lives and work were intertwined with the seasons and rhythms of the natural world. They knew the power of the waves and the wind, the heat of the sun, the bitter cold of a Scottish winter. Their faith in God was strong.

When my grandfather, Andrew, left home on a Sunday evening to go to sea for the week, he never left without the little printed testimony of Captain John Craigie of Westray in Orkney. Into his bag it would go, along with a weeks' supply of Aberdeen butteries for the crew. My grandfather died when I was three months old. Dog-eared and with my grandfather's thumb prints on every page, the booklet is the echo of a memory, connecting me to him and his faith. In the small rural, farming and fishing communities of Scotland, the people prayed and sung together, shared stories and visions and tears. Love of God and love of the earth were woven inseparably together through storytelling, poetry, prayer and songs.

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Alexander Carmichael, became known as the kilted exciseman in 19th century Scotland. On his travels around Scotland and in particular, the Highlands and islands, he listened to the oral poetry, incantations, invocations and songs of the people he met. He wrote them down and they were later published as a collection in 1900.¹

The *Carmina Gadelica* speaks and sings of the Gaelic heart, of the Celtic Christian and sometimes pagan imagination of generations of crofters and cottars, herdsman, shepherds and fishermen. The ancient prayers of the people were chanted at the rising and setting of the sun, invocations were said for blessing at the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one, rhythms of praise for the days and the turning of the seasons, songs of thanksgiving for the planting and the harvesting of earth's fruits. The poems, prayers and songs of the Gaels reflected a way of living, loving and understanding the world that would have probably been lost forever, had it not been for Alexander Carmichael.

Cold winters in Scotland meant evenings sat at the fireside, hearing my uncle Jim tell stories of our family and of his seafaring adventures. Or my father, Joe, reading the poetry of Robert Burns who is commonly thought of for his love of wine, women and song (and Burns did write much about all three), although many of his poems also conveyed a powerful message for his time and for all time. His famous poem, "A Mans a Man for a' that" still touches a chord in the hearts of all who cherish freedom, equality and brother/sisterhood. The religious hypocrisy of Burn's day also inspired his poetry and Rabbie was never short of material to write about, given the Kirk's abuse of power and privilege at that time.

1 Carmichael, Alexander (edited by C.J Moore), 1994, *Carmina Gadelica*, Hymns and Incantations, Floris Books

The third book I grew up with was the King James Bible. On the front page was an inscription to my mother and father on the day of their marriage. I still have that Bible.

Years later, at my ordination, my mother, Maggie, gave me another King James Bible, bound in red leather. I treasure it, because it was my mother's gift to me, and because its words take me to another place, yet the same place.

A few years later, I recall listening to words from the King James Bible, read in Holy Week at St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh by a very old and wise minister who had a voice like no other I have heard before or since. With him, we travelled in time, to another place, yet the same place, accompanying Jesus on his way to the cross. The poetry and song of God for our time and for all time, speaks to us in that translation, the 400th anniversary of which, we celebrate this year. The language, transcendent, yet grounded in our experience, many of its phrases and new words, forever embedded in our daily language.

We live in a world of ever more sophisticated information technology – a multi-media age of televisions, DVDs, e-books, cell phones, ipads, ever more sophisticated computers and social networking sites like Twitter. The soundbite, the slick, professional teaching aides and productions are, we are told, what people want, need and are familiar with.

Many churches these days use and film clips, powerpoint and other technology in their mission and outreach. All over the world, not least in New Zealand, many churches are also experimenting with hi-tech online worship, most notably in rural areas. Lynne McNeil, the editor of the Church of Scotland's monthly magazine, *Life and Work*, the sister publication of *SPANZ*, writes in the August issue that "in fifty years time, church services may be wholly online through hi-tech TVs or consoles which allow active participation in worship". This may, indeed, ensure a much larger online congregation. That has to be good, hasn't it?

The third book I grew up with was the King James Bible. On the front page was an inscription to my mother and father on the day of their marriage. I still have that Bible.

Yet in appreciating the creativity of those who create the information technology for us to use, what is it that we might have forgotten about God, about ourselves and about one another in our ongoing embrace and love affair with the flickering screen and the powerpoint presentation?

The faith and poetic imagination of my colleague, Gilleasbuig Macmillan, Minister of St Giles' Cathedral has, in my view, inspired a generation. I was assistant minister at St Giles' for five years, and there, the creative imagination was encouraged and nurtured through preaching, prayer and music. We also listened to the words of faith and doubt written by the poet priest, Gerald Manley Hopkins. We painted mind pictures with the poetry of the Orcadian, George Mackay Brown, influenced as he was by the traditional stories and rhythms of his people. "Poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty in words," wrote Edgar Allan Poe. Each Sunday, we were taken to a transcendent place, yet the same place, through the poetic preaching of the Word. There were no flickering screens, no powerpoint presentations. Simply the beauty of otherness, gifting our imagination, guiding us to the heart of a beautiful God.

New Zealand is a country that reminds me of a story told by my friend and colleague, the minister, writer and poet, John Philip Newell. In one of the chapters of his very fine and challenging book, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*, he recounts the words of an Irish priest friend who described the Hebridean Island of Iona as:

“an island that...still has the freshness of the first day of creation...The grass is vibrant, the rocks glow, the strands are pure, and the cattle are fat and sleek. Yes, it can be an island of wild wind and elemental storm, but in turbulence or stillness, Iona is a place where the sounds of the Beginning can immediately be heard.”²

I, too, can hear the sounds of the Beginning in this land of the long white cloud. Clive and I are learning Te Reo Maori and in listening to the whakapapa of the Maori people and hearing wise stories from the kaumatua and the tuakana, I have felt an affinity with their oral tradition and their interweaving of land, life and afterlife. I have come to value the insights and creativity of a language and culture which we are invited to share with them.

My father, Joe, died four years ago. We had lived together for many years and he had been ill for a long time and I was his carer. As a minister and pastor, having been alongside people in their grief, I thought that I was prepared for my father’s death. How wrong I was. I can only describe his death as an explosion – in my head, my heart, my life. It was hard to be fully present to people at these times, yet I found that I was gradually able to offer a more sensitive pastoral care, because of my own experience.

I wrote my first book of poetry, *Glimpses of Light*, a raw and doubting, bittersweet, honest and affirming account of grief.

As time went on, I searched for words to help me with the meaninglessness I was feeling. I needed words to accompany me on my journey, to give me the freedom to grieve in my own way and in my own time. I read my Bible, yet somehow at that time, it was not enough for me. Some books I read seemed to me to be full of empty platitudes or espoused theologies which could have turned me into an atheist, or, at best, an agnostic. I do acknowledge however, that there are many books that do speak to others in ways that are meaningful and helpful.

I eventually found a sense of peace in a growing connection and affinity with the created world. I moved to a little cottage beside the sea, some distance from where my father and his family lived, yet still in a landscape of memory. The Celtic spiritual inheritance I had grown up with, my love of the sea, given to me by my ancestors – its stillness and movement and rhythm – the coast, the beach, the sky, and the light became places and sources of my salvation and healing. Here, I found my solace. I found my God, whose healing spirit had been at work in my heart and soul since the first day I had been left on my own.

I wrote my first book of poetry, *Glimpses of Light*, a raw and doubting, bittersweet, honest and affirming account of grief. The hope is that it can be a kind of spiritual accompaniment for people, in whatever way they might imagine that to be, and that they will find a way, however falteringly, and for however long it takes, to live with their loss.

Robert Browning wrote, “God is the perfect poet”. If that is so, then by God’s very nature of self-giving love and self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and God’s created world, God gifts us something very special indeed. Sometimes then, maybe just sometimes, in our churches and places of worship, we can switch off the computers, pull up the screens, put the remote controls to one side and instead, find our creator God speaking to us in ways we might never have imagined.

Notes

Alexander Carmichael, ed, C.J. Moore, *Carmina Gadelica, Hymns and Incantations* (Floris Books 1994)

John Philip Newell, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*, (Wild Goose Publications 2009)

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2 Newell, J P, 2009, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*, Wild Goose Publications

TAKE PART IN THE CHURCH LIFE SURVEY

What does the Church Life Survey offer your parish?

The Council of Assembly is offering to pay for any parish that wants to do the Church Life Survey. So why should your parish take up the offer?

This survey is quite unlike the dry statistics of headcounts we do in June. It is focused on the impressions and feelings of person in the pews and it asks questions about their views on a whole range of things in parish and wider life. Some examples are:

- What aspects of this church/parish do you personally most value?" and
- Which music do you find most helpful?
- Does this parish resource your spiritual journey? ... or have an effective mix in services? ... or have helpful preaching/teaching?
- Do you feel you have grown in your Christian faith this year?
- Do you feel the presence of God at work? ... at home? ... in nature?

The focus of the survey is to ask questions that could be useful to parish councils, both as a "temperature gauge" of where their people are at but also potentially as a way of knowing how the current parish programme could be made more useful. To help, once the parish has input the information from the survey through an easy-to-use website, the site will automatically generate a number of customised reports that can be downloaded for free (or sent for a small cost). It is the potential usefulness of the survey for supporting parish decision-making that was the most attractive feature for the Council of Assembly.

To participate, parishes must register individually through the survey website www.clsnz.com. The survey forms will be sent out to your parish in late October, and the survey should be done in church (either during or immediately after the service) on a Sunday of your choice in November.

The Church Life Survey is organised every five years by an interdenominational committee (on which we are represented). The last time most Presbyterian parishes participated was ten years ago. The survey is anonymous, and the organisers have ensured appropriate confidentiality for the data. For further information on the survey, contact our Presbyterian representative on the committee Margaret Galt at mgalt@paradise.net.nz.

Stories told through poetry and metaphor

In his book *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Julian Barnes tells us that he used to be an atheist, but that he is now agnostic. “I don’t believe in God, but I miss Him,” he says.

I find it really fascinating, and kind of encouraging, that movies explicitly quoting Scripture and focusing on issues of faith, significance and meaning should receive such acclaim at the world’s most important film festival.

The Palme d’Or is the highest prize awarded at Cannes. This year it went to *The Tree of Life*, a movie which begins with a quote from Job 38: 4,7 where God asks Job “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth ... when the morning stars sang together?” The movie spends the rest of the time, and it is quite long, wrestling with some answers. The runner up at Cannes, the Grand Prix, went to *Of God’s and Men* - a movie in which the most extraordinary scenes feature the worship of a small group of Christians living in Algeria. *Higher Ground* is based on a memoir by Carolyn S. Briggs about her life in an evangelical Christian community, it received high praise and 3.5 out of 4 stars from *Rolling Stone* magazine. Highly acclaimed and very controversial, Lars von Trier’s latest movie, *Melancholia*, while not specifically Christian, has enough theological themes running through it to fill a seminary library. Especially for those who are interested in eschatology.

Okay, so *Melancholia* and *Tree of Life*, in particular, are not movies that you would go to on a Friday night for some escapist entertainment or to veg out. Go and see *Planet of the Apes* or the surprisingly good *Fast and Furious 5* if you need some cerebral candy floss. These movies are for the days when you want to think about stuff; they have meta narratives, big stories, told to us through poetry and metaphor. And yes, people in the secular old Wellington movie-going audience did walk out, but they are worth hanging in for.

I do not know who it was, or when it was (perhaps at some Bible Class camp), but I do remember a speaker who told me that there was some little empty space in all human hearts that could only be filled by God.

I have a memory that in one of those Alpha tapes Nikki Gumble may have made a similar point, drawing an analogy with some ancient saying of the Japanese, or Chinese (or some other predominantly rice eating nation) that only rice could fully satiate a hunger. The analogy could be stretched I suppose; bangers and mash for the English, a big Mac with fries for Americans? I remember once making the mistake of cooking some rice for a Japanese exchange student staying with us for a few weeks. It was the wrong rice, and not cooked properly either. I felt like writing to Nikki asking if he could be a little more specific about his rice eating analogies next time.

But is there a Scriptural base for such a view? That we all have a longing, a need, that can only be filled by being in relationship with God, whether we know it or not? Maybe. Paul certainly implies something of this when he addressed all those Epicureans and Stoics and idol worshippers in Athens.

Then I get worried about what Martin Luther says “Man is like a horse. Does God leap into the saddle? The horse is obedient and accommodates itself to every movement of the rider and goes whither he wills it. Does God throw down the reins? Then Satan leaps upon the back of the animal, which bends, goes and submits to the spurs and caprices of its new rider...”. No space being filled here, no longing being met, just some kind of horse and rider thing going on.

I have just watched Simon Sinek’s address on ted.com where he explains why we are inspired by some people, leaders, messages and organisations over others (http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action.html). He talks about the primary importance of sharing beliefs, the “why?” of our lives, before talking about the how and what. He gives the example of people coming to hear Martin Luther King, not because of a programme or plan or series of outcomes, but because of the beliefs that King articulated so powerfully. It is “I have a dream” not “I have a plan” that makes the difference.

If we really do “crave meaning and order and explanation”, and if we’re “desperate for connection with something or somebody greater than ourselves” (as Rob Bell claims in his book *Love Wins*) then how are our beliefs reflected in our buildings and structures? I do wonder, given the nature of the correspondence I have received from ministers over the last weeks in particular, if there is not a widening credibility gulf between our biblical and theological understanding of the ministry which we are being called to fulfil and the demands which emerge from the context of the material environment in which that ministry is being exercised?

These are interesting times, but they also might be times filled with opportunity and possibility as we join with Job and all those today who would seek answers to the most important questions.

Thanks for all your support.