

# Preaching a Homily at Mass

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*The following notes are based mostly on personal observation of what works and what doesn't in good preaching, with a bit of the priestly training from Womersley for good measure.*

## Preaching as Communication

Preaching is about COMMUNICATING. Can you sum up in one sentence the message you want to get across to your congregation? No? Then don't preach – not until you are clear about what you want to say.

Never try to get across more than 3 major points in a talk, whether a 3-minute homily or a 1-hour lecture. Your listeners won't take in more than that. And for a short talk, even better, stick to one point.

The Homily is meant to be a Breaking of the Word, in some way connecting the texts given for the day with the circumstances of the congregation. Your job is to make the connection.

What should you preach on? Any text from the liturgy of the day is a fair target – not only the Gospel, but the first reading, the psalm, the proper prayer texts and the normal liturgical responses and Eucharistic prayers. If there is something obscure in one of the readings, or something that could be misinterpreted (e.g. St Paul speaking “against” women or St John about “the Jews”) you would do well to comment on that.

Never assume your congregation took in the particular sentence of scripture you are going to hang your homily on. They were probably half-asleep, or captivated by a different verse in the other reading. So when you want to refer to the message of that text, remind them what the text said. No one likes being “told” (which signals that you think they've forgotten) but everyone likes being “reminded” (which signals that you think they did know really but are rusty). This goes for theological points too. And avoid jargon, like ‘Torah’ or ‘justification’ – you may have a qualification in theology, but they don't.

We are a people of “good news”. If we acclaim, “this is the Gospel of the Lord”, then look for the good news in the Gospel, and all the readings. Ask yourself, “Why is this Good News?” – then ask the Holy Spirit the same question. This is especially pertinent when a reading looks like bad news (a hard moral teaching or an unfinished story “to be concluded” tomorrow). It goes without saying that preparing and preaching a homily should be accompanied by prayer for God's guidance all the way through.

Be cautious about preparing a homily which only teaches a doctrinal point. There's nothing wrong with teaching doctrine, but it can seem a bit abstract unless it is connected somehow to Christian living. Always look for how it might impact daily life, and lead your listeners to seeing the connection, perhaps by leaving them with a question at the end of your homily.

If you choose to teach upon a moral point, don't shy away from identifying sin as sin. But always emphasise redemption and the Divine Mercy of Jesus. I once heard a talk on sexual ethics by a married man, a young professor, and I was really struck by the way he never talked about sin without deeply stressing the welcome that Jesus had at hand for the sinner.

Know your congregation. Weekday Massgoers can be presumed to have a particular level of faith (though the congregation may also have grieving people marking a recent death or anniversary). Sunday Massgoers include the devout who would go daily if they could, as well as those who go weekly or less often, perhaps out of a sense of obligation.

Once you have written your homily, review it. Does it clearly get across the one message you want it to? If not, revise it!

### **Using a Text**

This section presupposes you are preparing a homily based on one or more of the given readings. It is better to focus on *one* text than to contrive artificial connections with the others – there is no special connection between the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading and the others on Ordinary Sundays, nor between the 1<sup>st</sup> reading and Gospel on Ordinary or Eastertide Weekdays. The Gospel and 1<sup>st</sup> reading *are* chosen to be related on Ordinary Sundays, and there is *always* a connection between all the readings in Lent, Advent and Christmastide. You may happen to find a useful connection, and if that comes naturally, it's providential, but don't force it.

Given that you are basing your homily on a Bible text, you need to ask some basic questions to understand the context:

- ▶ Who wrote this text?
- ▶ Who was it addressed to?
- ▶ What does the passage before the selected reading say?
- ▶ And the passage after the selected text?
- ▶ What is its meaning (you need historical context especially for the history and prophecy of the Old Testament, and theological knowledge for some epistles).

According to *Dei Verbum*, understanding what the human author meant to say is the first step for Catholic Biblical interpretation. But that is *only* the first step, because then we ask what the Holy Spirit was saying to the Church then, and is saying to the Church today. In particular, ask: What is the Spirit saying to *this* congregation?

## **Some patterns – 10 routes to effective communication**

1. Choose a short sentence or question which sums up the message you want to get across – it could be a verse from the Scripture just proclaimed. Use this as your opening line, and as your closing line. You might also be able to use the same line mid-homily. Allow a silent pause at the end for the message to sink in.
2. If you can't find a particularly appropriate sentence, you could use "Accept the word of God for what it is – God's message, not some human teaching", or "The word of God is alive and active...". This gives a challenging emphasis to the message you have just drawn out of scripture.
3. Sometimes, you can use a very short line which you can repeat even more often, to give your homily the flavour of a litany. Think of the repeated "Blessed are..." statements of the Beatitudes, or the "evening came, morning came" of Genesis.
4. Choose a question which challenges each member of the congregation to apply scripture to their lives in some way. Build up the background, help the congregation understand the issue – then pop the question at the end. Allow a silent pause for it to sink in.
5. Do something interactive – this wakes up the congregation and draws them in. A liturgical response can be useful. For instance, if you want to preach about praising God, say "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God" and everyone replies, "It is right to give Him thanks and praise." Then you can unpack for them what that means.
6. Similarly, if you highlight something coming up later (e.g. the Eucharistic Acclamation) people will be attentive and look out for it.
7. Re-tell the reading of the day in your own words. But don't just tell people what they know already – draw out some hidden point, or a different perspective; or add background knowledge (especially if the text is some part of Old Testament history or prophecy which needs a context).
8. Tell a story – but one which relates to the point you want to get across. If it raises a laugh, fine, but be cautious about using a joke just to wow your audience. Unless you can bring in your serious point strongly, they might remember the joke and forget the point.
9. Use a visual aid (very good with kids), and do a "show and tell" which illustrates your point.
10. Give a personal testimony from your own journey in faith. If you are willing to risk being an open and vulnerable human being you will win sympathy from other human beings.

## **Valuing Difference**

Our congregation consist of many and diverse people. The danger of trying to connect your text with your congregation is this: Are you preaching a message which is meaningful to all of them? Most preachers have a few pet topics they tend to keep returning to; this is fine, as long as it does not prevent your hearers from receiving the whole of the Gospel.

It might be useful to do a “preaching audit” from time to time to see if you have preached messages which cover the whole congregation and the whole of God’s message. The following lists are probably not exhaustive, but unless your preaching, over the long term, caters for every entry, then someone, or something, is probably being missed out.

### ***Who are you preaching to? (involvement in church):***

- Life-long faithful Catholics.
- Returned prodigals.
- Recent converts.
- Non-catholic spouses or close relations.
- Occasional visitors.
- “Seekers” exploring the Catholic faith.

### ***Who are you preaching to? (domestic situation):***

- Families
- Separated spouses
- Those who are divorced, including those in a second civil marriage
- Single adults
- Widows and widowers

### ***Content of preaching:***

- Primary Evangelisation – helping the congregation to lead others to a relationship with Jesus Christ, and addressing those listening who have not yet come to know Him.
- Spirituality – helping people in their relationship with God.
- Doctrine – helping people understand the truths of the faith.
- Personal Morality – helping people identify sin in their lives and reminding them that God is ready and waiting to forgive it – *if* only they repent!
- Social Justice – considering our responsibility to the poorest in our own country and in the world, and challenging the congregation to action.
- Domestic Church – living as a Christian family. (Married deacons may bring a perspective, and a presumed authority, to this which celibate priests cannot preach from.)
- Community Building – helping the congregation to understand what it means to be a parish community, and challenging them to action.