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THE GOD WHO ILLUSTRATES: USING ILLUSTRATIONS IN PREACHING

Adrian Lane

God communicates through illustration, and this paper explores the implications for preaching. It argues that illustration is not just a means of supporting argument or concept, but also inherently communicates truth. We are shown how and why illustrations work, and how preachers can develop their ability in the use of illustrations.

Preaching in a visual, post-modern world

People often comment that we live in a world full of images—a visual world. Another common observation is that we live in a postmodern world, where one’s own experience and story is substantial, if not determinative, and where there is suspicion, if not rejection, of any metanarrative. If this is true, is there any place for authoritative, oral preaching in such a world? Some consider preaching at best a quaint medium of the past, not unlike gramophone records or black and white movies. Others cannot imagine how an invisible God, even if he exists, could intersect with their story.

This article explores the use of illustration in preaching. Illustrations and illustrative language draw heavily upon image and story. Even though preaching is essentially an oral-aural medium—and there are fundamental reasons why this remains crucial¹—biblical preaching will necessarily

¹ The central reason for this, I believe, is that relationships come into being and are developed through words. Words start something. They bring life. Speaking to someone acknowledges their presence and dignity. Consider the difficulty of developing a relationship with someone to whom you haven’t spoken, or with whom you cannot communicate. Non-verbal communication, such as visuals, can communicate much but are open to misunderstanding and are often dependent on what has already been established through words. Visuals are often static or closed. Words provide the dynamic means for an ongoing relationship, including the means to clarify what the communicator is seeking to convey. This is evidenced in the creation, where God brings an interpretive clarity, naming the relationship between the creation and the word through words, and in his initiating and developing his relationship with us through words (Hebrews 1:1–3, 10–12; Romans 10:14–17). Furthermore, although God plainly speaks through the written word for those with the facility to read it, he continues to gift his people with oral communicators to bring and nurture new life and to establish and mature churches for his witness and glory. For further comment on orality in a visual world and its implications for preaching, see Adrian Lane, ‘Training for the Sound of the Sermon: Orality and the Use of an Oral Text in Oral Format,’ in *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 6:2 (September 2006): pp. 77–94; also available at www.preaching.org.au.

contain many visual references. Moreover, even though preaching is about a God who makes authoritative demands on our lives, it is also about a God who makes and tells stories. In fact, he is already deeply involved in our own personal story and is longing to include us even more in his grand and eternal narrative. Classically, these concepts of imagery and story have been referred to as illustrations and they are integral to preaching. Webster's defines an illustration as 'an example or instance that helps make something clear.'²

Two styles of preachers

Most preachers fall into one of two groups. On the one hand are those who love telling stories, and they engage an audience quite naturally by painting pictures with words. Often these preachers have good experience in children's or youth ministry, or have worked in sales. Their danger as preachers is that, relying on their ability to communicate, they fail to work hard at understanding and communicating the Scriptures carefully. Audiences always enjoy and commend their sermons, but we have to ask whether they have really heard the Word of God.

On the other hand, there are preachers who apply themselves studiously to the Scriptures, garnering and gleaning its truths, but who wrestle to engage with their audience. They realise that their sermons lack variety and are wooden, even boring. This is often because they are too propositional, abstract or conceptual. As preachers they are usually looking for help. The good news is that preachers can solve this difficulty by following certain well-tried principles and practices.

Unfortunately some in this latter group do not realise they have a problem. They are generally strong propositional thinkers themselves and assume all learn this way.³ They may consider, consciously or unconsciously, that this is the only way to grow as a Christian and so are committed to training their listeners in a particular process or style of thinking. They may think of illustrations simply as supports to the expression and understanding of ideas. In this perspective illustrations are generally regarded as secondary, or derivative. However, this approach is fraught with dangers. It can privilege concept over identity, the word of the person over the person, and the description of the relationship over the relationship itself. More importantly, this approach doesn't mirror God's.⁴

² *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (10th Edition)*, (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1993), p. 578.

³ I am not using propositional in a strict philosophical sense, but rather to refer to a certain style of thinking, communicating and acting that is based and weighted strongly on concept and argument. In order to focus on homiletical issues, unfortunately it is not possible in this context to sufficiently discuss larger related philosophical themes.

⁴ This perspective may be an inadvertent consequence of the discipline of theology and theological education more generally, where time is rightly spent in thinking

The God who illustrates

God is most certainly interested in thinking and the things of the mind. He made our minds and he is God of them. He loves them and expects us to develop and use them. It is surely significant that he calls for our transformation by the complete renewal of our minds.⁵ Furthermore, God often reveals aspects of himself and his work through careful argument, such as in the detailed reasoning in Romans 1–11 or Hebrews. However, God does not limit his revelation to argument. Indeed, the vast bulk of God's revelation is not in this style. Nor do the Scriptures suggest that argument is a 'higher' order of revelation than other forms, though, of course, it is sometimes used to interpret and clarify them, just as other forms are used to clarify it.

'God is love'⁶—a proposition. That love is *demonstrated* materially and in relationship. 'This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.'⁷ In other words, the incarnation shows, demonstrates and illustrates God's love. Moreover, God's love is evidenced in the creation and in the whole Biblical story. This story is itself made up of hundreds of stories, miracles, parables, songs, poems, proverbs, dreams and visions. All these genres communicate truth using illustration. The Psalms and Proverbs are full of illustrations. The prophets are replete with illustration. Each of the parables is an illustration. Miracles usually have an illustrative component. Apocalyptic writing is mostly illustration. Interestingly, even those parts of the Bible which may not appear at first to be illustrative, such as the accounts of Israel's history and its leaders, or the design of the tabernacle, or the law, are often seasoned with illustrative language and are later described as illustrative.⁸

Preaching that focuses too much on the conceptual is therefore unrepresentative of the Biblical testament. It could even be effectively communicating an alternative perspective, such as asceticism or through and distinguishing between theological concepts. However, the Christian faith is obviously not essentially a theological construct or a system of ideas.

⁵ Romans 12:2.

⁶ 1 John 4:8,16b. Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NIV 1984. (THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide).

⁷ 1 John 4:9. Similarly, Jesus demonstrates the 'full extent of his love' by illustrative actions in John 13:1.

⁸ For example, the law is used as an illustration in Hebrews 10:1. It is 'only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.' Similarly, we later discover that the original arrangements and pattern for the tabernacle and temple are illustrative 'of what is in heaven' (Hebrews 8:5). See also Hebrews 8:2; 9:8–10 and 1 Corinthians 10:11.

Gnosticism. God is not just a God of rational thinking. He makes and delights in things. He calls and delights in his chosen people. He relates. He demonstrates. He illustrates, through image and story. Illustrations, then, are far more substantial than mere props or aids to argument. In the Scriptures, they are the means to further a relationship and help it mature. Often they are integral to the outworking of that relationship, such as the plagues in Egypt or the signs in the early church.⁹ Sometimes they bring greater understanding of a larger truth, such as the miracles in John.¹⁰ Other times, they communicate in their own context while also functioning as part of a larger truth, as in typology. They can even be the very essence of what they illustrate, as in the case of the incarnation.

The crucial importance for preachers of understanding illustration

Understanding the nature of illustrations and working with them well is therefore a key component of the preaching task. At the very least it involves understanding and communicating God's use of illustrations in the Bible. But for the contemporary preacher it is much more than this. It involves developing insight into how God is currently working and demonstrating his teaching in the world he has made—including in our own lives.¹¹ Since we are people made in the image of God and filled with his gifting Spirit, this involves developing our God-given abilities to use similar illustrations as we seek to communicate 'the whole counsel of God.'¹² Indeed, this ability to understand and use illustrations well is so integral to preaching that it can be argued that unless one is a good illustrator and storyteller one cannot be a good preacher. The aim of this article is therefore to help preachers cultivate illustrative homiletical practice—to help them to gather together, order, clarify, name and develop much of what they are probably already practising intuitively.

Let us train our focus

So let us continue with a personal exercise. If you are like me, it is always tempting to jump past an exercise or give it a cursory overview. But you will get more out of this article—and hopefully improve the quality of

⁹ Exodus 10:1–2; Acts 5:12–16.

¹⁰ I use truth, understanding and knowledge here in a relational sense, as in John 14:6.

¹¹ This was a constant ministry of the Old Testament prophets. In a similar way, Peter had to interpret his vision of the unclean food (Acts 10:12–13) and Paul his vision of the Macedonian man (Acts 16:9). Here, God's servants were prompted to move from illustration to interpretation by means of his wider revelation, in the context of his contemporary work with his people.

¹² Acts 20:27 (RSV).

your preaching—by taking the time to stop and reflect on the questions. You will need some means of recording your answers. Give yourself about twenty minutes to do this.

Make a list of the places you have lived, worked and visited. Make a list of some of the memorable events in your life, some of the interesting people you have met, and some of the passions and interests you have. When was your most embarrassing moment? Your most vulnerable? Would you be willing to share these publicly? When were you most excited, expectant, happy, thankful? When were you most scared, lonely, or worried? When were you most tempted, frustrated, or angry?

What do you note about yourself from this exercise? Initially, I hope you notice how full and rich your life has been. I hope that you will also notice how interesting it has been—though what is familiar and routine may not seem interesting to you because of its very familiarity. I hope too that you have glimpsed how you might use some of your experiences illustratively in a sermon. But let us not get ahead of ourselves. The point of this exercise is not simply to surface material from your experience which might be used in your preaching, but to help you to develop an illustrative mindset in which you become more alert to the world around you, to the events and feelings you are experiencing, to your own story, and to making connections between all this and the persons and work of God.

The exercise also illustrates an ever-present danger in our understanding and use of illustrations that is important to note from the outset. While all your answers would help me come to know you in all your variety and richness, the answers are not you. They tell me about you and are integral to who you are, but you not just the sum of these experiences. You are a person. In a similar way, knowing about God and his work helps us to come to know God, but is no substitute for the dynamic friendship that God is keen to have with each one of us.¹³ Preachers need to pray for and foster in listeners a hunger for knowing God in himself, not just for knowing about God.

Illustrations convey truth through experience

Illustrations help us to know God. They convey and clarify truths, understanding and knowledge of God. In contrast to a truth expressed abstractly, illustrations convey *experienced* truth. By this I do not necessarily mean truth that I personally have experienced, but truth that has an evident experiential component to it. The implications of this are significant and extensive. They point us to a God who creates, sustains, and delights in his creation, notably his people. So important is this creation that God sent his Son to die for its redemption and re-creation. This saving work required the incarnation, thus proving the value of the

¹³ John 15:14–17; James 2:23.

material. The incarnation also testifies to the centrality of *relationship*, both in the Trinity and the creation. Christ delighted in his relationship with his Father and was nurtured by it. He also enjoyed and worked in his world, delighting in and honouring his friends. In other words, God is more than just a God of ideas—glorious as that is. He ‘became flesh’¹⁴ in order to be like us and is essentially relational. Being made in the image of God, we too are essentially relational. Furthermore, we live in a world that we generally understand to be both material and spiritual. This is our daily experience. This is the world we know. God in his kindness reveals himself to us in these terms. Illustrations will therefore evidence the persons and relationships in the Trinity, as well as all that is in creation, and the relationships in it.

Illustrations use a wide range of referents

Illustrations convey this experienced truth by means of a *referent* which in some way resembles the truth. Referents may be images, metaphors or stories.¹⁵ They may be something material, like a vine, water or wine. The referent may be a human action, feeling or thought, such as, ‘the trees of the field will clap their hands’¹⁶ or ‘trampling the Son of God underfoot.’¹⁷ It may be focused on a person, such as the nature of Melchizedek¹⁸ or the faithfulness of the saints in Hebrews 11. It may come from an action or process in the natural world, such as a ewe mothering its lamb or anger being as fire. The referent may take the form of a narrative, such as the lessons from the exodus or the exile later on.¹⁹ Many of the parables have narrational referents. Paul uses his own experiences in this way.²⁰ The referent may be a miracle, such as the feeding of the 5000 or the raising of Lazarus, or it may be God himself, such as how our human relationships ought to reflect the relationships in the Trinity.²¹

Referents may be essential (ie of the essence), as the incarnation was, or analogous, as the lessons from Israel’s history were. They may be real, as in Peter’s vision of the unclean food in Acts 10:12, or imagined, as in the parables. The Bible brims with an overflowing cornucopia of illustrations, using a wonderful range of referents. The tongue is described

¹⁴ John 1:14.

¹⁵ Some, such as Jennifer Lord, gather all illustrations into the category of imagery. While this approach simplifies, it is not always amenable to distinctive analysis. See Jennifer Lord, *Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), p. 13.

¹⁶ Isaiah 55:12.

¹⁷ Hebrews 10:29.

¹⁸ Hebrews 6:20–7:28.

¹⁹ See, for example, 1 Corinthians 10:1–22; 1 Peter 2:9–12.

²⁰ For example, Philippians 3:4–8; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10.

²¹ For example, Philippians 2:5–7; 1 Corinthians 11:3.

as a bit, a rudder, a spark, a fire, a world of evil, a restless evil, full of deadly poison, fresh water, salt water, figs, olives, grapes—all in the one pericope!²² Likewise, Jesus is the word, the light, the lamb and the Son of Man—all in the first chapter of John.

Understanding illustrations helps us understand the Bible

Since illustrations communicate through experienced truth, they will assist us in our wrestling with the *meaning* of the Biblical text and its *communication*. For example, as I think about what it means for the creation to ‘wait in eager expectation,’ yet be ‘groaning as in the pains of childbirth,’²³ I consider how I have felt when I have been expecting things. Wrestling with the experience of expectancy and childbirth helps me not only to clarify the meaning of the text but to identify the most appropriate means for conveying its truth. Parents expecting a baby know that the wait, preparation and delivery will be a mix of excitement, sobriety and pain. They also know that in the joy of new birth, that pain will be put in perspective. In a similar way, the children of God know that the creation, including their own bodies, will ultimately be redeemed, even though the wait, preparation and ‘delivery’ all entail suffering. They also know that as they and the creation groan in labour, the Spirit himself intercedes and assists with those groans of imminent delivery. They also know that after this redemption there will be ‘no more crying or pain.’²⁴ In the meantime, we need to wait in eager expectation, preparing patiently, in certain hope. Exploring and understanding the illustration thus helps us to understand the meaning of the text better and discover the best means for communicating it.

Illustrations aid identification, application and engagement

Since illustrations communicate through experienced truth, they will also help people to *identify* with that truth and to *apply* it. Paul’s wrestling over the sin in his life, his awareness of his vulnerability and mortality, his longing for his redeemed body and his response to his ‘thorn in the flesh’ are all highly personal illustrations that we can identify with and apply to ourselves.²⁵ Similarly, the story of how the Spirit has convicted the preacher and led to repentance will often resonate with others, challenging them and modelling a way forward. This use of experienced truth will also assist *engagement* and therefore learning in general. Chiefly this is due to identification and pertinence. It will also be due to inherent interest and variety in communication mode.

²² James 3:1–12.

²³ See Romans 8:18–27 and Galatians 4:19. Similarly, John 16:20–22.

²⁴ Revelation 21:4.

²⁵ Romans 7:14–25; 2 Corinthians 4:7; 5:2 and 12:7–10.

Illustrations involve all the senses

Since illustrations communicate through experienced truth, they will involve all the senses, both in their expression and content. In terms of expression, verbal illustrations can be anything from a single word to a phrase, a story or even a whole sermon. Illustrations can also be non-verbal, such as a hum or a knock. Many illustrations are visual, such as a visual aid or gesture. When Jesus took ‘a little child and had him stand beside him’²⁶ he powerfully used a tangible visual illustration to teach about greatness. No doubt the small boy and his family never forgot the occasion, passing it down the generations! Illustrations can even be olfactory, such as the scent of perfume, or the aroma of cooking meat. Many illustrations involve a combination of senses, such as a movie clip. Even the preacher, as a preacher, serves as a multi-sensory illustration, consciously or not.

Developing illustrative homiletical practice

How then can preachers grow in their illustrative homiletical practice? What makes a good illustration?

Good illustrations convey truth, and they convey it *clearly*. By their nature not every aspect of the referent will correspond to reality. Hills cannot clap. The kingdom is not a mustard seed, nor a net. For this reason, it is the pertinent aspects of the referent that must be made clear. For example, Jesus says that the kingdom is like a mustard seed because of its small size and extensive productive growth, not because it is a hot condiment. The truth conveyed in an illustrative story must match the truth the preacher is seeking to communicate. There needs to be a clean, comfortable and enhancing fit. Too many stories in sermons are cluttered with extraneous details. This is sometimes to foster interest and engagement. However, it makes it difficult for the audience to locate the truth. Details need to be rigorously pruned so that only the details pertinent to the truth’s communication are included, in appropriate proportion. Listeners can thereby plainly discern the truth conveyed. Of course, sometimes an illustration or story is deliberately bemusing, in order to entice engagement. But even here, only those details pertinent to the communication of its truths are included. Of course, there will be times when the preacher deliberately veils the truth to certain parties in an audience by means of illustration, as Jesus himself sometimes did in the parables,²⁷ or, for instance, in settings of persecution. In these circumstances the illustrations are still crafted carefully to convey truth, but with the added purpose of only conveying it to certain listeners.

²⁶ Luke 9:47.

²⁷ Luke 8:10.

Nothing must distract in an illustration. Similarly, it must not be open to justifiable misunderstanding. Many illustrations have to be jettisoned, or at least set aside temporarily, because they do not quite fit, even though they may be great images or stories that the preacher cannot wait to use! They are like metric nuts on imperial bolts. Even that illustration may need to be jettisoned for an audience unfamiliar with imperial and metric measures. Some illustrations have to be discarded because they are too complex, or because they raise extraneous issues. Some may be heard as racist or sexist.

A related problem occurs when the preacher fails to give enough information to convey the truth being expressed. When doing a sermon review I will ask the preacher the purpose of an unclear illustration and will almost always get an apt reply. Generally speaking, however, this succinct response should have been included in the sermon. Unfortunately, because the preacher was so familiar with the truths they were seeking to communicate, not enough material was provided for the audience to grasp it. The preacher presumed it was clear. Of course there is a balance between providing too little information and providing too much. Too much information can mean an illustration loses its ongoing interest or mystery, as in an explained joke. But remember—you may have been pondering this illustration for some time, whereas for your audience, this is their first hearing. Audiences will also differ in terms of their insight and knowledge. In many cases, the preacher needs to have a clear summative line which can be repeated in order to drive the message home. James, for example, illustrates how a rich man is like a wild flower. He then summarises his point, ‘In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.’²⁸

Good illustrations lead the listener to *focus* on the truth being expressed, not its referent. It is all too easy for the referent to ‘take over.’ This is a real danger with personal illustrations, powerful stories and movie clips. Listeners enjoy and remember the illustration, but miss the truth being expressed. Even if they grasp the truth for a moment, it is often the referent that lingers. Again, a clear summative line, framed, for instance, as ‘Just as...so...’ will help the focus to move from the referent to the truth conveyed.

Nonetheless, while illustrations convey truth, they do not reduce it. They are not reductionist. When Flannery O’Connor was asked the point of one of her stories, apparently she replied, ‘If I could answer that, I wouldn’t have written the story.’²⁹ In other words, truth is *embedded* in the story. This is a difficult concept for Western minds trained in rational analytical thought to understand and work with. We keep wanting to

²⁸ James 1:11.

²⁹ Reference untraceable to date.

reduce the illustration or story to a set of propositions.³⁰ Yet it was not difficult for Jesus' listeners. They often all too quickly understood the truths being conveyed in his stories, parables and miracles, as the Pharisees' responses show.³¹ For more sympathetic listeners, these illustrations were internalised, becoming part of their individual and community heritage, memory and identity. The truth, in the form of illustration and story had become core, as illustration and story.

While illustrations convey truth, they simultaneously *amplify* it. Illustrations amplify the truth conveyed by referencing or resonating with other illustrations and by allowing, often even ensuring, that their words work at a number of layers of meaning. This is sometimes termed *multivalence*. Through this means, good illustrations will be exceptionally *evocative*. Listeners are not unused to this because they commonly experience multivalence in double-entendres, puns and word-plays, in advertising, humour, poetry and not least in children's media, which often has layers of meaning for adults embedded in it.

This multivalence is particularly pertinent to typology and the teaching of Biblical Theology. Jesus' illustrative use, for instance, of living water, bread, shepherd and blood references a vast array in his listeners' heritage, all of which contributes to his communicative purpose. He builds on this heritage, expressing it in fresh forms and adding to it, bringing rich new truths to it while at the same time giving fuller meaning to earlier references. Similarly, we understand Mary's song of praise at the annunciation far more deeply by understanding the stories of Sarah and Hannah from which she drew her inspiration. In the same way, the story of Jesus' rescue of his people touches us far more deeply when we understand how Joseph, David, Daniel and Esther also rescued their people. This is due to the nature of God's revelation. It is unified. It all proceeds from the same God, who is seeking out a relationship with his people. It is progressive and cumulative, with a clear pedagogical purpose, which is why it begins with that which is most accessible. Thus, the physicality of the land, covenant and temple in the Old Testament moves to the less material representation in the New. However, the Old is necessary to understand the New. Moreover, understanding the New helps us better understand the Old. Paul's illustrative use of 'circumcision of the heart' in Romans 2:29, for instance, helps us better to understand the nature of circumcision in the Old. Likewise, Jesus' use of Noah and Lot as illustrations of the coming judgement clarifies our understanding of the Genesis narratives.³²

Good illustrations are highly alert to the multiple references and layers of meaning contained therein. They must therefore be thoughtfully

³⁰ In many ways, this is yet another attempt to sit over, rather than under, the text.

³¹ See, for example, Luke 20:19.

³² Luke 17:26–33.

and carefully crafted. They will usually be the fruit of good time spent in exegesis and setting the text in the context of Biblical Theology. Interestingly, as preachers immerse themselves in the Scriptures, these multiple references and layers of meaning will often arise unconsciously. Care needs to be taken to ensure they are faithful to the text, and to ensure that they are not overwhelming, distracting or self-conscious. Often it is these multiple layers of referencing and meaning that serve as the meat in a sermon for the more mature listeners. Preachers who want to feed the mature will therefore work hard at this aspect of their sermons.

Good illustrations are *interesting*. There is something out of the ordinary in them. They catch. They are memorable. Who would have thought that the kingdom of God is like a man sowing, a mustard seed, yeast, buried treasure, a pearl, or a net? Yet all these illustrations occur in a single half-chapter!³³ Often they are something extraordinary happening in what is otherwise ordinary. Who would have thought that the kingdom of heaven is like a man sowing seed in a field that would later be sown with weeds?³⁴ To sow another man's field with weeds is extraordinarily nasty. It is premeditated. It takes time and planning. Who would have thought of Paul, that single older man, as a wet-nurse with a baby; or of the Laodiceans as luke-warm water about to be vomited?³⁵ Who would have thought that the poor widow who put in two very small copper coins 'put in more than all the others'³⁶ or that the tax-collector was justified? These last two illustrations both depend on *reversal*. They are the exact opposite of what we would expect. Similarly, illustrations can be made more interesting and effective through *escalation* as in: 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own?'³⁷ The parables of the talents and the seed in different soils are also classic examples of the same phenomenon.³⁸ Developing good illustrative homiletical practice therefore means developing the skill to locate the extraordinary in the ordinary and to know how to use it to convey truth. It also means developing the skills of identifying and using reversal and escalation.

³³ Matthew 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47.

³⁴ Matthew 13:25.

³⁵ 1 Thessalonians 2:7; Revelation 3:16.

³⁶ Luke 21:2–3.

³⁷ Matthew 7:3.

³⁸ For a more extensive discussion of narrative and its elements that contribute to engaging preaching, see Adrian Lane, 'Please! No More Boring Sermons: An Introduction to the Application of Narrative to Homiletics' in *Please! No More Boring Sermons' Preaching for Australians—Contemporary Insights and Practical Aspects* (ed. Keith Weller; Melbourne: Acorn, 2007), pp. 79–92. Also available at www.preaching.org.au

Good illustrations *engage*. They engage because they are interesting. They engage because they are pertinent. They engage by disturbing us, by ‘upsetting our equilibrium,’³⁹ by raising questions and getting ‘under our skin.’ They engage through creating tension, suspense and climax. They engage through good delivery. They engage by involving our *emotions*. We cannot wait to see how King David will react to Nathan’s courageous challenge by means of illustrative story, replete with escalation and reversal. We cannot wait to see what happens to the dishonest steward in the parable when his master discovers his duplicity. We cannot help but be seriously disturbed by Jesus’ frightening pictures of judgement, such as the pain of the rich man in Hades.⁴⁰ We cannot help but be encouraged by the triumphant picture of Christ reigning with his people in the new Jerusalem, as a bridegroom with his bride.⁴¹ Used by the Spirit of God, engaging illustrations convict, teach, warn and sustain.

Resourcing illustrations

Many illustrations naturally arise *out of the text*. As one exegetes the text and places it in its Biblical context, other illustrative material will arise. Use it! Some texts are so full of images, or their stories so powerful, that to seek further illustrative material is unnecessary. It may even distract or detract from the text’s power. An important aspect of illustrations that arise from the text is that they will interact with and illuminate other parts of the Bible.

However, illustrations do not need to be limited to those arising from the Bible and its context. God has given us a wonderful *imagination*. The prophets, Jesus and the apostles all made good use of what was ‘at hand,’ whether it be a mulberry tree, a temple treasury, or an altar ‘to an unknown God.’⁴² The *world* is full of illustration. Developing illustrative homiletical practice means developing the skill to use our imaginations and all in the world illustratively. Training as a preacher will in time mean a new perspective on the world. Many preachers find it helpful to develop some system for *recording* illustrative material as it arises as they go about their everyday life. This could be anything from a box of assorted papers one uses as a teaser file to an electronic resource with key words and themes bookmarked. Numerous collections of illustrations have been published and plenty are available online.⁴³ Be cautious, however,

³⁹ See Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form (Expanded Edition)* (Atlanta: John Knox, 2001), particularly pp. 28–38.

⁴⁰ Luke 16:19–31.

⁴¹ Revelation 21:1–4.

⁴² Luke 17:6; 21:1–4; Acts 17:24.

⁴³ See, for example, Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Timeless Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004); Craig Brian Larson and Phyllis Ten

in using the illustrations of others, as they can lack freshness. They can also be contextually-specific. Audiences may have heard them before, even more than once. The best use for published illustrations is to help to train preachers in developing illustrative practice. Generally, published illustrations are engaging, pithy and convey truth well. As you read them, ask yourself whether they are effective or not, and if they are, why!

Since illustrations use a referent to communicate truth, referents will need to *reflect and be consonant with the audience's world*. They must relate to men and women, young and old, active and sedentary, educated and uneducated, indoor and outdoor, the world of the arts and the world of the sciences—if these groups are reflected in your listeners. A classic mistake for preachers is to draw all their illustrations from their own world, whether it be the sporting, active, outdoor world of some, the domestic, relational world of others, or the ethical, political world of yet others. As a preacher, one needs to be attuned to the worlds of one's listeners, discerning their experience and how they communicate. Naturally this will mean participating in their worlds: their homes, their 'hangouts,' their workplaces. It will mean putting yourself in others' shoes: in the shoes of the salesperson working on commission, in the wheelchair of the nursing home resident, in the train with the student commuting to class. It will mean thinking through how to communicate Biblical truths in the vernacular: in language listeners understand, from a world they can relate to.

The freshest illustrations will arise from *personal* experience. Personal illustrations can also model the integration of the text with our own lives. However, preachers need to ensure that it is not they who become the focus, but God! Wisdom, perspective and balance are required here. An honest and transparent preacher is usually much appreciated by a congregation, as maturity and a healthy self-understanding in Christ is modelled. This sets a tone in a Christian community and helps build a healthy community. Nonetheless, there are appropriate limits to expressing honesty and transparency. Be careful not to feed an unhealthy voyeurism or curiosity unintentionally. The goal of the sermon has to be kept in mind. Will what is said be helpful, both in the present and in the longer-term? A sermon is a public address. With current technology it can be simultaneously available around the world and recorded for posterity. This new availability of sermons means that preachers now have to bear in mind a global audience who will be listening in very different contexts, geographically, temporally and culturally. When you share personal illustrations, listeners will think they know you. Some listeners will make assumptions based on the information you give that may be unhelpful for

one's ongoing ministry, not to mention the life of the congregation or the wider Christian community.

Be alert to ongoing issues in your own life. It may be your conditions of employment, a conflict, or grief. Be slow to use these as illustrations before sufficiently resolving and assessing the circumstances. Time and distance usually give greater perspective, whereas unresolved emotions such as anger or bitterness can skew or even sabotage an illustration. As in any relationship, there is an appropriate timeliness for the sharing of self as the relationship develops. Congregations will usually find it odd if you share deeply personal material early on, or if they learn about all the major events in your life in your first few sermons. Wait for the pertinent text and bring out your treasures with appropriate measure.

Many illustrations involve others, notably those with whom the preacher regularly interacts, such as family and church members. If your illustration identifies others, it is best if you can seek permission to use it. This shows respect, involves them in the preaching task and indicates your discretion and consideration. Asking is not always possible or appropriate. Remember the commands to 'show proper respect to everyone' and to 'honour one another above yourselves.'⁴⁴ Even if the illustration is in the public domain it may not be helpful to use it. It may be better to compose an analogous story. Always be alert, however, as to whom an audience may construe or presume is the subject of an illustration.

Using illustrations in a sermon

Writing out an illustration in full forces the preacher to discern what is essential to communicating its truth. It will help to crisp and sharpen it. If it is a longer illustration, such as a story, it will give the preacher a sense of its movement and length. Have the key words and themes been appropriately introduced, notably the multivalent words and themes? Is the language interesting and varied? Is the emotional flow engaging, yet sensitive? Is the truth clear? When it comes to preaching, however, the illustration must be so well-known that it can be spoken without notes. If a story has to be read, the preacher does not know it well enough. When preachers read personal stories it is especially bizarre—it comes across as though they cannot remember their own life! Longer illustrations will generally need to be signalled by a change of pace, mood, or introductory words. A useful technique is to reference an earlier illustration or story, adding new layers of meaning into the illustration as the sermon develops. This is what the Bible so effectively does with typology. Another useful technique is to delay the completion of an illustration. This assists engagement and gives opportunity for the discussion and amplification

⁴⁴ 1 Peter 2:17; Romans 12:10.

of key themes, so that the illustration's fulfilment is embedded with even greater meaning.

Preachers need to make it clear whether or not the illustrations they use are true. Never give the impression that a story is true unless it can be verified, because your integrity and that of your preaching ministry are at stake. I well remember a sermon where the preacher spoke about a conversation with a relative of his. Members of the congregation mentioned the story to the relative concerned, who unfortunately indicated that it was not true. The preacher immediately lost credibility and the leaders of the congregation found themselves having to address a serious pastoral problem. Yet all the preacher needed to say was, 'Imagine if...' or 'It would be like...'!

Similarly, limit the detail of an illustration to matters that you are certain about. Do not pretend to be an expert on things you know relatively little about. There will probably always be listeners who know more about football, Paris, geology, or whatever your referent is, than you do! In these cases, a mistake in the details will cause the knowledgeable listener to doubt the veracity of the rest of the sermon. On the other hand, inviting help from competent listeners about illustrations engages them in the sermon and often helps the preacher to strengthen the quality of the illustration.

Some preachers spend considerable time working hard to include humour in their sermon, in order to facilitate engagement. My experience is that a more efficient and generally safer approach is to allow humour to arise naturally out of one's illustrations. Many audiences appreciate preachers who tell stories 'against themselves,' who can laugh at themselves. I have a number of personal illustrations which I did not initially think of as humorous, such as the time my family home cracked apart as it slid down the hill because the underlying clay was wet and unstable, or when I rescued—naked—a drowning teenager. Congregations laughed at their telling, so I made greater use of their humorous aspects. However, I also had to work harder to ensure the truth in the illustration was not overshadowed by the story itself. An audience's response to humour varies with a great range of factors. Even if the humour is not outwardly acknowledged—there may simply be a smile on the inside—allowing humour to arise out of illustrations has the benefit that, even if it fails, the illustration remains pertinent and effective.

Illustrations almost always have an affective or emotional component. Be alert to their intensity. A few low-key illustrations from a range of worlds at the beginning of a sermon can serve well to gather, focus and motivate. Maintaining engagement after a particularly moving illustration is not easy. In this situation, changing the illustration's location to the climax of the sermon may be the way forward. Sometimes illustrations trigger strong emotional responses. Preachers need to be sensitive and

considerate in these circumstances, working hard to ‘read’ their audience’s response and stay in tune with the Spirit of God. The gospel will, of course, meet with a range of emotional responses. Preachers should not be surprised or afraid of this. Simultaneously, however, preachers need to ensure they are not manipulative, and that the affect communicated is congruent with the text.

There is a long and worthy tradition in preaching of the ‘jester’ role. Here the preacher says hard things by way of a lighter illustration or story. A key ingredient is irony. A good example is indeed Nathan’s story of the robbed peasant before King David.⁴⁵ But beware! This role requires spiritual discernment and skill. It can all too easily move into sarcasm, negativity or inverted pride. The true jester speaks with a holy fear, in deep love and honour. Jesting can unnecessarily offend and be easily misunderstood. The true jester seeks not to offend, but to be heard by respecting the listener, minimising confrontation, and speaking truth ‘with a slant.’^{46 47}

As preachers seek to be both faithful to the Scriptures and helpful to their congregations, it can sometimes feel overwhelming, even discouraging, given the high standards we set ourselves and the many factors involved in the task. Yet God promises to equip and mature us. Just as he is gloriously rich and wonderfully sophisticated, yet accessible to a child, so the use of illustration in preaching is both wonderfully sophisticated and accessible. One way forward to grow in your use of illustrations in preaching might be to take this article in sections and discuss it with a small group of colleagues. A prayerful humility and willingness to be used and taught by him will reap a harvest, beyond our imagining.⁴⁸

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⁴⁵ 2 Samuel 12:1–4.

⁴⁶ Tim Keller’s sermon, *David and Bathsheba* (23 August 2009) artfully expounds Nathan’s respect for David as Nathan adopts the jester role. Available at www.redeemer.com

⁴⁷ With reference to ‘Tell all the Truth but tell it slant,’ Emily Dickinson, Poem 1129 in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (ed. Thomas H. Johnson; Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1960).

⁴⁸ Luke 8:8; Ephesians 3:20.