23rd February 2024

Preaching

"Preach the Gospel at all times,
and, when necessary, use words."
Anonymous

Just a Minute is an award-winning BBC Radio 4 comedy panel game which was hosted for more than 50 years by the inimitable Nicholas Parsons, and, since 2021, has been in the capable hands of Sue Perkins. The object of the game is for panellists – an eclectic mixture of celebrities – to talk for sixty seconds on a given subject, "without hesitation, repetition, or deviation". The comedy comes from attempts to keep within these rules, interruptions to point out errors (both subtle and obvious), the banter among the participants and the verbal jousts with the gameshow host.

When I was training for the ministry, I had a placement with an experienced minister. One aspect of the learning programme was "Homiletics in Practice", thinking about the purpose, content and delivery of a sermon in a parish church. I remember the minister suggesting two mantras for a good sermon: "Stand up, speak up, and shut up" was one. The other was "Tell them what you're going to say, say it, then tell them what you've said." This sage advice on clarity of delivery and succinctness of content, as well as a good introduction and an appropriate conclusion, was tucked away in the sermon-case for future application.

But he surprised me with a third mantra: "Your sermon should be like *Just a Minute,*" he said. "A minute long?" I asked. "No, not quite," he replied, "though if 'brevity is the soul of wit', there's many a sermon would have been the better for brevity being the soul of that too! No, I mean 'don't hesitate'. Be clear and confident. Be bold. And 'don't repeat yourself'. It's OK to emphasise something that needs to be reinforced. But don't go on, and on, and on about the same thing. And 'don't deviate'. Stick to the point. What I mean is, don't worry about the Presbyterian norm of always having *three* points. And please, not the usual alliterative ones! Stick to one point, and don't deviate into irrelevancies.

Have I always heeded his guidance in my preaching? No, I haven't. But should I have done? Maybe. So, I'll need to think about that some more. Just give me a minute, and I'll try to work it out …

A prayer for today

A minute with you? Worth more than a long time without you, that's for sure. Amen

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