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Kathrine Bruce

The Vital Importance of the Imagination in the Contemporary Preaching Event

Abstract

This thesis suggests that the imagination is vital in the contemporary preaching event. It enables the preacher to speak into some important themes identifiable in postmodern thought. Noting the broad range of understandings of the term 'imagination' in an overview of approaches in Western history, and in a wide selection of homiletic texts, a framework for mapping the imagination is offered as an heuristic device for the homiletics classroom. A theology of imagination is presented to demonstrate the importance of imagination in the life of faith and to allay fears that it may be seen to connect preaching with fiction. Allied to this is an analysis of the sacramental nature of preaching and the role of imagination in enabling such sacramental 'seeing-as'.

Connected to enabling new seeing, preaching in the lyrical voice is discussed along with the importance of preachers shaping sermons for the ear. As imagination also has a vital role in how the preacher sees the preaching task itself, exploration of various theological entailments flowing from seeing the role of preacher through the lenses of particular governing metaphors is presented. The connections between imagination, preaching, and personality are explored, along with a critique of the understanding of imagination operating in the Myers-Briggs literature and exploration of the use of imagination in the SIFT method of preaching. A number of key issues for the practice and teaching of preaching are proposed.

**The Vital Importance of the Imagination in the
Contemporary Preaching Event**

Kathrine Sarah Bruce

A Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD

Department of Theology and Religion

**Durham University
July 2013**

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Introduction

The following thesis argues for the vital importance of imagination in contemporary preaching. If preaching is to capture and captivate it must forge connections with the hearer. Arguably, achieving such connection requires the active engagement of the imagination of the preacher as they seek to spark the same in their hearer. With this in mind, imagination needs to feature in homiletics teaching, both as a subject in its own right and as a factor shaping the teacher's approach to the structure and delivery of curriculum content.

Homiletics is here understood as the theoretical and theological underpinning of the practice of preaching. Preaching is defined as the design and delivery of an oral event which is based, in some form, on scripture and earthed in a particular cultural context. It occurs usually, though not necessarily, in a liturgical setting,¹ actively involving hearer as well as speaker, and is created in the hope of joining in with the narrative of transformative encounter between the divine, the gathered congregation, the individual, and the wider community.

Imaginative engagement has always been needed in preaching, but it is particularly striking that imagination seems to connect with a number of discernable features of the postmodern landscape. The thesis begins by establishing these connections, rooting the argument in the current context.

The question of how we might speak cogently about the imagination in terms of its function is crucial since the term has been understood and valued variously in Western history and, although a number of contemporary homileticians refer to it, the homiletic literature offers no clear, cogent framework for speaking of the imagination. Chapter two begins by examining the diverse ways in which

¹ See Stuart M. Blythe, *Open-Air Preaching as Radical Street Performance*, A Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD (University of Edinburgh, 2009), <<http://hdl.handle.net/1842/5813>> [accessed 5th April 2013]. Blythe argues for the importance of open-air preaching, critiquing the negative attitudes displayed towards this preaching form in much of the homiletic literature, and indicating that in-church preaching can learn from aspects of open-air preaching. Blythe shows how this form of preaching recognises and responds to a variety of gathered hearers, seeking to attract and interest the listener, and being open to a variety of performative styles. Whilst my own thesis focuses on in-church preaching, the argument for the centrality of imagination in preaching leaves the door wide open to learning from all forms of spoken discourse in order to connect with the diverse nature of the gathered community. Simply because the sermon occurs inside a liturgical event does not imply a homogenous audience.

imagination has been understood and valued in Western history and then offers a critical review of homiletic comment, drawn from a variety of authors from this century and the last, across different denominations, on the subject of imagination. This review leads to the conclusion that a framework of imaginative function would be profoundly helpful to teachers of preaching. Such critical overview is original to this thesis, as is the framework of imaginative function offered in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter three formulates this heuristic framework as a tool for teachers of preaching wanting to raise and explore the subject of developing imaginative preaching in a clear and comprehensive manner. Given the link between imagination and fantasy, the thesis is grounded in a robust theology of imagination, which is currently missing from the homiletic literature. This will serve to guard against the erroneous idea that in linking preaching and imagination the truth claims of the Gospel are in any sense negated. On the contrary the thesis contends that imagination and revelation are inherently linked.

Related to this is the argument that preaching has sacramental potential, the graced imagination of preacher and hearer enabling new seeing and a fresh disclosure of God. This is discussed in chapter four, where the point is made that in common with the visual image, language has multivalent, tensive possibility. The imaginative preacher will be one who gives thought to shaping the language they are using, noting that words have disclosive potential.

How we use language to encourage new vision is an important question, pertinent to the thesis that imagination is vital in preaching. It is part of imaginative function to create striking metaphors, to see new analogies, and to paint with language designed to be evocative, appealing, daring and invitational. This is preaching as poetic speech which, as Walter Brueggemann observes, peels back the layers of inanity and tedium and discloses new hope, new vision, and new possibility.² Chapter five explores this theme, arguing that what I am calling ‘lyrical preaching’, as opposed to what Brueggemann labels the more prosaic, flattened language of ‘settled reality’ and ‘pervasive reductionism³’, is marked by a desire to imaginatively grasp the disclosure of the gospel and to

² Walter Brueggemann *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1989), 1-11.

³ Brueggemann (1989), 4, 6.

render that seeing and its implications by learning from the craft of poetic expression.

Imagination is deeply connected to how we frame the world and ourselves in it. It is vital in preaching not only in terms of how we shape and express content, but also in how we see the preaching task itself. How the preacher imagines their role as a preacher affects how and why they engage in the task. Our master metaphors matter since they carry theological freight and will have practical outworking. Chapter Six explores six potential master metaphors (preacher as teacher, herald, artist, spiritual director, jazz musician and jester) and makes clear how these imaginative on-looks potentially affect theological understandings of the purpose and praxis of preaching.

The argument then shifts to focus on the understanding of imagination in the MBTI literature, not least because Leslie J. Francis and Andrew Village have developed the SIFT⁴ method of preaching which is based around MBTI, and which is inherently imaginative. Chapter seven focuses on this, critiquing the MBTI understanding of imagination which focuses on only one aspect of imaginative function, implying that those who are not strongly intuitive are not as imaginative as those who are. However, as the framework of imagination makes clear, there are four key aspects of imaginative function (sensory, intuitive, affective and intellectual) which map across onto the four aspects of MBTI (sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking). Developing the SIFT method of preaching demands that the preacher imaginatively engage with different personality types. The original point is then made that the SIFT method of preaching can be developed and used with non-Gospel text; Francis and Village apply it to the Revised Common Lectionary Gospel texts, but it works well with other texts as demonstrated at the end of chapter seven. This chapter also draws together in one place research into the dominant typologies of clergy, Readers, and male and female congregants as compared to the wider population, to underscore the vital need for an imaginative approach which seeks to connect with a wide variety of hearers; one style of preaching will not work for all – imaginative variety is needed.

⁴Leslie J. Francis and Andrew Village, *Preaching With All Our Souls: A Study in Hermeneutics and Psychological Type* (London: Continuum, 2008). The SIFT method of preaching is designed to appeal to Sensing, Intuitive, Feeling and Thinking types.

The thesis concludes that imagination is vital to preaching and must be developed as a spiritual discipline; the preacher needs to engage with imagination at each stage of the sermonic process and be willing to develop new approaches and performance methods. Allied to this, the vital place of imagination in preaching will affect the way homiletics is taught. These implications are explored in chapter eight.

Chapter nine underscores the distinctive insights of this thesis and offers a concluding summary concerning the vital importance of the imagination in the contemporary preaching event.

Chapter One: Establishing the Connections

Imaginative engagement has always been needed in preaching, but it is particularly striking that imagination seems to resonate with a number of discernable features of postmodern thought. Whilst Paul Lakeland reminds us of the variety of thinking that resides under this umbrella term,⁵ we can discern a number of common themes in the postmodern landscape which present the preacher with particular challenges and opportunities, and which call for vital imaginative engagement. Identifying these themes is important in constructing a homiletic which speaks critically and cogently from and into the context in which it is embedded. An examination of six features of the contemporary cultural context is undertaken here in order to demonstrate that imagination is an important aspect of a homiletic for the twenty-first century. An exploration of the field of meaning embraced by the term ‘imagination’ is undertaken in chapter two.

1.1 The Lack of Trust in the Dominance of Metanarrative

Jean-François Lyotard declares: ‘I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives’.⁶ By this he means a sense of indifference to Enlightenment grand stories which have been seen not only to have failed, but to have proved lethal in two world wars and the Holocaust. The danger of the metanarrative is that those who embrace it may regard themselves as different to those outside the grand story, and in that identification there may be an inbuilt superiority and a misuse of power. This is at the heart of Lyotard’s opposition to Jürgen Habermas’ view that postmodernity derailed the Enlightenment project which sought to bring justice and emancipation to society through the power of human reason, working towards informed consensus.⁷ In contrast Lyotard advocates innovation for its own sake, with no set goal to the undertaking other than waging a ‘war on totality’. The danger Lyotard discerns is that consensus becomes ‘a component of the system, which manipulates it in order to maintain and improve its performance.’ The real goal of such consensus is power and any

⁵ Paul Lakeland *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1997), xiii.

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), xxiii.

⁷ Habermas, Jürgen, ‘Modernity versus Postmodernity’, in *A Postmodern Reader*, eds., Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 102, 98.

threat to the consensus is a threat to the power holders. In place of the metanarrative, Lyotard points to the importance of the ‘petit récit’ or ‘little narrative’ in a move that heightens the importance of the local, particular, and personal. He also comments that postmodern knowledge ‘refines our sensitivity to differences.’⁸ This respect for difference within postmodern thought is demonstrated by the rise in social activism and a new hearing, for example, of the voices of women, members of non-dominant ethnic groups in society, and gay and lesbian perspectives.

A key question for homiletics is how can the preacher deal with incredulity towards the Christian metanarrative whilst also respecting and embracing the importance of the local and particular? Of principal importance is the engagement of imagination in its affective function (developed fully in chapter three) which allows us to enter into the feelings and perspectives of another. Rather than feeling threatened and reacting with hostility to this ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ the preacher needs to understand and appreciate the causes of this rebuttal. Metanarratives are governed by presiding principles and values which can be harnessed to the abuse of power and the dominance of the weak. Consider the Nazi metanarrative of supremacy:

Structurally, the gas chambers are driven by the same presiding principles that were taken for granted as the positive aspects of modernity: the principles of rational efficiency.’⁹

The Christian metanarrative of God as Creator and Redeemer, breathing life into the cosmos moment by moment, Lord of life and death, relentlessly seeking humanity in love, has frequently been corrupted. We see this in the crusades; the marriage of mission to the extension of Empire; the abuse of women, and the scandal of child sexual abuse by members of the clergy. Stuart Murray sees such corruption as most evident in the wedding of Christianity to Christendom stemming from the Constantinian settlement, leading to collusion with the social values of the powerful, an authoritarian ethos, oppression, domination by a male

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), xiii, xxiv, 82, 60, 70, xxv.

⁹ Thomas Doherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Harlow: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 12.

professional caste, and the suppression of dissent.¹⁰ An empathetically imaginative preacher needs to inhabit the suspicion of the postmodern hearer, to hear and articulate that suspicion and to address it directly, without pretence. Such empathetic imagination is based on a theological anthropology which articulates the human propensity to distort the good.

Alasdair McFadyen's work, *Bound to Sin*, offers a profoundly helpful theological perspective for the preacher, particularly in relation to the human propensity to such distortion. His thesis is focussed on the dynamics of child abuse and the Holocaust, but his ideas are helpful in understanding the dynamics at work in any situation where power is abused. McFadyen speaks of willing as the 'personal energy through which one's life is directed, committed and orientated.'¹¹ He argues that sin unplugs the whole person from the field of force exerted by the dynamics of the Triune God. The will becomes held in bondage, and worship then becomes distorted and descends into idolatry. When the Christian metanarrative has become distorted and corrupted in the ways Murray identifies, the imaginative preacher needs to understand what dynamics are operating within the Church and how that looks to the observer, making it clear that what they see is a false expression of the reality and love of God. The Church is not above failure, nor above criticism. If the preacher's message is to have any credibility then this must be acknowledged.

The postmodern hearer may respond with the criticism that since grand stories are open to abuse, would it not be wiser to shun such overarching narratives? Certainly, Lyotard's emphasis on the *petit récit* reminds us of the importance of the local, of the little stories of people and communities which the imaginative preacher will address, not least because in gathering such stories the hearer recognises something of their world reflected in the sermon. Also, identifying the little narratives means that those often side-lined are heard in a way congruent with Christ's ministry. In attending to the stories of the poor and marginalised, Christ offered a new overarching story, one which favoured the poor, the weak and the powerless. It is not a question of dismissing the concept of metanarrative,

¹⁰ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom, Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 183.

¹¹ Alasdair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 203.

but of analysing the grand stories around us through the lenses of a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’.¹²

Ironically, the claim for the overthrow of metanarratives itself operates as a metanarrative. Pat Waugh makes the point that:

If we continue to invest in ‘grand narratives’, such narratives can be said to exist. Grand narratives can be seen to be ways of formulating fundamental human needs and their ‘grandness’ is a measure of the urgency and intensity of the need.¹³

Fredric Jamieson, in his introduction to *The Postmodern Condition* speaks of ‘buried masternarratives’ by which he means that the great master narratives have not disappeared but have a continued and unconscious effect on the way we think and act.¹⁴ The empathetic preacher will explore the operative metanarratives and analyse how they affect others, who benefits and why? The gift of postmodern thought for the preacher is to call her to have the humility and honesty to unmask the ‘lurking cultural imperialism’¹⁵ which may distort the narrative of God’s love for creation. The gift of the preacher to postmodern thought is to offer an empathetic, open dialogue which offers challenge and hope. One of the key areas for postmodern homiletics to stress is that the power dynamics operating in the Christian metanarrative favour the weak; if they do not then the story being presented as Christian is bogus.

1.2 Many Truths, No Centre

In postmodern thought there are many ‘truths’ and no centre. As Stanley J. Grenz observes, it ‘marks the end of a single, universal worldview.’¹⁶ Truth is understood as socially constructed. Richard Rorty defines truth as ‘what is better for us to believe’ and ‘what our peers will let us get away with saying’.¹⁷ This is politically dangerous since, in some revisionist groups, people are permitted to deny the reality of the Holocaust. In a context in which meaning is understood as

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, transl. by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27.

¹³ Pat Waugh, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Arnold, (1992), 9.

¹⁴ Fredric Jamieson, ‘Introduction’ to Lyotard (1987), xii.

¹⁵ Waugh (1992), 9.

¹⁶ Stanley J. Grenz *A Primer in Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 12.

¹⁷ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 10, 176.

being what works and is created by individuals and communities then, as Veith puts it, ‘What’s true for you may not be true for me’.¹⁸

The particularity inherent in the Gospel presents a key challenge for homiletics in an age of pluralism and relativism. Where there is awareness of the plurality of perspectives and religious viewpoints, relativism calls us to think carefully about truth claims, and to listen wisely to the experiences of others, particularly to those voices which are silenced, or airbrushed out as a political inconvenience.

Theologies of preaching from a wide variety of contexts and cultures assert the presence of the Spirit found exclusively in Christ’s birth, life, death, and resurrection. Donald Coggan, a founder of the College of Preachers in the UK context, asserts the centrality of Christ at the heart of his theology of preaching.¹⁹ He reiterates this in *A New Day for Preaching*, also giving a central place to the role of the Spirit in the preaching endeavour:

When true preaching takes place, the main actor is – not the preacher, nor the congregation, but the Holy Spirit ... the most active, the vital part of the enterprise, is taken by the third person of the blessed Trinity.²⁰

David Buttrick, writing from the North American context, is clear that preaching is a Spirit-led continuation of the preaching of Christ to the church and through the church to the world, commissioned by the resurrection, seeking reconciliation, faith and repentance.²¹ Coming from the same context, Fred Craddock describes preaching as the ‘making present and appropriate to the hearers the revelation of God.’²² A South Korean homiletician, Unyong Kim Jangsuk maintains that:

Preaching flows from the life of Jesus, the Christ, and receives power from its nature as an announcement of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.²³

¹⁸ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Culture* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1994), 34-36.

¹⁹ Donald Coggan, *Stewards of Grace* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), 24-27.

²⁰ Donald Coggan, *A New Day for Preaching* (London: SPCK, 1996), 15.

²¹ David Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997), 449-459.

²² Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1985), 51.

²³ Unyong Kim Jangsuk, ‘Preaching Ministry in the Postmodern Era’, *Journal of Korean and American Ministries and Theology*, Vol. 2 (Spring 2009), 34.

A homiletic which speaks into a culture of pluralism and relativism will need to find ways of speaking plausibly in a variety of contexts without losing the distinctive particularity which is at the heart of the Gospel. In contact with those of other faith perspectives and none, the preacher needs to be open to learning from their particularity, allowing other viewpoints to shape and hone his own. How does the Gospel sound to a member of another faith tradition, or to an atheist or agnostic? How might the Spirit of God teach the preacher through these sources? In order to begin to answer that question preachers need to listen carefully, open to learning from the viewpoint of the other. This requires particular sensitivity to those hearers whose faith might best be described as at the 'individuated-reflective' stages (James Fowler's stage four), which needs to resolve messiness and which tends to take an either/or position in relation to other faith perspectives.²⁴ Inhabiting the viewpoint of another is a key skill in enabling a new way of seeing. Such homiletic empathy is rooted in the affective function of the imagination.

Graham Johnston makes the assumption that postmodern thought is an aspect of the life of those in the world and the pew, but crucially he makes no comment on postmodern thought in the pulpit, only recommending that preachers should listen to and understand postmodern people.²⁵ His preacher seems to stand as an outpost of modernity peering into the postmodern mist. Even the title of his book *Preaching to a Postmodern World* implies that the preacher is somehow separated from the postmodern milieu. He writes:

Postmodernity comes with a generation that has grown up in broken homes, been lied to by politicians, and deceived by the church and community leaders...²⁶

The operative assumption throughout his book is that the generation he refers to has no preachers. What about those preachers who do stand inside the postmodern milieu and understand the doubts, fears, suspicions, and desires of many postmoderns? Such preachers also belong to the community of faith and need imagination to grasp and articulate how the grammar of the Christian faith

²⁴ Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis, eds., *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1992), xxii, 21-24, 49-53.

²⁵ Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books: 2001), 82, 78.

²⁶ Johnston (2001), 55.

can inform, challenge, and learn from aspects of postmodern thought. What theological resources are available to assist the preacher in understanding their role?

The fragmentation in the contemporary theological landscape offers both challenges and riches to the preacher. John Franke describes the fragmentation in theology by looking at tensions within liberalism and conservatism, which have arisen in relation to the challenges of postmodern thought.²⁷ The emergent picture shows a blurring of the old fault lines between liberal and conservative, as both groups react differently within themselves in relation to postmodern themes. This opens up possibilities for fruitful dialogue between groups in both camps seeking to respond to aspects of postmodern thought. Franke identifies a wonderful irony as Christian theologians struggle to respond to postmodern ideas:

Ironically, one of the general critiques of postliberals by liberals will be that they have become too conservative, while conservatives will accuse postconservatives of being too liberal.²⁸

In 'Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age',²⁹ Roger Olson describes a number of features of postconservatism which he sees as a grouping trying to respond to postmodernism, whilst still embracing the defining characteristics of evangelicalism: namely, a stress on the importance of conversion, faith sharing, the authority of the Bible, and the atoning work of Christ. There is much in his description that is helpful to the preacher. He identifies openness in postconservatism, which is expressed in willingness to dialogue with non-evangelical theologians. He identifies the postconservative recognition of the dominance of conservative theology by white Eurocentric males, and a consequential desire to make space for other voices. Theology is seen as a second-order reflection, occurring under the norm of scripture, and drawing on culture, the current experience of the church, and popular religion. In approaching scripture, Olson argues that postconservative evangelical

²⁷ John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 29-40.

²⁸ Franke (2005), 39.

²⁹ Roger E. Olson, 'Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age', *The Christian Century* (May 3, 1995), 480-483.

theologians reject a 'wooden' approach, which tends to atomise the texts and regard scripture as a fixed repository of doctrinal truth. He identifies a holistic agenda in the postconservative handling of scripture, seeing the parts as interdependent aspects of the divinely authored narrative of God with us. Postconservatives are impatient with conservative wrangling concerning the 'right interpretation of the bible'. Conservatives tend to stress grace, at the expense of nature; postconservatives, drawing from the wisdom of Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologies of nature and grace, have a more positive view of the world as God's creation in which we live and co-create with God. Linked to this, Olson identifies a 'postconservative hope of near-universal salvation'. This does not extend to absolute universalism, or to identifying saviours other than Christ, but recognises the immanence of the Holy Spirit working for all people. Allied to this is a rejection of triumphalism and a tentative humility in postconservative theology. Olson's description speaks of an approach which seeks to be imaginatively faithful to evangelical principles, combining a willingness to see through the eyes of another with a trust in God which extends beyond the false security of partisan theology.

Franke identifies an internal division within liberalism between revisionists and postliberals. David Tracy's revisionist agenda is to ensure that theology speaks coherently in the public sphere,³⁰ rather than being primarily the internal discourse of the church. His position rests on the assumption of universal human experience which can be correlated with Christianity, leading to the erosion of a distinctively Christian theology. The postliberal perspective of Hans Frei, built on by George Lindbeck and others, seeks to redescribe theology so that scripture rather than the secular world sets the agenda for the process of Christian formation.

Even a cursory glance at this theological fragmentation, which is all that space permits, suggests to the preacher seeking theological resources to assist her homiletic that there is wisdom to be found in theologians across the liberal-evangelical divide, and that, bluntly, suspicion and mistrust within the church will not further the cause of the gospel. The work of the postliberal George Lindbeck offers a helpful model to the postmodern preacher.

³⁰ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (London: SCM, 1981).

Lindbeck identifies three main approaches to religion: the cognitive-rationalist approach, the experiential-expressive approach, and the cultural-linguistic approach. The latter, though not without weaknesses, speaks coherently into a culture of plurality and relativism, and is useful to a homiletic which takes seriously postmodern thought. The cognitive-rationalist approach to religion operates on the assumption that doctrines express propositions which correlate to objective truth claims. Preaching based on this understanding is likely to be deductive, based on a one-way didactic approach from the pulpit to the pew. The postmodern mind is likely to find this difficult, as it assumes the authority of the preacher and thus seems to disempower the hearer, and it does not take seriously how our situatedness affects the discovery and apprehension of faith. The second approach seems more promising, regarding religious doctrine as the external expression and codification of internal apprehensions of the divine. Preaching based on this understanding will seek to articulate and name the hearers' inner experiences of God. The difficulty here is the assumption that religion is primarily an individual experience. Lindbeck sees this privatisation as a 'structure of modernity' which denies the cultural significance of how religious language creates a readiness for the apprehension of faith. Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach, by contrast, regards doctrines as 'communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action.' His approach regards religions as 'a kind of cultural and /or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.'³¹

Lindbeck's model is useful to homiletics for a number of key reasons. First, it acknowledges that language and culture play a key role in creating the possibility and conditions for faith. Does this mean there is no propositional truth in Christianity, relating to objective reality? Is Lindbeck's stance bound to fideism with no basis in rational truth? What Lindbeck offers us is an operational understanding of truth. If a propositional statement lacks intrasystemic integrity can it really be spoken of as truth? As an example he gives us the image of a crusader declaring '*Christus est Dominus*' as authority for cleaving the infidel's skull, and argues that in this instance the proposition is intrasystemically false.³²

³¹ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine, Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25th Anniversary edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 2-3, 8, 4, 19.

³² Lindbeck (2009), 50.

The imagination of the hearer needs to be grasped by a vision of how the entirety of the Christian ‘language’ shapes, frames, and modifies behaviour such that truth is consistently expressed and inhabited. Lindbeck is not denying the place of propositional truth in Christian faith. He is calling for a keen awareness of the dangers of cultural imperialism lurking in the hands of those who wield truth. In this sense the truth of a statement is seen in the fruit it bears. Nevertheless, we tend to approach doctrines with the sense that they do enable us to shape a theology which speaks adequately about the nature of God. Jeff Astley identifies this danger in Lindbeck’s thesis: doctrine seems to be relegated to a regulative function, rather than being in any sense referential, which may lead to some holding the postliberal school at arm’s length.³³ Nevertheless, there is much of value in Lindbeck’s approach.

The second point is that in engaging in a context of plurality it is essential that the church has a clear sense of self identity. Lindbeck’s approach asks for just such a clear sense of Christian identity. This identity is forged in community, and based on the grammar of doctrine which shapes the nature of interaction within the community and with the wider context. This identity is rooted in doctrines of creation and incarnation which call the Christian to engage with the world as the work of God and the target of salvation. Here is the refutation of the critique, coming from a variety of voices, that Lindbeck is espousing a withdrawal from the world:

It is not the theological approach of a movement which seriously thinks it is in possession of some insights into a God who is interested in the whole world.³⁴

It seems that the future of Christianity lies, for Lindbeck, in being a cognitively dissonant sectarian movement; its identity and authenticity demand this.³⁵

On the contrary, if the community of faith understands and is true to its identity as a people created and redeemed by God, co-creators in the world, and called to serve that world in Christ’s name, then it cannot possibly accept ghettoization.

³³ Astley, Jeff, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 117.

³⁴ Clive Marsh, *Christianity in a Post-Atheist Age* (London: SCM, 2002), 47.

³⁵ James. M. Gustafson, ‘The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University,’ *Proceedings from the Catholic Theological Society*, Vol. 40 (1985), 86.

Such withdrawal from the world is the result of a stunted imagination resulting from a distorted self-identity.

Third, Lindbeck stresses the importance of language in shaping identity. The better we know our language the more we are able to experience and articulate. Preaching is an important aspect of the way the church learns her language and grasps the grammar of what it means to be Christian. Effective preaching takes the language of faith and uses it to paint alternative vistas of possibility which challenge the dominant narratives of the culture and challenge our collusion with them, offering other ways of being in the world and new horizons of hope. Without the language we cannot imagine different possibilities and therefore cannot hope to inhabit the kingdom of God in the present, communicate news of the kingdom to the world, or shape future possibilities.

Fourth, Lindbeck stresses the importance of community in the shaping of the narrative of faith. His willingness to explore how faith is formed in language opens Lindbeck to the criticism of those within Christianity who want to cling to the idea of Christianity as an unassailable propositional edifice, using this as the basis for apologetics and mission. The issue here seems to be one of process. How do people come to faith? The process is analogous to how people learn a language. Such learning is based on immersion; competence grows through exposure to the community of speakers. Similarly, people, on the whole, don't accept the propositions of Christianity first and then decide to belong to a community. They are often attracted by the cadences of the language even if they don't fully understand it and even if aspects of it are difficult to accept. The language of faith is learned in community. Skilled practitioners are formed in community. In a context of pluralism and relativism, Lindbeck's thesis stresses the importance of belonging in order to learn one's identity. Competent speakers of a language do not need to be experts in linguistics, they intuitively know what sounds right and what does not, and when it is appropriate to break the rules of this grammar.

One of the tasks of preaching is to help to shape competent speakers of the language of faith. Sometimes this is seen when the preacher articulates something the hearer has intuitively known but not consciously expressed. Herein lies one of the 'aha' moments of preaching where the hearer gains insight and increased vision. The preacher needs to employ creative imagination to

shape and inhabit language which entices, invites, challenges, and affirms, stretching the landscape of potential experience of faith. In short, preachers are to help shape identity by preaching in the lyrical voice: using imagination to communicate with captivating images, seeking to open the hearer to wonder, new seeing, and transformed and transformative engagement.

1.3 A Loss of Trust in Authority

A hermeneutic of suspicion operates in the postmodern critique of the relationship between authority and power. Michel Foucault comments that ‘every assertion of knowledge is an act of power.’³⁶ Heath White notes that ‘the authority to determine what counts as true is also the power to determine who counts as important.’³⁷ For the preacher this begs many questions. Can the preacher speak with any authority? If so what kind of authority might gain a hearing and from where is that authority derived?

One of David Norrington’s many objections to preaching is that clergy dominance expressed through the oppressive sermon leads to immature Christians.³⁸ Doug Pagitt, in a more recent critique of preaching, argues that preaching has become ‘speaching’, the implication being that it is an authoritarian practice which puts the preacher in position of ‘teller’.³⁹ Murray similarly denounces preaching as ‘declaiming from an authoritarian height’ and is scathing in his condemnation of preaching as a vestige of Christendom, ‘related to clericalism, massive buildings, unchallengeable proclamation and nominal congregations.’⁴⁰ Implicit in these critiques of preaching is a failure to differentiate between *authoritarian* and *authoritative* preaching. Preaching as an authoritarian and controlling practice can have no place in a postmodern homiletic. However, as John Tinsley has pointed out, ‘it is possible to be authoritative without being authoritarian’.⁴¹ He points out that the nature of Christian communication set forth in the incarnation is indirect: God is not

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed., Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 133.

³⁷ Heath White, *Post-Modernism 101* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), 55.

³⁸ David C. Norrington, *To Preach or Not to Preach: The Church's Urgent Question* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 82-83.

³⁹ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), 21-32.

⁴⁰ Murray (2004), 230.

⁴¹ John Tinsley, ‘Communication, Or “Tell It Slant”’, *Theology Today*, Vol. 35, No 4 (1979), 398 – 404.

declaiming from a great height, but walking with us. God ‘tells it slant’, revealing the divine nature in the ambiguity of the ordinary. In the incarnation God comes, awaited yet unexpected, glorious yet veiled, the Shekinah in skin, authoritative yet, in kenotic perfection, not authoritarian. Effective preaching needs to be authoritative: it needs to carry conviction with imagination, passion, and vulnerability. Authoritative preaching invites trust and the willing suspension of disbelief in the sense that the hearer is prepared to imagine the possibilities presented in the sermon.

Homiletics has much to learn from the experience of women preachers concerning the nature of authoritative preaching. The preacher’s task is to be honest, open, credible, and authentic: to establish genuine connection with the hearer. Traditional homiletics bestows authority on the preacher by virtue of their ordination or training, and their place in the Church’s hierarchy. The experience of marginalisation has caused many women to question the extent to which dominant paradigms of authority are normative. For example, ordained Anglican women, aware that the ‘authority’ conferred by their orders is complicated, contested, and limited, are likely to question the nature of this authority. As an ordained Anglican preacher, I do not regard my ordination as the primary source of homiletic authority: at times it is a hindrance to the establishment of the deep connections with others needed to form the developing trust that contributes to a sermon being received as authoritative. ‘Authority’, in a feminist understanding, is the ‘craft of authenticity weaving together mutuality, solidarity, and deeper faith sharing.’⁴² Honesty, love, openness, humour, compassion, and a willingness to wrestle imaginatively with text and context, are hallmarks of the authoritative preacher. The bullying, declamatory certitude of the authoritarian preacher (who might be male or female) lacks imagination, wisdom, and love. Pagitt, reacting to this view of preaching, calls for preaching to be re-imagined, but what he offers is ‘progressional dialogue’,⁴³ which looks very much like conversation by any other name. The practice of preaching does not preclude conversation before, during and after the preaching event, but it is more than this.

⁴² Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 47.

⁴³ Pagitt (2005), 23-24.

Murray points to the encouragement of the use of imagination and intuition in postmodernity and post-Christendom. He speaks of the importance of poets and storytellers stirring the Churches into re-imagining God's kingdom.⁴⁴ It seems here that Murray's critique is less directed at the mode of communication and more at its purpose, since both the straw preachers he sets up and the storytellers he refers to deliver monologues, the former in authoritarian declamation, the latter in invitational and inspiring speech. Jeff Astley reminds us that there is 'at least sometimes and to some extent' a connection between the what and the how of Christian learning.⁴⁵ Authoritarian preaching, along with domineering forms of leadership (the how) can contribute to an image of God who curtails human freedom: a divine policeman who punishes those who don't accept his 'love' (the what). There is a place for authoritative monologue in postmodern homiletics, but there is no place for authoritarian monologue that seeks to enforce conformity and crush dissent.

Jangsuk suggests three rubrics for preaching in postmodernity: 'honesty, humility, and openness.' She calls for honest discussion of issues, an attitude of humility concerning our finite perceptions, and openness to other notions of truth.⁴⁶ What does it mean to preach under these rubrics? The preacher needs to be honest with himself, avoiding the danger of a split between his words and his intentions. Honesty does not mean that the preacher should wear his heart on his sleeve and allow his personal issues to get in the way, but there may be times when it is right and appropriate for the preacher to tell his story. Honesty means the preacher actively acknowledging that he is the first audience of the sermon text. If he does not respond to the message, why should anyone else? Honesty in relation to the scriptures means not glossing the difficulties; we cannot pretend that Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*⁴⁷ do not exist. Sometimes the Bible does not seem to contain good news for many of its characters. This needs to be imaginatively acknowledged, bringing difficult texts into conversation with other texts, not to explain the difficulties away, but to see how they might be handled responsibly. We could develop these three rubrics by emphasising the

⁴⁴ Murray (2004), 277, 283.

⁴⁵ Astley (2002), 5-7.

⁴⁶ Jangsuk (2009), 34.

⁴⁷ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

importance of a relational tone in the sermon and the pursuit of integrity. The preacher comes from the pew to the pulpit and returns to the pew. She speaks as one of the body, walking alongside her community as part of that community. Even when she is a visiting speaker; she is still a part of the body speaking to the body. Any notions of hierarchy and authority are likely to be resisted in a postmodern context. Authority is given to the preacher by the hearer, and cannot be assumed. The character of the preacher, their desire for integrity, honesty, humility, openness, and their relational tone will carry more power and credibility than the trappings of hierarchy.

Frederick Buechner, speaking from the American context, critiques a particular form of evangelical preaching in which:

men in business suits get up and proclaim the faith with the dynamic persuasiveness of insurance salesmen...you feel there is no mystery that has not been solved, no secrets there that can escape detection.⁴⁸

Astutely, he sees such preaching as ‘godly utterances which the preacher stands *behind* but as a human being somehow doesn’t stand *in*.’ In contrast, he describes another kind of preaching ‘not seamless and armor plated’,⁴⁹ a preaching in which there are spaces and silences in which the preacher draws from the deep experiences of their life. He is describing a kind of preaching which is deeply and deliberately incarnated in the life of the preacher. This is a speaking which inhabits the rubrics which Jangsuk indicates. Its power lies in its being contextual, vulnerable, and spoken with integrity and trust in God. (This approach to preaching fits well with the image of the role of the preacher as spiritual director, which is explored in chapter six.) There can be an unimaginative, rabid certainty in preaching, deeply off-putting to the postmodern mind which is more open to the nudge of suggestion. One of the tasks of preaching in a postmodern context is to tempt people to consider the possibility of God. Such preaching must be alluring, authentic, tensive, open, and honest. It seeks to invite the listener to preach their own sermon:

It is the sermons we preach to ourselves around the preacher’s sermons that are the ones we hear most powerfully.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets* (New York: Harper One, 1991), 84.

⁴⁹ Buechner (1991), 84.

⁵⁰ Buechner (1991), 85.

This requires that the preacher engages in the preaching-event with a sharp awareness that her congregation are not empty vessels. The hearer always brings their own theology to the pulpit conversation.

The imaginatively alert preacher will be wondering what that theology is and will use the language of conversation ('perhaps', 'maybe' and 'I wonder') to create space within the sermon-event for the hearer to bring their own material into conversation with the ideas presented. She will be aware that some come with a deeper understanding of theology than she could hope to have, that some will be hostile to God, and only present under duress, whilst others are resistant to change, and some hungry for deeper challenge. Whether she agrees or disagrees with the hearers' range of narratives, she must respect the holders of these stories. The hope is that in the sermon-event there will be a fusion of ideas, as the sermon is formed, and something new is born. This is a challenge to the preacher to let go of 'Gradgrindesque' notions that what matters in preaching is that the preacher passes on a body of ideas which, in a 'successful' sermon, the hearer will be able to recall. An effective sermon is one that triggers new seeing for the hearer, a new appropriation of God, or a new challenge that won't be silenced. The preacher offers to the hearer a way of looking at the world, a set of spectacles to help new seeing, rather than a static block of knowledge about the scriptures. That new seeing involves a new grasp of the connections between their lives, their lived theology, the scriptures, and the broader tradition. It may involve affirmation, or it may come as a word of judgement, and a call to new vision.

The capacity to form our sermons around the preacher's sermon by making connections is rooted in imagination. The preacher is called to use their imagination to find ways of breaching potential walls of distrust and disinterest, to connect with the theology the listeners have already formed, and to enable people to connect with their own storehouses of images and metaphors with their attendant emotions and experiences. This requires the exercise of imagination on the part of all. Preachers are living sacraments; in the way they approach the subject they communicate a vast amount about it. If the subject matter seems unimportant to the preacher, why should it matter to me? Does the preacher communicate the value of what they are saying? I am unlikely to be impelled by a vision of the vast love of God by a mumbling figure with their head in a book.

Are they respecting the narrative I bring to the sermon, or am I implicitly being expected to erase my story? The hearer will often make an affective evaluation of the content and delivery of the sermon. The imaginative preacher knows this, and will seek out congruence between content, form, and delivery. These are theologically freighted decisions. How am I going to spark the imaginative intelligence of my hearer so that they might find God anew in the event of the sermon, and be enabled to live as a child of God in a world that they recognise as God's? Effective preaching will spark the hermeneutical conversation between the text of the sermon and the body of the hearers' pre-existent theology. Where change occurs as a result of this conversation, learning can be said to have taken place.⁵¹

Jeff Astley's stress on the importance of 'ordinary theology' is absolutely essential for the preacher. He defines ordinary theology as 'the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly academic or systematic kind.' He is referring to the 'content, pattern and processes' by which ordinary people articulate their theology. He regards the difference between academic and ordinary theology as one of degree and not of kind. Herein lies a real danger for the academically trained preacher: that of imagining that in some way they are above ordinary theology and that somehow their 'extraordinary' theology is better than the theologising of their hearers who therefore need correcting. I am not arguing against the importance of a teaching element in preaching, in terms of drawing on academic knowledge to offer insights, but I would suggest that a listening stance needs to take priority.

One of the main difficulties here lies in how quickly ordinands stop regarding themselves as ordinary and start to identify with the clerical caste, a process in which training institutions can play an unhelpful part. There is a tendency in theological training institutions to use the word 'formation' as if God has not been at work in forming these ordinands since they were shaped in their mother's womb. The rhetoric of the institutions can suggest that formation begins on day one of term one and all that came before is irrelevant. The crucial issue lies in

⁵¹ This section has been shaped in conversation with Jeff Astley's paper 'Ordinary Theology and the Learning Conversation with Academic Theology', in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 45-54; see also, Jeff Astley, 'On Standing and Delivering: Preaching and Theological Posture', *Rural Theology*, Vol. 11 (2011), 89-99.

not severing ordinands from the ordinary theology which has been forming them long before they ever heard the word ‘systematics’. This is not to denigrate academic theology, but rather to ensure that the importance of ordinary theology is not trampled underfoot. I would suggest, and I make this comment as an academically trained clergywoman, that in times of crisis it is not principally the works of academic theologians that sustain us, though their ideas may have been absorbed into our ‘faithing’. Rather it is the powerful, if unsystematic, images, stories, memories, and ideas of God, shaped from childhood onward, which form our belief-in God and our subsequent capacity to endure and grow. If the preacher has a respect for the importance of ordinary theology in her own ongoing faith journey, then she is much more likely to listen to the ordinary theology of others and be willing to grasp the revelatory potential of that.

Rightly, Astley makes the point that preaching requires knowledge both of the gospel *and* of the hearer. Such knowledge can only come about by meeting people in their own context and actively and reflectively listening to them. Such listening requires imagination, the capacity to sit with the other and try to see from their perspective. Such listening demonstrates respect. It also opens the preacher to the language, thought patterns, and questions of the hearers. Without this deposit of understanding preachers have nothing to draw from as they reflect on how the congregation might respond to a biblical text. The preacher, in this model, respects the authority of the hearer, in a relational attitude which is likely to engender mutual trust and openness to the authoritative potential of the sermon. The inductive sermon is the homiletic form which speaks most clearly into this sense of shared authority, as preacher and hearer make the journey through the sermon together. In contrast, the deductive sermon assumes that the hearer accepts the preacher’s authority and will allow themselves to be led from general statement to particulars.⁵²

1.4 Deconstructionism: A Destructive Force?

To define deconstructionism, an idea most associated with Jacques Derrida, goes against the drive of his thought, as becomes clear in reading his ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend.’ He maintains there that deconstructionism is not an analysis,

⁵² Astley (2002), 56, 64, 124, 157, 146, 147.

nor a critique nor a method.⁵³ All the terms we might use to define deconstructionism are themselves subject to deconstruction. Texts become decentered with the decentered interpretation itself subject to deconstruction. In this thinking there is no single, stable meaning. In contrast, the Enlightenment understanding of the purpose of interpretation is to get to the text's meaning, which is held to lie in its authorial intent. There is a sense here of a linear, clear interpretation, graspable by the application of reason. Deconstructionism challenges this; linearity is ousted and replaced by pluridimensional possibilities. The readers, rather than mining for meaning through structural analysis, become the meaning-makers as they inhabit and challenge the text. The text is 'undone, decomposed, desedimented.'⁵⁴ Robert Kysar and Joseph Webb point out that the common understanding of deconstruction is that its goal is the annihilation of the text.⁵⁵ How can homiletics respond to the apparent destructiveness inherent in this approach? To what extent can imagination be employed to enable a more constructive approach to the text?

Kysar and Webb argue for 'constructive deconstruction',⁵⁶ a form of deconstruction which seeks to open up the text to further analysis. Derrida, in his 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', comments that 'the undoing, decomposing, and desedimenting of structures' is 'not a negative operation.' Rather it is necessary, he argues, in order to understand and to reconstruct.⁵⁷ The key lies with the interpreter's intention. Here the preacher has much to learn from deconstructionism. Where the intention is to deconstruct in order to open up texts to fresh insight and understanding, there is potential, in the act of decentering a text, for marginal voices to be heard, drawing the imagination into fresh horizons of possibility. Kysar and Webb suggest that preachers decenter biblical texts by looking for the marginal characters and being sensitive to intersections in the text: places where the scenes shift and juxtaposition colours interpretation. They also counsel sensitivity to the 'side glances' of the text, attending to the

⁵³ Jacques Derrida 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed., Peggy Kamuf (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 273.

⁵⁴ Derrida, (1991), 272.

⁵⁵ Robert Kysar and Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching to Postmoderns: New Perspectives for Proclaiming the Message* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2006), 152.

⁵⁶ Kysar and Webb (2006), 151.

⁵⁷ Derrida, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed., Peggy Kamuf (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 272.

observations which seem peripheral. ‘Such details, while residing in the margins of a text, are never, of themselves, random or “just there”’.⁵⁸ This kind of reading requires asking ‘what if?’, and learning to ‘see as’ another person. It requires the preacher to take a ‘sidelong’ reading of the text and be willing to ‘tell it slant’, constructing new texts from the deconstructed material of the biblical texts. Such skills belong to the domain of imagination. The preacher does not have to accept without question common readings of biblical texts. Postmodern thought counsels awareness of structures of power operating in commonly held, often univocal interpretations. Rather, the preacher must inhabit the living word with a willingness to set down prized interpretation and hear the biblical voices speak in new tones. There is revelatory potential at work here. Deconstruction calls for great imaginative sensitivity to the way language has been and is used, acknowledging the palimpsestic⁵⁹ nature of words and being attentive to their emotional history. Such attention to detail requires the exercise of imagination enabling the reader to experience how words might sound and feel to another. Such imaginative sensitivity opens the possibility for power – that of the preacher, the text, the hearer, and the wider culture – to be named and unmasked.

Leon McKenzie explores how deconstruction is an important aspect of worldview construction (worldview being our ‘interpretive understanding of the world based on experience’). He recognises that whilst Derrida associates deconstruction with the critical analysis of texts it can also be applied to experience. New experiences are deconstructed, as are existing worldviews. If the new experience is compatible with our held worldview then the process of deconstruction may hardly be discernible. However, when the experience clashes with the current worldview we may become painfully aware of deconstruction at work.⁶⁰

At the 2012 Conference of the *Societas Homiletica* in Wittenberg, one of the sermons was preached by a Dalit delegate on the passage in which Jesus heals the Syrochenean woman’s daughter (Matthew 15.21-28). The preacher enabled a new hearing (at least for me) by deconstructing the operative power

⁵⁸ Kysar and Webb (2006), 164-167.

⁵⁹ Palimpsestic – referring to the way that older linguistic meanings might be nuanced, modified or changed, yet continue to have resonances in the word’s meaning.

⁶⁰ Leon McKenzie, *Adult Education and Worldview Construction* (Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1991), 28-32.

assumptions in the text, effectively exposing my own interpretive worldview. His sermon was not primarily concerned with defending Jesus' behaviour and explaining away his apparent hostility, which is a common feature of many sermons I have experienced and preached on this text in the UK context. The preacher aligned himself with the woman in her poverty and addressed her situation, a task made easier for him as he had often experienced the position of the outsider. The sermon raised questions about power, about who 'owns' Christ, and about the courage and tenacity of the poor who will not settle for crumbs. Deconstruction challenges the preacher concerning how their cultural embeddedness affects their interpretation. It enables a new 'seeing'. Hearing the voices of preachers from other cultures feeds the homiletic imagination and widens the interpretive scope.

1.5 The Rational is Dethroned

Postmodern thought questions the sufficiency of reason in discerning truth: the rational is dethroned. In David Dockery's assessment, modernity made:

an idol out of empirical observation so as to ignore any other – intuitive, personal, charismatic, ecstatic, prophetic, and any other revelation-grounded – mode of knowing.⁶¹

Grenz regards postmodern thought as a form of 'chastened rationality'⁶² which, whilst not dismissing the importance of the rational, refuses to regard it as the sole source of discovering truth: which, he argues, is constructed from our particular concepts, contexts, language, and conventions. John Franke reminds us of the collapse of foundationalism which is 'an impossible dream' for humans in their finitude and limited outlook, marred by sin which has sought to grasp and wield knowledge for selfish ends.⁶³ Dockery sees some similarity between the postmodern repudiation of a rationalist epistemology and evangelical Christianity's insistence on the inadequacy of a solely scientific world view.⁶⁴ This correspondence could be expressed in a less partisan way, since there is

⁶¹ David S. Dockery, *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 29.

⁶² Stanley J. Grenz, 'Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic', in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Evangelical Method*, ed., John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 108.

⁶³ Franke, (2005), 22.

⁶⁴ Dockery (2001), 27-28.

similarity here with the perspective of a more catholic sacramental theology that offers ways of seeing which are not proscribed by the purely rational. The connection between imaginative ‘seeing as’, sacrament and preaching is developed in chapter four. In the meantime the key question is how imaginative forms of knowing, particularly in the light of the collapse of foundationalism, might be helpful to homiletics.

There is a tendency in some forms of evangelical preaching to stress the rational and to regard imagination with suspicion. Grenz refers to evangelicalism as a ‘child of modernity’,⁶⁵ alluding to the tendency in evangelicalism to regard propositional language as the key means of communicating faith. Michael Glodo describes the preference for proposition as a ‘modernist contaminant in evangelical exegesis.’⁶⁶ The elevation of the epistemological importance of the rational pushes out other forms of knowing that may prove more effective in gaining a hearing amongst those influenced by postmodern thought.

Pierre Babin writes of ‘another logic, that of imagination and symbols.’ This mode of communication is the ‘language of temptation before it is the language of explanation.’ It is suggestive, alluring, hinting, and inviting. It seeks to move the hearer, both affectively and practically. Such language seeks to evoke experience and has more in common with poetry or music than the language of the lecture hall. The symbolic way draws on images, stories, and communal and liturgical life. What is at the heart of this approach is ‘modulation’ which ‘represents a maximum appeal to the sense and the imagination’. Here the preacher is more than a speaker: in their humanity they form part of the text of the sermon. Issues of performance, language use, and register, and use of the space, cultural reference, storytelling, and liturgical context, will all form part of the modulation of the sermon. Questions concerning how a preacher might inhabit and present their text in a given context will all draw on the imaginative faculties of the preacher. Babin contrasts modulation with the alphabetical and ideological way of communicating, which expresses itself in propositional

⁶⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, ‘Star Trek and the Next Generation: Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology’, in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 2nd edition, ed., David S. Dockery, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 82.

⁶⁶ Michael J. Glodo, ‘The Bible in Stereo: New Opportunities for Biblical Interpretation in an A-Rational Age’, in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 2nd edition, ed., David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 112.

models of communication.⁶⁷ He sees a place for both forms of communication, though with more emphasis on the imaginative/symbolic. He argues for ‘stereophonic communication’. In preaching terms this means preachers need to be flexible, able to preach in different styles and to combine these styles, seeking both to evoke religious experience and to speak about the content of faith. In a similar way, Jangsuk stresses the importance of preachers considering the sermonic language they employ and argues that rather than being ‘discursive, cognitive, or logical [they] must instead show, paint pictures of, and evoke experience.’⁶⁸ This evocative quest draws heavily on the imaginative power of hearer and listener: hence the argument that an appropriate homiletic in a postmodern landscape needs to foreground the importance of the imagination. Babin maintains that ‘the greatest catastrophe that can happen to communication today is for it to be governed by reason alone.’ His focus is on language which speaks to the heart.⁶⁹

Chris Altmock distinguishes propositional language, which appeals to the mind and imaginative language that ‘evokes emotions and creates experiences’, stressing the importance of using language which is image based.⁷⁰ He also calls for preachers to be clear about the ultimate *goal* of preaching, which is not simply exploring the meaning of the biblical text, nor explicating aspects of doctrine or practice, nor focussing on the human response to the divine imperative. Whilst all of these things may be aspects of a sermon, the goal of the sermon is theocentric: the evocation of an experience of the divine through the medium of the sermon.⁷¹ This calls for language which speaks to the heart.

Kysar and Webb, taking their cue from Derrida’s work on poesis, urge the preacher to study and preach with the heart as well as the head.⁷² By poesis Derrida refers to the process of giving form to the creative impulse. This is a process he associates with the heart, writing of: ‘letting your heart be traversed by the dictated dictation.’ This is a process which reveals the heart:

⁶⁷ Pierre Babin, *The New Era in Religious Communication* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1991), 33, 149, 80, 89-90.

⁶⁸ Jangsuk (Spring 2009), 37.

⁶⁹ Babin (1991) 104.

⁷⁰ Chris Altmock, *Preaching to Pluralist: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004), 131.

⁷¹ Altmock (2004), 65.

⁷² Kysar and Webb (2006), 170.

You did not know the heart and yet you learn it thus. From this experience and from this expression. I call a poem that very thing that teaches the heart, invents the heart, that which, finally, the word heart seems to mean and which, in my language, I cannot easily discern from the word itself.⁷³

His language points to the way the creative impulse arises from deep within; there is vulnerability in this: ‘No poem without accident, no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also a wounding.’⁷⁴ Applying this to preaching we see the importance of learning to preach in the lyrical voice, learning from the techniques of poetry (see chapter five). This is concerned with more than simply teaching biblical or doctrinal content. Preaching requires the preacher to imaginatively dwell with the biblical text, studying it with the language of the heart, and deconstructing it in the same language. Kevin Vanhoozer explores the theme of how the scripture shapes the human heart, pointing out that the variety of biblical genres seek, not to give us ‘axioms for theological calculus’, but to ‘cultivate the evangelical heart, mind, imagination.’ He describes the imagination in terms of a portal into other modes of seeing and experiencing,⁷⁵ and sees it as essential to the development of wisdom. Undoubtedly, imagination is an important aspect of a postmodern homiletic.

1.6 Creative Playfulness

There is a creative playfulness identifiable in postmodern thought. Kysar and Webb identify three uses of the word ‘play’, drawing from Jacques Derrida.⁷⁶ The first is of play in terms of movement, in the sense that there might be play in a wheel. In this sense there is a lack of fixity, a certain degree of give, and a sense of unpredictability. There is play in words, in this sense, in that the polyvalency of language makes it difficult to finally pin meaning down. Language is mobile. The second use identified is the sense of play as performance. A play is a movement in time. The future becomes the past in the moment of the play and the way we say our ‘lines’ determines the part we play and the way we interact with other players. The third sense of the word is close

⁷³ Jacques Derrida, ‘Che cos’è la Poesia’, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed., Peggy Kamuf (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 221-237.

⁷⁴ Derrida, ‘Che cos’è la Poesia’ (1991), 233.

⁷⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘The Voice and the Actor. A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology’, in *Evangelical Futures; A Conversation on Evangelical Method*, ed., John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 84.

⁷⁶ Kysar and Webb (2006), 171-173.

to the idea of playfulness with its attendant ideas of spontaneity, freedom, and open-endedness.

Creativity is particularly associated with this last description of the word 'play'. Here the concept of *bricoleur* is useful. A *bricoleur* is an artist who uses the materials around her, which were not necessarily designed for the purpose to which she employs them, and by adaptation, trial and error, alteration and juxtaposition, she creates something new from the old, termed *bricolage*. Derrida sees language in terms of *bricolage*.⁷⁷ The work of the *bricoleur* is often marked by irony, eclecticism, and humour. Charles Jencks, writing of postmodern architecture, speaks of a similar creative impulse at work which he describes as 'double coding': 'the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past.' Hence we see in postmodern architecture features of modernism blended with the transcendence of this form.⁷⁸ How can the postmodern openness to creative playfulness speak into our understanding of homiletics? This section will draw on Johan Huizinga and Hans-Georg Gadamer to examine the idea of preaching as play, pick up on the image of the preacher as *bricoleur*, and explore what childhood play suggests about the subject.

Preaching and play are not words we might naturally associate together; surely preaching is a serious business and play merely an idle pastime? Johan Huizinga describes humans as '*homo ludens*', seeing play as basic to culture. In his analysis play is voluntary; there is fun in it; it is a stepping out of 'real' life into a specific location for a certain duration; and within the play there are rules. Huizinga notes that even when a game is finished a 'play-community' tends to become permanent. The sense of having been 'apart together' in a particular situation, having withdrawn from the world of the everyday and submitted to the rules of the game has a bonding effect beyond the play itself. There is a tension in Huizinga's argument concerning the disinterested nature of play. He comments that play is not connected with material interest and 'no profit can be gained by it'. However, he also sees it as being necessary for society because of, amongst other things, its 'spiritual and social associations.' Huizinga argues that ritual is a form of play and sacred performances take place in a sacred space

⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed., Peggy Kamuf (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 231.

⁷⁸ Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1987).7.

which is ‘a temporarily real world of its own.’⁷⁹ If this assessment of ritual as play is correct then it cannot be right to disconnect play from its material effects. Ritual does have a material interest, since in the broadest sense, all our rituals are aimed at affecting the ways we interact with the world. This is an important point when we come to consider preaching as play.

Hans-Georg Gadamer draws on Huizinga, offering a helpful model of play which underscores its seriousness. He writes of ‘play’ in terms of a to and fro movement; he speaks of the play of waves, light, and gears in machinery. When we play we enter a space and accept certain ‘rules’ or limitations. All our playing has seriousness about it; a player who enters the game without seriousness spoils the play. There is freedom, spontaneity, and open-endedness in play. Gadamer insists that when we enter into a game the game plays us: ‘the game masters the players.’⁸⁰

Underpinning the following model of preaching as play is the idea that God is at play in the sermon. The idea that God plays with creation is inherent in a number of biblical pictures. The Jerusalem Bible translates Psalm 104.26 as follows: ‘there ships pass to and fro, and Leviathan whom you made to *sport with*.’ Although differing from most translations, this image presents a playful picture of God which resonates with the translation, in the Jerusalem Bible, of Proverbs 8.30-31 which describes Wisdom personified:

I was beside the master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at *play* in his presence, at *play* everywhere on his earth, delighting to be with the children of men.⁸¹

Across translations, Zechariah 5.8 speaks of the time when God will dwell in Jerusalem and the ‘squares of the city will be full of boys and girls playing there’. Play is seen here as part of God’s community. There is certainly a playfulness in much of Jesus’ teaching, most obviously in the parables.

Applying Huizinga’s and Gadamer’s ideas about play to preaching we begin to see the potential dynamism of the sermon-event as a game we play. The

⁷⁹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London: Paladin, 1970) 17-18, 26, 21, 28, 29, 31, 32, 27, 33.

⁸⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marsha (London: Continuum, 2004), 102-110.

⁸¹ Other translations do not use the word ‘play’; the terms ‘delighting’ and ‘rejoicing’ are employed in the AV, NIV and NRSV.

hearers are no longer passive recipients; they are no longer consigned to the bench. Interestingly, Jerome Berryman comments that:

If play is fundamental to our nature and culture, as Huizinga thought, then it is no surprise that the community of children in Godly Play, which prefigures by analogy the community of the Church, needs to be a playing culture to be authentic.⁸²

For the sermon to exist at all, the hearers must all be all invited into the play. God is the one who invites. The players are free to engage in the play or not; there can be no coercion. The play operates according to certain rules which will vary according to local context. Any preacher who goes over or under the expected time limit is left in no doubt that a rule has been breached! The sermon itself is not the text that the preacher clutches in her sweaty hand. The sermons, for there are always as many sermons as there are hearers, emerge in the to and fro of play that occurs in the space between the preacher, the hearer, and the scripture. In this movement there is the potential to discern the word of God, speaking into our individual situations and shaping us as community. This model sees the power of preaching being exercised by all the players in the Church community, one of whom is the preacher. In the game of preaching he has a particular task. In an earlier stage in the game the biblical text played him, capturing his imagination, producing material which is then shaped and played in the field of the liturgical event. How it is shaped and the way it is played-out are imaginative tasks. The task of the players is to enter into a willing suspension of disbelief, a willingness to run with the as-if of the sermon, even if the material is ultimately rejected. The hearer listens for the voice of God present in the play, open to the sacramental potential of the game, and following the connections that occur as they trace the implications of the preacher's moves on the material of their lives, raising a red card to the preacher's offside moves and being given space after the event to express this.

Sermons that have no 'play' in them, which assume in their use of language and mode of delivery that the job of the hearer is simply to 'catch the ball', are likely to be resisted in a postmodern context that is wary of authority and the

⁸² Jerome W. Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children* (Denver, Colorado: Morehouse Education Resources, 2009), 18.

misuse of power. The sermon as play does have a material interest, because God has a material interest in creation. The preacher hopes that in the playful event of the sermon the hearers will engage with God and find the resources they need to live out their particular Christian vocation in the days ahead. It is worth recalling Huizinga's comment on fun as an aspect of play. Whilst it would not be appropriate for all sermons to be fun, at least some of the time the preacher might consider the possibilities of humour in the play of the sermon. This is a theme explored in chapter six.

What can the preacher learn from the postmodern concepts of *bricolage* and play? Like Shakespeare's Autolycus, the preacher as *bricoleur* is a 'snapper-up of unconsidered trifles.'⁸³ The *bricoleur* reflects on whatever comes their way, searching – or at least being open to – the scriptures and the world for ideas, images, words, phrases, experiences, stories which can be combined in ways that, illuminated by the revelatory impulse in the sermon-event, might enable a 'new seeing' of God. This capacity to combine and recombine, and to create the new from the old, is a gift of the intuitive imagination. Preaching is an inherently imaginative undertaking, requiring the imaginative engagement of the preacher in the creation of sermonic material and of the hearer in the shaping of the sermon they hear.

Thinking of 'play' in terms of 'child's play' calls for preachers and hearers to be curious and open minded, with the innocent and playful outlook of the child, open to wonder, reverence, and joy. The Romantics associated imagination with childhood, challenging the idea of progressive growth through maturity; becoming an adult can lead to an atrophying of imagination and a lessening of the richness of life. Jesus' teaching that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these⁸⁴ underscores the need to stimulate childlike vision, playfulness, trust and joy in and through the preaching event.

In *The Development of Imagination*, David Cohen and Stephen MacKeith give a fascinating account of childhood paracosms – playful, imaginary worlds that some children construct and populate – through an analysis of the recollections of fifty-seven adults who created imaginary worlds in childhood. The paracosms were elaborate and systematised, tending to operate according to rules, as well as

⁸³ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, Act 4, Scene 2.

⁸⁴ Matthew 19.14; Luke 18.16; Mark 10.14.

bringing freedom and enjoyment. This might seem irrelevant to an argument for the importance of imagination in preaching and even invite the dismissal that imagination is childish and associated with that which is ‘made-up’, tarring preaching by association. However, their research points up the serious nature of imaginative play. Whilst not all children develop and sustain paracosms, all children do engage in forms of imaginative play which seems to be an essential aspect of human development through childhood and into adulthood.

Cohen and MacKeith helpfully identify stages in imaginative development, pointing to early, simple creative behaviours, such as pretending that an inanimate object is another object; to endowing it with life and creating imaginary companions; holding imaginary conversations and play acting.⁸⁵ Associated with this is joining in with the stories of others, which might be hearing a story, reading a story or producing a play. Participating in another’s story is a trait which does not fade with age; it is essential to reading, engaging with news, theatre, and film, and it is a skill crucial to preaching, as we join in with the stories of the text, our immediate situation, and the wider context. Paul Harris’ work on imagination is consonant with Cohen and MacKeith in regarding imagination as a key part of humanity throughout the life cycle, rather than a childish mode to be outgrown.

Far from being a peculiarity of childhood, children’s susceptibility to emotional engagement in imagined material is a characteristic of the human species throughout the life cycle, rather than a short lived phenomenon of the early years.⁸⁶

Reflecting on the serious nature of play, Harris alerts us to the integrated nature of imagination and cognition, seen even in the very young. In engaging in pretence, children draw from their knowledge of conceptual reality, offering the potential to explore inherent possibilities. To demonstrate this Harris uses the example of putting a teddy bear in a box, turning on imaginary taps, using a wooden block as soap and giving teddy a bath. In this example he reports that the

⁸⁵ David Cohen, and Stephen A. MacKeith, *The Development of Imagination* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 107-109.

⁸⁶ Paul L. Harris, *The Work of the Imagination (Understanding Children's Worlds)* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 80.

two year old joins in and states that teddy is wet before wrapping him in paper.⁸⁷ Here we can clearly see that imaginative play involves both pretence *and* logical, cognitive processes operating at the same time, even in the very young. The child suspends literal interpretation, since teddy is not objectively wet, but is guided by the causal chain of events provided by the narrative framework of the imagining: *if* teddy is put in the bath and the taps are turned on, and he is washed, *then* he will become wet and need to be dried.

Drawing from a variety of observations,⁸⁸ Harris argues that children as young as two and a half to three years are able to engage in the perspective shifts involved in role play, setting aside their own viewpoint, and assuming that of the invented person, entering into a simulation, and drawing from their knowledge of the world to speak and act in ways appropriate to the adopted role. For example, ‘A 29-month-old baby girl, adopting the role of mother, lays down a doll and says sternly: ‘Baby, you have to go to bed’.⁸⁹ Whilst the occurrence of such role play wanes in adulthood, Harris points out that ‘we should not mistake an outer decline for an inner change.’⁹⁰ Harris then identifies continuities between children and adults around this theme of imaginative pretence, making a link between childhood imaginative play and the adult reading of fiction. Both require the willingness to enter a pretend framework and be governed by the rules of that framework.

This ability to engage in perspective shifts operates in directional terms. Black, Turner and Bower’s (1979) research with adult readers introduced participants to a simple story and then asked them questions designed to elicit a sense of the participants’ imagined physical position, finding that adult readers, like children engaged in role play, tend to discover the protagonist’s position. Participants were introduced to a character with the words, ‘Bill was sitting in the living room reading the paper.’⁹¹ Another character, John, is described making his way into the room. Participants were then asked questions to determine whether they shared Bill’s point of view. Participants found it easier to process the sentence ‘when John came into the room’, rather than ‘when John went into the

⁸⁷ Harris (2000), 9-10.

⁸⁸ Piaget, 1962; Miller and Garvey, 1984; Dunn and Dale, 1984; all cited in Harris (2000), 31.

⁸⁹ Miller and Garvey, 1984, cited in Harris (2000), 31.

⁹⁰ Harris (2000), 36.

⁹¹ Harris (2000), 50.

room’, suggesting they had adopted the protagonist’s viewpoint. Researchers found that even if the story stated that someone ‘went’ into the same room as the protagonist, readers substituted the verb ‘came’ in their recall.

This human ability to adopt another’s perspective, a task of empathetic imagining, is an important aspect of preaching for both preacher and hearer. Ignatian spiritual techniques, whilst being principally aimed at engagement with the Spiritual Exercises, are profoundly helpful in preaching preparation, inviting the reader/hearer into the world of the text, imagining landscape and soundscape, adopting the perspective of different characters, and exploring and adopting their possible cognitive process and emotional state.

Engaging in imaginative play, whether as a child or an adult, seems to have a number of functions and possible outcomes: playfulness, enjoyment, vicarious and affective experience, exploration and cognitive engagement.

Pretend play is not an activity that is doomed to suppression but the first indication of a lifelong mental capacity to consider alternatives to reality.⁹²

It is useful to note here the connection Walter Brueggemann makes between preaching and the ‘poetic construal of an alternative world’.⁹³ Is this kind of preaching part of the ‘lifelong mental capacity’ which Harris sees as having its inception in childhood imaginary play? This connection suggests that preaching has a seriously playful quality about it, playful in the sense of exploring possibility, asking ‘what if’ questions and painting alternative vistas. Such playfulness is serious as it has the potential to render transformation of the self, the community, and the wider context.

This chapter has sought to expose some of the key themes of postmodern thought, bringing them into conversation with homiletics and indicating that imaginative engagement with these themes both takes them seriously and shapes the homiletic response to them. The firm contention is that the active engagement of the imagination is vital in shaping a robust homiletic, sensitive and responsive to the themes in contemporary culture. In order to equip the preacher to engage

⁹² Harris (2000), 28.

⁹³ Brueggemann (1989), 6.

their imagination effectively various questions emerge which need both theoretical and theological exploration and practical outworking. These questions operate as a map of the journey ahead.

What do we mean by the term ‘imagination’? Can we ground imagination in a robust theology? If imagination is connected with how we see things, does preaching have sacramental potential? What are the theological implications and how might this affect homiletic praxis? How are imagination and language connected in the preaching event? If imagination helps us to frame our understanding of the world, how does it connect with the preacher’s self understanding? Do the preacher’s master metaphors for their role affect the way they engage with the task of preaching? Does the psychological type of preacher and hearer affect the way they engage with preaching and how might an imaginative approach to homiletics help different types to engage with the sermon? Finally, what are the implications of these questions for imagination in preaching and the teaching of preaching?

The following chapter picks up the question of what we mean by the term ‘imagination.’

Chapter Two: The Diverse History of Imagination

The term ‘imagination’ is a slippery term. To demonstrate this, this chapter offers a, necessarily brief, survey of the historical field, showing that imagination has variously been denigrated and dismissed as well as lauded uncritically. The imagination has been associated with a wide variety of functions making it hard to speak of it in a concise and cogent way. Similarly, many homileticians make reference to the importance of imagination but without clear delineation of what is understood by the term. Following the survey of the understandings of imagination in the historical field, this chapter examines how imagination has been handled in a sample of homiletic texts belonging to this century and the last predominantly from the UK and US contexts, across a range of denominations. These particular texts have been selected since they represent key names in the field of contemporary homiletics.⁹⁴ The underlying question is how do they treat imagination? Overall, this chapter seeks to demonstrate the various ways imagination is handled, or overlooked, in Western history and in homiletic literature and thus highlight the usefulness for homiletics of a framework for mapping imaginative function. This framework, original to the thesis, forms the opening section of chapter three.

2.1 Surveying the Field: Imagination in Western History

Until the Enlightenment we find nothing that could be called a fully worked out theory of imagination. Before that period we must piece together brief passages and even random remarks where the concept comes into play...there was no classical theory of what today we call ‘imagination’ that is, of the capacity to mold experience, to bring something new out of the old or to sympathetically project oneself into the position of another.⁹⁵

To argue that preaching is an inherently imaginative undertaking requires some exploration of the field of meaning embraced by the term imagination. This is complicated by the etymology of the word ‘imagination’, coming to us from the Latin *imaginatio*, whose root *imago* means likeness or image. Also linked to the imagination is the Greek term *phantasia*, which has connotations of the word

⁹⁴ John Broadus was selected since his textbook, whilst reflecting many modernist assumptions, does afford a place to imagination and offers useful insights into what needs developing as we foreground imagination as a vital aspect of contemporary preaching.

⁹⁵ Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 141.

‘fancy’. The sense that imagination is associated with the frivolous or ornamental is often seen throughout the history of imagination. Exploring the meaning of the term is further complicated by the accretion of meaning attached to it over time; hence some review of the history of the term will help clarify the scope of meaning with which it is associated, and give a sense of the need to develop a workable framework for mapping the term.

From earliest times, imagination, emotion and memory have been associated. In early oral cultures we see how imagination operates in the activity of mythmaking. Sacred myth carries within its narrative shape the identity of the tribe and the codes for divine and social interaction. Such narrative is memorable, much more so than are lists of rules and regulations, and it elicits emotional commitment. Kieran Egan observes that the ‘patterning of sound, vivid images, and story structuring...helped human groups to cohere and remain relatively stable.’⁹⁶ Egan draws on the ancient Hebrew stories of the Fall and the tower of Babel to argue that the human exercise of imagination, with the employment of the Hebrew root *yetsirah* which means ‘creation’, was associated with the human drive to exercise divine power. In a similar vein, Prometheus, whose name means ‘fore-thinker,’ one with the ability to envision or imagine, encroaches on divine prerogative with the theft of fire. In both traditions, Egan comments, imagination, understood in terms of foresight or planning, is regarded as a divine attribute.⁹⁷ His reading of the Hebrew tradition leads him to conclude that the creative attribute is stolen by humanity from the divine. In chapter three the connection between the *imago dei* and imagination is explored, leading to the view that imagination is an aspect of the divine, gifted to humanity.

Edward Casey identifies three broad positions within Western philosophy concerning the role and function of imagination: subordination, mediation, and super-ordination.⁹⁸ The latter is associated with Romanticism, as we shall see below. Subordination expresses a Platonic view which regards the imagination as operating below cognition. Plato (429-347 BCE) regarded reason as the prime means by which humanity might know what is true. Imagination has only a

⁹⁶ Kieran Egan, *Imagination in Teaching and Learning: The Middle School Years* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 11.

⁹⁷ Egan (1992), 13.

⁹⁸ Edward S. Casey, *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (Ontario: Indiana University Press, 1979), 15-19.

mimetic function, producing shadows of the ideal, mere images on a cave wall. The irony in the ‘Allegory of the Cave’ lies with the means Plato uses of convincing Glaucon (his conversation partner) of the importance of philosophers returning from the intellectual world of right seeing to help those in the cave to perceive correctly. He offers Glaucon the image of a cave and sketches out the details of the figure, using that to convey his argument.⁹⁹ Even though the rational is being elevated, it is elevated on the back of an increasingly complex imaginative conceit.

Egan comments that the Platonic sense of the inferiority of imagination has led to a neglect of imagination in educational schemes influenced by Platonic thought.¹⁰⁰ The result is a curriculum focussed on the accumulation of knowledge. This model of education as banking information can be seen in forms of preaching which focus on increased knowledge of the biblical text as the chief homiletic goal.

With Plato’s student, Aristotle (384-322 BCE), we see imagination operating in Casey’s mediating position. The content of imagination is that which is perceived through the senses, these sense perceptions are remembered as images and made available to discursive thought.¹⁰¹ What is significant in Aristotle is that he sees imagination at work in intellectual activity, though more as an image-based servant of the intellect than a creative power.

There is a mediating role in St Augustine’s (354-430) understanding of imagination, linked to the way that sense perceptions store images which can then be brought to mind, reconfigured, and recombined. He commonly uses the term *phantasia* to refer to an image drawn from sense perception and stored in memory, and the term *phantasmata* to refer to the creation occurring in the mind when disparate images are shaped and re-shaped into something new. This creative function of the imagination is viewed with suspicion by Augustine. He seems to regard *phantasmata* as potentially deceptive, a contaminant of the heart, the root of idolatry, heresy, and diabolical contrivance, and capable of generating

⁹⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII, <<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html>>, [accessed 24th January 2013].

¹⁰⁰ Egan (1992), 15.

¹⁰¹ Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book 3, <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.3.iii.html>> [accessed 23rd January 2013]; see also Johnson (1987), 144; Michael Beaney, *Imagination and Creativity*, 2nd edition (Milton Keynes: Open University, 2010), 1; Egan (1992), 15.

false images of Christ's life and death.¹⁰² In keeping with this negative assessment of *phantasma*, he describes the temptation of his proclivities in terms of *phantasmata*, clouding his apprehension of God:

My heart passionately cried out against all my phantoms (*phantasmata*), and with this one blow I sought to beat away from the eye of my mind all that unclean troop which buzzed around it. And so, being scarce put off, in the twinkling of an eye they gathered again thick about me, flew against my face, and beclouded it.¹⁰³

This theme of the spiritual danger of the imagination is seen in Aquinas (1225-1274) who distrusts it, regarding it as the weaker part of the mind: 'Demons are known to work on men's imagination, until everything is other than it is'.¹⁰⁴ In developing a theology of imagination (see chapter three) these fears need to be born in mind, lest we construct an overly Romantic view of imagination's potential.

In the work of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) on imagination we see elements of Plato and Aristotle drawn together. He regards 'simple imagination' as bringing to mind things formerly perceived by sense, and a more compounded sense of imagination as when 'from the sight of a man at one time, and of a horse at another, we conceive in our mind a centaur.'¹⁰⁵ However, there is still a distrust of the creative faculty of imagination, as Hobbes writes later in *Leviathan*, 'But without steadiness, and direction to some end, great fancy is one kind of madness.'¹⁰⁶

Descartes (1596-1640) understands the mind as governed by reason. In the 'Second Meditation', he seems to deprecate imagination in contrast to reason, particularly in the wax example. Here we see clearly that he is conceiving of imagination principally as the power to produce images. We are asked to

¹⁰² Marianne Djuth, 'Veiled and Unveiled Beauty: The Role of the Imagination in Augustine's Esthetics,' *Theological Studies*, Vol. 68, Issue 1 (March 2007), 80-88.

¹⁰³ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII, Paragraph 1, transl., Edward Bouverie Pusey, [1909-14], <<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/augustine/Pusey/book07>> [accessed 22nd January 2013].

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, cited in Egan (1992), 17.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. II 'Of Imagination', <http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/thomas_hobbes/leviathan.html> [accessed 22nd January 2013].

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. VIII, 'Of the Virtues Commonly Called Intellectual and their Contrary Defects', <http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/thomas_hobbes/leviathan.html> [accessed 25th January 2013].

consider a piece of wax placed by a fire. It melts, changes shape and colour, and its scent fades, but it is still the same wax. How are we to understand the essence of what this wax is? How can we grasp extendibility, flexibility, and changeability? Descartes argues that the imagination cannot furnish us with this knowledge since we are ‘unable to compass this infinity by imagination, and consequently this conception which I have of the wax is not the product of the faculty of imagination.’ He seems to be understanding imagination here as a series of images, and since we cannot enumerate images of all the various changes in the wax then it is not the faculty of imagination which enables us to understand the nature of the wax: ‘it is the mind alone which perceives it.’¹⁰⁷ This perspective is open to challenge. Why should it follow that because I cannot form *every* picture of the changing wax that I cannot produce *some*, and that this production of these images is not part of my perception and understanding of the properties of wax?¹⁰⁸

Another interesting aspect of Descartes’ thinking on imagination relates to his attempt, by raising a series of progressively sceptical doubts, to work his way back to that which is indubitably true. In the *Second Discourse* he postulates that an evil demon is deceiving him. On the basis of this supposition, he writes:

Doubtless, then, I exist, since I am deceived; and, let him deceive me as he may, he can never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I shall be conscious that I am something.¹⁰⁹

As we shall see in the following chapter, supposition, with or without attendant images, belongs to the intellectual function of the imagination. As with Plato’s allegory of the cave, imagination can be seen to have a role in intellectual processes. Ironically, in both cases it is used to prove the epistemological centrality of reason!

¹⁰⁷ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy II*, ‘Of the Nature of the Human Mind and That it is More Easily Known than the Body’, <<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/descartes/meditations/Meditation2.html>> [accessed 23rd January 2013], point 12.

¹⁰⁸ Beaney (2010), 46.

¹⁰⁹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy II*, <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/descartes/meditations/Meditation2.html> [accessed 21st January 2013], point 3.

With John Dryden (1631 -1700) we see a similar understanding of imagination as we saw in Hobbes, with a sense of the imagination working with memory, combining, and designing. In a letter to Sir Robert Howard, which acts as a preface to his *Annus Mirabilis*, he writes about the poet's imagination:

So then the first happiness of the poet's imagination is properly invention or finding of the thought; the second is fancy, or the variation, deriving or moulding of that thought, as the judgment represents it proper to the subject; the third is elocution, or the art of clothing and adorning that thought, so found and varied, in apt, significant, and sounding words: the quickness of the imagination is seen in the invention, the fertility in the fancy, and the accuracy in the expression.¹¹⁰

This is helpful, in the sense that Dryden expresses a range of imaginative tasks in the creative act. However, the staged nature of these functions is questionable. Reflection on the sermonic process and writing poetry/liturgy suggests that finding, moulding, shaping, and expressing the thought is not easy to systematise as a staged process. Imaginative processes tend to overlap one another. A useful model of imagination for homiletics needs to allow for the coterminous working of aspects of imaginative function.

Three particular themes relevant to the unfolding discussion are drawn from David Hume's (1711-1776) work on imagination: the creative aspect of imagination; the use of imagination in reasoning; and the connection between imagination and emotion. In terms of the creativity of imagination, he writes:

Nothing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed the original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating and dividing these ideas in all the varieties of fiction and vision.¹¹¹

Even limiting the potential of imaginative function to the materials of sense perception, Hume recognises the considerable freedom and creative potential of imagination. Given his empiricism, Hume poses an interesting hypothesis in the 'Missing Shade of Blue.' The conceit is that a person has enjoyed sight for thirty years and in that time seen every shade of blue but one. If all the shades of blue

¹¹⁰ John Dryden, Preface to *Annus Mirabilis*, <http://www.online-literature.com/dryden/poetical-works-Vol.1/8/> [accessed 22nd January 2013].

¹¹¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section 5, part 2, 47, in Beaney (2010), 60.

were laid before the person would they, from their own imagination, be able to supply the missing hue?

I believe there are few that will be of opinion but he can; and this may serve as proof, that the simple ideas are not always derived from the correspondent impressions.¹¹²

The possibility that the imagination might be able to conjure that which we have not experienced is fascinating, though we might argue that the other shades of colour provide the information for the person to supply the deficit. Nevertheless, what is really important is that Hume's thought experiment relies on supposition and also, though not necessarily, attendant images. The point is that a form of intellectual imagination is operating here. This understanding of imagination at work in supposition will form part of the framework of imagination developed in the following chapter. Also important for our understanding of imagination and its potential in homiletics, Hume associates imagination with feelings:

'Tis remarkable, that the imagination and affections have a close union together, and that nothing, which affects the former, can be entirely indifferent to the latter... lively passions commonly attend a lively imagination.¹¹³

Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) understanding of imagination is difficult to grasp, not least because his ideas shift between the two versions of *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781 and 1787) and they are notoriously complex.¹¹⁴ Kant represents a fundamental shift from the rationalism of Descartes and the empiricism of Hume. In his understanding, imagination is the ground of our meaning making. Kant brings together the rationalist focus on reason and the empiricist stress on sense experience in the process of cognition: 'our cognition arises from two fundamental sources in the mind', sensibility and

¹¹² David Hume, *Treatise*, I,I,1, in Beaney (2010), 66.

¹¹³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) Section VI: 'Of the influence of the imagination on the passions,

http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm#link2H_4_0078

[accessed 23rd January 2013].

¹¹⁴ References to the *First Critique* in the literature are given in the form of Ax and Bx. A/B refers to the first or second edition respectively and x is the page number in the original edition.

understanding.¹¹⁵ Sensibility receives ‘intuition’, which is the translation of Kant’s term *anschauung* from the verb *anschauen*, ‘to look at’, and manages sense data from our experience of the world. Understanding is the faculty of ‘thinking of objects of sensible intuition’.¹¹⁶ Both are needed in the act of cognition:

Neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way, nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition.¹¹⁷

But the question remains, how do we account for the connection between sensibility and understanding? In her review of imagination in Kantian thought, Eva Brann comments: ‘It is the transcendental power of the imagination that will be the enabling ground on which they (sensibility and understanding) can interpenetrate each other.’¹¹⁸ Kant posits imagination as the ‘meeting ground’ of understanding and sensibility. The imagination draws on prior experience, enabling us to perceive of the whole of an object when only part of it is available to us; hence although we cannot see more than three sides of a cube, we perceive that it has all six sides.¹¹⁹ In Kant’s view imagination combines our fragmented experience of perception into a connected whole. This makes the imagination the ground of knowledge. Kant calls the synthesis born in the imagination ‘transcendental’. By this ‘transcendental’ process our experience of the world is synthesized by *a priori* principles at work in the productive imagination. For example, we can only make sense of experience by drawing on our *a priori* ideas of space and time, exerted by imagination on the synthesis of apprehension and giving us a sense of consistency in our experience of the world. Rather than simply receiving data from the outside world, as the empiricists understood it, Kant sees the imagination imposing order on that data, and therefore as having a key role in understanding, something the rationalism of Descartes seemed to deny:

¹¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A50/B74 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193.

¹¹⁶ Kant, A 51/B75 (1998), 193.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Eva T. H. Brann, *The World of the Imagination* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 93.

¹¹⁹ A. R. Manser, ‘Imagination’, in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1967), vol. 4, 136.

It is only by means of this transcendental function of the imagination that even the affinity of appearances, and with it the association and through the latter finally reproduction in accordance with laws, and consequently experience itself, become possible; for without them no concepts or objects at all would converge into an experience.¹²⁰

In short, for Kant, imagination is fundamental to human experience since it brings order to sensory data, giving us an experience in space and time and enabling us to conceptualise experience holistically. In the first *Critique*, Kant associates imagination principally with image formation in the process of understanding, which, whilst important, seems inadequate. Brann comments that *The Critique of Judgement* with its focus on the ground upon which judgements of taste are made, seems the natural home of the imagination with its connection to aesthetics. However, ‘the actual working of the imagination as a faculty is taken up only in passing in this Critique.’¹²¹ What of the place of the imagination in art and creativity?

Casey associates Romanticism with the super-ordination of the imagination which understands the role of the imagination as highly artistic and creative, the highest of all human faculties, often celebrated in inflated rhetoric. Romanticism upheld the idea that imagination is a source of freedom and autonomy, in reaction to the conformity of industrialisation. Coleridge (1772-1834) divides the imagination into the primary and secondary imagination:

The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate.¹²²

Here we see the primary imagination as comparable to Kant’s transcendental imagination, linking the world of thought and things and making experience possible. Coleridge designates the primary imagination as the image of God in man, naming as divine the strangeness of the transcendental imagination which

¹²⁰ Kant, A101 – A123 (1998), 240.

¹²¹ Brann (1991), 97.

¹²² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ch. XIII, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6081/6081-h/6081-h.htm#2HCH0013>> [accessed 25th January 2013].

Kant had identified. Coleridge draws a parallel between God creating order from chaos and humankind shaping meaning from raw sense data.¹²³ The secondary imagination, allied to the primary, has a creative function, breaking down and reshaping the content of sensory experience. Coleridge differentiates fancy from imagination, seeing fancy as mimetic and ornamental rather than a genuinely creative faculty. M.H. Abrams succinctly designates the Romantic shift in understanding of the role of the imagination from that of the mirror (reflective and mimetic) to the lamp (searching, illuminating and defining).¹²⁴ This idea is also expressed in Wordsworth's (1770-1850) 'The Prelude':

This spiritual Love acts not nor can exist
Without Imagination, which, in truth,
Is but another name for absolute power
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And Reason in her most exalted mood.¹²⁵

The separation of reason and imagination that we saw earlier in the history of imagination is no longer assumed. This is an important point to bear in mind when we come to shaping a framework of imagination for homiletics.

As we turn to the modern period we see a debate over the link between imagination and mental imagery. Alan White claims that imagination does not imply imagery because it is common to imagine in ways that do not or could not contain imagery. He offers the examples of imagining 'what the neighbours will think or why someone should try to kill us.'¹²⁶ The difficulty is that, although we don't necessarily have to picture these things to imagine them, there is no reason why there should not be some form of imagery, indeed, there probably will be. The flaw in White's argument is that he restricts his understanding of images to that which is copiable. He writes: 'it is easy to imagine that someone is in great pain, but what would imagery of a pain be like?'¹²⁷ He does not allow for the real and rich potential of abstract visual images and linguistic figures to communicate

¹²³ R. L. Brett, *Fancy and Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1969), 41.

¹²⁴ See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹²⁵ William Wordsworth, 'The Prelude', Book 14, lines 188-92, <<http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww300.html>> [accessed 25th January 2013].

¹²⁶ Alan White, *The Language of Imagination* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1990), 88-92, extract in Beaney (2010), 234.

¹²⁷ White, in Beaney (2010), 235.

something of the pain of the other. We might picture pain in colour, shape, and sound, such as jagged red lines with a screaming high pitched soundtrack. We might use figurative language such as ‘pain stabbing and lancing’ or ‘pounding’, implying an underlying metaphor of being in pain as being in battle.

White’s argument is countered by Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft who do see mental imagery as part of imagination.¹²⁸ The finer points of their argument are beyond the scope of this thesis, but the question remains, is there any need to enter into polarised arguments about what is involved in imaginative function? Such arguments, whilst offered in forensic detail, do not practically enhance the quest for a clearer understanding of imagination. We need a framework of the imagination which allows for imagery as a probable, though not necessary, aspect of all imagining, and which incorporates other aspects of imaginative function and expression.

A further aspect of commentary on the imagination in the modern period is the thought that it is wrong to speak of imagination as a distinct faculty of the mind. Jean-Paul Sartre regarded imagination as ‘the whole of consciousness as it realises its freedom’.¹²⁹ Sartre and I.A. Richards agree that imagination is better understood, not as a part of the mind’s functioning, but as a way in which the mind makes meaning.¹³⁰

Egan maintains that when we use the word ‘imagination’ we can be confident about ‘more or less what we mean’, and confident that ‘what we mean will be understood by others as what they more or less mean by the word.’¹³¹ However, across the material surveyed we have seen a variety of modes of imaginative function, pointing up the enigmatic and ambiguous nature of the imagination, and the difficulty of being ‘more or less’ sure about what we mean when we use the term. When a homiletics tutor urges students to be imaginative in their preaching, is she advocating the use of poetic images and illustrations to serve the clarity of the rational points raised, or is she urging the use of a narrative style to embody the meaning conveyed in the sermon? Maybe she is suggesting innovation in form, structure, and delivery? Perhaps she wants preachers to

¹²⁸ Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds: Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 24-6, in Beaney (2010), 265-67.

¹²⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1972), 270.

¹³⁰ Egan (2010), 29.

¹³¹ Egan, (1992), 3.

inhabit the scriptural text in an Ignatian manner, or is she commending an empathetic evaluation of the hearers' context? Is she advocating the use of supposition and 'what-if' thought experiments, feeding a prophetic edge to the sermon? It seems that Egan's confidence in the clarity of the term 'imagination', even in a 'more or less' sense, is misplaced. Given the complex variety of references to imaginative function in the history of imagination and, as we shall see, in the homiletic literature, homiletics could benefit from a framework mapping the imagination with the heuristic purpose of enabling us to conceive clearly of the range of imaginative function, allowing for coterminous expression and collaboration between various aspects of imagination. Shaped in such a way as to correlate with psychological type (see chapter seven) this would offer a useful tool for preachers and teachers of preaching.

2.2 From Broadus to Brueggemann: Imagination in a Range of Homiletic Texts

The following analysis examines how imagination is treated in a range of important homiletic textbooks, looking to the past with John Broadus, and drawing from the New Homiletic with Fred B. Craddock and Thomas Troeger, as well as examining works of established and influential homileticians on both sides of the Atlantic, and Australia, from a range of denominational backgrounds.¹³² The aim is to highlight the varied use of the term 'imagination' in the literature, and the general lack of clear delineation of the field of meaning associated with the term, highlighting the usefulness of a framework which clarifies and holds together different aspects of imaginative function.

i. John Broadus: Surprising Advocate of Imaginative Preaching

John Broadus' text, written in 1870, was for years 'the authoritative work on homiletics used in colleges and seminaries in the United States.'¹³³ Written against the backdrop of modernity, it is not surprising that Broadus considers that

¹³² Church of England: John Stott, Peter Adam; Episcopalian: Linda Clader; Baptist: John Broadus, John Piper, Warren Wiersbe; Methodist: Donald English, Cyril Rodd, Richard Eslinger; Presbyterian: Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, Thomas Troeger (also ordained into the Episcopalian Church); United Church of Christ: Walter Brueggemann; North American Mainline Protestant: Fred B. Craddock. The Roman Catholic contribution to the discussion is addressed in chapter four.

¹³³ Michael Duduit, *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992), 53.

‘preaching and all public speaking ought to be largely composed of argument.’ He asserts that ‘to explain the Scriptures would seem to be among the primary functions of the preacher.’ He urges the preacher to ‘ascertain the true meaning of his text,’ calling it a ‘fundamental and inexcusable error’ to say that a scriptural text says what it does not mean. Broadus takes as axiomatic the assumption that there is only one correct interpretation of a text, an assertion which is in tension with postmodern approaches to texts. In urging the preacher to ‘look at your text with a microscope’ we see the use of a figure which implies a scientific approach to scripture. He urges the preacher to ‘interpret logically’ and only to ‘interpret figuratively, where there is sufficient reason’. The literal is to be preferred over the figurative. He sees the preacher’s authority as resting with ‘the ability to establish the veracity of content’. He calls for precision in language use, urging the preacher to employ ‘words and phrases that exactly express our thought’. Here he seems to be assuming that the key to successful preaching is the conveyance of a particular idea or set of ideas, in a simple sender-receiver model of communication.

Postmodern thought rebuffs this, particularly in the deconstructionist argument that the hearer is not a *tabula rasa* waiting to receive an idea. Rather the situatedness of the hearer affects the way they interpret what the speaker says. Again, Broadus adopts a typically modernist approach in defining apologetics as ‘the evidences of Christianity, and its defence against assailants,’ an understanding in tension with more contemporary approaches to apologetics as bridge-building.¹³⁴ The former approach has a distinctly rationalistic basis, associated with the cut and thrust of argument; the latter is more conversational, relational and inviting. Overall, Broadus’ manual on preaching certainly emphasises the importance of communicating the meaning of the biblical text and assumes that there is a true meaning in the text which we can ascertain through careful study and contextual reflection. None of this is surprising in a text that reflects a modernist backdrop and assumptions.¹³⁵

However, what is surprising – and helpful – is that, alongside this rational approach, Broadus affords a place to the imagination in preaching:

¹³⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester: IVP, 2002).

¹³⁵ John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Armstrong and Son, 1870), ix, 54, 68, 79, 79, 82, 161, 345, 93.

It is a matter on which preachers seldom bestow any thoughtful attention; and yet few things are so important to their real success, as the possession, the culture, the control, of imagination.¹³⁶

In tension with the aspects of his textbook that suggest an almost scientific approach to preaching, Broadus also describes it as an art, ‘fashioned by constructive imagination.’ In his thesis, imagination has a shaping function, organising thought into ‘forms as new as the equestrian statue of bronze is unlike the metallic ores when they lay in the mine.’ Broadus goes further and makes a connection between imagination and the invention of thought. Whilst he cannot be precise about this, he is clear that imagination aids us ‘in penetrating to the heart of a subject, and developing it from within.’ Although this is but a passing comment, he is pointing to the relationship between imagination and the development of knowledge and discovery. He indicates that there is more to imagination than the production of imagery and ‘fireworks of fancy’ and points to its importance in scientific research, philosophical abstraction, and geometrical, ethical, and artistic ideals. As well as having a role in cognitive function, Broadus points to its potential to arouse the affective response and affect the will of the hearer. He writes of the importance of imagination in description to help stimulate the imagination of the hearer into seeing for himself. He refers to the ‘historical imagination’ which enables us to vividly describe the biblical world. It is interesting to note his fear that in exercising it we may distort our understanding of the scripture by carrying back ‘our modern conceptions’, leading to ‘erroneous representation.’ It is hard to see how we can avoid this, at least in some degree, as we engage with the text from our historical and cultural situation. A theology of the connection between imagination and revelation might have allayed some of Broadus’ concerns. Broadus provides some key themes to build into a homiletic centred on the importance of imagination. What is missing in Broadus, and which will be developed in subsequent chapters, is a more developed understanding of imaginative function, a theology of imagination and revelation, a discussion of the relationship

¹³⁶ Broadus (1870), 396.

between imagination and psychology, and a development of his brief suggestions concerning how the imagination might be cultivated.¹³⁷

Richard Eslinger, commenting on more recent homiletic literature, observes that much is made of the importance of imagery in preaching ‘without the homiletic imagination being considered in the least.’¹³⁸ His assessment is largely correct, although Paul Scott Wilson does directly address the importance of preachers developing imagination in order to preach effectively.¹³⁹ An evaluation of Wilson’s contribution is offered below.

Much of the contemporary literature which connects preaching and imagination tends to assume that, because the term ‘imagination’ is in common parlance, its meaning needs no particular clarification. This is particularly striking in the texts regarded as part of the New Homiletic, an umbrella term used to describe a paradigmatic development in North American homiletics in the years following the publication of Fred B. Craddock’s 1971 text *As One Without Authority*.¹⁴⁰ This consisted of a number of homiletic writers ‘with differing points of entry, various agenda, and diverse goals’.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, they offer a plethora of imaginative ways of preaching, from Buttrick’s ‘moves’ to the ‘Lowry Loop’,¹⁴² although with little developed consideration of the nature and theology of imagination.

ii. Fred B. Craddock: Herald of a New Era in Preaching

Fred Craddock’s *As One Without Authority* (1971) is widely regarded as the clarion call to a new emphasis on preaching in which the imagination was seen as central, though again he does not adequately explore the term. He does point out that since inductive preaching makes demands on imagination we need to be disabused of ‘faulty and inadequate understandings’ of this faculty which he

¹³⁷ Broadus (1870), 324, 398, 395, 20, 152, 399-400, 400-405.

¹³⁸ Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination: Reaching the Worlds That Shape Us* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1995), 57.

¹³⁹ Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart: New understandings in Preaching* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1988).

¹⁴⁰ F. B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, revised edition (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001).

¹⁴¹ Eugene Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1997), 15.

¹⁴² Buttrick, (1987); Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

claims is ‘fundamental to all thinking’.¹⁴³ It is debatable whether he fully achieves this clarification since he links imagination with critical reasoning, but leaves this undeveloped. Rather, he concentrates on the ocular nature of imagination, saying nothing about how it operates in potentially non imagistic ways, such as in the act of supposition. Nevertheless, his exploration of imagination and images is very useful to the preacher. As Ana-Maria Rizzuto reminds us, ‘no-one arrives at the “house of God” without his pet God under his arm.’¹⁴⁴ Craddock seems to concur with this view:

The galleries of the mind are filled with images that have been hung there casually or deliberately by parents, writers, artists, teachers, speakers, and combinations of many forces.¹⁴⁵

In Craddock’s analysis, transformation comes when these internal images are recognised, challenged, and changed. This point is developed in his 1978 Beecher Lectures, in which he observes that when preaching remains in the world of concepts the imaginative depths of consciousness remain unaltered and the hearer may give rational assent to sermonic content with no evidence of real behavioural change.¹⁴⁶ If the images in the inner gallery are to be altered, Craddock maintains that imagination needs engaging. This highlights the importance for preachers of listening to and observing carefully the dominant operative images in congregational imagination (those unconscious and often unnamed images that have implicit power) which may not be the same as the espoused images (images which people consciously own, but which may only have superficial power). For example, there is sometimes an observable conflict between an espoused image which speaks of the love of God and an operative image which suggests God is cruel, demanding, and largely never satisfied. It has been suggested, in a small scale study, that imagination engaged in creative writing has the potential to help people to name and challenge their images of

¹⁴³ Craddock (2001), 63.

¹⁴⁴ Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 8.

¹⁴⁵ Craddock (2001), 64.

¹⁴⁶ Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1978), 134.

God.¹⁴⁷ The preacher needs to consider the power of imagination operating in speaker and listener in the event of the sermon, which helps in the recognition, naming, and challenging of the inner imagery of faith.

Craddock highlights the importance for the preacher of close sensory observation of all of life, stating that ‘it is better to have a child's eye than an orator's tongue’.¹⁴⁸ This connection between imagination, childhood, and sensory awareness is echoed by Barbara Brown Taylor who offers this beautiful extended simile to capture her sense of the play of the imagination:

Imagination is like a child roaming the neighbourhood on a free afternoon, following first the smell of fresh bread in an oven, then the glint of something bright in the grass – led by curiosity, by hunger, by hope, to explore the world. When imagination comes home and empties its pockets, of course there will be some sorting to do. But do not scold imagination for bringing it all home or for collecting it in the first place.¹⁴⁹

Taylor's image of the child roaming the neighbourhood is deeply evocative, giving a powerful and appealing sense of ludic freedom and joy; regarding imagination as a source of discovery without judgement.

Craddock's stress on the methodology of preaching harnesses imagination in a more utilitarian sense which runs the risk of crushing the freedom captured so beautifully by Taylor. What Taylor suggests is that we develop a childlike contemplative approach to life. There is no sense of utilitarian compulsion: ‘Do this and your sermons will work.’ In contrast, Craddock does seem to crush the freedom of imagination by the weight of his methodology. We cannot turn imagination on for the purposes of preaching. Rather we need to allow the imagination to develop and grow, to be alive to wonder, curious, and open hearted, so that the childlike imagination cannot help but speak into our sermons as we grow as children of God. However, Craddock makes helpful suggestions about employing imagery. He stresses the importance of imaging in concrete, specific ways, avoiding vague generalisations and of being judicious in the use of adjectives and adverbs, since overdrawing the image leaves little space for the

¹⁴⁷ Kate Bruce, ‘Praying with a Pen in Hand: An Exploration of the Effects of Creative Writing on People's Images of God,’ *Anvil*, Vol. 24, Issue 3 (2007), 183-196.

¹⁴⁸ Craddock (2001), 65, 66.

¹⁴⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1993), 51.

hearer to enter in and make the image their own. He instructs the preacher to point towards and not get in the way with phrases like ‘we see’, and finally he stresses the importance of using the vernacular in the sketching of the image.¹⁵⁰

In the Beecher Lectures, Craddock refers to imagination in a sidelong way, without exploring the term. We can infer from his emphasis on beginning where the listener is that he is drawing on the power of empathy. He refers to this more directly in his later textbook, *Preaching*, in which he describes the ‘empathetic imagination’ as ‘the capacity to achieve a large measure of understanding of another person without having had that person's experience.’¹⁵¹ He offers a useful practical example of how to develop the empathetic imagination. This involves coming up with a range of scenarios the preacher has never experienced and then spending fifteen minutes scribbling down every thought, association, memory, experience or sensation which comes to mind with reference to the scenarios.¹⁵² In effect the preacher creates an imaginative bank of resources from which to draw.

Craddock calls for a new hearing of the gospel. He is thinking of the North American context in the 1970s in which the hearers had heard it all before. This may still be the case in the UK context, for the many that have faithfully attended Church over the years and heard countless sermons. However, the National Biblical Literacy Survey (2009)¹⁵³ found that the Bible remains irrelevant to almost half the population (47%) and this figure increases to 70% among those between 16 and 24.¹⁵⁴

Craddock regards one of the goals of preaching as being to help the congregation ‘look upon old landscapes with a new eye.’ The survey suggests that in our context the landscape is largely unknown to many travellers. In Craddock’s analysis, boredom works against faith, as it ‘drapes the whole occasion with a pall of indifference and unimportance.’ The survey suggests that

¹⁵⁰ Craddock (2001), 75-78.

¹⁵¹ Craddock, (1985), 95.

¹⁵² Craddock (1985), 97.

¹⁵³ This survey was undertaken at 9 locations across England and Wales, randomly sampling people in streets and shopping centres. At least 100 interviews were conducted at each of these sample points with people being invited to take part in face to face interviews designed to measure their attitudes towards and knowledge of the Bible.

¹⁵⁴ National Biblical Literacy Survey (CODEC:2009)

<<http://pmphillips.posterous.com/pages/codecs-national-biblical-literacy-survey-2009>>, [accessed 10th June, 2013]

in our own context boredom may be induced not by over-familiarity but by sheer incomprehension. Drawing from Kierkegaard's critique of nominal belief in the Danish Church of the 1850s, Craddock views the 'transmission of information as one of the lowest forms of communication', and sees one of the reasons for dull preaching being an over focus on the content of the sermon rather than seeing the sermon as seeking to evoke new capacities in the hearer. Gaining such a new hearing is a challenge that 'taxes all the faculties of thought and imagination.' We cannot now rely on the biblical knowledge Craddock assumes his hearers have. Contemporary preachers need to consider carefully how to weave necessary biblical content into their sermons in subtle and imaginative ways, so the sermon is rooted in the biblical texts, and feeds those with good levels of biblical literacy without alienating those for whom the biblical landscape is an undiscovered country. Such a feat requires the active engagement of the imagination in the preparation and reception of the sermon.

Craddock's thesis in the Beecher Lectures is that through story, parable, and indirect communication, the imagination can be captivated and a new hearing effected. Arguably this approach can be made to work with a mixed congregation of people with little biblical knowledge and those with much. Craddock links imagination with variety of form in preaching. He denigrates the fear of trying new methods as 'passive, defensive and unimaginative', making the astute comment that 'no-one wins all races with the same horse.' For Craddock, rightly, a concern with aesthetic form in homiletics is not a sell out to frivolous ornamentation but is essential to the revolutionary potential of preaching.¹⁵⁵ There is a connection here between imagination and seeing how to shape the sermon which Craddock does not make explicit.

iii. John Stott: Imagination as the Handmaid of Propositional Preaching

John Stott makes reference to imagination in homiletics claiming that it has a 'legitimate, even an essential place in preaching'. He refers to the importance of the preacher picturing the congregation in preaching preparation and imagining how the text relates to individuals in their context.¹⁵⁶ In a section in which he is

¹⁵⁵ Craddock (1978), 89, 13, 58, 16-20, 79, 55, 102, 78.

¹⁵⁶ John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 146, 252.

stressing the importance of imagery in the sermon, he quotes from the fifth series of Beecher's Yale Lectures on Preaching:

The first element on which your preaching will depend for power and success, you will be surprised to learn, is Imagination, which I regard as the most important element of all which goes to make the preacher.¹⁵⁷

Beecher sees the power of imagination as being the ability to give shape to things invisible to the senses and to make such things as though visible to the eye.¹⁵⁸ Drawing on this, Stott sees the God-given importance of the role of imagination as lying in the translation of abstraction into picture because we often find abstract concepts difficult to grasp. The purpose of illustration is to 'stimulate people's imagination and to help them to see things clearly in their minds.' The choice of the right word is a matter of imagination; the right word illuminating meaning, and so Stott calls for preachers to consider carefully their language use, arguing for precision, familiarity, and vividness, whilst criticising verbiage. Stott says little about metaphor, other than pointing out the danger of the confusion caused by the employment of mixed metaphor. One of the tensions present in Stott's view of imagination is between the desire for precision in language and his praise of the imagination for its ability to create pictorial representations of abstraction. In doing this the imagination often employs metaphor which can lose precision because of the variety of meanings that can arise through the use of the metaphoric. Stott gives little room for the possibility of tensive and multivalent language to communicate divine revelation.

Stott favours propositional preaching, with imagination as the handmaid of the communication of proposition through the use of effective imagery. This focus can be seen in his stress on the preacher meditating on a text until they are able to 'isolate the dominant thought'. Stott's emphasis on such exegesis is problematic since some texts resist reduction, demanding imaginative engagement in narrative, or wrestling with the tensive possibility of the lyrical voice. His fear is of the 'danger of unscrupulous text twisting.'¹⁵⁹ However, reducing a text down

¹⁵⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching* (New York: Ford, Howard and Hulbert, 1881), 109, <<http://www.archive.org/stream/yalelecturesonp00beec#page/n124/mode/1up>> [accessed 8th December 2011].

¹⁵⁸ Beecher (1881), 110.

¹⁵⁹ Stott (1982), 239, 231-236.

to a dominant thought may in itself effect twist the text. Imagination is more than a homiletic tool serving the communication of a reasoned exegesis, although it is at least this.

Although Stott quotes from Beecher, he does not give imagination the same vital position in preaching. Beecher sees imagination as having a key role in revelation; it is 'indispensable for the formation of any clear and distinct ideas of God the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit'.¹⁶⁰ For Beecher, the Spirit working in the human imagination opens us to the experience of God in city and town, in retreat, in creation, in suggestion and association, enabling us to see Christ and to communicate that seeing to others. Beecher seems to be presenting a sacramental view of preaching which seeks to do more than communicate information about the historical Christ, doctrine, and social and political issues. Important as these areas are, on their own they turn the sermon into a lecture. The essential purpose of preaching, in Beecher's analysis, is to present the love of God in Christ Jesus and to apply this to the human soul as a loving and present reality which people can grasp for themselves.¹⁶¹ In comparison to Beecher, and in spite of drawing from him, Stott assigns the imagination an important, but less central role in the preaching event, regarding it as a tool for making abstract ideas concrete.

Stott's understanding of expository integrity relates to his view that interpretation should be faithful to the principles of historical criticism and to the grammatical construction of the text, looking for the 'plain, natural, obvious meaning of each text, without subtleties.'¹⁶² There are serious flaws with this understanding of how we interpret biblical texts. First, the Bible itself contains many imaginative examples of texts being taken out of their historical contexts to amplify or explore an idea. Thus, in Mark 10.6-7 Jesus cites Genesis 1.27 and 2.24, using these texts to argue against divorce even though it is permitted according to Deuteronomy 24.1-4. Ironically, given his high view of scriptural authority, Stott's understanding of exposition would rule out Jesus' own use of Genesis since Jesus does not stay with the 'plain, natural and obvious meaning of the text'.

¹⁶⁰ Beecher (1881), 111.

¹⁶¹ Beecher (1881), 114-117.

¹⁶² Stott (1982), 127.

Second, we often interpret scripture through the lenses of other scriptural texts, imaginatively picking up intertextual echoes and resonances. For example, we might read David's raw honesty with God as he walks weeping up the Mount of Olives, betrayed by his son Absalom (2 Samuel 15.25-30), alongside the behaviour of another Davidic King who throws himself on the mercy of God in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, weeping, betrayed by his friend. Using texts to help us explore and interpret other texts does not fit with Stott's insistence on the 'plain, natural, obvious meaning of each text'. Yet such intertextuality is imaginative, resonant and rich, offering creative ways of handling the biblical texts.

Third, Stott assumes that texts can be reduced to a 'plain, natural, obvious meaning'. Such reductionism destroys figurative, multi-layered language. Parable and poetry are not meant to be boiled down to single meanings, but opened up for imaginative exploration. Stott is also assuming that the reader can accurately negotiate her way back to the original authorial intent. Assuming this is possible, what do we do with other interpretations offered throughout history; must they necessarily be discarded as flawed? Do we have to set aside the richness of allegorical interpretations? Can texts not have a variety of interpretations simultaneously?

Fourth, Stott's understanding of exposition seems to stifle imagination, closing down interpretations which are reached through creative engagement with the texts, such as Ignatian prayer, Godly Play, or through meditative exercises like *lectio divina*. Such interpretations can resource preachers and enrich sermons. Finally, Stott seems to be connecting accurate historical interpretation with veracity, but 'history simply cannot establish the truth or the meaning of the central claims of Christian faith.'¹⁶³ Added to this, Stott's homiletic is based on an overly-rational theology, anthropology, and hermeneutic. For Stott, God communicates via reason to reasoning people a reasonable gospel, but this view is too narrow. God communicates through imagination, symbol, and intuition, as well as reason. Humanity apprehends

¹⁶³ Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2008), 42.

knowledge through a variety of means, not all of which rely on the reasoned discourse which is such a strong feature of Stott's preaching.¹⁶⁴

'It is my contention that all true preaching is expository preaching.' Stott is careful to define his understanding of what constitutes expository preaching, distancing himself from a view of the sermon as verse by verse explanation of a passage. Rather, he sees expository preaching as relating to content rather than style; the content being the plain clarification of a biblical text in which the text is 'a master which dictates and controls what is said.'¹⁶⁵ This leaves the preacher with the challenge of finding imaginative and engaging ways of exploring and communicating biblical meaning; remembering that the clarification of a text in and of itself is not preaching. Preaching is about leading people towards the possibility of transformative encounter, a goal that requires explanation, imaginative openness, and creativity.

Stott reminds us that preaching stands on the foundation of the biblical texts. However, whether every sermon has to be tied directly to a specific passage is questionable. It has been said of Austin Farrer that, 'While his theological points are certainly consistent with and informed by biblical teaching, usually they are not explicitly based on a passage of holy writ.'¹⁶⁶ Stott seems over-prescriptive on this point; much depends on context and homiletic purpose. He quotes Donald Coggan in support of his perspective that 'exposition sets us limits',¹⁶⁷ arguing that a preacher should stay with a particular scriptural text. However, in Coggan's *Stewards of Grace* the limit Coggan speaks of is the gospel itself, rather than the horizons of a set biblical text. Interestingly, Coggan's next sub-heading is that 'the Christian preacher has well-nigh boundless scope.' The point Coggan makes is that preaching should cover the scope of the 'whole counsel of God'.¹⁶⁸ This can be done in a variety of imaginative ways, biblical without always being tightly bound to a single text.

¹⁶⁴ The 2007 Keswick Address and the compilation of talks given by Stott at the Keswick convention, reproduced in John Stott, *The Last Word, Reflections on a Lifetime of Preaching* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2008), 19-44 and 71-93, lacks images and relies heavily on exegetical reasoned discourse.

¹⁶⁵ Stott (1982), 125, 126.

¹⁶⁶ O.C. Edwards and David Hein, 'Farrer's Preaching' in *Captured by the Crucified: The Practical Theology of Austin Farrer*, ed., David Hein and Edward Hugh Henderson (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 181.

¹⁶⁷ Stott (1982), 126.

¹⁶⁸ Coggan (1958), 47.

Stott regards taking a verse out of context and preaching on it in a way that distorts its meaning as unfaithful exposition. He also regards tangential homiletic focus and the wilful manipulation of a text to say something not in accord with its original intent as unfaithful exposition.¹⁶⁹ How would he regard preaching which picks up something unusual in a text, or focuses in on a seemingly minor detail, unfolding it in a way which is congruent with the wider backdrop of biblical teaching, but not necessarily congruent with its immediate textual setting? Perhaps ‘poor’ exposition, served by imaginative insight, is not incompatible with good theology? Stott maintains that expounding with honesty and integrity gives the preacher confidence, and he urges the preacher to handle the text with ‘scrupulous fidelity’¹⁷⁰ that God might speak through the words of scripture. For Stott, ‘scrupulous fidelity’ means subscribing to a particular hermeneutic strategy, one which favours a rational-cognitive discourse. However, it is not a particular form of exposition that gives us the confidence to speak, but faith in a communicating God who uses all our human faculties: acute sensing, creative intuition, affective power, and cognitive processes, to speak to us through the scriptures and through the medium of preaching.

Exposition is crucial to preaching, but the question remains, what kind of exposition? Attempts at historical interpretation are not ruled out, but need to sit alongside other exegetical tools. Stott makes reference to ‘grammatical construction’¹⁷¹ as being important in exegesis, but does not mention how the literary form might affect expository strategies. He touches on the subject of how literary form might impact sermonic form and accepts that there are many different ways of structuring a sermon.¹⁷² Considering Stott’s high view of scripture as God’s Word written, we might expect more focus on the genre of the biblical texts and the impact this has on hermeneutics and sermonic shape.

Stott says nothing about the imagination of the *hearer* in the preaching event. The listener seems to be little more than a passive recipient, dependent on the preacher’s ability to construct a bridge between the pole of scripture and that of the contemporary situation. Michael Quicke demonstrates that listeners have an active role in the preaching event in his model of preaching as a 360 degree

¹⁶⁹ Stott (1982), 130.

¹⁷⁰ Stott (1982), 132.

¹⁷¹ Stott (1982), 127.

¹⁷² Stott (1982), 229, 231.

event.¹⁷³ The purpose of preaching is to gather up the Church into the community of the Trinity, with all that means in terms of wholeness, relationship, transformation, mission, and service in the world. Therefore the hearer (which includes the preacher) has a responsibility to listen actively and to act on the basis of what has been heard. This holy listening is closely connected to the proprium of the Spirit who teaches (Jn. 14.26), guides (Jn.16.13) and reminds the Church of Jesus' teaching (Jn.15.26). In the encounter with the sermon, there is the divine possibility that the whispered word of God in the hearers' inner lives connects with aspects of the proclaimed word of the sermon, as the hearer draws from the sermonic content the images and ideas which speak most powerfully into their own story. Sermons help us to narrate our existence. This process of making connections is an imaginative act in which Christ is incarnated in the life of the hearer. The preacher models this process in their handling of the scripture; the whispered word shaping the proclaimed word.

Stott comments, 'I believe that by far the most important secrets of preaching are not technical but theological and personal.'¹⁷⁴ His statement seems irrefutable at face value; but to separate theology from methodology is flawed. The homiletic decisions each preacher makes are theologically loaded. Stott maintains that homiletics belongs to practical theology on the basis that 'it cannot be taught without a solid theological foundation.'¹⁷⁵ His implication seems to be that homiletics is simply about teaching communication skills, building on a theological foundation offered elsewhere. Theology is obviously foundational for homiletics, but it is a part of homiletics. Methodology is itself a theological and personal issue. *How* we preach communicates as much, if not more, than *what* we preach.

For example, picture the preacher in the pulpit, high above the hearers, reading from a tightly worded script, which proceeds in a logical and linear fashion, seeking to persuade the hearer of the reasonableness of the gospel. Contrast this with the preacher moving about a space, amongst the people, without a written script, sketching out in gesture and word a narrative, inviting the hearer into the narrative, and asking and exploring open ended questions.

¹⁷³ Michael J. Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, And Living The Word* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003), 60-61.

¹⁷⁴ Stott (1982), 10.

¹⁷⁵ Stott (1982), 92.

Both varieties of preaching carry theological freight, both positive and negative. The first model suggests that God is discovered in clarity and certainty, reason, and reference, and suggests that revelation is top down, ordered, structured, and logical. Here is a model with which Stott would identify. The weakness is the tendency to reduce the listener to a passive recipient. The second model is more dynamic, appeals to the imagination, and places the preacher in a more vulnerable position. It suggests that revelation is discovered in interaction and in risk. It implicitly images God as present in the muddle of human interaction with the divine narrative. It runs the risk of lacking clarity and certainty, and becoming too emotive.

Overall, Stott's understanding of imagination in preaching is as a handmaid to the lord of reasoned discourse, rather than as the central locus of the revelatory event.

iv. Peter Adam: Imagination on the Touchline

Peter Adam constructs his theology of preaching on three foundations: the premise that God speaks, that this is written, and that these writings contain the divine commission to preach. At the heart of his thesis is the view that preaching is concerned with exegesis, exhortation, and application, expressed through the expositional sermon, with scant attention given to the role of the imagination in the preaching event. This severely limits his understanding of revelation and of the theological creativity of the homiletic task in terms of hermeneutics, apologetics, sermon craft, delivery, and the hearers' reception.

Adam argues against those who would see God as silent, maintaining that:

People prefer a God who does not speak because he makes less clear demands, asks no questions, makes no promises, and threatens no punishments... Nowadays this rejection of the meaning and purpose of God goes even deeper. The postmodern move against meaning in words, and against words themselves, is part of an attempt to create not only a world without God but a universe without meaning.¹⁷⁶

Is this actually the case? Does postmodernity grow out of such a cynical and concerted aim? Or is postmodernity, at least in part, a varied reaction of mistrust

¹⁷⁶ Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Leicester: IVP, 1996), 24.

in institutions that have spoken in the name of powers they have misused? Is it less an attempt to create a universe without meaning and more a reaction to a loss of meaning? Seeing the threads of separation, loneliness and mistrust in the postmodern context generates a compassionate apologetic and a less adversarial homiletic theology. Theologies that stand on impregnable edifices of revealed truth, of ‘this is what the Bible says’, will make no headway in a context suspicious of authority; an imaginative theology of preaching is needed which is open, relational, honest, and vulnerable. Preachers need imaginative wisdom to stand in the position of the hearer and develop apologetic and affective approaches which seek to establish connection. Once again, the preacher needs to exercise the imaginative in its various functions, in this case ‘seeing as’ and ‘feeling as’ a cynical and jaded hearer.

Adam explores the way that God’s voice is heard, looking at biblical references suggesting that when God speaks there is audible sound.¹⁷⁷ He adds that in some cases God’s word ‘communicates directly from his mind to that of the recipient.’¹⁷⁸ His example is Isaiah 28.23-26, where the prophet speaks of farmers knowing how to farm because God has instructed them. Adam argues that the revelation of God comes, in this case, through observation of farming traditions. At this point he seems to be saying that God speaks through a medium other than the biblical text. Extending his argument, we could say that God speaks through such things as art, poetry, music, literature, comedy, and contemplation. Again we see a potential connection between imagination and revelation. Yet Adam does not develop his theology in that direction. His theology of revelation is tightly bound to the biblical text, which has implications for his homiletic. For Adam, ‘The motto of those who engage in expository biblical preaching must be ‘let the Bible speak, let God speak!’¹⁷⁹

For Adam, the word of God is ‘fixed’ and ‘inscriptured’. In this view God’s revelation is fixed at a particular time and preserved in a particular way for future generations.¹⁸⁰ He writes, ‘What we have in Scripture is the revealed and

¹⁷⁷ Genesis 2.1; Exodus 19.9; Exodus 20.18-19; 1 Samuel 3; Matthew. 3.17; 17.5; John 12.28-29.

¹⁷⁸ Adam (1996), 23.

¹⁷⁹ Peter Adam, ‘Introduction to Preaching: Whatever happened to Preaching?’ from ‘Preaching and Pastoral Ministry’, in *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis*, ed. Melvin Tinker (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1995) <<http://www.stjudes.org.au/about-us/peteradam>> [accessed 20th 2013], 8.

¹⁸⁰ See: Exodus 34.27; Jeremiah 30:1-2; Romans 15.4; Acts 7.38.

preserved words of God'. There is something very static in this perspective, as though revelation was a fixed, immutable packet of knowledge handed down through subsequent generations. He borrows from J.I. Packer the phrase 'Scripture is God preaching.' However, he does not explore the point that both scripture and preaching need to be interpreted. This process of reception and interpretation is one which draws from the faculty of imaginative 'seeing as'. Adam does not address issues of hermeneutics and so his homiletic theology seems static. He does speak about the importance of the application of the text to the contemporary situation, but says nothing about how the preacher exegetes the context and makes the connections between text and context, which are imaginative tasks.¹⁸¹

The third foundation of Adam's theology of preaching is the call to 'preach the word'. He sees in the scriptures a divine commission to 'preach, teach and explain it to people and to encourage and urge them to respond.'¹⁸² He focuses on the example of Moses as the first preacher, with Deuteronomy 1.5 seen as introducing the first sermon in which Moses undertook to expound the law. He sees the second sermon starting at verse 6 (making the first sermon little more than a reference), being a rehearsal of the Ten Commandments, and the third sermon dealing with the covenant and exhortation to faithfulness in Deuteronomy 29. But we don't actually have sermons here and Moses is not preaching, since preaching is an oral-aural event in time. What we have is a written account of Moses' teaching. We do not have a model of Moses as preacher. We have no idea how he spoke, nor how he delivered his message. There is much that is useful in the example of Moses in terms of a leader who knows the spiritual narrative of his people, and is able to offer encouragement and direction in terms of how the people draw from that narrative to shape their future conduct. Adam identifies exposition, exhortation, and application in Moses' 'preaching' and concludes that these elements are central to preaching today. But there are other themes we can draw on from the biblical material to develop a richer homiletic which gives space for human imagination and creativity as part of the preaching event.

¹⁸¹ Adam (1995), 27, 34, 10-12.

¹⁸² Adam (1996), 37.

Adam recognizes that the ministry of the word in the Old Testament is carried out by, amongst others, ‘writers of songs’.¹⁸³ This is a fleeting reference which calls for greater exploration. We can see clearly that many of the psalms seek to exhort, as well as offering theological wisdom in beautiful and arresting images, giving voice to lamentation, rage, and devotion in imaginative and striking tropes. In Psalm 45, the writer speaks of having a ‘tongue like the pen of a ready scribe’ (45.1) and proceeds to sketch a poetic vision of the majesty of God. Psalm 47 speaks of singing praise to God with a ‘well-wrought psalm’ (47.7). There is a sense here that the revelation of God is earthed in the imaginative skill of the psalmist who draws from observations of everyday life, the natural world, and the stories of God with his people; images embedded in the theological psyche of his listeners.

Interestingly, when Adam turns to the example of Jesus as preacher he says very little about the parables, focusing briefly on the Parable of the Sower and its *explanation* of the seed as the word, in Mark 4. Why is Adam drawn to a parable which has the tensive, invitational aspect flattened by explanation? What of the much more common parabolic style which is open, invitational, and alluring, and which demands imaginative engagement?

In the second part of the book, Adam sets out to address issues of preparation and presentation. He defines preaching as:

The explanation and application of the Word to the congregation of Christ in order to produce corporate preparation for service, unity of faith, maturity, growth and upbuilding.¹⁸⁴

He helpfully reminds the reader of the corporate nature of preaching, seeing preaching as one expression of the ministry of the word, arguing that individual edification can come through other, more appropriate, expressions of this ministry. However, congregations are made up of individuals and there is unlikely ever to be a single cohesive, corporate hearing of the word. The preacher needs to hold in tension the fact that they are addressing a body consisting of many members. Each member will hear in a way that resonates with their individual narrative, as well as their understanding of the narrative of

¹⁸³ Adam (1996), 40.

¹⁸⁴ Adam (1996), 71.

the body as a whole. Holding this tension requires discernment, imaginative ‘seeing-as’ and ‘hearing-as’, in the sense of being able to adopt the perspective of particular hearers and to identify the key concerns and live issues of the corporate body, drawing from the affective dimension of imaginative function.

Why does Adam insist that preaching must be a ‘formal monologue’? There are two critical issues here. First is the assumption of formality. What does this look like for Adam? Should preaching in a café Church context be formal? Must all forms of preaching require a particular formal register, a standard position, or standard dress? The pre-requisite of formality feels like a straightjacket which does not allow for contextual variation or for playful, imaginative delivery. Second, he assumes that a monologue sermon ‘does not allow scope for interaction between preacher and congregation.’ Later he seems to contradict himself in commenting, ‘as Walter Brueggemann has demonstrated, good preaching ensures that real dialogue has taken place.’¹⁸⁵ It seems clear that there is always interaction between preacher and congregation, even in a monologue sermon. There is the visual interaction which, however minimal in some Churches, is present as congregants express themselves through eye contact (or lack of it) and body language. Also there is huge potential for interaction in the sense that the preacher imaginatively identifies and responds to the contrapuntal objection in the hearer. This task is made easier if the preacher actively engages with the ordinary theology of the hearers in sermon preparation and review groups. In a monologue sermon the preacher must inhabit different perspectives and ask questions about how the particular passage or theme might sound to another person, exploring how objections might plausibly and effectively be addressed. Vital to persuasive preaching is the employment of imagination.

Adam addresses the dichotomy in R.E.C. Browne’s argument that drives a wedge between propositional and poetic revelation.¹⁸⁶ Rightly, Adam points to Psalm 1 as an example of scripture written in the lyrical voice which conveys propositional truth. He also comments that the impact of the Book of Revelation ‘lies not only in the truth it conveys but also in the images it uses in order to convey those truths...’ He expresses the point that the range of scriptural genre

¹⁸⁵ Adam (1996), 71, 132.

¹⁸⁶ R.E.C. Browne, *The Ministry of the Word* (London: SCM, 1956).

offers support for a variety of sermonic styles.¹⁸⁷ However, the contradiction in his argument becomes clear when he writes:

The only kind of preaching worthy of the name is that in which the truth of a Scripture text is explained and applied to the lives of the hearers.¹⁸⁸

Adam accepts that the Scriptures themselves do not explicitly direct us to propositional preaching before offering a number of pragmatic and theological reasons as to why this form of preaching should be the norm.¹⁸⁹ He argues it allows God to set the agenda, as opposed to topical preaching which he sees as starting with humanity, not with God. In his argument, exposition respects history and context. But careful exegesis in preparation should always do this, regardless of the final form of the sermon. He assumes that expositional preaching will always take a pointed form.¹⁹⁰ However, exposition can be woven into a wide range of preaching styles. He assumes that an expositional sermon is always deductive. Does it have to be? In Adam's analysis all sermons should have a 'ministry sentence'¹⁹¹ which is the summary of the sermon's main point. The problem with the 'ministry sentence' is that it forces tensive biblical texts into a shape that limits their scope. For example, a ministry sentence for the parable of the Prodigal Son or the Prologue to John's Gospel would flatten out narrative shape and reduce theological richness in interpretation. It says to the hearer that '*this* is what this means'. The theology of revelation operating behind the call for a ministry sentence is complex. Positively, it speaks of clarity and graspable cognitive truth. Negatively, it flattens and reduces in a way that the lyrical voice resists. It places the hearer in the position of passive recipient of a revelation already given, rather than as a co-creator with God and the preacher in the discovery of revelation.

Adam points out that preaching should not be dry, unimaginative or uninvolved, rather it should be, in the words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones 'logic on fire!' In his analysis the preacher must remain committed to expositional

¹⁸⁷ Adam (1996), 92, 94.

¹⁸⁸ Adam (1996,) 119; see also Peter Adam, 'Introduction to Preaching: Fourteen Incontrovertible Arguments in Favour of Expository Preaching' (no date given), <<http://www.stjudes.org.au/about-us/peteradam>> [accessed 20th February 2013].

¹⁸⁹ Adam (1996), 128.

¹⁹⁰ See diagrams, Adam (1996), 33-34.

¹⁹¹ Adam (1996), 131.

preaching, not handing over to sculpture, pictures, drama and dance.¹⁹² However, in a short paper on ways to avoid boredom in expository preaching, Adam writes of the importance of variety, noting that the different biblical genres call for different expository styles and commenting that: ‘the true artist is the one who can use a given form, but use it creatively.’¹⁹³ There seems to be some contradiction here. If the preacher is to preach in lively, imaginative ways which reflect the range of biblical genre, then preaching will combine exegesis, exposition, and logical and artistic forms of communication in imaginative ways.

A robust practical theology of preaching, which Adam sets out to deliver,¹⁹⁴ needs to explore the connection between the preacher’s use of language, their delivery, and the revelation of God’s word. Undoubtedly, God can speak through poor preaching, but are we not more likely to hear God when the preacher attends to the importance of crafting and delivering the sermon as an intellectual, artistic and imaginative process? Adam says very little about the craft of preaching, suggesting in his analysis that this is separate from the theology of preaching. Overall, Adam gives little space for the role of imagination in preaching or revelation. It seems to have a place on the team, but no developed role on the pitch: it looks on from the touchline.

v. John Piper: Imagination as Undercover Agent

Predominant in John Piper’s homiletic is his claim that: ‘All Christian preaching should be the exposition and application of biblical texts.’¹⁹⁵ He calls for preaching which cites the verse and takes people through the text:

We need to get people to open their Bibles and put their finger on the text. Then we need to quote a piece of our text and explain what it means. Tell them which half of the verse it is in. People lose the whole drift of a message groping for where the pastor’s ideas are coming from. Then we should quote another piece of the text and explain what it means.¹⁹⁶

He presents a model in which the success of preaching depends on the hearer following the preacher through a pointed exegetical sermon which aims at

¹⁹² Adam (1996), 169, 168.

¹⁹³ Peter Adam, ‘Five Completely Effective Ways to Avoid Boredom in Expository Preaching’, <<http://www.stjudes.org.au/about-us/peteradam>> [accessed 20th February 2013], 3.

¹⁹⁴ Adam (1996), 9.

¹⁹⁵ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2004), 44.

¹⁹⁶ Piper (2004), 45.

increasing understanding of the biblical text as a means of drawing people to God.

In true worship there is always *understanding* with the mind and there is always *feeling* in the heart. Understanding must always be the foundation of feeling, or all we have is baseless emotionalism.¹⁹⁷

Is it the case that cognitive understanding is always the foundation on which feeling is built? Can affective attraction, rather than operating as ‘baseless emotionalism’, draw us into a desire for greater understanding? Why can an appeal to the aesthetic imagination not be a route into the apprehension of the divine?

There is another model of preaching operating in Piper’s analysis, though in a much less obvious way. Direct reference to the imagination is not a feature of this book, yet throughout he calls for preaching to give people a vision of the beauty, holiness, glory, majesty, and supremacy of God. Reflecting on his study of Jonathan Edwards, he comments on the importance of delighting in God’s glory. This delight is associated with holy affection or the ‘vigorous inclination of the human heart.’¹⁹⁸ For Edwards, faith consists of believing the truth and having a corresponding inclination of the heart. Reflecting on Edwards, Piper writes:

Therefore, delight in God is the root of faith and faith is an essential expression of our delight in God. Contrary to much contemporary teaching, saving faith is by no means a mere decision of the will separate from the affections.¹⁹⁹

Presenting people with a vision of God that delights and stirs up the heart requires the employment of the imagination of both preacher and hearer. Piper writes that the ‘heart is most powerfully touched not when the mind is entertaining abstract ideas, but when it is filled with vivid images.’ He points out that whilst Edwards was a man of powerful intellectual logic, ‘he knew that abstractions kindled few affections.’ The tension in Piper’s homiletic is between a model that sees cognitive understanding as the route to worship and a model

¹⁹⁷ Piper (2004), 10.

¹⁹⁸ Piper (2004), 80.

¹⁹⁹ Piper (2004), 81,

that recognises that cognition alone will not transform the human heart. He writes of the importance of ‘preachers painting pictures of glory’,²⁰⁰ whilst offering a predominant model of pointed sermons that move through the text, verse by verse, appealing principally to the mind, with no explicit reference to the importance of imagination in preaching. Ironically, perhaps the most powerful part of his book lies in the imaginative extended metaphor he employs to encourage preachers to strive in knowledge of God with due humility:

Don’t be content to guide people among the foothills of his glory. Become a mountain climber on the cliffs of God’s majesty. And let the truth begin to overwhelm you that you will never exhaust the heights of God. Every time you climb over a rim of insight there stretches out before you, disappearing into the clouds, a thousand miles of massive beauty in the character of God. Set yourself to climb and ponder the thought that everlasting ages of discovery in the infinite Being of God will not suffice to weaken your gladness in the glory of God or dull the intensity of gravity in his presence.²⁰¹

This metaphor of the mountain range of God’s majesty is expansive and breath-taking, resonant of the vision of Psalm 121. Imaginative insight is sparked and the heart catches; the mind is motivated to re-apply itself to the exploration of the knowledge of the glory of God. How has Piper achieved this motivation? Not through a rationalistic, point by point exhortation, but in a powerful extended metaphor. Imagination is at work here.

Piper sees the cross of Christ as the ground of preaching as it overcomes the pride of humanity that seeks its own self-sufficiency and glory and reorients us around the glory of God.²⁰² Does arguing for the importance of imagination in preaching empty the cross of its power by placing the power and potential of preaching in the hands of the preacher’s own imaginative skill, opening the door to pride and closed circle, homiletic self-sufficiency? Piper explores the first chapters of 1 Corinthians in relation to the risks of self-sufficiency in preaching. Hearers taken with the oratorical skills of the Corinthian preachers boast in who they follow – ‘I follow Paul! I follow Apollos! I follow Cephas!’ Paul reminds his readers that no-one can boast in the presence of God (1.29). Whatever models of preaching we espouse, whether centred on appeals to the mind, the importance

²⁰⁰ Piper (2004), 60, 92.

²⁰¹ Piper (2004), 66.

²⁰² Piper (2004), 31-39.

of the imagination, the helpfulness of narrative and the need for skilful delivery, we always run the risk that if these things are goals in themselves then the preaching itself will negate the power of the cross by inflating the human ego, the very thing the cross annihilates. Much depends on the imaginative orientation of hearer and speaker. Our imaginations need to be captivated by God and orientated around him, as was Paul's prodigious imagination. A sanctified imagination is one which enables a right seeing of the self, of humanity and of God. The fracture between humanity and God means that of themselves the preacher can do nothing to reveal the glory of God. The preacher is utterly dependent on God as is the hearer. It is God who enables an apt illustration, a sharp insight, or cathartic connection, and the deep resonance between the proclaimed word of the sermon and the whispered word within the hearer.

Arguing for the importance of imagination in preaching does not empty the cross of its power; that comes about through human pride and shallow reliance on any sermon style or technique which forgets our irrevocable dependence on God. Implicitly, Piper affords a place to the employment of imagination in the preaching event. This is undeveloped but revealed in the tension within his homiletic: imagination is undercover!

vi. Donald English: Identifying 'Transcendence in the Midst'

There is no explicit naming of imagination as a vital factor in the preaching event in Donald English's homiletic theology. However, the importance of imagination is apparent throughout this text, in a much more obvious way than in Piper's homiletic. English borrows the delightful phrase 'transcendence in the midst'²⁰³ from David Jenkins. English's theology of preaching is concerned with seeing and naming the presence of God among us. English argues that 'transcendence in the midst' is recognised in creation, in the story of the people of Israel; the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and the on-going unfolding of the Kingdom of God, which is a call to our involvement in God's work. English states that 'We are called not just to be a mouth for the Lord, but also an eye for the Lord,' as he offers the image of preacher as observer.²⁰⁴ He comments that the artist's skill lies in what he sees. How they perceive the world shapes the art

²⁰³ Donald English, *An Evangelical Theology of Preaching* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996), 17.

²⁰⁴ English, (1996), 19.

they produce. Similarly, the preacher is called to notice and point to a reality which many in our culture do not see or for which they have no name. There is an implicit call here to be actively open to the revelatory impulse of God.

Towards the end of the book, English explicitly offers the image of preacher as artist,²⁰⁵ arguing that preachers need to paint verbal pictures which help people to see in their mind's eye, connecting a new seeing of the transcendence of God with the reality of their particular situation. This new seeing draws particularly on the sensory, intuitive and affective functions of imagination (discussed in the following chapter). Understanding preaching as an art form necessarily involves the engagement of imagination in both preacher and hearer.

As well as seeing the preacher as observer and interpreter, English also names the preacher as prophet and herald of liberation.²⁰⁶ The preacher's role then is more assisting people to see in a new way. This seeing needs to express itself in active involvement as we are shaped by the biblical narratives and the values of the Kingdom of God. There is an if-then structure at work here, a feature of intellectual imaginative function. *If* we accept that the revelation mediated to us through perception, 'seeing-as' and our affective response, *then* we must logically respond in ways congruent with that revelation. Calling people to action is the prophetic expression of preaching. Walter Brueggemann calls this the 'imaginative or' of preaching, drawing people into new ways of seeing and being, freed from the dominant ideologies of the age.²⁰⁷ In offering the model of preacher as 'herald of liberation', English reminds us that God transcendent in our midst is not bound. 'God may be perceived anywhere, since God is free to be everywhere.'²⁰⁸ If God is free to be everywhere, then the preacher as observer needs to be radically open to the possibility of revelation, mediated through the imagination, in surprising places.

English explores the strengths and weaknesses of the Catholic stress on creation, incarnation and sacrament and the Protestant emphasis on redemption, atonement and the word and argues that these doctrines are united in Christ. The Catholic position values the world as God's gift, sees the Incarnation as an

²⁰⁵ English, (1996), 127.

²⁰⁶ English, (1996), 24-25.

²⁰⁷ Walter Brueggemann, 'An Imaginative "Or"', in David Day, Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis, eds., *A Reader on Preaching: Making Connections*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 51-64.

²⁰⁸ English (1996), 25.

affirmation of life offered to God, and in the sacraments sees God revealed in the material of the world. This perspective underestimates the awful cosmic proportions of sin and seems to downplay the need for the atonement. The Protestant emphasis leads to a stress on the essential disjuncture between nature and grace with a consequent desire to convert the world rather than affirm it. The Church is seen as radically separate from the world which may lead to a lack of interest in issues of justice. English seeks to unite these two positions in the person of Christ, arguing on the basis of John 12.23-26 that death and resurrection are written into the fabric of creation and are the way of Christ and of his followers. Creation and redemption are ‘two parts of the one saving activity of God’. Pertinent to the argument for an implicit understanding of the place of imagination in English’s homiletic are a number of points that flow from this connection. In creation we can discern the fingerprints of God in art, literature, music, film, drama, comedy, nature; indeed anything that ‘is beautiful good and true must come from God’.²⁰⁹ Remembering that high culture does not have a monopoly on the ‘beautiful and the good’, preachers need the eyes of faithful imagination to perceive the presence of God in the world, and the wisdom to use our God-given creativity to communicate that perception in ways that seek to captivate the hearer. English points out that seeing creation and redemption unified in Christ means that the preacher can begin where the hearer is located.²¹⁰ This act of standing in another’s shoes is an act of affective imagination. There is continuity and discontinuity between nature and grace which can only be resolved in Jesus Christ. The stories of the world need to be laid alongside the narrative of Christ, an imaginative act which will help us to discern ‘transcendence in the midst.’

vii. Thomas Troeger: Alerting the Eye to Keener Sight

In *Imagining a Sermon*, Thomas Troeger acknowledges that there is ambivalence surrounding the term ‘imagination’: it being associated with fantasy, daydreams, and unreality. He argues that setting imagination against what is real is wrong; it has a vital role on enabling us to define the real:

²⁰⁹ English (1996), 26-32.

²¹⁰ English, 30.

The socially constructed imagination of the city and the nation define the nature of our life together, shaping our ideas of what is fair and unfair and how we will respond to poverty and injustice.²¹¹

Here again we see the connection between imagination and seeing-as. As we shall see, what is missing in Troeger is Brueggemann's instinctive distrust of the dominant narrative of the nation. Given that our imagination is shaped by our cultural context, which may constitute a form of wrong seeing or wrong imagining, there is wisdom in Brueggemann's suspicion.

Troeger's insights concerning how the preacher might develop their imagination can be used to gain a sense of what he understands the imagination to be. He refers to alerting the eye to keener sight, advocating close attention to the details of everyday life and the biblical text, and stressing the importance of producing sermons that the listener can see. Embedded here are two assumptions about the imagination. The first is that it is deeply connected with how we see things and the second that it has a role in helping us to communicate that vision in ways which encourage the insight of the receiver. Similar assumptions are present in his suggestion that preachers might train their imagination by drawing parables from life. This requires close observation and vivid language. Troeger also acknowledges the *somatic* nature of our existence, and therefore of the way that sermonic material can be communicated in gesture, expression, and body posture:

We want them [the hearer] to know God, who identifies not only with our thoughts but also with our breath and our pulse beat, our muscle and our bone. This is why we are training our imaginations to feel the body weight of truth.²¹²

This suggests that in developing the imagination in preaching, preachers need to give thought to the performative aspects of their craft, not because such performance is a frivolous, ornamental add-on, but because it bears profound sacramental importance. However, this is not an area Troeger explores.

Troeger recommends that in training imagination the preacher should pay attention to speech patterns. He contends that the rhythm, pitch, volume, and

²¹¹ Thomas Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1990), 100.

²¹² Troeger (1990), 59.

inflection of speech are ‘a kind of music that makes the imagination dance’. This is clearly seen in the call and response patterns of Afro-American preaching but is an aspect of preaching neglected in white western homiletics. The human voice represents sound incarnated, and the way the sound is shaped influences the message conveyed, arguably more than the actual meaning of the word itself. Troeger talks about the importance of plotting verbal content against tonality to ensure that there is congruence within the sermonic communication as a whole. However, he does not address the subject of the sacramentality of sound; this is an area that needs developing in the formulation of a homiletic which gives explicit place to the imagination.²¹³

viii. Warren Wiersbe: Imagination - Lauded but Unexplored.

Warren Wiersbe, in *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*, makes the comment that imagination is ‘the image-making faculty in your mind’, ‘a womb that is impregnated with the old so that it might give birth to the new.’ He does not explore how this image-making function might operate, or explain how the old can bring forth anything new. What processes go on in imagination’s gestation? He states that imagination has a ‘recalling, perceiving and combining function’, but makes no further comment or clarification, whilst still arguing that imagination is essential to preaching. Helpfully, he does differentiate between fancy and imagination:

Imagination helps us to penetrate reality and better understand it, while fancy helps us temporarily escape reality and better endure it.²¹⁴

Unfortunately, he then associates the works of Tolkien with fancy and overlooks the point that all fiction can help us to gain a deeper understanding of reality. He does not appreciate that the creation of an alternative world can enable a better understanding of the world we are in. Herein lies the rich potential of the vicarious experience of film, theatre, literature, and arguably preaching, to captivate the imagination and teach the heart and mind; surely more than mere fancy? Like Craddock, Wiersbe is clear that imagination in preaching

²¹³ Troeger (1990), 99, 33-52, 89-99, 67, 76.

²¹⁴ Warren Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination: The Quest for Biblical Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994), 26.

is not about adding cosmetic touches, but is essential to the humanity of the preacher and hearer, regarding imagination as a divine gift. He mentions 'sanctified imagination' by which he understands imagination 'captivated by the beauty of God.' This idea is given no further theological development, however. He refers to the need for a 'sensitive imagination' in approaching the range of biblical genre, but again this is not fully explicated. The reader is left in no doubt that Wiersbe regards imagination as essential to preaching, but he fails to offer more than a superficial description of his understanding of this faculty.²¹⁵ The term is lauded but not explored.

ix. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale: Imagination as Tool of Empathy and Right-Seeing

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale gives a central role to imagination in *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*. She understands imagination in two ways: as enabling empathetic understanding, serving the preacher in the exegesis of the congregation; and in terms of seeing-as, having a shaping role in how we understand and apprehend God and the world. In her helpful thesis preaching has the potential to affect congregational imagination. The sermon can confirm the right imaginings of the congregational heart. Here she stresses the importance of affirming correlation between the gospel and congregational attitude and action. The sermon should seek to stretch the limits of congregational imagination, expanding understandings of God, Church and the world. Another potential of the sermon is to invert the assumed ordering of the congregation's imagined world, challenging priorities, and naming idolatries. False imaginings can be named in the sermon, opening up the potential for judgement in preaching in terms of naming the false imagining of nations and Church. Congruent with Brueggemann's thesis, Tisdale sees the potential for preaching to help congregations in imagining worlds not yet seen or imagined, offering a new vista of possibility, naming the not-yet, and offering a world to grow into. Intuition, that ability to make connections and follow hunches, is implicitly central to reading a text and context, yet Tisdale doesn't explicitly address the connection between intuition and imagination.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Wiersbe (1994), 25, 27-28, 29.

²¹⁶ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1997), 11, 111- 120.

x. Cyril S. Rodd: The Many Facets of Imagination

Cyril S. Rodd's slim volume in the Preacher's Library series makes a tantalisingly brief attempt at defining the imagination and touches briefly on many relevant aspects of imagination for preaching. He describes it as an underrated human faculty which needs developing by the preacher. He points out its connection to poetry and music, and its role in scientific discovery. He argues that imagination is a virtue, and alludes to its role in forging empathetic connections with others. He does not develop this point to its logical conclusion: that imagination has a key role to play in ethical decision making. Like Brueggemann, he connects the imagination with the search for deeper language than the everyday speech of the mundane, language which enables us to speak of God. This he calls 'the language of poetry, the language of the imagination.'²¹⁷ Of all the homiletics textbooks this one indicated most clearly the range of imaginative function, so is worth mentioning, but there is little to develop in terms of critical argument as the text is so short. Nevertheless it is a good introductory text.

xi. Linda Clader: Imagination and New Discovery

Clader's understanding of the term imagination can only be garnered by working across her text, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching*, identifying a variety of roles she implicitly gives to the imagination and drawing conclusions from this. She uses the term 'imagination' to refer to the process of discovering the means of offering the congregation what the preacher has received from the Spirit, implicitly connecting imagination with revelation and the process of shaping, and delivering the sermon. In her discussion the imagination is connected to that mysterious point in preparation when inspiration comes. She makes no attempt to analyse the connection between revelation and imagination, though it is central to her discussion. She connects imagination with play and artistic expression, and regards imaginative preaching as creating a 'playful energy' that enables people to see things in a new light. As she describes the process of coming up with an idea for a sermon she describes herself imagining the community in which she will preach, implicitly connecting imagination with the creation of mental pictures and the

²¹⁷ Cyril S. Rodd, *Preaching with Imagination* (Peterborough: Foundry Press, 2001), 1-7.

development of empathetic understanding. This is made more explicit in a later chapter when she speaks of the importance of imagining a biblical story, the characters' perspectives, and the setting. This process leads Clader to new realisation which helps in the exegetic and homiletic processes. Here she connects imagination to new discovery and new ways of seeing. However, at no point does she explicitly set out to explore what is meant by the term imagination.²¹⁸

xii. Paul Scott Wilson: Imagination of the Heart

Paul Scott Wilson's book, referred to earlier, specifically aims to help preachers 'to spread the wings of imagination when exploring the bible'.²¹⁹ As we shall see, Wilson's approach to imagination is similar to Walter Brueggemann's idea of imagination as enabling a new apprehension of reality. Shaped by scripture, the imagination is enabled to envisage new possibilities. Like Brueggemann, Wilson connects prophecy with imagination:

The notion of prophecy as the dreaming of alternate realities is appropriate to imagination.²²⁰

Wilson connects imagination to the heart and regards the imagination as having an important role in stirring the faith of others. He sees one of the tasks of imagination in preaching as being to reconcile apparently opposite concepts. For example, he notes that imagination is needed in the work of abstract systematic theology and that it is also needed, especially by the preacher, 'to touch the heart and stir the soul to action'. The preacher needs to make the abstract concrete; a vital work of imagination. In Wilson's analysis the imagination arcs the spark between the respective polarities of scripture and experience, law and gospel, story and doctrine, and the pastoral and prophetic aspects of preaching.²²¹ He takes the preacher through the sermon preparation process, examining practical ways in which the imagination can be engaged in wrestling with each polarity.

²¹⁸Linda L. Clader, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Press, 2003), 6, 84-85, 5, 86, 118.

²¹⁹ Wilson (1988), 12.

²²⁰ Wilson (1988), 251.

²²¹ Wilson (1988), 17, 18, 49-236.

As the arc is sparked between the polarities he mentions, Wilson rightly connects imagination with metaphor:

We may understand it as *the bringing together two ideas that might not otherwise be connected and developing the creative energy they generate.*²²²

He maintains that imagination is a ‘function of language’, acting like the spark between the poles of the generator. Undoubtedly, he is right to say that imagination is needed to overcome the ‘decay of language’, by which he means that many theological words have lost their resonance and therefore their effectiveness in preaching. He argues that ‘language renewal is faith renewal’. Such renewal happens often in the ‘juxtaposition of opposites’. However, Wilson pushes his argument too far in saying that ‘without language we unable to express thought.’ Here he misses an important aspect of the vital place for imagination in preaching. Imagination can help us to communicate thought without language, and to add emphasis to thoughts communicated verbally. There is a vital connection between imagination and the performative aspect of preaching which Wilson overlooks at the outset of his argument, only later making a brief, undeveloped reference to gesture.²²³

Although he does not offer a specific theology of imagination, a major weakness of the book, Wilson does connect the imagination with revelation, ‘Imagination should be understood as a vehicle used by the Holy Spirit’. He makes brief reference to the way that imagination has been treated variously since Aristotle.²²⁴ However, in a book that rightly claims the importance of imagination for preaching, sharper definition of how we might understand imaginative function would have brought deeper clarity to his argument. This is a weakness which marks the homiletic literature more generally, raising the need for a framework of imaginative function which is developed in the following chapter.

²²² Wilson (1988), 34.

²²³ Wilson (1988), 33, 40, 42, 46, 33, 235-6.

²²⁴ Wilson (1988), 19, 35.

xiii. Richard Eslinger: A Fuller Exploration of Imagination

Richard L. Eslinger devotes considerable attention to understanding the role of imagination.²²⁵ He explores imagination in terms of mental imaging, operating in ‘recognition, memory and recall’, and describing the poetic imagination as a more intense expression of this mundane function of imaging. He differentiates between the objective and subjective functions of imagination. The objective imagination brings to mind images of actual perceptual experience in the absence of the object. Subjective experience is associated with the ability to evoke perceptions and situations which we have not experienced. It is worth noting that Eslinger's comments on subjective imagination neatly sum up Brueggemann's understanding of the purpose of preaching being to present kingdom possibilities, alternative to the dominant narratives of the age, through poetic language. Eslinger stresses the formative power of imagery in shaping the social and theological self-understanding of the community of faith. There is also a need, which he does not indicate, for preachers to be aware of images generated by other narratives which can distort the gospel. Sometimes the task of the preacher is to name and critique such distorting images. Images drawn from the narrative of success rooted in consumerism and pedalled by advertising, spring readily to mind. It has become common practice amongst some preachers to include film clips in sermons and there is a wealth of online resources designed to facilitate this. Whilst the benefits are clear, film clips are engaging and show the preacher is in touch with popular culture, the preacher needs to take care since the images from films carry their own narrative freight which can pull against the narrative intent of the sermon. Images are powerful and the imaginative preacher needs to be sensitive to the kind of power they exert.

Eslinger borrows Edmund Casey's three step model of the act phase of imagining: imaging, imagining-that and imagining-how,²²⁶ which Casey says are distinct yet linked. Imaging is linked to the senses and is fairly straightforward to understand: ‘imaging occurs in the specific modalities of visualizing, audializing, smelling in the mind's nose, feeling in the mind's muscles, tasting with the

²²⁵ Eslinger (1995), 46-114.

²²⁶ Casey (1979), 4-46; Eslinger (1995), 60-62.

mind's tongue, and so on.²²⁷ Picking up the theme of visualising, the evidence for mental imaging is now strong, though not without critics.

Gilbert Ryle argues that though we talk about 'seeing' mental images, we know this is not the same as seeing. He regards it as, at best a ghostly snapshot.²²⁸ Wilhelm Wundt's (1832-1920) work on imagery, covering a quarter of a century, led to grave doubts as to whether anything meaningful could be said about the subject, which was subsequently banished from the table of respectable psychological discussion. Renewed interest in imagery followed in the 1970s when Roger Shepherd and Jacqueline Metzler presented subjects with two geometrical forms and asked them to judge as quickly as they could whether they were representations of the same object seen from a different position. They found that when the angle of rotation was small the answer was given almost instantaneously; the response time increased with the size of the angle of rotation. The authors interpreted their findings as indicating that the subjects were comparing the forms by mentally rotating the image of one of them, an account verified by the subjects.²²⁹ Stephen Kosslyn et al. (1979) have built on this work. In one study they showed subjects a map containing various locations: a tree, a rock, a beach, a patch of grass, a well, a hut, and a lake. Participants were asked to familiarise themselves with the map and then imagine it. They were asked to locate a specific area on the image of the map and then to look for a second one. The subject was then asked to imagine a black dot moving as quickly as possible from one location to the next and to push a button when the dot reached the destination. Results showed that the time to scan between the sites correlated in a linear way to the distance between the points; the further the distance, the longer the time. It seems subjects were scanning a map in the mind in much the same way as they would scan a map in their hand. Following a wide variety of experiments, Kosslyn et al. 'defend the notion of a 'quasi-pictorial' form of mental representation called 'imagery'.²³⁰ This work has received much attention and criticism, which Gardner weighs before concluding that given the

²²⁷ Casey (1979), 41.

²²⁸ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of the Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949).

²²⁹ Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 128-130; 325.

²³⁰ Gardner (1985), 327.

consistency of Kosslyn's results it would be folly to dismiss them.²³¹ So we can see that many psychologists accept that mental imaging does occur.

Casey's categories of 'imagining that' and 'imagining how' overlap and are of little practical use for homiletics; the key discernible difference in Casey's model seems to lie in the imaginer being at more of a distance in the 'imagining-that' phase whereas in 'imagining-how', the imaginer is more directly involved.²³² In relation to 'imagining-that', Eslinger, following Casey, extends the function of imagination beyond the ocular model. He gives Casey's illustrations that the 'Washington monument is walking' and the 'Bill of Rights is amended' to state that whilst the former is more obviously visual, 'the latter can be construed in a completely nonsensuous way.'²³³ However, it seems hard to accept that there is any form of imagining which doesn't have a sensory aspect. Even if I try to conceive of that which cannot be accurately imaged, such as a chiliagon, I still find myself picturing a shape with many sides; I am imaging inaccurately, but I am still imaging. As a thought experiment, I think about the Holy Spirit, the images flood in: from scripture (I image a dove, fire, and flames); nature (I 'see' trees moving in the wind); everyday life (I 'see' a sailing boat with a full sail); popular religious culture (I picture the shimmering figure of Sarayu, the Asian woman who depicts the Spirit in *The Shack*);²³⁴ and from my personal faith story (I image a kingfisher darting over the River Wear). These images are simply 'there', each loaded with particular narrative freight reflecting my history and cultural locatedness. It is perhaps a mistake to think that there can be any imagining that does not have attendant images. In the amendment of the Bill of Rights example, Eslinger is suggesting that there is an act of the imagination which he sees as a movement beyond an exclusive focus on imaging. His exploration of this would have been clearer if he had introduced the notion of 'supposing', which is clearer than his term 'nonsensuous' imagining, because to some extent even supposition is likely to have some sensory association.

Eslinger identifies four stages in the development of the homiletic imagination.²³⁵ The first stage involves birth into the community of faith; the

²³¹ Gardner (1985), 335.

²³² Casey (1979), 45.

²³³ Eslinger (1995), 61; Casey (1979), 42.

²³⁴ William P. Young, *The Shack* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008).

²³⁵ Eslinger (1995), 95-102.

beginnings of homiletic imagination are rooted in Christian imagination. It is not easy to see in Eslinger's theory the difference between the two. He terms this first stage the 'conformative' stage. This is the primary invitation to all to conform to scripture and tradition as catechumens. This is a process involving struggle. Eslinger regards 'patience' as the next stage, viewing waiting before Scripture as a hermeneutical stance, stressing the importance of waiting while being conformed to the Word. This is not a passive stance, but deliberate and active. The Christian imagination is 'honed and exercised in the disciplined patience of waiting and of prayerfully interpreting the scriptural text.'²³⁶ The third stage is identified as 'sermonic', which Eslinger sees as focused on the development of sermonic plot and image systems; the former being influenced by the shape of the biblical text and congregational need, the latter seeking to bring immediacy to the sermonic material. He dismisses the historical imagination, arguing that this is not part of the sermonic imagination since the purpose of preaching is not to plunge into the world behind the text but to explore the text and its interplay with the context, as a movement in consciousness.²³⁷ Eslinger is wrong to dismiss the usefulness of historic imagination for the preacher. Preaching is not about trying to imagine ourselves into a world behind the text, but making imaginative use of historical detail can enable new understandings of the situations and struggles explored in scripture and help in application of such understanding to our contemporary context and our understanding of God as a present reality. Eslinger's fourth stage in the formation of homiletic imagination is a new patterning of the imagination, the *telos* of preaching, enabled through a paradigm shift, in which all aspects of the self are creatively reorganised in conformity with the biblical narrative. He describes a paradigm shift as 'not a matter of adjustment but of total transformation'.²³⁸ Where we might take issue with Eslinger's model of homiletic imagination is that the key paradigm shift really occurs in the conformative stage, when the hearer orientates her life to a radical new reality in the event of conversion. What he labels as his paradigmatic fourth stage might better be labelled 'sanctification'. The goal of preaching week by week is bifocal.

²³⁶ Eslinger (1995), 98.

²³⁷ Eslinger (1995), 98-99.

²³⁸ Eslinger (1995), 100.

There needs to be opportunity for and invitation to that paradigmatic *moment* of conversion which comes with the primary decision to conform the will after the pattern of Christ, alongside attention to the *movements* of conversion: those incremental alignment shifts between attitude, lifestyle and the call of the gospel.

xiv. Walter Brueggemann: The Poetic Imagination

The grounding thesis of Walter Brueggemann's most recent book is that:

Prophetic preaching is an effort to imagine the world as though YHWH - the creator of the world, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we Christians name as Father, Son, and Spirit, is a real character and an effective agent in the world.²³⁹

For Brueggemann imagination is about seeing-as, re-framing reality and expressing possibility in the light of that vision. He sees the benefit of allowing the words 'prophetic' and 'imagination' to qualify each other. 'Imagination' qualifies 'prophetic', drawing us away from notions of moral earnestness towards a sense of playful, poetic language which probes beyond appearances.²⁴⁰ He understands preaching as 'a poetic construal of an alternative world' which leads to new and fresh ways of imagining, bearing fruit in the birth of 'new realities in the community.'²⁴¹ In his analysis the imagination can remain stunted and shrivelled, capable of producing only 'predictable language' about God which reflects a 'deadened relationship.'²⁴² Such language is seen in preaching which simply repeats itself in predictable and dull ways that fail to lift the heart or catch any sense of new possibility. Brueggemann directly associates poetic imagining with the task of prophetic ministry which he describes as being 'to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.'²⁴³ He argues that qualifying 'imagination' with the term 'prophetic' serves to sever imagination from notions of fantasy and root the term in a searching for genuine

²³⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2012), 23.

²⁴⁰ Brueggemann (2012), 22.

²⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, (1989), 7, 138; Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 2.

²⁴² Brueggemann (1986), 15.

²⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.

covenantal ways of seeing and being in partnership with YHWH.²⁴⁴ Whilst this is potentially the case, anyone hostile to the place of imagination in preaching is likely to need a more nuanced argument, underpinned with a theology of imagination, in order to be convinced that imagination is not captive to fantasy.

In Brueggemann's thesis imagination has a vital role in freeing up human understanding concerning divine possibility. If we begin thinking about what is real on the basis of what is rationally possible and empirically viable, faith becomes limited by the bounds of modern rationality and we reject the God who can do the impossible. If, however, we reverse the order and begin with a sense of the real as the mystery and possibility of God, articulated in the imaginative capacity to 'generate and enunciate images of reality that are not rooted in the world in front of us', we are moved beyond the limits and constraints of human rational thought and the declaration 'what is impossible for mortals is possible for God' (Luke 18.27) is given space for reflection, expression, and possible realisation. Such utterance is not characterised by certitude but by the possibility for what has been, until now, unthinkable and unsayable.²⁴⁵

In Brueggemann's writing, imagination, allied to the work of the prophet and the artist, is imbued with political and spiritual power, capable of offering alternatives to the dominant vision of the state, and called to 'energise the community to new forms of faithfulness and vitality.'²⁴⁶ Given that imagination underpins vision, it is possible to imagine wrongly. Brueggemann makes the point starkly with reference to Lawrence Thornton's novel, *Imagining Argentina*, in which the main protagonist, Carlos, refuses to accept the dominant culture of the torturing regime, recognising that there are two types of imagination, that of the generals and their opponents. Here we see most clearly Brueggemann bringing out the connection between imagination and how we see the world. Carlos speaks:

²⁴⁴ Brueggemann (2012), 22.

²⁴⁵ Brueggemann (2012), 107, 25.

²⁴⁶ Brueggemann, (1978), 63.

‘They see sheep and terrorists because they imagine us that way... So long as we accept what the men in the car imagine, we’re finished... We have to believe in the power of the imagination because it’s all we have, and ours is stronger than theirs.’²⁴⁷

Brueggemann’s work is powerful and persuasive; it is clear that he associates imagination with ways of seeing reality and sees the potential for preaching to initiate change through poetically construed challenges, drawing on the imagination of the scriptural writers in conversation with the preacher’s observations concerning the contemporary context. However, his works lack practical homiletic suggestions about how imagination might be developed. If the preacher is imaginer²⁴⁸ and poet, how might she develop these skills? Is imagination associated with the poetic alone? Is there a place for imagination in the construction of a more reasoned hypothesis and argument? How might imagination be employed in developing an empathetic pastoral sensitivity in preaching? Most importantly, what would supplement Brueggemann’s work on imagination is a theology of the same.

As we have seen from the overview of the use of the term ‘imagination’ in history and in a range of homiletic texts, the term is enduring and slippery. Many homileticians refer to the importance of imagination, but none offer a detailed theology of imagination, neither do we see a framework which holds together the complex field of meaning embraced by the term in a coherent and cogent way, readily useable in the homiletics classroom. If imagination is vital to preaching, how can we speak of it in a cogent way which enables understanding and circumvents the fear that imagination is the provenance of the arts, or simply connected with fantasy and the imaginary? The next chapter addresses these issues.

²⁴⁷ Lawrence Thornton, *Imagining Argentina* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 65. See also Brueggemann (2012), 27, 145.

²⁴⁸ Brueggemann (2012), 24.

Chapter 3: Understanding the Imagination: Framework and Theology

The following chapter offers a framework for mapping the scope of imaginative function as a device enabling us to hold together the various ways of understanding imagination in a cogent way. This is a useful tool for homiletics teachers wanting to raise and explore the subject of developing imaginative preaching. Once this is in place a theology of the imagination is explored with the intention of demonstrating that imagination is a credible and vital element in theology. Given the link between imagination and fantasy, the thesis is grounded in a robust theology of imagination, which is currently missing from the homiletic literature. This will serve to guard against the erroneous idea that in linking preaching and imagination the truth claims of the Gospel are in any sense negated. On the contrary the thesis contends that imagination and revelation are inherently linked.

3.1 Framing Imaginative Function

Mary Warnock offers the following description of imagination which exposes a number of threads to be woven into the framework:

There is a power in the human mind which is at work in our everyday perception of the world, and is also at work in our thoughts about what is absent; which enables us to see the world, whether present or absent as significant, and also to present this vision to others, for them to share or reject. And this power...is not only intellectual. Its impetus comes from the emotions as much as from the reason, from the heart as much as from the head.²⁴⁹

Four threads emerge from this: the way we see things in everyday perception; how we make connections and present that ‘seeing’ to others; our emotional experience; and our intellectual processes. We can affirm and enhance Warnock’s understanding of imagination by describing it under four headings: the sensory function, the intuitive function, the affective function and the intellectual function. This simple framework enables us to speak cogently about the different aspects of imaginative function and as such will prove helpful in the homiletics classroom. As we will see in chapter seven, these four functions of imagination can helpfully be linked to the Myers-Briggs type functions (sensing,

²⁴⁹ Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 196.

intuition, feeling and thinking). The framework suggests why some people express different aspects of imaginative function more strongly than others. It also provides a means to help preachers to examine areas they might develop as they seek to preach in more imaginative ways. Underpinning this framework is a view of creativity as the outworking of imagination engaged in its productive mode in either or all of the four areas identified.

i. The Sensory Function

The sensory function picks up the Aristotelian understanding of imagination as:

an indispensable and pervasive operation by which sense perceptions are recalled as images and made available to discursive thought as the contents of our knowledge of the physical world.²⁵⁰

In its sensory function the imagination draws from sensory perception and enables the formation of images in mind. The more receptive a person is to sensory data from the world around, the more material they have to draw on as they ‘see’ in the mind’s eye, and the more material is available for the intuitive function to work on in the shaping of figurative language designed to enable others to ‘see’. This is a vital aspect of preaching in the lyrical voice which is explored in chapter five.

The richness, variedness, unusualness, and effectiveness of our imaginative activity will turn in significant degree on how much it has to compose or construct with.²⁵¹

Here is a reminder to the preacher to be a keen observer of life, filing away observations from scripture, nature, relationships, popular culture, and literature: anything which has the potential to add a rich sensory patina to the final sermon.

As Warnock observes, imagination is essential in mundane everyday perception; it helps us to recognise types. How do I know that a car that passes by is in fact a car, if I have never before seen that particular make and model? Mapping across previous images I am able to recognise this new thing as a car. There is an association in the sensory function between memory and recognition.

²⁵⁰ Johnson (1987), 144.

²⁵¹ Egan (1992), 53.

Without the image-making potential of imagination, sensory data would overload us as we would never be able to process incoming data through similarity and categorisation. Although our experience of the world consists of fleeting impressions, the sensory function of imagination enables us to conceive of continuity, identifying and labelling similarity and difference, perceiving of objects being in absence, and recognising ourselves as beings in time. This provides a sense of continuity to our existence.²⁵² Without this sense of being persons with a past, present, and future, our identity would fragment; we would have no sense of individual selfhood, or of belonging to communities with histories, existing in the present with responsibility for the future. The sensory function is essential to humanity. ‘To lead a human life, a man must have a notion of himself as having a past and a future.’²⁵³

In terms of the sensory function’s work in drawing from sense data, there is continuity between perception and imagination, but the imagination does not always need direct sense data to operate. There is continuity with perception when the sensory function is operating in a reproductive sense, but discontinuity when it is operating in its more productive mode. To elucidate further, with the imagination operating in a reproductive sense, I can imagine the inside of my car and there is continuity between my imagination and what I would actually perceive were I to get up and go and sit in the vehicle. The discontinuity lies in the fact that, with the sensory function operating in productive mode, I can imagine mundane things that I would not objectively perceive, such as changing the colour of the interior. The sensory function operating at a quasi-mundane level might lead me to imagine an ejector seat. Operating at the supramundane, transcendent level, I might imagine things I could never objectively perceive such as driving with Christ as navigator.

The sensory function supplements what the perception cannot directly access. Since perception occurs from a standpoint, we do not see the whole, yet our seeing is not partial but holistic. As I look at my car I do not perceive it as just part of a vehicle, although that is actually what I am looking at; imagination supplements my limited perspective and I see the car as a whole. The sensory function enables us to ‘see’ aspects of the implicitly present.

²⁵² Warnock (1976), 21.

²⁵³ Mary Warnock, *Imagination and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 2.

Perception is discontinuous with the sensory imaginative function in terms of how space, time and perception operate. For example, on my walk to the shops I pass people and objects that exist around me in a perceptual field and are located in time. The edges of my perception are sharp. In imagining that same walk to the shops there is indeterminacy; we can play with exploring different possibilities and outcomes. The imagined journey is not time bound. In perception I am limited to what sense data I am presented with, in imagination I am free. The final point of discontinuity is that I can be wrong about how I interpret the sense data about me. I may misjudge my footing and trip on the curb, or think I recognise the person approaching me when I do not. In imagining, such errors do not occur,²⁵⁴ at least if they did I would not be ‘punished’ by tripping and so they are not termed ‘errors’.

Why does any of this matter to preaching? This discontinuity between perception and the sensory function of imagination means that we can create scenarios that do not presently exist. At a particular point in time a community might be facing crisis, with no obvious perceivable resolution. The imagination is not bound by the limits of this situation, but free to take wing and create a different ‘reality’. This is not to be dismissed as building ‘castles in the air’. Arguably, where there is no power to change the present situation, the imagined possibilities of a new reality in themselves can bring the power to endure and to hope. The point is that we can never become what we can’t imagine, so a community in bondage will always be so until someone finds the imaginative power to declare that they ‘have a dream’. This is part of the task of preaching, as it operates on the mundane level, to bring to words an alternative vista of possibility through an act of the sensory function reading the current context and the intuitive function working to envisage new possibilities. Imaginative power operating on the supramundane level lifts our eyes beyond the immediate to focus on the transcendent, setting the immediate in the context of the eternal.

ii. The Intuitive Function

In its intuitive function imagination expresses itself in flexibility, in making connections and seeing beyond the obvious, conventional, and literal. It

²⁵⁴ Casey (1979), 169.

transposes, re-orders and re-arranges ideas. In this sense, intuitive imagination has a vital function in forming figurative language. It can raise possibilities by combining old material in new and surprising metaphors, enabling a new 'seeing'. The importance of metaphor in preaching is discussed in chapter five. Interestingly, much of the work of the intuitive function takes place beyond our consciousness as the intuition works with the concepts, images, and ideas gathered by the work of the intellectual imagination in the sermon preparation process. Many preachers will attest to reaching a point in preparation when they find themselves surrounded by scribbled notes and stumped. Perhaps after going for a walk, or sleeping on it, the insight comes in a sudden rush, as if from nowhere. The spark comes and the fire burns. There is wisdom in ensuring that sermon preparation allows time for the blending and fusing work of the intuitive function or valuable insights may be lost.

In intuition the imagination takes us beyond seeing in the sense of sensory perception and embraces 'seeing-as', or 'aspect perception'. Ludwig Wittgenstein demonstrated this in Jastrow's famous duck-rabbit figure.²⁵⁵ We see exactly the same drawing and yet in a moment of insight we suddenly interpret the data differently and something new emerges, either a duck or a rabbit.

In a concept similar to 'seeing-as', Donald Evans writes of 'on-looks'. An 'on-look' implies greater commitment than an outlook or perspective.²⁵⁶ On-looks are a way of describing what we 'see', how we look on the world and our part in it. This vision 'flows back into the character, as it leads to change and learning in us.'²⁵⁷ Our on-looks are shaped by the material available to the intuitive imagination. Part of the preacher's task is to inhabit and model the concepts and contours of theology such that the hearers can have their prior recognitions of *x* as *y* encouraged or challenged, enabling hearers to recognise the way they notice and name God at work in the scriptural text and in the ordinary aspects of our lives. A similar event to the duck-rabbit shift in seeing can happen as we consider a scriptural text. We see it one way and then a new on-look is born and we see and interpret differently, something new emerges

²⁵⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe (London: Blackwell, 1968), 194-195.

²⁵⁶ Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self Involvement* (London: SCM, 1963), 125, in Astley (2002), 83.

²⁵⁷ Astley (2002), 84.

from the familiar landscape of the text. This is the terrain of the intuitive imagination. Sometimes the connections made are quirky and unusual as the intuitive imagination engages with material in serious playfulness, enabling us, in Blake's words, to 'see a world in a grain of sand, /And a heaven in a wild flower'.²⁵⁸

This brings us to the theme of sacramental seeing in the intuitive function. Although not writing from a religious perspective, Warnock does express a sacramental aspect in her analysis of the role of the imagination. She writes of the imagination as the power which combines ideas to 'create the form of things which seem to speak to us of the universal, and which at the same time necessarily causes in us feelings of love and awe.'²⁵⁹ The sacramental potential of imagination's intuitive expression opens us to an appreciation of its ability to pull back the curtains to glimpse transcendent reality. John McIntyre's 'conspatialising' function of the imagination can be applied here since in his understanding it makes present that which is absent to us.²⁶⁰ How does a person apprehend anything of the divine, or 'the realms of glory', the communion of saints, or of a sense of the majesty of God enthroned? We can only do this through the grace-filled engagement of the imagination in its intuitive function which can lift our vision to a perception, albeit 'through a glass darkly', of transcendence. In this sense religion must always call upon acts of intuitive imagination, using the material gathered from the world of sense perception to create figurative forms, pictures to both lift and express the vision. Preaching is an artistic, theological act which seeks to evoke a response which is primarily about encouraging and enabling on-looks which inspire new ways of living. Here imagination operates at the supramundane level.

A vital area for the preacher to consider is how they look on or imagine themselves in the preaching event. For example, my on-look on the preaching role will differ if I see myself as a herald, or a teacher, a painter or a spiritual director, a jazz musician or a jester. A key issue, discussed in chapter six, relates to the various entailments which follow from such different on-looks concerning the preaching task.

²⁵⁸ William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence', <<http://www.artofeurope.com/blake/bla3.htm>> [accessed 13th December 2010].

²⁵⁹ Warnock, (1976) 84.

²⁶⁰ John McIntyre, *Faith, Theology and Imagination* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press: 1987), 165.

iii. The Affective Function

The homiletic literature does not address the difference between empathy and sympathy. Both these aspects of affective imaginative engagement, which can be differentiated by degree rather than difference, are important for preaching.

Astley differentiates between empathy and sympathy. He connects empathy with a partial-understanding of the situation of the other. He points to Ninian Smart's analogy of play-acting or novel-reading as a way into understanding empathy at work. This should not be taken as reducing the importance of empathy. Empathy opens up the potential for vicarious experience, which carries with it epistemological potential. Astley describes it as 'a form of imaginative comprehension that involves projecting oneself into another person's standpoint'.²⁶¹ It requires that the one trying to understand the feelings of the other draw analogies from their own life experience. It is similar to the affective understanding demonstrated by an observer; it is real but not as complete, or as visceral, as the participant's affective experience. Eslinger refers to the empathetic imagination (though the term affective imagination would be clearer since it holds empathy and sympathy together) which he sees as essential in preaching enabling us to 'live into a context not our own' which can transform our attitudes and understanding. Wisely, he points out that imagination needs to be employed with 'care and precision' because of the risk of mis-imagining.²⁶² Trevor Hart discusses the power of the imagination operating in engagement with literature which can engender deep compassion for characters very different from ourselves and spark new insight and understanding. He does not name it as such, but here we see the affective imagination at work.²⁶³

The affective imagination can make present what is absent in terms of the perspective and emotions of another:

The means whereby such identification is effected is imagination, which... perceptively places itself in the other's shoes, understands his feelings and cares enough to take remedial or reassuring action.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ Jeff Astley, 'The Place of Understanding in Christian Education and Education about Christianity', *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 16, Issue 2 (1994), 93.

²⁶² Eslinger (1995), 102, 103.

²⁶³ Trevor A. Hart, 'Creative Imagination and Moral Identity', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Vol. 16 Issue 1 (2003), 1-13.

²⁶⁴ McIntyre (1987), 75.

At the other end of the affective continuum lies sympathy which involves feeling-with the other, sharing her feeling states in the manner of participant understanding.²⁶⁵ For example, if I attend a funeral as a mourner I have a sympathetic understanding of the affective state of other mourners. My situation in grief means I have no choice; I simply find myself located inside this feeling state. As the preacher at a funeral (assuming I have no connection with the deceased) I can *choose* to adopt an empathetic stance towards the mourners. In order to preach in a way that connects with the potential range of narratives in the room, the imaginative preacher will consider the various potential affective states, such as grief, shock, anger, guilt, and relief. In her empathetic imaginings she needs to draw from and then bracket out her own grief experiences to avoid the danger of shifting into a sympathetic identification which will hamper her ability to manage the funeral effectively.

In all preaching preparation, the affective imagination is profoundly important for the preacher's reflection on text and context. In terms of textual exploration, Ignatian prayer techniques draw heavily on the skills of the affective imagination. Central to Ignatian spirituality is the view that imagination has revelatory potential; in imaginatively entering into the world of the text and considering the experiences of the characters, new insights can be experienced. As an aside, it is interesting to observe in Ignatian approaches that a relatively small amount of chronological time spent engaging in an imaginative episode can produce detailed material for reflection which seems to extend well beyond the time investment. In affective imaginative engagement with the text empathy can move into sympathy as we shift from imagining, for example, Peter's desolation following his denial as if we were Peter in the biblical narrative, to feeling our own guilt and shame connected with the story of our own denials of Christ. Similarly, we can empathetically imagine the joy of the younger son, welcomed home in celebration, or we can draw closer and sympathetically feel with him God's welcoming embrace. In this understanding there is more affective distance with empathy than with sympathy. Empathy is 'near-by' affect; sympathy is 'inside' affect.

²⁶⁵ Astley, (1994), 95.

In terms of consideration of the sermon's context, affective imagination enables a preacher to exegete the congregation, tailoring the sermonic context and the style of delivery to their particular needs, in a way that is sensitive to differing perspectives amongst the hearers. David Heywood points to congregational lack of interest as being a key barrier to listening which is compounded by sermons which are too difficult to understand. He recommends listening to the passage 'with the ears of the congregation.'²⁶⁶ Although he does not say this, he is pointing to the importance of exercising the affective function of the imagination. Part of the preacher's task is to enable an affective connection in the hearer with what they are describing; preaching should appeal to people's affective capacities. The imagination produces images which have the power to arouse feeling. If preaching is to stimulate and handle affect responsibly and appropriately then preachers need to be aware of the power and potential, as well as the associated dangers, of using strong affective approaches. Preaching which plays on emotionalism becomes morally questionable. When the affective imagination moves people to deep behavioural changes, perhaps in terms of forgiving another, interceding for them or offering alms, we might argue that it is operating towards the sympathetic end of the continuum. Affective engagement can build up the sense of continuity between the individual, their community and wider contexts. Such imaginative function is the antidote to a fragmented, myopic individualism which stunts vision, damages identity and community, and destroys the impetus to engage in a life founded on the ethic of neighbour love.

iv. The Intellectual Function

Recognising the intellectual function of imagination helps us to avoid polarising reason and imagination, mitigating the accusation that imagination is naught but fantasy and feeling. Egan makes the point that imagination 'is not distinct from rationality but it is rather a capacity that greatly enriches rational thinking'.²⁶⁷ Paul Ricoeur observes that imagination has a 'prospective and exploratory function'.²⁶⁸ Alan White comments that 'imagination is linked to discovery, invention and originality because it is thought of the possible rather

²⁶⁶ David Heywood, *Transforming Preaching* (London: SPCK, 2013), 36-37.

²⁶⁷ Egan (1992), 43.

²⁶⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Evanston, Illinois: North Western University Press, 1965), 126.

than the actual'.²⁶⁹ Hypothesising, a reasoned step by step process, constructed around an 'if...then' model of supposition, with or without attendant images, is exactly this: thought of the possible. This skill of hypothesising is an inherent aspect of the intellectual imagination.

George MacDonald, writer, preacher, and poet, passionately advocated understanding the role of imagination in science, claiming, in 1893, that the 'prudent question' comes from the imagination which suggests new directions in research, and enables the 'scaffolding of hypothesis' without which 'the house of science would never rise.'²⁷⁰ Only 23 years prior to this, when physicist John Tyndall delivered his 'Discourse on the Scientific Use of the Imagination' to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the response from *The London Times* was scathing. It polarised imagination against the skill and patience of observation, and experiment.²⁷¹ The importance of imagination in science, however, is now widely accepted.

Gerald Holton identifies three aspects of imagination which are essential to science: the visual imagination, the thematic imagination, and the metaphorical imagination.²⁷² The visual or iconic imagination is linked to the ability to form successive mental images out of elusive optical images in the process of conceptualising. As an example, Holton points to the experiments of the physicist C. T. R Wilson who in 1912 had directed a beam of alpha particles from a radioactive source into a box containing moist air at a low temperature. The resulting photographs showed the path of the alpha particles, like vapour trails following aircraft. Holton comments that

to the properly prepared mind connected to the alert eye, the photographs presented an overwhelming drama – the first, irrefutable evidence of the existence of atomic discreteness far below the level of direct perception.²⁷³

²⁶⁹ White, (1990), 186.

²⁷⁰ George MacDonald, 'The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture' (1867), <http://www.wordiq.com/books/Dish_Of_Orts,_A:_Chiefly_Papers_On_The_Imagination,_And_On_Shakespeare/6> [accessed 5th July 2010], 6.

²⁷¹ Lorraine Daston, 'Fear and Loathing of the Imagination in Science', *Daedalus*, Vol. 127, Issue 1, Science in Culture (Winter, 1998), 73-95.

²⁷² Gerald Holton, *Einstein, History and Other Passions: The Rebellion Against Science at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Woodbury, New York: American Institute of Physics Press, 1995), 160-184.

²⁷³ Holton, (1995), 161-162.

Holton does not make the point, but the experiment required Wilson's imaginative insight to hypothesise that *if* he used the method of projecting a beam into a cloud chamber *then* this might reveal the behaviour of elementary particles.

The phrase 'properly prepared mind' is important, since what we see is conditioned by our experiences and expectations. This is a point Thomas Kuhn makes, commenting that in science 'initially only the anticipated and usual are experienced' because of the background of our expectations.²⁷⁴ Kuhn makes reference to Jastrow's duck/rabbit in describing the way scientists experience shifts in 'seeing' as they grow in knowledge of their subject:

Looking at a bubble-chamber photograph, the student sees confused and broken lines, the physicist a record of familiar sub nuclear events.²⁷⁵

However, such shifts in seeing are more gradual than the sudden gestalt shift which occurs in the duck/rabbit case, which is more akin to the intuitive function of the imagination. The shift in seeing which Kuhn describes comes as a result of effort, learning, application, trial and error, and the application of hypothesis and supposition. Here the intellectual function of the imagination is at work, which may contribute to a sudden realisation. Kuhn described the scientific process in terms of 'normal science' which is research based upon a paradigm: a body of widely accepted knowledge, a model which shapes how we look at the world. Normal science might be seen as the spade work of research, exploration, and experimentation. This is the intellectual function of the imagination at work. In Kuhn's analysis, as research progresses anomalies will occur which do not fit the current paradigm. Whilst these may be resisted for a time, eventually they lead to a crisis point followed by a sudden, revolutionary shift into a new paradigm. Kuhn's work can be criticised on many fronts, not least because his use of the term paradigm is broad, he has a very conservative view of the work of the scientist, and does not seem to accept that science progresses towards a better description of reality. However, what is useful for our purposes is his consideration of the power of the paradigm to shape our vision.

²⁷⁴ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 64.

²⁷⁵ Kuhn (1996), 111.

Another aspect of imagination, identified by Holton, is the ‘thematic imagination’. By this he means the willingness to challenge the assumptions our ‘properly prepared mind’ might present to us. The shift from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican view of the universe required scientists with imagination to notice anomalies and to risk and question the ‘irrefutable’ evidence of the Ptolemaic paradigm. The intellectual imagination involves a willingness to follow hunches and search beyond the immediate.

Holton also identifies what he calls the metaphoric imagination at work in science. He notes that scientists frequently use metaphor and analogy. In a similar vein, Brian Sutton-Smith, exploring the question of the imaginative function in research, describes the metaphors that neuroscientist Karl Pribram used at various stages of his research to describe the function of the brain. His metaphors ranged from a telephone exchange to a thermostat to a hologram. The point is that when Pribram lacked a metaphor his research faltered suggesting that the ‘imagination is the source of knowledge, not its limitation’.²⁷⁶

To argue for the vital importance of imagination in the contemporary preaching event does not mean that all sermons should be narrative or poetic or delivered with dramatic performance. Some sermons, drawing on the logical skills of the intellectual imagination, will employ reason, supposition, and hypothesis, marshalling thoughts to present an argument, anticipating and countering objection. One of the interesting aspects of supposition is that we can engage in it without having a commitment to its truth content. We can invite a congregation, in which many hold postmodern suspicions of reason and authority, to suppose in imagination that God exists and imaginatively explore the possibilities of that supposition even if their current experience is to doubt or deny the possibility of God as ontic reality. In such suppositional engagement lies the possibility of faith, which is essentially rooted in the question ‘*What if the gospel accounts of the nature of God are true?*’ Were they to be true, *then what?* This is fundamentally an imaginative question with the potential to affect reality. This argument assumes that there is a connection between our imaginative explorations and the potential effect they have on our apprehension of the external world. What goes on in imagination affects who we are and how

²⁷⁶ Sutton-Smith, Brian, ‘In Search of the Imagination,’ in *Imagination and Education*, eds. Kieran Egan and Dan Nadaner (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 7.

we live. One of the tasks of homiletics is to encourage suppositional questioning in the fields of faith and ethics with the aim of opening up the potential for transformation. In short, this means stimulating the intellectual function of imagination.

In introducing the framework to a class, the teacher asks the students how they would describe imagination to an alien and takes their suggestions in a plenary session. Each student suggestion is written into one of four quadrants on a board, as the teacher, thinking on her feet, assigns descriptions to one of the four areas of imaginative function. At the opening of the session the names of these quadrants are not identified but it becomes clear that items in each quadrant are related in a particular way. The teacher can then reveal the titles of each quadrant: ‘Sensory’, ‘Intuitive’, ‘Affective’ and ‘Intellectual’. Detail can then be added to what the students have offered in each quadrant, enabling a holistic understanding of imagination to emerge from the combination of the group’s offerings and those of the teacher.²⁷⁷

We now turn to the issue of constructing a theology of imagination, beginning with analysis of how imagination is understood in the content of scripture and what the form of scripture suggests about imagination. This will be followed by a consideration of the role of imagination in the construal and use of scripture, before examining the role of imagination in theology in general, and in more specific theological areas. With the caveat that there are limits to the power of the imagination, the aim is to show the centrality of imagination in the theological task and hence in the event of preaching.

3.2 Imagination and Scripture: Problem, Mandate and Use

i. Scripture: A Problematic Picture?

What does the Bible actually tell us about imagination? At first consideration the biblical material relating to imagination is problematic. The etymology is complex and on the whole the usage is pejorative. There is no single word used in the Bible correlating to the English term ‘imagination’, though there are a number of words, in Hebrew and in Greek, which carry connotations of the

²⁷⁷ This method of introducing the framework has been used in a range of homiletics classes, preaching conferences and clergy training events and has proved a useful way of generating student engagement, representing the variety of imaginative function and circumventing the assumption that imagination is the provenance of the artistic.

term.²⁷⁸ *Yatsar*, meaning ‘to form’ is used of God’s creation of man and of the beasts (Genesis 2.7, 8 and 19) and the majority of its 62 occurrences relate to divine creative activity.²⁷⁹ *Yatsar* can also mean ‘purpose’ or ‘inclination’ as in ‘every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually’ (Genesis 6.5). Similar usage is found in Genesis 8.21 in which God resolves never again to destroy the earth even though the ‘inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.’ In its 52 occurrences, the Hebrew word *machāshābāh* conveys meanings ranging from the devising of works of art and decoration for the Temple (Exodus. 31.4; 35.32, 33, 35) to the thoughts, devices and plans of the human heart (e.g. 1 Chronicles 28.9; 29.18; Job 5.12; Proverbs 12.5). *Maškiyth* occurs six times and its meanings vary from a carved figure or an idol (Leviticus 26.1), to a picture (Numbers 33.52) or an imaginative conceit (Proverbs 18.11). Much more common is the word *lēb*, occurring 589 times and meaning the inner self, heart, mind, will, resolution, and seat of emotion, source of courage, conscience, and understanding. Alison Searle sees the term as ‘inevitably encompassing what we now categorise as imagination’.²⁸⁰ However, she misses the point that *lēb* does not convey a sense of creativity or aesthetic design, so we do need to hold it alongside the other biblical words which convey a broader sense of imagination.

In the New Testament there are a number of terms which bear some connotations of our understanding of imagination. *Meletao*, meaning to devise or contrive, occurs three times: ‘When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not *worry beforehand* about what you are to say’ (Mark 13.11). ‘Why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples *imagine* vain things?’ (Acts 4.25). ‘*Put these things into practice,*’ (here the Authorised Version reads ‘*meditate upon*’ (1 Timothy 4.15). These three usages all relate to a sense of inner reasoning, cogitation and projection. Closely linked to this, and occurring 14 times, is *dialogismos* – conveying a sense of inner reasoning, thought or deliberation, as well as doubt,

²⁷⁸ Alison Searle, *The Eyes of Your Heart’: Literary and Theological Trajectories of Imaging Biblically* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 32.

²⁷⁹ All references in the following paragraphs to word frequency, connotation and occurrence are taken from: <<http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Lexicon.show/>> [accessed 10th August 2010].

²⁸⁰ Searle (2008), 34.

disputation and argument.²⁸¹ The word *dianoia*, occurring 13 times, relates to the mind, to understanding, desiring, and feeling. It occurs in the commandment to love God with heart, soul, and *mind*. In Ephesians 1.18 it is translated variously as ‘The eyes of your ‘understanding’ or ‘heart’.²⁸² Finally, there is the term *kardia*, occurring 160 times, meaning the heart, the centre of physical and spiritual life, and the source of passions and desires; it is the inner world of the person, the source of good and bad contrivance.

Bringing together the terms *lêb* and *kardia*, Searle’s analysis of the biblical concept of the heart, with the proviso mentioned above, does contribute helpfully to a theological understanding of imagination. She goes so far as to contend that this concept ‘defines the essence of our nature as human beings.’²⁸³ The heart is the spiritual, intellectual, moral, and ethical centre. As Proverbs counsels, ‘Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life (Proverbs 4.23). According to the Psalmist, ‘Fools say in their hearts, “There is no God”. They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good’ (Psalm 14.1). In Genesis the wickedness of humanity is located in the inclination of the thoughts of their hearts (Genesis 6.5). Similarly, the beatitudes understand purity of heart as having a connection with seeing God, in the sense of recognising, apprehending, and understanding, with the correlate implicit meaning of living out that purity in practical ways. The heart is associated with decision making, being the source of David’s decision to build a house for the Lord (1 Kings 8.17). The heart is also portrayed as a centre of emotion, the spring of joyful worship and gladness, as well as grief. In Romans, Paul pictures the heart as the centre of belief. Oral expressions of faith need to be supported by deep seated heart-belief:

if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and *believe in your heart* that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For *one believes with the heart* and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. (Romans 10.9-10)

Overall, the biblical picture of the heart is that it is in need of change. The prophet Ezekiel expresses the divine promise: ‘A new heart I will give you and a

²⁸¹ See Matthew 15.19; Mark 7.21; Luke 2.35; 5.22; 6.8; 9.46; 9.47; 24.38; Romans 1.21; 14.11; Corinthians 3.20; Philippians 2.14; 1 Timothy 2.8; James 2.4.

²⁸² See also Mark 12.30; Luke 1.51; 10.27; Ephesians 2.3; 4.18; Colossians 1.21; Hebrews 8.10; Hebrews 10:16; 1 Peter 1.13; 2 Peter 3.1; I John 5.20.

²⁸³ Searle (2008), 37.

new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh' (Ezekiel 36.26). The imagery of a stone heart conveys the sense of deadness and coldness in the biblical view of the heart without God, and underscores the centrality of the heart in steering thought, determination and action. In this sense Searle's correlation of the biblical idea of the heart with the concept of imagination is illuminating, not least because it highlights the range of imaginative function, and the centrality of imagination in the life of faith. Searle sees imagination as part of everyday life common to all. In her analysis imagination is a vital component of biblical anthropology:

Imagination is one significant, inextricable part of the complex that makes up our humanity in biblical perspective.²⁸⁴

The imagination, rather than being the provenance of an artistic elite, has the potential for good or ill, and needs guidance from the injunction to love God and neighbour.

ii. Biblical Form: A Mandate from Koheleth

Illuminating as analysis of the biblical content is for grasping a sense of the scriptural view of imagination, the form and style of the sacred texts is also important. Their creation suggests imagination at work, seeking the best literary form to convey particular material. The picture painted of Koheleth seeking out proverbs and setting them in particular order, whilst also searching to 'find just the right words' (Ecclesiastes 12.9-10), conveys in microcosm the biblical focus on the importance of form. The wide ranging genre and the powerful use of poetic imagery and form convey a sense of the role of the imagination in shaping and communicating biblical ideas. The corollary to this is that engaging with the Bible calls for active imagination in interpretation and application. To read the text as though meaning can be extracted and the form cast aside like a paper cup is to fail to see the imaginative connection between what is said and how it is conveyed. This is examined further below. The content and form of the scriptures convey to the preacher a sense of the need to engage imaginatively in the creation of sermonic content and form, and linked to the latter is the issue of delivery. Just as biblical engagement should not be flat and passive; neither

²⁸⁴ Searle (2008), 39.

should the hearers' engagement with sermons. Preaching is a work of the imagination in its redeemed sense in every aspect. Shaped by the scriptures, in conversation with the tradition and context, the sermon seeks to articulate the truth of God, and what that might imply, in a particular way (structure, shape, content, and delivery) for a specific community, at a given time. Imagination is at work in the creation and reception of the sermon.

John McIntyre understands the term 'parable' to embrace all of Jesus' use of metaphoric and symbolic language, aphorisms as well as more developed parables. In examining the commonplace elements in the parables alongside the artistry of their construction, Warnock's sense of the imagination encompassing the everyday mundane aspects of perception as well as the more artistic creative potential of humanity springs to mind. In terms of the framework outlined above, the imagination is at work in the parables particularly in its sensory and intuitive functions. The imagery of the parables is commonplace – coins, bread, neighbours, sheep, fields, vineyards, fish, nets and so forth. Jesus takes the sensory data of his everyday context and, in a fusion of intuitive insight, gives new twists to familiar stories and invents new parables. McIntyre sees here, undoubtedly rightly, that imagination is part of biblical thought and that in the parables we witness the 'implicit rejection of aniconistic thinking.' As McIntyre reflects on and explores the parabolic imagination of Christ he argues that we are left with an uneasy sense that we have not engaged fully with iconistic thought. He is critiquing the over-conceptualisation of theology. Although McIntyre makes few direct references to preaching, he points out that in his vast use of figurative language, Jesus communicates a crucial aspect of how we should be 'talking and thinking about the fundamental facts of faith.'²⁸⁵ The very existence of the parables invites preachers to think creatively about the use of story, anecdote, resonant image, and subverted expectation. They invite reflection on how to engage people's imagination, using structures that imprint on memory in order to challenge, confront, and comfort the hearers.

In developing his ideas about the parabolic imagination, McIntyre points to the relationship between particularity and universality which he sees in the

²⁸⁵ McIntyre (1987), 19, 31, 32.

parables and argues is a hallmark of all imaginative thinking.²⁸⁶ Much of Jesus' teaching is given parabolically as he uses particular figurative ways of communicating the universal themes of his message. Each theme can be seen operating within a variety of parables and symbolic actions.

For example, *the immediacy of salvation* is expressed in the particularity of fishermen appointed as fishers of men (Luke 5.10); knocking on a door that will be opened (Matthew 7.7-8); the invitation to take on the yoke of the one who gives rest, and to learn (Matthew 11.29); as well as the many miracles of healing, all earthed in the ordinary. *The loving mercy of God for sinners* is conveyed beautifully in the particularity of the three parables of Luke 15 – the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son(s). *The reality of judgement* is conveyed in such parables as the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25.31-46); the parable of the tenants (Luke 20.9-18) and the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12.13-21), as well as in the analogy between the days of Noah and Lot and the coming of the Son of Man (Luke 17.26-37). *The call to penitence* is, for example, made specific in the image of the plank and the speck, the removal of the plank being an act of penitence and humility, enabling clear vision (Matthew 7.3-5); in the parable of the two sons, with its emphasis on concrete actions rather than fickle words (Matthew 21.28-32); in the image of the tax collector who makes generous reparation (Luke 19.1-9) and the tax collector who humbles himself before God, measured against the foil, the haughty Pharisee (Luke 18.9-14). *The cost of discipleship* is communicated in the particular demand for total commitment expressed through the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Matthew 13.44-46); as well as in the image of cross carrying (Matthew 16.24) and the parables of building the tower and the king weighing the cost of war (Luke 14.27-33). *The requirements of the life of faith* in terms of offering love and forgiveness are made specific in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37); the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18.21-35) and the aphorism about the measure employed being the measure used (Mark 4.24). *The blessings of discipleship* in the sense of security in God are made clear through the image of commanding the mountain to throw itself into the sea as a picture of confidence in God's response to prayer (Mark 11.22-25);

²⁸⁶ McIntyre (1987), 22.

the point made again in the parables of the friend at midnight (Luke 11.5-8) and the persistent widow (Luke 18.1-8) and in the images of God's provision for the birds and the lilies (Matthew 6.28-29).

In the *teaching on the road to the cross*, Jesus again turns to figurative language to convey this vast theme in the particularity of graspable imagery: his destiny as a drink to be swallowed (Matthew 20.22; Mark 14.39) and a baptism to be undergone (Mark 14.39); his body as bread broken and his blood as wine outpoured (Luke 22.19-20). His life is depicted in terms of a grain of wheat (John 12.23) that in dying produces more life, a dying also presented in terms of a ransom image (Matthew 20.28; Mark 10.45). *The final consummation* of all things is presented in a 'veritable avalanche of imagery and of parables'.²⁸⁷ McIntyre does not note the shift in imagistic type, but it is interesting to see that the images change at this point and transcend the local world of first century Palestine, and indeed of any age of humanity. The figurative language is elevated and apocalyptic, perhaps because the great theme it describes cannot be earthed in the ordinary. We are presented with images of the sun and moon darkened and the stars falling from the sky and the Son of Man coming on the clouds, accompanied by angels (Matthew 24.29-31; Mark 13.24-26). Even here the imagery is soon brought down into the particular; immediately following this lofty description an analogy is drawn from the homely fig tree concerning reading the signs (Matthew 24.32-33; Mark 13.28-29). In terms of *anticipating the consummation*, again graspable imagery is employed such as the thief who comes in the night (Matthew 24.43; Luke 12.39-40). Until this point the good and bad are left to grow together as the parables of the weeds and the net suggest (Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43, 47-50). The key point of this brief review is that Jesus communicates the universal themes of his teaching in the garb of the particular:

The whole of the essential teaching of Jesus is both contained within the parables, and mediated to us by powerful and moving imagery and imaged story.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ McIntyre (1987), 30.

²⁸⁸ McIntyre (1987), 31.

This is instructive for preaching; stating universal theological themes does not communicate them well. For example, simply stating the mercy of God for broken people is bland, to some a truism, to others a meaningless platitude. Preaching after the pattern of Jesus' imaginative example means to particularise the abstract in the concrete, using the currency of resonant, contextual images which will speak the astonishing universal into the specific, the ordinary, and the mundane. This is not to say that preaching should be in parables, but that preaching should make rich use of figurative language, graspable image, and story to communicate its universal freight. Earthing the abstract idea is a task of the imagination in all its functions. What does the preacher notice in the ordinary that can be drawn upon (Sensory function)? How might images and ideas be fused in arresting and unusual ways (Intuitive function)? What emotional responses might this material both communicate and generate (Affective function)? How does this image or idea feed into the overall logic of the sermon structure; what objections might be raised and how could they be countered (Intellectual function)?

Analysis of Nathan's parable of the lamb in 2 Samuel 12 is instructive in the discussion of imagination and preaching, as it is a good example of the use of figurative language: graspable image and story which combine to create a 'sermon' which effectively bears the freight of judgement. The parable follows David's adulterous liaison with Bathsheba and his subsequent successful murder plot. The prophet uses a secular story to effect change, underscoring the power of fiction to draw people to God, and reminding us that this is the strategy underpinning Jesus' parables.

In Nathan's parable we see clearly how an imaginative approach has the power to confront and challenge, and be heard. Nathan comes at David's sin obliquely and appeals to his imagination. The story gets under the wire of David's defences and disarms him. Had Nathan simply denounced David's behaviour out of hand would he have been able to force him into repentance? The parable clearly shows Nathan's psychological astuteness. As McIntyre noted in relation to Jesus' parables, there is a relationship here between the universal (sin and judgement) and the particular (how Nathan communicates this to David in a concrete story). David, in his sin, has a distorted view of himself, a false imagining, presuming to stand in judgement on the one who represents himself,

without seeing the connections. The parable offers him the chance to perceive himself truly and repent. The parable, an imaginative construct, has the power to create new insight or right seeing, which leads to penitence and restoration of relationship. Throughout this, the imagination plays a vital role in the speaker and the listener.

The features of the parable are contextually relevant, drawn from a world with which the primary hearer, David, is familiar. Structurally, the piece is woven around the narrative staple of the binary opposition of the rich man and the poor man. Such a structure is a memorable and therefore common feature of oral discourse. The form and content are tightly woven with an incremental and cunning use of pathos, the layering up of words and images designed to provoke an emotional response. The rich man with his '*very many* flocks and herds' is contrasted with the poor man who had '*nothing but one little ewe lamb.*' The parable shows how the choice of a single word can increase a particular effect; note how less effective the word 'sheep' instead of 'lamb' would have been. The pathos builds with reference to the lamb being brought up with the poor man's children and sharing his '*meagre* fare'. At this point there is merciless layering up of emotional tension. This lamb, from being brought up with the man's children, nursed as a child, becomes like a daughter to him. Before the tension can break into the release of humour, the subject is abruptly changed through the device of the traveller, who is structurally important in terms of carrying the shift of focus but also useful in that he presents familiar content in terms of the need to provide hospitality. The meanness of the rich man is emphasised as we recall that with his '*very many* flocks' he has ample resources from which to provide for the needs of his guest. The narrative trap is sprung as the wealthy man helps himself to the poor man's lamb and David erupts in a rage that will shift to penitence as he recognises himself in the rich man's actions. The wisdom of the parable bears out Paul Harris's observation that 'an imagined situation has the capacity to arouse emotion.'²⁸⁹ The parable is not a direct account or even an allegory of David's behaviour; rather it functions analogically, drawing David into a first hearing in which the sin belongs to another and into a deeper hearing in which he recognises that he is indeed 'the man'.

²⁸⁹ Harris (2000), 76.

In working with Nathan's parable when leading a preachers' workshop,²⁹⁰ I was interested to note one participant's observation that there is a passive-aggressive aspect to the parable. The parable sets out and succeeds in trapping David. Is it therefore appropriate to set it up as an example of an effective form of preaching? The question raises deeper issues about the purpose of preaching and the role of the preacher. Suffice it to say here that in this case the sermonic intent is to bring David to a place of repentance. In this sense Nathan is operating out of a 'hermeneutic of spiritual direction',²⁹¹ engaging in the task of helping to restore David's relationship with God, by helping David to see his behaviour clearly and recognise his sin.

The process of imaginative recognition seen in David's response to Nathan's story is important to scriptural engagement in general and preaching in particular. As we make connections with perspectives and characters within the scriptures we are drawn closer-in, invited to recognise our own voices in the cadences of the lament psalms, our own weaknesses in Peter's denial or Judas' betrayal, or our own potential in the humanity of Christ. In such imaginative recognition we encounter something of the divine shaping effect of scripture.

Exploring the importance of imagination in relation to hermeneutics, Glen Scorgie argues convincingly that the hegemonic status of the historical-grammatical hermeneutic in evangelical circles leads to a deficiency over personal formation, practical application and divine encounter.²⁹² With the functional focus on getting a sound cognitive grasp on the text, 'standard evangelical hermeneutics fails to provide any substantive resources for meeting the challenge of changing readers' lives.'²⁹³ In other words it does not facilitate any imaginative connection between what we read in scripture and who we are becoming. This hermeneutic approach enables the reader to grasp what the text meant but is less helpful in enabling a grasp of what it might now mean; it does not inspire imaginative recognition. Scorgie adds that the focus on relating to

²⁹⁰ Kate Bruce, 'Through a Glass Darkly: Imagination as a Vehicle for Transformation in the Preaching Event', Preachers' Workshop, St John's College, Durham University [13th July 2010].

²⁹¹ Kay L. Northcutt, *Kindling Desire for God: Preaching as Spiritual Direction* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2009), 7.

²⁹² Glen G. Scorgie, 'Hermeneutics and the Meditative Use of the Scripture: The Case for a Baptised Imagination', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 44, Issue 2 (June 2001), 273-276.

²⁹³ Scorgie (2001), 274.

the text is at the expense of relating to God, God becoming an off-stage, distant director, rather than an on-stage actor. Scourgie is not disparaging this hermeneutic method, but simply pointing out that it needs to be supplemented by the ‘spiritual reading of scripture’,²⁹⁴ by which he means attentive reflection on the text, as in the practice of *lectio divina*. We could add to this the technique of Ignatian meditation or engaging with scripture through artistic exploration, creative writing, or Godly Play. At the heart of such methods is the active engagement of the imagination which can enable the spark of recognition of who we are and who God is.

Dale Martin, in his analysis of methods of biblical interpretation across ten US seminaries, found that the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation was very common though often not acknowledged as such. To my knowledge no comparable survey has been done in the UK context. One of the dangers Martin identifies with this hegemony is an unhelpful emphasis on the difference between *exegesis* and *eisegesis*, an emphasis which implies that there is one meaning in the text which can be exegetically mined²⁹⁵ and failure to do this results in *eisegesis*. However, in a sense, all our biblical reading is ‘reading in’ and if our reading is not subjective, we can hardly be said to be fully involved with the text. Objective reading, if such a thing could exist, sounds cold, passionless and frighteningly dull. Grasping this might help to allay some of the fears relating to the use of imagination in preaching. There is no single stable, objective meaning to be drawn out which can be verified in the court of secular empiricism. However, all our readings are subject to controls, as outlined later in this chapter.

iii. Scripture: How You See it is How You Use it

David Kelsey makes a convincing case for the *a priori* role of the imagination in the way theologians judge the purpose of theological activity, which affects their construal of scripture, which affects their usage of the same.²⁹⁶ He identifies the mode of God’s presence among the faithful as a vital imaginative theological judgement. He outlines three possible modes of divine presence: *ideational*, which regards God as present in doctrine proposed by scripture; *concrete*

²⁹⁴ Scourgie (2001), 277.

²⁹⁵ Martin (2008), 30.

²⁹⁶ David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London: SCM, 1975), 158-181.

actuality, which sees God as present in Christ rendered through scripture; and *ideal possibility*, which understands God's presence mediated through scripture in ways which enable the possibility of transformation from inauthentic to authentic existence. Applying Kelsey's ideas to preaching clarifies the important observation that how a preacher construes and uses scripture is dependent on how they look on the mode of God's presence with us.

Using Kelsey's modes, the preacher operating within the *ideational mode* will tend to preach in ways that give emphasis to the communication of doctrine and stress the need for belief in sound doctrine. The scriptures will be mined for material which can be connected to support doctrinal propositions. Reasoned argument is likely to play an important part in the subsequent homiletic, which will tend to springboard between different texts in building a case in the deductive mode. The preacher understanding God's presence with us as being revealed in the *concrete actuality* of Christ will seek to preach about the identity of Jesus and what his presence means, handling the scripture as a narrative which anticipates and depicts his presence: a narrative which in its diversity renders Christ to us. The preacher operating with an understanding of God's presence with us in the mode of an *ideal possibility* will seek to urge change in the hearer from patterns of behaviour and attitudes which cripple and distort to authentic relationships with self, others and the world. The scriptures will be treated as a source of exemplar material which effects and evokes such transformative possibility. The vital point is that a preacher's engagement with scripture is shaped by a prior imaginative sense of God's mode of presence with us. The imaginatively aware preacher needs to ask what mode might be most resonant with this text, in this or that context, without always drawing from the same mode. Imagination is at work in helping us to recognise our favoured mode of conceiving God's presence. It helps us to make decisions about what mode might work best in a given context, guiding our construal of scripture, how we see patterns and make connections, and aiding us in shaping and delivering the sermon.

3.3 Imagination as Theology's Vital Tool

Might we actually suppose imagination itself to be a vital tool and resource for our grasp and elucidation of the substance of theology, enabling us, in

certain circumstances at least, to go farther and to see more than other more discursive modes of theological reflection?²⁹⁷

There are a number of reasons why Trevor Hart's proposal might be resisted. Linked to fantasy, idolatry, deceit, delusion, and evil, imagination might not appear too congenial to the theologian. An image of this is painted vividly in *Paradise Lost*, where Milton describes Satan as:

Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve,
Assaying by his devilish art to reach
The origins of her fancy, and with them forge
Illusions, as he list, phantasms and dreams...²⁹⁸

However, imagination can be defended on the grounds that, like any other aspect of humanity, it can be employed to positive or negative ends. Temptation may come in the shape of images and inner narratives, but resistance can also be mediated by the same means. That imagination can be abused is no reason to oust it from the theological arena. Eva Brann sees imagination operating in Christianity in four ways: narrative, the stories of faith needing absorption and visualisation; metaphorical, in the handling of the figurative language of scripture; visionary, in the insight of the seer; and as a cognitive mode in theology, shaping the use of analogy.²⁹⁹ We can add to this the role of imagination in memory and anticipation, so important to faith.

Gordon Kaufman speaks of the whole of theology in terms of imaginative construction, seeing the primary role of the 'theological imagination' as being 'the continuing critical reconstruction of the symbol "God"'.³⁰⁰ However, unlike Trevor Hart, he does not ground the basis of our image of God on 'the supposed authority of revelation' but on the effectiveness of "God" as a symbol in promoting genuine human fulfilment.³⁰¹ Kaufman's thesis is helpful since it reminds us that theology is a human undertaking, requiring the exercise of

²⁹⁷ Trevor Hart, 'Imagining Evangelical Theology', in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Evangelical Method*, ed., John G., Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 192.

²⁹⁸ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV 800,
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_4/index.shtml> [accessed 7th February 2013].

²⁹⁹ Brann (1991) 705-706.

³⁰⁰ Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 12.

³⁰¹ Kaufman (1981), 46.

imagination. However, his separation between our images of God and the possibility of their having any referential descriptive power may account for some evangelical nervousness around the use of imagination in theology. He does allow that the ‘symbol of God must in some way correspond to or represent something metaphysically real,’³⁰² but he is wary of the reification of this concept. There seems to be a tension here; if the term God corresponds to something metaphysically real, then there must be some objective reality to which the word God applies.³⁰³ By bracketing out the existence of God as objective reality, Kaufman creates room for the criticism that theology involves the creation of an imaginary ‘God’, who is no more than a pragmatic symbol. On the contrary, being engaged by God is ‘a matter of having our imagination taken captive and being drawn into the divine drama.’³⁰⁴

David Kelsey recognises the role of imagination in theology without separating it from revelation. *Imagining Redemption* is an excellent example of the imaginative theological method which seeks to respond to a very practical question concerning what redemption means, using imagination to weave together insights and method from systematic theology grounded in the narrative of a particular situation, the story of Sam, a boy who suffered a devastating illness and the effect this had on him and his family. Kelsey, drawing from Garrett Green (see below), sees imagination as enabling us to see patterns; it is perceptual and practical. Imagining redemption involves seeing the shape of God’s interaction with us as we look back, enabling us to reframe our experience and see it against the backdrop of God’s presence with us. The basis of those patterns gives us hope in the present moment with God and frees us from limiting self-definitions, enabling us to anticipate and ‘live into’ a future redeemed from the sin we commit and the evil which befalls us. Kelsey demonstrates this redemption at work in the lives of Sam and his father as, in time, they begin to imaginatively re-frame their experiences and hope becomes possible for them.

³⁰² Kaufman (1981), 48.

³⁰³ Bruce L. McCormack, ‘Divine Revelation and Human Imagination: Must We Choose Between the Two?’ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 37 (1984), 441.

³⁰⁴ Hart (2000), 198.

What is important in Kelsey is that he does not polarise imagination and revelation.³⁰⁵

3.4 Imagination: The Human Point of Contact

In exploring imagination and revelation it is instructive to review David Tracy's work on the disclosive power of the classic and his combination of manifestation and proclamation as conduits of disclosure, bringing this into conversation with Garrett Green's work on imagination as the human point of contact in the revelatory event. A similar focus is also found in Paul Avis' approach to the relationship between revelation and imagination.³⁰⁶ David Brown's connection between imagination, tradition, and revelation helps us to see revelation as an on-going work of God woven into the fabric of the tradition. John McIntyre's connection between the Spirit, imagination and revelation adds to an understanding of the potentially inspired nature of interpretation, creation, and appropriation.

David Tracy's understanding of the classic, developed in the context of his argument for the public nature of theology, addressing the academy, the Church, and wider society, extends beyond seeing the classic simply as a text. In his analysis an event, image, person, ritual, text or symbol could constitute a classic. He explores both secular and religious classics, in both cases arguing that the classic is an expression of the human spirit which has an excess of meaning; it exerts a claim for attention on the subject, who is always a social-subject, related to other interpreters. The classic challenges our understanding, provoking us to new questions and new vision. Classics are reinterpreted over time, later interpreters bringing their specific questions to it.³⁰⁷ One of the most fascinating aspects of Tracy's work is that he sees the event of proclamation as a 'classic religious expression'. This entails a high view of preaching:

A word of address bearing a stark and disconcerting shock of recognition for the self; a word of address with the claim of a nonviolent appeal to listen and

³⁰⁵ David Kelsey, *Imagining Redemption* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 99-100, 39, 59-61, 41.

³⁰⁶ Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

³⁰⁷ Tracy (1981), 102, 118.

receive its gift and demand; a questioning, provocative, promising and liberating word that the event happens now: a judging, forgiving word.³⁰⁸

In shaping the proclaimed word the preacher works with the classic of scripture, and with the insights gained from observation of the everyday. She is called to shape the content and form of an event which might be worthy of the term ‘classic’ as defined above. Without making revelation dependent on human skill, it is incumbent upon the preacher to apply their particular theological insights and communicative gifts into a piece which is worthy of attention. The role of imagination is central both to the production of a classic text and to its interpretation. Preachers come to the scriptures with their pre-understandings of the material, pre-understandings shaped by culture, context, and the faith community’s previous interpretations. In the process of preparation the scriptural text exerts its claim to attention which will probe and challenge the preacher’s previous readings, interpreting the preacher in her act of interpretation. In the locus of imagination the preacher’s ideas, questions, images, and observations, drawn from the scriptures, the tradition, and the cultural context, are intensified until a new seeing is forged and revelation is clarified. This needs to be rendered in the shape, form, language, and gesture of the homiletic performance, which further defines and clarifies the God-given insight. This process of rendering occurs in the studio of the imagination. In the following quotation, Tracy is speaking of the work of the artist, but his imperative urging applies well to the task of the preacher:

We must feed the imagination; we must be alert to the possible presence of some disclosure; we must recover, discover, invent, create a genre and a style, a personal voice, to render, to express the meaning of that intensified experience of something essential.³⁰⁹

In interpreting the sermon the hearer comes as a subject with their own perceptions of the scriptural material and of the event of preaching. If the sermon is to have revelatory impact it will occur in the locus of imagination as the sermon exerts its claim, opening up the potential for the divine content of revelation to convert and redeem the imagination of the hearer, enabling new

³⁰⁸ Tracy (1981), 269.

³⁰⁹ Tracy (1981), 129.

seeing and impelling new ways of being. Dull, unimaginative preaching, poorly written, shaped and delivered, dishonours the classic status of the preaching event and its claim is likely to be rejected by the hearer.

Tracy sees the secular classic also operating with disclosive potential; we can and should expect to discover God in the secular classic events, images, persons, rituals, texts, and symbols of cultures. The preacher needs to draw from these classics in the content of his preaching. This raises the question of what counts as a classic. We need to be careful here not to simply equate the artefacts of high culture with classic status; there is no place for revelatory snobbery in homiletics. Is there any reason why a film, novel, or popular song cannot operate as a classic, speaking into our experiences, sparking our imagination, challenging our horizons and demanding a response? Now the cry of 'Nein' comes into sharp focus since such a view seems to negate the devastating effects of sin on human nature. Brunner maintains that the human quest for God is the point of contact for revelation.³¹⁰ However, the argument for an anthropological basis for revelation suggests that revelation is not entirely bound up in an act of divine grace but is reliant on human potential and the desire to find God. Yet the Barthian view that revelation is purely an act of God means that we cannot offer an explanation of revelation other than in self-referential categories; the explanation cannot communicate beyond the realm of theology.

Green seeks to find a way through the Barth-Brunner impasse by focussing on a particular understanding of the role of imagination in revelation. He regards imagination as the *Anknüpfungspunkt*, the anthropological point of contact between revelation and human experience.³¹¹ Green seeks to uphold revelation as an act of grace and account for the human reception of revelation. He argues that the imagination is the locus of revelation not because of any inherent connection it has with God, but simply because it is the point in our experience where revelation is encountered.³¹² Sandra Levy expresses a similar point:

³¹⁰ Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans, 1989), 31.

³¹¹ Green (1989), 29. A similar connection was made by Brian Hearne in

'Theology and Imagination', *The Furrow*, Vol. 18, Issue 9 (September 1967), 414 - 415.

³¹² Green (1989), 35, 43.

It is the imaginative power (the God-given way in which humans are hardwired) that provides the locus for transcendent revelatory truth to be revealed.³¹³

The content of revelation is unique; an act of grace; but its reception can be compared to any other event in the world. It is received by an ordinary, human capacity, that of imagination. In this sense Green argues for a connection between the substance of revelation and the act of imagining. Is Green opening the possibility of a reductionist critique that elides imagination into the category of the imaginary or of make-believe? Green's response is to highlight the distinction between the imaginative and the imaginary. The former refers to the ability to discern what is objectively there, which may or may not be present, and the latter refers to something not present in an objective sense. So he recognises that imagination can be linked to fantasy and deceit, but makes the point that it is also related to truth and discovery. There are things that are real but cannot be directly apprehended physically, either through their physical absence or because they cannot be apprehended in a physical sense. In terms of the subatomic level, or in the field of cosmology, physical realities are absent in the sense of our ability to spatially apprehend them. Green reminds us that the natural sciences and theology both make use of paradigms – models which draw from the 'mesocosmic,' or everyday world, in order to enable the 'seeing' of realities that transcend the ordinary.³¹⁴ In a sense this is exactly what the parables seek to do, and it is a vital goal of preaching, to draw from the mesocosmic to open our eyes to the cosmic reality of God. From a faith perspective God is real, objectively present, but not apprehended directly. Therefore, Green's category of the imaginative embraces the concept of God. The past would also fit his definition, being temporally absent, as indeed would the future. Both memory and the conception of the future are imaginative acts based upon our potential to extrapolate and anticipate; both are vital aspects of preaching.

Paul Avis points to the importance of figurative language in biblical revelation; his argument is that divine revelation comes to us in ways which mostly, though not exclusively, appeal to imagination. Avis adopts a 'figurative realist' position, such that working through the imagination, revelation is

³¹³ Sandra M. Levy, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), 103.

³¹⁴ Green (1989), 38, 63, 74.

disclosed and concealed. Helpfully, he suggests that our linguistic images add incrementally to our understanding and help us to see, albeit through a glass darkly, more profoundly than we do when we pursue the illusion of trying to nail God down with ‘precise, specifiable, purely objective, literal description’.³¹⁵ He does not mention preaching, but his stress on the importance of figurative language in the Bible, as bearer of revelatory potential, strengthens the argument that preachers need imaginative sensitivity in handling such tensive structures and skill in deploying them.

David Brown is critical of understanding scripture as the fixed deposit of revelation residing in the pages of the Bible; he views its authority in the Church in terms of a moving stream, not a changeless deposit. In his analysis, imagination builds on the tradition, bringing together an attempt to discover the original focus of the author (whether or not we choose to read the text differently), the way the text has been interpreted in various stages during the past, and the current context. This process is powerfully suggestive of the processes of imaginative fusing which many preachers go through in preparing a sermon. Brown goes so far as to suggest that subsequent interpretation may improve upon scripture.

Preachers of a more evangelical persuasion are likely to find this too strong a claim. However, if we are to avoid arid bibliolatry and embrace an understanding of the lively, present, local revelation of God, Brown’s view is worth consideration. There is a strong sense in much evangelical thinking that the text lies static in the distant past and we must mine for its proper meaning. In many ways this seems a reductionist view of revelation. As Gadamer reminds us, ‘every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way,’ adding later ‘an interpretation that was correct in itself would be a foolish ideal that mistook the nature of tradition.’³¹⁶ Contextual understanding is not so much an ‘improvement on scripture’ as the scripture breathing anew in a different context. This is generative in the sense that imaginative interpretation and insight lead to new readings of the scriptural text which Brown argues are divinely motivated.³¹⁷ Brown’s view of revelation as a process that continues well beyond the closure

³¹⁵ Avis (1999), 3-7, 11, 51.

³¹⁶ Gadamer (2004), 296, 398.

³¹⁷ David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31.

of the canon is important for homiletics. If we see revelation as fixed and finished, the task of the preacher is to extract the meaning from the text and teach it. This leads to an account of preaching that is overly rational, takes no account of genre, nor the context of the preacher's life, nor the situation of the hearers.³¹⁸ Preachers nervous of the implications of Brown's thesis might find some assurances in controls which judge our imaginative construal of God's revelation.³¹⁹

The imaginative construct needs to count as 'intelligible discourse' within the community of the Church. We need to be able to give a reasoned account for why an imaginative discourse has validity. Preachers need to take seriously the difficulty some hearers have with miraculous aspects of scripture and address the hearers' objections. Anecdotally, when I have done this long term members of the Church have expressed relief, a sense of assurance that God can be trusted enough for us to doubt, question and argue with biblical content, and a real sense of engagement with the sermon. How we construe God's revelation must be 'seriously imaginable' to the wider culture. This could result in theological proposals being subject to culturally imposed limits, leading to theology merely restating what a culture can imagine. The preacher does need to be willing to challenge the culturally imposed limits to the seriously imaginable, particularly in areas of social justice. Many would have found Wilberforce's message concerning slavery seriously unimaginable, not to mention financially uncongenial, but the message needed articulating. Similarly, Luther King's dream was beyond the imaginative horizons of many of his hearers on both sides of the racial equality debate, hence the importance of the challenge. The tradition exerts a controlling effect on the preacher's imaginative construal. By tradition here, I mean the nexus of creedal confessions, liturgical forms and scripture, grounded in the decisive, historic occurrence of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and earthed in the context of the faith community.

David Brown regards the *consensus fidelium*, by which he means the views of the body of the faithful, past and present, as an important guard against arrogance and prejudice, whilst also indicating that conflict within the Church may help to

³¹⁸David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 40, 127, 55, 108, 101.

³¹⁹Material in this paragraph has been based on Kelsey (1975), 170-175; Brown (2000), 389-406 and Levy (2008), 103-108.

generate true belief.³²⁰ Often the ‘faith of the Church’ seems to mean the opinions and ideas of the official theologians of the Church ignoring the *consensus fidelium*.³²¹ Michael Armstrong sees this as a failing in Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model. For Lindbeck those who are best able to judge in matters of acceptable theological teaching are all those who are competent speakers of the language of faith. However, he argues that simply being part of the Church does not guarantee such competence. Nevertheless, Armstrong identifies a later softening in Lindbeck’s approach which allows that spiritually mature people who may not be able to articulate their faith, can ‘recognise misdescriptions’ and identify when the usage of theological formulations ‘violate the deep grammar of the faith’.³²²

In line with the drive of Astley’s ordinary theology, the congregation should be recognised as a control on the imaginative formulations of pulpit talk. They are part of the preaching event, they bring their experiences of ordinary theology, of faith lived out in daily life, and they are the Body of Christ. At the very least, preachers should ensure that there is space for their hearers to question and explore sermonic content, even through a simple device such as ensuring a table for sermon discussion during coffee after the service. Moral criteria also help to weigh the assertion of revelatory impulses present in an imaginative construal of a text in a particular context. For example, reflection over time in western culture has lead away from a view that women and children are chattel, and any attempt to demean their humanity in the name of God would fall foul of this moral control. Indeed unreflective propositional preaching on Pauline passages which suggest that women should be silenced or subject to oppressive headship teaching also falls foul of this control.

John McIntyre’s understanding of the role of the Spirit in revelation is helpful at this juncture. He describes the Holy Spirit as ‘God’s imagination let loose’.³²³ It is a delightful expression but what does it mean? For McIntyre, imagination is

³²⁰ Brown (2000), 404-405.

³²¹ Astley (2002), 157-158.

³²² Michael Armstrong, ‘Ordinary Theologians as Signal Processors of the Spirit’, in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*, eds., Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); see also George Lindbeck, ‘Spiritual Formation and Theological Education’, in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader in Theology and Christian Education*, eds., Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 288.

³²³ McIntyre (1987), 64.

the integrating category of the various activities of the Spirit both in ensuring the reception of revelation and in charismatic manifestation. The radical nature of sin, something Brown never mentions, disrupts and endangers human apprehension of the presence of God. Self-interest, entrenched views, stubbornness, and stupidity can blind us to discerning God's revelation amongst us. The Spirit poured into human hearts enables right seeing. The Spirit acts as guide and prompt in the process of sanctification. In such activity we see God reaching out in love into the situation of sinners, shaping, guiding, and creating new possibilities. The hallmarks of charismatic activity, untidiness, richness, and extravagance are found in the accounts of the day of Pentecost which McIntyre describes as the 'expression of God's imaginative creativity in the spiritual sphere, diverse, uncoordinated and confusing to the tidy mind.'³²⁴ Helpful as his brief account is, McIntyre neglects the point that the imaginative work of God's Spirit activates imaginative response in the recipients in terms of our cognition and creativity. In cognitive terms the Spirit enables us to apprehend the world through a new paradigm in which the world is eternally related to God and it is God's story that shapes, holds, and judges all other stories. This is not to dismiss all other stories, in a narrow paradigmatic outlook that brooks no alternatives, but rather to live out of this paradigm with the conviction that this is the truest way to view existence. This is Paul Ricoeur's 'second naïveté'³²⁵ which allows for doubt and listens to other perspectives, trusting God in the face of life's inevitable uncertainties. In creative terms the Spirit inspires a response which extends far beyond the horizons of what McIntyre terms the 'charismatic movement'. All of our imaginative response to God, in its various functions, can be seen as part of the expression of God's imagination working in us and through us to engage with others.

3.5 Incarnation: The Shekinah in Skin

McIntyre draws our attention to the 'daring imaginativeness' of God who sends his son to embody the message of the prophets, calling people to repentance and forgiveness.³²⁶ Yet McIntyre says little about why the incarnation

³²⁴ McIntyre (1987), 64.

³²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, transl. Emerson Buchanan (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press), 350-351.

³²⁶ McIntyre (1987), 54.

should be seen as an imaginative act of God. He does point out that the Word is ‘bodied forth, in flesh and blood, to be seen and heard, touched and handled, in a medium and in terms unmistakeable.’³²⁷ This is left undeveloped. The incarnation is paradigmatically crucial. That the Shekinah takes on skin and dwells among us changes everything. It is a new experience in the life of God and the history of humanity. Although God can be seen to be materially involved with creation in the act of creating, in the incarnation the immanence of God is magnified in a way that had not occurred before; it creates a human history for God. This presents a new way of revealing the nature of God and of God’s interaction with humanity. This act of imagination creates new stories, human imaginative reflections on God’s central imaginative act. These gospel stories tell of a God with a face, a God with emotions, a God who speaks in human tones, and tells stories in familiar idiom. They become central stories in a new movement of God’s Spirit in the formation and on-going life of the Church. This is an act of daring, prodigious imagination.

McIntyre’s explanation of why we struggle to see this daring imagination at work is instructive. One reason is familiarity. One of the greatest difficulties for Christians, preachers particularly, as the Christmas season approaches, is the question of how to capture a sense of the extraordinary imagination at work in the incarnation. Familiarity dulls the edges of our imaginative engagement. We have heard the story, studied the doctrine, absorbed it and assimilated it such that we have normalised it. Here a reduced imagination, numbed by seasonal spin, limits our vision. On this point, David Brown’s exploration of the theological importance of the nativity stories and their post canonical accretions is instructive. He demonstrates how the imaginative layering of these stories in scripture and art allows us to be present to them, that we might feel their full impact.³²⁸ Rather than the tradition being a ‘dead weight’ he demonstrates its imaginative richness.

The second reason McIntyre gives concerning why we miss the daring imaginativeness of the incarnation relates to the connection between prophecy and fulfilment in the early Church kerygma, which implies from our perspective a neat connection between the two. Prior to the event, it would have been unclear

³²⁷ McIntyre (1987), 54.

³²⁸ Brown (1999), 74-106.

which prophecies might be fulfilled and in what sense, a point demonstrated by the range of messianic movements and expectations current in the years before Christ's birth. Those who were associated with Jesus struggled to gain a sense of his identity and the religiously privileged rejected him. So McIntyre argues that familiarity and kerygmatic neatness blind us to the daring imagination of the incarnation.

Hans Urs von Balthasar begins his massive theological work by stressing the importance of beauty and critiquing theology for no longer being able to read the language of beauty. He stresses the divine beauty expressed in Christ as the 'very apex and archetype of beauty in the world.' He comments that recognition of this requires that the contours of the form dawn before the eyes of the spirit.³²⁹ Arguably, this 'reading' and 'dawning' occurs in the locus of imagination, as Green suggests. Von Balthasar, quoting Barth, comments that without this appreciation of beauty, with which comes a sense of the glory of God:

proclamation...will always, even if ever so discreetly, and yet perhaps very dangerously, have something joyless, lustreless and humourless about it – not to say something boring and, finally, unconvincing and unpersuasive.³³⁰

Preaching needs imaginative vision to see in Christ the beauty of God. This catches us up in the life-giving outbreath of divine love, filling heart and head, and enabling new seeing, forgiveness, restoration and hope. Such 'seeing' sparks our delighted bewilderment in the sheer mystery, glory, love, and presence of God. This awareness brings with it the invitation into the drama of relationship with God, which von Balthasar terms 'theo-drama'.

Drama in general has rich disclosive potential and as such is effective as a metaphor for our attempts to live out the gospel. It has many helpful entailments: the nature of God's character and how that is 'played out' in the incarnation; the shaping of our own character; our interactions with others in the parts we play; the scripts we work with; how we improvise in our playing of the gospel; and what constitutes an authentic and 'faithful performance'.³³¹ Ben Quash

³²⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: Volume 1, Seeing the Form*, transl. by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed., John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 19, 69, 127.

³³⁰ Balthasar (1982), 54.

³³¹ Trevor A. Hart, 'Art, Performance and the Practice of Christian Faith', in *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, eds., Hart and Guthrie (2007), 1-9

recognises in von Balthasar's theology a call to 'the live performance in solidarity with others of witnessing to and sharing in Christ's all-encompassing mission to the world.'³³²

It is also instructive for the preacher to consider the discontinuities between drama and life. Most dramatic performance works with a relatively set script; the actor knows what is coming next in the plot and how they are supposed to react; they generally have plenty of rehearsal time. Hart comments that 'the performance of life is more like a certain sort of improvised drama than the playing of a carefully scripted role.'³³³ The Christian improvises around a script comprised of cultural heritage, biblical material, theological learning, and life experience; a script that is both similar and different to those of other pilgrims. Our expectations and hopes are often thwarted by events, and we must work out how our script is performed and changed in the context of tragedy or unexpected joy. Finally, when the curtain closes on the final act down at the Hippodrome, the actors have a reasonable expectation of what comes next. When the curtain closes on our drama, it is imaginative hope that leads us to trust in another act. Preaching can offer a mirror to our performance, suggestions for interpreting the biblical script, and shaping our own script in the light of this, as well as ideas for interacting with the more difficult characters we encounter. It can give us the permission to lament when devastation comes, and to trust God in the midst of bewilderment, suffering and death. It can help us to shape our performance around that of Christ, trusting in the next act, alluded to in the garden in the early morning light. This eschatological hope will affect the way we perform, 'we do not just look backwards, but perform hopefully towards a promised and imagined end.'³³⁴ If it lacks this imaginative vision, preaching soon becomes desiccated and pointless: the withered fruit of a stunted imagination, alienated from God, saying little and going nowhere.

³³² Ben Quash, 'Real Enactment: The Role of Drama in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar', in *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, eds., Hart and Guthrie (2007), 31.

³³³ Trevor Hart, 'The Sense of an Ending: Finitude and the Authentic Performance of Life', in *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, eds., Hart and Guthrie (2007), 175.

³³⁴ Hart (2007), 185.

3.6 Imagination as a Divine Attribute

Donal O’Leary, Catholic priest and writer, expresses what he understands as the breath-taking scope of the divine imagination:

Divine imagination is wider and wilder than we could ever dream of and it is closer and more loving than we dare hope. God’s imagination is at work in every aspect of creation from the heart of the cosmos to the heart of the tiniest insect, and in the very core of our own being.³³⁵

John McIntyre seeks to theologically ground the argument for imagination as a divine attribute, drawing from Barth’s discussion of the perfections of God.³³⁶ Barth describes love as ‘the being, the essence and the nature of God’.³³⁷ This love is utterly free, requiring no love offered in return in order to sustain itself, nor needing any merit or worth in the beloved. Barth states, ‘While God is everything for Himself, He wills again not to be everything merely for Himself, but for the other.’³³⁸ Can this attitude be described as imaginative? Barth uses powerful images to suggest that the movement of God outwards towards the sinner is like a ‘light shining out into the darkness’ or a ‘bridge thrown over a crevasse.’³³⁹ The images suggest a willingness to enter the territory of the lost sinner. This is surely an enterprise in imagination, in perfect freedom beginning a new thing, imagining new possibilities for the recipient of divine love and desiring transformation. Just as McIntyre sees God’s love seeking the other as contiguous with imagination, he sees God’s immanent presence, entering the condition of the sinner in understanding and sympathy, as an imaginative activity. Similarly, in the perfection of mercy, McIntyre sees divine imagination at work, as God enters into the distress of the other with the desire to heal and transform. Likewise in the attribute of patience, which works with people in the process of sanctification, opening up possibilities for new life, McIntyre perceives divine imagination at work.³⁴⁰

In considering the idea that imagination is an aspect of the divine nature, creation seems an obvious subject for reflection. When we encounter the creative work of humans we naturally associate this with the idea that they are expressing

³³⁵ Donal O’Leary, ‘Imagination: The Forgotten Dimension’, *The Furrow*, Vol. 57, No. 10 (Oct., 2006), 525.

³³⁶ McIntyre (1987), 41-49.

³³⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/I* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1957), 280.

³³⁸ Barth (1957), 280.

³³⁹ Barth (1957), 278.

³⁴⁰ McIntyre (1987), 47- 49.

the works of their imagination, materially involved with the stuff of their creation. Even though the analogy is not perfect, given that human creating is always secondary, in that we create from a material given and God creates from nothing, is it justifiable to look at creation and draw from this the conclusion that creation reflects the nature of God and that nature expresses God's vast imaginative qualities? There are five key reasons why this conclusion seems justifiable and necessary. (a) Our strictures concerning natural theology have robbed us of an appreciation of how the character of God is revealed in the beauty around us.³⁴¹ (b) Many people do encounter a sense of God, admittedly often ambiguous, through the beauty of the natural world. George MacDonald writes compellingly of the relationship between creation and human response:

Even the careless curve of a frozen cloud across the blue will calm some troubled thoughts, may slay some selfish thoughts. And what shall be said of such gorgeous shows as the scarlet poppies in the green corn, the likeliest we have to those lilies of the field which spoke to the Saviour himself of the care of God, and rejoiced His eyes with the glory of their God-devised array.³⁴²

Even when people do not have categories of faith with which to frame their response to natural beauty, there is often a sense of peace, calm, awe, or of the numinous sense of sacramental significance speaking through the natural world. (c) The breathtaking beauty of creation inspires imaginative responses, as though we sought to echo something of divine creativity in human expression. (d) We need to re-capture a theology which sees God involved in nature in order to counter the secular, utilitarian, economically driven approach to the earth's resources. Such a theology would seek to preserve and protect creation because it is in itself an expression of the beauty of God. In damaging it we damage ourselves as we destroy the beauty around us to feed the idols of wealth and comfort. (e) McIntyre lines up the Latinisms of the three-fold formula of the doctrine of creation (*creatio ex nihilo*, *creatio per verbum* and *creatio continua*) and suggests, notwithstanding the formula's worthy theological pedigree, that it might have been more effective to 'have employed language and references which did not fall with quite such a leaden thud.'³⁴³ Here, McIntyre's method is particularly illuminating for preachers. In criticising the leaden Latinisms above

³⁴¹ McIntyre (1987), 51.

³⁴² MacDonald (1867), 8-9.

³⁴³ McIntyre (1987), 50.

he is calling us to engage in theological exploration, reflection, and communication in imaginative ways, finding images and symbols that uplift, inspire, and speak to the human heart and mind. Generally speaking, propositional statements do not cause the throat to catch quite like the scent of a rose. Both may point us to the same thing, the infinite imaginative capacities of God, but which is the more memorable?

3.7 Imagination as a Divine Gift

In what sense can we see imagination as part of the *imago dei* given to us as an essential part of our humanity, reflecting the divine imagination? The reference in Genesis 1.26-27 to humanity made in the image (*selem*) and likeness (*d'mut*) of God has been interpreted in a variety of ways. The word 'likeness' acts as a qualifier on 'image', suggesting that in some way there is a resemblance between God and humans, similarity amidst difference. The most common interpretations of the divine likeness relate to the capacity for reason, relationship, and the exercise of dominion. David Wilkinson points out that the stress on reason runs the risk of the intellectualisation of the human being and seems to diminish humans in whom the capacity for reason is not strong.³⁴⁴ If we take the divine image as being associated with our capacity for *relationship with God, exercising dominion, and reproduction* (the latter two interpretations being favoured by R.R. Reno),³⁴⁵ we can start to build an argument that being created in the *imago dei*, in the sense of any of these interpretations, implies the gift and exercise of imagination.

Relationship with God requires imagination in the exercise of prayer, in biblical meditation, theological construction, and ethical living. McIntyre writes of imagination as a devotional principle,³⁴⁶ referencing the role of imagination in self-examination, the reading of the biblical stories, the use of the Psalms (in which we place ourselves alongside the Psalmist, allowing their praise and lament, faith and hope to move us in prayer and worship), and in linguistic and visual imaging in prayer. He also writes of the use of the imagination in seeking the will of God in the scriptures as we imaginatively fuse the horizon of the

³⁴⁴ David Wilkinson, *The Message of Creation* (Nottingham: Inter Varsity Press, 2002), 35.

³⁴⁵ R.R.Reno, *Genesis* (London: SCM, 2010), 53.

³⁴⁶ McIntyre (1987), 84-87.

biblical text and the situations of our own contexts.³⁴⁷ McIntyre also explores the connection between the imagination and the injunction to love, arguing that imagination inculcates increased perceptivity towards others. An imaginative approach to the other will consider their present situation and the factors contributing to it, constructing from the parts of their history a sense of the whole and weighing actions carefully, anticipating the possible outcomes of certain words or behaviours upon the other, whilst cultivating interaction that will bring about positive outcomes. An imaginative perceptivity exercised towards the other will engage with the story of how they arrived at a particular state. This may mean that the lover has a greater understanding of the predicament of the beloved than they have themselves, as when Jesus weeps over the sins of Jerusalem. Such imaginative engagement is more than simply a flood of feeling; it connects with the cognitive state of the other, seeks to appreciate the variety of pressures being played out, and looks to take practical remedial action. McIntyre argues that this awareness is the ‘outcome of the openness which imagination engenders a heightened dimension of sensitivity to the needs, the sufferings, the hopes, and the potentiality of the other person.’³⁴⁸ The human ability to love in such a way can be seen as a hallmark of being made in God’s image.

However, Barth maintains the stark discontinuity between the divine and the human; our finitude creates frontiers against the personalities of others. Limited by the need to be true to ourselves, Barth argues, we cannot be true to others; our presence, communicating, and listening, are all necessarily tentative. Since we cannot transcend ourselves, neither can we be fully immanent to the other.³⁴⁹ McIntyre regards this Barthian separation between the human and the divine as an overdrawn distinction, pointing to historical accounts of self-sacrifice, and to the call to ‘love one another as I have loved you.’ He maintains that this injunction requires a measure of that ‘*same* imaginative penetration’ exercised by God.³⁵⁰

McIntyre does not explore the insight that human imagination is vulnerable, often acting from either honest or masked self-interest. Held in sin’s distorting framework, our relationship with God broken, we are easily deceived by our

³⁴⁷ Gadamer (2004), 305.

³⁴⁸ McIntyre (1987), 75.

³⁴⁹ Barth (1957), 313.

³⁵⁰ McIntyre (1987), 46.

motives for wanting to reach out to the other. The fallen nature of humanity means that human imagination is flawed, limited, and potentially dangerous.

Sin is described by Green as ‘bad imagination’,³⁵¹ which affects our epistemological insight. Idolatry is the fruit of ‘wrong seeing’ or bad imagining. A cursory review of recent history throws up examples of heinous imagining: the Final Solution, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the attack on the Twin Towers. Aside from such public and devastating examples of violent imagination acted out, the imagination can become folded in upon the self, a source of bitter cogitation and plans of petty vengeance. It can be an agent that leads us to wrong action if we brood on sequences of imagined images of revenge, greed or lust. In essence, practising the divine imagination might be summarised as ‘right seeing’. However, the vast gulf between God’s imagining and the imagination of the human heart apart from God is clear. We need to have the imprint of the divine imagination pressed upon us again in redemption. The potential for this lies in relationship with Christ ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 1.15) in and through whom the divine imagination judges, reforms, and redeems our broken imagining.

Forgiven, we are enabled to exercise forgiveness which is clearly associated with the imagination. To forgive requires some sense of the reasoning of the offender, of their situation and motives: ‘All forgiveness involves an imaginative self-projection into the place of another person who has wronged us.’³⁵² Forgiveness may also be motivated by the anticipation of the cost of withholding forgiveness on the individual, the recipient, and the wider community.

One of the main tensions in the field of ethical praxis, often seen in struggles with forgiveness and in the area of spiritual development, lies between knowing the right course of action and not being able to act upon it. At the heart of many spiritual practices (such as spiritual direction, Ignatian prayer, journaling or meditative art), lies the work of the imagination enabling us to reach greater self-understanding, and openness with the self, others and God, naming weakness and failure and being willing to envisage a different future. Confession is itself an act of ethical imagining, drawing on remembered failure and setting that next to the anticipation of life lived differently. It is a form of storytelling – ‘this is the

³⁵¹ Green (1989), 91.

³⁵² McIntyre (1987), 79.

reality of my/our failure, but in the grace of God the plot-line will change.’ Imaginative openness to the possibilities of God working with us in the present moment is an antidote to the cynicism that closes down, silences, and separates people.

Exercising wise *dominion*, in the sense of leadership and care over creation - which might be in any context from family life to farming, mending a car to managing a business – calls for the exercise of imagination in its various functions: a rich sensing imagination, noticing what needs attention; entrepreneurial intuition, making creative connections; the exercise of affective empathy and sympathy; and careful consideration along the if-then lines of intellectual hypothesising. In short, effective ‘dominion’ calls for wise imagination. In the Genesis account, the command to be ‘fruitful and multiply’ seems most clearly to mean to *procreate*. Reno comments that in its fully realised form this means more than the bringing to birth of children. He sees parenting as an expression of the divine image since the parent has to let the child go in an act of trust in the future over which the parent has no absolute control.³⁵³ There is a similarity, admittedly not evident in the Genesis account where the verb *bārā* is only used of God, between the bringing to birth of a child and the more general human desire to create. O’Leary writes:

We sense the divine creativity, in a most intimate way, in our own deepest desire – the desire to create, to be radically original, to break through our limitations, to fulfill God’s dream in us, to become full of divine light. We reflect the imagination of God in our passion for the possible – and for the impossible, in our refusal to be subdued, in our everlasting hope even when all seems lost... God’s imagination in us calls us to be faithful to our own unique creativity.³⁵⁴

Creatio ex nihilo is the work of the imagination of God. In exercising our unique creativity, humanity can only create from that which is given; all our creating is from something. Works of art are created from given materials and, no matter how original, art is always derivative, because humanity exists in time, in communities, in relationship, and in creation. Literature is coined in words, new words are formed from pre-existing shapes, sounds, and categories; all

³⁵³ Reno (2010), 57.

³⁵⁴ O’Leary (2006), 525.

artistic creation is from something. Scientific paradigms, new possibilities, hopes and dreams are always created from something, even if that is a reaction against the current situation. The genius of human imagining is the bringing together of the unusual, the unexpected re-thinking old ideas in new formats. That which is derived from something else can also be ‘new’, innovative and surprising. Juxtaposing ideas and images in unexpected ways can enable a new seeing of something, and therefore a deeper appreciation and learning.

This chapter has offered a way for the teacher of preaching to introduce the theme of imagination in a way designed to draw from the participants’ ideas of imaginative function, combined with detail from the framework itself, enabling her to speak of the range of ways the imagination expresses itself. This needs to be supported with a robust theology of imagination, demonstrating that imagination is a vital element in theology from the content, form, construal, and use of scripture, to the formulation, expression and apprehension of doctrine. Preaching which is an expression of the theology of the church seeking to connect with hearers’ narrative, by sparking connections in their hearts and minds, is an inescapably imaginative act: imagination is of vital importance to preaching.

Chapter Four: The Sacramental Potential of Preaching

The sermon as a graced act of God working in and through the humanity of the preacher is redolent with sacramental potential. Sacraments draw our attention to the ‘more’ present in the everyday. They engage our imaginations, operating as windows, drawing us in to capture a sense of deeper meaning. There is a materiality about the stuff of sacrament; the ordinary becoming translucent as we apprehend something of a greater reality mediated through the everyday. If we recognise that there is a materiality about language which has the power to disclose the ‘more’ then we can begin to see that there is a profound sacramentality about preaching. As we saw earlier, Brueggemann speaks about the potential of preaching to lift us beyond the flattened reductionism which he connects with the prosaic language of the accepted dominant narratives. He regards preaching as ‘a poetic construal of an alternative world.’ He sees this language as ‘shattering evocative speech that breaks fixed conclusions and presses us always toward new, dangerous, imaginative possibilities.’³⁵⁵ As discussed below it is a profound mistake to separate word and sacrament; there is a rich sacramentality about preaching. The sermon is a potential bearer of disclosure which can help the hearer to reframe their view of themselves, their neighbour and the world in the light of the self-revealing love of God. Seeing this disclosure, framing it, communicating it, receiving it, and responding to it requires the active engagement of the imagination as we notice and name grace through the sensory imagination, make the intuitive connections between Scripture and the everyday, feel the pain and dis-grace of the world, and shape ethical responses formulated around the if... then model of the intellectual imagination. This chapter discusses the sacramental potential of preaching and its connection with the vital place of imagination in preaching.

4.1 Sacramentality: Naming the ‘More’

Our ability to read the sacramental involves seeing-as, the capacity to recognise and name the ‘more’ made available in reading the sacred. Broadly speaking, we can say that a sacrament is a holy sign, which conveys grace, and therefore has a vital role in building up the faithful.

³⁵⁵ Brueggemann (1989), 6

By the sacramental is commonly understood the physical or material mediating that which is beyond itself, the spiritual; in the familiar definition 'the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.'³⁵⁶

At first glance, this understanding seems to exclude language from a definition of that which might be regarded as having sacramental potential, appearing to suggest that sacraments are *verba visibilia*. However, if we argue that the sacramental refers to aspects of creation which can, when illuminated by the divine spirit, make present to us the reality of God, then this would include the potential of language to function sacramentally. Paul Tillich reminds us that the word is a 'natural phenomenon', as 'breath, as sound, as something heard'.³⁵⁷ Paul Janowiak, with specific reference to the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, argues that they employ 'elemental things' amongst which he cites 'word and gestures.'³⁵⁸ Donald Baillie argues that we express ourselves through a material world which includes 'words uttered by the tongue and throat and lips and heard by the ear.'³⁵⁹ Stephen Webb comments that speaking is a bodily act, 'because all parts of the person, from feelings to thoughts to impulses, are expressed through the voice.'³⁶⁰ Stephen Sykes reminds us that like the Eucharistic elements the spoken word is received bodily.³⁶¹ Language springs from our materiality. Words are learned through early bodily need. They are formed from breath and understood along with bodily gesture. Language is profoundly material. As Coggan aptly states, 'sermons are God's *verba audibilia*. Water, bread and wine are the stuff of baptism and eucharist. Words are the stuff of preaching.'³⁶²

If we accept, drawing on Romans 1.20, and, as Macquarrie argues,³⁶³ that in the economy of God's grace creation can make present to us the reality of God,

³⁵⁶ David Brown and Ann Loades, eds., *Christ the Sacramental Word: Incarnation, Sacrament and Poetry* (London: SPCK, 1996), 4.

³⁵⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 98.

³⁵⁸ Paul Janowiak, *The Holy Preaching: The Sacramentality of the Word in the Liturgical Assembly*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 19.

³⁵⁹ D.M. Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments and Other Papers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 49.

³⁶⁰ Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2004), 58.

³⁶¹ Sykes, Stephen, 'Ritual and Sacrament of the Word', in *Christ the Sacramental Word*, eds., Brown and Loades (1996), 159.

³⁶² Coggan (1996), 17.

³⁶³ John Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments* (London: SCM, 1997), 1-11.

and if we also accept that language is an aspect of creation and has a materiality about it, then there is every reason to explore the theological and practical implications of preaching as sacrament. This is not to argue for preaching to be recognised as a third, or eighth sacrament, but to point to the Orthodox and Catholic principle of sacramentality which sees all reality as potentially acting as bearer of God's saving presence.³⁶⁴ Limiting the number of sacraments by arguing that only specific sacraments can be counted as such would seem to preclude a wider understanding of the sacramental. Leonardo Boff argues that:

Salvation is not restricted to seven channels of communication. The totality of salvation is communicated to the totality of human life, and is manifested in a significantly tangible way in the pivotal points of life.³⁶⁵

He argues that the seven sacraments are 'nodal points', key aspects of life which condense and focus the presence of God. Embracing specific sacraments (be they two or seven) does not rule out this wider understanding of the sacramental principle, and does not prevent exploration of the possibility that preaching may have a sacramental structure and function.

Sacramental theology can be seen to be underpinned by a doctrine of creation that affirms the significance of matter. Andrew Greeley, writing of the 'Catholic imagination', refers to the disclosive power of creation:

Everything in creation, from the exploding cosmos to the whirling, dancing, utterly mysterious quantum particles, discloses something about God. And, in doing so, brings God among us.³⁶⁶

God is involved in creation and matter reveals something of the creator God. On the basis of such thinking, Boff states, 'All the things of the world are or can be sacramental.'³⁶⁷ George Pattison suggests creation is to be understood not simply as an expression of God's divine power but as God's self-expression,³⁶⁸ revealing his omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence, as well as his artistry,

³⁶⁴ Jeff Astley, *SCM Studyguide to Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM, 2010), 69.

³⁶⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Sacraments of Life: Life of the Sacraments* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1987), 60.

³⁶⁶ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 6-7.

³⁶⁷ Boff, (1987), 47.

³⁶⁸ George Pattison, *A Short Course in Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM, 2005), 50.

relationally, and spontaneity. In short, Pattison is asserting that creation speaks something of the life of God.

However, there are some potential difficulties in basing sacramental theology on the doctrine of creation which are explored below. Creation does not act as an unambiguous pointer to the divine. If it were, there would be no need for ecclesial sacraments. Whilst Macquarrie argues that there is a ‘sacramental potentiality in virtually everything’,³⁶⁹ the key word is ‘potentiality.’ Osborne pursues the same point: ‘the world itself is not a sacrament, but it is a place in which sacramentality is possible.’³⁷⁰ A sacrament requires both the action of God and a human response, the latter being secondary but essential. Therefore, sacramental potential may not be realised because humanity is closed to the possibility of God or because the situation seems only to suggest an absence of God. Creation is ambiguous; ‘the mystery of evil has always been a sticking point for natural theology.’³⁷¹ Paul Tillich recognises that in theory everything could have a sacramental nature attributed to it, but in reality our existence is marked by both the presence of God, ‘the ground of being’,³⁷² and our separation from God. He acknowledges that we cannot fix a place or construct and say that *this* operates sacramentally, in a final and definitive way; neither can we exclude the potential of anything within creation ‘from communicating to us a word from the Lord.’³⁷³ Strangely, in the situations which speak only of God’s absence, there may still be a longing for God, a seeking of presence-in-absence. Perhaps the pain of God’s apparent absence in itself has a sacramental function, mediating to us our longing for God?

From a neo-orthodox perspective, the connection between revelation and creation is fractured by sin, bridged only by the agency of God revealed in the person of Christ. However, this raises the question of how the revelation of Christ to material beings operates if not through the materiality of the world. Is creation so distorted that God cannot reveal Godself through the natural world, even in a way that we might only perceive in a fragmented manner? Baillie asks:

³⁶⁹ Macquarrie (1997), 8.

³⁷⁰ Kenan B. Osborne, *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World: A Theology for the Third Millennium* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 140.

³⁷¹ Macquarrie (1997), 10.

³⁷² Tillich, (1957), 94-112.

³⁷³ Tillich, (1957), 124.

Is the divine Word entirely absent from the wider world from which it singles out special elements for a specially sacred use? ... Do they not lend themselves to such a use because God made them, because they are his creatures?³⁷⁴

What about the material nature of the revelation of God seen throughout scripture through the natural world, through symbols, and ultimately in flesh? What of the sense of the numinous experienced through nature, of the love shared between humans, or of acts of courage and sacrifice? Do such things have nothing to do with God? If they are not signs of God, of the Other, then what are they? What of sermons which have incorporated, along with biblical material (itself the creation of human witnesses), narratives from everyday life to enable people to see God and to inspire people to seek God? How do we account for preaching which has, through ordinary words, spoken by ordinary people, brought new perspective and ushered in a new reality into the hearers' lives? Is all of this discounted on the basis of the impossibility of God being revealed in the sinful, material world? Such an argument inflates the power of sin in relation to divine power and stresses the transcendence of God at the expense of divine immanence, peddling the heresy that God is utterly separate from the material. As Edward Schillebeeckx puts it, 'God never acts outside of men and women.'³⁷⁵

However, Rowan Williams, in exploring the logical movement of ecclesial sacraments, questions the broader principle of the sacramentality of creation. If creation has the inherent capacity to bear unambiguous divine meaning why do the dominical sacraments imply a movement of re-creation? If human community can reveal the divine, why does baptism presage a movement into a new community? Equally, if creation communicates the divine, why do we need to be gathered into a new body in the eucharist? If creation itself is sacramental, why is there this need for such re-generation and re-integration? Williams opposes accounts of sacramentality which see the sacramental as rooted in creation. His view is that sacramental actions indicate a movement from one reality to another, into the gift of a new identity given in the rite itself.³⁷⁶ This inherent sense of movement from estrangement to belonging, in Williams'

³⁷⁴ Baillie (1957), 43.

³⁷⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *God is New Each Moment* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd, 1983), 66.

³⁷⁶ Rowan Williams, 'Sacraments of the New Society', in *Christ the Sacramental Word*, eds., Brown and Loades, 89-90.

account, can be opposed to any 'bland appeal to the natural sacredness of things'.³⁷⁷ Is Williams right to warn us away from seeing the divine presence around us in all things? He argues that a sacramental view can point us to the 'not God-ness' in our world.³⁷⁸ This is a good critique of a bland sacramentalism, but we need to hold this in tension with more positive assessments of the sacramental potential of creation.

Mary Catherine Hilkert helps here with a thesis that holds together dialectical theology with what she terms the 'sacramental imagination':

Dialectical theology affirms that sin has destroyed the image of God in creation, along with the human ability to discern anything of God, hence the need for Christ's redemptive action. The sacramental imagination asserts that in the face of sin, grace abounds and God can be apprehended in the human story, albeit in a fragmented way.³⁷⁹

Tillich also holds together the dialectical and sacramental perspectives. He argues that humanity 'is never without a word from the Lord and he never ceases resisting and distorting it, both when he has to hear it and when he has to say it'.³⁸⁰ Similarly, Hilkert fully upholds the warnings of the dialectical perspective:

Preaching a sacramental vision of reality credibly today requires a critical wrestling with the truth of the dialectical imagination's reminders: the divine mystery is hidden and absent; everything human is profoundly affected by sin; the Church is always in need of critique and reform; the reign of God is 'not yet'; the tragedy of the cross is the key to all reality.³⁸¹

At the same time she urges that we see the 'world through the prism of God's promise'.³⁸² Here she draws from her understanding of the sacramental imagination which affirms the goodness of creation and of the human body. The sacramental perspective regards history, creation, and human life, of which the scriptures are a part, as full of revelatory potential. Sin is not negated in this view, but it is relegated in its power:

³⁷⁷Williams (1996), 90.

³⁷⁸Williams (1996), 98.

³⁷⁹Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 104.

³⁸⁰Paul Tillich, *The New Being*, (London: SCM, 1956), 121.

³⁸¹Hilkert (1997), 189-90.

³⁸²Hilkert (1997), 189.

At the heart of the sacramental imagination is the conviction that in spite of all that is broken or contradictory, the power of God's grace is stronger than the power of human sin.³⁸³

Hilkert's sacramental imagination keeps us open to the *possibility* of finding and being found by God in creation. It keeps us open to meeting God in the material: nature and environment, movement and music, art and architecture, and language, an argument which David Brown consistently upholds.³⁸⁴ Ann Loades reminds us to be alert to the sacramental potential of the tradition, pointing to the way the lives of the saints, including the 'almost nobodies', can mediate the divine presence to us. She gathers this sacramental resource up with many others, ranging from gardening and engineering to embroidering and food, calling for us to 'live sacramentally in our risky, mistake-ridden, very complex world.'³⁸⁵ Her understanding of sacramentality is not based on a bland appeal to sacredness, rather she uses words from Williams's foreword to *The Gestures of God* in tension with his earlier perspective, to indicate the view that sacramentality is 'the very specific conviction that the world is full of the life of God whose nature is known in Christ and the Spirit.'³⁸⁶ Williams' earlier argument about the logic of the movement inherent in sacramental action, which reminds us to be hesitant about bland appeals to the sacramental principle, can thus be held in tension with the view that God, in divine creativity and grace, does speak through the banal and the ordinary aspects of the world. The graced sacramental actions and words of the Church are needed to connect humanity to the Christian narrative of salvation, set forth and becoming complete in Christ. Arguing that salvation is a process which is becoming complete in Christ is not to argue that the cross is anything other than a once for all act, but rather to indicate that our apprehension, reception and growth into this salvation is a process, one that requires the sacramental aspects of ecclesial life, which includes preaching.

³⁸³ Hilkert (1997), 191.

³⁸⁴ David Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: OUP, 2006); *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: OUP, 2007) and *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

³⁸⁵ Ann Loades, 'The Sacramental, a New Sense', in *The Gestures of God*, eds., Rowell and Hall, (London: Continuum, 2004), 164-165.

³⁸⁶ Rowan Williams, 'Preface' to *The Gestures of God*, eds., Rowell and Hall (2004), xiii.

Loades argues that in the incarnation God does not ‘merely flesh-make, but flesh-takes.’³⁸⁷ Given that in the incarnation, the value of the material is stressed – ‘the Word became flesh and lived amongst us’ – would it be more coherent to base a theology of the sacraments on the incarnation rather than creation? Loades and Brown maintain that the incarnation strengthens the connection between God and the material world. Their argument runs that in Genesis, divine transcendence is not breached by the relationship between God and the word he speaks. There is ‘no intrinsic relation between God and his chosen medium’,³⁸⁸ whereas in the Johannine description of the Word made flesh, the Word has become that which binds world and God together.³⁸⁹ Whilst Loades and Brown’s argument is helpful in its conclusion, an affirmation of the sacramental nature of language, it seems questionable to conceive of the Word in creation as a mere matter of indicative speech, rather than the creative act of the Triune God which in itself forges a deep connection between God and the material. Geoffrey Rowell is surely wrong to assert that it is on the basis of the incarnation that ‘matter matters’,³⁹⁰ as though the creation itself does not affirm the importance of the material to the God who creates and sustains it.

The sacramental principle seems to rest most naturally on the doctrine of creation, since if we understand Jesus as ‘the primordial sacrament’³⁹¹ of God, this raises questions about the nature of Christ’s humanity. Osborne asks how it is possible to be fully human, finite, and limited, and also to be a primordial sacrament, since ‘primordially is not a constitutive part of human nature.’³⁹² However, we can view Christ as having a sacramental function in his humanity in that he reveals the powerful vulnerability of a God who becomes limited, the Shekinah veiled in skin who embraces being at a particular point in history, accepting the limitations of space and time. In this the incarnation acts as a sacrament of the humility of God, but because of his humanity Jesus cannot be said to fully reveal God, as this is beyond human capacity.

³⁸⁷ Ann Loades (2004), 162.

³⁸⁸ Brown and Loades (1996), 2.

³⁸⁹ Brown and Loades (1996), 3.

³⁹⁰ Geoffrey Rowell, ‘The Significance of Sacramentality’, *The Gestures of God*, eds., Rowell and Hall, (London: Continuum, 2004), 4.

³⁹¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 15.

³⁹² Osborne (1999), 104.

Too close an identification between incarnation and the sacramental perspective can mar the singularity of the incarnation as an event in human history. God's presence with us *now* is not in flesh after the pattern of the incarnation, but in Spirit illuminating and enlivening the material. In the eucharist and in the sermon, Christ is revealed by the power of the Spirit, but does not take on flesh. In physical terms bread and wine remain bread and wine, and human words also remain human. Preaching is not an incarnational action, as Christ is not made flesh again. To argue that would be to come dangerously close to saying that the preacher in themselves incarnates Christ. Regarding creation as the basis for the sacramental perspective avoids this pitfall.

Although some doctrines of the real presence come close to claiming a re-enactment of both the incarnation and Christ's sacrifice, Donald Baillie argues that 'if salvation is located with the incarnation being extended and received through the sacramental act, then the death and resurrection of Christ seems unnecessary.'³⁹³ Allied to this point is the giving of the Spirit. The Johannine material indicates an anticipated discontinuity between the time of Christ's presence in flesh and his presence in Spirit.³⁹⁴ Although the physical presence of Christ will cease, Christ's presence in Spirit will continue to teach,³⁹⁵ comfort and help,³⁹⁶ enabling a seeing which is beyond physical sight; a perception, or deeper knowing.³⁹⁷ Arguably, the sacramental imagination rests on this principle that, by the initiative and grace of God's Spirit, humanity is enabled to see through the windows of all that God enables to function sacramentally to perceive the presence of Christ. 'Without the Spirit, sacraments are no more than sunshine on blind eyes or a voice to the deaf.'³⁹⁸ Preaching becomes empty; dead words on deaf ears.

4.2 Language: Painting New Vistas

Tillich argues that there is no justification for the separation between 'word and sacrament'³⁹⁹ on the basis that words are natural phenomena which like other

³⁹³ Baillie (1957), 63.

³⁹⁴ John 14. 25-28.

³⁹⁵ John 14.26.

³⁹⁶ John 14.16, 26; 15:26.

³⁹⁷ John 14.17, 19.

³⁹⁸ James F. White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1999), 20.

³⁹⁹ Tillich (1957), 98.

elements can open a window onto the transcendent and convey a sense of that transcendence to us. Loades and Brown contend that there is a false dichotomy between ‘material symbol and verbal image’ and argue that words can function sacramentally.⁴⁰⁰ Stephen Webb states that ‘sound is the most fundamental category by which we can conceive God.’⁴⁰¹ However, Geoffrey Rowell disputes this, suggesting that words and images are both ‘earthen vessels’⁴⁰² that can only point to the reality that transcends them, rather than mediating that reality to us. This raises the question: are words merely indicative or does language have transformative power? Does God’s revelation operate through human language? Can language function sacramentally?

Barth wrestles with this question in relation to preaching; people come to Church with an expectation, longing to hear the word of God spoken and yet ‘the word of God on the lips of man is an impossibility; it does not happen: no one will ever accomplish it or see it accomplished.’⁴⁰³ However, surely all divine speech is mediated through human speech for we have no other words; if the word of God is not on the lips of humanity then God is silenced, and there can be no knowledge of God. Karl Rahner develops this point, arguing that God’s revelation must come in one of two ways – either a theophanic vision of divine light or ‘he comes in word’ as he must ‘without already taking us away from the world to himself.’⁴⁰⁴ Rahner is clear that the utterance and perception of God’s word is an act of divine grace, but one which can be known. ‘The light of grace shines also by burning the oil of this world.’⁴⁰⁵ Applying the concept of divine kenotic humility, Rahner suggests that the Word descends and inhabits all words: ‘the word of God can take on the form of a slave and be found as a human word of the street; simple, without pretention, almost worldly wise.’⁴⁰⁶ In contrast with Barth, in Rahner we see continuity between creation and redemption. For Rahner

⁴⁰⁰ Brown and Loades, eds., (1996), ix.

⁴⁰¹ Webb (2004), 32.

⁴⁰² Geoffrey Rowell, ‘The Significance of Sacramentality’, in *The Gestures of God*, eds., Rowell and Hall, 7.

⁴⁰³ Karl Barth, ‘The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching’, in Barth *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1957), 124.

⁴⁰⁴ Karl Rahner, ‘Priest and Poet’, in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 3 (London: DLT, 1967), 303.

⁴⁰⁵ Rahner (1967), 313.

⁴⁰⁶ Rahner (1967), 314.

it seems that preaching is about speaking a word which unlocks the ability to respond to God that, by grace, is within the person already.

In discussing the power and scope of language, Rahner sets up a contrast between utility words and primordial or depth words. The former are words which convey information, indicative in purpose: these are the ‘worn-down verbal coins of daily intellectual intercourse’. Whilst God may choose to inhabit such words, it is to primordial language that Rahner looks as having the richest potential to function sacramentally. By primordial words Rahner means language which is more akin to poetry. Such language is multi-valent and tensive, it ‘brings the reality it signifies to us, makes it “present”, realizes it and places it before us.’ He also argues that anyone who has ‘not sunk completely into spiritual death’⁴⁰⁷ is capable of uttering such depth language, but he points to the poet as the one with the particular gift and calling to shape such words.

Brueggemann links the vocation of the poet to the calling of the preacher. He identifies two extremes within the Church: severe reductionism leading to a reduced sense of God’s sovereignty and an over-exaggerated sense of autonomy, or docility before an all-powerful God who brooks no objection. Into this broken conversation, Brueggemann calls for preaching to paint new vistas of possibility, using language that ‘shatters settled reality and evokes new possibility in the listening assembly.’⁴⁰⁸ This sounds like a call for sacramental language, and has resonances with Rahner’s position. Preaching in the lyrical voice has this disclosive potential, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Rahner helps us to reclaim a sense of the power and sacramental potential of language. Words are part of our material existence. They imprint themselves upon our brains, with layered and complex levels of meaning and association. Words can point to a reality beyond them and simultaneously communicate aspects of that reality; a love letter can both describe and evoke the presence of the lover. Talking therapies rest on the broad principle that by naming and narrating the individual can express and experience the pain with which they wrestle. The words used to narrate the symbolic aspects of the eucharist act both referentially but are also to be taken in and chewed over as they create images of

⁴⁰⁷ Rahner (1967), 298, 299, 301.

⁴⁰⁸ Brueggemann (1989), 4.

the last supper, making present imaginatively that to which they refer.

Celebrating the power of language, Hilbert asserts:

Words create new possibilities. Words preserve memories. Words change relationships and worlds. Words break hearts and mend them. Words cause grief and give hope. Words move us to action.⁴⁰⁹

Words are more than signs pointing beyond themselves; language has the power to evoke change. 'Whenever a primordial word of this kind is pronounced, something happens: the advent of the thing itself to the listener.'⁴¹⁰

4.3 The Sacramentality of Preaching

Paul Janowiak argues for 'liturgical proclamation as a sacramental act.'⁴¹¹ Boff claims that 'prophetic proclamation is a sacrament.'⁴¹² Loades makes a similar point in arguing that sacramental understanding will 'give pride of place to preaching.'⁴¹³ Brown finds elements of understanding preaching as a sacramental act in both Catholic and Protestant thought, identifying a vital goal of preaching as encounter in theologies in both denominations.⁴¹⁴ Christoph Schwöbel speaks of the potential for the 'sanctification of human communication,' the Spirit communicating God's word through our human words.⁴¹⁵ Edward Farley goes as far as to suggest that 'preaching may be Protestantism's primary sacrament.'⁴¹⁶ These points strongly suggest that preaching has sacramental potential.

This idea is strengthened by applying Boff's analysis of the threefold dimensions of a sacrament to preaching:

It [a sacrament] *remembers the past*, where the experience of grace and salvation burst into the world; it keeps alive the memory of the cause of all liberation, Jesus Christ and the history of his mystery. A sacrament also *celebrates a presence in the here and now of faith*: that is, grace being made visible in the rite and being communicated to human life. Thirdly, a sacrament

⁴⁰⁹ Hilbert (1997), 60.

⁴¹⁰ Rahner (1967), 299.

⁴¹¹ Janowiak (2000), 4.

⁴¹² Boff (1987), 91.

⁴¹³ Loades, in Rowell and Hall, eds., (2004), 162.

⁴¹⁴ Brown (2008), 112-113.

⁴¹⁵ Christoph Schwöbel, 'The Preacher's Art: Preaching Theologically', in *Theology through Preaching*, ed., Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 4.

⁴¹⁶ W. Edward Farley, 'Can Preaching Be Taught?', *Theology Today*, Vol. 62 (2005), 176.

anticipates the future in the present: that is eternal life, communion with God, and the shared banquet with all the just.⁴¹⁷

In the Eucharist we remember God's presence in Christ, are receptive to the depth of the present moment – to the intimacy of God's presence communicated through the materiality of bread, wine and word – and we anticipate His coming again. Likewise, the sermon stands as an event in time in which the community *remembers* God's work in history, primarily through the scriptures, though connecting with the wider witness of the church throughout history: anamnesis is an aspect of the sermon. In the Eucharist, the prayer of epiclesis seeks the blessing of the Spirit that 'these gifts of bread and wine may be to us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.' This is a prayer that the materiality of the elements will nourish and sustain us in the given moment and beyond. Similarly, sermons which begin with a form of prayer seeking that God takes and blesses the preacher's words are demonstrating the hope that the sermon will awake us to the reality of God, mediated through the materiality of fleshy language, *in the here and now*, and sustain us in the future: epiclesis is an aspect of the sermon. The eucharist also orientates us to the future as we look for Christ's coming in glory and to eating and drinking in Christ's kingdom. Similarly, preaching has an important element of *eschatological hope*, looking to a time when we are gathered up into God's new creation. As David Wilkinson argues, we need to see the relationship between creation and new creation 'represented by a tension between continuity and discontinuity.'⁴¹⁸ Preaching which over stresses the theme of continuity will fail to offer hope. Preaching which over stresses discontinuity will dismiss creation as a mere prologue to the work of God, and lead to a diminishing of environmental care and active concern for the suffering.

Thomas P. Rausch reminds us that because of the Trinitarian nature of God, who is both within and beyond time, 'eschatology is intrinsically connected with the concept of time.'⁴¹⁹ Geoffrey Wainwright expresses this promise in terms of a divine movement from the future:

⁴¹⁷ Boff (1987), 84-5.

⁴¹⁸ David Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 186.

⁴¹⁹ Thomas P. Rausch, *Eschatology, Liturgy and Christology: Towards Recovering an Eschatological Imagination* (Collegeville, Minnesota: 2010), 22.

It is always a characteristic of God always to reserve further action for himself in the future, but He ‘throws forward’ some part of that future action into the present *as a promise*.⁴²⁰

Jürgen Moltmann offers a useful perspective when he writes of the dual focus of ‘Easter hope’ which ‘shines forwards into the unknown newness of the history which it opens up’ as well as illuminating the ‘graveyards of history’ which have in their midst the ‘grave of a crucified man.’⁴²¹ Moltmann’s perspective is applicable to a sacramental understanding of preaching. Eschatological hope comes in the promise of God which has the potential to transform the way we interact with present issues and how we see the broken history of humanity needing to be transformed in new creation.⁴²² The ability to see God at work in the past, to discern His presence in the present moment, and to anticipate His promises for the future requires the active and disciplined engagement of the imagination, whether that is in the sacrament of the Eucharist, or the sacrament of preaching.

What are the implications of taking the eschatological hope inherent in the Eucharist and applying it to a sacramental understanding of preaching? Broadly, it calls for preachers to be alive to the themes of remembering God in the past, being vitally open to God in the present, and alert to the hope of God in the future. It reminds the preacher that the sermon must be concerned with more than parochial issues. Because preaching is concerned with God’s work in the material, sermons need to be earthed in matter and not become vacuous, over spiritualised or disengaged. Preachers need to be able to articulate hope for the past atrocities and injustices in the world. The voices of the broken and abused must be remembered and their stories articulated, just as the promise of the God of resurrection power must be named. There is more at stake here than a pep talk for living well! To do this effectively it is vital that the imaginations of preacher and hearer are engaged.

In the traditional understanding, sacraments combine sign and word together, shaping and mediating the event. In preaching, the word is obviously that which

⁴²⁰ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (London: Epworth, 1971), 16.

⁴²¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Bristol: SCM, 1984), 123.

⁴²² The theme of God coming to us as a movement from the future, transforming the past, is explored by Kate Bruce in ‘An Evaluation of Moltmann’s Trinitarian Account of the Suffering of God in the Context of the Holocaust’ (BA Dissertation, Durham University 2001).

is spoken, and which is at the same time a sign pointing beyond itself, with the potential to make present that to which it refers. There is another sign operative in the preaching event: the humanity of the preacher himself. The preacher's humanity is the material of a sacramental sign in the preaching event: a sign that God speaks to people through people; a sign of the centrality of relationship to Christian faith. Preachers come from the people of God to the people of God; a sign of the embodied and material nature of faith which is utterly dependent on God, and a sign of the God who speaks into the vulnerability and specificity of the present moment. Kay Northcutt, in her hermeneutic of preaching as spiritual direction (explored further in chapter six), makes the apt point that the preacher whose deep love and desire for God is reflected in their preaching, acts as a sacramental image through which we are attracted to God. This is not because of any moral superiority on the part of the preacher; but where the hearer recognises the preacher's willingness to wrestle with difficult issues, to pay attention to God in the scriptures, and the day-to-day muddle of life, authority is granted and the preacher becomes a sacramental, embodied image through which God attracts.⁴²³

'*Haecceitas*' comes from the Latin *haec*, meaning 'this'. Osborne picks this up, reminding us of the uniqueness of each sacrament; there is a particular 'thisness' about any sacramental event. 'No actual baptism can ever be repeated; no actual Eucharist can ever be repeated.'⁴²⁴ To this I would add, 'no actual *sermon* can ever be repeated.' There is an 'eventedness' about the sermon which is dependent on context which necessarily includes participants. A sermon is amongst *this* group of people, with *this* preacher, in *this* particular liturgical setting at *this* moment in time. Even a scripted sermon delivered and then repeated at another venue is not the same sermon, because it is not the same event. We can draw an analogy here between preaching and musical or dramatic performances. Like such performances, each sermon is specific and vulnerable. It can claim no inherent revelatory power, but only rest on the hope that God has revealed Godself through the speaking of the preacher and the listening of the gathered before, and may do so again. Recognising the *haecceitas* of each sermon event should increase the sense of engagement and expectancy on the part of preacher and hearer.

⁴²³ Northcutt (2009), 27-29.

⁴²⁴ Osborne (1999), 58.

This vision of the sacramental potential of preaching raises some considerable objections, relating to both the content and structure of sermons. How do we address the reality of evil in the world, and not mute human suffering? How do we preach presence in absence? Boff warns against the diabolic potential of the sacrament.⁴²⁵ We need to be honest that, whilst language has the potential to open up new vistas of hope, it can also manipulate, twist, and enslave. Preaching that claims the divine imprimatur to sanction the status quo, lacks any sense of redeemed imagination and reveals nothing of God as it effects no spiritual-ethical change. The key is to note that preaching occurs in communities, communities that are called to inaugurate the kingdom through deeds as well as words, communities which bear the responsibility for naming the misuse of language and the denigration of the sermon into an anti-sacrament. In this understanding preaching is an activity and responsibility of the whole Church.

Janowiak regards ‘the communal encounter as the locus of revelation between God and humankind’,⁴²⁶ seeing the normative locus of Christian revelation in the context of the ecclesial community. Its sacramental function is to mediate grace, build up faith, assure people of God’s promises, enhance the commitment within the Church, and enable the Church to be a transformed and transforming agent in society. This sacramental function clearly embraces the goals of preaching. However, if preaching is sacramental in nature, mediating the presence of God to us, why does it so often seem to fail? One reason may be that it is not seen as a communal task, calling for response to God from preacher and congregation, openness, a desire to hear, and a willingness to engage. ‘The human response in a sacramental event, even though secondary, is an integral part of the interrelational encounter that constitutes sacramentality.’⁴²⁷ Preaching is a shared responsibility of holy speaking and holy listening. Using the Eucharist as an analogy, the use of stale bread and sour wine would affect the ability of the participant to experience the fullness of God mediated through the physicality of the elements, the elements themselves distracting from the sacrament. Equally, if the preacher uses stale words, worn out phrases, poorly constructed images, combined with poor delivery, then the realisation of the full sacramental

⁴²⁵ Boff (1987), 85.

⁴²⁶ Janowiak (2000), 13.

⁴²⁷ Osborne (1999), 142.

possibility of preaching is likely to be severely impeded. Staying with the analogy of the Eucharist, if we receive carelessly, this does not mean we haven't received but that we have missed much of the resonance and taste, like bolting a meal and not noticing flavour, texture, or contrast. With the eyes of the imagination closed, we will miss much of the sacramental potential of preaching. Similarly, in the preaching event the holy listening of the hearer involves chewing over the words of the sermon and the biblical text, in conversation with personal and communal narratives, prayerfully, and expectantly.

Is this a realistic expectation? Results from a pilot survey into preaching, although small scale (197 respondents across five denominations) suggested that 97% look forward to hearing sermons either 'frequently' or 'sometimes'.⁴²⁸ This sense of anticipation *may* suggest a desire on the part of congregations to experience sermons which operate sacramentally. Even allowing for the fact that those respondents were self-selecting, with people perhaps feeling they *should* report a level of anticipation to the sermon, the percentage is still remarkably high. Further research is needed here into why exactly people seem to look forward to the sermon, and how often they are disappointed by sermons.

The nature of Anglican worship has been described as 'bi-focal', holding together the importance of word and sacrament.⁴²⁹ Perhaps inevitably, some traditions within the Church of England seem to lay more stress on one than the other. If the sacramental shape and function of the sermon is recognised on the basis of the sacramental potential of language, then the sermon and the Eucharist are drawn more closely together. In some ways it becomes illogical to separate them into separate categories of 'Word' and 'Sacrament', as though they could be separated into neat verbal and visible units. The sermon, like the Eucharist, combines the visible and the verbal in sacramental action. As with the sermon, the words used in the Eucharist are much more than indicative in function. The language used strengthens and adds depth and resonance to the material aspect of the sacrament. For example, the words: 'Take, eat, this is my body given for you,' are rich with resonances of gift, sustenance, sacrifice, and incorporation. Without the words the Eucharist would lack some of this depth. Language builds

⁴²⁸ Ben Blackwell, Kate Bruce, Peter Phillips, *The View from the Pew* (Durham: CODEC, 2009), 8.

⁴²⁹ Donald Coggan, *On Preaching*, (London: SPCK, 1978), 3.

pictures and impressions that interact with the visual images to create layered and rich fields of meaning.

Holding together word and visual image in preaching and the Eucharist offers a countercultural critique of the current ascendancy of the visual image. Webb identifies in the current context a tendency, evidenced through less attention being paid to political speeches, that the ‘spoken word does not matter.’⁴³⁰ The Church is one of the few places in contemporary culture in which people gather to hear the spoken word. This is not at the expense of the visible image; the two are held together as elements of the sacramental event.

Does this argument collapse the distinction between word and Eucharist? Jenson argues that ‘the distinction between audible and visible signs is only relative: sounds are also material, only more malleable than sights.’⁴³¹ The danger that in this malleability the gospel is distorted is mitigated by the reminder of the external nature of the gospel replayed through the visible aspects of the Eucharist. This supports the *normative* liturgical arrangement in Anglicanism of preaching being located in a service of the eucharist, a point picked up in the rubrics of the 1662 prayer book which directs that in the communion service, following the Creed, ‘then shall follow the sermon.’

4.4 Implications for Homiletic Praxis

Regarding preaching as sacramental has implications for our approach to the content and construction of the sermon.

The mystery of preaching is at once the proclamation of God’s word and the naming of grace in human experience.⁴³²

The imagination operating with sacramental alertness, vital to preaching, holds to the fundamental goodness of creation; revelation is not hermetically sealed within the pages of scripture but is to be found in people’s lives. Hilbert reflects ‘rather than beginning with emphasis on the power of the proclaimed word to transform sinful humanity, we might reflect on preaching as the art of naming

⁴³⁰ Webb (2004), 26.

⁴³¹ R. W. Jenson, ‘The Sacraments’, in *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, eds., C.E. Braaten and R.W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 302.

⁴³² Hilbert (1997), 49.

grace found in the depths of the human experience.’⁴³³ Naming grace requires imaginative seeing-as and feeling-as which operates across all four of the imaginative functions discussed in chapter three. If we are seeking to name grace then the sensory function of imagination will be attentive and focussed on the details of creation and of people’s stories. The intuitive imagination will make connections between scripture, theology and everyday life, looking to name God in the world. The affective function of the imagination helps the preacher to exercise and discern grace as she imagines the perspectives of the other. The intellectual imagination helps to orientate right ethical responses to seeing God in the world, using the ‘if...then’ structure of hypothesis. For example: *if* the universe is created and loved by God *then* we have a responsibility to do what I can to care for the environment; *if* I accept the commandment to love my neighbour as myself *then* I need to scrutinise how I treat others to ensure that my beliefs are reflected in my actions.

This presents a challenge to approaches to preaching which remain within the horizons of the biblical texts, in what might be seen as a verse-based teaching model. Preaching is more than this. Imaginative preaching will seek to connect God’s word in the scriptures with the life of God in the world, being honest about the difficulties inherent in working with sacred texts that are necessarily human and therefore not always obviously discernible as the word of God, and being honest that often the world seems to display an absence of God. By naming the present signs of grace in the world, preaching can point beyond to the completion of such hope in Christ. But does this take seriously the reality of evil?

One way of doing this is to reclaim the tradition of lament for preaching. The structure of lament is inherently imaginative. The lament tradition finds words to bear and expresses the distress of the community or individual. Before hope can be named the dis-grace of the world must be articulated.⁴³⁴ It then recounts the faithfulness of God and re-orientates the faithful on the basis of trust in God. The future hope is never realised within the lament itself, so in that sense lament is always open-ended. Sacramental preaching can never be too neatly closed. ‘The temptation for the Christian preacher is to “offer solutions” rather than to attend

⁴³³ Hilkert (1997), 44.

⁴³⁴ Hilkert (1997), 111.

to the anguish of the assembly and to entrust the pain to God.⁴³⁵ Whether it names grace or disgrace the sermon is always pointing beyond itself. By nature, preaching seeks to open the Church to deeper engagement with God in prayer and action. On that basis, sermons must not be too finished, or too neatly completed. The aim of a sermon is to have a life beyond the time bound period of its utterance. This has structural implications for the sermon. There are many possible ways of keeping the sermon focussed outward, such as a structure that weaves questions of application throughout, or one that builds towards a sermonic ending that opens outward. Not every sermonic question should be, or can be answered.

To bring to speech the deepest experiences of human being requires a contemplative aspect to the preacher's life. Hilkert argues that preachers need to be in touch with their own deepest struggles in order to be attuned to the issues of dis-grace in the world. Effectively, she is arguing that preaching be recognised as a spiritual discipline, embracing prayer and imagination. Imagination, with the 'power to reconfigure reality by seeing it through an alternative lens,'⁴³⁶ is central to sacramental preaching. It takes imaginative insight to make connections between the depth experiences of doubt, fear and confusion, and the hope of the gospel, and imaginative vision to discern the grace at work in the suffering of the world. Hilkert argues that inherent to preaching is the prophetic ability to make connections between God's past faithfulness, his continuing fidelity and the promise of hope.⁴³⁷ Making these connections calls for an imaginative openness to the Spirit. The dynamic of imaginative contemplation and action has the potential to shape sermons that are honest and realistic in their naming of grace and dis-grace and able also to move beyond naming into shaping active response, in penitence or praise, or political and ethical action.

If we accept that language can function sacramentally, then the words of the sermon matter. Rhetoric is reclaimed as an important aspect of sermon preparation and delivery. Contra Barth, the preacher is more than simply a herald, but is potentially an artist, a poet, a linguistic musician or a jester (see chapter six). Not that the human alone can reveal God through linguistic and

⁴³⁵ Hilkert (1997), 116.

⁴³⁶ Hilkert (1997), 188.

⁴³⁷ Hilkert (1997), 56.

performative skill, but the human, taken into relationship by God on God's initiative, can use the giftedness of imagination, language use and performance to break open the scriptural word and point to the reality of the incarnate Word, who by grace breathes through the event of the sermon. Language that names the depths of human experience or seeks to enable the congregation to soar in hope and worship belongs to the palette of the poet. Such language is 'shattering, evocative speech that breaks fixed conclusions and presses us always toward new, dangerous and imaginative possibilities.'⁴³⁸ Preaching which seeks to learn from poetry is preaching which seeks to articulate depth experience, to subvert, to surprise, to provoke, and to delight. It is incumbent on the preacher to wrestle with language and find imagery which will enable a new seeing:

The role of the preacher and of prophetic communities, like that of the prophet and the poet, is precisely to evoke and nurture an alternative perception of reality.'⁴³⁹

The words a preacher utters spring from the physicality of the person in terms of pitch, volume, facial expression, and bodily gesture. 'We speak with our limbs as well as our throats.'⁴⁴⁰ Storytellers know that the way the story is spoken profoundly affects the way it is apprehended. Accepting that preaching operates sacramentally, by God's grace opening up the possibilities of seeing and experiencing the divine, then preachers naturally have a calling to develop their skills in performance. Performance is perhaps a controversial word, implying something artificial, an acted out pretence. However, if we take the word 'performance' as meaning to make present before the other that which has been internalised there is no danger of a lack of integrity. Richard Ward argues that the term 'performance' is to be preferred to 'delivery' since the latter term implies that preaching is merely a transaction in which the preacher 'delivers' theological goods:

⁴³⁸ Brueggemann (1989), 6.

⁴³⁹ Hilbert (1997), 83.

⁴⁴⁰ Webb (2004), 58.

‘Performance’ is a richer, more integrative schema for putting the elements of language, action, and form, together with speech, gesture, and embodiment in the event of preaching.⁴⁴¹

We might add that there is something unpleasantly utilitarian about the term ‘delivery’, which implies a flattened dropping off of goods in a one-way model of communication. A performance requires the involvement of the hearer for it to have meaning; it speaks much more obviously of a communal event.

J. L. Austin reminds us of the performative power of language: words do something. He identifies three dimensions of language: locutions, illocutions and perlocutions.⁴⁴² These dimensions refer to what is said, what is done by the utterance, and its psychological effect. As Austin puts it:

Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention or purpose of producing them.⁴⁴³

In Austin’s theory illocutionary utterance does something. Examples include baptising a child, naming a ship, making a bet, or saying wedding vows. The perlocutionary power of language lies not in what the words do but in the potential effect of such speaking, that is on the psychological response to the words. For example the illocutionary force of the words, ‘Your sins are forgiven’, announces a new relationship between the hearer and God. The perlocutionary impact of these words is intended to be one of comfort, hope, and peace. James Nieman compares the performative power of such liturgical declaration with preaching the gospel, arguing that ‘declaring God’s persistent and relentless love for us in Jesus Christ bears the reality it asserts.’⁴⁴⁴ Here, the sacramental potential of preaching becomes clear as it seeks to awaken the hearer to the reality of God with us, eliciting an appropriate psychological response: for example, the determination to live out, or perform, the gospel in everyday life.

⁴⁴¹ Richard F. Ward, ‘Preaching as a Communicative Act: The Birth of a Performance’, *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, Vol. 30, Issue 2 (1996), <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=341>> [accessed 10th December 2012, no page numbers given].

⁴⁴² J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 108.

⁴⁴³ Austin (1962), 101.

⁴⁴⁴ James R. Nieman, ‘Preaching that Drives People from the Church’, in D. Day, J. Astley and L.J. Francis, eds., (2005), 249.

The imaginative preacher needs to have a care for the words they use and the work they expect words to do. Thoughtless use of language – such as non-inclusive terminology or derogatory slang – can exercise negative perlocutionary force, destroying the sacramental nature of the preaching event. Nieman reminds us of the way the performative power of sermons can be negatively derailed by illustrations in which ‘all women are ditzy, all men are heroes, and all the children are just props.’⁴⁴⁵ The performative nature of preaching is a vital aspect of its sacramental nature, for which words matter profoundly.

This chapter has sought to critically analyse the sacramental potential of preaching, based on a theology of creation, which underscores the revelatory power of language in the preaching event. It reminds us of the shared task of preaching; ecclesial sacraments being communal actions of the Church. Like the visual image, language too has a multivalent, tensive potential. Recognising this strengthens the connection between word and sacrament in Anglican worship, the visual image acting as a reminder of the external reference of the gospel. Grasping the sacramentality of preaching has implications for understanding the nature and praxis of preaching. An important area to explore in relation to this is the vital connection between imagination and language, a theme picked up in the following chapter, focussed on the theme of preaching in what I am naming as the ‘lyrical voice’.

⁴⁴⁵ Nieman (2005), 251.

Chapter Five: Preaching in the Lyrical Voice

Walter Brueggemann astutely observes that ‘reduced speech leads to reduced lives’. He calls for preachers to employ ‘alternative modes of speech’ which he describes as dramatic, artistic, invitational, tensive, prophetic, and poetic. In his analysis the language of prose is the language of foreshortened vision in contrast to the insightful nature of poetic language. Of course prose can be poetic, but Brueggemann seems to be using the term ‘prose’ to point to the flattened language of ‘settled truth’ and ‘pervasive reductionism’. Brueggemann points to the preacher as a prophet/poet who comes and shatters the ‘dread dullness’ of our prose world which has eviscerated the power of the Gospel by trivialising it. Preaching as poetic speech peels back the layers of inanity and tedium and discloses new hope, new vision, and new possibility.⁴⁴⁶ Brueggemann writes much on the political and spiritual importance of such speech, however the question still remains: how can preachers craft such sermons?

This chapter explores what I am calling ‘lyrical preaching’ which is marked by a desire to imaginatively grasp the disclosure of the gospel and to render that seeing and its implications by learning from the craft of poetic expression. Caveats are offered concerning the limits of language when attempting to speak of the divine. The tools of lyrical preaching are explored in some detail, focusing on analogy, simile and metaphor, with discussion on the imaginative richness of conceptual blending theory. At the heart of lyrical preaching is concern to construct sermons which recognise the ocular potential of the auditory function; people can be enabled to see through their ears. This is at the heart of all good radio speech and is essential to effective preaching. An example of preaching in the lyrical voice is offered, with analysis. The aim throughout is to demonstrate that imaginative engagement is vital in preaching in the lyrical voice.

5.1 What is Lyrical Preaching?

Preaching in the lyrical voice describes preaching which seeks to learn from and to employ poetic strategy. This is not an argument that sermons should be poems. As W. E. Sangster observed, the poet in ‘taking wing into realms of

⁴⁴⁶ Brueggemann (1989), 1-11.

daring thought' can 'outsoar the needs and natural expression of the majority of people who compose a typical congregation anywhere.'⁴⁴⁷ Speaking of hymnody, David Brown comments that hymns need to appeal to a range of intellects, and given that there is no time for prior reflection on the meaning of the words used, only relatively accessible language can work, 'but this emphatically should not entail the absence of the poetic.'⁴⁴⁸ This argument can be applied to preaching. The preacher needs to employ poetic insight and learn from the craft of poetic expression, so that sermons, whilst not poems in themselves, have features of the lyrical about them.

Sallie McFague comments that theologians can learn lessons from lyrical poetry. Such expression is personal; it seeks to create new contexts for old symbols, minting new metaphors which allow us to see in new ways, inviting contemplation. She suggests that the development of the imagination ought to be a major component of theological training. She does not offer specific strategies suggesting how this may be undertaken, but writes more generally of the importance of being aware of imaginative associations between the word of God and contemporary images, and an openness to learning about metaphoric renewal from popular culture.' She argues that the alternative to such lyrical theology is a 'dead language and a ghettoized Christianity'.⁴⁴⁹ Malcolm Guite makes the case for 'poetic imagination as a truth bearing faculty' in a book that critically and theologically analyses the work of a wide range of poets. His thesis is that the poetic imagination can help to 'renew and deepen our vision of the word,' and that it has the power 'to mediate meaning between unembodied "apprehension" and embodied "comprehension"'.⁴⁵⁰ Neither McFague nor Guite specifically address the subject of homiletics, but we may follow their cues and explore how the work of the poet informs the task of preaching, and develop a model of lyrical preaching.

Lyrical preaching rests on a theological consideration of what language can achieve and what it cannot presume, particularly concerning speech about God. Preaching in the lyrical voice is an approach to preaching which is consciously

⁴⁴⁷ W.E. Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Illustration* (London: Epworth, 1946), 79.

⁴⁴⁸ Brown (2008), 82.

⁴⁴⁹ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*, 2nd edition (London: SCM, 2002), 83-91.

⁴⁵⁰ Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 1, 5, 15, 243.

and critically aware of the importance of attending to language use, balancing the disclosive potential of simile and metaphor against the inherent danger of the metaphoric tendency to imprecision. Sometimes the preacher will want to employ the fecund, tensive nature of metaphor, at other times greater precision will be needed through the use of qualified analogies. Such preaching will explore the illuminating power of analogy, aware of the need to walk the univocal/equivocal tightrope (developed below). In a homiletics text book written early in the last century, Harry Jeffs comments that the appreciation for poetry will give the preacher ‘a sense of the colour and music of words.’⁴⁵¹ Whilst it may employ startling metaphors, lyrical preaching will weave these into the flow of ordinary language. It will consciously explore the affective and dramatic power of layering descriptive phrases and varying sentence length, deliberately writing for the ear.

Other hallmarks of the lyrical voice are that it is imaginative and passionate. It draws, often indirectly, on personal experience and, as we see in the lyrical focus of the Romantic poets, it has an appreciation for common humanity and a deep appreciation of the natural world. Preaching in the lyrical voice will be sensitive to the genre of scripture: seeking to engage the imagination, the locus of divine revelation, of speaker and hearer. Lyrical preaching is a homiletic strategy which seeks to evoke, intimate, gesture, and co-operate with the disclosive impetus of God. It is always seeking to discover the more beyond what we directly experience. We might preach in a context of disaster and whilst acknowledging the immediate reality, still indicate that there is more. This is the structure of lament. In preaching in a context of religious self-satisfaction, the preacher also acknowledges the immediate reality, but points beyond it. There is always more, and that more critiques the present experience. This is the structure of prophecy. Both lament and prophecy require an imaginative seeing beyond the immediate. There are occasions in the preaching event when both preacher and hearer are aware that something is happening which is more than either expected. This involves a moment of recognition, the ‘aha’ moment of discernment in which the hearer is awakened to the ‘more’. Lyrical preachers are imaginative preachers; it is incumbent on teachers of homiletics to encourage the development of

⁴⁵¹ Harry Jeffs, *The Art of Sermon Illustration* (London: James Clarke and Co., 1909), 68.

imagination in their students. (The practical aspects of this are dealt with in chapter eight).

5.2 The Presumption of Language

Those who work to help others to hear the word of God need to be radically open to associations with that word, which of course means assuming the risk of being wrong.⁴⁵²

On what basis can the preacher presume to speak about God? Ian Ramsey urges caution: ‘Let us never talk as if we had privileged access to the diaries of God’s private life.’⁴⁵³ He would add to this a caution against naïve realism: not least because such approaches tend to reduce the divine to a puny godlet, easily describable and easily controlled. Ramsey traces the responses of the early fathers to the question of how, if it all, we might speak of God. He identifies a frequent caution over claiming too much for human language. Clement of Alexandria writes that, even in union with Christ, ‘we only reach in a measure to the conception of God, knowing not what He is, but what He is not.’⁴⁵⁴ Similarly, Origen indicates that the superiority of God renders him beyond the power of unaided human understanding;⁴⁵⁵ a thought echoed both in Athanasius and the Cappadocians. Hilary of Poitiers also reminds us of the difficulty of discovering adequate language for the Divine, a difficulty summed up by John of Damascus when he writes that God ‘in His essence and nature is absolutely incomprehensible and unknowable.’⁴⁵⁶ There seems to be a stark choice: complete silence or the attempt, however inadequately, to speak. Augustine observes:

And yet God, although nothing worthy of His greatness can be said of Him, has condescended to accept the worship of men’s mouths, and has desired us through the medium of our own words to rejoice in His praise.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵² McFague (2002), 91.

⁴⁵³ Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: SCM, 1957), 91.

⁴⁵⁴ Clement of Alexandria, in *Words About God*, ed., Ian T. Ramsey (London: SCM, 1971), 16.

⁴⁵⁵ Ramsey (1971), 16.

⁴⁵⁶ Ramsey (1971), 18.

⁴⁵⁷ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk.1 ch. 6,

<<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/augustine/ddc1.html>> [accessed 10th March 2013].

However inadequate our language is, God desires it. In worship, we address God and describe God, offering our praise, penitence, plea, lament, and love.

Preaching is a part of this act of worship, in which the preacher offers the best of their linguistic skill in an act of service to God transcendent and God immanent in the Church, conscious, as David Brown comments in terms of hymnody, that our human language ‘will only partially succeed in talking of God.’⁴⁵⁸

Lyrical preaching brings together non-cognitive and cognitive dimensions of religious language. In terms of the former, lyrical preaching seeks to use language artistically to evoke an affective response, to bring delight, to surprise, and sometimes to shock. In this sense the use of language is congruent with John Hick’s outline of the main philosophical understandings of the non-cognitive function of religious language.⁴⁵⁹ He begins with religious language as emotive expression, for which the purpose of the language of praise is to express and induce feelings of joy. The artistic evocation of feelings of awe, based on experience of the natural world, is offered as a second example, its purpose being functional rather than indicative of transcendence. Third, religious language is used as an expression of ethical purpose: statements about God being expressions of moral commitment rather than attempts at describing the divine as objective reality. In this understanding, to speak of God as forgiving is a disguised expression of the intention to act in forgiving ways.

In such non-cognitive understandings, religious language points us not outward towards an objective reality, but back towards ourselves. In this perspective preaching might be seen as a cathartic opportunity, an art form, or an encouragement to engage in forms of ethical behaviour. Lyrical preaching can be all of these things, but *it is more than this*. As Astley observes, ‘we can allow the non-cognitive functions of much religious language, while arguing that it is *ultimately grounded* in a factual belief.’⁴⁶⁰ Lyrical preaching stands on the rock of the self-revealing God. We dare to attempt to speak of God because, in Christ, God speaks to us and, in Christ, our broken words are healed and addressed to God. Preaching in the lyrical voice is grounded in a critical realist approach which claims that our words about God, whilst they can never be finally

⁴⁵⁸ Brown (2008), 95.

⁴⁵⁹ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975), 4-9.

⁴⁶⁰ Astley (2010), 51.

definitive, have referential and disclosive potential *because* God is objectively real, and is the one who speaks first.

Lyrical preaching can be seen as an aspect of what Astley terms the ‘primary language of living faith’ which includes the ‘poetic and story language of Scripture, piety and worship’ and ‘the autobiographical, anecdotal and figurative discourse of ordinary theology.’ This language is related to, but distinct from, second-order talk about God, which is the “more prosaic” academic theology, whose language is systematic and consistent, and employs carefully defined concepts.⁴⁶¹ This is not to argue that there is never a place for the more academic sermon, nor is it to imply that the preacher cannot shift voices within the sermon. However, on the whole, preaching in the lyrical voice will resonate with the primary language of faith and speak a language which is likely to be more appealing to postmodern scepticism and also to ordinary theologians coming to worship.

David Brown argues for the disclosive possibility of language ‘to open us up to new worlds’. He explores the metaphoric potential of revealing ‘genuinely new knowledge’.⁴⁶² Edward Riegert uses the phrase ‘imaginative shock’ to describe that moment when what we thought we knew and understood undergoes rapid revision, reality is redescribed and a new world of possibility is revealed.⁴⁶³ This concept of imaginative shock lies close to Ramsey’s understanding of ‘disclosure’. Ramsey employs this concept in describing situations in which there is a revelation of depth and something strikes us in a new way, the ‘light dawns’, the ‘ice breaks’ and the ‘penny drops’.⁴⁶⁴ Such a disclosure is, very often, primarily a ‘revelation of an objective transcendent “more” through an empirical or linguistic medium’.⁴⁶⁵ Disclosure situations consist of two elements: discernment and commitment. Both are features of imaginative seeing. Discernment often involves recognition: recognising the ‘more’ of the disclosure. Commitment involves recognising the inherent value of that new thing, whether that is a revelation of divine love or the experience of falling in love, and having

⁴⁶¹ Astley (2010), 44-45.

⁴⁶² Brown (2008), 66, 56.

⁴⁶³ Edward Riegert, *Imaginative Shock: Preaching and Metaphor* (Burlington, Ontario: Trinity Press, 1990), 10.

⁴⁶⁴ Ramsey (1957), 19.

⁴⁶⁵ Jeff Astley, ‘Ian Ramsey and the Problem of Religious Knowledge’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 35, No.2 (October, 1984), 416.

the vision to re-align our commitments around it. Ramsey argues that we experience discernment situations in everyday life, and maintains that these everyday experiences give us a way of understanding religious disclosure. He gives examples such as a judge and the accused recognising each other in the impersonal context of the High Court: eye meets eye; astonishment; an odd word is uttered... the Court is electrified. An impersonal situation has come alive.⁴⁶⁶ Each recognises in the other something that bursts out of the formal and impersonal setting of the court, which now takes on a new dimension. Preaching in the lyrical voice, whilst recognising the limitations of figurative language (see below) is particularly open to its tensive, disclosive power:

A good metaphor may not simply be an oblique reference to a predetermined subject but a new vision, the birth of a new understanding, a new referential access. A strong metaphor compels new possibilities of vision.⁴⁶⁷

5.3 Tools of Lyrical Preaching: Analogy, Simile and Metaphor

Analogy works by showing the similarity between two things. In this sense it has affinities with simile and metaphor and there is an overlap between these categories. Often analogy compares an unknown object to something with which we are familiar to help us develop understanding. Soskice comments that ‘analogy as a linguistic device deals with language that has been stretched to fit new applications’. Whilst she regards analogy as working with minimal ‘imaginative strain’,⁴⁶⁸ analogy can create an imaginative jolt in the hearer when the source that is stretched to describe God is unusual or unexpected. Many of the parables create analogies between humans and God and then invert our expectations by having the human character act outside the expectations of the analogy, throwing new light on our understanding of God. For example, stretching human categories and applying them to God initially seems to suggest that God, like fathers, should punish errant children, like bosses he should pay people according to productivity, and like a gardener he should attend to weeding. In all three parables the expectation in the analogical stretch is

⁴⁶⁶ Ramsey (1957), 19.

⁴⁶⁷ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 57-58.

⁴⁶⁸ Soskice (1985), 64.

inverted.⁴⁶⁹ Such parables operate with analogical power because they highlight difference in the similarity.

There are pitfalls in using analogy to speak of God. Any univocal connections between the human and the divine will lead to anthropomorphism. This may result from a failure to specify that if we speak, say, of God's love we need to qualify in what ways divine love is *unlike* human love. In preaching, too close an analogical connection between the human and the divine may result in a negative response. If God is described through the analogy of human love and the hearer's knowledge of human love is that it is fickle, unreliable, and ever shifting, the analogy, without further qualification, is likely to lead to a negative view of God. The preacher needs to imagine and address the contrapuntal that her analogies might give rise to in the hearer.

However, if language about humans is used equivocally of God then we cannot really describe God positively at all. If God's love is *nothing* like human love, then the analogy has no descriptive power. As Astley points out, our God-talk needs to walk the tightrope between the univocal and the equivocal.⁴⁷⁰ In spite of its epistemological limitations, Paul Avis maintains that analogy is 'a serviceable tool of unpretentious theological work, in preaching, catechising and biblical interpretation.' He sees the usefulness of analogies which, with elaboration and refinement, can become building blocks of theological construction. For example, he takes the metaphor of kingship and draws from it the analogy between earthy kingship and God's rule, showing how an analogical form can be developed from this, while highlighting the importance of critical scrutiny and careful elucidation of the similarities and differences between divine and human government.⁴⁷¹ Analogical language functions with the tension between 'is' and 'is not' which is also characteristic of simile and metaphor.

There is some disagreement in the literature concerning the power and potential of simile. Max Black, Sallie McFague and Paul Avis all see simile as less powerful than metaphor. Black argues that 'looking at a scene through blue spectacles is different from comparing that scene with something else.'⁴⁷² In his

⁴⁶⁹ Luke 15.1-32; Matthew 13.24-30, 20.1-16

⁴⁷⁰ Jeff Astley, *Exploring God-talk: Using Language in Religion* (London: DLT, 2004), 57-58.

⁴⁷¹ Avis (1999), 73, 76-77.

⁴⁷² Max Black 'More About Metaphor', in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed., Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 31.

analysis, metaphor is a trope which draws the reader/hearer into a more profound encounter with the referents. Simile is the weaker trope. McFague argues that in simile the shock in the comparison is reduced by the word 'like', which screens out dissimilarity and collapses the tension between the 'is' and 'is not' which metaphor supplies.⁴⁷³ On similar lines, Avis contends that simile lacks the 'spontaneity, immediacy and vividness' of metaphor.⁴⁷⁴

Is simile simply the trope of comparison, lacking deep descriptive power? To what extent is the presence of 'as' or 'like' a mere grammatical detail or even an impediment to deeper meaning? The writers cited above lean towards the latter view, but Janet Soskice challenges this, arguing that simile, whilst differing in grammatical structure from metaphor, can share the same role even if they are textually different. She sees simile as functioning along a continuum, with some similes operating with metaphoric richness. To elucidate the point, she differentiates between 'illustrative similes' and 'modelling similes'.⁴⁷⁵ The illustrative simile takes two things that are known and uses one to give a sense of the other, making connections between the similarity of the referents: 'as fast as a hare' or 'as ferocious as a bear'. The scope of such similes is limited, in contrast to the potential of the modelling simile which, like metaphor, potentially takes us beyond our first cognitive grasp on a subject, into new territory.

What should be noted with the modelling simile, in contrast to the illustrative simile, is that something known is used to open up and develop cognitive apprehension of something beyond our grasp. For example, the writer of Hosea 13.8 uses the following simile, 'Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and tear them asunder.' This does more than illustrate the nature of God's fury, it models the nature of God's relationship to his people and is open to further schematisation. God's rage with the rebellion of Israel is like that of a mother bear robbed of her cubs. At the same time it is those cubs whom she threatens to attack and rip open. The simile holds together both the righteous fury of God and a subtle underlying message of hope in the maternal image offered for God. In Matthew 23.37 and Luke 13.34, Jesus is imaged as a mother hen in the lament over Jerusalem. Like the Hosea example, this simile operates with metaphoric

⁴⁷³ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 38.

⁴⁷⁴ Avis (1999), 98.

⁴⁷⁵ Soskice (1985), 59.

power, offering a startling model for Christ's love for the people of Jerusalem. The simile portrays Christ as protective, maternal and nurturing, offering warmth and comfort. As a corollary, the people are imaged as clucking chickens, running away from their source of protection. Soskice's distinction between illustrative and modelling similes is helpful for the preacher. A modelling simile extends beyond simple illustration and opens up the potential for deeper exploration of meaning and resonance. Using Soskice, we can see that simile is a trope with the potential to operate with metaphoric power.

If metaphor has the power to enable new ways of seeing, and, on the basis of this, new ways of acting in the world, then it is clearly essential to the preacher. Preachers need to be trained to understand, apprehend, challenge, and shape metaphor. The word *metapherō*, constructed from the words *meta* (with, after) and *pherō* (I carry) gives us a sense of something being carried over or transferred, and links with the broad sense of metaphor as being associated with the idea of a transfer from one thing to another.⁴⁷⁶ In a basic definition, Sallie McFague writes that the employment of metaphor is, 'spotting the thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects.'⁴⁷⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson state that metaphor is 'understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.'⁴⁷⁸ Janet Martin Soskice offers this working definition: 'metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another'.⁴⁷⁹

Lakoff and Johnson, addressing a perspective with which they do not concur, state at the outset of their work that:

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language... for this reason most people think they can get on perfectly well without metaphor.⁴⁸⁰

For the purposes of preaching in the lyrical voice it is important to counter such an erroneous view by critiquing the ornamental theory of metaphor and

⁴⁷⁶ Astley (2004), 37.

⁴⁷⁷ McFague (1982), 15.

⁴⁷⁸ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

⁴⁷⁹ Soskice (1985), 15.

⁴⁸⁰ Lakoff and Johnson (1980), 3.

demonstrating how metaphor has the potential to enable new ways of seeing. At the same time it is important to be alert to the criticisms levelled at metaphor: it can be merely emotive and it lacks precision.

Since Aristotle, many have associated metaphor with ornament, suggesting that it is nice but not necessary.⁴⁸¹ The ornamental theory regards metaphors as ‘inessential frills’, ‘unimportant, deviant, and “parasitic” on normal language usage’.⁴⁸² In the ornamental theory the purpose of metaphor, when it is not supplying a lack in literal language (catachresis), is to delight the reader. It is hard, however, to conceive of an example in which metaphor might operate in a purely ornamental way: compare ‘there is smoke coming under the door’ with ‘there is smoke creeping under the door.’ In the second example the personification of the smoke increases the emotive temperature, adding further cognitive content to the literal statement and bringing a sense of insidious danger with the verb ‘creeping.’ Even if we seek very simple metaphors that could be expressed similarly in literal terms it is plain that the metaphor adds cognitive content. For example, take the figure ‘her face is drip-white’. Even in this weak metaphor, which could be replaced with the literal statement, ‘she is very pale’, the metaphor carries cognitive resonances supplied by the intercourse of meaning between the words ‘drip-white’ and ‘face’. In the stripped down literal version of the metaphor, the resonances of thinness, weakness, vapidness, and shock are lost. We are left with just a pale-faced woman; the removal of the metaphor has robbed the line of cognitive content, bearing out a point made by Max Black:

The relevant weakness of the literal paraphrase is not that it may be tiresomely prolix or boringly explicit (or deficient in qualities of style); it fails to be a translation because it fails to give the insight that the metaphor did.⁴⁸³

Similarly, take the metaphor ‘He is a fox’.⁴⁸⁴ To convey the same cognitive content would take a wide variety of literal statements, as many as there are interpretations and nuances relating to the word ‘fox’: he is cunning, wily, a scavenger, predatory, he hunts at night, he is attractive, and so on. These simple

⁴⁸¹ Andrew Ortony, ‘Metaphor a Multidisciplinary Problem’, in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed., Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 3.

⁴⁸² Ortony (1979), 2.

⁴⁸³ Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1962), 46.

⁴⁸⁴ Adapted from Soskice (1985), 25.

examples show clearly that metaphor can never be seen as merely decorative. Gerd Theissen is emphatic that images are ‘not ornaments in a sermon. They are part of its substance. The poverty of imagery in many sermons is an offence against the task of preaching.’⁴⁸⁵

Understood as merely decorative, metaphor has excited criticism from the empiricist perspective. Soskice identifies this clearly in John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.⁴⁸⁶ Locke warns that figurative speech, whilst bringing delight, is misleading: a serious charge for the lyrical preacher who wishes to develop the use of metaphor. The argument runs that figurative language is to be avoided on the grounds that the metaphoric, in exciting affective response, misleads judgement. But why should the generation of affect be misleading? We could argue that an emotional response to an issue can inform judgement. Brown further points out that for the will to be moved, which is Augustine’s key homiletic goal, ‘an emotional commitment to love is necessary.’⁴⁸⁷ That aside, in this perspective literal truth is presented as being superior to metaphoric meaning. For Locke, the plain truth should be spoken plainly. This view implies that there is a category of language which might be termed direct, as opposed to the ‘misleading’ indirection of metaphor.

However, Lakoff and Johnson argue convincingly for the pervasive nature of metaphor which shapes our concept systems, a thesis which effectively counters the idea of metaphor as a substitution for a more literal means of saying something. They analyse linguistic use in order to trace the way we think of, shape, and experience reality. The point is perhaps most succinctly made in relation to their exploration of the metaphor ‘time is money’. We commonly speak of time in terms such as: wasting, saving, spending, costing, having, budgeting, investing, offering, and losing.⁴⁸⁸ In another example, Lakoff and Johnson identify a range of words and phrases which suggest the governing conceptual metaphor of life as a gambling game. We use such terms as: odds, playing an ace, playing your cards right, high stakes, bluffing, ‘the luck of the

⁴⁸⁵ Gerd Theissen, *The Sign Language of Faith: Opportunities for Preaching Today* (London: SCM, 1995), 74.

⁴⁸⁶ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), 146-7; see also Soskice (1985), 12-13.

⁴⁸⁷ Brown (2008), 119.

⁴⁸⁸ Lakoff and Johnson (1980), 7-9.

draw' and the 'chips are down.'⁴⁸⁹ Along with such governing conceptual metaphors they identify orientational metaphors which are culturally embedded.⁴⁹⁰ Happy is generally 'up' and sad is 'down'; we might speak of spirits being boosted, or lifted, of energy levels soaring, of a mood rising; or of feeling down, depressed or low. Consciousness is portrayed with up words and unconsciousness with down language: we wake up and get up, but fall asleep, drop off, and go under anaesthetic. Within our culture more is up and less is down, so we speak of income rising, unemployment soaring, turning the volume up, having high status, and of markets taking a down turn, of losing income and so forth. What is crucially important is that these governing metaphors are part of our everyday thought and language: we use them 'unconsciously and automatically, with so little effort that we hardly notice.'⁴⁹¹ Far from being a matter of ornament, metaphor is deeply embedded in language.

The comparison theory of metaphor asserts that metaphor brings two elements together, which are connected analogously. A comparison view would understand 'Tom is a fox' as meaning that 'Tom is like a fox', with the common descriptors associated with foxes being left un-stated yet implicit. Black cites the key objection against the comparison view of metaphor as being its vagueness.⁴⁹² John Searle makes a similar point, asking how we are to know what is entailed by the sun in the metaphor 'Juliet is the sun'. It might mean "'Juliet is for the most part gaseous"' or "'Juliet is a million miles from the earth"''.⁴⁹³ This is a fair point, but if we see metaphor as interacting with a sentence, embedded in a larger text – such as a sermon – this goes some way to reducing the range of possible entailments. Given that Romeo utters the words at sunrise, as the woman he loves comes to her window, at the opening of a speech which develops a metaphor of Juliet in terms of heavenly light, it seems clear that the context limits the range of possible interpretations. The fact that there are a range of possible interpretations which combine, within a limited field, to illustrate the nature of Romeo's love, underscores the rich, fertile potential of metaphor.

⁴⁸⁹ Lakoff and Johnson (1980), 51.

⁴⁹⁰ Lakoff and Johnson (1980), 14-21

⁴⁹¹ George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xi.

⁴⁹² Black (1962), 37.

⁴⁹³ John R. Searle, 'Metaphor', in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 106.

As we saw with analogy, at times we may need to sharpen our God talk with further qualification and specification. Given these caveats, figurative language may enable us to articulate faith ‘at least to some approximation’.⁴⁹⁴ But the weakness of metaphor – its lack of precision – is also one of its great strengths, since a good metaphor can convey a number of related entailments in a highly compressed linguistic form which implicitly invites the hearer to participate in making the metaphor their own.

The comparison theory assumes that within the metaphor two terms are explicitly and neatly present. However, this is not always the case. In the following simple metaphor, the vehicle is not present but implied: ‘biting cold’. The tenor is the cold, the vehicle an unnamed creature with sharp teeth.⁴⁹⁵ The vehicle/tenor distinction is not always helpful, as in some metaphors it is hard to identify the principal subject, since both are key in the metaphor. An example can be drawn from Ted Hughes’ ‘The Thought Fox’,⁴⁹⁶ in which the poet writes of the fox which ‘sets neat prints in the snow’. Here the fox’s paw prints on the white snow are drawing us towards the imprints of the writer’s words on the page; but the latter is only implicitly present until the final line of the poem, and even then the connection between the footprints and the printed page is never made explicit.

Ricoeur points out that in a metaphor ‘the tenor does not remain unaltered, as if the vehicle were nothing but wrapping and decoration’.⁴⁹⁷ Indeed the transference works in both directions, as Max Black comments:

If to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would.⁴⁹⁸

This is a particularly important point for the preacher, since in any metaphor describing God the vehicle is also affected. As Colin Gunton points out, in seeing the cross as victory our understanding of the cross is illuminated and our

⁴⁹⁴ Astley (2010), 59, 60.

⁴⁹⁵ I.A. Richards, *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 96. In Richards’ analysis the terms ‘tenor’ and ‘vehicle’ are used to name the principle subject and the source used to throw light on it.

⁴⁹⁶ Ted Hughes, ‘The Thought Fox’, in *Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn, Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 35.

⁴⁹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 81.

⁴⁹⁸ Black (1962), 44.

conception of what constitutes victory is also challenged, subverting notions of victory as military success.⁴⁹⁹ Another example, highlighting the need for a variety of metaphors for God, is the metaphor ‘God is father’. Here we are modifying both our understanding of God and of fatherhood. The transference moves in both directions; our understanding of God is potentially opened up, and so is our understanding of fatherhood, which is elevated both in terms of our expectation of what a father should be and in terms of the potential for actions committed in the name of fatherhood to be divinised. Over-reliance on male metaphors for God implicitly denigrates the female.

The lyrical preacher needs to be sensitive to the wider implications of the metaphors they employ, keenly aware that unintended messages can be communicated by figurative language. For example, a sermon preached shortly after the Japanese earthquake of May 2011, on the subject of appropriate and prayerful rest, almost de-railed in the opening section with the preacher referring to a ‘tsunami of demands coming to meet us.’ The use of this metaphor clashed violently with the memories of scenes of devastation in Japan and seemed to downplay such images in comparison to the theme of overwork in a small college, an outcome the preacher would never have deliberately intended. The effect of this metaphor was that a number of hearers were distracted from the opening of the sermon as they dealt with their emotional response to the use of the metaphor, meaning that important sermonic moves in the opening stages were lost to some of the hearers. In this example the literal meaning of ‘tsunami’ competed with the relatively lightweight metaphorical freight being placed on the term. The literal meaning, being by far the stronger, caused massive disruption to the preacher’s intended meaning. The problem with this kind of interference is that it creates a sense of mistrust in the hearer. If the preacher was as unwise as to use this metaphor, can the rest of what is said be trusted? (In the case of this example, however, the preacher had a positive prior relationship with the hearers which meant the dissonance was set aside relatively quickly.)

Paul Ricoeur regards metaphor as ‘commerce between thoughts’ rather than a ‘simple transfer of words.’⁵⁰⁰ Max Black develops an interactive theory of

⁴⁹⁹ Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of the Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 78-9.

⁵⁰⁰ Ricoeur (1978), 80.

metaphor in *Models and Metaphors*.⁵⁰¹ He claims that what interact are thoughts about the principal and subsidiary subjects in the metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson consistently uphold the view that metaphor is primary an issue of thought and consequent action.⁵⁰² This interaction creates new insights. These interactive thoughts are the ‘system of associated commonplaces’⁵⁰³ linked with the principal and subsidiary elements in the metaphor.⁵⁰⁴ The metaphor ‘man is a wolf’ will not work in a context which has a different set of lupine commonplaces: where, for example, wolves are regarded as gods. Most useful for the preacher is that Black’s theory underscores the point that metaphors function in speech communities with shared assumptions and beliefs. Where those commonplaces do not exist, metaphors break down. Thus to describe God as shepherd in a context where the concept of shepherd has few shared commonplaces is to offer an ineffective metaphor. The implications for the preacher are clear: she needs to look for new metaphors *and* find ways of re-invigorating the old metaphors. If people are to engage with the richness of biblical metaphors, there is a need to create shared associations of commonplaces. This is one of the tasks of developing biblical literacy: increasing people’s cognitive and emotional familiarity with the key biblical metaphors. Preachers also need to attend carefully to their means of communication outside the speech community of the Church. This is one of the vital tasks of evangelistic preaching, finding metaphors which convey the gospel in a culture which does not share the associated commonplaces of a biblical worldview.

Metaphor has the power to generate recognition of similarity between two apparently dissimilar items. Wayne Booth offers a powerful and evocative example of this in an account of a court hearing in which a large firm was defending a suit from a smaller one and apparently winning:

Then the lawyer for the small utility said, speaking to the jury, almost as if incidentally to his legal case, ‘So now we see what it is. They got us where they want us. They holding us up with one hand, their good sharp fishin’ knife

⁵⁰¹ Black (1962), 38-47.

⁵⁰² Lakoff and Johnson (1980), 153.

⁵⁰³ Black (1962) 40.

⁵⁰⁴ In the metaphor ‘man is a wolf’, the principal element is ‘man’, since this is the focal point of the metaphor. ‘Wolf’ is the subsidiary element, used to help us gain understanding of ‘man’.

in the other, and they sayin', "you jes set still, little catfish, we're jes going to gut ya."'⁵⁰⁵

The use of the dramatic metaphor, linking a small company with a 'little catfish, and depicting the larger company as a hunter, carries powerful inferences of butchery, bullying, and injustice. This, combined with the colloquial language and vivid, contextually relevant imagery, enabled the jury to see the matter in a new light. The penny drops and reality is re-described: metaphor has much more than mere ornamental function.

Black comments that poets and writers can create 'specially constructed systems of implications'⁵⁰⁶ to support metaphors:

But in a poem or a piece of sustained prose [or a sermon], the writer can establish a novel pattern of implications for the literal uses of key expressions, prior to using them as vehicles for metaphors.⁵⁰⁷

This, too, is an important point for the preacher. For example, in working to communicate a sense of the meaning of 'life from death' the preacher could draw from a pool of contextual and cultural commonplaces drawn from literal usage, so as to create a pattern of associations that begin to elucidate potential meanings for a concept difficult to convey. For example: the football club that avoids relegation; the unemployed person who finds work; the regeneration of industry on Teeside; or the work of the Corrymeela community. These instances create a series of associations with the concept of new possibilities in a situation of apparent hopelessness. The cognitive and emotive force of these associations can then be drawn on when exploring the biblical metaphor of life from death.

Black also talks about the organising power of metaphor which both suppresses and accentuates aspects of our understanding of the principal subject of the metaphor. This point is raised by Lakoff and Johnson as they explore the metaphor of argument in terms of a battle. In this metaphor, with its language of indefensible claims, weak points, strategy, shooting down arguments and so forth, the positive and cooperative aspects of serious argument tend to be suppressed. 'Someone who is arguing with you can be viewed as giving you his

⁵⁰⁵Wayne Booth, 'Metaphor as Rhetoric: The Problem of Evaluation', *Critical Enquiry*, Vol. 5. Issue 1 (Autumn, 1978), 52.

⁵⁰⁶Black (1962), 43.

⁵⁰⁷Black (1962), 43.

time, a valuable commodity, in an effort at mutual understanding'.⁵⁰⁸ Black develops this point through the metaphor of war in terms of a chess game which promotes certain aspects of war and suppresses others. Emphasis falls on war as strategy and manoeuvre, and the human cost of war is suppressed. Pieces are 'taken', no blood is shed and no cities destroyed. In the example of war as a game of chess, chess is seen as a battle, rather than a simple game; all elements of the metaphor are affected by the interaction. 'The system of implications does not remain unchanged by the action of the metaphorical utterance.'⁵⁰⁹

Metaphors for God have the power to give us new insights into the nature of God and to reveal to us our attitudes towards the subsidiary subjects we might use to enable a new vision of God. Imagine describing God using the metaphor of a single parent. The metaphor probes deeply our assumptions about lone parenting. It opens up potential points of empathetic connection between God and those who may have felt devalued in the eyes of a Church that frequently overplays the centrality of the nuclear family as a kingdom category; and asks us to think again about how we relate to God. For some the metaphor, with its inferences of self-sacrifice and struggle, may serve to bring God closer than the metaphor of God as king – with its particular portrayal of distant power, or God as shepherd – with its lack of resonance for the modern city dweller. This is not an argument for the abandoning of potentially difficult metaphors. It is rather that, along with strategies to reclaim them, new metaphors should be minted, which whilst creating problems of their own may also open up possibilities for imaginative insight and new apprehensions of the divine.

I. A. Richards reminds us of the importance of attending to the 'interanimation of words', arguing that we arrive at meaning through the whole utterance and its surrounding context,⁵¹⁰ rather than through lexemes in isolation. From here he builds his theory of metaphor as the interanimation of all the words in the utterance; he does not bracket some words out. The lyrical preacher will be attuned to the interanimation of words, images, and sentences throughout the sermon. (An example of this is provided in section four of this chapter.)

⁵⁰⁸ Lakoff and Johnson (1980), 10-13.

⁵⁰⁹ Ricoeur (1978), 88.

⁵¹⁰ Richards (1965), 55.

Developed since the mid-nineties, conceptual blending theory offers some useful insights for the preacher regarding how metaphors function, and also sheds light on the question of whether metaphor is principally a feature of thought or of language. This theory sees metaphor as a linguistic expression *because* it is the way we think,⁵¹¹ as Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate. Paul Ricoeur describes metaphor as a ‘commerce between thoughts ... a transaction between contexts’, describing metaphor as a ‘talent of thinking.’⁵¹² Conceptual blending theory builds on the account of metaphor in which knowledge of one area (the source) is mapped across to gain understanding of a second area (the target). This theory adds two more spaces to those of the ‘source’ and the ‘target’. These spaces are each ‘packets of conceptual knowledge’,⁵¹³ which may convey more information than is explicitly put into words in the metaphor. Conceptual blending adds ‘the generic space’ and the ‘blended space’.⁵¹⁴ The former contains the abstract concepts common to the source and target, and as such is not particularly innovative in metaphorical theory; it bears the ground of the metaphor. However, the key innovation of conceptual blending theory is the fourth space, the blend. This helps us to observe and analyse the way that metaphor can create implications in the blend that do not appear to originate in either the source or the target domains.

To elucidate, the following diagram is used to analyse the way metaphor operated in a story told in a sermon. The sermon opened with the preacher relating an incident which occurred when she lived in a flat in Oxford. Looking through the window into the street, the preacher saw a young girl of about six years, walking along the pavement in a pair of, what was assumed to be, her mother’s red, high-heeled shoes. The child was described as looking very pleased with herself, proud to be in her mother’s shoes, in spite of the fact she kept falling over as she tottered along. The preacher described being captivated by the scene, delighted by the child’s joy and determination. As she watched she became aware of a sense of God and saw a connection between how she felt observing the child and God’s response to our attempts to ‘walk in God’s shoes’.

⁵¹¹ P. Van Hecke. ‘Metaphor and Conceptual Blending’, in P. Van Hecke, ed., *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 218-19.

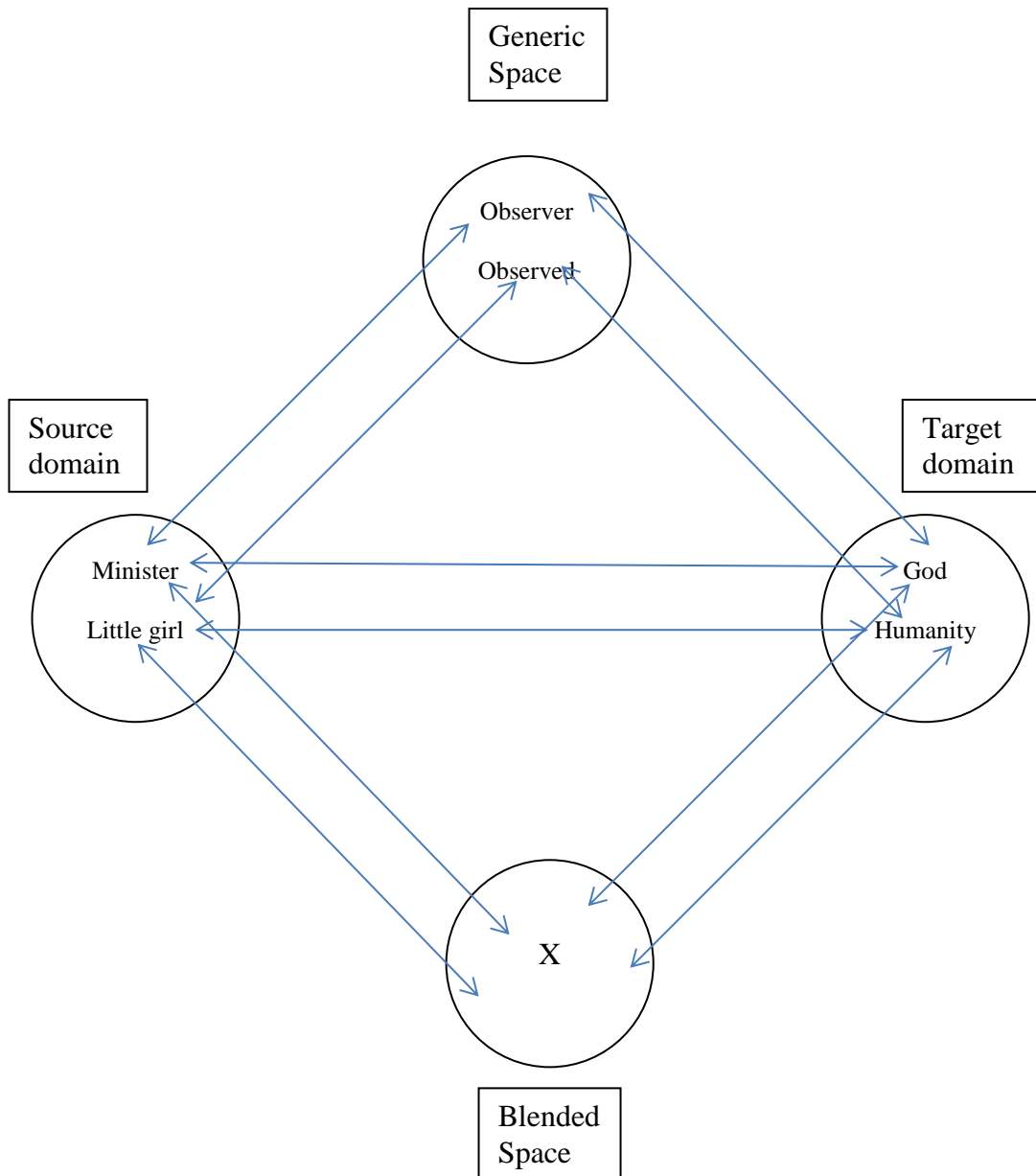
⁵¹² Ricoeur (1978), 80.

⁵¹³ Van Hecke (2005), 220.

⁵¹⁴ Van Hecke (2005), 220-221.

Applying the conceptual blending theory of metaphor uncovers some interesting implications which were never made explicit in the telling of the story.

Application of Conceptual Blending Theory to a Sermon Illustration



The connection between the minister in the source domain and God in the target domain was an inherent risk in the story, subverted by a deft narrative shift in which the minister, the 'observer', swiftly became the 'observed', the child trying to walk in her mother's shoes. The emergent structure in the blend (X), which was not explicitly present in the source, target or generic domain, is of God as mother (a point implied by the gender of the observer and the high-heeled

shoes), and a particular kind of mother: one who does not intervene when her children fall over in the process of learning, who is not critical, and who observes the attempts of her child to imitate her with pleasure and approval. Had the preacher directly introduced the idea of the maternal in God it is likely that some would have closed down the possibility because of being theologically and culturally conditioned into only ascribing masculine vehicles to God. The metaphor functioned well in the sermon since it created a sense of warmth and invitation to consider the implications of the story, and it also revealed to us something of the spirituality and character of the preacher, generating a willingness to listen seriously to what this preacher wanted to communicate.

Picking up a point raised earlier in relation to the interactive theory of metaphor, conceptual blending stresses that the meaning of the metaphor is not only to be found in the blend:

Information from the blend can be projected back to the input spaces, resulting in a renewed understanding of these spaces.⁵¹⁵

For example, the blended space in the example above influences the way the relationship between God and humanity is understood in the target domain, as well as affecting the congregational understanding of their vicar in the source domain. This in turn points up the need for a variety of metaphors, since this metaphor alone portrays humanity as children, which implicitly reduces the degree of responsibility we hold for our failure to walk appropriately in the divine path. Ramsey underscores this need for a variety of metaphors:

All attempts to explain the nature and relations of the Deity must largely depend on metaphor, and no one metaphor can exhaust those relations. Each metaphor can only describe one aspect of the nature and being of the Deity, and the inferences that can be drawn from it have their limits when they conflict with the inferences that can be drawn from other metaphors describing other aspects.⁵¹⁶

Thus if God is king, lord, and potentate he is so in a fatherly way, as a protective shepherd or a fierce mother bear. This riotous mixing of metaphors reflects the imaginative creativity of the biblical writers and calls forth all the imaginative

⁵¹⁵ Van Hecke (2005), 223.

⁵¹⁶ Ramsey (1957), 164.

ingenuity of the preacher. Similarly, McFague talks of the importance of a plurality of models.⁵¹⁷ Preachers need to adopt a wide range of models, thinking creatively of new metaphors, and challenging the built in assumptions of old ones. Although Ann Loades critiques McFague for collapsing models and metaphors into one category, according to Black, models can be seen as ‘sustained and systematic metaphors’.⁵¹⁸ Loades sees that metaphors catch ‘all sorts of strands of association in a text or cluster of texts’.⁵¹⁹ These various strands of association can help to balance our metaphors for God. David Brown writes in relation to metaphors in hymnody: ‘In pulling against one another, rival metaphors can then help generate a better balance.’⁵²⁰

Metaphoric language stands as a guard against the human will to power which wants to close down and control with flattening, fixed statements. ‘One metaphor ... constantly leads into another, and so definite closure is forever precluded.’⁵²¹ The imaginative eye will always note that there is more to be said and more to be said in better ways. Metaphor leaves room for mystery and at the same time invites encounter with that Mystery: the encounter of disclosure, discernment, commitment, and faith. Hence figurative language is not merely useful to the sermon, it is essential:

The power of metaphorical language is awesome, With metaphor we can form attitudes, emotions, and profound understandings in congregational consciousness.⁵²²

5.4 Through the Ear you See

Writing for the ear, which is an essential aspect of lyrical preaching, requires the employment of multi-sensory language, helping the hearer to imaginatively see, hear, smell, touch, and taste the scene. Preaching can be seen as visual speech, or verbal iconography, a form of ‘orality which bridges the word-image

⁵¹⁷ McFague (1982), 138-144.

⁵¹⁸ Black (1962), 236.

⁵¹⁹ Ann Loades, ‘Review of *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*’, by Sallie McFague, in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 4, Issue 1 (1990), 141-142.

⁵²⁰ Brown, (2008), 96.

⁵²¹ Brown (2008), 8.

⁵²² Buttrick (1987), 191.

divide'.⁵²³ This resonates with the purpose and nature of preaching in the lyrical voice.

Martin Luther King underscored this point when he expressed his reluctance to have a volume of sermons printed on the basis of 'the fact that a sermon is not an essay to be read but a discourse to be heard...directed towards the listening ear rather than the reading eye.'⁵²⁴ Jolyon Mitchell finds homiletic insight in the language of radio speech which can 'fire imagination with pictorial language.' He maintains, rightly, that pictorial and experiential language has the potential to create alternative imaginative worlds for listeners'.⁵²⁵ He offers the following extract from a radio report by American war correspondent Ed Murrow, master of the 'little picture', to highlight the effectiveness of description which attends to detail:

One night last week I stood in front of a smashed grocery store and heard a dripping inside. It was the only sound in all London. Two cans of peaches had been drilled through by flying glass and the juice was dripping down onto the floor.⁵²⁶

Analysing this, we see/hear that the onomatopoeic focus on the sound of the peach juice, combined with the hyperbolic statement that this was 'the only sound in London' creates a haunting and evocative effect. The reporter effectively creates a 'close up' of the drops of syrup and, with an economy of words, paints a sense of destruction and waste without over-describing the scene. Too much description closes down the space the hearer has to step into the discourse and imaginatively appropriate the scene for themselves. Too many adjectives 'clutter oral language and prevent communication.'⁵²⁷ Sensitive to this danger, the lyrical preacher will rely on nouns and verbs as the tools of description.⁵²⁸

On the basis of his research into radio speech, Mitchell offers four imperatives to the preacher: to listen, picture, translate and edit.⁵²⁹ He recommends 'multi-faceted listening': listening to the context, the congregation, the theological

⁵²³ Jolyon Mitchell, *Visually Speaking: Radio and the Renaissance of Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 234.

⁵²⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) ix-x, in Mervyn A. Warren, *King Came Preaching* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2001), 151-152.

⁵²⁵ Mitchell, (1999), 220, 6,

⁵²⁶ Mitchell (1999), 52.

⁵²⁷ Buttrick (1987), 192.

⁵²⁸ Richard Eslinger, *Pitfalls in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 11.

⁵²⁹ Mitchell (1999), 223-234.

issues raised in popular culture, the nature of everyday language, the musicality of words themselves, and the acoustic environment of scriptural narrative. We might add to this the need for deep listening for the whisper of God. Mitchell's plea for multi-faceted listening can be connected to Theissen's argument for the importance of 'multi-dimensional preaching'.⁵³⁰ This is preaching which seeks to speak to the individual, and address the social and cosmic dimensions of faith. This calls for sustained listening across a range of fields. Theissen explores how concentrated images and more concrete symbols can come alive in all three dimensions. Lyrical preaching needs to ensure that in its imagery and in its relationship to the rest of the liturgy the importance of multi-dimensional address is kept in mind. Where Mitchell has stressed the importance of concrete, pictorial language over the conceptual and abstract, as the primary dialect of preaching, Theissen points out the importance of vivid homiletic imagery being integrated into the argument of the sermon, reminding us that the figurative needs to be harnessed.⁵³¹ Images and illustrations, which are 'images grown up into narrative',⁵³² need to be tightly stitched into the structure of the sermon or they will tend to pull away from the narrative flow of the sermonic argument. Mitchell reminds the preacher of the importance of avoiding religious jargon, advocating the translation of biblical and theological terms into vivid, conversational language. His final imperative for the preacher is to edit, a process involving the removal of redundant expression, which Eslinger calls 'empty-calorie language'. Eslinger offers a number of examples: overused adverbs such as 'truly', 'very' or 'really'; phrases such as 'if only we would', 'if only we might', 'I just want...'; sloppy fillers such as 'you know', 'well' and 'like'.⁵³³ We might add to this list clichés such as 'each and every one', and bullying imperatives of the 'should' and 'ought' variety.

Whilst part of the editing task is editing out, another aspect is marking up the text or outline to cue variations in tone, pitch, pace, and volume. This underscores the point that the sermon is not simply a piece of writing but a form of oral communication.

⁵³⁰ Theissen (1995), 96-101.

⁵³¹ Theissen (1995), 116.

⁵³² David Day, *A Preaching Workbook* (London: Lynx, 1998), 106. See also Sangster (1946), 13 where Sangster describes figures of speech as 'minor illustrations.'

⁵³³ Eslinger (1996), 15.

The following is an extract from a sermon based on Luke 8.22-39. It demonstrates a concern for the lyrical voice, seeking to create a multi-sensory experience in words, showing awareness of the interanimative potential of language, the importance of context, of careful listening to the narrative flow of the gospel, and the need to earth the sermon in the everyday.

First let's zoom in on the disciples after the storm has been stilled. There they are, hair plastered down by lake water, crouching in a half-submerged boat, its hull caressed by gentle wavelets. For all the calm around them, in their hearts and minds they are buffeted by questions: fear, awe, wonder. Perhaps a tempest of recrimination blasts at them? They have woken up to their spiritual amnesia.

Peter – have you forgotten so soon? You saw the nets breaking as the fish slapped into the boat. You recognised Jesus as Holy, as Lord. You saw him heal people. You heard him teach. You were there at Nain when he told the dead man to get up, and he did.

No, I don't think the calm on the lake is matched by calm in the disciples' hearts:

'How could we have been so stupid?'

'How could we have forgotten?'

'Where is our faith?'

'He stands before us – He has power over the elements.'

'Here is God with us.'

Jesus the storm bringer.

And what of us? Are we immune to this spiritual amnesia?

Have you had those moments of an intense sense of God, times when you have prayed and seen God at work?

That retreat when you were overwhelmed by the love of God?

That time in the garden when the wonder of creation moved you so deeply you wept?

Sitting in the sublime beauty of a quiet Cathedral, infused with a sense of Presence?

A moment with a mentor or spiritual director when you see that what looked like death is a gateway to life?

Perhaps you write your experience in a journal and come across it sometime later and you are surprised by the memory.

'How could I have forgotten this?'

The tensions, trivialities, and traumas of life have robbed you.

The banality of life numbed you in its routine.

Spiritual amnesia.

It shrinks Jesus down until he is dashboard sized.

We forget - the Lord of heaven and earth,

God almighty,

is only a heartbeat away.

Where is our faith?

Sometimes we need a storm to wake us up.

Jesus is a storm bringer.

He brings a tempest of realisation that tears up our self-reliance, uproots our pint sized idols...

The preacher is seeking to write for the ear, creating a series of strong visual images. Stormy images such as ‘hair plastered down’, ‘crouching in a half-submerged boat’, ‘buffeted by questions’, ‘tempest of recrimination blasts’, ‘we need a storm to wake us up’, and ‘uproots our pint sized idols’ contrast with the calmer imagery of ‘hull caressed by gentle wavelets’, ‘all the calm around them’, and ‘calm on the lake’. The metaphor of Jesus as a storm bringer, which was repeated at the end of each move throughout the sermon, helped to connect the events on the lake with the ‘storm’ Jesus creates in Geresene. It also generates tension, pulling away from the commonplace homiletic decision to preach a sermon on the Christ who calms our storms. The layering of examples of Jesus’ power resonates with the language of ‘Lord of heaven and earth’ and seeks to generate imaginative shock through juxtaposing such description with metaphors of Jesus as ‘dashboard sized’ and our ‘pint sized idols’. The inflated language of ‘the Lord of heaven and earth, God almighty’ is juxtaposed with the image ‘only a heartbeat away’, highlighting a sense of transcendence embracing immanence. The preacher attends to the onomatopoeic potential of language in the image of ‘fish slapped into the boat’, and shows a playful awareness of the musicality of alliteration in the reference to the ‘tensions, trivialities, and traumas’ of life. The preacher shifts perspective, employing a technique, suggested by Tom Troeger and David Buttrick, of using the techniques of the movie script.⁵³⁴ We begin with a close-up on the disciples in the boat – their misery framed. This is followed with stills of Peter’s previous experience of Jesus earlier in the Lukan narrative, before we overhear the imagined inner dialogue of the disciples. The sermon then shifts to addressing the hearer directly with potential instances, deliberately chosen with a particular congregation in mind, of our contemporary ‘spiritual

⁵³⁴ Thomas H. Troeger, *Ten Strategies for Preaching in a Multi-media Culture* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1996), 48-59; Buttrick (1987), 55-68.

amnesia'. In this example the preacher has sought to apply the tools of the poet to the task of preaching, seeking to discover the lyrical voice.

The aim throughout this chapter has been to demonstrate that imaginative engagement is vital in preaching in the lyrical voice. Such preaching embraces all aspects of imaginative function. It requires that preachers exercise their sensing imagination, entering into and evoking powerful images of the biblical text, and appealing to the sensing imagination of the hearer through their use of language. The intuitive imagination fuses images and ideas together, bringing in elements from the wider passage within which their particular text is set and looking for the analogical connections between material in the passage and aspects of contemporary life. Employing the affective imagination allows the preacher to stand in the shoes of the biblical characters and consider the text from the perspectives of their hearers. The intellectual imagination explores the 'if...then' structure of supposition. In the case of the example above *if* Jesus the storm bringer creates 'a tempest of realisation that tears up our self-reliance' and 'uproots our pint sized idols' *then* what are the implications?

Lyrical preaching is fundamentally dependent on the employment of imagination. Also vital in preaching is the preacher's own self understanding. The master-metaphors framing the preacher's self-understanding will influence their theological grasp on the purpose of preaching and their homiletic practice. This theme is discussed in the following chapter where again we see the vital role of imagination in preaching.

Chapter Six: Imagining the Preaching Task

As we have seen, imagination is deeply connected to how we frame the world and ourselves in it. It is vital in preaching not only in terms of how we shape and express content, but also in how we see the preaching task itself. How the preacher imagines, sees or looks upon their role will affect the way they engage with the task of preaching: the metaphors that master us shape our practice. David Trygve examines the metaphors of preacher as teacher, herald and artist, exploring their concomitant conceptual systems.⁵³⁵ This chapter evaluates these metaphors and their entailments, and also offers the metaphors of preacher as spiritual director, jazz musician, and jester as potentially helpful, creative, and theologically resonant ways for the preacher to look upon their praxis. The drive of the argument is not to claim that any *one* master metaphor *should* be adopted as the best; some metaphors are likely to be more or less appropriate in some situations and some metaphors combine well together. The contention here is that the preacher needs to evaluate how they imagine their role as preacher because these internalised models carry theological freight and will have practical outworking. Connected with this, it is important that hearers are encouraged to explore the on-looks they bring to the preaching event which will affect the way they engage with it. Preachers can affect hearers' on-looks, for good or ill, by their attitude and pulpit demeanour. The preacher needs to employ imagination to explore the messages being communicated by her choice of words, her paralinguistic 'speech', and the entailments of her underlying master metaphor(s).

6.1 The Preacher as Teacher

The metaphor of preacher as teacher has a long pedigree in Christian history. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book IV (AD 426), the earliest homiletics textbook, Augustine reiterates Cicero's goals of oratory, 'Accordingly a great orator has truly said that "an eloquent man must speak so as to teach, to delight, and to

⁵³⁵ David Johnson Trygve, *The Preacher as Artist: Metaphor, Identity, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*, PhD Thesis, (University of St. Andrews, 2010), <<http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/944>> [accessed 15th August 2011].

persuade.”⁵³⁶ In Augustine’s analysis preaching has two aspects: the interpretation of scripture and the teaching of that meaning.⁵³⁷ The preacher as teacher is to ‘teach what is right and to refute what is wrong...to conciliate the hostile, to rouse the careless, and to tell the ignorant both what is occurring at present and what is probable in the future.’⁵³⁸ This teaching can embrace different styles: narrative and pointed propositional structures with a variety of affective appeals:

If the hearers need teaching, the matter treated of must be made fully known by means of narrative. On the other hand, to clear up points that are doubtful requires reasoning and the exhibition of proofs. If, however, the hearers require to be roused rather than instructed, in order that they may be diligent to do what they already know, and to bring their feelings into harmony with the truths they admit, greater vigour of speech is needed. Here entreaties and reproaches, exhortations and upbraidings, and all the other means of rousing the emotions, are necessary.⁵³⁹

Whilst Augustine does not refer to this, it seems that the tasks he outlines require the active engagement of the preacher’s imagination. Communicating effectively in narrative form calls for imaginative shaping, handling ‘scene shifts’, pacing, tonal variation, and gesture. To explain concepts clearly requires the ability to understand what makes an idea hard to grasp and then to find apposite images or models to enable a new seeing. To ‘conciliate and rouse’ requires the preacher to engage affectively with the hearer, matching content, language, tone, and paralinguistic emphases to the affective goal. For Augustine, the preacher’s aim is persuasion. He comments that there is no profit in confessing truth and praising eloquence if the hearer ‘does not yield his consent, when it is only for the sake of securing his consent that the speaker in urging the truth gives careful attention to what he says?’ In Augustine’s analysis, rhetoric is an important tool to use to this end; it has a role to play in helping to make clear what was obscure. He draws an analogy between the use of persuasive devices and adding flavour to food: ‘the very food without which it is impossible to live

⁵³⁶ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk. 4, Ch. 12. 27, <<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/augustine/ddc4.html>> [accessed 22nd February 2013].

⁵³⁷ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk. 4, Ch.1. 1.

⁵³⁸ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk. IV, Ch. 4. 6.

⁵³⁹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk. IV, Ch. 4. 6.

must be flavoured to meet the tastes of the majority.’⁵⁴⁰ Judging what the tastes of the majority are (never mind a consideration of the needs of the minority) requires imaginative engagement with the context, community, and individual. ‘Flavouring’ the sermon appropriately, so that the needs of the learners are central to the educative act, requires at least the engagement of the affective function and a strong sensing imagination which notices what is going on in the hearers’ environment, and pays attention to the ordinary theology therein.

Where does the responsibility fall in Augustine’s model of preacher as teacher? In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine puts considerable weight on the eloquent skill of the teacher to successfully teach, delight, and persuade the hearer. He urges that the laws of rhetoric are not neglected ‘being indeed specially necessary for the Christian teacher, whom it behoves to excel in eloquence and power of speech.’ At first glance it does seem that Augustine places all the responsibility for teaching with perspicuity and persuasion on the preacher. However, in chapters 15, 16 and 30 he stresses the divine agency at the heart of preaching. He urges the preacher to pray for himself and his hearers before he attempts to speak; ‘he will succeed more by piety in prayer than by gifts of oratory.’ He makes the point that, since God knows the hearts of all, he knows ‘what is expedient at a given moment for us to say, or to be heard saying’. It is God, he says, ‘in whose hands we and our speeches are.’ Augustine urges preachers to ‘learn all that is to be taught’ and acquire a suitable faculty of speech for a preacher. He balances this with the enjoinder that when the time to preach comes the preacher should remind themselves of these words, ‘Take no thought how or what ye shall speak; for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you.’ Referring to the reception of the sermon, Augustine comments that ‘no one learns aright the things that pertain to life with God, until God makes him ready to learn from Himself.’ He draws an analogy between medicines and rhetorical devices; both ‘applied through the instrumentality of man, are of advantage to the soul only when God works to make them of advantage.’ In the penultimate chapter, Augustine again stresses the importance

⁵⁴⁰ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk. IV, Ch. 13. 29; Ch. 11. 26.

of the preacher's prayer that God 'put into his mouth a suitable discourse.'⁵⁴¹ Augustine's model roots the initiative for the revelatory act with God, but this in no way negates the role of the preacher who works under the agency of the Spirit.

Augustine's model of preacher as teacher is useful in that it calls the preacher to use the artefacts of culture (in this case classical rhetoric) to help teach the scriptures. It calls for dependency on God's grace, and a responsible development and exercise of communication skills with the end goal of persuading the hearer. However, Trygve argues convincingly that Augustine's enduring model of preacher as teacher has been re-shaped by the modern emphasis on rationality and individualism.⁵⁴² The tension in Augustine's model between divine and human agency shifted with the modernist stress on reason as the arbiter of truth. The ascendancy of Enlightenment rationalism meant that reason became the authoritative compass in society. Truth was no longer regarded as lying in the biblical narrative but in verifiable ideas and propositions grasped by the autonomous power of reason, to be communicated in a didactic model of the preacher as teacher. The task of the preacher in modernity is to fit the scriptural revelation to this scientific worldview, resulting in sermons dealing with propositions extracted from scripture, with appeals to reason and logic.

Buttrick comments:

It is no accident that a rational, objective homiletic arose at the same time as scientific method. Rational homiletics does seem to parody scientific procedure in which an object is isolated for study and a general deduction is followed by descriptive statements.⁵⁴³

The on-look of preacher as teacher, affected by the modernist turn to the self, has a number of serious negative consequences relating to: the handling of the biblical text; the shape of the sermon form; the interpretation and use of figurative language; the relationship between faith and reason; the danger of adopting contemporary communication techniques as though they were neutral; and the unhelpful stress on the distance between the pulpit and the pew.

⁵⁴¹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk IV, Introduction; Ch. 15. 32; Ch. 16. 33; Ch. 30. 63.

⁵⁴² Trygve (2010), 81-100.

⁵⁴³ David G. Buttrick, 'Interpretation and Preaching', *Interpretation*, Vol. 35 (1981), 47.

In terms of handling the biblical text, Buttrick sees a ‘method of distillation’ at work when passages are reduced to single propositional ‘truths.’⁵⁴⁴ This approach implicitly places the reason of the interpreter over and against the imaginative vision of the biblical writer: the preacher risks mutilating the particular biblical genre in extracting propositions. The form of the subsequent sermon, rather than being shaped by the intent of the text, generally follows a deductive, logical, step by step, pointed shape which betrays its captivity to the *telos* of rational persuasion. There is little space here for imagination, wonder, mystery, or playfulness. There is no reason to dismiss the pointed deductive sermon out of hand, but it is important that the preacher is critically aware of the sermonic style they are using, the reasons for that choice, and that they are not blind to the assumptions embedded in the particular approach adopted. Using an approach that seeks to give a reasoned account for a particular text or doctrine is not the same as saying that reason is the only vehicle for and arbiter of serious discourse. The imagination is capable of bearing truth and in some contexts, with some congregations, a sermon working with an affective appeal to the imagination will achieve a better hearing.

The danger in the modernist understanding of the preacher as teacher can play out in the way figurative language is handled, both in its interpretation and deployment. The tensive, multi-valent nature of such scriptural language is distorted if it is boiled down into propositions. The modernist teacher-preacher model tends to use figurative language as ornamentation in service of the communication of rational points. The wedding of the preacher as teacher model to the agenda of a modernist outlook elevates reason over faith and completely overlooks the point that faith is not, in human terms, reasonable. Paul offers a powerful corrective to this perspective (1 Corinthians 1.18-31) which demotes the human desire for proofs and wisdom before the exalted foolishness of God which is ‘wiser than human wisdom.’ The modernist elevation of reason results in hubris: the arrogant declaration that ‘if I don’t think it is reasonable it cannot be true,’ elevating the thinking ‘I’ over the creator God, and eviscerating the wonder of faith and mystery. The modernist mind seeks to pin faith down like a butterfly on a board: beautiful, but dead.

⁵⁴⁴ Buttrick (1981), 48.

Another potentially negative entailment of this model is the uncritical adoption of communication aids. Augustine assumed rhetoric was neutral. However, like any communication medium, rhetoric is value laden. Can the gospel be corralled into linear logical forms? What does that do to mystery? The deductive sermon presupposes that all can be rationally explained, and even the inductive sermon in the teaching mode tends to assume that everyone will neatly arrive at the conclusion the preacher reached in their study of the text. This seems to force a sense of uniformity on the hearers. More recent technological communication developments carry risks if used as though they were neutral ‘tools’. PowerPoint can give support to the sermon and provide helpful material for visual learners. However, uncritical usage can have a number of deleterious effects: images carry with them their own narrative freight which can easily tear away from the particular narrative drive of the sermon. The theological entailments of a film clip may be at odds with the theological focus of the sermon; preachers need to take care to exegete the film carefully. Images operate as ‘eye candy’⁵⁴⁵ and as long as an image is on a screen people will look to the image rather than the preacher. Judicious use of blank screens is essential to avoid seriously distorting the theological nature of the sermon as embodied event. Too many words on a screen and ‘busy’ slide transitions distract and relocate the focus from the interaction between hearer and preacher to a dubious, and often irritated, interaction between viewer and screen. David Heywood makes the wise observation that using PowerPoint to communicate the main headings of an address results in the emphasis being shifted ‘from the intention of the sermon to its information content.’⁵⁴⁶ Adoption of new technologies such as Twitter can provide brilliant interactive opportunities used with a filter, such as a third party monitoring a Twitter feed, who can pass comments or questions to the preacher at appropriate moments built into the sermon structure. My experience of sermons during which comments go straight to a ‘twitter fall’ (a screen displaying all tweets in real time) visible to all, suggests that the hearer is distracted from the preacher by reading tweets – the eye-candy factor at work. Another risk of using Twitter in sermons is that it shuts out those who do not

⁵⁴⁵ Geoffrey Stevenson, ‘Communication and Communion’, in *Preaching with Humanity: A Practical Guide for Today's Church*, eds. Geoffrey Stevenson and Stephen Wright (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), 105.

⁵⁴⁶ Heywood, (2013), 24.

have access to a smartphone. However, Twitter is a very effective tool in broadcasting aspects of the sermon to a wider audience and it enables a preacher to see how different people have heard the sermon, through an analysis of what they considered worth passing on and how they compressed those ideas into 140 characters.

A further limitation of the preacher as teacher metaphor relates to the distance and power imbalance it creates between the pulpit and the pew. Christine Smith finds a deeply patriarchal bias in this model, which assumes the set-apartness of the preacher. She argues that women gain their sense of self through sustaining affiliations and relationships, through intimacy and interconnectedness. Shaped by the experience of being mothered by women, female identity tends to emphasise attachment, identification and bonding, whereas male identity is associated with differentiation and detachment from the mother. 'A boy's masculinity depends on *detachment*, a girl's femininity on her *attachment*.' On the basis of this, Smith comments that 'when the preacher is a woman, perhaps there is a radically different relational understanding at work in the act of proclamation.' There is a corrective to the masculine bias of the preacher as teacher model in Smith's metaphor of preacher as weaver. The weaving image overcomes the distance between pulpit and pew, highlighting the essential connection between the single threads and the whole cloth. It also highlights the imaginative vision involved in preaching and the importance of design.⁵⁴⁷

In her Bryn Mawr commencement address, Ursula Le Guin differentiates between mother and father tongue.⁵⁴⁸ The former we learn as children, 'a language always on the verge of silence and often on the verge of song'. It is the everyday language of story, subjective, conversational, common speech, which seeks to connect with others. In contrast, the father tongue is learned in the academy. It is the language of public discourse and speech making. Is this the language of the preacher as teacher in the enlightenment model? Given that the father tongue is distancing, one-way communication, spoken from above, seeking no answer or response, it seems this is the dialect of the enlightenment pulpit. Le Guin praises the father tongue in its search for objectivity and yet on

⁵⁴⁷ Smith (1989), 15-21; 32-40.

⁵⁴⁸ Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Bryn Mawr Commencement Address' in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 147-160.

balance her address ‘feels’ at odds with this praise. She speaks of how men have often learned that the mother tongue, with its inherent vulnerability, is not a safe language, and they forget the language of their childhood. Does this make it harder for men to inhabit the childlike trust in God of which Jesus speaks?⁵⁴⁹ In terms of the father tongue such trust seems potentially yielding, relational, and vulnerable. Le Guin refers to the way that ‘institutions of patriarchy’ teach us to attend to those who speak the father tongue and in so doing we can easily tune out the mother-tongue speakers.

It is important to note that Sandra Bem’s Sex-Role Inventory shows that masculine and feminine attributes are both psychologically and socially constructed.⁵⁵⁰ Users of mother and father tongue may be male or female, and given that masculinity and femininity are orthogonal constructs we can expect to find different traits emerging in different circumstances. Astley connects ordinary theology with the mother-tongue. He also notes that more women tend to speak it than men. He observes that male God-talk tends to be more cool, analytic, and detached than female, though not as detached as the language of the academy.⁵⁵¹ If ordinary theology tends towards the mother tongue, and this tongue focusses on relationship and trust, then perhaps preaching should attend primarily, though not exclusively, to the cadences of this speech mode.

Le Guin speaks of a third language, her ‘native tongue’. This is the language of art. It is the welding of public language to private experience, the wedding of father and mother tongue. Le Guin does not say this, but her description sounds like lyrical preaching at its best. Artistic, tensive, bold, honest, seeking connection with the other, this is public language that notices and names the essential things of life: God, love, humanity, forgiveness, the truth of God’s kingdom among us, the news of God’s Spirit who summons forth our best and

⁵⁴⁹ Matthew 18.3; 19.14; Mark 10.13-16; Luke 18.15-17.

⁵⁵⁰ The Bem Sex-Role Inventory is a paper and pencil self-report instrument on which respondents indicate on a seven point scale the degree to which each of sixty different attributes describes them. It consists of 60 descriptors, 20 of which reflect the definition of masculinity in the American culture of 1974 - when it was devised. Words such as assertive and independent are in this list. 20 words reflect the definition of femininity - such as ‘tender’ and ‘understanding’ and 20 words act as neutral buffers - such as: ‘helpful’, and ‘friendly’. See Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The Lenses of Gender* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 118-119.

⁵⁵¹ Astley (2002), 78-80; Jeff Astley, ‘Giving Voice to the Ordinary’ in *Exchanges of Grace: Essays in Honour of Ann Loades*, eds., Natalie K. Watson and Stephen Burns (London: SCM, 2008), 204-207; Anthony Lees-Smith ‘Ordinary Theology as “Mother Tongue”’, in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, eds. Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 23-31.

names and transforms our worst. This is a language that learns its cadences from the ordinary world of laughter, joy, pain, loneliness and misery, and names these realities boldly in the contexts where the father tongue, distancing, analytic, uninvolved, has often held sway. The art Le Guin speaks of is not ‘some ejaculative act of ego but (as) a way, a skilful and powerful way, of being in the world.’⁵⁵²

The preacher as teacher model *can* imply that the one in the pulpit is the expert, holding all the knowledge, and that the purpose of the sermon is the dissemination of that information. However, this criticism depends on a particular understanding of the role of a teacher. According to Trygve’s summary, a teacher has a vocation to teach; causes others to know something; guides the study and development of students; imparts knowledge; instructs by example; and forms habits and practices of learning.⁵⁵³ If we focus on the formational role of the teacher, which Trygve does not develop, this helps to correct the top down pedagogic model of the preacher as teacher. Such a teacher will begin with the hearer, will listen to their ‘ordinary theology’ in the dialect of the mother tongue, seeking to work with the community in discerning what God is doing in the present moment. This understanding of the preacher is perhaps better envisaged under the model of the preacher as spiritual director (a type of teacher), which is explored later in this chapter.

6.2 The Preacher as Herald

The ascendancy of the metaphor of preacher as *keryx* or herald in Barth’s homiletic suggests his reaction to the influence of modernity on the preaching of his day, which highlighted the role of reason and autonomy as arbiters adjudicating the truth of God’s divine word. In Barth’s analysis we can never know God on the basis of our ability to translate biblical themes into rational, scientific, historical data. On the contrary, for Barth, revelation comes to us as a message from a king, through his herald, to his people:

Proclamation is human speech in and by which God Himself speaks like a king through the mouth of his herald, and which is meant to be heard and accepted as speech in and by which God Himself speaks, and therefore heard

⁵⁵² Le Guin (1989), 154-155.

⁵⁵³ Trygve (2010), 64.

and accepted in faith as divine decision concerning life and death, as divine judgment and pardon, eternal Law and eternal Gospel both together.⁵⁵⁴

Underpinning Barth's understanding of the preacher as herald is his insistence on the sovereignty of God: 'The fixed point from which all preaching starts is the fact that God has revealed himself.'⁵⁵⁵ The Bible is not the Word of God in the sense of a fixed, codified manual, or 'a state code that tells us precisely what the view of the state is.'⁵⁵⁶ Rather it *becomes* the Word of God through the interpretive agency of the Holy Spirit. The preacher 'can only live by faith in God's promise that the lightning that has struck in the past will strike again in the future.'⁵⁵⁷ Barth always privileges the biblical text above other authorities. Through it God speaks in 'an invasion of our world through words.'⁵⁵⁸ The preacher cannot turn to scripture as the fixed and immutable word of God, certain of being able to fasten upon it and communicate it into the hearts and minds of the listeners. The preacher's receptivity to God's word and the congregation's response are dependent upon a gift bestowed: a fresh revelatory 'event' that is preaching graced by God. The scriptures are not simply texts pointing to what people believed in another age and recording God's engagement with them; scripture speaks into the particularity of the present moment. The fact that a herald has anything to say depends entirely on the words they are given. 'In preaching, there is a voice that is beyond the voice of the preacher, that is, the very voice of God.'⁵⁵⁹ Positively, the preacher as herald metaphor offers us a reminder of the sovereign grace of God, points up the preacher's dependence on God and on the scriptures, and positions prayer at the centre of the practice of preaching:

The listening of the herald is thus prior to the herald's speaking. Essential disciplines for the preacher are the disciplines of hearing – prayerful, attentive, focused, obedient, and courageous receptivity – rather than the disciplines of delivery and address.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 57.

⁵⁵⁵ Karl Barth, *Prayer and Preaching* (London: SCM, 1964), 70.

⁵⁵⁶ William Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2006), 23.

⁵⁵⁷ Willimon (2006), 171.

⁵⁵⁸ Willimon (2006), 23.

⁵⁵⁹ Willimon (2006), 168.

⁵⁶⁰ Willimon (2006), 168.

If we accept the theological assertion that preaching begins with God, there is great comfort here for the preacher who is not left alone in the study wrestling to find a word, but is guided by the Living Word who interprets the Written Word and shapes the Spoken Word. This model is a corrective to the Pelagian risk inherent in the preacher as teacher model. However, there are a number of difficulties with the preacher as herald metaphor, concerning the nature of revelation, the humanity of the preacher, the reduced significance of context, a flattened homiletic style, the downplaying of rhetoric, and a negating of the importance of apologetics.

To image revelation in *Romans*, Barth used the image of a circle, representing time, which is intersected by a line, representing eternity.⁵⁶¹ The intersection is episodic, coming from outside as an uncontrollable event. However, in seeking to guard the sovereignty of God in the revelatory act, Barth runs the danger that the episodic, unpredictable nature of revelation makes God seem like the Scarlet Pimpernel, here then gone, fleeting and unreliable. In contrast to this intervallic understanding of revelation is Bonhoeffer's assertion that:

Our God ... is the God who has, in the Incarnation, freely bound himself to the world. We can therefore intelligently speak about the continuity and reliability of God's revelation, not simply its eventfulness.⁵⁶²

A theology of preaching needs to hold together the reliability of God's self-revelation (Bonhoeffer) with the sovereignty of God's control over that revelation (Barth) if the preacher is to remain confident in God and avoid justifying her sermons on the basis of her own rhetorical efforts.

Another difficulty with Barth's homiletic is the sense that the herald is little more than a neutral conduit for God's message. This implies a denial of the unique humanity of the preacher:

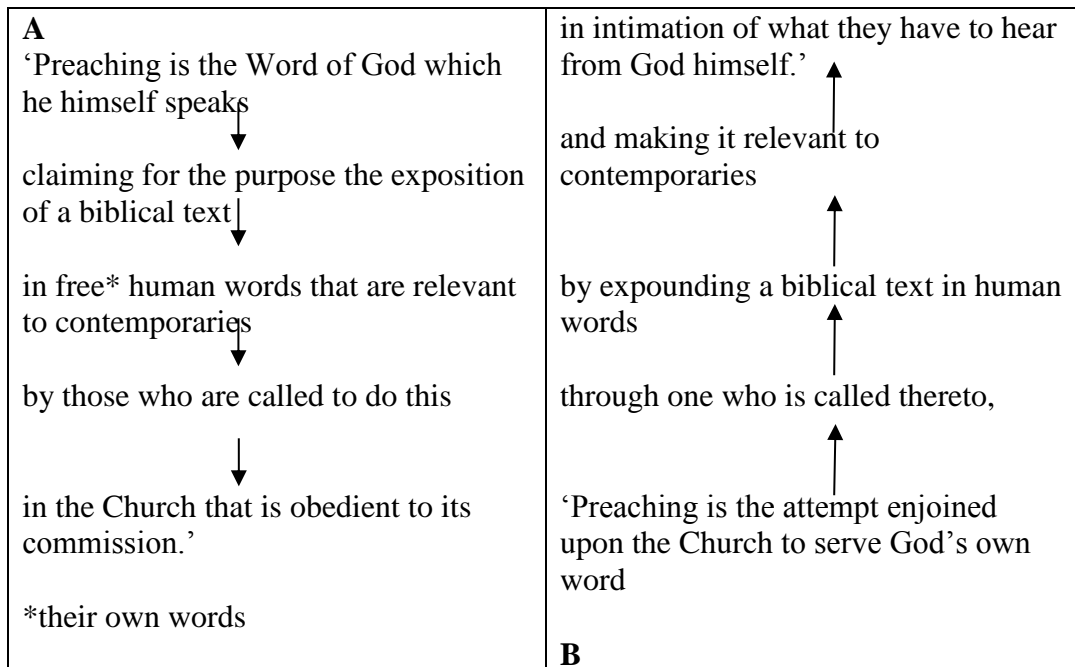
The preacher should simply believe the Gospel and say all he has to say on the basis of this belief. This means that the thrust of the sermon is always downhill, not uphill to a goal. Everything has already taken place.⁵⁶³

⁵⁶¹ Willimon (2006), 23.

⁵⁶² Bonhoeffer, in Willimon (2006), 173.

⁵⁶³ Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 53.

Is it possible to ‘simply believe the Gospel’ in a way that is separate from the cultural location and character of the preacher? Barth seems to treat the preacher as a mere conduit, which implies that the listeners are little more than receptacles. If the task of the preacher is simply to pass on a message, in which ‘everything has already taken place’, then the task is simply one of repetition. In Barth’s homiletic there is no place for rhetorical skill, imagination is unnecessary, even dangerous, as it might embellish, or confuse the message, or play into Feuerbach’s critique that religion is illusion in which we ‘first create God in our own image before we are created in God’s image’.⁵⁶⁴ Willimon comments that, ‘in stressing the role of God as the ‘real and only preacher’, the role of the preacher is almost driven from sight.’⁵⁶⁵ As a general comment on Barth’s position this seems quite justifiable. However, in *Homiletics*, Barth specifically attempts to define preaching using two formulas,⁵⁶⁶ which need to be held together as a way of expressing the relationship between the Word of God and the human word. These formulas are represented in a diagrammatic form here as a way of highlighting the directional thrust of both:



⁵⁶⁴Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 124. See also Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 11, 12.

⁵⁶⁵Willimon (2006), 252.

⁵⁶⁶Barth (1991), 44.

The preacher is not driven from sight in the Barthian homiletic task; rather (see B above, reading up the page) they are called in and with the Church to ‘serve God’s own word’. They are called as ‘specific people with their own characteristics and histories,’ to be themselves, rather than attempting to imitate another preacher.⁵⁶⁷ Barth stresses simplicity of speech to communicate the fruit of exegesis and meditation. There is a tension here – if preachers are to be themselves they need to use their specific gifts. The fruits of imaginative labour – rhetorical flourish, poetic insight, drama, and humour can be effective ways of communicating the reality of divine revelation. Lest we fall again into an over reliance on human skill, as the preacher wrestles with the impossibility of the task of saying anything about the sovereign God, Barth reminds us that the task is God’s initiative (see A above). The fact of divine initiative does not mean, however, that the preacher can be careless about the task of sermon construction. Barth makes the salutary comment that ‘if it is true in general that we must give an account of every idle word, we must do so especially in our preaching.’⁵⁶⁸

In a very short section of *Homiletics* he argues for the sermon to be written out in full, stating that ‘writing is a creative production.’ He calls for orderly language, appropriate to content, on the basis that the ‘right form is part of the right content.’⁵⁶⁹ Whilst this is hardly a ringing endorsement of the role of rhetoric, it does serve as a reminder that matters of form and a care for language and construction do concern Barth, and presumably have some role in the revelatory event, or why make the comment? Barth’s stress on the sermon being written out in full seems unnecessarily prescriptive, particularly when we note that Jesus’ preaching was in the oral mode and sought to persuade, to entertain, to confuse, and to delight, using a rich range of rhetorical devices. There is the risk that in writing a sermon script out in full, the preacher falls into the trap of writing for the eye and not the ear, the written word eclipsing the orality of the preaching event.

The preacher as herald model seems to overlook the character of the preacher and their relationship to the congregation as significant factors in the preaching event. Thomas Long comments that the underlying sense of movement in this

⁵⁶⁷ Barth (1991), 81-82.

⁵⁶⁸ Barth (1991), 119.

⁵⁶⁹ Barth (1991), 120.

model from God to hearer 'can give the impression of preaching as an anonymous message dropped into a box.'⁵⁷⁰ As discussed in chapter one, the authoritative nature of the sermon lies in the nature of the relationship between preacher and hearers, even if, as in the case of a guest speaker, that is a relationship which the preacher has to initiate in the event of the sermon itself, through their language and pulpit demeanour. Inevitably, the character of the preacher is a part of the event of the sermon, a point seriously downplayed in the preacher as herald model.

Barth stresses the centrality of the biblical text which leads him to downplay context:

On special occasions, e.g., the outbreak of war, the text must always stand above the theme of the day. Thoughts about the war must not be intruded into the text. More than ever in precisely these situations we must maintain obedience to the text. The Church can execute its true task only if it is not caught up in the general excitement but tries to achieve mastery over it by proclaiming what is above all things human.⁵⁷¹

However, Barth also contends that:

If preaching is to be congregational, there must also be an openness to the real situation of the congregation and reflection upon it so as to be able to take it up into the sermon.⁵⁷²

Preaching is exposition, not exegesis. It follows the text but moves on from it to the preacher's own heart and to the congregation.⁵⁷³

He stresses the importance of the preacher keeping central the question, 'How is it with us now?'⁵⁷⁴ There seems to be contradiction here: how can the preacher be open 'to the real situation of the congregation' and *not* attend to the wider context that congregation lives in? The answer to the question, 'How is it with us now?', is *bound* to be affected by issues such as 'the outbreak of war'! How can the preacher move from text, to heart, to congregation, and not address the concrete situations the congregation faces? To ring-fence the biblical text, not

⁵⁷⁰ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1989), 30.

⁵⁷¹ Barth, in Willimon (2006), 28.

⁵⁷² Barth (1991), 84.

⁵⁷³ Barth (1991), 81.

⁵⁷⁴ Barth (1991), 84.

allowing it to speak into the context of the upheavals and the joys of life, seems to consign the text into a kind of holy-otherness which, if pushed too far, feels and looks rather like irrelevance. This conclusion is bolstered by Barth's warning against preachers bringing in 'social and ethical' problems to the pulpit. He argues that these issues 'will always be there to seduce a preacher into having a shot at them.'⁵⁷⁵ Should there have been no preaching against slavery, apartheid, or segregation then? Was Martin Luther King having 'a shot' at the evils of segregation? Or was his preaching actually in line with Barth's injunction that preachers love their congregations? Barth himself writes 'It will not help to speak with the tongue of either men or angels if this love is missing.'⁵⁷⁶ Barth's stress on the text does lead him to downplay the importance of context in the preaching event. That preaching must be rooted in the biblical text, seeking to do in the sermon what the text itself is doing, does not mean that it should be silent on social, political, economic or ethical issues. The first two modes of revelation address such matters: Jesus (Living Word) addressed these areas in his teaching; the scriptures (Written Word) address these areas, especially in the Gospels and the Prophets; it should come as no surprise that the Word of God in the sermon (Spoken Word) addresses such areas of human life. To argue against this is to grasp after an indifferent God. Barth seems so keen to protect the sovereignty of God that he ends up limiting God; silencing God in areas of contemporary concern.

Another weakness in the preacher as herald image is that it 'cashes out' in a particular homiletic style. 'Barth's sermons assert and announce, but they almost never seduce, entice, cajole, and sneak up upon the hearer.' Yet, as Willimon points out, the 'biblical text delights in such allurements',⁵⁷⁷ in its rich array of genre. Given biblical textual diversity, why should we expect preaching to conform to the dictates of just one genre? Given the artistry of the biblical texts, we should expect all the tools of rhetoric to be available to the preacher, not as mere sermonic ornamentation, but as part of the preacher's artistic palette to be used in ways congruent with the content and communication of the message.

⁵⁷⁵ Barth (1991), 118.

⁵⁷⁶ Barth (1991), 84.

⁵⁷⁷ Willimon (2006), 190.

The homiletic tendency in recent years, seen in the texts of the New Homiletic, has been to focus primarily on the listener, advancing methods of fostering congregational hearing. Barth would resist aspects of the New Homiletic which seek to evoke an experience in the hearers, since that is the remit of God alone. God is the source of all our questions and the generative heart of all our experiences of preaching and listening to sermons. There is a helpful reminder here not to seek to devise preaching methods which are not centred on God. Undoubtedly though, the preacher does have agency, and therefore responsibility; but neither are sovereign. Humanity cannot seek through its own means to possess, control, fix or ensure the revelation of God. Any attempt to do so is idolatrous in intention, negating the lead role of God in the divine-human encounter, and failing to trust that ‘we really do have a God who redeems our speech, who breathes, discloses, and declares in a way that is beyond all of our rhetoric.’⁵⁷⁸ Nevertheless, preachers are bound to use the gifts they have, applying imagination and intelligence to ensuring that the sermon is the best they can give; that in itself is an act of worship. James Kay argues on the basis of the doctrine of *concursum* that ‘preaching is more faithful to the Word of God when it is fitting or appropriate to its hearers’ context.’ *Concursum* speaks of the way that God’s grace is conformed to the specific needs of the recipient, ‘respecting and not violating our creaturely context and condition.’⁵⁷⁹ Kay applies this doctrine analogously to the use of rhetoric in preaching, the preacher employing rhetorical devices to speak appropriately into the context of the listeners.

Whilst it is easy to criticise David Buttrick for placing too much emphasis, at times in a doctrinaire tone, on rhetorical technique;⁵⁸⁰ he does so because he is concerned with the earthed realities of how people hear, and how preachers might helpfully communicate. Barth stresses the otherness of God, but seems less concerned with the very real question of how the preacher shapes and communicates the sermon. He is anxious that ‘the preacher must not be tedious,’ he insists that preaching that ‘is faithful to the Bible cannot be tedious,’ and he urges the preacher to have the congregation constantly present in mind through

⁵⁷⁸ Willimon (2006), 155.

⁵⁷⁹ James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2007), 57-58.

⁵⁸⁰ Buttrick (1997).

the preparation of the sermon.⁵⁸¹ As we have seen, in avoiding tedium and speaking into the context, the preacher needs to exercise imaginative insight. However, Barth offers little by way of guidance on the shaping of the sermon. The fact remains that the preacher, as a communicator, will inevitably make use of rhetorical strategies, consciously or otherwise. How do we develop homiletic strategy which respects the otherness of the revelation of God and at the same time acknowledges the immanence of God who gifts humanity with the potential to speak and to listen? What is the connection between divine providence and human responsibility in the homiletic endeavour? For Barth, God comes to us in his Word by an act of sovereign grace,⁵⁸² not because we have alighted on a particular homiletic strategy that means we can have God, fixed and fastened. At the same time we need to heed Buttrick's concern with a rhetoric which points up the need for preachers to take responsibility for the nuts and bolts of communicating. This fusion of divine sovereignty and human responsibility means that the preacher is bound to offer their best imaginative listening, preparation, and performance. It also means, rather comfortingly, that if because of the limits of our ability, health, or time, we can produce little more than a meagre homiletic serving, the grace of God can yet transform the worst of our best efforts into something which brings sustenance.

The point was made earlier, using Barth's own understanding of revelation as entirely in the hands of a sovereign God, that we cannot fix God, pin God down and say '*here* is the revelation of God.' Using this argument, we cannot ring fence God's power and assert that God *cannot* be found revealing Godself through aspects of the created order – through the natural world, artistic forms or scientific enquiries. To deny that God can work to reveal Godself through such media plays into the hands of docetism and discounts the Incarnation, the concrete expression of God's working from 'the human side of the equation.' Barth reacted to Brunner's statement that "the mere act of 'bearing witness' remains sterile unless it can be integrated with the truth that the listener already possesses," with a resounding 'Nein'.⁵⁸³ Here Barth seems to be limiting the sovereignty of God on the assumption that it is inconceivable that God might

⁵⁸¹ Barth (1964), 107.

⁵⁸² Willimon (2006), 19.

⁵⁸³ Willimon (2006), 178.

work from the human side; but if God is sovereign than surely God is absolutely free to do as God chooses?

To argue that God cannot use apologetics as a means of grace seems to limit God. Apologetics works from the assumption that God can and does speak to people through their experiences of ordinary life, drawing them to the richness of the scriptures and the community of the Church as the context in which that communication is confirmed and the conversation opened up. Willimon, commenting on Barth, seems conflicted over the place of apologetics, at one point arguing that because ‘the unbeliever lacks the one requisite for true knowledge, that is faith, there is no wonder why apologetics, which tries to get around the need for faith, doesn’t work.’ He then concedes that ‘perhaps our rationales and justifications for our faith are a sort of testimony, a front door, a modest beginning to more interesting theology’. He will not go as far as Barth in asserting an anti-apologetic stance, whilst recognising that Barth holds this view out of a fear that in engaging with apologetics preachers would domesticate revelation, eviscerating the wildness of the gospel. Taking Barth seriously, we need to exercise a hermeneutic of suspicion when engaging with and encountering apologetics, but that does not negate the importance and usefulness of apologetics to homiletics. On the basis of Barth’s anti-apologetic stance, Willimon is prepared to assert that ‘the Church is not here to speak to the world.’ Rather than ‘deferential speaking’, the Church is to ‘let God destroy and create a world through our preaching.’⁵⁸⁴

The problem here relates to the connection between our preaching and the world. Preaching, occurring mostly in the context of Church worship, is aimed at the community of faith. In our society preaching rarely encounters the wider world directly, except through occasional offices and street preaching. A Barthian approach to these occasions would probably make scant concession to the presence of people who may have little or no faith, on the basis that it is up to God to make the connections in his sovereign will. Such a perspective overlooks the point that God works with and through the preacher and if there is no attempt to connect with people the likely outcome is that people will not hear.

⁵⁸⁴ Willimon (2006), 178, 180, 181, 177.

Willimon maintains that for Barth ‘the ontic precedes the noetic’,⁵⁸⁵ using this as an argument against apologetics. But is there any reason why, in the work of apologetics, the ontic may not still be regarded as leading and inspiring the noetic? The apologist works as a bridge builder, but in the sovereignty of God they do not work alone, any more than the preacher does. It is on the basis of Paul’s apologetic endeavour (Acts 17) that he has the opportunity to preach; on the basis of his preaching some scoff, some want to hear more, and a few believe. There seems no reason why we cannot regard his apologetic endeavour as part of the sovereignty of God speaking in and through the Athenian situation. Without this imaginative bridge building through observations about the natural religiosity of the Athenians, Paul would have had no opportunity to preach and none would have heard the Word of God. In Acts 17 we see apologetics working in accordance with Craig Loscalzo’s understanding of the first role of apologetics:

Christian apologetics should have two immediate roles: (1) to present unbelievers with a viable understanding of Christian faith so they may want to make it theirs, and (2) to instruct, confirm and affirm those who are already believers in the faith.⁵⁸⁶

In both roles, the task of the apologist is to forge connections and in and through such connections point to God. Is there any reason why this task cannot be inspired by God, the ontic leading and blessing the noetic through the medium of the imagination?

6.3 The Preacher as Artist

Because of the tendency of the preacher as teacher metaphor to overlay human responsibility and the teacher as herald on-look to put all the stress on divine agency, Trygve argues that the preacher as artist is a model that upholds the strengths of both and avoids their inherent weaknesses.⁵⁸⁷ This model also has a good basis due to the renewed epistemological significance of imagination in postmodernity.

⁵⁸⁵ Willimon, (2006), 181.

⁵⁸⁶ Craig A. Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Post-modern World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2000), 25.

⁵⁸⁷ Trygve (2010), 163-164.

How is the work of an artist best understood? Edward Farley differentiates between art as the repetitive application of a skill – such as in bricklaying or mending a fuel pump – and forms of art which are non-repetitive and creative. This seems an arbitrary division, as all highly creative forms of art require the employment of repetitive skills. That aside, Farley identifies three features of his second understanding of art: it is drawn from the individual’s experience of the world, it is creative and innovative, and it involves imagination.⁵⁸⁸ Trygve offers his summary of the work of an artist: an artist works with a given material; he or she adds value to that, working within a tradition, having trained to gain skills; the artist has a gift, is creative, works imaginatively, and performs for an audience within a given context.⁵⁸⁹ We can add to this some reference to the purpose of art, which is to reveal something to the beholder about the world and themselves in relation to that world: ‘The purpose of art is to open us to that which is hidden, to break open a mystery.’⁵⁹⁰ There are clearly potential resonances here between the work of the preacher and that of the artist, if we understand preaching as helping people to discover truth, rather than foisting opinions on them with declamatory certitude. However, without a theological framework this model of the preacher, like that of the teacher, runs the risk of collapsing into the Pelagian heresy.

Trygve avoids this by grounding his model in J. B. Torrance’s understanding of the vicarious work of Christ’s one acceptable offering, on behalf of all humanity, in our humanity, to God the Father. United with Christ, we are involved in the life of the Trinity through his humanity and his intercessions as High Priest.⁵⁹¹ In Christ, humanity is reconciled to God and God to humanity. The gifts given to us in our humanity – our imagination, creativity, and reason – can be offered back to God in Christ, not as a means of strong arming revelation, but as a free response to the revelation we have known. Joined to Christ we are free to exercise our imaginative gifts, confident that our failings and wrong motivations are known, forgiven, and transformed. Freed from homiletic

⁵⁸⁸ Farley, (2005), 173-174.

⁵⁸⁹ Trygve (2010), 165.

⁵⁹⁰ John Westerhoff, *Spiritual Life: The Foundation for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 23.

⁵⁹¹ J.B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 23.

neuroticism, we are enabled to offer all our gifts of imagination, creativity, and reason to God in Christ in the preaching event.

Seeing preaching as part of the on-going creative work of God suggests that we should consider carefully the relational life of the Trinity. In Christ our humanity is invited into the life of the Trinity, in him our redeemed imaginative creativity is employed in the worship of God and the proclamation of God's love. The Spirit guides, leads, and nudges us as we seek to engage in the artistry of preaching both as preachers and hearers. All our preaching endeavours are based on a theology of the Trinity. 'It is the inner nature of the Trinity to be outwardly reaching, seeking and communicating.'⁵⁹² Given this, the preacher is not to be considered as some tortured artist struggling alone to chisel meaning from the marble of scripture, but as part of a community, human, and divine. The preacher, trusting in God's self-communication, works with Christ, in the power of the Spirit, the 'empowering collaborator,'⁵⁹³ with the materials of scripture, life experience, language, voice, facial expression, gesture, and bodily movement, in the context of the gathered community of God's people. Grounded theologically, preachers are free to fully exercise their imaginative skills, without falling into a Pelagian quagmire. Herein lies part of the joy of preaching. In Christ there is no need to be bound by the 'right' homiletic method. The straight jacketing of such counsels of perfection limits the preacher from offering all of their particular giftedness to God in the task of preaching. Preachers have the freedom to exercise the full stretch of their imaginative skill at the service of the gospel and in fealty to Christ; rooted in this ground even our preaching 'mistakes' are redeemable.

High up in the quire of Durham Cathedral, in a place only visible from a lofty walkway, there is a series of repetitive patterns carved in the shape of an arc. Viewed from left to right we see the arc beginning with an identical series of carvings, uniformly spaced: it is clear that the master craftsman began the work. The stone tells the story of where the apprentice took over. The carving becomes less confident. The gaps between the carvings become uneven until, towards the end of the arc, the carvings are squashed in. This looks like the work of a lesser mason, and yet the work speaks of patience and hard work, and of a desire to

⁵⁹² Quicke (2003), 145.

⁵⁹³ Quicke (2003), 59.

mirror the work of the master. There is something beautiful about this flawed work of devotion, which may serve as a metaphor for the preacher as artist bringing together the perfection of the divine artist with the learning of the human apprentice.

Farley asks whether aesthetic art can be taught, as part of his wider discussion concerning whether preaching can be taught. He notes that techniques and styles can be taught, but points out that these are not an end in themselves. This leads him to comment that ‘there are environments – pedagogical communities and subcultures – that encourage, model, and evoke creativity and imagination.’⁵⁹⁴ A key question falls out of this which concerns how the Church and its training institutions can be communities which actively foster the development and use of the imagination and art in worship and shared common life. One of the key issues over the employment of art in any context is that it requires a willingness to lose control of the interpretation. Communities in which power is located in the hands of a few are not likely to employ art as part of the community’s meaning making since the interpretation is difficult to control. Imaginative preaching, using the on-look of preacher as artist, will go some way to creating cultures in which the freedom of imagination, issuing forth in creativity, is valued and its links with revelation demonstrated.

There are many positive aspects of the entailments of seeing the preacher as artist. It encourages the preacher to be creative with their homiletic resources, combining methods and models to create new forms; it focuses the preacher on the importance of mastering the craft of preaching as an oral event: being deliberate and thoughtful over structural decisions; language choice and its effects; the use of images; the construction of moves; the nature of movement, delivery, and range of vocal intonation. Of vital importance is that a work of art, arguably, only becomes art when it is exposed to the critical interpretation of its audience. The sermon is only a sermon when preacher and hearer come together to create it. In this model the Church can be seen as a guild of artists. Trygve rightly refers to the importance of the preacher as a liturgical artist, working with ‘other liturgical artists like readers, musicians, visual artists, architects and the

⁵⁹⁴ Farley (2005), 176.

artistic mob that is the congregation.’⁵⁹⁵ Finally, the preacher as artist model reminds us of the importance of preachers being consciously apprenticed to Christ. Without this there is a danger that the preacher-artist could become self-indulgent, producing pieces that, divorced from the life of the Trinity and the centrality of worship, become empty, self-serving artefacts.

6.4 The Preacher as Spiritual Director

David Trygve refers to the formational role of the teacher, but does not develop this in great detail. Kay Northcutt offers an interesting and potentially helpful model which speaks into the formational role of the preacher; she sees preaching as spiritual direction. Her thesis is that:

Preachers become as spiritual directors to their congregations, that preaching itself be a formational, sacramental act of spiritual direction, and that sermons do for congregations what spiritual direction does for individuals.⁵⁹⁶

There is potential for misunderstanding the nature of the authority implicit in the word ‘direction’. Not to discount a director’s training and expertise, their authority is not primarily conferred by the position they hold, but is based upon the trust the directee places in them: a trust that grows as the relationship develops and the directee sees that the director is a person of prayer and humanity. Northcutt sees the authority of the preacher as spiritual director as an authority based on the authenticity of their intimacy with God, rather than as an entailment of their role. John Westerhoff calls this ‘sapiential authority’.⁵⁹⁷ Northcutt argues that postmoderns seek authenticity and trustworthiness; ‘someone who “talks to God” and practices hospitality,’ rather than moral perfection. She adds that whilst they categorically dismiss ‘external positional authority, postmoderns seek guidance.’⁵⁹⁸ Drawing from Margaret Miles, Northcutt speaks of ‘formation by attraction’ as a vital element in learning. Miles comments that ‘religious seeing implies perceiving a quality of the sensible world, a luminosity, a “certain slant of light”, in which *other human beings* [my

⁵⁹⁵ Trygve (2010), 218.

⁵⁹⁶ Northcutt (2009), 2.

⁵⁹⁷ Westerhoff (1994), 49.

⁵⁹⁸ Northcutt (2009), 64.

italics], the natural world and objects appear in their full beauty, transformed.⁵⁹⁹ Presumably on the basis of this (she doesn't say), Northcutt argues that preachers (like directors) can act as sacramental images of attraction. Their own desire for God, love of God, and time spent with God becoming tangible in the preached event.⁶⁰⁰ This calls for preachers to ensure that prayer has priority over method in their homiletic.

In the one-to-one process of spiritual direction the director's task is to listen and discern, to apply the perceptive and imaginative eyes of faith to the directee's life, in order to enable them to notice and co-operate with the movement of God in their lives. Such direction is not about problem solving, explanation, persuasion, or advice dispensing. It is a process of seeking God's shalom, God's wholeness in the lives of individuals: a process in which we discover our vocation. It assumes that God is already present in the longings and struggles of the directee. There is resonance here with Craig Dykstra's work on the pastoral and ecclesial imagination. His concept of the pastoral imagination is similar to the work of spiritual direction. It involves 'seeing in depth', 'perceiving the more' of what is before us. Like spiritual direction, exercising pastoral imagination involves 'enabling, helping, guiding and encouraging a specific community to practice Christian faith themselves'. Preaching is part of the service of that end goal. Dykstra sees pastoral imagination as a gift of God given to ministers through the ecclesial imagination of the community which has in turn been shaped by the pastoral imagination of its ministers.⁶⁰¹ There is a virtuous cycle at work here that many spiritual directors would identify in their one-to-one work. The wisdom of the director comes to the fore in the relationship with the other, whose insights and growth feedback and shape the work of the director.

Northcutt is critical of the legacy of Harry Emerson Fosdick's model of preaching as pastoral counselling since it results in a focus on fixing problems in the individual, and portrays a fix-it god. She links this with a view of the congregation as a set of inward looking 'individualized and private clients,

⁵⁹⁹ Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1961), 145; Northcutt (2009) 24, 2.

⁶⁰⁰ Northcutt (2009), 27.

⁶⁰¹ Craig Dykstra, 'Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination', in *The Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, eds., Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 48, 58, 59.

whose tithes and offerings constitute a fee for the professionalized services of the pastor.’ This model underplays the fact that much human suffering cannot be solved and lacks the recognition that desolation can be formative, as well as, at times, simply bewildering and distressing. There is a risk in Fosdick’s model of encouraging superficial preaching which effectively mutes the sufferer; they remain stuck in their predicament amidst a community of pious problem solvers. Preaching as spiritual direction sees loneliness, anxiety, pain, and temptation as part of what it means to be human. These are not sufferings to be muted, but entered into in the deep love of God.⁶⁰² This allows scope for the sermon as lament, even for imprecatory expression from the pulpit, on behalf of the beaten and abused; as well as for expressions of hope, trust, and new possibility. This frees the preacher, and the hearer, from the pressure to pretend to be more or less than they are, hiding in fear behind a veil of false holiness and piety, or playing down giftedness with a false modesty. Such dishonesty can lead to a split between the private and public self, resulting in potential breakdown. Northcutt calls the preacher to attend closely and honestly to their own spiritual formation, a point strongly endorsed in Westerhoff’s work.

Westerhoff contends that ‘unless we are in spiritual direction and have a developing spiritual life, we ought not to offer others direction. If we are not learners, we ought not to teach.’⁶⁰³ By extension, the process of the preacher’s learning, including their failing and suffering, becomes a resource for their preaching: not in an unhelpfully disclosive public way, but as a deep resource, a source of empathetic imaginative identification with the struggles of the other. Self-knowledge brings spiritual freedom, an ability to laugh at oneself, and (especially important for egotistical preachers!) a wry understanding of our need for admiration and accolade. Through her understanding of and compassion for the false self, the preacher will communicate compassion and understanding to the hearer.

Westerhoff offers three images for preaching, the third of which sits well with Northcutt’s model of preaching as spiritual direction. His first image is of the assembly line. The hearer is the raw material and the preacher as technician seeks to mould the hearer into a predetermined design. The agency of the hearer

⁶⁰² Northcutt (2009), 39-58.

⁶⁰³ Westerhoff (1994), 35.

is ignored. The second image is of a greenhouse. The preacher as gardener cares for the growth of the 'seeds' in the somewhat patronising understanding of a caretaker encouraging dependence. Finally, Westerhoff offers the model of the pilgrimage, the preacher as co-pilgrim, part of a community journeying together.⁶⁰⁴ Together we seek God, not with the preacher above or over against the congregation. The co-pilgrim preacher listens to the questions being asked and creates space for the ongoing conversation, open to being shaped by the other and willing to offer their own life as a resource for the learning of the congregation. The questions, concerns, thoughts and ideas of fellow pilgrims are of great importance. Prayer, rather than technique, is at the heart of this model. In this model the congregation is seen as *paideuterion*, a school for wisdom,⁶⁰⁵ in which attentiveness is cultivated and the importance of simply waiting is stressed.

One of the main problems with Northcutt's thesis is that the sermon examples she gives are taken from special occasions at which she was the visiting speaker. She does not provide examples of how the preacher as spiritual director might operate week in and week out in the local Church community. Her guidelines on sermon preparation portray the preacher working in isolation. She describes the preacher reflecting on what *they* have seen or felt of God at work in the congregation. However, at no point does she suggest actually talking with people about *their* concerns, about where *they* have discovered God or about *their* reflections on the scriptures. This seems a massive oversight in an otherwise helpful model of preaching.

John McClure's model of collaborative preaching sits well with Astley's stress on listening to the ordinary theology of Churchgoers and compensates for the oversight in Northcutt's thesis. McClure comments:

We must seek out the unique, strange and sometimes bizarre interpretations of the Gospel that are around us in our culture, in the minds and hearts of good Church people, and latent within the recesses of our own lives.⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁴ Westerhoff (1994), 47-48.

⁶⁰⁵ Northcutt (2009), 3-5.

⁶⁰⁶ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1995), 17.

In other words, we need to listen to the ordinary theology in ourselves and our hearers. McClure identifies the importance of face to face symmetry between speaker and hearer in the preaching event. He notes that this is denied in the 'sovereign' model of preaching, as we saw in the metaphor of preacher as herald. Inductive models, whilst going some way towards mitigating this asymmetry, can misconceive just how different people's experiences can be. Whilst the affective imagination can help us to appreciate something of the experience of others, greater collaboration between preacher and hearer opens the preacher to learning from the other, respecting their very different experiences and avoiding the danger of collapsing them all into an extension of the preacher's worldview. Another difficulty of the inductive model is that the focus tends to be on 'multiple individual insights' rather than genuine communal approach to discernment and articulation.⁶⁰⁷ Northcutt's thesis is open to the same critique.

McClure's model of roundtable preaching stresses the importance of listening and shows us a practical way in which preaching as spiritual direction might work in practice, though he speaks in terms of collaborative leadership rather than spiritual direction. The roundtable sermon group constitutes a cross section of the community, rotated on a regular basis, including people on the margins as well as those more central to the community. It meets on a weekly basis to review the previous sermon and to discuss the scriptures on which the subsequent sermon is to be based. Interestingly, McClure advocates the inclusion of those who are not Christian but are associated with the Church in some way, such is his concern to connect the redemptive work of Christ to the public realm, avoiding the privatisation of religion: 'Our baptism does not isolate us as a sectarian cult that shares no common humanity with other people.'⁶⁰⁸ In many ways the role McClure ascribes the preacher in the roundtable sermon group is resonant with the role of a spiritual director; he describes the preacher as host, working with a co-host who manages the discussion process, freeing the preacher to listen reflectively and, where helpful, to participate. He offers detailed and useful guidance on managing the discussion process,⁶⁰⁹ and he stresses the importance of the preacher taking time to reflect on the group process as soon as possible

⁶⁰⁷ McClure (1995), 30-47.

⁶⁰⁸ McClure (1995), 18.

⁶⁰⁹ McClure (1995), 58-72.

afterwards. It is of central importance that the process of the conversation itself finds its way into the pulpit. There is an inductive model here, but it is much more collaborative than Northcutt's model of the preacher making the journey alone in their study. The preacher has the task of shaping the sermon, drawing from the process and wisdom of the group and acknowledging the difficulties people might have with the text and its implications. In McClure's worked example, the group process is often referenced in the subsequent sermon, although appropriate confidentiality is maintained.⁶¹⁰

A technique often used to bring the spiritual direction meeting to a close is to ask the directee to sum up what has been significant in the meeting. Such deliberate summation helps to fix the key material in mind for further reflection and prayer. The preaching as spiritual direction model reminds the preacher and worship leader to create space for reflection immediately after the sermon, so that vital themes the hearer has woven around the preached sermon are not lost. With this in mind it is important for congregations to have opportunity to reflect on the place of the sermon in their ongoing spiritual lives as individuals and as a community. How often are congregations encouraged to reflect on the importance of active engagement with God in the event of the sermon, and after the event as they continue to explore the particular themes they heard? When is there opportunity for congregations to reflect together concerning what they have heard across a sermon series as they discern together the movement of God in their corporate lives?

Jeff Astley explores metaphors of posture and theology,⁶¹¹ drawing from von Balthasar's kneeling theology and his contrast with a 'sitting theology', the research posture of the academy. Astley also refers to Stewart Sutherland's concept of 'holding at arm's length' theology to depict sitting theology at its most critical. He then offers the metaphor of 'standing theology' as an image of the position of the preacher. Standing captures the authoritative nature of the communication, in its assertive, hortatory, and declarative form. Astley insists that the communication is not, ultimately, all one way, as the hearer contributes from her ordinary theology, shaping the sermon through her personal receptivity. However, from a feminist perspective 'standing theology' seems very close to Le

⁶¹⁰ McClure (1995), 95-108.

⁶¹¹ Astley (2011), 89-99.

Guin's father language, with the attendant risks of asymmetrical distancing and one way communication. Is there another theological model of body posture we can draw on here: not to escape from the importance of clear, bold, authoritative, public speech, but to remind us that this speech is rooted in and amongst the people of God? The model of preacher as spiritual director implies a form of theology engaged in symmetrical, face-to-face communication. The body posture metaphorically operating, for hearer and speaker, is one of 'sitting towards' the other.

All preaching is rooted in kneeling theology, both in preparation and in the liturgical context of the delivery. The movement from kneeling to 'sitting towards' implies openness, respect, a willingness to listen, and to share in the ongoing conversation. This seems a position more in keeping with the mother tongue of ordinary theology. Remembering that the framework is figurative means that preaching does not have to be delivered sitting down, although this preaching position has a long history. Nevertheless, the inner attitude of the preacher might usefully be grounded in this posture.

Combining McClure's collaborative model of the roundtable sermon with Astley's stress on the importance of the ordinary theology of the congregation and the metaphor of 'sitting towards' the other, Northcutt's on-look of the preacher as spiritual director has real potential. It places the preacher with, not above, the people, as a fellow pilgrim, to borrow from Westerhoff. It stresses the importance of seeing God at work in the ordinary, a task of imaginative perception. It notices the sacramental potential of the preacher, and if we take McClure's thesis seriously, of every member of the community. At the roundtable we may find people at the stage of 'belief-that', a third person experience of learning about religion, alongside people who inhabit 'belief-in', who embrace the faith with personal commitment, many of whom will want to 'move-on' in a process of continued, inhabited learning.⁶¹² All of them have contributions to make to the direction and life of the community as a whole. This model stresses the importance of listening. Even if the preacher did not go as far as establishing a roundtable sermon group, at the very least the model underscores the need for parish retreats and quiet days, in a culture of face to face

⁶¹² See Astley (2002), 25-34.

engagement, to give space for discovering more of the congregation's ordinary theology. The sermon seeks to find and articulate, through engagement with scripture and congregation, what God is about amongst a community and where God is leading. The model is richly relational, based on mutual trust and prayer.

6.5 The Preacher as Jazz Musician

A fifth metaphor, which has a number of creative entailments, is that of the preacher as jazz musician. Jazz has its roots in the Afro-American experience of slavery and oppression which birthed the spirituals and the blues, musical narratives of remembrance, anguish, honesty, and hope. 'Jazz music is a gumbo of life music traditions, traditions that sought to truthfully convey the story of life, its hallelujahs and its horrors.' The spiritual structure of jazz, with its themes of joy, lament, risk, and creative defiance, resonates with the gospel, and these themes are etched into the accounts of Jesus' life. If preaching is to gain a deep hearing it needs to strike these deep chords in the hearts and minds of hearers. Jazz makes use of improvisation, listening to the 'voices' of others, nuancing, challenging, and re-working them creatively in an open ended movement which seeks to do new things with old notes and riffs. Jazz has a wide range of 'voices' not least is the capacity to sing the blues with poignancy and healing honesty.

Rigid preaching methods often close down the possibility of improvisation, possibly as a reaction to being on the receiving end of experiences of poorly prepared, rambling spiels; and also because for the preacher there is great security in sticking to the script. Jazz teaches us that improvisation is nothing to do with poor preparation. Kirk Byron Jones calls it 'spontaneity infused by preparation'. The preacher who has prepared well, who is familiar with the movement and intent of the sermon score has the freedom to improvise in the moment, responsive to the other players in the group: the Spirit, the hearers, the scripture, and the sermon score. Jones describes the Spirit as the 'Sacred Improvisational Helper,' underscoring the importance of listening, risk and trust in the improvised movements of the preaching performance. There is a similar theme here to one raised in the metaphor of preaching as spiritual direction which is that of listening to other voices in the dialogue. The 'credo of jazz

dialogue is this: We are all responsible for and to the music.’⁶¹³ In order to improvise well, the jazz musician practices. Practice is not a dirty word in preaching, although it is rarely mentioned. Rehearsal gives the preacher the confidence to depart from the script, knowing how and where to reconnect with it. This kind of improvisational freedom requires the preacher to relax. Being too uptight, and nervous results in a rigid clinging to the prepared text, an anxiety which will communicate itself to the hearer, and close down the possibilities of joyous improvisation in the moment.

Jones recounts the following anecdote, reported in the *Atlantic Monthly*, as an illustration of the power of improvisation.⁶¹⁴ However, he does not develop the deep theological resonances associated with improvisation which are inherent in the incident. The trumpeter, Wynton Marsalis, was playing at a famous jazz club, the Village Vanguard, in Manhattan. The way Jones cuts the story implies that Marsalis is at a high point in his career. However the full report shows that he was playing a supporting role in a lesser known band on a quiet August evening, having lost his record label. At the most dramatic part of his solo part in ‘I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You’ a mobile phone went off in the audience, ‘blaring a rapid singsong melody in electronic bleeps. People started giggling and picking up their drinks. The moment – the whole performance – unravelled.’ The expectations of the audience were derailed and they turned back to the ordinariness of their conversations. The reporter, David Hajdu, writes in his notebook, ‘Magic, Ruined.’⁶¹⁵ The incident seems to reflect the state of Marsalis’ career.

However, in a movement filled with profound theological resonance, Marsalis begins to play back the notes of the ringtone, improvising through various keys, slowing down to a ballad tempo and joining the song at exactly the point he left off, finishing in a storm of applause. Marsalis imaginatively weaves the audience member’s antisocial oversight into his performance. The ‘death’ of the performance is swallowed up in the musician’s ability to continue though the apparent end point into a renewed, richer performance. Perhaps to suggest that

⁶¹³ Kirk Byron Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching: How to Preach with Great Freedom and Joy* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2004), 35, 85, 94, 102.

⁶¹⁴ Jones (2004), 79. See also David Hajdu, ‘Wynton’s Blues’, *The Atlantic Webzine*, (March 1st, 2003), <<http://www.unz.org/Pub/AtlanticWeb-2003mar-00025>> [accessed 5th March, 2013].

⁶¹⁵ Hajdu (2003) paragraphs 6 and 7 (no page numbers given).

there might be a theological connection between improvisation and resurrection is too strong a claim. However, improvisation is not a cobbled together afterthought. Marsalis' improvisation, based on his human skill, wisdom, understanding, and courage, combines with a seriously playful defiance. There is an echo of resurrection hope here. God takes the ruin we make of our 'performances' and creates the possibility for renewed movement, connected to the old and yet different. Improvisation isn't simply a sermonic technique; it is a theological analogue to the work of God.

Jazz is deeply creative, seeking to do new things with old notes and riffs. With its focus on 'developing a new note disposition',⁶¹⁶ jazz is never satisfied with repeating the same score. Preachers have much to learn from this concept of having a 'new note disposition'. If we accept that the gospel speaks afresh into new situations and is not merely a message to be intoned accurately by an obedient herald, then the preacher needs to attend to the creative process of finding the right notes to allow the music to soar. This entails having a genuine care for words and their weight, being imaginatively open to the way words can operate as sharps and flats, creating resonances and dissonances for particular effects. Developing a new note disposition also reminds the preacher not to be bound to the same sermon structures, but to engage with creative and experimental freedom in the quest for a variety of forms which will do new things with old material. This creativity can be seen as a form of worship, taking the best we have to offer and giving it back to God in Christ in the sermon event: herein lies much of the joy of preaching.

Preachers can learn from the blues theme in jazz music. Jones comments that 'Blues preaching is not afraid to hold heartache; it is only after holding it that it walks haltingly onward.'⁶¹⁷ The capacity to name grief, pain, and suffering honestly is one of the entailments of preaching as spiritual direction. One aspect of spiritual direction is the holding of silence, particularly in the presence of the pain of the other. The wordiness of preaching can close down the spaces for the hearers' response. Blues incorporates musical pauses, creating space for the hearer's lament. Blues preaching can effectively hold heartache through honest naming and incorporating silence, creating space for the recognition and

⁶¹⁶ Jones (2004), 17.

⁶¹⁷ Jones (2004), 20.

expression of emotion. Sermons which are tightly structured, logically arranged edifices can take us from Good Friday to Easter Sunday too quickly; negating the horror of the darkness lessens our appreciation of the joy of the dawn. Preaching can learn from blues the importance of dwelling in the painful reality of the middle day.

6.6 The Preacher as Jester

Perhaps the best place to begin with this model is by responding to the objections it raises. The jester is another term for the fool and in both testaments foolishness is opposed to wisdom: the fool is proud, rebellious, greedy, and imprudent – hardly a fitting subject for emulation. Surely this model denigrates the serious subject matter of Christianity? Is salvation a fitting topic for levity? Doesn't this model of the jester-preacher reduce the *telos* of preaching to mere entertainment? Is there a serious theological foundation underpinning the metaphor of preacher as jester?

On the whole the scriptures do contrast foolishness with wisdom and condemn the former. Yet Paul plays ironically with the concept of foolishness, particularly in his letters to the Corinthians in which foolishness becomes a matter of perspective.⁶¹⁸ In the cross and its proclamation, God subverts the world's wisdom, confounding human expectation. Human wisdom becomes folly in comparison to the deep wisdom of God's foolishness, rooted in the very nature of divine love that cannot be captured or understood by rational calculation. God offers love and in so doing becomes open to rejection, mockery, and betrayal, in a move which strikes the fearful, defensive mind as profoundly foolish. Yet the foolishness of divine love does that which 'all the ingenuity of wisdom cannot. It can turn evil into good.'⁶¹⁹ For the person who seeks to live from the basis and in the strength of this foolish love, new possibility arises in the freedom of forgiveness received and offered. This sense of the foolishness of God is earthed in the person of Christ.

Harvey Cox identifies aspects of the jester in the life of Christ: he defies custom, scorns kings and, like a wandering troubadour, fraternises with questionable characters. In entering Jerusalem on a donkey in mock pageantry he

⁶¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 1.18-31; 2:14; 3.18-19; 4:10; 2 Corinthians 11.17-19.

⁶¹⁹ John Austin Baker, *The Foolishness of God* (London: DLT, 1970), 402.

satirises authority, a satire ironically echoed in the way the soldiers attire him in the paraphernalia of royalty.⁶²⁰ If the story ended with the burial of Jesus, this mock pageantry would be painful and tragic. However, the resurrection turns the Christian faith into divine comedy, and comedy is the language of laughter and hope. The resurrection relativizes all that has come before. The pathetic attempts of humanity to control and abrogate power are seen against the backdrop of the creative scope of divine power. The mourning of Mary, as an archetype of all who suffer, is utterly transformed. In the serious business in that garden, in the early morning light, surely laughter rings out across eternity? On this basis, salvation is a most fitting subject for levity!

The jester's role is irrevocably associated with comedy, which whilst associated with the generation of laughter, has a much broader framework; the comic sermon is not to be judged by the degree of laughter it generates. Joseph Webb offers five aspects of the comedic spirit.⁶²¹ First, he identifies immanence in the comic vision, a point also made by Cox: 'Comedy disports in the mud and gumminess of life, it has no pretensions.'⁶²² Undoubtedly, both are right to highlight the comedic focus on the earthy and ordinary, but this underplays the comic potential in the interplay between the eternal and the everyday which cashes out in the rich theology of the divine comedy mentioned above.

Second, he points to the probing doubt of comedy which opens up authority through question and parody. He points out that the jester can be seen as a form of institutionalised doubt whose job it is to poke fun at the pomp and ceremony of the court. Sadly, too often, the preacher is a representative of this pomp and ceremony, failing to see the connection, at least in the Anglican Church, between her clerical garb and the jester's motley. When the crown of thorns becomes one of gold, the holy laughter of fools can be silenced by ridiculous, ecclesiastical pride. Perhaps one credible argument for the wearing of vestments is to keep the preacher in touch with the comic holiness of her vocation.

In an essay on *King Lear*, L. C. Knights writes that:

⁶²⁰ Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools: Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), 140-141.

⁶²¹ Joseph Webb, *Comedy and Preaching* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1998), 21-34.

⁶²² Cox (1969), 150.

The Fool... speaks to (and out of) a quite different order of apprehension: his function is to disturb with glimpses of confounding truths that elude rational formulation.⁶²³

This captures something of the role of the preacher. The gospel intersects with the everyday in its 'confounding truths' of judgement, forgiveness, grace, and hope which do 'elude rational formulation'. Lear's Fool demonstrates courage and wit. He sees and names the rapacious behaviour of Goneril and Regan, and wittily chastises Lear for the folly of trying to make 'his daughters his mothers', noting that in so doing Lear 'gavest them the rod, and put'st down thine own breeches.'⁶²⁴ The Fool demonstrates foresight and understanding, reading the truth of the situation which he interprets to Lear. Speaking boldly from a position of powerlessness, the Fool runs the risk of being whipped for his words. Truth telling is a serious and costly undertaking which, perhaps, only a fool would embrace. Preaching in the footsteps of the Divine Fool will find preachers speaking words of dangerous wisdom. The jester's role is to question that which seems self-evident. We see Jesus doing exactly this in many of his encounters and parables. It is self-evident to the Pharisee that the woman anointing Jesus' feet is a worthless sinner (Luke 7.36-50); it is clear to the disciples that the storm will kill them (Mark 4.38-40), and to the crowds that Zacchaeus is a thieving rogue (Luke 19. 1-9). In each case Jesus reveals the 'more' in the situation. Cox reminds us that 'the clown refuses to live inside this present reality.'⁶²⁵ On the basis of resurrection hope, the jester-preacher, 'a fool for Christ's sake' (1Corinthians 4.10), must resist all attempts to normalise, neutralise or dismiss the radical, surprising, hope-filled resonances of the resurrection.

Third, Webb highlights the identification of incongruity as a hallmark of comedic vision. 'This is the comedy created when disparities or even conflicts within an individual or social order are made explicit and held up for public scrutiny'.⁶²⁶ In preaching this can involve the naming of conflicts within biblical characters as a way of holding up a mirror to our own hypocrisy and conflict: David the great king portrayed as a peeping Tom; Elijah who called down fire, huddled in a miasma of depression; or Judas, a chosen disciple, clutching his bag

⁶²³ L.C. Knights, *Some Shakespearian Themes* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), 108.

⁶²⁴ *King Lear*, Act 1, scene IV, 179-81.

⁶²⁵ Cox (1969), 150.

⁶²⁶ Webb (1998), 25.

of silver. Comic recognition here is not designed to elicit laughter, but is deployed as a penitential lure.

Fourth, Webb highlights how the comedic spirit of ambiguity messes up clearly drawn lines, muddling the neat separation between insiders and outsiders which always grants the moral high ground to the powerful insider. Jesus challenges this attitude from the start of his ministry, pointing out that the grace of God is not the preserve of Israel, it extends to Sidonians and Syrians (Luke 4.25-27).

Finally, Webb comments that the ‘goal and end of classic comedy is ‘invariably social equality and solidarity.’⁶²⁷ This involves the bringing down of the high up and the raising of the low, which, though Webb does not say this, brings to mind the dynamics of the Magnificat. Comic vision seems to underpin the social inversions inherent in this divine agenda. Ultimately, the comic vision presses those who think they are above the common fray into the realisation of connectedness, which, in shared laughter, challenges loneliness and alienation.

Suggesting that the preacher inhabits the jester’s motley might be seen to reduce the *telos* of preaching to mere entertainment. Whilst it must never be only this, surely entertainment *should* be an aspect of preaching? In an address to the Academy of Homiletics, Henry Mitchell pointed out: ‘The opposite of entertaining is BORING, not educational. And unless we ENGAGE an audience, we need not try to teach them anything at all.’⁶²⁸ Why should the entertaining sermon be regarded as theologically weak and unspiritual? Any teacher knows that the best way to capture the imagination of the learner and generate interest in the subject is to make it interesting, engaging and, dare I say it, entertaining. This is far from a view of entertainment as mere frippery; for something to truly captivate it needs to grip our hearts and minds as being of essential importance. With that in mind, the use of jokes in the pulpit, especially the abhorrent practice of starting with a joke – especially one culled from a book of sermon jokes – should be ruled offside, since it inherently undermines the goal of true comedic preaching. Warren Wiersbe comments that, ‘if humour is natural to the preacher, then it should be used in preaching; but one must never ‘import’ jokes just to

⁶²⁷ Webb (1998), 27.

⁶²⁸ Webb (1998), 38.

make the congregation laugh.⁶²⁹ Preachers need to be themselves. If they have a gift for humour then that will naturally shape the way they preach. If they don't then importing off the shelf jokes will fail. Often such jokes have little to do with the sermon, they irritate and patronise with the inherent assumption that congregations need 'warming up'. In my experience congregations give their attention to the preacher at the outset: the preacher's task is to hold it.

The comedic vision of preaching scrapes back the superficiality of the imported joke and has the potential to truly grip us. Does this mean that sermons should evoke laughter? Much depends on the nature of the laughter evoked. Derisive, sarcastic mockery has no place in preaching. The 'horrid laughter of the oppressor'⁶³⁰ may be named, but never evoked. Preaching which evokes the laughter of self-identification and recognition binds the hearers together affectively. This is the holy, joyous laughter of the community of sinners who know who they are and who Christ is, and who can always look forward in hope, even when that laughter is accompanied by tears of penitence and grief.

The preacher can learn a great deal from the work of our contemporary jesters on the stand-up scene. Successful comics demonstrate observational imagination, communicative body language, apparent spontaneity and the ability to interact with their audiences. Looking at the work of Peter Kay and Michael McIntyre, in particular, we see that their comedy is drawn from their keen observational skill. They notice the oddities of life, from our scripted chit chat with taxi drivers ('Been on long? What time d'ya finish?') to the politics of the contents of the condiment cupboard, they have keenly attuned sensing imaginations which notice, question and highlight. We laugh because we recognise our life and behaviour in their observations. The preacher as jester needs to notice the oddities of our human behaviour in the ordinary stuff of life.

Eddie Izzard is a master of facial expression and gesture. In the riff 'Englebert Humperdink is dead' he is able to repeatedly contradict and confirm the singer's death. He raises his eyebrows, opens his eyes wide, nods his head to indicate the truth of the statement and then frowns, shakes his head, sometimes accompanied by a palm down gesture of the hand, to deny the statement. At the height of the gag, he uses no words, his body shifts are minimal but they communicate his

⁶²⁹ Wiersbe (1994), 275.

⁶³⁰ Webb (1998), 12.

intent clearly and carry the audience with him.⁶³¹ In ‘Cats and Dogs’ his body movement and gestures create a sense of narrative space; the audience know exactly where the sofa is and where the cat is in relation to the owner and the visiting neighbour. His use of gesture to demonstrate the cat putting on its goggles and drilling adds comic texture to the piece. The mimes are simple and effective and demonstrate to preachers how body position, varied eye-lines, and gesture can create a sense of a story inhabiting a space. By changing body stance the preacher can become a different character and create a sense of holding a conversation with another character. Study of any contemporary comedian demonstrates the importance of apparent spontaneity, which takes a great deal of practice. Preachers often invest considerable time in working up a sermon text, but fail to consider how to get the text off the page and end up simply reading the text to their hearers. This hampers the development of a sense of relational ‘togetherness’ in the preaching event. This is not to argue for or against having a sermon script, rather to make the point that the preacher needs to be familiar enough with the content to be free to paraphrase, look up, move, and make use of gesture.

There is a balance to be struck between having a care for language and becoming trapped by a written text. The key, as all good dramatists, poets, comedians, speech writers, and liturgists know, is to write for the ear. A problem many new preachers encounter is not that they write their script out in full (which is a good discipline) but they write it as an essay, forgetting that the hearer does not have the reader’s opportunity to scan back up the page. The preacher needs to attend carefully to language which paints an impression for the hearer, being open to inspiration in all stages of the sermon, from crafting on the page to inhabiting it in context. Careful preparation is vital, but the preacher needs not to be so text dependent that there is no space for interacting with the hearers in the event of the sermon: picking up on the mood of the moment and risking some improvisation.

Comparison between the performances of comedienne Sarah Millican onstage with her work on ‘The Sarah Millican Television Programme’ demonstrates how an over dependence on text can create a less spontaneous sense of delivery. On

⁶³¹ Eddie Izzard, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o78MkSWe8Mw>>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rryNobB_rvw> [accessed 5th March 2013].

stage she seems free and spontaneous. In the television programme she reads from an auto cue and cue cards and her humour seems much less natural. Webb comments that preachers ‘must become so good at using a manuscript that, from the congregation’s point of view, it disappears.’⁶³² This may be overstating the case. However, the goal is a combination of care for crafted language and a genuine presence in the preaching moment. Effective comedians engage with their audiences, making the live event a one-off, weaving the ad lib into the performance script. Similarly, the effective preacher needs to be in touch with the hearers during the sermon, making eye contact, alert to the responses in body language, and attentive to the mood the sermon creates.

Considering the on-look of preacher as jester reminds the preacher that Christianity is essentially a comedy, founded on hope. Preaching itself is a kind of foolish wisdom in which the preacher does well to take the task with utmost seriousness and herself with somewhat more levity. This model is associated with bold speech, naming truth to power, and respecting the hearers’ need to be genuinely engaged. There is something profoundly joyful in this model of preaching which has such an appealing authenticity about it. In an age of cynicism and mistrust ‘the human community, needs a company of dreamers, seers, servants, and jesters in its midst.’⁶³³

The images of the preacher analysed in this chapter are not meant to be exhaustive. The intention here has been to show how the metaphors that master us shape our practice and to highlight the need for preachers to be encouraged to become conscious of how they imagine the preaching task and to explore how this perspective affects their praxis. Adopting new metaphors for the preaching task can bring new approaches and richer theological understanding of the purposes and methods of preaching. So we see that imagination as at work in the conception of preaching as well as the creation of the sermon. Once again the point becomes clear: imagination is of vital importance to preaching.

⁶³² Webb (1998), 163.

⁶³³ Webb (1998), 96.

Chapter Seven: Preaching and Personality

Given the widespread use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) in practical theology, its association with a particular method of preaching (the SIFT method)⁶³⁴ and the way it apparently associates imagination chiefly within one type choice (the intuitive preference) means it is important to look more closely at this theory. This chapter offers a critique of the relationship between (MBTI) and imagination, seeking to help preachers to notice where their imaginative function may be strongest and weakest and take remedial action.. Research into the dominant typologies of preachers and listeners is drawn together here, underscoring the need for an imaginative approach seeking to connect with a wide variety of hearers. The SIFT method of preaching is critiqued, applied and extended. The original point is then made that the SIFT method of preaching can be developed and used with non-Gospel text.

7.1 Psychological Type Theory

Psychological type theory has increasingly been used as a tool to help analyse and develop a number of areas of practical theology. It has been employed as a means of identifying individual differences,⁶³⁵ understanding preferences in prayer⁶³⁶ and spirituality,⁶³⁷ and exploring attitudes to Christianity.⁶³⁸ It has also been employed in assessments of tolerance for religious uncertainty,⁶³⁹ correlating psychological profile with approaches to biblical hermeneutics,⁶⁴⁰ and in analysing clergy personality profile⁶⁴¹, and those of their congregations⁶⁴² in

⁶³⁴ Leslie J. Francis and Andrew Village, *Preaching With All Our Souls: A Study in Hermeneutics and Psychological Type* (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁶³⁵ Malcolm Goldsmith, *Knowing Me, Knowing God: Exploring Your Spirituality with Myers-Briggs* (London: SPCK, 1994).

⁶³⁶ Bruce Duncan, *Pray Your Way: Your Personality and God* (London: DLT, 1993); Ruth Fowke, *Personality and Prayer: Finding and Extending the Prayer Style that Suits your Personality* (Guildford: Eagle, 1997); Charles J. Keating, *Who We Are is How We Pray* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991).

⁶³⁷ Julia McGuiness, *Growing Spirituality with the Myers-Briggs Model* (London: SPCK, 2009).

⁶³⁸ Michael Fearn, Leslie Francis and Carolyn Wilcox, 'Attitude Toward Christianity and Psychological Type: A Survey Among Religious Studies Students', *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 49, Issue 5 (2001), 341-348.

⁶³⁹ Leslie J. Francis and Susan Jones, 'Psychological Type and Tolerance for Religious Uncertainty', *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 47, Issue 4 (1999), 253-260.

⁶⁴⁰ Andrew Village and Leslie J. Francis, 'The Relationship of Psychological Type Preferences to Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of Empirical Theology*, Vol. 18, Issue 1 (2005), 74-89.

⁶⁴¹ Leslie J. Francis, Charlotte L. Craig, Michael Whinney, David Tilley and Paul Slater, 'Psychological Typology of Anglican Clergy in England: Diversity, Strengths, and Weaknesses in Ministry', *International Journal of Practical Theology*, Vol. 11, Issue 2 (2007), 266-284.

order to identify potential areas of conflict and suggest issues for clergy training. As we see below, it is instructive to examine the connection between MBTI, imagination and preaching.

However, MBTI has been criticised on a number of counts. Can the entirety of humanity, made in the image of God, be adequately ‘typed’ into sixteen categories, even allowing for differences within each type? Thomas Long is particularly critical about MBTI, regarding it as:

an attempt to make manageable what is essentially unpredictable. To force some semblance of order onto a process that is inescapably wild and full of wondrous surprises.⁶⁴³

In response to this critique, it helps to remember that type codes are not concrete fixed descriptors. Not every ENFJ, for example, is deemed to be exactly the same. Type dynamics, discussed below, demonstrate the rich variation both across and within types, and highlight the possibility of development across a lifetime, mitigating the criticism that MBTI ‘puts people in boxes.’ The danger with MBTI lies, rather, in the way it can be misused simplistically to stereotype and justify behaviour: ‘This is late because I am a P’! However, this is a criticism of the use being made of MBTI, not of the framework itself. Long offers us two key warnings concerning the use of MBTI profiles. He points out that the descriptors are unerringly optimistic, overlooking the flaws and faults of our basic humanity. He also comments that ‘taken too seriously, they can be perilously close to fortune cookies for the human potential movement.’⁶⁴⁴ In mitigation, MBTI should be used in conjunction with a theology which embraces the reality of sin as a powerful dynamic within created order. And there is the potential of the integration of MBTI with the doctrines of creation and redemption:

In terms of theological interpretation, type theory can be properly integrated within a doctrine of creation, which embraces the full range of individual differences within the divine intentionality (Gen. 1.27-28). It is a mistake to

⁶⁴² Leslie J. Francis, ‘Personality and Christian Belief among Adult Churchgoers’, *Journal of Psychological Type*, Vol. 47 (1998), 5-11.

⁶⁴³ Thomas G. Long, ‘Myers Briggs and Other Modern Astrologies’, *Theology Today*, Vol. 49 (1992), 295.

⁶⁴⁴ Long, (1992), 294.

argue that type theory is grounded in a deterministic worldview, which ignores the Gospel potential for repentance, change, and salvation.⁶⁴⁵

In terms of whether the MBTI framework is provable, John Lloyd helpfully reminds us that the theory supporting the typology falls into the epistemic category of ‘Justified Belief rather than Knowledge’, and comments that supporters of MBTI need to embrace the ambiguity of working confidently within their belief system with openness to the reality that its theoretical underpinning is unproven and perhaps un-provable.⁶⁴⁶

The approach to MBTI underpinning this chapter is that it offers a helpful overview of personality which, for all its flaws, correlates well with observation. It has found widespread acceptance as a tool in practical theology and offers a useful framework to apply to the preaching process. MBTI offers a means of exploring the relationship between psychological type and hermeneutics, and is therefore important in understanding the way we read the biblical text and hear and handle it. Also, MBTI can help us to ‘increase understanding by “talking the language” of different types in the group’.⁶⁴⁷ The application of MBTI to preaching is itself an imaginative task, as this chapter seeks to demonstrate. The framework of imaginative function outlined in chapter three which describes the sensory, intuitive, affective, and intellectual imaginative functions, was designed to correlate with Myers-Briggs typology. Not only does the framework allow us to describe coherently the varied nature of imaginative function, it also compensates for the narrow association in the MBTI literature of imagination with the intuitive type preference. This is explored further below.

7.2 MBTI: An Overview of the Type Dichotomies.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is based on Katharine Briggs’ study and revision of Carl Jung’s work on psychological types,⁶⁴⁸ which was taken up and

⁶⁴⁵ Andrew Village, Leslie Francis and Charlotte Craig, ‘Church Tradition and Psychological Type Preference among Anglicans in England’, *Journal of Anglican Studies*, Vol. 7 (2009), 97.

⁶⁴⁶ John Lloyd, ‘Myers Briggs Theory: How True? How Necessary?’ *Journal of Psychological Type*, Vol. 68, Issue 6 (June 2008), 43, <http://www.gsconsultants.net/courses/mbti/pdfs/Validity_article_6-08_JPT.pdf> [accessed 7th June 2012].

⁶⁴⁷ Isabel Briggs-Myers and Mary H. McCaulley, *Manual: A Guide to the Development and Use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (Palo Alto, California: Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 1985), 5.

⁶⁴⁸ Carl Jung, *Psychological Types* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

developed by her daughter, Isabel Myers.⁶⁴⁹ MBTI assesses four dichotomous indices of psychological type, offering 16 different psychological type preferences. There is no sense that one type is better than another, simply that we each have preferred ways of interacting with our environment, processing information and making decisions. Extraversion and introversion are dichotomous *orientations*; sensing and intuition are dichotomous *perceiving functions*; thinking and feeling are dichotomous *judging functions*; and judging and perceiving are dichotomous attitudes, describing how the individual prefers to function in the outside world.

Extraverts draw energy from the external arena and learn best when discussing ideas with others; their ‘attention seems to flow out, or to be drawn out’.⁶⁵⁰ For the extravert, ‘the essential and decisive determination always come from outside’.⁶⁵¹ In contrast, the introvert’s primary focus is inward: for them, ‘energy is drawn from the environment and consolidated within one’s position’.⁶⁵² Introverts work best alone and can sustain periods of intense concentration. They relish the opportunity for inward reflection, preferring to understand a situation before acting. They are often engrossed in their inner world and less attentive to the outer environment.

The perceiving functions (S/N) address the ways people gather and process information. Those with a preference for sensing have good observational skills, make effective use of material drawn from the use of their senses, have a practical bent, and like to come to a decision on the basis of a logical process. Malcolm Goldsmith describes this type as ‘clear, uncomplicated and rooted in reality’.⁶⁵³ Julia McGuinness writes that:

Because they trust what they can measure, they tend to rely on tried and tested ways of doing things built up through past experience.⁶⁵⁴

This preference for the known is borne out in Francis’ research into personality and Christian belief among adult Churchgoers.⁶⁵⁵ Using a sample of

⁶⁴⁹ Isabel Briggs-Myers, *Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type* (Palo Alto, California: Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 1980), 17-26.

⁶⁵⁰ Myers and McCaulley (1985), 13.

⁶⁵¹ Jung (1971), 334.

⁶⁵² Myers and McCaulley (1985), 13.

⁶⁵³ Goldsmith (1994), 54.

⁶⁵⁴ McGuinness (2009), 12.

315 people (206 male, 109 female) who attended 21 courses related to personality and spirituality over several years, psychological type preference was measured against Christian belief. The study showed that sensing people scored higher in terms of conservative or traditional belief. Francis points out that this is in line with the established perspective that sensing types prefer the conventional; whereas intuitive types prefer exploration and experimentation, and are able to deal with new formulations of ideas.⁶⁵⁶ Francis and Jones' research on psychological type and tolerance for religious uncertainty⁶⁵⁷ used the same sample to assess the correlation between MBTI and a ten-item scale of agnosticism.⁶⁵⁸ Confirming Ross' findings,⁶⁵⁹ this study demonstrated that the perceiving function is the key to a person's ability to tolerate religious uncertainty, intuitives being better equipped to handle this.

Intuitive types are insightful, able to make links between seemingly disparate elements. They work with 'hunches'. Myers and McCaulley state that the goal of the intuitive type's conscious mental activity is 'the furthest reaches of the possible and the imaginative'.⁶⁶⁰ The adjective 'imaginative' does not crop up in the Manual description of any of the other types. Within the MBTI literature, the operative understanding of imagination relates to the intuitive type's ability to see patterns and make surprising connections, being focused on possibility. As we have argued, there is more to imagination than its intuitive function alone.

Once information has been acquired through the perceiving process, through either sensing or intuition, the judging function, which governs decision making, takes over, with people having a preference for either thinking or feeling. Thinkers make decisions on the basis of logical analysis, tending to seek objective truth with an emphasis on the rational and the impersonal. 'Dominant thinking shapes the analytic person.'⁶⁶¹ On the basis of observation of the facts, they are 'mindful of long term consequences of decisions'.⁶⁶² They prize fairness

⁶⁵⁵ Francis (1998), 5-11.

⁶⁵⁶ Francis (1998), 9.

⁶⁵⁷ Francis and Jones (1999), 253-260.

⁶⁵⁸ Francis and Jones (1999), 256.

⁶⁵⁹ C.F.J., Ross, 'The Intuitive Function and Religious Orientation', *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, Vol. 37 (1992), 83-103.

⁶⁶⁰ Myers and McCaulley (1985), 12.

⁶⁶¹ Francis (2006), 15.

⁶⁶² McGuinness (2009), 16.

and justice.⁶⁶³ A person with a feeling preference will be aware of the personal impact on others of their decision making, regarding this as more important than issues of logic and analysis. Francis comments that ‘dominant feeling shapes the humane person’.⁶⁶⁴

The Judging-Perceiving dichotomy describes how people relate to the outer world. Judging types are goal-orientated and systematic; they seek closure on tasks and work in organised and methodical ways, controlling their work to ensure they achieve their objectives. Perceiving types enjoy variety and open-endedness, being flexible, curious, and spontaneous, and able to deal with unexpected changes and last minute ideas. Perceiving types can find coming to conclusions difficult as there is always more to consider.

7.3 The MBTI Understanding of Imagination

Myers states that sensing types are ‘observant at the expense of imagination’ and ‘intuitives imaginative at the expense of observation’.⁶⁶⁵ This association of the intuitive type with imagination is echoed in the popular literature associated with MBTI, which seems to operate with a narrow definition of imagination that does not do justice to the full range of imaginative possibility as outlined in the framework of imaginative function offered in chapter three. Malcolm Goldsmith and Martin Wharton list ‘imaginative’ as an attribute of the intuitive type,⁶⁶⁶ adding that intuitive types ‘perceive through their imagination,’⁶⁶⁷ loving to envisage new horizons and possibilities. McGuinness states that intuitives ‘prefer speculative activities that involve imagination.’⁶⁶⁸ Angela Butler describes intuitives as having ‘leap-frog minds’,⁶⁶⁹ being able to see connections between seemingly disparate themes; she associates this type with skill in handling metaphor, symbol and poetry. Francis and Village comment that intuitive types perceive patterns, have a grasp of the symbolic, make links, see possibilities, and

⁶⁶³ Francis and Village (2008) 103; Briggs Myers (1980), 65-68; Malcolm Goldsmith and Martin Wharton, *Knowing Me, Knowing You: Exploring Personality Type and Temperament* (London: SPCK, 1993), 24-28.

⁶⁶⁴ Francis, Leslie, J., ‘Psychological Type and Liturgical Preaching: the SIFT Method’, *Liturgy*, Vol. 21, Issue 3 (2006), 15.

⁶⁶⁵ Myers (1980), 63.

⁶⁶⁶ Goldsmith and Wharton(1993), 21.

⁶⁶⁷ Goldsmith and Wharton (1993), 161.

⁶⁶⁸ McGuinness (2009), 15.

⁶⁶⁹ Angela Butler, *Personality and Communicating the Gospel* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999), 12.

have a reliance on inspiration'.⁶⁷⁰ Butler recommends that when preaching to intuitives the preacher needs to 'be creative and imaginative'.⁶⁷¹ The literature thus suggests that imagination is a particular feature of one Myers-Briggs type preference. The key question remains, are intuitives *the* imaginative type, or can imagination be seen as an aspect of the way other types operate? I believe that there is a strong case for arguing that imagination, in its various functions, has a role within all the personality preferences.

7.4 The Importance of Type Dynamics for Preaching

Before turning to an examination of the SIFT method, it is useful to explore the nature of type dynamics and their importance for preaching. Type theory assumes that we each have a preferred function and enables the identification of preferred and less preferred aspects of psychological profile. The dominant function is our preferred and strongest function which operates in our favourite world – the outer (e) or the inner (i). The auxiliary function complements the dominant. It is the other letter of our personality type's function pair (the middle two letters in the MBTI type code) and it operates in the opposite world from that which is preferred. The tertiary function is the opposite of the auxiliary. The inferior is the weakest function, sometimes referred to as the shadow function. In expressing type dynamics an 'e' or an 'i' is placed beside the function to indicate whether it is introverted or extraverted; everyone introverts or extraverts one of their functions. 'Opinion is divided over whether the tertiary function is orientated toward the outer (e) or inner (i) world.'⁶⁷²

It should be remembered that the types are preferences, not fixed descriptors. People can be enabled to develop their less preferred functions. People will always have a favoured, strongest approach to perceiving and judging but there can be an 'adequate but not equal development of the auxiliary for balance'.⁶⁷³ The ability to do this is part of imagination's gift, looking at the world 'as if' you were favouring a different preference. These less developed areas are potential sources of discovery and creativity. McGuinness argues that operating from less preferred traits is possible and, although costly in terms of effort, may open up

⁶⁷⁰ Francis and Village (2008), 100.

⁶⁷¹ Butler (1999), 15.

⁶⁷² McGuinness (2009), 68.

⁶⁷³ Myers and McCaulley (1985), 14.

discovery and play.⁶⁷⁴ Myers points out that the underdeveloped function ‘remains relatively childlike’.⁶⁷⁵ Preaching should be about discovery, growth in divine and self-knowledge, and spiritual depth. Less common is the idea that there might be playfulness about preaching as congregants and preachers are open to new ways of preaching and willing to take risks and to fail. Appealing to the less developed psychological preference through the sermon may subvert adult defences, open up new ways of receiving the gospel, and offer the freedom to play with ideas and possibilities. In this sense playfulness does not mean a lack of seriousness, but openness to new things, the willingness to risk and to laugh. Butler comments that some people report that through their less developed function they have had some ‘spontaneous experience of God’.⁶⁷⁶ Working with the less developed personality preferences can surprise and subvert our favoured ways of apprehending and interpreting experience, allowing new theological insights and religious experiences. If we take seriously the command to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind then we need to engage with all four psychological functions as a move towards wholeness.

To counter the risk that MBTI might become a narcissistic, self-fulfilling badge, there needs to be growing awareness of the negative features of one’s psychological type. John Lloyd explores the connection between psychological type and self-knowledge. He contends that self-knowledge is vital to growth in wisdom and maturity, which are valuable attributes in the spiritual life. Lloyd sees the type approach to personality as leading to an appreciation of the qualities ‘associated with the polar opposites’ of our preferred type. Exploring these qualities can help us to grow and develop, delivering affirmation and challenge. His ideas can be linked to the importance of the preacher understanding type dynamics. For example, a strongly sensing preacher might become aware of a failure to link with the bigger picture; a dominant intuitive might realise a tendency towards superficial attention being paid to text and context; an extraverted feeling type might realise a pull towards preaching to please; and a thinking type might note that their attention to detail and logical argument may fail to engage some hearers. Lloyd notes that over a lifetime, people often begin

⁶⁷⁴ McGuinness (2009), 12.

⁶⁷⁵ Myers, (1980), 3.

⁶⁷⁶ Butler (1999), 20.

to explore and utilise their less dominant functions. However, he contends that the development of our less dominant preferences can be ‘much more than a later life excursion into unfamiliar territory.’⁶⁷⁷ It is useful for preachers to be aware of their own type dynamics to help them assess and imaginatively employ and compensate for the stronger and weaker aspects of their preaching.

In order to identify the type dynamics in an extraverted person, the first step is to identify the final letter in the MBTI four letter code. If it is J, the dominant function will be the judging function. If it is P, the dominant function will be the perceiving function. The next step is to identify whether the type is extravert or introvert. A preference for extraversion means the type will extravert their dominant function.

Example 1

Energy	Perceiving Function	Judging Function	Orientation to the outer world
E	N	F	J

The 'J' points us to the Judging function as the dominant.

The type in example 1 will extravert their judging function (Fe), which is the dominant function, and introvert the perceiving function (Ni), which is the auxiliary function. The tertiary function is sensing and the inferior is thinking.

Example 2

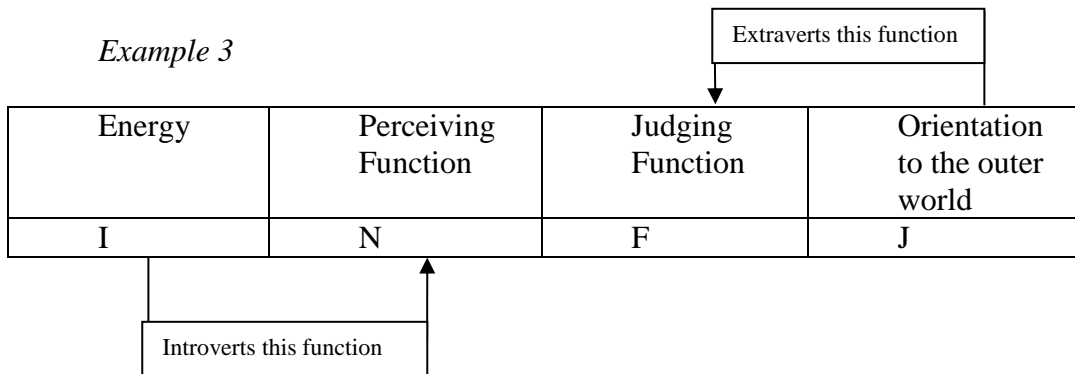
Energy	Perceiving Function	Judging Function	Orientation to the outer world
E	S	T	P

The 'P' points us to the Perceiving function as the dominant.

The type in example 2 will extravert their perceiving function (Se), which is the dominant function, and introvert their judging function (Ti) which is the auxiliary function. The tertiary function is feeling and the inferior function is intuition.

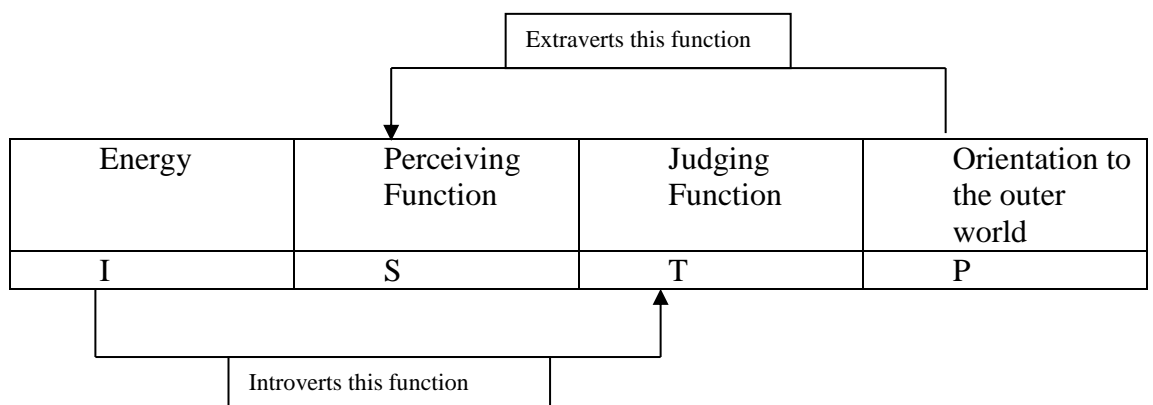
⁶⁷⁷ John B. Lloyd, ‘Psychological Type and the Religious Quest for Wisdom and Maturity’, *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, Vol. 15, Issue 9 (November 2012), 843, 844, 845.

The dominant function is harder to recognise in introverts as it operates in the inner world, whereas the introvert's auxiliary function will present itself in the outer world. The final letter in the MBTI four letter code indicates which function the type extraverts. If it is J the type will extravert their judging function. If it is P the type will extravert their perceiving function. *The dominant function for an introverted type is the function they introvert.*



The type in example three extraverts their judging function. The dominant function, however, is the one they introvert. Therefore introverted Intuition (Ni) will be the dominant function, extraverted Feeling (Fe) the auxiliary, with Thinking as the tertiary function and Sensing as the inferior function.

Example 4



This final type extraverts their perceiving function. The dominant function, however, is the one they introvert. Therefore introverted Thinking (Ti) will be the dominant function, extraverted Sensing (Se) the auxiliary, with intuition as the tertiary function and Feeling as the inferior function.

Understanding type dynamics gives the preacher a useful tool in assessing their areas of strength and weakness.

7.5 The SIFT Method of Preaching

The SIFT method of preaching is based on Leslie Francis' work, which draws on the theology of individual differences suggested by Genesis 1:27. Here human gender difference demonstrates God's embrace of diversity.⁶⁷⁸ Francis argues that from a sociological perspective the feminine interpretation of scripture is different from the masculine, and therefore men and women must talk together and share their insights in order to hear the divine word in a rounded sense. Similarly, he argues, if those with different type preferences generate different insights to scripture, preachers need to attend to psychological type differences in planning and delivering sermons.⁶⁷⁹

As the name 'SIFT' suggests, preachers are encouraged to address the biblical text using Sensing, Intuition, Feeling and Thinking, in that order.⁶⁸⁰ Data are gathered using the sensing function, ensuring close attention to genre, and to details in the text and its context. Sensing hearers will start from a literal interest in what is being communicated and will struggle if too many ideas are introduced too quickly. They need time to savour the text. Once the sensing function has gathered the data, the intuitive function can begin to see patterns and associations, and build apologetic bridges. Reflecting the MBTI connection between imagination and the intuitive type, Leslie Francis writes that 'dominant intuition shapes the imaginative person'.⁶⁸¹ Francis, Robbins and Village comment that intuitive preachers and hearers faced with a scriptural text will 'want to know how that passage will fire their imagination and stimulate their ideas.'⁶⁸² The intuitive hearer will appreciate the generation of possibilities, even if some of these are not followed through. A plethora of minutia will disengage the intuitive hearer who is focussed on the bigger picture. The danger in the

⁶⁷⁸ Francis and Village (2008), 74-77.

⁶⁷⁹ Leslie Francis, Personal Correspondence (2nd May, 2012).

⁶⁸⁰ Francis and Village (2008), 136.

⁶⁸¹ Francis (2006), 15.

⁶⁸² Leslie J. Francis, Amanda Robbins and Andrew Village, 'Psychological Type and the Pulpit: an Empirical Enquiry Concerning Preachers and the SIFT Method of Biblical Hermeneutics', *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, Vol. 65, Issue 1 (2009), <<http://go.warwick.ac/unwrap>> [accessed 29th February 2012].

preacher bringing intuition into play too soon in the planning process is the danger of misreading the data and making incorrect tangential associations. The feeling function enables inhabitation of the perspective of others, both of characters in the text and potential hearers in the contemporary context. Sensitive pastoral application relies on engagement with this empathetic type's outlook. Feeling hearers will have an interest in how feelings within the text illuminate their faith journey. Finally, the thinking function is applied to the material gathered so far in the process, raising questions, creating hypotheses, organising material logically, and addressing issues of theological coherence. Thinking hearers are 'keen to do theology and to follow through the implications and the logic of the position they adopt'.⁶⁸³

The SIFT method of preaching is helpful, as it reminds the preacher to understand their own strengths and weaknesses in sermon preparation and to respect and speak to the individuality of hearers, a task requiring imaginative engagement. The method respects the diversity of the hearers as an aspect of divine intention, as well as unlocking the 'full revelatory potential of God's word'.⁶⁸⁴

7.6 Imagination: Central to SIFT

The SIFT method in itself is an excellent example of imaginative homiletic engagement. Whatever their own psychological type, the preacher needs to be able to ask and answer the question, 'How can this sermon appeal to the sensor, the intuitive, the feeler, and the thinker?' These are imaginative questions, drawing on the affective function of our framework of imagination and requiring the preacher to adopt a viewpoint other than their own.

Francis describes the sensing person as having an eye for detail; when hearing a passage of scripture 'they want to savour all the details of the text, and may become fascinated by descriptions that appeal to their senses'.⁶⁸⁵ In the SIFT method of preaching the first step is addressing the sensing perspective, which means asking, 'What is there to see, to hear, to touch to smell and to taste?'.⁶⁸⁶ The ability to construct a sense of place in the mind's eye in this way is

⁶⁸³ Francis, Robbins and Village (2009), 11.

⁶⁸⁴ Francis and Village (2008), 138.

⁶⁸⁵ Francis (2006), 17.

⁶⁸⁶ Francis (2006), 17.

inherently imaginative. It would seem that dominant sensing can facilitate imagining which enables the preacher to establish the text, particularly narrative text, in the consciousness of those who respond to sensory detail.

In *Personality Type and Scripture: Exploring Mark's Gospel*, Francis takes each of the RCL Year B set Gospel passages and, applying the SIFT method of preaching, offers preachers ways of preaching which are designed to appeal to all types.⁶⁸⁷ Although Francis principally associates the intuitive type with imagination, in 23 of the 34 suggestions for appealing to sensors, he invites the hearer into the biblical text, to picture the scene and experience it as an onlooker, drawing from the Ignatian method. In nine examples he asks the hearer to picture something not drawn from the biblical text, still encouraging a form of imaginative 'seeing'. In one example he asks the hearer to recall examples from Mark's Gospel associated with the messianic secret, and in one example he looks at the main facts of the feeding miracles. The key point of this brief survey is to show how Francis most frequently draws on the imaginative skill of the sensing imagination, even if he doesn't name it as such.

Andrew Village's research into the relationship between type preference and readers' ability to imagine themselves into a New Testament healing story is interesting in relation to Francis' appeal to sensors to picture the scene. Four hundred and four Anglican Churchgoers across eleven congregations of different tradition and size were given Mark 9.14-29 to read, and then asked if they can imagine themselves as part of the story and, if they could, who they would be. Possible answers presented in the research instrument were: 'Jesus', 'the boy', 'one of the disciples', 'the boy's father', and 'I can't imagine myself in the story'.⁶⁸⁸ In the analysis respondents were split into 'imagers' and non-imagers' and this was correlated against type using the Kiersey Temperament Sorter, which assesses personality along the same four dimensions as Myers-Briggs but is shorter and does not require workshop sessions and training to administer. Village found that the ability to imagine in this pictorial way is actually highest among intuitive, rather than sensing types – 83% 'can imagine',

⁶⁸⁷ Leslie Francis, *Personality Type and Scripture: Exploring Mark's Gospel* (London: Mowbray, 1997).

⁶⁸⁸ Andrew Village, 'The Influence of Psychological Type Preferences on Readers Trying to Imagine Themselves into a New Testament Healing Story', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, Vol. 65, Issue 1 (2009), 184-189.

across both sexes, followed by feeling types (67%), then sensers (65%), with thinkers as weakest in this area (44%). It is interesting that the sensing imagination, whilst not scoring highest in the sensing group, does have appeal for sensers and feelers and some thinkers.

In a study seeking to correlate the personality type of churchgoers who have had no professional theological training with their interpretation of scripture,⁶⁸⁹ Francis' findings help to demonstrate the sensing imagination at work. In this admittedly small study (eight people, three women, and five men) Francis found that the four sensing types handled Mark 1.2-8, the narrative of John the Baptist, in a particular way. They paid close attention to the details of the narrative, attending to John's appearance, the crowds' behaviour and the words of John about Jesus. They attended to what was before them and didn't go beyond this passage, exemplifying the focus of the sensing imagination.

In McGuiness' description of the sixteen types, of the eight types with a preference for intuition all are regarded as having the ability to see beyond the immediate being described as visionary, future-orientated, and able to pierce through the 'conventional wisdom to view things from an imaginative angle'.⁶⁹⁰ They are described as able to see patterns, make connections and come up with innovative approaches.⁶⁹¹ Francis particularly associates intuitive types with imagination, picking up on the imaginative ability to see patterns, connections and future possibilities.⁶⁹² In the study seeking to correlate the personality type of churchgoers with no professional theological training with their interpretation of scripture, Francis' findings help to demonstrate the intuitive imagination at work. Francis found that the intuitive types handled Mark 1.2-8 in a particular way. They picked up on details of the narrative: John's call that people confess; his voice crying in the wilderness; his acceptance of all who came for baptism, and his sense of unworthiness before Christ. From these points the intuitives drew out questions and quickly moved beyond the horizons of the text, asking: does the Church today call people to confession? Where is the voice crying in the wilderness today? Do we have a sense of our unworthiness before Christ? Should

⁶⁸⁹ Leslie Francis, 'Ordinary Readers and Reader Perspectives on Sacred Texts: Drawing on Empirical Theology and Jungian Psychology', in *Exploring Ordinary Theology* (2013), 87-96.

⁶⁹⁰ McGuiness (2009), 31.

⁶⁹¹ McGuiness (2009), 29-58.

⁶⁹² Francis (2006), 17.

the Church have a radically open baptism policy? This is the intuitive imagination at work, with an emphasis on seeing in new ways and shaping future possibilities. When Brueggemann appeals to the imagination in preaching, he is also drawing on this aspect of imaginative skill, the ability to communicate an alternative vista of possibility; preaching being the painting of prophetic possibilities.

Francis states that the feeling type is able to ‘empathize deeply with people in the story and with the human drama in the narrative’.⁶⁹³ I would argue that preaching that is seeking to appeal to the feeling type will draw on the affective function of the imagination to develop themes of sympathy and empathy in relation to the characters in the text and in relation to the contemporary context. All 34 examples that Francis gives for preaching the RCL Year B Marcan texts in ways designed to appeal to feeling types involve some invitation to inhabit the perspective of a character in the story or in contemporary society. For example, we are invited to ‘step into the sandals’ of John the Baptist; ‘become an adolescent bullied by classmates at school’; ‘stand in Jesus’ shoes as the leper man approaches’; ‘see things through the eyes of the paralysed man’; ‘put yourself in the place of the good and faithful shepherd who had a hundred sheep’ and to put on the ‘villain’s crown and explore the story from Herod’s perspective’.⁶⁹⁴ Such affective skill is a function of imagination: the ability to ‘see’ from a viewpoint not your own.

The findings of Francis’ study, referred to above, thus help to demonstrate the affective imagination at work. Francis found that the empathetic types handled Luke 3.2b – 20, the Lucan account of John the Baptist, in a particular way. They focussed on the characters, trying to understand their situations and motives, recognising that Herod was bullied and under pressure, and noticing that John’s proclamation was a hard, but necessary word, and noting too their negative reaction to John. Here again is the affective imagination at work, seeking to understand the other.

The final aspect of the SIFT method offered by Francis and Village is the appeal to the thinking types. With a focus on the objective, impersonal and rational, this type might seem the least likely to utilise or welcome an appeal to

⁶⁹³ Francis (2006), 18.

⁶⁹⁴ Francis (1997), 15, 22, 37, 41, 59, 76.

imagination. However, it is a mistake to separate the rational and the imaginative, as we saw in chapter three where the case was made for the intellectual imaginative function. In the suggestions Francis gives for preaching the RCL Year B Marcan texts in ways designed to appeal to thinking types, he frequently attends closely to textual detail, often drawing from scriptural material outside the immediate passage, and asking the hearer to think through textual material to work towards resolutions of difficulties raised in the text. There is an implicit ‘if...then’ pattern operating in the sections designed to appeal to thinkers. This ability to hypothesise, to ‘see’ possible outcomes, is an aspect of the intellectual imagination, which is closely associated with discovery. In the same study referred to above, Francis’ findings help to demonstrate the intellectual imagination at work. Working with the Lucan account of John the Baptist, the thinking types are logical and analytic, identifying John’s message of judgement, and picking up themes of responsibility. Here is an implicit ‘if this... then’ pattern; an approach that does not blunt the prophetic edge of the passage.

7.7 Critique of the SIFT Method of Preaching

A key question in relation to SIFT is whether there is a proven connection between biblical interpretation and type preference? Leslie Francis and Andrew Village have established that there is such a correlation.⁶⁹⁵ A sample of 404 lay Anglicans from 11 different Churches were asked to read Mark 9.14-29, and were then presented with a paired choice of statements about the passage that reflected a choice between sensing and intuition, thinking and feeling. Type preferences were assessed using the Kiersey Temperament Sorter. The research demonstrated a match between psychological type preferences in perceiving and judging and different interpretative approaches to scripture:

Interpretations that reiterate details of the passage, or stress the sensory information it contains, are more likely to attract sensing than intuitive types. People who have a preference for intuition, in contrast, are more likely to prefer interpretations that establish connections beyond the immediate passage and raise deeper questions about it. Similarly, interpretations that stress the emotional or relational aspects of a passage are more likely to appeal to feeling types than to thinking types; who are in turn more likely to prefer

⁶⁹⁵ Village and Francis (2005), 74-89.

interpretations that analyse the passage in a more logical and detached manner.⁶⁹⁶

Francis has subsequently explored the extent to which preachers interpret texts according to their dominant type preference.⁶⁹⁷ Twenty-four licensed Anglican Readers and 22 licensed clergy in total participated in CME training days at which their dominant type was scored and they were put into dominant type groups. Participants all worked with the same text (Matthew 6.33-34). Although this was a limited study both numerically and in the sense that only one scriptural text was used, it was found that the material each group produced was consistent with their dominant psychological type:

Sensors gave close attention to the details of the text and focused on practical outcomes. Intuitives allowed the text to spark their imagination and sometimes ended up with themes far removed from the starting point of the passage itself. Feelers saw the passage through the lens of compassionate concern and from the perspective of the people within the narrative. Thinkers saw the passage from the perspective of the ongoing theological issues raised.⁶⁹⁸

Is it possible to appreciate a hermeneutic approach that appeals to our inferior function? Francis, Robbins and Village took a sample of 389 preachers involved in ongoing professional development.⁶⁹⁹ (They do not specify if this was a sample from one particular denomination, or an ecumenical group.) Participants' MBTI (predominantly I 62%; N 48%; F 62%; J 74%) was measured against their preferred interpretation of Mark 1.29-39. Participants were offered a choice of four interpretations designed to reflect the perspectives of sensing, intuition, feeling, and thinking. Based on the Jungian theory that individuals will find it difficult to access their inferior function, the function opposite to their dominant function, the hypothesis was that the sensing interpretation would be less preferred by the intuitive and vice versa and the feeling interpretation less preferred by the thinkers and vice versa. However, the research findings showed

⁶⁹⁶ Village and Francis (2005), 85.

⁶⁹⁷ Leslie J. Francis, 'Five Loaves and Two Fishes: An Empirical Study in Psychological Type and Biblical Hermeneutics Among Anglican preachers', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, Vol. 66, Issue 1 (2010), <<http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/811/pdf>> [accessed 23rd May 2012].

⁶⁹⁸ Francis (2010), 4-5.

⁶⁹⁹ Francis, Robbins and Village (2009).

that preachers were also able to appreciate interpretations that reflected their inferior preference:

When presented with the full range of sensing, intuitive, feeling and thinking perspectives, these perspectives are appreciated almost equally by those for whom the perspective reflects the dominant preference and for those for whom it reflects the inferior preference.⁷⁰⁰

These findings certainly answer the question posed concerning whether preachers can appreciate a hermeneutic approach that appeals to their inferior function. Is the same true for lay people within the congregation? We might argue simply that, since preachers come from congregations, we should expect to find this trait in congregations too. This then raises the question of the purpose of the SIFT method. If people can access different interpretations anyway, is there a need for SIFT? This question was raised in personal correspondence with Francis, who writes that:

For me the good news of my empirical studies is that although different types generate different insights, these different types are not closed to hearing from insights generated by other types.⁷⁰¹

It may be the case that the experience of clergy or Reader training leads to an enhanced recognition that there are dimensions other than one's own perspective. This raises the importance of SIFT as part of a means of enabling the *congregation* to grasp the richness of a holistic experience of scripture through this preaching method. This informs the importance of listening to, learning from, and addressing other types in the processes of preparation and preaching, since preachers and their congregations need the insights of others to gain a fuller appreciation of the biblical text. The four approaches of the SIFT method offer a fuller explanation and exploration of the scriptural text.

The research suggests that in order to be able to preach effectively for all types and to have a rounded hermeneutic, the preacher needs to be trained in recognising and preaching from their dominant and their less preferred functions. How easy is it for preachers to generate a reading of the text that draws from

⁷⁰⁰ Francis, Robbins and Village (2009), 19.

⁷⁰¹ Leslie Francis, Personal Correspondence, (May 2nd 2012).

their weaker type preferences? Inherent to such training is a question relevant to the domain of imagination: ‘What is it like to read this text as a senser, intuitive, feeler or thinker?’ The vital point for the preacher here is the exercise of imagination, the intentional decision to see from another’s perspective and weave such insights into the overall sermon. For SIFT to work, the imagination is of central importance.

A further question arises related to the degree to which the SIFT method, overused in a formulaic way, becomes predictable. If every sermon is designed to appeal in part to every type there is also a risk that everyone will feel short changed. Francis and Village encourage both preacher and hearer to utilise the full range of interpretive strategies ‘to engage with the full richness of the text’.⁷⁰² However, they acknowledge that ‘we cannot imagine preachers wanting to follow this pattern slavishly week in week out’.⁷⁰³ They recommend that some sermons seek self-consciously to target all four perspectives, but at other times target only one.⁷⁰⁴ On a practical note, when time pressure on preparation is a factor, it is quicker for the preacher to draw from the skill and insight of their own type preferences. They are likely to preach more readily and easily from these particular preferences. If the preacher is trusted and known, and there are a range of sermon styles delivered regularly which appeal across the types, then congregants are likely to grow in their imaginative appreciation of different styles:

We envisage this process leading to a deeper spiritual awareness as individuals gain closer contact with the less well-developed aspects of their inner self, and come to appreciate more deeply how the God who created us with diversity of gifts and diversity of preferences can be worshipped and adored through sensing as well as intuition, through thinking as well as feeling.⁷⁰⁵

Another important question relating to SIFT is whether it works with non-narrative texts. Francis’ work on SIFT is applied in three particular books which examine the use of the method with the Revised Common Lectionary readings in

⁷⁰² Francis and Village (2008), 133.

⁷⁰³ Leslie J. Francis and Peter Atkins, *Exploring Luke’s Gospel; A Guide to the Gospel Readings in the Revised Common Lectionary* (London: Mowbray, 2000), 11.

⁷⁰⁴ Francis and Atkins (2000), 11.

⁷⁰⁵ Francis and Atkins (2000), 11-12.

the Synoptic Gospels.⁷⁰⁶ Whilst SIFT is predominantly used with narrative text, the revised edition on preaching Mark's Gospel includes SIFT readings of key texts from John, including the Prologue,⁷⁰⁷ the discourse on the feeding of the five thousand,⁷⁰⁸ some of the 'I Am' sayings⁷⁰⁹ and parts of Jesus' final discourse.⁷¹⁰ With non-narrative text, the method generates an interesting range of routes into the biblical material, generating different ideas, images and questions, demonstrating that SIFT is a useful method across the biblical genre and, although no material has been published applying SIFT beyond the Gospels, there is no discernible reason why it could not be applied more broadly. A worked example, employing imagination to use SIFT with a section of an epistle, is offered in section eight below.

7.8 Is SIFT really necessary?

People may be hearing but not listening because congregations and preachers are on different wavelengths.⁷¹¹

Examining the dichotomous type preferences amongst Anglican clergy and congregations, compared with UK norms, strongly suggests the need for the SIFT approach, with its implicit requirement for imaginative engagement to enable appreciation of differing 'wavelengths' in congregational hearing. Various studies of UK clergy type profile have been carried out. Taken together,⁷¹² a picture emerges of clergy tending to prefer introversion over extraversion, feeling over thinking, and judging over perceiving. There is some discrepancy, however, over the findings concerning sensing and intuition. As Francis et al. indicate:

⁷⁰⁶ Francis and Atkins (2000); Leslie J. Francis and Peter Atkins, *Exploring Matthew's Gospel; A Guide to the Gospel Readings in the Revised Common Lectionary* (London: Moorhouse, 2001); Leslie J. Francis and Peter Atkins, *Exploring Mark's Gospel: An Aid for Readers and Preachers using Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary* (London: Continuum, 2002).

⁷⁰⁷ Francis and Atkins (2002), 157-161.

⁷⁰⁸ Francis and Atkins (2002), 184 -201.

⁷⁰⁹ Francis and Atkins (2002): The good shepherd , 202-206; The true vine, 215-209.

⁷¹⁰ Francis and Atkins (2002), 219-232.

⁷¹¹ John V. Tornfelt, 'Preaching and Learning Styles: How to Communicate so People can Listen', *Evangelical Homiletics Society Database*, (2003), <<http://www.ehomiletics.com/papers/03/papers03.php>> [accessed 19th January 2012].

⁷¹² Findings from Irvine; Goldsmith and Wharton; Francis, Payne and Jones; and Francis and Robbins, reported in Francis, Craig, Whinney, Tilley and Slater (2007), 271-273.

While the results of studies by Irvine; Francis, Payne and Jones; Francis and Robbins; and one of the four studies reported by Goldsmith and Wharton suggest that clergy in the United Kingdom tend to prefer sensing over intuition, the other three studies reported by Goldsmith and Wharton suggest that clergy in the United Kingdom prefer intuition over sensing.⁷¹³

(There is some question over the research method of Goldsmith and Wharton, given a failure to provide sample sizes or background information on their participants.)⁷¹⁴ Building on these studies, Francis et al.⁷¹⁵ focussed on the psychological type profiles of 626 male Anglican clergy in England and 237 female Anglican clergy in England. The results of this study can usefully be compared with those of a study of the profile of 108 male Anglican Readers and 128 female Anglican Readers serving in the Church of England⁷¹⁶ to discern the type patterns of those authorised to preach. These figures can then be compared with type patterns found among 93 female and 65 male active members of the Anglican Church in England,⁷¹⁷ along with UK population norms,⁷¹⁸ to explore the type patterns of hearers and potential hearers of sermons and to assess the need for the SIFT approach. The comparative figures are shown in the table below. Inferences can be drawn from these figures which support the importance of engaging with the SIFT method of preaching, and underline the vital role of imaginative engagement in the preaching task.

⁷¹³ Francis et al. (2007), 272.

⁷¹⁴ Francis et al. (2007), 272.

⁷¹⁵ Francis et al. (2007).

⁷¹⁶ Leslie J. Francis, Susan H. Jones and Mandy Robbins, 'The Psychological Type Profile of Readers in the Church of England: Clones of the Clergy or Distinctive Voices?', *Journal of Anglican Studies / FirstView Article* (May 2013), 1-22, < http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1740355313000077 > [accessed 1st June 2013].

⁷¹⁷ Leslie J. Francis, Angela Butler, Susan H. Jones and Charlotte L. Craig, 'Type Patterns among Active members of the Anglican Church: A Perspective from England', *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, Vol.10 (2007), 435-443.

⁷¹⁸ Elizabeth Kendall, *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Step 1 Manual Supplement* (Oxford: Oxford Psychologists Press, 1998), results cited in Leslie J. Francis, Jeanette Barwick and Charlotte Craig, 'Psychological Type Preferences of Christian Groups: Comparisons with the UK Population Norms', *Journal of Psychological Type*, Vol. 70 (March 2010), 33, 36.

A comparison of dichotomous preferences between male and female Anglican Preachers in England, lay and ordained, and the UK population (figures are percentages).

	E	I	S	N	T	F	J	P
Male Anglican Clergy	43.1	56.9	38.3	61.7	46.5	53.5	68.2	31.8
Female Anglican Clergy	46	54	35.4	64.6	26.2	73.8	64.6	35.4
Male Anglican Readers	32	69	62	38	42	58	81	19
Female Anglican Readers	46	54	50	50	36	64	71	29
Male Anglican Church members	46.2	53.8	49.2	50.8	56.9	43.1	78.5	21.5
Female Anglican Church members	44.1	55.9	54.8	45.2	21.5	78.5	72	28
Population Norms: Male	47	53	73	27	65	35	55	45
Population Norms: Female	57	43	79	21	30	70	61	39

Preachers of any/every psychological type need to engage the imagination if they are to produce sermons which will connect with the range of psychological profiles amongst their hearers. In order to develop preaching as a collaborative venture of the whole Church, in conversation with scripture and society, those licensed to preach need to re-imagine their preaching process in order to connect more closely with their hearers. Openness to the other is an aspect of imaginative

function and engagement, and as such is crucial to the preacher. This raises the importance of sermon preparation and discussion groups, which offer the preacher an ideal opportunity to learn how members of the congregation approach the biblical texts and what aspects of the preachers' sermons have most impact with particular psychological profiles. A preaching preparation and/or review group is likely to support the extraverted preacher and to appeal to the extraverted hearer, who will discover more of what they think and how they respond to the biblical text and sermon when they are engaged in conversation with others. Bearing in mind that the majority of preachers have a preference for introversion, online sermon preparation and feedback, using Facebook, online forums, the Church website, email, Twitter and dedicated preaching preparation sites, might be preferred by many, allowing the introvert control over the degree and timing of their involvement as they reflect with the hearer. Introverted hearers are likely to resist being put into a situation of being expected to make a direct response to the sermon in the event of its being preached. For introverted preachers and hearers space for reflection will be appreciated.

Preachers cannot assume that their hearers' minds work in the same way as their own. Malcolm Goldsmith observes that 'what supports and encourages one person in their spiritual journey may have no affect whatsoever upon someone else'.⁷¹⁹ With that in mind, it should be noted that the figures report a preference for sensing in female congregation members, with an almost even split between S/N preferences in male congregants but a clear preference for intuition in male and female clergy. This may result in clergy sermons being regarded as too abstract and impractical by a sizeable proportion of the congregation who are more concerned with the concrete and actual. As discussed in the opening section of this chapter, sensors have a lower tolerance for religious uncertainty than intuitives. This has implications for preaching styles, and offers an important steer to the intuitive preacher; the sensor is likely to regard doubt as a weakness whereas the intuitive will warm to and enjoy the exploration of difficulties in the text or faith, and cope with issues being left unresolved in the sermon, believing that doubt strengthens faith. Intuitive preachers may unwittingly cause sensing hearers anxiety in their preaching which raises doubt and questioning, but leaves

⁷¹⁹ Goldsmith (1994), 29.

matters unresolved. The exercise of the affective imaginative function enables the intuitive preacher to consider their material from the perspective of a different psychological type and tailor the sermon in such a way as to increase the likelihood of it being received.

Male and female Readers show a significantly higher preference for sensing than do their clergy counterparts, with 62% of male Readers preferring sensing (compared with 38% of male clergy) and 50% of female Readers preferring sensing (compared with 35% of female clergy). Although the figures for a sensing preference are considerably higher in the UK population (with 73% of men and 79% of women showing a sensing reference), Francis, Jones and Robbins point out that:

In terms of the two perceiving functions, Readers have some claim to be extending the personality profile of those engaged in ministry to reflect more closely the profile of the society in which they live and work.⁷²⁰

Preachers engaged in creating addresses for occasional offices and non-Church based outreach events need to construct sermons which take into account an appreciation for detail, which are earthed in the practical, and aware of live issues in the given moment. Preachers will need to pay attention to cultural issues and local issues being, like Paul in Athens, alive to the detail of the day.⁷²¹ Colourful and evocative illustrations that appeal to the senses are likely to be appreciated. Here the sensory imagination serves the preacher.

Sensors, preferring the conventional, may find innovative preaching styles unsettling, preferring the known in terms of content and delivery. Discerning preachers will know that at times unconventional preaching can, because it causes discomfort, surprise people into new perceptions, whilst at times it may be counterproductive, creating barriers in the hearer. The vital point lies in the employment of a range of preaching styles, which calls for imaginative engagement.

Francis comments that ‘dominant sensing shapes the practical person’.⁷²² They like to ‘let the eyes tell the mind’,⁷²³ focussing on specifics rather than the

⁷²⁰ Francis, Jones and Robbins (2013), 16.

⁷²¹ Acts 17.16, 23-28.

⁷²² Francis (2006), 15.

⁷²³ Francis and Village (2008), 101-102.

overall picture. The sensing hearer needs an experiential element, enabling them to grasp content: perhaps through the use of direct reference to specific aspects of the biblical text, physical images and objects, and tangible ways of responding to the sermon. For sensing hearers, the sermon needs to be connected to the present moment rather than over-focussed on future possibilities. Earthing the sermon in the text and the contemporary context requires the use of the sensing imagination with its attention to detail and ability to engage people's sensory perceptions. Preachers need to enable sensing congregants to see how the details of the text connect with their lived experience. Sensers find it hard to see the bigger picture. Uncritical sensing preachers are likely to bring a wealth of material to the pulpit, but lack connection with the themes underlying the text and connecting into the broader Christian narrative. Enabling even a glimpse of how our everyday lives map onto the canvas of a Christian worldview, which stretches from creation to new creation, requires the employment of the intuitive imaginative function; the use of the symbolic and the metaphoric opening new ways of connecting the mundane with the supramundane.

Their skill in discerning connections serves the intuitive preacher well, enabling them to see patterns in the biblical text and its relation to context. Intuitives are focussed on possibilities. The intuitive love of metaphor and symbol enables them to create arresting images, forge apposite apologetic connections, and delight in the writing of the sermon. However, the intuitive type runs the risk of using the text as a launching pad for the sermon and losing connection with the drive and intent of the specific passage. Here the intuitive has much to learn from the sensing type's attention to detail. Whilst sensing preachers need to look up from the details of the immediate and ask the bigger question, intuitives need to attend closely to the details before moving on to vision and implications.

In the T/F function it is important to note the significant preference for feeling amongst females across all four categories (i.e. clergy, Readers, congregants, UK population). In comparison, there is a marked preference for thinking in the male congregational sample and in the UK population norms, which is not reflected in the male clergy or Reader sample (both of which show a preference for feeling).

This, and the fact that there are more women than men in the Church,⁷²⁴ means that men may find the Church to be stereotypically feminised, and this could be reflected in preaching which is overly pastoral in focus with an emphasis on empathy and well-being at the expense of logic, order, rationality, and unsentimental applications relating to discipleship and justice. Given the difference in UK population norms between the T/F preference in males and females, preachers, statistically more likely to preach with a preference for feeling, need to imaginatively consider how to appeal to thinking types if they are to make apologetic connections with those holding stereotypically male approaches. Evangelistic appeals that are based on intuition and affect are likely to be regarded as irrelevant and sentimental to people with a concern for logic and truth, and worse still, to support the stereotype that religion is for women. The exercise of imagination across the psychological preferences is vital in enabling preachers to connect with hearers across a range of contexts.

Whilst, in the Church context, the affective imagination will appeal to the majority of listeners, the thinking type is in the minority in the Church community, and likely to feel alienated and unfed by sermons which often seek harmony and peace with a strongly affective element. Female Anglican clergy are weak on the thinking preference (26.2%), as are female Readers (36%), as compared to the male congregants (56.9%). This underscores the particular importance for female licensed preachers of following Isabel Briggs-Myers' advice and enlisting their thinking to discover the logical reasons required to gain a thinking type's acceptance of a conclusion they have already reached by way of feeling.⁷²⁵ This requires the exercise of imaginative energy, trying to see the world from the perspective of the thinking type and communicating in the 'if...then' language of the intellectual imagination. To appeal to the thinking type sermons need to attend to the logical development of ideas and pay close attention to theological coherence. The deductive sermon is likely to appeal to this type. Preachers with a preference for thinking will be more able to preach in the prophetic voice without being impeded by an over concern for the hearers'

⁷²⁴ Leslie J. Francis, 'The Psychology of Gender Differences in Religion: A Review of Empirical Research', *Religion*, Vol. 27, Issue 1 (1997), 89-90.

⁷²⁵ Myers (1980), 67.

feelings. However, pastoral sensitivity may be overlooked in the pursuit of logical, rational argument; truth may be delivered without tact.

Feeling types are good at reading people's motives. In analysing biblical texts and the contemporary context, the strongly affective feeling type will focus on the human factor, with a concern for conciliation and harmony. Unlike thinkers, feeling types find it hard to be objective in their decision making. The strength of the preacher with a dominant feeling preference is likely to lie in the pastoral sensitivity of their sermon, with a focus on the merciful love of God. The correlate of this is the danger that they preach to please, and find it difficult to preach in the potentially unpalatable prophetic voice; tact may be substituted for truth.

The preference for judging in clergy and Readers may mean that the sermon easily becomes an item on a checklist to be completed, rather than an open ended and on-going conversation between the Spirit, the preacher, the scriptures, the tradition, the contemporary context, and the congregation. Options may be closed down too quickly and, in the desire to complete the task, the creative process of conversation about the sermon is curtailed, reducing the potential for the input of others. The danger for the judging preacher is that they rush to conclusions without enough information and inhibit the full range of imaginative engagement in the preparation process. The Judging type could usefully reflect on the dynamic theology of preaching offered by Michael Quicke,⁷²⁶ which, although not written on the subject of MBTI and preaching, offers material which could help the J type to resist the temptation to see the sermon as simply a task to be completed. Quicke's theology of preaching underscores the sense of preaching as revelatory process, in which imagination plays a vital role (see chapter three, section four).

Those with a perceiving preference are not so driven by the need to complete the task, and are therefore potentially more creative and flexible in their approach to sermon preparation. However, the danger of this tendency to leave things until the last minute is that it potentially inhibits team work. A last minute sermon in many Anglican contexts means that others are likely to find it difficult to connect the themes of the sermon in with the music and intercessions. The ideal for the

⁷²⁶ Quicke (2003).

preaching event is that the preacher strikes a balance between the need for organisation, good planning and communication, and the need to be imaginatively open to new ideas, on-going conversation, and changes. Good organisation need not flatten the dynamism of the preaching process, and dynamic openness need not become last minute disorganisation.

7.9 Worked example: SIFT as an Imaginative Tool for the Preacher.

In order to demonstrate the importance of imagination in the SIFT process and to show the applicability of SIFT with non-narrative texts, the following section focuses on a SIFT reading of Philippians 2, a mixture of epistle and poetry, extending Francis' and Atkins' application of SIFT beyond the Gospel texts. The approach requires imaginative identification with the perspectives of others if it is to work, calling for the preacher to set aside their usual interpretive strategies in asking how each type preference might approach the text – a task for the imagination.

Sensers are 'very careful about getting the facts right and are very good at engaging in precise work.'⁷²⁷ The sensing approach comes to the passage focussing on the details of what is there in the text, reflecting on each piece of information and getting the facts established clearly. The genre of the text will be particularly noted, along with the situation of the writer. The stages in the shape of Paul's plea will be marked by the sensing type: because of what you have known and experienced of God (2.1-2) behave in a manner worthy (2.3-4), and let the mind of Christ be in you (2.5). The insertion of the poetic material (2.6-11) will be particularly noted, as will the heightened mood this brings to the letter. Attention will be focussed on the outworking of the mind of Christ in the life of Christ and establishing the pattern of discipleship to which Paul is urging his readers. The sensing attention to detail will note the 'therefore' of verse 12, which connects the hymnodic insertion with Paul's continuing urging for obedience and continuation on the path of discipleship (2.12-15). This connects with Paul's own situation of suffering and his desire that in the faithfulness of the Philippians his boast on the day of Christ may be made and in this he rejoices and calls them to do likewise (2.16-18). The sensing perspective attends to the body of the textual material, noting it but not rushing to interpretation or

⁷²⁷ Francis and Atkins (2000), 6.

application. On its own, a sensing interpretation is unlikely to move beyond the horizon of the biblical text. The statistics from Village's research⁷²⁸ suggest that an Ignatian approach, exploring the narrative of Paul's situation as he writes his letter, is likely to be appreciated by the majority of sensors, as well as intuitives and feeling types. This would offer a useful way into a sermon on this passage.

The intuitive will be looking for 'abstract, symbolic and theoretical relationships, and the capacity to see future possibilities'.⁷²⁹ The intuitive type is likely to see the connection between the supreme example of Christ offered in the poem and the earthed examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus; individuals who express the mind of Christ in their concern respectively for the Philippians and for Paul (2.19-20; 2.25-26). Epaphroditus becomes ill almost to death in his desire to serve the gospel through caring for Paul. In an indirect way, Paul offers his readers clear examples of the kind of discipleship to which he is calling them. An intuitive reading of this passage will look for resonances and connections with other texts, such as seeing connections between the kenotic outpouring of Christ in the hymn with the washing of the disciples' feet in John 13. Similarly, intuitives may warm to connections being made between Christ's kenotic sacrifice and that of martyrs through history. The intuitive preacher will ask questions such as 'what does kenotic discipleship look like today?' and 'what difference does it make in society?'

The feeling type is likely to empathetically enter the narrative that forms the back story to the letter: the broader backdrop of Paul's own story, his suffering and the fact that he writes from prison.

Feeling types look at life from the inside. They live life as a committed participant and find it less easy to stand back and to form an objective view of what is taking place.⁷³⁰

This type will readily stand in Paul's shoes, considering his struggle, his love for the Philippians, and his anxiety that there are those who might lead them astray (2.21; 3.2). A feeling type might explore the relationships between Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus and consider how it might feel to receive Paul's letter with its

⁷²⁸ Village (2009).

⁷²⁹ Francis and Atkins (2000), 5.

⁷³⁰ Francis and Atkins (2000), 8.

challenging call to discipleship based after the pattern of Christ. This type will readily stand in the shoes of those in the congregation who feel that the call is too daunting, and will find ways of making that call accessible and possible, seeking to address the contrapuntal in the hearers' response. They will seek to take the congregation on a journey through their feelings in response to the text, in a sermon which is likely to be warm, affirming, and encouraging.

The thinker will not necessarily take Pauline authorship for granted, but may explore the date of composition, authorial purpose and identity, which has a place, although it would be unusual in a sermon. A thinking reading of this passage will isolate and explore the theological resonances and significance of the passage. The insertion of the hymn material, focussing on Christ's outpouring and exaltation, points to the likelihood of this theology being part of the early Church's liturgical celebration. 'Paul' uses this material as the motivation and exemplar for the life of discipleship, and as part of his wider argument against resisting heresies rife in the Philippian context. Christ's exaltation above all things becomes the lens through which all other interests are to be read and judged. The logical focus of the thinking interpretation will ask sharp questions about how this theology challenges and shapes the commitments of the contemporary Church, exposing our hypocrisy and double thinking.

The process of applying SIFT to this mixed genre chapter of scripture indicates that SIFT can work with non-narrative material. It requires the exercise of the sensory, intuitive, affective and intellectual imagination and generates insights that I, at least, would have missed – had I relied solely on my dominant feeling preference.

Undoubtedly, exercising the SIFT method of preaching calls for preachers to engage imaginatively with the approaches of hearers, employing the imagination in its sensory, intuitive, affective and intellectual functions. Again we see the vital connection between preaching and imagination. The following chapter will extrapolate three important areas for the preacher who wishes to develop imagination and draw out certain implications for teaching preaching.

Chapter Eight: Implications for the Practice and Teaching of Preaching

The imaginative preacher will seek to preach sermons which are ‘heart-deep and world-wide.’⁷³¹ Reflecting on the themes explored in the previous chapters, it becomes possible to extrapolate three important areas for the preacher who wishes to develop such preaching: the practice of imagination as a spiritual discipline; conscious engagement with the imagination in each of its four functions throughout the sermonic process; and a willingness to try new sermonic structures and performance methods, having assessed what might be most appropriate in a given context. Developing such imaginative preachers has certain implications for teaching homiletics, relating to the teacher’s engagement with the students and the nature of curriculum design. This chapter address these issues.

8.1 Mystery and the Mundane: The Practice of Imagination as a Spiritual Discipline

It is from the basis of developing imagination as a spiritual discipline that genuinely profound connection can be made between mystery and the mundane. If we are to notice God in the everyday, to make connections, seeing this as that, we need to be imaginatively open and alert. So imaginative preaching does not begin with techniques and tips, it starts in deep relationship with God. Robert H. McKim comments that ‘any mental ability that is not exercised decays’ and makes a connection between perceptual loss and lost imagination.⁷³² Although he is not writing from a faith perspective, his point is instructive. The role of the sensory imagination is to notice and to gather data. However, many of us run our lives with the accelerator foot so heavy on the pedal that we do not really attend to the richness of sensory details; our sensory imagination operates only passively. Clergy often find sermon preparation time squeezed by the multiple demands of ministry. Likewise, lay preachers are often pressured by the demands of their working lives and family commitments. If preaching is to have depth and

⁷³¹ Lionel M. Moriah, ‘Imagination: Matchmaker for Preaching and Worship’ in *Connecting Preaching with Worship*, Papers, 2010 Conference, Evangelical Homiletics Society (2010), 107-122, <ehomiletics.com> [accessed April 3rd 2013], 39.

⁷³² Robert H. McKim, *Experiences in Visual Thinking* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1972), 24.

resonance, the preacher needs to develop their sensory imagination as a spiritual discipline, resisting the lure of worthy busyness.

McKim comments that ‘seeing is an active art to be developed, not a passive experience to be taken for granted.’⁷³³ The same can be said for hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling. Preachers need to be encouraged to really focus on exercising sensory imagination as they engage with the details of the everyday and walk the scriptures with the senses alert. Herein is a gateway to experiencing wonder and joy, and the route into noticing the suffering of the other. Unless preachers attend to the details of the everyday how can we ever really understand and preach into the contexts within which we are located? A stunted sensory imagination offers little to the other functions of imagination, resulting in vapid description which does not resonate with the hearers’ context, lack of precision, weak affective connection, and a paucity of detailed data to offer to the intellectual function.

How might such sensory awareness be promoted? One key method is in encouraging the preacher to slow down and notice, to develop a contemplative and sacramental awareness. Sandra Levy makes the point that exhaustion, distraction and laziness are obstacles to imagination.⁷³⁴ With this in mind, preachers need to be encouraged to practise the pause, whether that is the deliberate pause of the scheduled retreat or the regular recollection of the self before God in the midst of a busy day. A similar point is made by Eric Liu and Scott Noppe-Brandon in a recent secular book on developing the imagination. They observe that ‘modern life is almost completely free of stillness’. They uphold the practise of stillness as an exercise for developing imagination.⁷³⁵ Such a contemplative gathering of the senses will lead to greater attention to the sights, sounds, smells, and textures of the everyday, providing a rich data bank for the preacher.

Related to this need to slow down is the irrevocable connection between the state of the body and our ability to imagine. As embodied beings, if we are tensed up, tired, or run down our imaginative insight is distracted and impeded. Many preachers might be surprised and relieved to learn that all work and no

⁷³³ McKim (1972), 25.

⁷³⁴ Levy (2008), 118.

⁷³⁵ Eric Liu and Scott Noppe-Brandon, *Imagination First: Unlocking the Power of Possibility* (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 43-45

play makes for poor preaching. Preaching preparation crammed into the last minute will suffer, since there is no relaxed opportunity for the intuitive imagination to play with the material, nor for engaged affective reflection and the logical working of the intellectual imaginative process. Levy explores the importance of engaging in imaginative prayer practices, highlighting the richness of Ignatian meditation and engagement with scriptural passages.⁷³⁶ Similarly, use of the Ignatian *Examen* fosters imaginative recollection of the details of the day and the points at which we noticed or failed to notice God.

McKim writes about the importance of recentering viewpoint as a skill in creative seeing. ‘Recentering is characterized by the flexible ability to change from one imaginative filter to another.’ He gives the example of a sketch of a naked woman and demonstrates recentering though looking at the sketch as a sculptor – looking at the lines and the nature of her pose; as a feminist – noting issues of exploitation; and as the woman herself – feeling a bit chilly. The point is that our perceptual filter affects what we see. We can apply McKim’s ideas to the development of the sensory imagination as a spiritual discipline. When we engage the sensory imagination what do we see? Do I see the drunken tramp as a dangerous threat, a social embarrassment, or a child of God? Imaginative recentering challenges our stereotyped on-look habits. This is what Jesus demonstrates in his seeing, a flexible recentering which sees a tax collector as a son of Abraham and religious professionals as a hindrance to the spiritual growth of the people.⁷³⁷ McKim comments that ‘visual stereotypes are always socially conditioned.’⁷³⁸ Liu and Noppe offer a useful practice to help us to become aware of and challenge such conditioning, becoming aware of the danger of our snap judgements:

The work of cultivating imagination is, in some respects, the work of deferring the blink – keeping eyes pried open – and suspending the process of judgement formation.⁷³⁹

⁷³⁶ Levy (2008), 128-129.

⁷³⁷ Luke 19.9; Matthew 23.13.

⁷³⁸ McKim (1972), 44.

⁷³⁹ Liu and Noppe (2009), 115.

The imaginative preacher needs to ask what she is seeing and why, challenging congregations to look at our ‘camera habits’, and challenging the ways in which we frame the world.

8.2 Radical Openness: Engagement with the Imagination throughout the Sermonic Process

Engaging with imagination throughout the sermonic process will be enhanced by an openness to developing all four aspects of imaginative function, even those that lie in the preacher’s MBTI tertiary and inferior functions. The development of the sensory imagination was addressed above. Attending to the intuitive imagination requires that preachers give time for the ‘in-press’ of ideas before they turn to efforts to express. The in-press process can be fed by engaging with scripture in visualising and guided imagining: indulging the intuitive imagination as it makes its connective leaps, and allowing a free rein to curiosity. A radical openness to drawing connections from everyday life, both high and low culture, without closing down possibilities through a misguided sense of piety, will lead to much richer expression. Such radical openness is a result of a deep sacramental understanding of God’s engagement with the world. This will require some sifting and reflection as we empty our intuitive pockets, but we should ‘not scold imagination for bringing it all home or for collecting it in the first place.’⁷⁴⁰

McKim describes expression as being ‘to press out’.⁷⁴¹ There are many ways for the preacher to bring to birth the fruit of intuitive engagement and provide further material with which the imagination can play. Graphic ideation offers a means of sketching out the geography and movement of a biblical narrative, perhaps drawing the sermon shape, or blocking out sermonic moves. In the process of sketching out ideas the imagination is given opportunities to continue shaping and refining the material. Other ways of expressing the in-press in the sermonic process is to play with words on the page, exploring the descriptive potential of lyrical phrasing, and resisting the pressure to move too quickly from jotted notes to a more developed script.

⁷⁴⁰ Taylor (1993), 51.

⁷⁴¹ McKim (1979), 116.

Affectively imaginative preachers will explore their sympathetic and empathetic connections with biblical characters and the perspectives of potential hearers of the sermon. Here the wisdom of Harper Lee's character, the lawyer Atticus Finch, as he speaks to his daughter Scout, is instructive for the preacher:

'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view -'

'Sir?'

'- until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.'⁷⁴²

The imaginative preacher will step into the skin of different hearers, seeking to establish trust through the development of affective bonds. This calls for genuine attention to be paid to the details of people's life stories and contexts. To ensure preaching does not become overly parochial and inward looking, the imaginative senses need to be tuned into the sacramental nature of narratives beyond our immediate horizons. Sermons which seek to engage the imagination of the hearers will create spaces, ask open ended questions, and invite the hearer to make the sermon their own. Care needs to be exercised to ensure that images and instances are not all drawn from the same sphere of life as this shows a failure to consider and draw from the experiences of the other and reduces the potential for affective engagement across the congregation.

Engaging the intellectual imagination in the preaching process reminds the preacher of the importance of exercising reason and logic in making decisions about sermon structure, content, and delivery. This might involve seeing oneself in the preaching space and exploring issues related to sightlines, acoustics, the formal/informal nature of the context, and congregational expectations, before making sermonic decisions on an 'if...then' basis. Here the preacher can usefully engage imaginative supposition to explore the possible results of deliberately seeking to preach in ways which challenge and surprise expectation.

The intellectual imagination follows the logic of eschatological hope, structured in the Easter faith that the hopelessness of Friday's death and desolation will be redeemed in the light of Sunday's resurrection. It is this faithful, determined hope which gives the strength to endure the long Saturday. The intellectual imagination sustains the weary emotions and the darkened

⁷⁴² Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (London: Heinemann, 1960), 35.

intuition with an insistent grasp on the hypothesis that ‘if God has promised redemption, then redemption will come.’ This gives courage and strengthens the lyrical voice to give wing to words in the heart of darkness, re-naming and re-imagining as a source of hope.

The intellectual imagination can act as a watchdog on the affective imagination which, with its concern for the feelings of the other, can peddle cheap grace, blunting the prophetic edge of the logic of the intellectual imagination and muting the ethical challenge of the gospel. The prophetic thrust of the intellectual imagination is not afraid to push the challenge: *if* we believe, trust and love God, *then* our behaviour will reflect an orientation around God and not self. *If* our behaviour does not demonstrate such gospel values *then* what does it demonstrate?

8.3 Develop a Repertoire: The Willingness to Try New Sermonic Structures and Performance Methods

Being wedded to one particular style of sermon structure and delivery betrays a lack of imagination and perhaps a lack of confidence. Liu and Noppe suggest that a useful imaginative practice is to ‘unschool yourself periodically’, recognising that the point of achieving mastery is not to stamp out repeated performance *ad infinitum* but rather to recycle the mastery and to express it in new ways.’⁷⁴³ As preachers develop competency in their craft, they can afford to take risks and develop new methods, not for the sake of novelty, but to be faithful to the scriptural shape, and purpose and the nature of the context. Very often, preaching in a liturgical context results in a lack of variety in the shape of the sermon and its relationship to the rest of the liturgy. From time to time it might be appropriate to follow the sermon with an act of penitence (allowed, but unusual, in the Anglican context) or to weave congregational prayer or verses from a hymn into the sermon itself, highlighting the corporate nature of the preaching event.

Preachers can learn much from the use of ‘placement’ in British Sign Language, in which the narrator of a story indicates through sign, gesture and eye movement where the people and objects she is describing are located, creating a

⁷⁴³Liu and Noppe (2009), 176-179

sense of narrated space. Using this technique, the preacher can implicitly locate the congregation within the geography of the narrative. They are no longer distant observers but players in the game, an effect which reduces emotional distance. This requires the preacher to be aware of their position in the narrative. For example, in preaching on the story of Zacchaeus, is the preacher below the tree, looking up, or in the position of Zacchaeus looking down? It might be that during the sermon flow the preacher wishes to change characters. This can be enacted with a change of the angle of the head and a shift in eye-line. In this way, the preacher can indicate conversational shifts.

Rather than repeating the same sermon structure and delivery week in and week out, the imaginative preacher will develop a repertoire of methods and skills, always focused on using these to work with God in effecting encounter and transformation in the sacramental event of the sermon. Using the word 'repertoire' might offend some, linking preaching with acting or pretence. On the contrary, preaching is about integrity and honesty, but this needs to be communicated in some way, and all communication is a form of performance, the bringing of something to expression. The question facing the preacher concerns what is the best performative method to convey the sermonic content with the greatest truth. Here the preacher needs to be true to scripture, true to the context, and true to themselves. Hence a repertoire of preaching methods and performance skills is profoundly helpful. To this end it is worth remembering that the richest repertoire resides not in the individual, but in the preaching team. Imaginative preaching is best achieved through a team of people offering the best of their repertoire on a rota basis. Too often, all the preaching rests with one person, which is a recipe for burnout and congregational boredom.

Within some contexts this may raise the objection that many ministers serve in areas where there are no other preachers, with one minister perhaps covering a number of rural churches, or working in deprived areas where people lack the confidence or biblical literacy to begin to preach. This situation requires an imaginative response which seeks to give people confidence. Possibilities could include designing a sermon series which includes opportunities for people to share their testimonies, working with the preacher to weave this into the sermon. Another way of building confidence is through preaching preparation and response groups. Part of the role of the imaginative preacher is recognising

potential preachers in the congregation, and providing training opportunities and encouragement into Reader training. However they go about the task of preaching, such leadership will be marked by ‘empathy, humility, personal and vicarious identification, compassion, courage, concern and candour, grace, and justice. All these characteristics shape the imaginative preacher.’⁷⁴⁴

8.4 Implications for Homiletics Teaching

Levy suggests that imagination is a gift which is shaped by the way we develop it. Addressing the question of whether it is a matter of nature or nurture, she asserts that the development of imagination has elements of both. The key time for imaginative development is in childhood and adolescence – but it can also be developed in adulthood.⁷⁴⁵ She writes:

‘If we conceive of the imagination as a power or capacity we all possess at least in nascent form, then analogous to a virtue such as patience, it becomes strengthened through practice.’⁷⁴⁶

Frederick Buechner compares imagination to muscles which ‘can be strengthened through practise and exercise’.⁷⁴⁷ In a similar vein, Douglas Purnell comments that it is ‘possible to exercise the creativity “muscle” by encouraging people to practise creative acts.’⁷⁴⁸ Highlighting the importance of developing imagination, Anna Carter Florence uses the same image: ‘Imagination is not an ingredient you add in. It is a muscle you develop.’⁷⁴⁹ The entire premise of Liu and Noppe-Brandon’s helpful book on developing imagination is that ‘imagination is completely malleable: we all have it – and we can all develop it.’⁷⁵⁰ They go on to offer twenty nine insightful practices for the development of imagination.

In response to the disclaimer ‘I don’t have any imagination,’ Robert McKim suggests that the main difficulty is not a lack of imagination but an inability to

⁷⁴⁴ Moriah (2010), 111.

⁷⁴⁵ Levy (2008), 112-115.

⁷⁴⁶ Levy (2008), 115.

⁷⁴⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 69.

⁷⁴⁸ Douglas Purnell, ‘A Gallery Tour: The Creative Project as an Assessment Mode in Theological Education’, *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (1999), 205.

⁷⁴⁹ Anna Carter Florence, ‘The Preaching Imagination’, in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice*, eds., Thomas G. Long and Nora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2008), 123, 116-133.

⁷⁵⁰ Liu and Noppe-Brandon (2009), 22.

contact imagination consciously and exercise it productively.⁷⁵¹ If imagination is a gift given, which can be nurtured and shaped to help us to apprehend the divine, then it should be a vital element in theological education. Purnell maintains that:

Theological education is a place for naming God and naming God is an act of the imagination. Theological colleges and seminaries must be places that foster, encourage, and equip the imagination. We can do this by creating an environment within the institution sympathetic to, and encouraging of, the development of the imaginative expression.⁷⁵²

Furthermore, if imagination is central to preaching, then the homiletics classroom needs to be a place which particularly fosters, encourages, and equips students' imaginations.

In a paper on the status of imagination in secondary school English teaching, Lisa Dart makes the observation that the imaginative engagement of the teacher fosters the development of the children's imaginative response.⁷⁵³ Similarly, the teacher of homiletics needs to model imaginative engagement in the way she approaches the subject of preaching. Imagination needs to be part of the cargo of the preaching curriculum, a subject for theological discussion in its own right. It is also the vehicle that enables the communication and reception of curriculum content. Whatever else it might be, the homiletics classroom should never be dull. If it is to inspire spiritual discipline, theological faithfulness, rich scriptural engagement, openness to the sacramental nature of life, consideration of the embodied nature of communication, a willingness to play with language and risk performance, exploration of the relationship between personality and preaching, and a desire to enter deeply into the homiletic waters, then the teaching of preaching *must* be rooted in imagination. A number of issues flow from this in terms of engagement with students and curriculum design.

In terms of engagement with students, the affectively imaginative teacher will be aware of the potential range of emotions present, particularly as a new class forms. The potential for fear and vulnerability in adult learners, particularly those

⁷⁵¹ McKim (1979), 25.

⁷⁵² Douglas Purnell, 'Educating the Whole Body: Addressing and Equipping the Imagination in Theological Education', *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 49, Issue 3 (2001), 219.

⁷⁵³ Lisa Dart, 'Literacy and the Lost World of the Imagination', *Educational Research*, Vol. 43, Issue 1 (Spring 2001), 68.

new to preaching, is very high. Those who have had prior preaching experience may feel a sense of defensiveness about being required to take a preaching class, and are likely to come with a desire to prove themselves as competent preachers, which may impede their openness to learning new homiletic methods. The affectively imaginative teacher will be sensitive to the unnamed anxieties in the room, and aware of their importance. Such emotions are not merely to be named and then dismissed or avoided.⁷⁵⁴ Fear, anxiety, vulnerability, and defensiveness are theologically important in the practise of preaching, partly as they remind us of the foolishness of the undertaking and our inherent need of God. Such emotions need to be articulated and then managed if students are to be free to engage with serious playfulness with the curriculum content.

Dart makes the point that ‘a climate where approaches of ‘play’, ‘experiment’ and ‘risk-taking’ which, it is well recognized, often leads to creative outcomes, needs to be established and valued.’⁷⁵⁵ The same holds true in the homiletics class where serious playfulness demands taking risks and being prepared to fail as part of the learning process. Indeed, Liu and Noppe hold up failing well as an imaginative practice which runs counter to the fear of getting it wrong and looking a fool.⁷⁵⁶ Students who do not feel that the environment is safe will not try new things, a reluctance which will hamper their development as preachers. In establishing relationship with a preaching class the teacher will seek to create a safe space for anxiety to be acknowledged, explored and understood.

Imaginative strategies to manage these emotions may include the use of humour, the use of story – the teacher sharing her own anxieties in her preaching, and the provision of opportunities for the naming of experiences and anxieties in non-threatening ways. Examples of the last might include students working to create a tableau such as ‘My Sunday morning congregation’, to draw out expression and discussion of students’ understanding of their preaching contexts and the challenges these create. A ‘cross-the-space’ exercise can help students see the range of backgrounds and experiences in the group, with students crossing the space if they, for example, read news online, watch soap operas,

⁷⁵⁴ For an exploration of the importance of attending to emotion in adult education, see John M. Dirkx, ‘The Power of Feelings: Emotion, Imagination, and the Construction of Meaning in Adult Learning’, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Vol. 89 (Spring 2001), 63-72.

⁷⁵⁵ Dart (2001), 72.

⁷⁵⁶ Liu and Noppe (2009), 186-191.

listen to local radio and so on. A spectrum exercise can help to draw out the variety of opinions and experiences students have concerning preaching. Students are asked to arrange themselves in a line in response to a range of questions, with ‘strongly agree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ at opposite ends of the spectrum.⁷⁵⁷ Questions might include ‘Sermons should always be preached on one biblical text’, ‘women preach differently to men’, or ‘imagination is of central importance in preaching’.

The affectively imaginative teacher will also be sensitive to possible student resistance to a focus on imagination in preaching, and might respond to this through creating the opportunity for students to engage theologically with the framework of imaginative function. Given that most theological training institutions use Myers-Briggs within their programmes, connecting MBTI type to the shape of the framework of imaginative function, in conversation with the SIFT method of preaching, offers a useful way of helping preachers to see the relative strengths and weaknesses of their imaginative functions, and how these might be developed.

Seeking to stand in the students’ shoes, the teacher may note that resistance to imagination can be rooted less in theological objections and more in earlier negative educational experiences. Douglas Purnell recounts his own fear of saying the wrong thing in preaching which hindered his imaginative freedom. He traces the root of this anxiety to an incident he had at the age of twelve when he had written a story he thought was a wonderfully creative piece. Failing to grasp his authorial intention, and without discussing the piece with the young Purnell, the teacher read out his work to the class as an example of poor writing, leading to his humiliation and embarrassment, and a subsequent difficulty in trusting his imagination. He comments that ‘many adult learners can tell similar stories’, pointing up the need for theological colleges to ‘become communities of healing in which people are encouraged to trust and express the work of their imagination.’⁷⁵⁸ Adult learners who were schooled in a culture of standard assessment tests may not have had much opportunity for developing the free play of imagination, or of valuing imagination. A vital issue here is respecting the

⁷⁵⁷ These three exercises were designed by Revd. Prof. David Wilkinson as part of the first session in a preaching course at Cranmer Hall, St John’s College, Durham.

⁷⁵⁸ Purnell (2001), 222-223.

experiences, positive and negative, which students bring with them to the homiletics classroom.

Some students may be impatient with the stress on developing imagination as a spiritual discipline, because the pressure of upcoming preaching appointments leads to a desire to learn ‘how to preach’ in a more instrumental fashion. However, this impatience to learn the nuts and bolts of preaching as quickly as possible is usually rooted in a deep anxiety which can be eased through engaging in deeper imaginative engagement with God, out of which flows the confidence to preach. This is not to say that homiletics classes should not teach the basic skills of preaching. Indeed, equipping the preacher with an appropriate preaching toolbox is of great importance, but the teacher should resist any sense that there is *a* right way to preach, as this will hinder preachers from discovering their own preaching voice.

Inhabiting an imaginative pedagogy of homiletics means drawing from a wide range of resources to model imaginative engagement and to stimulate and equip the student preacher, both in terms of their theoretical grasp of homiletics and their practical engagement with preaching. As discussed in chapter six, the ways we imagine the preaching role have powerful theological entailments. Five years of teaching preaching classes and running conferences on preaching have made it clear to me that many preachers simply have not considered their theology of preaching. Weak theoretical foundations hamper deep reflective practice. Inviting students to explore a range of similes for the preacher’s role (preacher as teacher, herald, artist, spiritual director, jazz musician and jester), and developing their own models, is one way of creatively and playfully raising these issues.

In encouraging students to engage imaginatively with the biblical text the homiletics tutor can also borrow from the techniques of the drama workshop. Careful exegetical work on a text can be followed up with hot-seating a character as a way of building an imaginatively affective connection, bringing the feelings and experiences of the biblical character closer to our own. Hot-seating enables the students to focus on and articulate the questions they bring to the text whilst also highlighting the question of what congregants might be asking about a text. Freeze-framing can be used to help students to consider the embodied nature of communication. For example, students might be asked to choose a biblical character involved in a particularly dramatic situation (e.g. Peter after he had

denied Christ and fled the scene; the woman healed of a crippling disease; Mary at the annunciation; or Paul on the Damascus road).⁷⁵⁹ They are then instructed to freeze-frame a position and facial expression which communicates the emotions of their chosen character. Students are then asked to see if they can draw inferences from the bodily communication and try to guess who is being represented. Exercises like this encourage students to consider how they use their bodies to add communicative force to their preaching.

Douglas Purnell describes an exercise used in a pastoral studies class on human sexuality at Wesley Theological Seminary (Washington). Students were required to adopt a role different from their own experience and research it in order to create a fifteen minute monologue in role.⁷⁶⁰ They were asked to draw from a hat a particular role. Roles included prostitute, gay person, homophobe, etc. This exercise could be adapted for the homiletics class. Students could be asked to take on the perspective of a biblical character, considering their perspective and using that to present a dramatic monologue. Learning outcomes might include: the development of the affective imagination in the empathetic mode; demonstration of exegetical skill in using biblical material, and drawing apposite inferences, and effective performance in terms of gesture, facial expression, and use of space, vocal intonation and pace.

As we saw in chapter five, writing for the ear involves using lyrical language which is richly evocative. Student preachers need to be exposed to the power of poetic language and given opportunities to play with figurative language, identifying and discussing the effective use of the lyrical voice in sermons. This can be achieved in a wide variety of ways, such as listening to and analysing contributions to Radio Four's 'Thought for the Day'; writing their own radio reflections and discussing these in groups; analysing the sermons of effective lyrical preachers such as Martin Luther King; and thinking critically about their own use of language and the reasons why they have employed particular strategies. Beavsee this thesis has identified the vital role of imagination in preaching, important aim in the teaching of preaching is to encourage preachers

⁷⁵⁹ Matthew 26.69-75; Mark 14.66-72; Luke 22.54 -62; John 18.15-17, 25-27; Luke 13.10-17; Luke 1.26-38; Acts 9.1-5.

⁷⁶⁰ Purnell (2001), 216.

to be imaginatively reflective about all the dimensions of their craft and to help them to connect with the imaginations of their hearers in the preaching event.

Chapter Nine: Drawing the Threads Together

This thesis has sought to establish the vital importance of the imagination in the contemporary preaching event. Some have questioned the place of preaching today; asking whether the day of the sermon is over?⁷⁶¹ The contention of this thesis is that the sermon is an essential part of the outreach and worship of the church. However, there is no room for preaching which is dull, pointless or irrelevant, if indeed there ever was. Sermons need to connect.

Imaginative engagement has always been needed in preaching, but it is particularly striking that imagination seems to connect with a number of discernable features of the postmodern landscape. We saw in the opening chapter that the lack of trust in metanarrative invites the preacher to engage their affective imagination in order to inhabit the incredulity and suspicion operative amongst some hearers. Where grand stories are questioned, the importance of the *petit récit* is highlighted. The imaginative preacher will attend to the little stories of the poor, the weak and marginalised precisely because they are the concern of the overarching story of God's redemptive work in Christ. In a context in which there are many truths but no accepted centre the preacher is challenged to plausibly represent the particularity of the Gospel. Rather than simply attacking the perspective of the other, a wise imaginative approach is to inhabit that perspective in order to understand and be able to name and explore people's objections to the Gospel. At the same time, the imaginative preacher will be aware that the grammar of faith is formed principally in the community of the church which shapes the identity of the believer. Having a clear sense of self-identity gives the security to be able to engage with integrity in genuine dialogue. Such integrity, humility and honesty, as well as a confidence in one's particular faith identity, are essential in the communication of faith. Allied to this, in a context where authority is questioned and regarded with some suspicion, an imaginative preacher will seek to preach authoritatively, searching for the credibility that comes through listening to the other and forging sermons which tell the truth and tell it slant. Here the use of story-telling and the skills of the poet are invaluable in shaping sermons which are alluring, tensive, open, honest

⁷⁶¹Norrington (1996); Pagitt (2005); Johnny Baker, *Transforming Preaching: Communicating God's Word in a Postmodern World* (Nottingham: Grove Booklets, 2009).

and invitational. This is the heartland of the lyrical preacher and it is inherently imaginative. The imaginative preacher is open to the rich possibilities of creative deconstruction in which old texts can yield new insights and meaning. For the imaginative preacher revelation is not caged up inside a book, but free to take flight and lift our eyes to new vistas of possibility graced by God. In a context in which the rational can be seen to have been dethroned the imaginative preacher will recognise the potential of the symbolic to awaken us to new seeing. She will seek to create the ‘stereophonic communication’ of which Babin speaks, welding together the alphabetic and symbolic ways of communicating. Recognising the serious nature of creative playfulness, the imaginative preacher will seek to create sermons which leave space for the hearer to step inside. Tightly woven propositional sermons tend to leave little space for the hearer to step into the play and engage creatively with God in the shaping of their sermon for that moment in their story. In engaging with each of these themes imagination proves itself to be vital to the preaching event.

As we saw in chapter two, the imagination has been understood and valued in diverse ways both throughout Western history and in the homiletic literature. Such critical overview of the literature is original to this thesis, as is the framework of imaginative function offered in chapter three. The function of this is as an heuristic tool to enable discussion of imagination in the homiletics classroom. Related to this purpose, on the basis of having identified a gap in the preaching literature and seeking to correct this deficit, a robust theology of imagination was given in the same chapter, drawn from a range of theological texts to serve homiletic purposes.

The sacramental potential of preaching and its inherent connection to the imaginative skill of ‘seeing more’ was discussed in chapter four. This was underpinned by a critical theology of sacrament. Here the point was made that like the visual image, language has multivalent and tensive possibility. The imaginative preacher will be one who gives thought to shaping the language they are using, noting that words have disclosive potential. This linked into chapter five which focussed on the concept of lyrical preaching with its focus on deliberately writing for the ear. How we use language to encourage new vision is an important question, pertinent to the thesis that imagination is vital in preaching. It is part of imaginative function to create innovative and striking

metaphors, to see new analogies, to paint with language designed to be evocative and appealing. Such preaching is marked by a desire to imaginatively grasp the disclosure of the gospel and to render a new seeing through the inherently imaginative craft of poetic expression.

Chapter six focused on the connection between imagination and how we frame the world, pointing out that it is vital in preaching not only in terms of how we shape and express content, but also in how we see the preaching task itself. Our internalised models carry theological freight and affect the way we engage in the task of preaching. An imaginative preacher will be conscious of their master metaphors and willing to challenge and recombine them. Imagination is thus vital not only to the praxis of preaching but also to how we conceive of the task of practical homiletics.

The vital connection between preaching and imagination was again underscored in the seventh chapter which offered a critique of the MBTI understanding of imagination, which has not been found elsewhere. MBTI seems to connect imagination principally with the intuitive type. As the framework of imagination makes clear, there are four key aspects of imaginative function (sensory, intuitive, affective and intellectual) which map across onto the four aspects of MBTI (sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking). The SIFT method of preaching demands that the preacher engage with different personality types. This in itself is an inherently imaginative undertaking, requiring the preacher to ‘see as’ each of the personality types. This chapter made the point that the SIFT method can be extended beyond the Gospel texts, widening the scope of its applicability. The point is made clearly in this chapter that one style of preaching will not work for all. Imaginative variety is needed.

The penultimate chapter extrapolated three important areas for development: the practice of imagination as a spiritual discipline; conscious engagement with the imagination in each of its four functions throughout the sermonic process; and a willingness to try new sermonic structures and performance methods. This has implications for homiletics relating to the teacher’s engagement with the students and the nature of curriculum design. Imagination is vital in the praxis and teaching of preaching.

Undoubtedly, imagination is at the heart of preaching. Imagination is an agent of divine transformation: it enables intuitive connection, sparks new vision,

paints alternative vistas of hope-filled possibility, and opens us to the perspective of the other. It shapes our ability to describe, to image and intimate. It governs the way we look upon others, ourselves, and even the preaching role itself. Grasped by the Spirit, imagination clears the vision of the sinner, it causes the heart to catch, and re-orientates the will towards the worship of God. 'The imagination is a space for the revelatory voice of God.'⁷⁶² As such it is vital to preaching.

⁷⁶² Purnell (2001), 213.

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