

PREACHING AT CHRISTMAS

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As one who has pastored one church for thirteen years and another church for twenty-one years, I know the challenge of preaching at Christmas. It is not as if there is just one sermon to prepare – each year there are a host of occasions. There are the four Sundays in Advent (for me that always meant morning and evening) and of course Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Then there are all the carols services – many of church are targeted for various age groups: e.g. young families, young people, and senior adults. How can we find a fresh word to say, year in and year out?

Over the years I have found that the one way to keep fresh is to engage in expository preaching. In my experience, if we go for thematic preaching, we soon run dry. In the words of James Stewart, a Scottish preacher of a past generation: “The preacher who expounds his own stock of ideas becomes deadly wearisome at last. The preacher who expounds the Bible has endless variety at his disposal. For no two texts say exactly the same thing.”¹

Although for many years I have used the Lectionary for my daily devotions, I have not been a Lectionary preacher. Instead, I have normally preached in ‘series’. However, at the same time I often tried to observe the themes for the different Sundays of Advent: Advent Sunday, with its emphasis on the Last Things; the second Sunday in Advent used to be known as Bible Sunday, and I confess that I continued to preach on a theme related to the Bible, even though Bible Sunday was then switched into earlier in the autumn; the third Sunday, Ministry Sunday, traditionally related to John the Baptist; then what I called ‘Christmas Sunday’ (the Sunday before Christmas) is often linked with Mary. It was all quite a challenge to be different each year.

As I look back on my past preaching plans I see a variety of sermons series:

- Christmas Personalities: Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, Simeon
- Christmas Songs: The Benedictus (Zechariah’s son), the Magnificat (Mary’s song), the Gloria (the angels’ song), the *Nunc Dimittis* (Simeon’s song)
- Parables at Christmas: The Ten Bridesmaids (Advent Sunday), the Sower (Bible Sunday), the Talents (Ministry Sunday), the Tenants (Christmas Sunday).
- Christmas apologetics: on Advent Sunday, ‘No God of love would send people to hell’ (John 3.16-21); on Bible Sunday, ‘You can’t believe the Bible’ (Luke 1.1-4; 1 Tim 3.16); for third Sunday in Advent, ‘Virgins don’t have babies’ (Matt 1.18-25); for the fourth Sunday in Advent, ‘Christmas? It’s a fairy story!’ (John 1.14).

Another possibility is over a particular Christmas period to preach only from one part of Scripture: e.g.

The Good News according to Matthew

¹ James Stewart, *Preaching* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2nd edition 1955) 12..

1. The genealogy of Jesus the Messiah (Matt 1.1-17)
2. The birth of Jesus (Matt 1.18-25)
3. The visit of the wise men (Matt 2.1-12)
4. The aftermath of the wise men's visit (Matt 2.13-23)
5. An overview: Who is Jesus?

. The Good News according to Luke

1. The dedication to Theophilus (Luke 1.1-4)
2. The birth of Jesus foretold (Luke 1.26-38)
3. The visit of Mary to Elizabeth (Luke 1.39-45)
4. Mary's song of praise (Luke 1.46-55)
5. Zechariah's prophetic song (Luke 1.67-79)
6. The census (Luke 2.1-2)
7. The birth of Jesus (Luke 2.3-7)
8. The shepherds and the angels (Luke 2.8-20)
9. The presentation of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2.22-36)
10. An overview: Jesus the revolutionary

. The Good News according to John

1. Jesus is the universal Word (John 1.1-5)
2. A witness to the light (John 1.6-8)
3. Good news is for telling (John 1.10-13)
4. The Word became flesh (John 1.14-18)
5. God's Christmas gift (John 3.16)
6. An overview: The real meaning of Christmas

. The Good News anticipated in the Old Testament

1. The sign of Immanuel (Isaiah 7)
2. A new king is coming (Isaiah 9.2-7)
3. The dream of God's kingdom (Isaiah 11.1-9)
4. The ruler from Bethlehem (Micah 5.2-5)
5. An overview: Dreaming of peace

. The Good News reflected upon in the Epistles

1. Freedom begins in Bethlehem (Romans 8.3)
2. The Christmas jackpot (2 Cor 8.9)
3. God's timing is always right (Gal 4.4-5)
4. Jesus the servant-king (Phil 2.6-11)
5. Jesus the king of creation (Col 1.15-17)
6. Jesus the saviour (Titus 2.11)
7. Jesus the Word of God (Hebs 1.1-4)
8. An overview: Christmas is good news for all

At this point some observant readers may note that I have just reproduced the contents page of my book *Joy to the World: Preaching the Christmas story* (IVP, 2005). Still in print, at just over 200 pages, I dare to think it is still worth £9.99! The principal aim behind this book

is to help preachers tell the Christmas story by engaging with Scripture. So, if you are stuck to know what to preach on