



THE MYSTERY OF PREACHING, PART 2
ENCOUNTERING CHRIST IN THE PEW

Isaiah 66:1-2

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Thus says the Lord:

“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool;
what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?
All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be,
declares the Lord.

But this is the one to whom I will look:

he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

Introduction – What do you need to do to encounter Christ in the pew?

Last week I shared with you my growing conviction about preaching. It is this: preaching exists not simply to impart information to you about God or the Bible or the Christian life. No, preaching exists to enable you to encounter the living Christ.

I referred to this as the mystery of preaching and told you the story of the Scottish soldier who found himself in the presence of the mystery of preaching as he sat under the ministry of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Earlier this week I came across another great description of the mystery of preaching:

Through the miraculous presence of the Holy Spirit, the words of the preacher become in reality the living voice of Jesus Christ the risen Lord. Through the work of the Spirit, the simple, ordinary Sunday sermon is the conduit through which the eternal power and wisdom of Christ the exalted Lord of the entire cosmos are made manifest to every new age of the church. What the preacher says on Sunday morning, however fearfully and inadequately put into words, Jesus Christ himself now says in the church and for the world of today.¹

That is what I mean by the mystery of preaching. It is the words of the preacher becoming in reality the living voice of the risen Christ. The mystery of preaching is Jesus Christ present in the preaching because he has made the words of the preacher his very own and is now speaking in and through them.

¹ Paul C. McGlasson, *Invitation to Dogmatic Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), pp. 148-149.

Of course, the mystery of preaching places a responsibility on the preacher to do what he can to enable his listeners to encounter the living Christ. As a preacher, I must pray earnestly for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit; I must proclaim Christ with clarity and conviction in every message; I must pursue greater freedom in preaching; and I must focus our gaze unswervingly upon God.

That is what I must do, as the preacher, to enable you to encounter the living Christ from the pulpit. But that's only one side of the coin. There is another side, and it is what you must do, as the listener, to encounter the living Christ in the pew.

Last week I told you that is what we were going to look at today. And I am delighted to see so many of you have come back! But what do you need to do in order to encounter Christ in the pew?

1. You need to recognize the importance of the event of preaching itself.

One of the great benefits of the modern technology is the massive explosion of preaching that is available, not just in print form in books, but on the radio and on TV and online. Never has so much preaching been so readily available to so many for so little; it costs nothing or next to nothing and is often very easy to access.

But one of the disadvantages with this is that it tends to downplay in our minds the importance of the event of preaching itself. But more than that: it tends to make us think that the value of preaching is to be found in the content we can take away from preaching rather than in the encounter preaching itself enables. This downplaying of the event of preaching is then further reinforced by the widespread view that the most important aspect of any good sermon is its take away value: that is, the application. If there is nothing immediately relevant or practical I can use on Monday morning, then there is not much of value in the message.

Now, I must tell you that I disagree with that mindset almost entirely. Why? Because preaching exists not simply to impart information to you about God or the Bible or the Christian life. No, preaching exists to enable you to encounter the living Christ! The primary purpose of preaching is not to teach you helpful things that you can then apply to your life later on. No, the primary purpose of preaching is to enable you to worship Jesus Christ in the event of preaching itself—on the spot and in the pew.

So, then, what happens to you right now in the pew is more important than what you remember about the sermon later on this afternoon, or tomorrow, or next week. Because the main benefit of the sermon is not the application after the fact, but the transformation in the moment. It is not that what you remember of the sermon is unimportant. It is just that encountering Christ is more important than remembering content.

Besides, unless something happens to you in the event of preaching itself, remembering or even applying the content of the sermon later on will be, at best, only futile and short-lived, and, at worst, dangerous. Unless you are changed by the preaching itself, applying the teaching of the sermon to your life later on will either make you more self-righteous, because you are able to make the application work without a changed heart, or more despairing, because you are not able to make the application work and you cannot figure out why.

Let me illustrate what I am trying to say. Let us say you are having problems in your marriage. The wife resents her husband because he is too preoccupied with his work, and the husband despises his wife because she is not meeting his needs at home. Now, let me ask you:

How is that marriage going to change? What's going to affect transformation in that relationship? Three nicely alliterated principles on effective communication from, say, the Song of Solomon, together with an inspiring story of a marriage that was saved by coming to this church?

No, what is needed in that relationship is for both husband and wife to encounter the living Christ in the pew, and be gripped by the depth of their own sin, humbled by the mercy of God in the cross, and embolden by the new life that is ours in the Holy Spirit; so that they both go home repenting of their sin and reveling in the grace of God. That is what is needed! Repentance and faith, brokenness and humility, affection for Christ, worship in the pew—that is what you need when you come to church!

So what does this mean practically speaking for you in the pew? It means your presence here, in the pew, week to week, must be a priority. And it means that when you are here, you need to be all here.

It also means that while you're here, you should not worry as much about grasping the content of what is preached as receiving the life from what is preached. Listen to Martyn Lloyd-Jones on this point:

If I am preaching in the Spirit, as I pray God I am, I am not only uttering words to you, I am imparting life to you, I am being used of God as the channel of the Spirit and my words bring life and not merely knowledge. Do you accept that distinction? I am almost afraid sometimes for those of you who take notes, that you may just be getting the words and not the Spirit. I am not saying that you should not take notes, but I do warn you to be careful. Much more important than the words is the Spirit, the life; in Christ we are being taught, and built up in Him. So that in a sense, *though you may forget the words, you will have received the life*, and you go out aware of the life of God, as it were, pulsating within you.²

Receiving life through the preaching of the word of Life; encountering the living Christ in the pew. This is what preaching enables and why you must recognize the importance of the event of preaching itself.

2. You need to pray that the Holy Spirit would cause you to hear the voice of Christ in preaching.

Listen very carefully to what I am about to tell you: encountering Christ in the pew is not a given, but a gift. It is not something that just happens when you hear a sermon. Nor does your presence in the pew mean you will actually hear the voice of Christ.

It is also not enough for the preacher to communicate effectively. This does not guarantee you will hear the voice of Christ. Nor is it enough for the hearer to listen attentively: to not fall asleep, to take good notes, to follow the outline of the message, to say 'Amen' at all the right places. While helpful and much appreciated by the preacher, these things do not guarantee you will hear the voice of Christ either.

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity* (Studies in Ephesians; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), p. 114.

In order to hear the voice of Christ in the pew, there is something God must do. God must do something by the Holy Spirit. He must graciously enable you to hear.

This is the point of one of Jesus' most troubling sayings of all: "To him who has ears to hear, let him hear." Perhaps this has become almost cliché for some of you. But if you stop and really consider what Jesus is saying, it is both fascinating and frightening. In fact, it ought to trouble us a lot more than it does.

Why? Because by it our Lord is clearly saying that the hearing that is true hearing is not something we can do ourselves. It is only done by him who actually has ears to hear. And those ears to hear are a gift of grace.

Hearing the voice of God, then, is also not a given, but a gift. It is something God himself enables and allows through his Holy Spirit. This is why I pray for you the way the Apostle Paul prayed for believers:

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may *give you* a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, *having the eyes of your hearts enlightened*, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints (Eph. 1:15-18).

This is also why *you* must pray the way Augustine prayed, that you too, like him, might be enabled to hear the voice of Christ speaking to you:

Have pity on me and help me, O Lord my God. Tell me why you mean so much to me. *Whisper in my heart, I am here to save you.* Speak so that I may hear your words. My heart has ears ready to listen to you, Lord. Open them wide and *whisper in my heart, I am here to save you.* I shall hear your voice and make haste to clasp you to myself.³

Earlier in the service, we prayed a wonderful prayer in the song as we sang, "Speak O Lord." This ought to be your prayer each Sunday as you sit in the pew:

Speak, O Lord, as we come to You,
To receive the food of Your holy word.
Take Your truth, plant it deep in us;
Shape and fashion us in Your likeness,
That the light of Christ might be seen today,
In our acts of love and our deeds of faith.
Speak, O Lord, and fulfill in us all your purposes,
For Your glory.⁴

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I.5.

⁴ Stuart Townsend and Keith Getty, "Speak O Lord."

Practically speaking, then, let these three words be constantly on your lips as you listen to the preaching of the word of God: *Speak O Lord*. Let them be on your lips, and in your heart. Let them fill the silent spaces between every word you hear: *Speak O Lord*. And do not presume to think you will hear the voice of Christ without the enablement of the Holy Spirit. “To him who has ears, let him hear,” Jesus said. So we say in response: *Speak O Lord. And enable me to hear your voice by the power of your Holy Spirit.*

3. You need to surrender yourself over entirely to the sermon.

It’s been my experience that hearers of sermons, myself included, tend to view sermons as something we *use* rather than something we *receive*. It seems to me that we often see the sermon as something made for us, to be used by us, like a product; rather than as something addressed to us, to be received by us, like a voice.

Have you noticed how, in response to sermons, we tend to ask questions like, “Did you get anything out of that sermon?” Or, “What did you like about that message?” Or we say things like, “I had a hard time relating to that message.” Or, “I’m not sure I can apply that to my life.”

In other words, our tendency is to want to do things with the sermon, when what you ought to do is allow the sermon to do something to you. A sermon is something God owns by his grace and uses to speak to you. When it is empowered by the Holy Spirit, the sermon is God addressing you. And it is to be received as such.

This means surrendering yourself over entirely to the sermon; this means laying yourself open to sermon in the totality of what it is—and what it can do to you, not what you can do with it.⁵ This means resisting the temptation to insert yourself into or even over the sermon, but instead to listen and receive and get yourself out of the way.⁶ This means doing what the Thessalonians did when they heard Paul preach: “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess. 2:13).

This also means listening reverently and responsively; that is, you must listen worshipfully. There is great a danger in not viewing what you are doing right now as you listen as itself an act of worship. Listening is worship. In fact, it is one of the highest forms of worship. As Charles Spurgeon has rightly said:

. . . rightly to listen to the gospel is one of the noblest parts of the adoration of the Most High. It is a mental exercise, when rightly performed, in which all the faculties of the spiritual man are called into devotional action. Reverently hearing the word exercises our humility, instructs our faith, irradiates us with joy, inflames us with love, inspires us with zeal, and lifts us up towards heaven.⁷

So, practically speaking, then, do not let the first word out of your mouth after the close of the service be something inane or pedestrian like, “Hey, I’m starving. Want to go to lunch?” Or, “Honey, would you get the car and I’ll grab the kids.” In fact, just pause and pray. Linger for a

⁵ This paragraph is indebted to comments by C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, pp. 16-17.

⁶ This paragraph is similarly indebted to comments by Lewis, *Experiment*, p. 19.

⁷ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, p. 53.

while over the sermon. Ask the Lord to continue to speak to you, to impress something specific upon your heart.

By listening rightly to the word preached, by surrendering yourself over entirely to the sermon, you will find that you more consistently encounter the living Christ and thus spontaneously worship in your pew.

4. You need to anticipate an encounter with the living Christ all week.

One of the great threats to encountering the living Christ in the pew is coming to church without any sense of anticipation. You are far less likely to encounter the living Christ in the pew if you are not anticipating an encounter with him all week.

But let me tell you that one of the great threats to coming to church with anticipation, is coming to church full rather than hungry. Yet, I fear many of us come to church to serve God out of our fullness, rather than to be served by God in our emptiness.

Do not come to church to serve God, as though he needed anything from you. “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:24-25).

Instead, come to church to allow God to serve you as though you needed everything—because you do. Come to church to sing and pray and listen to a sermon not out of your fullness, but out of your emptiness. For God is glorified more by emptiness than fullness. Because a full vessel cannot be filled; but an empty vessel is a delight to the Fountain of Delights.

If you are going to encounter the living Christ in the pew, you need to come to church hungry. You need to come to church not merely to learn about Christ, but to feed upon Him.

O that we would all anticipate and even long to go to the house of God to be together with the people of God to hear the voice of God and enjoy the presence of God! O that we would long for this like the psalmist did:

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival (Psalm 42:1-4).

This is the kind of hungering that creates longing, and the kind of longing that builds anticipation—which is just what you need, if you’re going to encounter the living Christ in the pew.

Practically speaking, how do we anticipate an encounter with Christ all week? One thing you can do is to make practical adjustments in the way you approach your Sundays. I fear that for many Sunday is an afterthought at the end of a busy and tiring week. So let me challenge you to be, first of all, more intentional about building your entire week around the Lord’s Day and worship with God’s people. For example, why not begin tomorrow preparing your heart for next week’s message by meditating all week on the passage to be preached?

Let me challenge you also to be more intentional about what you do with your Saturdays, especially Saturday night. You cannot gallivant around on Saturday night and then expect to come to church hungry on Sunday morning. It simply will not happen! Nor can you stuff yourself with a thousand trivialities on Saturday night, and expect to be in a frame of mind to feed upon the living Christ on Sunday morning.

Let me, finally, challenge you to be more intentional about what you do with your Sunday mornings. Do not use Sunday as a time to sleep in. Do that on Saturday. Instead, use Sunday morning to prepare your heart for corporate worship and the word. Go to bed at a reasonable time, so that you can get up in good time, and so that you can have time to read the word of God and to pray, to eat with the family and pray with them as well; and, to get ready and make it to church in a way and at a pace that does not end up ruining the entire morning. In other words, avoid rushing.

I trust you know that great spiritual, “Soon And Very Soon.” It goes like this:

Soon and very soon we are going to see the King
Soon and very soon we are going to see the King
Soon and very soon we are going to see the King
Hallelujah, Hallelujah, we're going to see the King

That ought to be your song on Monday morning, as you anticipate seeing King Jesus in corporate worship, encountering the living Christ in preaching.

Conclusion – What might God be pleased to do if we encounter Christ from the pulpit and in the pew?

Encountering the living Christ from the pulpit and in the pew—that is the mystery of preaching! And it requires something from me, as the preacher, and something from you, as the listener.

But what might God be pleased to do if we encounter Christ from the pulpit and in the pew? The honest answer is: I don't know. God is God and is therefore completely free to do what he wants, when he wants, and in the way he wants. “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Psalm 115:3).

But I can say this, in light of the evidence of church history: it would appear that God delights to use the mystery of preaching to accomplish three things.

First, renewal: Throughout the history of the church God has used anointed preaching to accomplish genuine *renewal* among his people. So I am praying for renewal in each of our lives and in the life of our church. I think we are beginning to see little trickles of renewal here and there, but I want to see the dam break and a great cleansing work of the Spirit take hold in hundreds of hearts.

Second, conversion: The conversion of those who are here, young and old, and those who are not; the conversion of those who know they are not Christians, and the conversion of those who thought they were Christians.

And, thirdly, revival: Revival is renewal and conversion on a large scale. Revival is something that would begin in our church and spill over into our community and beyond. Revival is real. And revival is possible.

The image I have in my mind is a thousand little tributaries separated from one another by some distance; they would otherwise appear to be unrelated. But from God's perspective, they are not. And they are moving under the sovereign hand of God in the same direction; they are flowing ultimately into the same place. And that place is a river: a mighty river called Revival.

O, what God might be pleased to do should Jesus Christ be encountered in the pulpit and in the pew! May it happen, Lord Jesus, by your grace and for your glory.

Amen.

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