



# Just Preaching – The Essentials

I am not an expert on preaching. I don't have any training; I just preach. And I believe that preaching the Word of God is the most important thing I do as a priest and always has been in every assignment.

I have been a priest for almost 33 years, working in seven different parishes (suburban, commuter-belt, American urban and rural Irish). I was involved with *Intercom* and provided resources for preachers – but never used them myself!

To me, preaching God's word is the most important thing I do. Every Sunday my aim is to bring good news, not to give out about the world or the Taoiseach or Donald Trump, or Brexit, or those in front of me, but to bring some good news to bear on people's lives in a way that encourages. There is always something worth sharing in God's word, sometimes challenging, always different and new.

I don't have to 'do it all'. I have heard people talk about homilies I gave in the past and how much those words affected

them, words long forgotten by me; I recognise the work of the Spirit in that. All I need to do is to give people enough to keep going for the week, until the following Sunday.

I started in 1984 by preaching in a moralistic way ('we should, ought to, etc.') preaching provocatively but entertainingly. My preaching has evolved, with God's help and a bit of study – and maturity. As a result, I look for an encouraging word (I need one as much as the people listening to me). The homily is always based on the readings: I look at the Gospel first, or the First Reading. Sometimes the Second Reading appeals to me; even the Psalm can be a mighty springboard (when all else fails).

## HOW I PREPARE A HOMILY

My secret for preaching is the same as for surviving parish ministry, simply: pray, take a day off, work and rest. This is how my Sunday homily evolves. Each Monday,

after Mass, I pick up the following Sunday's missalette and fold it into my shirt pocket. I take a first look at the readings in prayer later that day and mentally note my initial thoughts.

I allow the readings sit in the background for the week, as I go around the parish, letting what people say resonate with me; sometimes a story will emerge, or a drift, or an opening gambit, a way to start. My prayer each day is 30 minutes with the Lord, focussed on the following Sunday's readings: ten minutes to ease myself into the Lord's presence, ten minutes with the Word and ten minutes on its implications, both for me and for the homily.

Each Tuesday I take as a day off, so there's no overt homily preparation that day, though it's probably in the back of my mind. On Wednesdays there is a cup of tea after Mass with some older parishioners. Lots of topics come up (about hospitals, schools, money worries,

family issues, etc.): a good reality check for preaching. On Thursdays there's usually school visitation – and each day there are visits to homes, hospitals, funerals, etc, as well as that half hour in prayer. On Saturdays, I pray with the readings again, then light a candle, say Evening Prayer and finally write down the homily, every word of it (about 400 words or less). It takes about four minutes to preach it. Then I breathe a sigh of relief!

## FIVE ESSENTIALS

There are five essentials for preaching (in my experience): a pastoral heart, being heard, silence, the 'focal scoir' and feedback.

### A Pastoral heart

Having a pastoral heart means listening to the needs of the people in the parish as a pastor (or listening to those you meet in any ministry situation). Take people's problems and dilemmas to heart. Keep them in the background as you preach. Sometimes a thing you say may help a particular situation but always keep each situation in mind and be careful not to hurt anyone.

### Being heard

You must be clearly audible when you preach. Check microphones, and more importantly check the way you use them. Ask your friends if you can be heard.

### Silence

Your homily is formed in silence (in your prayer) and makes its home in silence. You achieve this by allowing a few quiet moments after you preach, so that people get a chance to reflect and take your words to heart.

### 'Focal scoir'

At the very end of Mass, after the announcements, before the final

blessing, can you sum up your homily in two or three sentences, (about the length of a text message)? Share the thoughts that seem most important to you at that moment, unscripted, from the heart: that's the message to take home. I believe it's vital.

### Feedback

Reaction to homilies flows freely in city parishes, maybe big towns too (I have no experience of these). It's harder to hear in the country, where people have a mortal fear of falling out with you.

Feedback can still be gained from:

- observing whether people are listening (eye contact);
- listening well to what people say after Mass (be at the door as people leave, what they say can help you nuance your words for the next Mass);
- what your friends say (most priests have 'safe houses' where they can truly relax and be themselves; ask your friends there for an honest verdict).

## RECURRING CHALLENGES FOR THE PREACHER

### Holidays of obligation

In my opinion, these are never as important as Sundays, so they deserve one day's preparing and no more. Holydays should not interrupt the flow of preparation for the Sunday homily (but sometimes they do). The bottom line is that the few who come to Mass on working holydays deserve an encouraging word.

### Weekday Mass

I rarely preach at a weekday Mass, and if I do it's 'off the cuff'. Maybe in the seasons like Advent and Lent, a brief few words might inspire those who make the effort to be there.

### Baptisms

I preach a short, accessible homily at baptisms, on a piece of God's word that appeals to me (usually it's the same one each time!). Standing near the family means they challenge me to speak their language (I always use a microphone so no baby can 'shout me down').

### Reception of Remains

As at baptisms, when I am officiating at a removal, I preach a similar but personalised homily on a piece of God's word that appeals to me, usually also referring to the symbols used in the ceremony – pall, holy water and candle.

### Weddings

My suggestion is to ask couples not to include the Gospel in the nuptial Mass booklet, then possibly use the following or the previous Sunday's Gospel — with an adaptation of the homily you are preparing or have given.

### Funerals

Pick a Gospel that seems to reflect well the life or the death of the deceased and preach on that. Also have a few 'anytime use' homilies for back-up.

### Next Sunday

For next Sunday's homily, start today, even if you've never prepared a homily before. God will help you and the people you preach to will be grateful to you.

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The above article is based on an address given at the annual assembly of clergy of the Diocese of Kerry, in Killarney earlier this year.

Fr Paddy Mooney PP Glenamaddy on Saturday evening last with some of the youth and TY students from Glenamaddy Community School with their teacher Niamh O'Flanagan who participated in the liturgy and singing in an uplifting Mass for students sitting examinations in June. They are photographed beside the 'Parish Exam Tree' which is located in the church. People can write and hang the names on the tree of those preparing for exams and they will be remembered in all our Masses until the end of June.

