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SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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2nd January: Epiphany

'STRANGERS AND ALIENS'

*By the Revd Dr Marjory A. MacLean
Edinburgh*

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Bad enough – don't you think – that strange and inconvenient things were being said about this baby within the life of Judea itself. Odd and apocalyptic-sounding promises made to his pregnant mother; altogether peculiar goings-on in the temple in the months just past; bizarre tales from the local countrymen after his birth; the unmistakable smell of trouble brewing, the kind of trouble that ends in the horrible things that desperately-frightened powerful people can do.

But worst, perhaps, when international attention is shown, when people outside the safe box of the familiar community start wanting to know what's going on and where the real action is. That threatens something that is worse than insecurity for the people of power; and that is the danger of looking weak and idiotic from the outside.

Strictly on their own terms, this was a community that looked forward to being in the world's limelight for all the best reasons, as dreamed for them in Isaiah's prophecy. One day their light would come as the glory of the Lord shone unmistakably and chased away everything that felt like darkness. Nations once a source of terror for God's people would gather from far afield, bringing their wealth and sharing that heart-thrill promised by God through his people. And nothing would be too good and precious for admirers to bring; even gold and the richest of incense.

Strictly on their own terms ... This was the vision of the Psalmist too; a vision of justice reigning forever, and righteousness and peace triumphing at last, of the needy and oppressed restored after

so long waiting in desperation, of the great and the good from the kingdoms of the earth bringing tribute to God's people.

But this visit of exotic foreign thinkers bent on reaching Bethlehem was disappointing to the point of alarming. Their object of attention was not the place of power, Jerusalem, was not the place where the religious vision was preserved and sustained. These unnerving eastern visitors hadn't read the script.

So Herod was thoroughly frightened when he heard the rumour that foreign dignitaries were looking for a new ruler newly born. He turned on the full force of diplomatic charm, met them very discreetly and wrung all the information out of them that he could get. And he was rattled.

We 'do' rattled.

We do 'rattled', those of us who think we are preserving the religious truths of our community. We do 'rattled' when people come searching for the wrong thing or in the wrong way and not according to the script we thought we understood. We are irritated when people flock to nativity plays and watchnight services but flock *only* to nativity plays and watchnight services: as if they thought they were receiving something they wanted there, when all the while we know what would be much better for them in our weekly worship in the routine parts of the year. We're terribly glad to see them when they're here in December – don't get us wrong or anything – but we know how much more they're missing. Apparently. We know we're on the inside of what God is offering. Apparently. We know that these poor folks are on the outside. Apparently. After all, who in their right minds would want to be finding God anywhere other than where we have found God? Who would not be grateful to come to our light, the glory of our God as presented by us? Who could possibly more deserve the gold and frankincense of religious activity and commitment and support than us?

But we are rescued from making ourselves complete fools like this by people like St Paul, who

describes in the wonderful hymn that is Ephesians chapter 3 how he was breaking the community of God open so that Gentiles could come in. He treated non-Jews as fellow-heirs without stopping to protect himself from the consequences; he spoke of what he understood within the greater mystery, proclaiming and not preserving, letting the world hear if it was listening. He regarded himself as being at the bottom of the heap, yet would not compromise at any price his calling to speak to those no-one else would think of addressing. He keeps us from being Herod, and so does every saint in our churches who welcomes new faces without scrutinizing them and who rejoices in those who come without counting them.

What a different experience of God's welcome is felt by curious outsiders like those wise men travelling through the wilderness towards the Christ-child's birthplace. The open-minded seekers in this gospel story would not be deflected from following the signs that were guiding their instincts. They wouldn't be fobbed off with the account that was convenient to the powerful; they wouldn't be distracted by the oily charm of the ruling elite behind carefully-closed doors; they wouldn't be impressed with the predictable and the traditional when they felt deep down there was something remarkable and promising still to be found. They just wouldn't follow Herod's script, because what they were seeking was too important and too exciting to settle for less. As they set off again from Jerusalem and headed towards the unlikely destination of Bethlehem, they showed the courage to behave apparently randomly, to do something apparently extravagant, to make a gesture that was apparently pointless and to declare something that was obviously dangerous.

Today, too, it is possible that someone hearing this sermon is not a cosy insider in our familiar church system; that someone catching these words visualizes themselves on the outside of a story that draws them and mesmerizes them; that there are ears listening to this that are blessedly open to hear something thoroughly fresh and exciting. At Epiphany the Church must have the courage to promise that all its privileges and most treasured possessions will be broken open for those who demand to be included for the first time, who insist on being blessed though they are outside the community.

They will have accents that will trick us into thinking they could not possibly belong here, and they will have clothes that make our eyebrows dance

in disapproval. They will bring gifts that seem vulgar and ask questions that sound impertinent. They will look for signs and messages in places we do not approve of and they will infuriate us by their inability to do things our way. They will be strangers and aliens, too exotic or too open-minded, and they will take what belonged to us once.

Whenever I am Herod and I want the course of religion to follow the path I have defined to be the true one, may mysterious strangers always shift the focus away from my silliness and find something I had not thought possible. When I am the guardian of the faith and have Christian belief packed tightly into a box of my choosing, may I be overwhelmed by a St Paul who springs the Spirit from such a prison. When I am a priest and a scribe and using my cleverness and cunning in religious self-preservation, may the infant, incarnate Jesus disarm me and, ever and again, take my breath away.

9th January: First of Epiphany

A NEW BIRTH FOR THE NEW YEAR

*By the Revd Jack Kellet
Walkerburn*

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

At the beginning of last year, an Edinburgh church-woman, doing her weekly shopping in the local supermarket, found herself increasingly irritated by the wild behaviour of a child – who had tried even to climb into a freezer compartment! – and the inability of the young mother to control him. The disturbance persisted in the queue at the till, and eventually the older woman, who knew a lot about parenting having brought up a family herself, said out loud: 'What that bairn needs is a good skelping!'

Now, you and I might have shared the verdict, if not the recommended punishment. But the harassed mother turned round and said into her judge's face: 'The excuse for my son's bad behaviour is autism. What is the excuse for your bad behaviour?'

The message of Christmas/Epiphany is directed at *adults* – and not just 'unbelieving' adults.

Most people in our society today rejoice that the Christmas/Epiphany season brings delight to children. We may not always remember that it was to older folk that Jesus came.

The Bible spells it out that Mary was young; but she was a grown woman.

The shepherds at Bethlehem – the first people, after Mary and Joseph, to whom God revealed His gift of the Messiah – *they* were working men on the night-shift, while the bairns were long tucked up and asleep.

The wise men from the east, to whom God first showed His unique Son very plainly as not just Messiah for the Jews but as the Saviour of the world – *they* could not have been youngsters, for all sorts of obvious reasons.

It *was* to older folk – to folk who had experienced the injustice and suffering of life, the effects of rampant sin in the world, and who knew the need for a Saviour, that Jesus came.

Now, I don't know about you, but in my young life *Christmas* was certainly a time for children: my Father went out to work as usual. The *New Year*, on the other hand, was mainly a time for adults. We children relished a special treat first thing in the morning – a choice of blackcurrant 'wine' or ginger 'beer', being taught to clink our glasses and say very cheerily to each other: 'A Happy New Year!' When older, we got out of our beds during the night to perform our party pieces before uncles and aunts gathered to celebrate the renewal of hope. Only on *becoming adults* did we sense the remembrance of the past year's sadnesses, and see eyes filling up, and realize the fervency of hope in what was not a light-hearted greeting after all, 'Happy New Year'.

And only within the church did we learn the Psalmist's ground for hope, that 'The Lord is King above the flood ... The Lord will give strength to his people; the Lord will bless his people with peace.'

To the prophet Isaiah, the loving God had revealed that he would present a servant, bestowed with His own Spirit, who would 'make *justice* shine on *the nations* ... on every race ... plant justice on earth'.

These are not concepts for children, but for *adults* who need to trust that this will be a *new* year, a different year, the life of joy that Jesus promises. This is, indeed, a message for mature people – momentarily forgetful while out shopping in the supermarket, or self-absorbed on a career ladder for that matter – who can respond to God's cry for help in His cause, to the God who appoints adults like us

'to be a light to all peoples, a beacon for the nations', who declares 'new things'.

At his baptism, the ultimate Saviour in whom God delights presented Himself as a mature man – no longer an infant – among fully grown men whose baptism was into a new way of living. They'd seen what was wrong with the world, what was wrong and miserable in their own lives, and had decided to trust the voice of God's prophets. They wanted to pass through the drenching and cleansing waters of the Jordan and climb up on the other side. And the Son in whom God delights, identifies with them, joining them in their will for change, as in His infancy he had first taken the plight of common humanity on Himself.

Christmas/Epiphany – a new birth for the new year. A message for adults.

In no time at all after His Baptism Jesus was confronting with the call to a costly discipleship John, Simon, Andrew and the rest – adults all. And then, so soon, characteristically too, He was transforming the piety of the very senior and devout Nicodemus, as if to say, 'At your first birth, you and your safety were all that mattered: now your controlling awareness must be of the Kingdom of God, *wherever*.'

At this New Year checkpoint, we modern disciples must all be seeing Jesus in His Glory and sensing His Spirit blowing constantly, to freshen and often to disturb us, for our own sake, and for the sake of His other children in their need.

Glory be ...!

16th January: Second of Epiphany

'BEFORE I WAS BORN THE LORD CALLED ME'

*By the Revd Dr Chris Knights
Scotswood, Newcastle-upon-Tyne*

Isaiah 49:1

Last March, I spent three days on retreat at the beautiful Anglican Franciscan Friary on the Northumberland coast at Alnmouth, keeping silence, praying, reflecting, reviewing my life and ministry to date, planning for the future.

The last day I was at the Friary was the Feast of the Annunciation – 25th March, exactly nine months before Christmas Day, for the Feast of the Annunciation celebrates the sending of Gabriel to

Mary to announce to her that she would conceive, virginally, and that her son, to be called Jesus, would be the Christ, the Saviour of the World.

And the Feast of the Annunciation was kept by the Brothers in an upbeat and spectacular way, and I regarded it as a real privilege to be able to share with them in it.

I spent some time alone in the Friary Chapel after Evening Prayer the night before, with which the Brothers began the Festival (in true Jewish fashion!). As I did, I was suddenly forcefully reminded that, in truth, while the Church generally celebrates the Incarnation – God becoming human in Jesus for our sake – at Christmas, the Feast of Jesus' birth, the real celebration of the Incarnation is the Feast of the Annunciation.

For the Annunciation celebrates the conceiving of Jesus in the womb of Mary. And it was at that point that the Word became flesh and began to dwell among us. The unborn Jesus in Mary's womb was nevertheless God incarnate.

I went on to realize that, if that is indeed the case, then those passages in what we call the Old Testament that refer to God's knowledge of and care for the pre-natal child in the womb can legitimately be applied to the unborn Jesus also.

We had one such passage in today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah 49: 'Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name' (v. 1).

The verses that we heard from Isaiah 49 are usually called one of the four 'Servant Songs' which punctuate Isaiah 40–55, chapters that are generally – and I believe rightly – thought to have been composed in the sixth century BC Exile of the Jews in Babylon, and not to have been composed by Isaiah of Jerusalem in the eighth century BC.

The other 'Servant Songs' are Isaiah 42:14 (which we heard last week), 50–49 and 52:13–53:12. These passages from 'Second' Isaiah are used sometimes in this season of Epiphany, because they speak of the Servant's mission to be a light to the nations, which is one of the Epiphany themes, but mainly they are used in Holy Week, as they speak extensively of the sufferings, death and vindication of the Servant – for Christians have, right from the time of the New Testament, seen in these passages evocative descriptions, prophecies even, of the ministry, sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But the words from Isaiah 49:1 allow us to reflect also on the prenatal Jesus in the womb of Mary his mother – God incarnate, but hidden from all view. 'Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name'.

In similar fashion, we can use God's words to Jeremiah (1:5) to reflect on the prenatal Jesus, 'Before I formed you in the womb I chose you, and before you were born I consecrated you', and be reminded that God's choice of Jesus as the Messiah, our Saviour, predated his birth. Indeed, that choice predated his conception.

And we cannot but also put into the mouth of Jesus those timeless words from Psalm 139 (vv. 13–16a):

You created my inmost being,
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully
made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the
earth,
your eyes saw my unformed being.

It is part of God's self-emptying love in Jesus that in becoming incarnate, he embraced the whole of human life, not just from *birth* to grave, but from *conception* to grave – and beyond.

And that is a mystery which fills me with awe, with wonder, with reverence, with humility before God.

Further, it leads me to realize anew that, if the Incarnation began at the conception of Jesus, then God's concern for and knowledge of *me*, and his work in my life, similarly began at *my* conception, and continued for nine months before ever I saw the light of day – that before *I* was born, the Lord called *me*; that he formed *me* in my mother's womb, and chose *me* and consecrated *me* before I was born, that it was *my* inmost being that he created. And, of course, not just me, but each and every single one of you, too. And that is a mystery that fills me with awe, with wonder, with reverence, with humility before God, too.

All of these insights must, of course, be taken into account when we try to think about those difficult ethical issues about when life begins, about the 'rights' of the unborn, about the 'rights' of mothers to make a choice, about abortion, and so on – issues

which are contentious and with which to come down on one side or the other is to risk vilification by those who take the opposing view.

As I thought about these difficult – but very real – ethical issues, while I sat in the Chapel of Alnmouth Friary on the Eve of the Feast of the Annunciation, I recalled something I once heard David Bellamy say in a TV programme, something which made a lot of sense to me. David Bellamy said that he longed for the day when every pregnancy in the world was a wanted (even if not planned) pregnancy – because, when that happens, all issues to do with both population growth and terminations would be resolved automatically.

And that is now my prayer, as I rejoice that the Incarnation of Jesus my Saviour began at his conception in the womb of Mary, as I rejoice that God's knowledge of, care for and love for me began at my conception in my mother's womb, that God would hasten the day when every conception in the world will be a wanted, cherished, loved conception – by the parents as well as by God – so that all may be able to say, with 'Second' Isaiah, with Jesus, with me and with each of you, 'Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name.'

23rd January: 3rd of Epiphany

ROLE MODEL

*By the Revd David Atkinson
Enfield*

Isaiah 9:1–4; Psalm 27:1, 4–9; 1 Corinthians 1:10–18;
Matthew 4:12–23

At present I'm reading John Drane's book, *The McDonaldization of the Church* in which he argues that churches are too much the same like branches of McDonalds which all offer the same menu. He argues that people vary in their interests and needs and the church needs to change to meet these various needs. He categorizes what various groups are looking for and one group he says are looking for role models. He attended a conference in Hollywood of movie-makers, story-tellers, theologians and a group of young adults from different ethnic and social backgrounds to look at present day culture. The young people all said they were looking for role models and heroes to follow. The media and people in authority have so effectively deconstructed and

ridiculed the famous that they have been left with no-one to admire and follow.

I recently heard that the present Pope, John Paul II, has made more saints than any previous pope. When asked why, he replied that people need role models.

At our United Reformed Church District Council last Monday the new Youth Worker, Kevin Woods, at our Plume Avenue church in Colchester, said young people need heroes.

I suspect we all have role models and heroes, those people we look up to and follow. They may be parents, teachers, friends or public figures. At present there is David Beckham who is admired for his footballing skills, wealth, clothes, fame and star life. He is also probably admired for his love for his family and that an ordinary person can achieve so much. We personalize politics and so there are not only polls on how much support there is for political parties but also on the support for the leaders of those parties. The Conservative dominance of government in the 1980s and early 1990s relied a lot on the leadership and popularity of Margaret Thatcher. Likewise the present Labour dominance relies a lot on the leadership and popularity of Tony Blair.

In the last twenty-five years probably the most well known role model and hero in this country has been Princess Diana. The reasons for this were that she was a member of the royal family and married to the heir to the throne and she was young and beautiful. But I suspect that even more important was that she cared for people and had time for people.

In 1987 there was a lot of fear about AIDS and some AIDS victims were treated like modern day lepers. Some lost homes and jobs and were shunned by their families when it was found they had AIDS. A unit was set up at the Central Middlesex Hospital for AIDS sufferers and it was visited by Princess Diana. One fear was that AIDS could be caught by normal social contact. Princess Diana met the AIDS sufferers, talked with them, shook their hands, sat on their beds and spent so long with them that she was twenty-five minutes late leaving the hospital. One sufferer said, 'She shook my hand without her gloves on. That meant more to me than anything else.'

I saw Princess Diana only once when I went to Harrogate to see her open a Barnardo's centre for disabled children and their parents which a friend had recently redesigned and refurbished. I waited outside with a large group of school children, their

teachers and parents. Although she was late coming out of the centre she made a point of going round the crowd speaking to the children, smiling at them and shaking their hands. She cared for and had time for the people who had come to see her, and especially for the children.

As a young person one of my heroes was Martin Luther King. I admired his campaign against racial prejudice in the southern states of America and his conviction that all people are equal before God and should be judged by their character and not by the colour of their skin. I further admired his insistence that all the protests against racial segregation should be peaceful and non-violent and people should love their enemies. I admired his deep faith and courage which enabled him to continue his ministry despite threats, hostility and opposition. His book, *Strength to Love* became a favourite and provided me with many sermon illustrations. Of course, he was a different personality and lived in a different culture to me, but his faith, love and values were a shining example and role model to a young man and minister.

However, our role models may be people we know and meet such as parents, teachers, family and friends. They are people we look up to and think 'I would like to be like him'. I've been told I'm like my father. If so, I'm glad. I can think of fellow ministers I'd gladly be like because I admire their preaching, caring and time for people. Often they are people who have helped me. Likewise I have friends whose faith, integrity, kindness or thinking power I admire. I suspect that we all have role models or heroes.

But we need one warning about role models. All our human role models will have frailties and problems. Princess Diana's marriage went badly wrong and she suffered from bulimia. My admiration for Martin Luther King led me to read biographies about him and I discovered that he committed adultery and wasn't always faithful to his wife, Coretta Scott King. At first it surprised and saddened me, but after a while I felt I couldn't let it negate all his good and Godly qualities. Let's also remember that some of the greatest biblical figures had their faults. Moses murdered an Egyptian taskmaster but God still called him to lead the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times but God still made him leader of the early church and called him to preach the Gospel. Some fallibility doesn't negate all a person's faith and goodness.

So where is all this leading? As Christians we need to be role models, probably for many of us in a low-profile way with family and friends. We need to be people through whom others can see the light and goodness of Christ. We all have our failings, but with God's help, let's be role models for Christ.

But our chief role model is Jesus who was God with us and without sin. The Bible calls Jesus Saviour, Lord, Master and Teacher, but it doesn't use the term role model or hero. But this is what Jesus is. He said to the first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John, 'Follow me.' Likewise Jesus says to us, 'Follow Me.' Jesus is our role model.

30th January: 4th in Epiphany

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

By the Revd John D. Searle, BA, BD
Carterton, Oxfordshire.

1 Corinthians 1:18–31; Matthew 5:1–2

A Paradox – Strength in Weakness

The missionary statesman, Hudson Taylor, once said, 'All of God's giants have been weak people.' Nineteen hundred years previously, St Paul wrote, 'For God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world ... so that no one might boast in the presence of God' (1 Cor 1:27–29). In Scripture there are many illustrations of those who, although weak in some way, have 'come good', or whose handicaps were transformed into strengths – poor speakers, those handicapped by their youth, or disease: Moses, Jeremiah, David and Job, for example. There were conspicuous 'weak links' even among the apostles – Simon, initially hardly deserving his nickname 'Rock'; Thomas, the sceptic; James and John the intemperate 'Sons of Thunder'; and Paul, himself, burdened by a 'thorn in the flesh', whose life is a supreme example of victory over adversity. Although there were those of some standing in the early church, Christianity spread most rapidly among the lower classes. Celsus, a hostile second-century philosopher, described Christians as 'foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children'. Whereas Paul rejoiced in the fact that 'not many were wise by human standards, not many were

powerful, not many were of noble birth' (1 Cor 1:26). For it was these ordinary, fallible folk who, in spite of opposition and persecution, 'were turning the world upside down' (Acts 17:6) and who took the gospel to 'all nations'. What reasons prompted Paul to claim, 'when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor 12:9 REB)?

1. *Our weakness prevents pride and self-reliance*

We admire strong people – the self-reliant, self-assured and independent. We are fortunate if we are naturally well endowed, but so long as we rely solely on our own strength we are unlikely to experience the full power of God. In fact, the stronger and more talented we are, the less likely it is that we will feel any need for help, human or divine. The Book of Judges recounts how Gideon recruited a huge force of 32,000 men to fight the Midianites. But God instructed him to reduce the number to 300 in order that the Israelites would know that it was God's power and not theirs alone which defeated the superior enemy army (ch. 7). Paul was aware of the danger of self-sufficiency and of any pride in his charismatic gifts. He therefore declared that his incurable weakness, the 'thorn in the flesh', was of value in order 'to keep me from being conceited', and therefore, 'I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses' (2 Cor 12:7, 5: NIV; cf. 1 Cor 14:18, 19 *et al.*) There was once a Christian 'magazine' to which preachers could send their monthly 'score cards' for publication – so many conversions, re-dedications and baptisms. We may not be so blatant, but need to be on our guard against pride in our spiritual gifts, academic knowledge, eloquence, or the ability to 'go it alone'.

2. *Our weakness drives us to seek God's help*

Awareness of our limitations forces us to recognize our dependence on God. The first Beatitude is a fitting preface to those that follow, 'Happy are those who know their need of God' (Matt 5:3). It is in times of weakness, suffering and trouble, that we are most likely to turn to God for help. Following a traumatic experience in Asia, when feeling 'So utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself', Paul says that this had happened 'so that we would not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead' (2 Cor 1:8, 9). (*A personal example could be given here, otherwise an illustration such as follows*). Gladys Aylward was a diminutive, un-

educated parlour maid who taught herself Chinese, made her own way to China in the 1930s, and whose courageous missionary work became world-famous. In the Spring of 1940, in a bid to escape the invading Japanese army, Gladys took over a hundred homeless children across high mountains, only to have their journey halted by the Yellow River. Exhausted and with no visible means of crossing, Gladys knelt on the river bank and prayed, 'Oh God, I am finished. I can do nothing more. I am at the end. Oh God, don't let us down. Save us – Prove yourself.' It is when we are confronted with a challenge beyond our strength and admit being 'at the end of our tether', that we are most likely to discover the truth of the Lord's promise to Paul, 'My grace is enough: for where there is weakness, my power is shown the more completely', and to say, with the apostle, 'Therefore I have cheerfully made up my mind to be proud of my weaknesses, because they mean a deeper experience of the power of Christ ... For my very weakness makes me strong in him' (2 Cor 12:9, 10: JBP). Furthermore, we will be less disheartened by our deficiencies if we can think of them as spaces in which God's grace can operate.

3. *Our weakness manifests God's power*

It was through the weakness of the crucified Christ that God demonstrated his resurrection power (2 Cor 13:4). So it is not surprising that he is able to use human messengers of the gospel who are no stronger than 'clay jars'. In this way, too, it is 'made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us' (2 Cor 4:7). Paul was not the type of evangelist to say, 'Come to Christ and all will be well'. On the contrary, he lists the many forms of suffering he has had to endure in the service of his Lord (2 Cor 11:23ff.), and says that, if he is to boast, it will be only 'of the things which show my weakness' (v. 30). Jesus was equally realistic with his would-be followers, 'let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34 *et al.*; cf. Matt 5:11). However, his realism was tempered by re-assurance, 'In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have overcome the world!' (John 16:33; cf. 14:27). In the world of today, happy are we if, with Paul we can say, 'We are at wit's end, but never at hope's end. We are persecuted by men, but never abandoned by God. We are knocked down but not knocked out' (2 Cor 8, 9: Barclay). With the need comes the grace, with the weakness comes the strength.

4. *Our weakness can benefit others*

Recognition of our limitations should also make us more aware of our need of other people, for it is through them that God's power is most likely to be mediated. Paul likens the Christian community to the human body with its varied, indispensable, interdependent members (Rom 12:4ff., 1 Cor 4:12ff.). Receiving and *giving* help is mutually beneficial, particularly for those who become disheartened by their own weaknesses. 'Super-christians' who never seem to be depressed, anxious or to have doubts, are often a cause of discouragement to the more numerous 'tries hard but has a long way to go' type of disciple. Those who admit their spiritual and other inadequacies, and yet demonstrate by their lives

that God can use even the least favoured members of Christ's body (cf. 1 Cor 12:22ff.), provide the faint-hearted with the encouragement to seek similar empowerment. Furthermore, personal experience of weakness and suffering enables us to understand and show practical compassion to others (2 Cor 1:4; cf. Heb 2:18).

Postscript

If anyone fractures a bone, callus forms around the break. So in life, as Ernest Hemingway wrote, 'We are made stronger at the broken places.' Or, as Jean Vanier puts it in verse, 'Our brokenness is the wound/ Through which the full power of God/ can penetrate our being/ and transfigure us in him.'

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From the Written Word ...

Some thoughts on written worship aids – especially sermons



By DR PATRICIA BATSTONE

Honiton, Devon

IT was one of those occasions when 'the sermon' was under fire: too long, too wordy, too shallow, too heavy – all ignoring the fact that the churches that serve up 45-minute plus sermons are thriving!

That was because they were 'teaching' not 'preaching' we were told. Preaching has to be from the heart, spontaneous, for a verdict, challenging. Throw out the three points – they're too artificial. And written sermons lacked conviction!

Back came the question of books of sermons, John Wesley, and the popularity of sermons published in journals such as *The Expository Times* and the *College of Preachers' Journal* – aids for busy parsons.

They weren't *real*. A 'proper' sermon can't be written down: period.

The subject (wisely perhaps) was moved on, but it had set me thinking. Certain 'constants' immediately presented themselves.

- a. The objector was a senior lay preacher, one of the old 'inspirational' school, for whom any form of continuing development was suspect and left out the Holy Spirit.

- b. There was an inherent suspicion of anything 'written down'. It was not spontaneous or inspired, not for the 'moment'.

- c. The mere fact of putting sermons into print meant that others might preach them and that, as well as being dishonest, negated the work of the Spirit.

No consideration was allowed for the possibility of the Spirit working in a preacher's preparation anywhere other than the moment he or she prayed in the pulpit! Hours spent before that might be spent in prayer and inevitably reading the Bible to be guided on a subject – or to appease the steward who needed readings in advance. But write more than a postage stamp's worth? NO! And to even think about reading another preacher's sermon – NEVER!

Unhealthy Divisions

In a sense, the three become two: the case against writing and the case against reading, and the two have begun to evolve into an unhealthy two-tier approach which is spiritually and emotionally damaging to those preachers who happen to fall into the 'wrong camp'.