

13th September 2020

Preaching

**“But, my dearest Agathon, it is truth which you cannot contradict;
you can without any difficulty contradict Socrates.”**

Plato, Symposium

A little girl was taken to church by her granny, who encouraged her to ask questions. So, it was things like, “What’s that?” “That’s a Baptismal Font.” “What’s that for?” And an explanation would follow. And, of course, there was, “What’s that thing?” “It’s a pulpit.” “What’s a pulpit?” “Well, that’s the box the minister goes into for his sermon.” “What’s a sermon?” “It’s when the minister talks to us and explains things?” “Why’s he need a box?” “So that ...” and another explanation would ensue. Just then the minister came in and the little one was told to “Shoosh!” And, in time, of course, the minister went into the pulpit for the sermon. “He’s in his box now,” the girl whispered. “I told you to shoosh,” said granny.

Now, this minister preached with Presbyterian passion, and his voice, volume and vigour continued to rise throughout the sermon, till he reached a fever pitch and was ranting, raving, and flailing his arms. Just as he came to the climax of his peroration, the child pulled at her granny’s skirt and said with a trembling voice, “Granny! I’m glad the minister’s still in his box, cos I’d be awfully frightened if he ever got out again ...”

I once asked a minister why the pulpit in his church was so high. “Because,” he replied, “when I’m there, I’m six feet above contradiction.”

I don’t know what you make of preachers, in high pulpits or anywhere else, but I have to confess I’ve always been uncomfortable with the “ranting and raving” style, and I’m increasingly ill-at-ease with the “above contradiction” approach too. There may be “truth which you cannot contradict”. But even Socrates is worthy of challenge and open to contradiction, as Plato suggests he should be.

Let preaching be the start of dialogue and not the end of a search for truth. Let pulpits be a location for openness and not a platform for incontrovertible certainty. After all, the exploration of meaning and truth only really begins when the preacher has come out of the box.

A prayer for today

Certain, Lord? It may sound like it. But I’m open to dialogue with you too. Amen.

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