

PREACHING ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Preface

All preachers of the Bible, the Word of God, will from time to time have the privilege and responsibility of preaching on special occasions. Such times can fill the preacher with a sense of fear and trepidation as he is aware that the expectation of those present is for him to say something appropriate and even out of the ordinary. We must always remember that the Lord has promised us that his grace is sufficient for our every need and therefore will come to our aid as we depend on him. This, however, does not mean that we are to be negligent in our sermon preparation, and it is with this in mind that this book has been written.

In a series of talks for the '*Serving Today*' radio programme for pastors and church leaders, Philip Grist gave us some very useful hints and suggestions as to the right approach to preaching at these times, and his talks form the bulk of the material in these pages. Ian Flanders, a member of the radio team at Grace Baptist Mission, has worked through Philip's scripts and put them into the form in this book. Ian has also added a number of very helpful sermon outlines at the end of each chapter to give some guidance to us when called upon to preach at special occasions.

I am very grateful indeed to Philip and Ian for their valuable contribution in these pages. Both men have had

many years experience in preaching and pastoral ministry and they have kindly shared a little of that with us in this book. It is our combined prayer that the Lord will use what has been written to help his servants to preach God's Word with confidence.

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March 2004

Chapter 1 Introduction

Preaching on special occasions can be quite a testing time. Some preachers may dread it because they feel that everything has been said before, while others revel in them as further opportunities to speak for the Lord.

However, at the outset there is a fundamental question that needs to be discussed: Is it right to consider certain days as special at all? For example, should Christians keep 25th December as a day to remember the birth of Christ? The same could be asked of Easter, harvest and anniversaries? Professing Christians hold widely differing views about the rightness or wrongness of observing Christian Festivals or special occasions. There are those who are adamant that observing Festivals in the Christian calendar is quite unnecessary.

Take Christmas and Easter for example. It is true that today Christmas means little to the vast majority of people. For most it is simply a long holiday; just a time for eating, drinking and giving presents. Many say that Christmas is

primarily for children. We must all agree that followers of the Lord Jesus Christ should not be interested in all the revelling associated with Christmas. Some then question whether Easter should be observed as a special Festival. Surely, they claim, all our preaching must centre upon Easter. They would remind us that the apostle Paul wrote: "We preach Christ crucified" and suggest that every Sunday is an Easter Sunday. According to such Christians we do not need to have something special because every time believers come together for worship it is to worship the risen and living Christ. So, they say, we do not need special Festivals.

We need to examine what lies behind this line of thinking. Surely there is nothing sinful in remembering the birth of Jesus, or his death and resurrection in a special way, is there?

Those who frown upon special occasions may well think that they are more spiritual than Christians who insist on observing Festivals in the Church's calendar. If this kind of attitude is present then it may indicate a rather serious problem that of spiritual pride. Never forget that the Lord's blessing is not on the proud in heart. The Bible says, "*....the proud he (God) knows from afar*" (Psalm 138:6), and Peter writes: "*All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*" (1 Peter 5:5). We need constantly to search our own hearts before God lest we secretly feel ourselves to be spiritually superior. This is

a very dangerous matter, for Solomon, who wrote much of the book of Proverbs, reminds us: "*Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall*" (Proverbs 16:18.)

On the other hand, others may justify the observance of special occasions by referring to the festivals and special gatherings of God's people that are recorded in the Old Testament. This position too needs to be discussed.

There were indeed many Festivals in the Old Testament that God instructed his people to observe (the Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Day of Atonement, for example). However, all these Festivals were a shadow or a type of that which was to come. They were fulfilled in Christ for all the Old Testament points towards him. We must not forget that. This is why the Old Testament scriptures are so important and must always be interpreted in the light of the New Testament and vice versa. For instance, much of the books of Exodus and Leviticus can only be understood as we study the letter to the Hebrews. The point is that if these old covenant Festivals were a picture of Christ and what he was to accomplish, then, as we now have the real thing in Christ, there is no justification for the continuation of these Festivals.

If this is the case then could it be said of Christians who see an obligation in keeping special meetings and festivals that they are being legalistic?

The observance of Christian Festivals may amount to legalism for some. There are professing Christians who say, "I go to Church three times a year - Christmas, Easter and Harvest. I am sure God will be pleased with that!" Sadly, there is something very wrong with any who are satisfied with just three times a year. They should be challenged to examine the genuineness of their faith. They are either not believers at all or they have seriously backslidden and need to repent. A genuine believer desires to be with the Lord's people as often as possible.

At the same time there are professing Christians who go regularly to Church and yet who do not have a living relationship with Jesus Christ. Sadly, their worship is a sham and completely unacceptable to God. So, legalism is not just restricted to attending special Festivals. It can be true of all church attendance. We must all search our own hearts and make sure that our motives for worshipping God are right. The Bible exhorts every one of us to examine ourselves to make sure that we are of the faith.

The preceding discussion has cleared up a number of issues but we still have not reached a conclusion to the questions: Are special festivals and anniversaries legitimate occasions for Christians? Should we or should we not keep them? Are they legitimate opportunities we should take to preach Christ?

One thing is clear. The New Testament nowhere instructs us to observe special Festivals. It is quite silent. At the

same time it never forbids us to observe a Festival like Easter, for instance. We have a freedom in Christ, freedom to observe these special occasions, or not to observe them.

The principle of freedom can be dangerous because we can easily abuse that freedom. We need to be disciplined, we need to do something to remember all that the Lord has done for us and special occasions can be helpful even though they are far from obligatory. This is why the Lord instituted the Lord's Supper, in case we forget the meaning of the cross, the source of our salvation. Now, this is one regular occasion that we are commanded to observe.

Paul wrote a letter to the Colossian believers about this issue of special days that we have been considering.

"Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival." (Colossians 2:16). In all likelihood there were some in the fellowship who wanted to observe certain Festivals and there were others opposed to this. Whilst pointing out that Old Testament Festivals were only types of that which was to come, Paul was also asking believers to refrain from passing judgment on one another. Whilst some were being legalistic, for others, times of special recognition acted as reminders of important spiritual matters. Perhaps all this in turn reminds us of the words of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, *"Do not judge or you too will be judged....."* (Matthew 7: 1).

Personally, because we have this liberty from the Lord, I hope you will be persuaded of the importance of special

occasions as opportunities for preaching the gospel. Every opportunity presented to us must be taken up, and it is true to say that many come to church for special occasions that would not normally be present. It is good to take advantage of this and to preach the gospel clearly. We are Christ's ambassadors here on earth and the command is to go into the entire world and to proclaim Christ, the Saviour of sinners.

This booklet examines how we can use a number of special occasions as opportunities to serve the Lord.

Chapter 2 Easter

All over the world the Christian Church observes Easter. Many non-Christians recognise that this Festival, which includes both Good Friday and Easter Sunday, is important and they will respect it. Indeed, many will go beyond respect and will actually be prepared to attend a Christian Church for this occasion.

They may, of course, just take the view that they are "doing their bit for God". Human beings were created to worship. When our first parents Adam and Eve rebelled against God and disobeyed him they were excluded from fellowship with God. This is recorded for us at the close of Genesis 3 where we read the sad words that God "*banished him from the Garden of Eden....*" (Genesis 3:23). However, even though we human beings were barred from God's presence, the desire to worship is still present, built into our very make-up. So at Easter,

multitudes of people feel that they must join in the worship of God and pay their respects to him. Many of these people believe that this will make sure that at least once a year they will please God. However, the Bible is very clear that by nature, not one of us is able to please God by what we do. The writer to the Hebrew Christians reminds his readers, and us, that: "*without faith it is impossible to please God.*" (Hebrews 11: 6).

Whether you are enthusiastic about observing the Festival of Easter or whether you believe that we do not need a special Festival because you look upon every Sunday as being an Easter Sunday, an occasion to rejoice in the resurrection of Christ from the dead; you must accept the fact that Easter is observed and that many unbelievers are prepared to be invited to an Easter service. The Festival of Easter therefore presents us with a marvellous opportunity to preach the gospel and to challenge people of their need of a Saviour. What better occasion to preach the gospel than Easter because on Good Friday Jesus died on the cross and on Easter Sunday he rose from the dead. It is true that our preaching must always contain that message. It is the heart of the gospel. However, at Easter-time you may have people at your services who will never come at any other time. It may be the one opportunity they will have to hear the gospel and it is vital that you take that opportunity and make the challenge of the gospel perfectly clear. You must also realise that some of those present may never be given the opportunity to hear the gospel again. This means that

all preaching must be with a sense of urgency. God's word says: *"I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation."* (2 Corinthians 6:2). At Easter, you are given an opportunity beyond normal occasions and this must not be missed.

As mentioned previously, the Easter weekend remembers two distinct events. On Good Friday we solemnly observe the death of Christ upon the cross and on Easter Sunday we joyfully celebrate his resurrection from the dead. We will look at each of these occasions in turn.

First then, we will discuss preaching on Good Friday. People often question within themselves: "Why did Jesus die?" "Why did he have to die such a horrible death?" "Was crucifixion not reserved for the most wicked criminals? Jesus was a good man, was he not?" When preaching on Good Friday, it is the cross that must be preached. That is your subject. Paul wrote these words to the Church in Corinth: *"we preach Christ crucified."* (1 Corinthians 1:23) That is your message whenever you preach but on Good Friday you will have a marvellous opportunity to expound that.

Christ was indeed a good Man. In fact he was perfect and completely without sin. So it is true that he was not guilty of any criminal offence and that must be made clear in your preaching. The point is that Christ did not suffer and die for himself or for anything that he had done. He suffered and died for sinners. Jesus, the pure Son of God, took our sins upon himself and was punished for those sins

on our behalf. He died that we might be forgiven and so share with him the beauty and joy of heaven for all eternity. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* (2 Corinthians 5:21) We have no righteousness of our own and however much we try to make ourselves acceptable to God, we will fail. Therefore, sinners like ourselves, must trust only in what Christ has done for us. When you preach on Good Friday, make these truths as clear as you can to your hearers. Point them to Jesus Christ, the one and only Saviour and urge them to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ that they may be saved.

Moving on then to the other day, Easter Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus confirms a number of important facts:

First, that Jesus Christ is who he said he was - the Son of God. Had Jesus not been raised from the dead then his claims to divine son-ship could easily have been doubted. Many in Israel thought him to be an impostor, a madman, and a blasphemer. However, the resurrection is proof that God approved Jesus. He would only have done this if what Jesus said was true.

Second, that God the Father accepted Christ's sufferings and death as a complete and perfect sacrifice for our sins.

Third, that Jesus by his death and resurrection had conquered death, sin and Satan. The victory is his and all who trust in him will share in that victory. Jesus held out the hope of resurrection to eternal life for all who would believe in Him. His own resurrection gives proof that this hope is set upon a sure foundation.

Easter Sunday is, then, the time to preach the triumph of Christ, to proclaim him as the Living Saviour and to assure your hearers that he is alive for evermore. The apostle John in his vision recorded in the book of Revelation wrote, *"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said, Do not be afraid, I am the First and Last. I am the Living One; I was dead and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."* (Revelation 1:17-18) This is the message of Easter. Preach it enthusiastically but above all, seek the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sermon Suggestion for Good Friday:

Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:11-21.

The Meaning of the Cross - Reconciliation.

- 1) What is reconciliation? The repairing of a relationship that has been broken. Illustrate with human examples.
- 2) Why is reconciliation with God necessary? Our relationship with God has been broken because of sin. Remind of the consequences of this.

- 3) How does God reconcile men to himself? Through the cross of Christ. Jesus took upon himself our sin, he bore our punishment, and God credits the believer with Christ's perfect righteousness. The believer is forgiven and this allows a new start in our relationship with God.
- 4) Exhort the congregation to examine whether they are truly reconciled to God.
- 5) A ministry of reconciliation. God desires to be reconciled to unbelievers. He charges his church, believers, to be ambassadors bearing this message to the world. Are you playing your part?

Sermon suggestion for Easter Sunday:

Reading: Luke 22:36-49.

"You are my witnesses." Jesus' Resurrection and the Church's Responsibility.

- 1) What does it mean to bear witness? To experience an event and to declare publicly a reliable and true account of that event.
- 2) What does it mean to bear witness to Jesus' resurrection?
 - a) To defend the reliability of the Bible accounts of the resurrection. What is written is plainly what happened. Jesus did truly rise bodily from the dead. Alternative theories must be refuted.

- b) To proclaim the meaning of the resurrection, as found in the Bible: (i) God the Father declares that Jesus truly is Lord and Christ, (ii) God the Father accepts Jesus' death on the cross as a sacrifice for sin, (iii) Jesus' resurrection guarantees the resurrection to eternal life of all who believe in him.
 - c) To share our own personal story of being raised from spiritual death to spiritual life and eternal hope, a transformation that occurs because Jesus is alive and at work in people's lives today.
- 3) Conclusion or Application:
- a) Are you witnesses of Christ's resurrection? Have you experienced for yourself his life giving power and salvation?
 - b) Are you bearing witness to Christ's resurrection? Encourage all to get involved in the church's mission to proclaim the gospel.

Chapter 3 Harvest

One special occasion that Christians have often used to advantage is the time of harvest. Perhaps we think this is more natural for churches that are situated in rural areas

where work on the land surrounds the people and is part of their everyday life, but of course believers in big cities benefit from the harvest just as much. They feed upon that which has been produced elsewhere. With this in mind, this chapter will seek to help those who preach on this occasion by suggesting themes that messages could contain.

Christians all over the world have always placed importance on thanking God for a harvest. This is right and proper. Of all the Festivals, this is probably the oldest. Right back from the beginning of time, the Creator has been acknowledged as the true provider of our daily food. We read in Genesis 4 that "*Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord.*" (Genesis 4:3). Sadly, Cain's motives were wrong on that occasion because he did not bring the harvest just to say "thank you" but to gain acceptance from God. And we know that what he brought did not gain that acceptance.

This incident could potentially be a useful starting point for a harvest message. It contains such an important and relevant message for today.

Remember that when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, part of the punishment was that God cursed the earth. God said to them, "*Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you.....*" (Genesis 3:17-18.) This remains true today. Many of you may well know at first hand just how difficult it is to grow food, the problems

that arise, the enormous effort involved. It is demanding work to produce a harvest. We know that God alone can make the seeds grow. He must send the rain. Nobody on earth can produce that, and if God withholds rain there will be no harvest. So what Cain brought in order to gain acceptance with God was the result of his own hard work on cursed ground. The cursing was the consequence of man's rebellion. The whole account is a spiritual picture of mankind's continual rebellion and his futile efforts to gain favour with God by his own good works.

At the same time, Cain's brother, Abel, also brought an offering to the Lord. Abel brought the best of the flocks. These would have been offered as a sacrifice. Whilst Abel would not have understood the full implication, there is early recognition of the need of sacrifice. Today, with our New Testaments in hand, we know that Abel's offering is a picture of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ who is also known as *"the Lamb of God"*. (John 1:29). There are enough ideas here to produce a fine biblical sermon for a Harvest Thanksgiving. This could be put alongside the teaching of Paul to the Ephesians: *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and that not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works so that no-one can boast."* (Ephesians 2:8).

As we go on through the Old Testament, the people were encouraged to **give thanks for the harvest**. Moses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gave the Israelites three

annual Festivals. The first was called the feast of unleavened bread, the second was the Feast of Harvest and the third, the Feast of Ingathering, which was also known as the "Feast of Tabernacles". This was observed after the orchards and vines had been harvested whilst the Feast of Harvest occurred earlier in the year and was celebrated during the wheat harvest. We read of these feasts in Exodus 23:12-19. In New Testament times this corresponds to the "Day of Pentecost". This parallel should also provide some thoughts for preaching, notably the harvest of souls.

Pentecost was the beginning of the great harvest of Christ's death and resurrection when 3000 people were converted from all over the known world. In a similar way, the "Feast of Ingathering" probably directs us to the final ingathering at the end of time when the Lord returns. Certainly a Harvest service encourages you to preach on the coming again of Christ. If you do preach on this subject, keep it simple and to the point. Preach clearly on the fact of his coming because Jesus told his disciples that he would come again. He said: *".....if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me...."* (John 14:3). Later, when he ascended back into heaven, an angel announced *"This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."* (Acts 1:11). Challenge all who listen as to whether they are ready for Christ's coming.

Here is a further theme that could be developed. Harvest is all about separation. Jesus made that clear when he told the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30). Weeds can be poisonous and must be separated from pure wheat. This is done at harvest time. Today, the gospel must be preached to everybody. Jesus told us to do that. In this life, believers and unbelievers will grow together and we must not try to separate them. This is not our job. We would make terrible mistakes. God knows everybody's hearts. He knows all who belong to him. At the final Day of Judgment he will do the work of separating. That will be a very solemn time and as a preacher you, like Noah in the Old Testament, must warn people. At the end of the parable of the wheat and weeds, Jesus tells us that the weeds will be pulled up and burned in the fire. Jesus certainly uses very vivid picture language when he explains the parable in Matthew 13:36-43. This is certainly a solemn side to the message of harvest, but perhaps a most necessary thing to preach about, even if it is not the easiest.

Harvest affects everybody so much. Sowing and reaping are part of every day life for many, and we all know that we cannot do without food. So, here is a summary of our discussion:

First, use the Harvest Festival as a time for thanking God the giver of every good and perfect gift. Psalm 65 is a good psalm of thanksgiving. Remind people of the truth that we depend completely on the Lord's goodness.

Second, preach the great spiritual lesson intended by Harvest. The Word of God is like seed being sown. The day of the great and final harvest will certainly come and everybody must be made aware of this. They must be seriously warned that the God who makes no mistakes will judge the whole of creation.

Third, sowing and reaping speak to us of the spread of the gospel - the evangelism undertaken by the Church. Harvest Thanksgiving is a good time to challenge all believers about this. What are they doing to make Christ known? Are they witnessing to their friends at work, at college, at school or in the home? We must also underline the vital need for prayer that God's blessing may follow all witnessing and evangelism. The seed sown is to be watered and this can be done by prayer. *"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest therefore to send out workers into his harvest field."* (Matthew 9:37-38).

Sermon suggestion for Harvest:

Reading: Luke 8:1-15.

Harvest Fruitfulness and Personal Fruitfulness.

- 1) Why do we sow crops and tend our fields? We desire to see a fruitful harvest that will provide for our needs. We rightly give thanks to God when this happens. However, God desires to see fruitfulness not only on the land but also in our

lives and that is why we 'sow' his Word, preach the Bible.

- 2) What is the fruitfulness of this parable (v8, 15)? Compare with Luke 3:8 – the fruits of repentance; or loving, righteous, Christ-like lives. This is what God desires to produce.
- 3) The fruitfulness of a harvest can be threatened or ruined by many things: poor soil, lack of rain, pests and diseases. Many things can also spoil spiritual fruitfulness, some are mentioned in the parable: the work of the Devil, a wrong attitude to suffering, and the distractions of the world. What spoils your growth towards fruitfulness?
- 4) How can we guarantee spiritual fruitfulness? (v15) By hearing and retaining the Word of God. Are you listening to, applying and obeying the Word of God? There is no other path to fruitfulness.

Chapter 4 Christmas

Many pastors and preachers find themselves under considerable pressure throughout their ministries, and one particularly busy time, which comes around each year, is Christmas. The numbers of carol services at which they are expected to preach can be quite large, so some help will be given here with preaching suggestions for this period of the year.

However, before doing so, because Christmas has been almost sabotaged by the materialism of our age, and also

by unbiblical inaccuracies, it would be very useful to comment on some of the things we need to avoid at Christmas time.

Over the centuries, Christmas has captured the imaginations of millions. Sadly, the Biblical accounts have been twisted, misrepresented, and added to. The truth of God's Word has been grossly mixed with error. Many well known Christmas carols and hymns contain so much that cannot be substantiated with the Bible. Just think carefully for a minute about one or two examples:

"We three kings of orient are...." Where does the Bible record that Jesus was visited by three kings? The Bible tells us that wise men from the East visited Jesus. It is true that they brought three gifts but that does not prove there were three visitors. Or take "Away in a manger..." It says concerning Jesus, "No crying he makes." Was Jesus not a true human baby and do babies not cry, especially when they are hungry? Then there's the carol "The first Noel...." This goes so far as to say that the shepherds looked up "and saw a star". Where does the Bible tell us that? One last example, the famous hymn "Once in royal David's city...." - a delightful carol but it tells us that: "Christian children all must be, mild, obedient, good as he." Can any child be as good as Jesus? Are we not all sinners? Jesus was "without sin" and therefore he is the only one who can be completely good.

I suppose it is what some would call ‘poetic licence’, but really we need to be very careful that we are not guilty of altering the Word of God. Right at the outset I would recommend that you do not be tempted into fantasy. Rather, it is necessary to keep carefully and strictly to the teaching of Scripture. God will not bless our preaching if we add bits to embellish what we are saying and which cannot be proved by the inspired Word of God.

Preaching at Christmas-time should seek to correct some of the errors that are common in the Church's teaching. For example, many tell their congregations that the wise men visited Jesus around the same time as the shepherds. This is not true. If you look carefully at the records in Matthew and Luke, note the following: Firstly, Luke 2 tells us that the shepherds came to the stable and found Jesus lying in a manger. Matthew tells us in chapter 2 and verse 11 that the wise men came to a house. Secondly, again, Luke 2 tells us that the shepherds saw a baby. Matthew says that the wise men saw a young child, which means that he was probably beyond being a newborn baby. Thirdly, it is probably not without significance that King Herod gave orders for all boys in Bethlehem under the age of two years to be killed. This suggests that Jesus was a small child.

I say all this simply to encourage you to look very carefully at what the Bible says. It is always necessary to compare Scripture with Scripture when preparing your sermons. Read Matthew and read Luke at the same time and do not let your imagination run riot.

Having said all that, I must warn you not to allow your preaching to get entirely taken up with trying to put all the errors right. Some preachers spend far too much time doing just this. Certainly you can mention these matters **but major on the marvel of the fact of the coming into the world of the Son of God.**

Here are some suggestions as to how we should preach:

First, answer the question "Who is Jesus?" This is very important. Do not assume that everybody knows who Jesus is. They do not. In any case, it is good for those in the congregation who do know and love Jesus Christ to be reminded again of this important truth. The first chapter of John's gospel and especially the opening verses can most helpfully be expounded at Christmas. You must make it very clear that Jesus is the Son of God and that he has always been the Son of God for he was not created. He is the Creator of the universe. All this is vital because millions who respect Jesus as a good man or even a prophet will not go so far as to say that he is God. The fact that he is means that the baby the shepherds saw in a manger was truly God. He is indeed the One of whom Paul wrote many years later when he said that one day at the end of time, everybody who has ever lived will *"confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."* (Philippians 2:11)

Secondly, think of answering the question: "Was the coming of Jesus a miracle?" It is true that he was born as any other baby. He came out of the womb of his mother Mary. This poor, peasant young lady was just an ordinary girl and a sinner like any other person. The fact that she bore the Saviour does not change that. In her song, recorded in Luke 1 she sang, *"...my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour."* (Luke 1:47). Note her use of the word "Saviour". Mary needed the Saviour too! So she was just like us, a sinner in need of forgiveness. This is something that many have neglected or even denied. However, the coming of Jesus was without the aid of an earthly father. Joseph was not his biological father. The Bible clearly tells us: Firstly, that Mary was a virgin when he was conceived. *"'How will this be' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'"* (Luke 1:34) Secondly, that the Holy Spirit came upon her in power, *"so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."* (Luke 1:35.)

This truth is very important so make sure you preach it positively. It was in every sense a miraculous birth, a unique birth. He came from outside this world and so was not contaminated with sin, as we are.

Let me suggest one final question that it is helpful to answer at Christmas: "Why did Jesus come?" A clue is given in the name that Joseph (his step-father) was told to give him. *"You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins."* (Matthew 1:21) This is the main message of Christmas. One of our carols says,

"Love came down at Christmas....." This is true. One of the best known verses in the gospels says that *"...God so loved the world (that means, "God loved the world like this") that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16)

Christmas provides a wonderful opportunity to preach the gospel. Do not miss out on it, but remember what I said at the beginning, make sure everything you preach agrees with the Biblical accounts. The Bible alone tells the truth.

Sermon suggestion for Christmas:

Reading: Matthew 2:1-18.

Three attitudes to Jesus' Birth – Yesterday and Today.

- 1) Hatred and Opposition – the Example of King Herod (vv13-18).
 - a) Herod felt threatened and insecure. He hated to think that Jesus might take his place as ruler, and he expressed his opposition most violently. Do people fear Jesus' rule today? Why? How do they express opposition or hatred to Jesus in your situation?
 - b) A warning to be issued.
- 2) Indifference – the Example of the Priests and Teachers (vv4-6).
 - a) The priests and teachers knew from the Bible about the coming of God's chosen one – where? And why? However they remained

unmoved and indifferent at the news of his birth. They did not go to worship.

- b) This is the case to day. Most know why Christmas is celebrated but remain indifferent to Jesus, and do not truly worship him. Challenge those present.
 - c) A reminder from verse 6 – answering the question – who is Jesus? He is the promised shepherd king. Link this in with John 10:7-18. Jesus is the Shepherd King who laid down his life that we might have true life.
- 3) Worship - the Example of the Visiting Magi (vv9-12).
- a) Worship is a right response to Jesus' birth. The Magi are an example of true worship.
 - b) They recognised and believed the true importance of Jesus. Their voyage showed their commitment and their gifts were a sign of generosity and consecration. (See also Romans 12:1-3).
- 4) Conclusion – where do you stand?

Chapter 5 The Funeral of a Believer

Death is always a tragedy and such loss can bring considerable grief to family and friends. It is usual to mark this departure with a funeral service. These are always difficult occasions, but when it is the funeral of a believer, to conduct such a service is both much easier and a great

privilege. This chapter will give some guidance about what to preach on such an occasion.

First of all some general comments about death: Death is a serious matter. For many people it is the most feared event of their lives. People everywhere try not to think about death, especially in the early years of their lives. Death seems a long way off - so they like to think. The only absolute certainty in life is death. One cannot be sure of anything else. The writer to the Hebrews (we don't know who he was because nowhere does he mention his name) says, "*.....man is destined to die once and after that the judgment.*" (Hebrews 9:27) Even though people know in their hearts that physical death is inevitable, they generally try to keep it at a distance. It is not something that is talked about. The subject is considered to be morbid. So, death is a very solemn thing and we must treat it as such.

So, then, how should we approach preaching at the funeral of a believer, of one who has passed from this life trusting in Christ?

Firstly, it must not be forgotten that unbelievers are likely to be present at a believer's funeral. This means that they must be warned in a gracious way. Avoid any hard presentation but always be firm. Do not gloss over the seriousness of that event. It said of that great preacher, John Wesley, that he never preached on death or judgment without tears in his eyes as he considered the awful state of the lost. He saw the urgency of warning the unbeliever. I

have clear memories of when I was a small boy at Sunday School, our leader often asked us children: "Where will you spend eternity?" Such a question is still relevant. I think that this is a responsibility that we dare not avoid as servants of God, although I must say to my sorrow that I have attended funerals where nothing of that nature was shared with those present and I feel that those responsible wasted an opportunity.

However, in the case of a believer's funeral, whilst death is always solemn, there can be joy. That joy is occasioned because the believer, when living, trusted Jesus Christ and received from him the gift of eternal life. We know that when life ceases here the redeemed soul of the believer enters into the presence of Christ. I often say that when a believer closes his or her eyes on earth, they immediately awaken in heaven. Paul longed for that. In the midst of all his sufferings, he wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians: "*..... I would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*" (2 Corinthians 5:8). He knew that his body was growing old and was wearing out. He knew that one day his worn out body would be placed in the grave and would go back to dust, but he was also confident that his spirit would consciously enter into Christ's lovely presence for ever. For this, there is reason for rejoicing. It is natural to be sad and to grieve when loved ones are taken to their heavenly Home. We must never be ashamed of that natural human sense of loss and you must make that clear to any mourners who may think that they are un-spiritual if they show grief.

This is not true. Do not forget that Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:35.)

However, the believer's grief for the passing of another believer is not the same as that expressed for those who pass on having no hope. Accompanying this grief for the believer there is rejoicing that the loved one is "*with Christ which is far better.*" (Philippians 1:23) Our loved ones in Christ are truly at peace. They rest from their labours. They are at peace because Christ made peace through the blood of the cross.

Remember that preaching is important because it is one of the principle ways that God communicates with his people. We preach because he commanded it. The work of the preacher is very serious because, like the prophets of old, he passes on the Word of God. Prophesying in the Old Testament was communicating the will of God. God communicated directly to the prophets and they passed that on to the people. In these New Testament days we have the completed written word of God, the Bible. God now communicates through the reading and exposition of his Word. So, preaching at a funeral is important, how then should it be conducted, in the event of a believer's death?

First, it is necessary to seek to comfort the relatives of the deceased person, who has been called by God into his immediate presence. This comfort must find its source in the Scriptures. Paul reminded his readers that God was "*the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who*

comforts us in all our troubles...." (2 Corinthians 1:3) As God communicates through his Word, as it is preached, we can expect that he will comfort grieving relatives.

May I add at this point that it is important to read the Bible at a funeral. Choose relevant passages of Scripture and read them with feeling. The late Dr. Campbell Morgan, a well-known preacher in the early part of the 20th century, used to advise student preachers to read out aloud privately to themselves the passages of Scripture they intended to read publicly, and to read them several times until they really had the feel of the passages. This is all very biblical because Paul exhorted Timothy to *"....devote yourself to public reading of Scripture...."* (1 Timothy 4:13) What the Lord has to say, in and through his Word is far more important than what we have to say.

Secondly, always preach the triumph of the cross, which is confirmed by the resurrection of Christ from the dead, the triumph of the resurrection. Just before Jesus died, he called out in a loud voice, *"It is finished."* (John 19:30) It is but one word in the original Greek language and simply means, "accomplished" or "consummated". The entire work for the redemption of all his people had been achieved. There was nothing else to add. A believer after death does not go to a place where he or she has to do something more to atone for sin. Christ has completed that work. He has paid the penalty in full. When he rose from the dead, he convincingly proved that his work had been accepted by the Father and therefore brings the assurance

that every child of God will share in the victory of the resurrection. In the experience of the believer, this will be completed at the final day when the body will be raised from the dead. 1 Corinthians 15, an important chapter on the resurrection, shows us that *"the dead will be raised imperishable"* (v.52.)

This is a marvellous truth to proclaim when standing by an open grave. Death is certainly not the end for the Christian believer, and one day the body that is laid to rest in the earth will be raised to life again and made to be like Christ's glorious body. It is a most blessed and assured hope that is found nowhere else except in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It truly is a glorious aspect of the gospel that we preach, but remember, as you preach the resurrection, you will be issuing a warning challenge to every non-Christian who may be in your congregation. The resurrection is not only a reminder that Christ is alive and therefore is a living Saviour now, but it is also a reminder of a future judgment. All human beings have an inbuilt sense that one-day they will have to give an account of their lives. All religious endeavours, outside of faith in Christ, represent a vain attempt to appease the wrath of a god or gods. For the Christian believer the anger of God has been appeased by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that our God is LIVING. The book of Revelation records the words of Jesus, the person speaking to the Churches. He says, *"I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I*

am alive for ever and ever!" (Revelation 1:18) The whole of creation must one day face him. Use a funeral service very gently but firmly to exhort sinners to turn to Jesus now and to repent. Only then will they escape, if they flee, by faith, to Jesus now.

Funerals, especially those of fellow disciples of Christ, should have a profound effect on preachers. They should be stirred up with a sense of urgency to point men and women to Christ while there is still time. This is an awesome privilege that God has given, and much of his grace is needed to be faithful to do it.

A final point in closing: Many believers before death have said, "When I die, do not talk about me. Talk about my Saviour." Should we agree to that request? I believe not. We must say something about the loved one who has been taken. We should speak of their life and service. However, always make it clear that the service of a believer is only possible through the strength and grace of God. Let the main subject of every funeral be Christ. Always seek to glorify him and you will certainly do that when you challenge people to look to him for forgiveness and salvation. Remember again, it may be the only time they will ever hear the gospel. I recall a funeral that I had to conduct of a 17 year old lad. He was killed instantly in a road accident. At his funeral more than 40 of his friends, mostly teenagers, turned up. I looked at them and thought: "What a responsibility rests upon me. I may never meet any of them again and they may never be confronted with

the claims of the gospel again." If I had not presented the gospel, I would have had to tell my Saviour why at the Day of Judgment, and so will you!

Sermon suggestion:

Reading: John 11:17-44.

- 1) Lazarus died. Death is inevitable and unavoidable. Gently remind why this is the case.
- 2) Mary and Martha were grieving. Jesus grieved. Grief is a normal reaction and a necessary process at this time of departure.
- 3) Hope lightens the burden of grief. The Hope of the Resurrection.
 - a) A hope triply certain: based on Jesus' word (11:25), Jesus' act of raising Lazarus from the dead (11:43-44), and Jesus' own resurrection.
 - b) A hope reserved uniquely for those who believe in Jesus (11:25).
 - c) Lazarus would die a second time. Our hope is that of resurrection to eternal life. Describe its qualities.

Chapter 6 The Funeral of an Unbeliever

Probably the hardest meeting that we will ever be asked to conduct and preach at is the funeral of someone who, to our knowledge, never trusted in Christ for Salvation. Added to this difficulty is the possibility of being asked to

conduct the funeral of somebody we do not know. How should such solemn situations be approached?

In my ministry, I have been approached simply because the person who has died once went to Sunday School in a Baptist Church and I happen to be a Baptist. Their Sunday School days may have been 60 or 70 years ago and through the years they had not been connected with any Church. The relatives were anxious that somebody from the Baptists should take the funeral. Should this happen to you, let me make one or two suggestions.

Thinking first of the person you know. Make sure that you visit the relatives before the funeral. This is important. They may not be believers and so you cannot really comfort them from the Scriptures. However, in a time of bereavement, they may be open to the challenge of the gospel. You may have the opportunity quietly and graciously to point them to the Saviour who is the *"resurrection and the life"*. (John 11:25). Also, from your conversation with the relatives you will probably be able to gain some useful information about the loved one who has passed away. At times such as these, always seek the wisdom and help of God to guide you in all that you will say.

I think that personal contact with the family is so important and often it bears fruit long after the funeral of their loved one has taken place, as it allows you to revisit them after the event.

Now, thinking of the person you have not known. Also you may not know anything about the relatives. Again, do make sure you make every effort to meet with them. Do all that you can to show a real interest in them and the one they have lost by death. Ask questions about their loved one and again, pray earnestly that God will open the way for you to share the gospel. Try to accommodate their needs and requests without compromising your own position and your firm beliefs in the teachings of God's Word.

When you come to the funeral service, look upon it as a God-given opportunity to proclaim the good news of God's redeeming grace. You will possibly have a congregation of people who know very little or even nothing about the truth. They must never be allowed to leave the service without being told that as sinners they need salvation and that salvation is through Christ alone. Eternal life is his free gift. Be very careful how you introduce the subject of sin. Remember that your congregation are grieving and sad. Whilst they must be challenged about the seriousness of sin in their own lives, never give them the impression that as a Christian you are better than they are or that you are on a different spiritual level and thus superior. It is so easy to speak of sin and to give this impression. The Bible clearly states that: *"ALL have sinned"* (Romans 3:23) and that *"There is no-one righteous, not even one."* (Romans 3:10) This includes you and me. True, we have been rescued and we rejoice in that fact, but they too can be rescued and

saved by God's grace. So, present the gospel very humbly as a person aware of the marvellous love of Jesus Christ extended to such undeserving people as we are. Peter wrote, "*clothe yourselves with humility.*" (1 Peter 5:5) Let that fact be evident in your preaching. It is always useful to speak of 'us' when addressing bereaved families about the cause of death, so that they know we are just as needy as they are.

In conducting a funeral of an unbeliever, make good use of the Bible. Read the passages that are relevant to such occasions. For example, John 11, which relates the death of Lazarus and that which Jesus said to comfort this man's two sisters. Alternatively, read 1 Corinthians 15, especially the final verses that speak of the coming again of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. Couple with that the 5th chapter of John's gospel from verse 19 onwards. 1 Thessalonians 4 from verse 13 is also a good passage to read and certainly verses from the final chapters of the book of Revelation. You are reading from the inspired Word of God and it is important that you should do so. Read it in such a way as to convince your hearers that you believe what you are reading. Never forget that the Bible is able to make a person wise to their need of salvation.

In the case of a known unbeliever or a stranger, is it wise to say anything about them at the funeral? And if so, what, as there can be no assurance that they have gone to heaven.

Although this is true, I think it will help relatives if you try to say something about the one who has departed this life. That person may have lived a good life. They may never have done any harm to anybody. They were perhaps moral and did many worthy things while alive. However, never give the impression that their good life will have earned them acceptance with God. At the same time, do not go to the other extreme and give the impression that you believe they have gone to hell. Sadly, that may be the case, particularly if you know that they never showed any interest in the Lord Jesus Christ and refused to acknowledge any need of him. However, you do not know what may have taken place in the final moments of life. Remember the thief on the cross who trusted Christ just before he died and was given the promise of heaven. Whilst we must be careful about deathbed conversions, we must also remember that God is merciful. I read of a man who for 100 years lived without Christ but a month or two before he died repented and sought the mercy of God. His final days on earth became a marvellous testimony to the grace of God. Deathbed conversions do take place, and God is gracious. I well remember one man I had the privilege of talking with during his final days, and he came to trust in Christ with the result that he had a remarkable peace about dying. It was so real even his unconverted family noted the change in him, and it was a joy to tell them it was Christ who had brought that change.

However, whilst you remember the dead, your real ministry is to the living - to those people who are before

you. Seek God's help lovingly and graciously to speak of Christ and his willingness to save. Make it clear that death can come to anybody at any time and the only way to be prepared is by trusting Jesus who gave himself for our sins and who welcomes all who come to him.

One final piece of advice: at the graveside you will probably use words that have been prescribed for such an occasion. You will commit the body to the earth and the words you read may say, "...in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life..." Certainly you can be sure of the resurrection but not of certain hope. Jesus said, *"...all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out...."* (John 5:28-29). This is a solemn thought, especially as all who rise will not rise "to eternal life", that is, life in heaven. Those who are not in Christ will rise to judgment and will be shut out from God's presence. At the committal of an unbeliever, the best formula would be, "...in hope of the resurrection from the dead." That is as far as you can go. The rest you have to leave with the Lord.

Sermon suggestion:

Reading Luke 23:26-43.

- 1) Jesus shared in the human experience of death – he understands our anxieties.
- 2) Jesus offers hope in the face of death – the promise of paradise – v43 (eternal life).
- 3) Explain the meaning of the cross:

- a) Jesus did not deserve to die, he was innocent – v41.
 - b) Death is a consequence of sin.
 - c) Jesus died bearing the burden, punishment of our sin (see 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 2:24).
 - d) As a result we can be forgiven and enter into the hope of resurrection life.
- 4) This hope is a gift of grace:
 - a) The criminal at Jesus' side was a very bad man – but not beyond the reach of grace.
 - b) It's never too late – the criminal was a dying man - but not beyond the reach of grace.
 - 5) A choice:
 - a) Look away from and scorn Jesus – a hopeless death.
 - b) Have faith in Jesus' promise – a hopeful death.

Chapter 7 Threat of War

One of the most stressful times to preach God's Word is when the nation where we are living is facing the threat or state of war. Sadly, war all too frequently troubles the world in which we live, and the whole issue is rather difficult. Sometimes the hostility is found within one country itself, and is called civil war. At other times it is one nation or several nations against another. War is a military event when armies of soldiers are involved, but

tragically, these days there are often many civilian casualties, as well as the deaths and injuries among the armed ranks. Also there is the threat of terrifying weapons of mass destruction. It has been like this for centuries and we need to think about how to minister God's Word at such times.

The Old Testament history is full of wars. The first war in the Bible is mentioned as having taken place in the Valley of Siddim. This was possibly at the southern end of what is now called the Dead Sea. Here a war took place between one alliance of four Kings and another of five Kings. A question that has troubled the minds of men since the very first war is: why can nations not live together in peace?

The answer is simple. The world is in rebellion against its Creator. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, began this rebellion when they listened to Satan rather than to God. Satan, once a high-ranking angel, led a rebellion against Almighty God. Satan became puffed up with pride and wanted to take the place of God. As a result he was cast out of heaven. On the earth he seeks to convince the human race that he is the boss, and generally he succeeds. He came to Adam and Eve, who listened to him, were taken in and rebelled against God. As a consequence they were banned from the Garden of Eden and from fellowship with God. Now, Adam and Eve were the representatives of the human race. Although God created man in his own image, a result of this fall into sin is that we now show more of the image of Adam.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church and said, "*As in Adam all die...*" (1 Corinthians 15:22) This means that all human beings are now born into a state of spiritual death. No human person possesses even a spark of Divine life. Ephesians 2:1 states that we are all dead in "*transgressions and sins*". By nature we are controlled by Satan who is at war with God. That means that we too, in our unbelieving state, are at war with God and one expression of this is our lack of harmony with each another. This makes war an issue that affects us personally because we are all sinful.

The real root of war is in the human heart. War between nations occurs when one nation covets another nation. Or it may happen when a leader covets rule over another nation. Adolf Hitler was, for instance, such a dictator. His desire was to become ruler of the world. Most such leaders are cruel, heartless and greedy for personal power. These are situations that often lead to war.

So, how do we prepare our congregations for such times? How should Christians behave when faced with war or the threat of war?

Christians, because of their changed hearts, should desire peace. Those who trust the Lord Jesus Christ know that he has made peace with God for us. Paul wrote to the Colossian believers, reminding them that Jesus had made "*peace through his blood shed on the cross*" (Colossians 1:20.)

However, whilst we rightly detest war between nations, it must be acknowledged that war is at times inevitable. It is even sometimes necessary for the purpose of overcoming a greater evil or threat to the well being of mankind.

Jesus said to his disciples, "You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see that you are not alarmed." (Matt 24:6) As Christians we recognise the sovereignty of God over the world. God has a great plan and purpose and nobody can thwart him. On another occasion Jesus told his disciples, "*Take heart! I have overcome the world.*" (John 16:33) This means that God is in complete control of the nations. No world leader can go further than God allows. You need to preach that message to your people. Point out that God has everything in hand. Show from the Scriptures that God has an eternal plan and that he always intends the good of his people. In teaching about the days of great distress, Jesus said that: "*for the sake of the elect (that is his redeemed people) those days will be shortened.*" (Matthew 24:22) My point here is to show that God wants his people to be assured that he is concerned about them in particular. So encourage your hearers, that they may be comforted in knowing, as Deuteronomy 33:27 says: "*The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.*" Knowing that God is in control is a tremendous comfort at these perplexing and alarming times.

Christians also need to be exhorted to pray urgently. When King Hezekiah received a letter with news of a planned attack upon him and his people he "*went up to the temple of the Lord and spread it out before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord...*" (2 Kings 19:14.) This is what all Christians are to do. As the Word of God is expounded, the importance of prayer must be taught. Many Christians see prayer as an optional extra. This is wrong. Prayer next to preaching is a most vital part of our ministry. When Peter was put in prison, the church was at once called to pray (Acts 12). The book of Psalms is full of exhortations to pray as well as examples to encourage us in prayer. In one Psalm the writer said, "*I love the Lord for he has heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.*" (Psalm 116:1) That was a personal recognition of God hearing and answering prayer. God therefore acts in answer to his people's prayers.

Times of war can also be used to challenge people about their spiritual condition. It is a wonderful opportunity to preach repentance. God often used wars in the Old Testament as a means of disciplining and humbling his people. Their ways often did not please him and they needed to confess this. Do our ways please him or does something like a threat of war remind us that we need to change? When godly Daniel prayed it would have been easy for him to blame the wickedness of the people. He did not. In Daniel 9:4 he said, "*I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed... we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and rebelled... we have not listened.*" It is a

humbling thought that the Lord's people may be partly responsible for a threatening catastrophe. We are all guilty. Exhort believers to repent and to submit themselves to God's mercy.

Finally, preach that we should express concern for our brothers and sisters in every country, even in an enemy country. In Christ, we all belong to each other.

Sermon suggestion for a Time of War:

Reading: Psalm 46.

Insecurity without. Security within.

- 1) The Psalm was probably written at a time of international turmoil. It describes the security of the town of Jerusalem at a time of war and siege. The Church and Christians can draw much comfort from this, for we are the 'new' Jerusalem.
- 2) The image of the earthquake and the storm (vv2-3) represent great turmoil, insecurity and war. These things are realities in a fallen world. However, in the midst of all this, God:
 - a) Is with us and for us (vv 1, 7, 11).
 - b) Is a source of help and protection, a source of strength renewing us from within (vv4-5).
 - c) Guarantees our security, we are safe with him. See the image of the fortress (vv1, 7, 11). This security is above all spiritual. War may bring us much suffering and loss but certain things can never be taken from us: our

relationship with God, our eternal hope etc. See also Romans 8:35-39.

- d) Remains sovereign and works to establish peace. Any peace in this age will always be imperfect and temporary because of man's sin. However, following the resurrection we will enter an age of perfect and eternal peace (v9).
- 3) War can bring heartache, fear and worries. At such times we need to still our hearts and contemplate God. As we do so he will console, reassure, strengthen, and bring hope (v10).

Chapter 7 The Death of a Leader

A time of great sadness in many nations is when a prominent leader dies. These can be occasions of much outward grief. However, not all prominent leaders are honourable, and some may have been very wicked. How, then, should we respond and preach during times of national mourning?

There is some basic teaching that we need to give concerning those who rule over us. When Paul wrote to the believers who lived in and around the city of Rome he said, *"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."* (Romans 13:1) That may seem hard to accept. How could Paul issue such directives when the ruling authority in Rome was entirely pagan? Furthermore, history shows us that the Roman leaders were cruel

despots. Surely he could not expect Christians to submit to them!

This is not the easiest of questions to answer.

He further wrote that the ruling authorities were established by God. How could a loving God place such terrible people in power? Remember, Paul is writing this letter to believers in Rome and Paul had at times been badly treated by the rulers. Yet, despite their cruelty, he was thankful for some of the benefits he had received. Paul did not overlook the fact that at times, believers had to disobey ruling authorities when forced to do things opposed to the Scriptures. Peter had to take a stand on one occasion before the Jewish authorities. He said to them, *"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God..."* (Acts 4:19.) This may be necessary, but rulers are still appointed ultimately by the Lord.

We need to remember that Paul, in giving his instructions is thinking of normal governments when rulers would uphold good justice and law. In our personal Christian lives we are taught by Jesus to love our enemies and we are to teach that. Our attitude toward rulers must always bear that in mind. Where it does not conflict with Christian principles, even though it may be hard, we are to subject ourselves to ruling authorities and leaders.

On one occasion during the ministry of Jesus, somebody asked him *"Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*

Maybe the questioner thought, "Why should I pay taxes to a government who might completely misuse what I pay?" Jesus' answer was concise and to the point, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's"* (Luke 20:21.) Christ was stating a principle to be observed and preached. He was also setting an example of submission to the ruling authorities. The death of a leader gives us the opportunity to put this teaching over.

The first thing to do is to teach what the Bible says on the Christian's attitude to leaders and governments. You must make it clear that violent opposition is not Christian and Christians are never to be involved in this kind of behaviour. Again, you are not to pour out verbal hate and venom against your rulers, however much you think they are wrong. Take the opportunity to preach on the words just noted in Luke 20. Add to that other passages such as the teaching of Paul in Romans 13 and 1Timothy 2. Christians are under no circumstances to be troublemakers in society but rather peacemakers. When a leader dies, you are given a wonderful opening to be very topical in your preaching, maybe under the general heading of "The Christian's behaviour in the world." The Sermon on the Mount will give you plenty of material.

The death of a ruler also raises the whole issue of prayer. Thinking of 1Timothy 2, you will remember Paul exhorted Timothy, and through him the church, that *"prayers....be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority..."* (1 Timothy 2:1-2) When a ruler dies you are given a

further opportunity to give teaching on the importance of prayer within the church. Constant prayer should be made for rulers. They carry a heavy responsibility. You may think they are doing everything incorrectly but this should be an incentive to pray for them. I think the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray indicates that we Christians should pray for all our leaders. Jesus tells us to pray that his kingdom should come and *"your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* (Matthew 6:10)

Inevitably when a national leader dies then the whole matter of appointing a successor comes into the picture. Now, such appointments are arrived at in different ways in different countries, but what principles should govern our response to that need?

The death of a leader should also encourage us to pray for the new leader. Maybe if your church in the past has not regularly prayed for leaders, you should challenge them to do so from now on. Teach them to pray that God will give wisdom to a new leader and show that person his mercy. We should also pray for the conversion of leaders. Is there anything too hard for the Lord? Can he not change hearts? If all Christians prayed earnestly for their leaders, we may well see some marvellous changes.

The death of a leader also gives us the opening to preach on the sovereignty and authority of God. This can be handled in the following way.

First, preach on the eternal reign of Christ. The book of Revelation says: *"Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns."* (19:6) Later on this statement is made, *"King of kings and Lord of lords."* (19:16) This is a direct reference to Jesus Christ who is referred to in verse 13 - *"His name is the Word of God."* John began his gospel with the words, *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."* (John 1:1) So preach positively the person of Christ.

Then, secondly, take the opportunity to preach from Philippians 2:10-11 - *"At the name of Jesus every knee should bow....and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord....."* All rulers in this world will finally bow before Christ and confess him to be "Lord". Remember Paul wrote those words in a time when he could have been executed for confessing the Lordship of Christ. It would have been an insult to the Roman ruler who considered himself to be Lord. The Bible says we must preach this great truth and even rulers must be reminded that they are frail human beings who one day must give an account to the one true God.

Death has come to a leader, an event that will come to every person. You are at once presented with the great privilege of preaching on the subject of "Preparing for death." This is not a popular subject for unbelievers but everyone must be presented with its certainty. *"Just as man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many*

people, and he will appear a second time ...". (Hebrews 9:27-28)

Sermon suggestion:

Reading – Psalm 33.

- 1) The Death of a Leader – a time of change and anxiety – in whom should we trust?
- 2) National leaders trust in their own strength and power to get things done – vv 16-17.
However, their power is limited: they cannot always fulfil their promises, events are beyond their control, and the final enemy death awaits them, as it does every man.
- 3) Leaders are to be respected, obeyed and supported as far as is possible, but ultimately our trust and hope is to be placed in the Lord. (vv 20-21). Why?
 - a) What he says is trustworthy and true (v4) – this is not always true of men.
 - b) The Lord is perfectly just and faithful (v4-5) – this is not always true of men.
 - c) The Lord has limitless power, he remains in control of every situation (vv 6-11) – this is not true of men, whether their intentions be good or bad.
 - d) The Lord will keep his promises and accomplish his purposes (vv11) – this is not always true of men.

- e) The Lord can deliver from death, he gives the hope of resurrection through Jesus Christ (vv 18-19) – no man can do this.
- 4) We must pray for our leaders, and the new choice of leadership – that they too trust in the Lord, more than in their own illusory strength. In this way they may prove to be more just and able in their government.
- 5) Above all – trust in God, place your hope in our perfect King.

Chapter 9 Weddings

It is said that: "everybody likes a wedding." This is natural, they are joyful occasions and not times to be miserable. However, we really need to begin our consideration of weddings with the book of Genesis.

Right back at the beginning of time when God created the heavens and the earth, he fashioned the first man. Man was the "crown" of God's creation. He was different from the animals in that he was made in the image of God. This word 'image' signifies that man was given intelligence, the ability to speak an understandable language, he also had reasoning powers and God gave him authority over the animal kingdom. Similarly, man himself is a creative person. Now, at first, when he was created he was on his own. Then God said, "*It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.*" (Genesis 2:18) So God created a woman from the man and brought

her to him. The woman became Adam's wife and helpmeet. In this way God set the pattern for the future of the human race. Men and women are intended to marry and within that marriage bond, bring forth children. United in marriage and through sexual relations the man and woman become as "*one flesh*". (Genesis 2:24)

Children are born in their parents' likeness. They are God's provision for the good of the human race and for blessing in society.

The relationship between Adam and his wife Eve was very different from relationships seen in the animal world. Man is different from the animals in that God never intended that men should have several wives at the same time. Nor, like the animals, should males mate with many different females. Sadly, in our present world, this is happening and with the most dire consequences. God's intention and purpose for man is that he should love and live with one wife for all the days of his life here on earth. In the New Testament, the writers give much advice and wise counsel about the marriage bond. Marriage is even likened to the bond between Christ and the church.

May I suggest that you carefully read Ephesians 5:22-33. I would also urge that this passage should be read at every wedding.

A wedding is a "joyful occasion" and that is what you want it to be. However, there is a very serious side.

When you conduct a wedding you must not overlook that. I am assuming at the moment that the wedding you conduct is between two believers in Jesus Christ, "born-again" people. I think it would be right and proper to say that you should not knowingly conduct a wedding between a believer and an unbeliever.

I stress this because such a union will not generally work. A lady once went to see her pastor about getting married. She said her prospective husband was not a believer. The pastor said, "Get up on that table." She did. Then he said, "Pull me up." She tried to do so but fell off the table. The pastor said, "That is what will happen to you if you marry an unbeliever." The moral of the story is that the unbeliever will usually pull the believing partner away from the Lord. Secondly, and this of course is our main reason, the Bible is very clear: "*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers....*" (2 Corinthians 6:14.) Marriage is the closest "yoke" or "tie" in human experience. It is closer than blood relationships. For a believer to marry an unbeliever is like trying to mix light with darkness or water with oil.

Let me return to the serious side of a wedding. A couple make vows and they promise to keep themselves to each other until death separates them. That vow, for a Christian, is not only made before many witnesses but more seriously, before God. You need therefore to make it very clear that divorce is not a future option. Marriage vows are therefore very solemn and, as most marriage

services state concerning the vows, they should not be "taken lightly".

In your preaching during the marriage service, you are talking mainly to the couple and so you should take this opportunity to give good, biblical advice. There are at least four things to say:

First, sharing. Eve was known as Adam's "helpmeet" which meant he shared his life with her. From the outset, there must be openness with each other. Problems, difficulties, anxieties as well as joys are to be shared. Marriages break down when couples stop talking to each other.

Second, praying. Prayer is personal communion with God but prayer together in the family is vital. The newly wed couple must begin this immediately. Marriage is sometimes referred to as a "holy triangle". God is the third person and at the head of the triangle. Praying together makes sure God has the place of priority. It has been said that: "the couple that prays together stays together."

Third, support. The husband particularly is to support his wife. Peter wrote, "*Husbands,.....be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect.....*" (1 Peter 3.7) The husband, biblically, is the head of the house but that does not mean that he rules his wife in a hard and unkind way or treats her like a slave. Indeed, husband and

wife are to support one another lovingly, respectfully and graciously. Make that clear in your preaching.

Fourthly, over all this, emphasize the continuance of LOVE. Husband and wife may have arguments and disagree. They will discover little irritations but the Bible does say, "*love covers a multitude of sins.*" (1 Peter 4.8) Love is to grow with the passing of the years.

Finally, as at other events, preach the gospel. There are likely to be unbelievers present. You can weave the gospel into a wedding address as you speak of the blessings of having God at the head of our lives and the joy of knowing him personally. Should you be asked to conduct the wedding of two unbelievers, many of the principles that govern Christian marriage are still relevant and certainly preach the gospel.

Sermon suggestion.

Reading: Ephesians 5:22-33.

- 1) The marriage relationship should reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church.
- 2) Husbands should love their wives in a Christ-like way – headship is to be compassionate and not tyrannical.

Draw parallels between Christ's love and love between husband and wife for every point:

- a) Sacrificial love – living together involves giving things up, making concessions and working hard at the relationship.

- b) Faithful love – the marriage relationship is exclusive and should last until death separates the couple.
 - c) Forgiving love – nobody is perfect, and living together, couples see each other's faults so easily. There must be a patient and forgiving spirit.
 - d) Leadership love – the husband is to show the way forward in a kind and wise manner.
- 3) Wives are to submit to their husbands as the Church submits to Christ.
- a) Essentially a relationship of trust and confidence.
 - b) Going in the same direction – husbands and wives should have similar goals and aspirations.
 - c) Service – the wife is her husband's helper (see Genesis 2:18).
- 4) Conclusion.
- As the couple start a new life together, invite the unbelievers present to start a new life with Christ whose loving headship will turn our sinful ugliness into the beauty of righteousness.

Chapter 10 Thanksgiving for a New Baby

Quite regularly in pastoral work families want to express their thanks to God when he has given them a new child, and I want us to think about that opportunity now.

Family life and children are important to the Lord. Children are a gift from God. The Psalmist referred to them as a *"heritage from the Lord"* (Psalm 127:3.) They are the outcome of God's intention for the development and spread of the human race. The first woman, Eve, was told she *"would become the mother of all the living."* Before Eve was told that, the Bible gives us God's instructions to the man and the woman. *"Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it"* (Genesis 1:28). God's plan is that the union of a man and woman should produce offspring, the outcome of a loving and intimate relationship. Society is adversely affected when children are born outside of the marriage union. We must be clear about that. The Bible's view of marriage is very important. The New Testament shows that a man is to be the husband of one wife and that for the duration of life here on earth. The birth of children then brings great joy to a married couple and quite naturally, a Christian couple will want to thank God and praise him for his marvellous gift.

So what should be the emphasis at such a time of thanksgiving?

A husband and wife who love the Lord Jesus Christ will recognise many things. I want you to notice three:

First, the newly born baby is, in one sense, a miracle. Who can fully understand the mysteries of reproduction? The moment the male sperm enters and fertilises the female egg

a new human person is brought into being. In that primitive state, everything is there to develop rapidly into a recognisable human person. A couple will therefore be over-awed by the wonder of it all. I can remember that feeling when our own children were born. It really is a miracle of God.

Secondly, a Christian couple will recognise the good hand of God that was present, controlling the growth of the foetus in the womb. In Psalm 139 the writer David says, *"You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.....my frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place....."*

Finally, a believing couple will recognise that God the Creator of all things is worthy of praise. We are to *"give thanks in all circumstances"*. (1 Thessalonians 5:18) That is God's will for every Christian person. Hence, we include the birth of a baby as one of the "all circumstances." Whether it is a boy or a girl, we should give thanks, and I want to emphasise this issue of male and female children.

We must understand that a boy does not have more importance than a girl. Both are gifts of God and, in his sovereign design, have a purpose in life. It is very sad when a girl baby is placed on a lower level of importance. This must never be the case in Christian thinking. To

demand a boy child from God is almost telling God that we know better! This is not right.

Jesus loved little children. The New Testament never says that he loved boys more than girls. Rather, he said to his disciples, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them." Jesus therefore set the example and received boys and girls on equal terms. I think this is very important because in the view of so many, sadly even some Christian believers, boys are considered more important than girls. That may be the view of the culture in which we were brought up, but it is not a Biblical view.

From all that has been said it should now be obvious that giving public thanks for the birth of a baby is right and proper. It is something that glorifies God. It is also right that our local Church should be the place where we acknowledge God's goodness.

It is not really important whether you want your pastor to hold the baby as he gives thanks or whether you remain where you are in the congregation. I stress this because there could be a danger with the former as you may be tempted to think that the pastor is endowed with some sort of special power. We must never allow ourselves to believe that. You simply bring your child to the Church to say "thank you" to God. You want your fellow believers and friends to know that you are truly grateful for God's goodness. You want them to join with you in saying "Thank you."

The service has been variously named. For instance some like to call it a "Dedication". This is fine. The prophet Samuel's mother in 1 Samuel 1 told Eli the priest, *"I prayed for this child and the Lord granted me what I asked. So now I give him to the Lord."* (1 Samuel 1.27-28) That was the dedication of the child. If you do use the term, make sure that you know what you mean. For Hannah it meant parting with that little boy from an early age. Would you be prepared for that? On the other hand, if you apply "dedication" to yourself as a parent, this is good.

Perhaps "Thanksgiving" is the more suitable term. Surely there is thankfulness to God for his gift of new life. It is right therefore that we express our gratitude in the family of God's people and so ask them to join us in giving God the praise. It should be a specific act within the context of our worship. When Jesus healed ten men who had leprosy, only one came back to say: "thank you." That was sad and Jesus took special note of that and sadly asked the one man where the other nine were. It seems they took Jesus' compassion on them for granted. In the case of a new baby, do not take God for granted but make sure that out of gratitude you bring your thanks and at the same time, commit the child and its future to the Lord. Also pray that you as a parent will be given much wisdom bringing up that child in the fear of the Lord. Your earnest prayer is surely that early in life, he or she will be brought by grace to trust your Saviour.

Sermon suggestion:

A Child is Born – God's Role, and Ours.

Psalm 139:13-18 and 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

- 1) God has created something marvellous, the newborn baby – he is to be praised.
- 2) God has granted a wonderful gift, the newborn baby – he is to be thanked.
- 3) God has entrusted this new life into our care – a great responsibility, requiring dedication. A baby depends upon his parents to provide for every need: physical well-being, loving care and protection, and education. The parents are to help the child to grow up towards maturity and independence.
- 4) The Bible underlines the parents' role in spiritual education – they are to instruct the child in the ways of wisdom and salvation, they are to make known the scriptures and present the person of Christ (2 Timothy 3:14-17, Proverbs 3 & 4).
- 5) We, as parents, are to bathe our minds in the scriptures and to depend upon the Lord for his help in the task.
- 6) We, as parents, are to pray that God would do that which we cannot do; we are to pray that God would graciously bring our children to salvation in Christ.

Every country has its share of national disasters. Indeed, some disasters, such as "September 11, 2001", affect the whole world in some way or another. However, in this chapter I will consider what we would call "natural disasters" such as earthquakes, famines and extensive flooding. All these disasters can profoundly affect society. Families can suddenly be bereft of loved ones when, for instance, an earthquake takes place. Famines cause gradual and painful hardship to millions. Flooding due to excessive weather conditions can quickly sweep away lives and property. Such disasters have been around since the beginning of history.

One question, which I guess has been around for as long as disasters have taken place, is - why do they happen? Is there any spiritual reason for them?

We must not forget that man's original rebellion against God had far reaching effects. Indeed, the whole of creation was affected. The worldwide flood in the days of Noah was the direct outcome of man's wickedness in the earth. We are told that *"The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time"* (Genesis.6:5.) The flood was God's response, at that time, of judgment upon man's wickedness. Whenever a disaster strikes we must never forget that we human beings are the ultimate cause because our fall into sin and rebellion has affected everything. I think we far too often fail to appreciate the devastating effect sin has had, even

upon the natural world in which we live. This is a serious issue. How should we then approach preaching at such times?

If you have an opportunity to preach at a time of national disaster you can use it to highlight the seriousness of man's sin. God does not treat sin lightly. This becomes clear when we consider the cross and the awful sufferings that God's Son, Jesus Christ, endured there. Our salvation is the outcome of the indescribable suffering of Jesus. Sin must be punished because it is so dreadful but Jesus Christ, the perfect Son of God, was willing to go through the suffering of the cross in order that millions might be rescued and made fit for heaven. So, whilst you preach the "sinfulness of sin" you also preach Christ crucified so that all who truly believe might experience forgiveness and acceptance with God. Preaching the cross as God's only way for salvation must always be central in your ministry on every occasion.

This still leaves us with a question that crosses the mind of many, particularly at times of natural disaster - "If God is a God of love, why does he allow such disasters?" How do we answer that?

This is not an easy question and there are no straightforward answers. All men have limited understanding and cannot know the mind of the infinite God, except in so far as he chooses to reveal it to us. We cannot then know why he allows a particular disaster to

take place. From the Scriptures we do know that God is sovereign and that he has an eternal purpose. Also, God never makes mistakes. Remember that ancient character in the Old Testament, Job. He could not understand why God permitted such terrible disasters to overtake his family, but Job did not at any time charge God with making a mistake. Instead he said, *"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised"* (Job 1:21). This is a tremendous example of submission to God and also of great faith.

Elsewhere Job said, *"Who can say to (God) - What are you doing?"* Right at the end of his bitter experience he says: *"Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!"* (Job 40.2) This is not the language of fate but of faith in a living God. It is possible to include this in our preaching when disaster strikes.

You can use the opportunity of a disaster to preach the sovereignty and power of God - the God who is in complete control and who through such experiences brings blessing to those who trust him.

Disaster obviously brings much loss, sorrow and sadness. So you will need to preach the God of all comfort. People need comfort and help in their confusion and sorrow. As Jesus Christ the Son of God shared our humanity and was tempted, or exposed to trials, just as we are, he understands everything we go through. He, of course, went through the

terrible agony and pain of the cross, so not only does he understand us but he is a fellow sufferer with us in all our pain and grief. The Bible tells us that he *"took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows....."* *"He was oppressed and afflicted....."* Jesus was *"crushed"*. We can read all that in Isaiah 53, a passage that prophesies the sufferings of Christ. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that we have a High Priest who can sympathise with us completely and we are encouraged to approach his *"throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."* (Hebrews 4:16)

When you know that many of your congregation are frightened, anxious or sad, you must bring a message of comfort and hope to them from the Word of God, assuring them that God has not forsaken them. In their hour of need his grace will be wonderfully sufficient. In Hebrews God says, *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* (Hebrews 13:5) There are actually five negatives in the original language. It could be translated, "I will absolutely not leave you nor forsake you under any circumstances." This is the Word of God and the Holy Spirit will apply it to your hearers. It is a tremendous truth for us to know personally and to bring to our people in their times of great need.

Sermon suggestion:

All Creation Groans.

Reading: Romans 8:18-25.

- 1) The creation, the natural world is marked by “frustration” (v20), “bondage and decay” (v21) and “groaning” (v22). Something has gone wrong with the natural world, things are not as they should be, and natural disasters are an expression of this.
- 2) What has gone wrong with the natural world? The natural world was cursed by God, as an act of judgment, following Adam and Eve’s disobedience (Genesis 3:17-19). There is now struggle and conflict between man and nature, rather than harmony and peace. Natural disasters are a consequence, an expression of this curse and of this conflict.
- 3) This is the tragic reality of this fallen world, a tragic consequence of sin – but there is hope. Into the tragedy of evil a gracious God promises salvation in Christ.
 - a) Those who trust Christ become the adopted sons of a perfect heavenly Father (Romans 8:14-17, Gal 4:4-7). The sons of God have the sure and certain hope of a fantastic inheritance on the day of Christ’s return.
 - b) The hope of the resurrection body, perfectly free from illness, ailment and handicap (v23).
 - c) The hope that the created order will be remade in such a way that there will be no more natural disasters (v21; 2 Peter 3:12-13).

- 4) As we await the new age we need to strengthen our hope, share that hope with the victims of disaster, but also, as far as is possible, show practical love and help to those who have suffered.

Chapter 12 Preaching in times of persecution

According to the New Testament, persecution is inevitable. In his last letter, the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, his son in the faith, and said, *"Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* (2 Timothy 3:12) Remember that Paul was writing as one who had been persecuted throughout his Christian life.

We can wonder why it is that Christian believers are persecuted. Why do people not leave us alone to get on with what we believe?

The answer is not difficult to find. First of all, because of man's original rebellion against his Creator and the spiritual death that followed, by nature everyone is a God-hater. No one wants to walk in his ways. No one wants to worship him. No one wants God to control and interfere with their lives. We are sinful people, opposed to purity and holiness. To those who hate God, somebody whose life has been changed and who is seeking to live a life of holiness is an embarrassment. Such a person makes the unbeliever feel awkward. Hence, the genuine Christian will not be liked. This was the case with Jesus. Many people did not like him. Why was this? Why especially did

the so-called "religious" people hate him? Why did they constantly try to get rid of him as we find again and again in the Gospels? They hated him because of the purity of his life. A person who is habitually dishonest will not like an honest person. A person who tells lies will not like a person who tells the truth. The problem for the people of Jesus' day was that nobody could find any fault in him and that was a cause of great annoyance.

This answers a further aspect of our question and sheds light on Paul's statement that godly people will be persecuted. Just as Christ was hated for his pure and sinless life, so believers in Jesus Christ will also be hated. Jesus said to his followers: *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."* (John 15:18)

To become a follower of Christ is to open oneself to persecution. This is a great challenge to our faith. Are we prepared to be persecuted? Now not all Christians are persecuted, but to follow Christ means that we must be ready for persecution. Even though you may, as a Christian, do much good in the world, the world will still hate you. This seems unfair, but sadly it is true. Jesus said that even though he performed many miracles, which brought help and blessing to many, people still persecuted him. *"If I had not done among them what no-one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father."* (John 15:24)

This became ever more evident the nearer he got to his death. The cruel governor, Pilate, could not find anything wrong with Jesus and tried to get him released. However, he was a weak man and gave in to the people. They were infuriated and screamed out, *"Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!"* (John 19:15)

In your preaching, challenge believers about the certainty of persecution if they desire to live a truly godly life. Challenge those seeking salvation to beware of easy believism. There are many who sadly preach a false message. They tell people, "Believe in Jesus and you will have health, wealth and prosperity in your life." That is a lie of Satan. Such preaching cannot be substantiated from the Bible. It certainly was never the experience of the first century Church. When Saul of Tarsus, later called Paul, was converted, God sent a man named Ananias to him. The Lord told Ananias that Paul would be sent to many people to preach the Gospel and share his Christian faith. Then God added, *"I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."* (Acts 9:16). Through the whole of his Christian life Paul discovered the truth of those words. Years later, when writing to the Church in Corinth he said that he had been through troubles, hardships, distress, beatings, imprisonments and riots (2 Corinthians.6:4.) He suffered all this because he was a Christian, a follower of Jesus. Once he himself had persecuted Christ's followers, but he was now ashamed of that fact. He told the Galatian believers that - *"You have heard of my previous way of life*

in Judaism (ie before he was converted) how intensely I persecuted the Church of God." (Galatians 1:13)

Now, even here we find some tremendous thoughts for preaching. For instance, you could preach on the subject of "God's ability to change the most violent persecutor." This is why Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel even though making it known got him into trouble. He said that the Gospel *"is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes."* (Romans 1:17)

People being persecuted certainly need encouragement. It would not be true to tell them that persecution will cease in this life but they can be encouraged by the words of Paul written to the Roman believers, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."* (Romans 8:18) Heaven will make amends for all the suffering and hardship endured in this present life, which will then appear only as a speck in eternity. There will never be any persecution or opposition in heaven.

We must assure persecuted believers that the Lord is with them and that he will never leave or forsake them, whatever others may try to do to us. Even if they are locked away in solitary confinement, the persecutors of Christians cannot keep Christ from his dear children. We must preach this to our people even before persecution arises, as it will prepare them for those difficult days that they may have to endure.

Sermon suggestion:

Reading: 1 Peter 1:1-9.

- 1) Peter was writing to believers who were facing opposition and persecution.
- 2) When persecuted, Christians can feel rejected, unloved and alone. Peter reminds the believers that they are loved by God, and this is the most precious love. Believers are:
 - a) Chosen (v2).
 - b) Sanctified, that is set apart as special (v2).
 - c) Purified by the blood of Christ, the price of love that God has paid (v2).
 - d) Born into a new, eternal life (v3).
- 3) Persecution involves loss and pain (v6) but God can bring good out of evil (v7). True and authentic faith is revealed under trial, and suffering can contribute to the maturing of faith.
- 4) Faith – is to hold tight to the promises of God:
 - a) One day we will be delivered, or saved, from this desperately evil world (v9).
 - b) God is holding a tremendous inheritance in reserve for us, and none can take it from us (v4).
 - c) God's power will keep us and preserve us in this present age. This is not to say that there will be no physical pain or material loss, but that God will keep us in the faith, in his blessings, and in his promises (see also Romans 8:35-38, John 10:27-29).

Chapter 13 Preaching in the Open Air

An occasion that is not open to every preacher, but which is certainly available to many around the world, is the opportunity to preach evangelistically in the open air.

The Biblical basis for open air preaching of this kind is that the whole world must be reached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the command of our Master. He said, "*Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.*" (Mark 16:15.) It is the responsibility of all local churches to be obedient to this command. Preaching in the towns, villages and cities or wherever people are to be found is one way of fulfilling the command of our Saviour and this should be done wherever possible.

Jesus preached in the open air probably far more than indoors. The Apostles preached in the open air and sometimes got into trouble for doing so, but then, Jesus did warn his followers that they must be prepared for opposition. In Mark 13 he said that they might be arrested and brought before the courts. Indeed, he warned that they would be hated and then added the cause for that hatred, "because of me". However, the world must hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

For those who have the freedom to preach in the open air, how should it be done? Is it any different from preaching inside a church building?

The Bible makes it clear that we are to preach Christ. Paul tells us emphatically that we are to preach: "Christ crucified." That is, we must say why Christ was crucified - for our sins. We must in our preaching make it clear that everybody in the world is guilty of offending God the Creator and that we are therefore under his divine judgment. The cross was the place where Christ suffered the punishment for human sin. The good news is that Christ crucified is the Saviour and that through him alone sin can be forgiven and the peace of God given as God's free gift. For all who repent and seek the forgiveness of God, peace is restored with God the Father. The Father is satisfied with the work his one and only Son accomplished upon the cross. We have peace with God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one eternal God, a blessing with which the greatest riches in the world cannot compete.

To sum up so far, we must clearly present:

- a) The awfulness of sin.
- b) The inevitable punishment of sin and judgment
- c) The Saviour, that is the Son of God, crucified to take away sin.
- d) The good news that calls sinners to repentance and faith and the gift of everlasting life that follows.

Here is some guidance as to how we should preach in the open air.

It will help to look at a sermon preached in the open air, Paul's sermon preached in the city of Athens, recorded in Acts 17. You will remember that Paul was waiting at Athens for the arrival of his colleagues, Silas and Timothy. As he spent time looking around the city, he became very distressed by all that he saw. The city was full of idols. These idols were dedicated to a large number of different gods worshipped by the people. Then, to his surprise, he discovered an idol that had this inscription, "*To an unknown god.*" (Acts 17.23). The Greek people of that day were afraid of offending any god by neglect. So there might just be a god that they did not know about who was not being worshipped. Paul immediately latched on to that and began his sermon by pointing out that there was a "god" who was not being worshipped and that he was the one true and living God, the Creator. The Greeks needed to know about him. From this I would say that it is always helpful in the open air to latch on to something that is current news or that can be seen. The people will relate to it because it affects them.

However, always make sure that your illustration does not blot out the main message of clearly presenting Christ. What did Paul then do at Athens? He takes this "unknown God" and explains who he is. Remember that the world does not know God, so proclaim the truth about God, about his nature and being because people are "*without God and without hope*". (Ephesians 2.12)

As Paul taught the Greek people about the "unknown God" he told them: First, that God is the Creator. Second, that God is Spirit. Third, that God is in control of everything and every living person. Without him we cannot even breathe. Fourth, that God has an eternal plan and purpose that cannot be thwarted. Fifth, that God cannot be represented by man's art or craft. Indeed, one of the 10 commandments in Exodus 20 forbids anyone to make a replica of God. Idol worship is strictly forbidden. God must, as Jesus once said, be worshipped "*in Spirit and in truth*". (John 4:24) Sixth, that God now commands everybody everywhere to repent, because at the end of time the whole world will be brought before God's judgment seat.

Paul's final word in his sermon is absolutely crucial. Jesus has been raised from the dead. Here is the point where you can with great emphasis bring in the good news of salvation. You have told people who Jesus is - God, the Creator and Preserver of the universe and all life. You have exposed the sin of mankind - "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" (Romans 3:23). If Christ has been raised, it follows that he must have died. The question is "Why did he die?" 1 Corinthians 15:3 gives the answer - "*Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures....He was buried..... He was raised on the third day.*" Then you can follow with the lovely gospel invitation in Acts 16:31, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.*" Apply that by emphasising the word "you".

Open air preaching presents us with a great challenge but also an opportunity to proclaim the glorious good news of the gospel, which is for all people. Do not waste a moment of that opportunity and pray earnestly for the power of the Holy Spirit. You cannot convince anybody, only God can do that. Remember you are merely an instrument, a tool in his hand and give him the glory.

Sermon suggestion:

Matthew 22:1-14.

- 1) God wants to invite you to a party, a wedding feast. What is the meaning of this image?
 - a) God is wonderfully generous, gracious and merciful.
 - b) God invites us into fellowship with himself, what a privilege and joy!
 - c) Eating together is a sign of reconciliation. God invites us to be reconciled to himself, for by our sin we are estranged, the relationship has broken down.
- 2) You must come to the party wearing the right clothes (vv11-13). What is the meaning of this mystery?
 - a) In this event it is probably the King who provided the clothes. Not to accept them would have been dishonourable and offensive.
 - b) We can only come to God clothed in the righteousness of Christ, that is, accepting by faith the forgiveness and salvation that

Christ obtained for us on the cross. (Compare with Isaiah 64:6 & 61:10; and Zechariah 3:3-6.)

- c) We will not be accepted in God's presence trusting in our good works, religious ritual, respectability, law-keeping etc.
- 3) There can be no better invitation but people are so indifferent to it and give such pathetic excuses, refusing to accept (v5). Quote the kind of excuses that might be given in your situation. Give a warning that those who refuse this fantastic invitation will be banned from God's presence for eternity, an awful prospect. Present this solemn choice of destinies – a party or a prison.

Chapter 14 Preaching – Church Anniversaries

We move on now to look at preaching at Church Anniversary Services. Some may find this a controversial issue and wonder: Is it not a bad thing to dwell on the past? Should we not be moving forward and looking to the future?

It may well be dangerous to dwell on the past. On the other hand, we can learn lessons from past experiences. Over-emphasis on the future can equally be dangerous because we can be tempted to worry and anxiety. This is why so many folk are interested in astrology, and in seeking to

divine the future in various ways. People want to know what the future holds for them. Although astrologers and diviners boast of their ability to see into the future, those who trust in God are commanded to have nothing to do with such things. These activities are condemned as evil and those who practise them will be judged. God alone knows the future because he has planned it. He holds the "blue print" of our lives and the Bible clearly tells us to *"walk by faith and not by sight"*. (2 Corinthians 5:7). God promises the sufficiency of his grace for each day. We do not need to know anything about tomorrow. Isaiah the prophet said, *"Surely God is my salvation: I will trust and not be afraid."* (Isaiah 12:2) This could be a good text for a Church anniversary!

One of the purposes of Church anniversaries is to look back over a year or perhaps a period of years. Why look back? There is a clue in the Old Testament. The people of Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness. Had they obeyed the Lord in the first place, they could have travelled by a direct route into the Promised Land. Most of the men Moses had sent to investigate the Promised Land came back with a gloomy report. The people listened to these pessimists and became frightened. Rather than trusting the Lord, they feared men. So God had to teach these people many lessons and he caused them to wander by a lengthy route throughout the desert for 40 years. At the end of those difficult days, Moses, their leader, gave commands for their good. Then he added, *"Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty*

years, to humble you and to test you..." (Deuteronomy 8:2.) Do you see the clue? The Church anniversary is a time to reflect on the goodness of God in the past and to learn from the many experiences through which the Church has come. This is good and right and leads to a further purpose, that of praising God and giving thanks for his guidance and blessing. So then we have two reasons and two subjects on which we can preach: First, to look back and see the wonderful hand of God and learn the lessons he has been teaching; and second, to give God all the glory through praise and thanksgiving.

Praising God from the heart is pleasing to him. The Bible is full of texts and passages on which you may preach, particularly the book of Psalms. The Church is God's work. He is building it. By Church, of course, I mean the people and not the building in which the Church meets. Jesus said to his followers, *"I will build my church and the gates of Hades (i.e. the forces opposed to Christ and his kingdom) will not overcome it."* (Matthew 16:18) At an anniversary you can preach that Christ is building his Church, that he is the Head of the Church, and that he keeps his Church and protects it from the assaults of Satan. This is why God is to be praised - the entire work is his and not ours. There are many other texts in addition to the one I quoted above. For example: Paul wrote, *"Christ is the head of the Church."* (Ephesians 5:23); then there is the short letter of Jude, who writes, *"To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault..."* (Jude 24). What a

great message of assurance this is for the Church! A Church anniversary is a very suitable time to remind believers of the keeping power and love of God.

At times we feel that the Church is so weak. Many Churches are in very hostile surroundings and are under attack from the forces of evil. We can wonder whether the Church can stand, but remember, the Head of the Church is far stronger than all the powers of hell. You might say, "I know many Churches that have disappeared. They no longer exist." Why is this so? We have already mentioned the Church in Ephesus to which Paul wrote. It disappeared hundreds of years ago. Why? Listen to the letter the Holy Spirit caused John to write. *"I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love...Repent."* (Revelation 2:4-5) That Church most probably did not repent of its lack of devotion to Christ and God removed it.

This introduces another possible subject for the Church anniversary: the challenge to examine our love for Christ and the warning that comes with it. The Church needs constantly to examine itself in the light of the scriptures and to repent of any coldness of heart.

Sermon suggestion:

Joshua's Memorial Stones.

- 1) At various times in the book of Joshua, God told Joshua to set up memorial stones which were to remind the people of various events,

but above all of the spiritual lessons that should be retained. We will consider three.

- 2) Read Joshua 4:8-24.
 - a) The stones were a reminder of God's powerful intervention when the people crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land. They were also a reminder that God keeps his promises and accomplishes his Word.
 - b) Churches and individuals can face difficulties and problems – we can turn from despair to faith as we consider God's past mighty acts and remember his faithfulness.
- 3) Read Joshua 7:20-26.
 - a) The people had been defeated at Ai and it was discovered that this was due to Achan's sin. The memorial stones were set up to remind the people of the dreadful consequences of disobeying God.
 - b) Churches and individuals need reminding that the consequences of sinful disobedience can spread far and wide. The sin of one person can bring disrepute upon the church, the gospel and Christ. Fellowship can be spoiled and mission hindered. This is an exhortation to righteousness.
- 4) Read Joshua 24:14-27.
 - a) The covenant with God is renewed and the people commit themselves to obedience.

The memorial stone serves to remind the people of the promises they had made to God.

- b) There are times in our lives when we can consecrate, or commit ourselves to the Lord's service, but as time passes we may begin to neglect or forget these commitments. These stones remind us to remember and renew our commitments.
- 5) Conclusion: remembering the past prepares us for the future.

Chapter 15 Preaching at the dedication of a new chapel building

This chapter will consider preaching at the dedication of a new chapel building. Of course, not every church has its own place in which to meet, but where it is possible to acquire a building, this is a happy occasion. So, how should we, as preachers, approach our preparation for such special meetings?

As we begin this subject, it would perhaps first of all be helpful for us to be aware of some quite strong and conflicting opinions.

The Old Testament has much to say about the temple building in Jerusalem and there is a whole chapter devoted to the dedication of Solomon's very elaborate temple building, (1 Kings 8). This chapter gives a record of one of

the longest prayers in the Bible, to which I will return in a moment. When we look in the New Testament, apart from mentioning the temple in Jerusalem, which was burned to the ground in AD70, nothing is said about Church or Chapel buildings. New Testament Churches generally seemed to meet in homes. For example in Acts 12:12 we learn that the Church was meeting for prayer in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Some believers are of the strong opinion that the Church should continue to follow this example. I respect such views but I am not prepared to argue this convincingly from the silence of the New Testament. The silence of the scriptures probably indicates that we have freedom in this matter, and each local church must decide where best to meet in relation to their own needs and possibilities.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will assume that you are to preach at the dedication of a building where a local Church will meet. There are a number of things that we need to think about.

First of all I want to refer again to 1 Kings 8. We are told that: "*the king and all the Israelites dedicated the temple of the Lord.*" (v63). The temple in Jerusalem was, in Old Testament days, the place where God promised to meet with his people. That building therefore was very special. It was dedicated for the glory of God. It would become a sacred place and God's people constantly longed to gather there. In Psalm 122 as they travelled up for one of the festivals in Jerusalem they sang, "*I rejoiced with those who*

said to me *'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'*" You could preach on the Psalm at a dedication. As a new building is dedicated to God, you acknowledge that it will be a place where God will meet with those who love him whenever they gather for worship. The very place will become "holy" for the simple reason that God is there. Jesus promised that where two or three meet to worship and pray, he is there among them. So your hearers need to be challenged to pray that whenever they meet in that building dedicated to God, they will do so with reverence and awe. When God appeared in a dream to Jacob at Bethel (Jacob named it "Bethel" because it means "house of God") and he later woke, he said, *"Surely God is in this place.....How awesome is this place!"* (Genesis 28.16-17) That should be your desire and the desire of your people as you meet in a building dedicated as a place where God is to be worshipped by his gathered people.

Secondly, some people refer to a building where Christians meet for worship as a "Church". That is not strictly correct and is really the wrong use of the word "Church". The word literally means "called out ones" and so refers to the people and not the building. Believers in Jesus Christ are "the called-out ones" who have been, by God's grace, called out of spiritual darkness. These people are the "Church". Dedicating a building to God gives you the opportunity to explain the Biblical meaning of "Church". For instance, in Ephesians chapter 5, Paul uses the husband/wife relationship to illustrate the nature and meaning of the Church. He shows that Jesus Christ is the

Head of the Church. Also Jesus feeds his Church through the preaching of the Word of God. He came to redeem his people, the Church, through the shedding of his own blood on the cross and now makes every provision for her needs. So Ephesians 5:25-33 is a good passage to preach on at the dedication of a new building. It is the place where the local "body of Christ" is to meet.

Then, there is need at such times to sound a warning. This might seem a strange thing to say for such a happy occasion. The new building may have a beautiful and perhaps ornate appearance, or it may be simply a plain building with no particular attractions. The warning note is the possibility that people may come to worship the building and the things in the building. On no account must this be permitted to happen. God does not look on the outward appearance! If a Church begins to think more about the building than about the God who alone is to be worshipped, then the local Church there becomes guilty of idolatry. The Bible shows us that idolatry is an abomination to God. The first commandment states clearly, *"You shall have no other gods before me"* (Exodus 20.3) and the second commandment goes on to say, *"You shall not make for yourself an idol....you shall not bow down to them or worship them...."* (Exodus 20.4) A building is man-made and is merely a place where the Church gathers to honour and worship the eternal God and to be taught from his Word. Whilst we are to look after a building so that it always looks "cared for" we must not forget that it is only a building like any other building and, like all the works of

man, it will finally be destroyed. Note 2 Peter 3. So remind the people of that important fact.

Rejoice then that God has provided the means to erect a building. Give him the thanks and dedicate it as a place where God's name will be exalted and his Word faithfully preached.

Sermon suggestion:

Psalm 84.

- 1) This Psalm was sung by pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem in order to worship at the temple. Nevertheless, their desire was not so much to see the temple but to meet with and worship God.
- 2) The Psalm is an example and a challenge to our attitudes towards worship.
 - a) Do we have that ardent desire to worship God and have fellowship with him and his people (vv2, 4)?
 - b) Do we desire to serve God, even in the humblest of ways (v10)?
 - c) Do we prefer the company of God and his people to the company of the world (v10)?
- 3) The Psalm is an example of the fruits of fellowship with the Lord's people (vv5-7).
 - a) We "go from strength to strength" (v7). Fellowship provides mutual encouragement, exhortation, and comfort, enabling us to persevere and grow.

- b) We are made a blessing to others (v6). As we are strengthened through fellowship we are better able to help and minister to others in need. The 'valley of Baca' or 'of weeping' (v6) is an image of those to whom we can bring the hope of God's Word.
- 4) Our new building is a place that we dedicate to God to be used as a place of fellowship and worship. The building is but a tool and the people are the true church. The building will only be useful as a tool in as much as we rededicate ourselves to worship and the benefits of fellowship.

Chapter 16 Preaching to University/College Students

I did not study at a University so I often found preaching to University students a bit daunting. I was tempted to believe that this was a kind of specialised ministry. Maybe this is partly true. A university graduate will understand the difficulties and troubles of students far better because he has already been through the experience. However, we must remember even if we are not graduates ourselves, we are not speaking to win an argument or compete with the intellectual abilities of students. We are called as God's servants to speak the Word of God. The great Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth and admitted, *"I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaim to you the testimony about God.....I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling."* (1 Corinthians 2:1,3) He then adds something that is extremely important. He

wrote, *"My message came with a demonstration of the Spirit's power."* (1 Corinthians 2:4) Never forget that. Preaching to students is not an opportunity to show off your own intellectual prowess. Rather, simply and clearly proclaim the message of Christ in the power of God the Holy Spirit. Paul told the Corinthian believers, *"I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."* (1 Corinthians 2:2)

I want to stress this point. As a servant of Christ, you are a messenger of the cross. Preaching the cross must be central to all your preaching. You have no other message, whether preaching to students or to ordinary village people. The same message is needed because as Peter said soon after Pentecost, *"Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12) The point is, as Paul taught, *"There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* (Romans 3:23) Our message must remain the same, whoever we are addressing, and we must not change it when we find ourselves preaching to highly intelligent people.

One of the great preachers of the 20th century was Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He always reckoned that one of his most effective sermons was when he had the privilege of preaching at one of Britain's most prestigious universities. He preached a direct gospel message simply presented. The blessing was quickly evident. Learn then from this. When you preach to students do not try to be

clever. You may well make a fool of yourself! Preach simply and clearly. Preach the gospel always seeking the power and help of the Holy Spirit. Like Paul, you can never convince anybody by being eloquent or clever in your arguments. You are called to sow the seed through preaching. God alone can give the increase. Only the Holy Spirit can bring the life of God into the soul. The new birth is "from above". Remember what John the Baptist said: *"I am the voice of one calling in the desert..."* (John 1:23). As a servant of God, you are but a "voice", a voice to proclaim God's saving news in the gospel. Your prayer must be, "Lord, let the beauty of Jesus shine through me." John the Baptist later cried out, *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."* (John 1:36). Later, the same John commented concerning Jesus, *"He (Jesus) must become greater; I must become less."* (John 3:30). Keep that thought in mind whenever you preach, not just to students, to anybody. That will make sure that Christ has the pre-eminence and you remain just a voice declaring God's way of salvation. Jesus Christ must have all the glory in everything you do. This is your call. Seek therefore the help of God to be faithful to him and to his revealed Word.

Sermon suggestion:

Readings: Luke 12:13-21.

- 1) As students, you will have ambitions about what you want to achieve in life (give some examples). Some will be worthy, others less so. These ambitions give life meaning and purpose, but are they the right ones.

- 2) In the parable the man's goals in life were to accumulate wealth and possessions, and to enjoy himself, but Jesus shows this to be ultimately meaningless, leading only to broken dreams. How?
- 3) Jesus introduces the reality of the universal prospect of death into the picture:
 - a) Death may seem a long way off for students, but for some (as with the man in Jesus' parable) it will come suddenly, rather more quickly than expected. We need to consider the implications of death however old we are.
 - b) Nothing of that which we have achieved from a worldly or material point of view can come with us beyond death.
 - c) Jesus reminds us that after death we will have to give God an account of our lives. If we are found wanting, we will be eternally excluded from his presence.
- 4) Jesus says that we should be "rich towards God". What does this mean?
 - a) It does not mean that we can buy, merit or obtain favour before God through any effort of our own. This is impossible.
 - b) Being rich towards God means allowing God to speak into our lives and to rule our lives.
 - c) Paradoxically, being rich towards God means receiving from him grace and mercy through the cross of Christ.

- d) Being rich towards God means offering him our redeemed lives to be used as he desires. It means making God's purposes and priorities our own.
- 5) These things can be carried through into eternity and will be perfected there as we dwell with God forever.

Chapter 17 Preaching to Elderly Christians

Preaching to elderly Christians is an extremely important ministry. Attitudes towards the elderly vary depending on where you live. In some cultures, the elderly are greatly honoured and respected and families will do everything possible to care for their elderly. This is good and right. The Bible would uphold that attitude towards the elderly. Sadly in most western nations, many view the elderly as being a nuisance and in the way. Older people are often placed in Residential Homes for the Elderly and in some cases conveniently forgotten. They are left to the care of paid workers so that families can live their lives unhindered by the needs of their elderly relatives. This attitude is very sad. Indeed it is a great sin, not only against the elderly but also against God. Thank God that he never forsakes his people and watches over them at every stage of life. He does not leave them even when they are old and in the view of some, useless.

That leads me to my first thought on preaching to elderly believers. They need reminding constantly that God does not forsake them. In old age, when the body becomes frail and the mind weak, there is the tendency to think, "I am no longer of any use to anybody and I cannot do anything for God." This is not true and in our preaching we must clearly state that such thinking is quite wrong. God does care. As long as we are alive in this world, God does not leave us. Till our dying day, he has a continuing purpose for us. In Psalm 71:9 the writer prayed: *"Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone."* Later on in the same Psalm he prayed: *"Even when I am old and grey, do not forsake me, O God."* The Psalmist prayed like that because he believed that it was God's purpose to look after the elderly and he wanted that purpose to be fulfilled in his life. So bring to the elderly in your preaching the promise God made in the Old Testament and confirmed in the New: *"God has said: 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'"* (Hebrews 13:5). When God says "never" he means "NEVER". That promise applies to every stage of life and right on to the end.

Again, when preaching to the elderly saints, speak often about their eternal home in heaven. That is where, by God's grace, they are going. Jesus once told his followers, *"I am going to prepare a place for you...."* (John 14:2). Then he added the wonderful promise *"I will come again and receive you to myself."* (John 14:3). God has revealed to us in his Word some basic facts about heaven. We know

that it will be a place of perfect peace, beauty and happiness because sin will be gone forever. We are told that God *"will wipe every tear from their eyes."* (Revelation 21:4). This means there will no longer be any reason to cry. Furthermore, we are told *"there will be no more death, or mourning or crying...."* (Revelation 21:4). Death is an intruder into the human race, the consequence of our fall into sin and disobedience. Death brings separation from family and friends. Death brings sadness and grief. There will no longer be any parting because of death. Then, again in Revelation chapter 21:4, the Bible says that there will be no more *"pain"*. This is particularly comforting to the elderly because many suffer continuous physical pain. So then, talk much about heaven - the place where all who truly love the Lord are travelling.

Finally, often in old age, all sorts of doubts and fears come into the mind. This may be due simply to the ageing process or it could well be the work of Satan who comes along and says, "All that work you have done for God, the faith you say you have just is not true. You have been deceiving yourself. God is not going to keep you. Your trust in him is all in your imagination." Satan is a liar. Jesus said so. He loves to discourage elderly believers and make them depressed. The outcome is that many begin to doubt their salvation. In preaching to them, help to dispel their doubts and fears by emphasising the lovely doctrine of "assurance". Bring verses like Romans 8:1 to their minds: *"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* Indeed there is much more in Romans 8, like the

"golden chain" in verse 30, *"Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."* The first letter of John is full of assurance. Time and time again John says, "We know" - *"we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."* (1 John 3:3). God the Holy Spirit will surely apply this preaching to the hearts of your elderly hearers.

Sermon suggestion:

Reading: John 10:25-30.

- 1) Jesus is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14).
- 2) The Good Shepherd is absolutely committed to the well being of his flock, even to the point of laying down his life for them (John 10:15, 18), we have become his sheep at the price of the cross.
- 3) A shepherd's role is to guarantee the security of his flock; this is what Jesus promises (vv28-29).
 - a) We may feel frail and vulnerable, surrounded by enemies, and wonder how we are going to last the course.
 - b) However, our eternal survival, or security, depends not upon our frail efforts but upon God.
 - c) God has promised, he and his Word are entirely trustworthy.
 - d) God is all-powerful, "he is greater than all" (v29), and so, no one and nothing can prevent him from accomplishing his promises.

- 4) To be strengthened and comforted on our pathway towards eternity we need to learn to listen to the Shepherd's voice (John 10:4, 16, 27). We will hear it most clearly as we read his Word, and fellowship with his people.

Chapter 18 Preaching at special evangelistic services

Many Churches arrange special meetings that are aimed at being "evangelistic". They may be called by a variety of names like "Guest Services". The main idea is to give members of the Church and congregation an opportunity to bring their friends along who may be interested but who are not converted to Christ. These services may be arranged in conjunction with a meal. Certainly in some countries this means of outreach is effective. The Apostle Paul was so keen to reach people for Christ that he was willing to use all legitimate means to get the gospel to them. When he wrote to the Church in Corinth and said, *"I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some"* (1 Corinthians 9:22) he did not mean that he would be willing to compromise his position as a believer in Jesus Christ or that he was prepared to water down the gospel. Paul always sought to live a life glorifying to God, as did Jesus before him. However, Paul was flexible and was not ashamed to associate with the outcasts of society or to go anywhere to share the gospel with people. His longing was to get alongside people whatever their background. Now, arranging an evangelistic service would be one of these legitimate means. It may

involve hard work but we will be ready to go the extra mile.

Secondly, your preaching can be very direct, perhaps more direct than when speaking in the open air. The reason for this is that the people invited know that they are coming to a gospel meeting. They have probably come willingly and will therefore be ready to listen to you. In the open air you have to win a hearing from the passers by although, of course, even there you will not compromise the gospel message.

Thirdly, remember that God has given you an opportunity to preach to people who may afterwards decide that they never want to hear the gospel again. This means that you must preach sin and salvation with great clarity and definiteness. Preach with urgency and preach for a response. Make it clear that your hearers have to do with the eternal, holy God to whom they will be called to give an account of their lives. Leave them in no doubt that they are by nature not right with God. Show clearly that the only way to God the Father is through the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, *"No-one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6). You must expose the teaching that suggests there are other ways to God. Many wrongly believe that all religions in the world ultimately lead to God. According to the Bible that is not true. Jesus stated in no uncertain terms, *"I am the way..."* (John 14:6). Some of your hearers might take exception to this, but you are there to preach the truth. Somebody once referred to it as "true

truth". It is a bold statement to make but in a special evangelistic meeting you must make the truth very plain to your hearers.

There are some Churches that would not be happy about my insistence on preaching. Some would ask, "Should evangelistic services not consist of singing, music, drama and similar activities? Surely preaching will not draw anybody." I have to say that neither Jesus nor his followers resorted to these methods. I am not saying we should have no singing. I believe that singing is a useful means when properly used. Although having said that, should unbelievers be expected to sing songs of praise to God for salvation when they are unsaved and therefore cannot mean what they are singing? Just a thought! I believe that the heart of an evangelistic service is preaching the gospel. This is thoroughly biblical. Paul taught that: *"faith comes through hearing the word of God."* (Romans 10:17). Furthermore Jesus said that the gospel was to be preached throughout the entire world as a witness to all nations. So do not be ashamed of the spoken Word of God. Paul clearly taught that the *"gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."* (Romans 1:16). So let me emphasise again, present the gospel clearly, forcefully and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sermon suggestion:

Reading: John 3:11-21.

- 1) Introduction: when something goes wrong, or a problem arises we go to someone in order to have

a solution. Give some examples, for instance when we are sick we consult a doctor.

- 2) There is something very wrong with everyone – sin and evil badly affect our lives, and we are all confronted with our final destiny, death.
- 3) Jesus declares that he is the solution (v14).
 - a) Jesus refers to an incident in Numbers 21:4-9. The people of Israel had sinned against God who had afflicted them with a plague of poisonous snakes. Death could only be avoided by looking to a bronze snake that Moses held up.
 - b) Jesus is saying that he provides a solution to the universal problem of personal sin, and the death that represents God's sentence against sin.
 - c) Jesus will be lifted up. This refers to the cross of Christ by which God's rightful anger against sin is appeased or turned away.
 - d) Only those who look to Jesus in faith will receive the salvation that God offers, they are released from the condemnation that stands against sin and given the promise of eternal life.
- 4) Jesus being lifted up is a gift of love to an evil and condemned world from a gracious and merciful God (v16).
- 5) Conclusion: exhort the congregation to look in faith to Jesus for there is no other solution to the

problem of sin and death, there is no other way into the hope of eternal life.

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