

# EXPLORING OUR FAITH

## A Walk Through the Sunday Service Session 11 – Breaking Open the Word: Preaching

*This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.*

**The sermon or homily.** The Book of Common Prayer, in its outline of the Eucharist (pp. 400-01) uses the title “Proclaim and Respond to the Word of God” for the readings and sermon. It is telling us that what the preacher is doing in this part of the service is a response to the Scripture passages that have just been read. Before the 1979 Prayer Book it was often the fashion to preach “theme sermons”: on generosity, for instance, or patriotism or the Christian family. A verse or two of Scripture might make a cameo appearance in support of the preacher’s message, but the message was essentially the preacher’s own. With the reforms embodied in the 1979 Book, this changed: preaching was to be based on the Scripture that had just been proclaimed. (A note here: sermon and homily are essentially the same thing, the first term more associated with the Protestant tradition, the second with the Catholic.)

**Bible and newspaper.** A great theologian of the last century, Karl Barth, said that the preacher should go into the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. What Barth was saying is that preaching should connect the teaching of Scripture with the lives of a congregation and the world they live in. A good sermon gives its hearers something to take away with them that will help them live out their baptismal vows as the Body of Christ in the week to come. Illustrative stories are helpful in this; they are usually what we remember from a sermon. So too is unpacking a Scripture passage.

**The person of the preacher.** Barth also said that he did not preach because he was a preacher; rather he was a preacher because he *had* to preach. This points to another homiletic (meaning relating to preaching) essential. The preacher’s words must be Good News to her, pour forth from her heart with an urgency like that of the ancient prophets and a love like Jesus’s for the suffering world. In this sense, good preaching is always personal, but not in the sense of calling attention to the preacher. In the end, a homily should call the attention of both preacher and congregation to just one thing: God. A famous pulpit in an English church has carved in it as reminder to the preacher: “Sir, we would see Jesus.” At the end of a sermon, its hearers should want to respond with only one word: Amen. As we listen to a sermon we remember too that every good preacher preaches not just to the congregation, but to him or herself.