

Column – Staying awake during sermons

Since its inception on the day of Pentecost 2000 years ago, the Christian Church has been remarkably resilient. Despite heresies and divisions and personalities, she has maintained and expanded her presence. The “faith once delivered to the saints” has never grown stale or lost its power to change hearts and lives.

Wherever the sun is in the sky, people on every continent are lifting voices of praise and prayer. The prayer Jesus taught his disciples is never silent. The sacraments Jesus instituted – Baptism and the Supper of the Lord – continue to be observed.

Finally, preaching persists, both in the form of announcing Jesus as the promised Messiah and world’s true lord and summoning men to faith and obedience and in the form of instruction to those who are already believers. Peter delivered a sermon of the first sort on the Day of Pentecost, while an example of the second can be found in Acts 20:7-12 where Paul’s teaching went on so long that a young man by the name of Eutychus fell out of a window

and was taken for dead. Fortunately, Paul was able to revive him.

That reminds me . . . I once had an older lady in my congregation who slept through every sermon I preached. Happily, though, instead of falling out a window, she would on occasion droop her head onto the shoulder of a stranger. I always said she needed the sleep more than the sermon, as she served on many boards, did volunteer work and was taking college classes.

With that said, preaching is part of the legacy Christians have received from the early Church. Much responsibility falls on the preacher. Sermons should challenge and stir the congregation to faith and action by bringing the eternal truths found in the Bible down to life in the present. To be relevant, the preacher must always be crossing the bridge between the ancient world and the modern world, to quote the late John Stott.

If those who give sermons have a responsibility, so do those who hear them. There are, in fact, some

things the hearers of sermons can do to get more out of them. These include:

-- Believe God has something to say to you. Many things divert the listener's attention away from the message of the sermon, including the preacher's voice and manner or style of delivery. One's own pre-occupations with work, family or what's for lunch may also raise a barrier. Nevertheless, every effort should be made not to let such things interfere with receiving God's message. A spirit of expectation must be maintained.

-- Work out at least one point or thought to take away. Usually, in sermons there is an over-arching theme with a few sub-points. The Holy Spirit will often point out different things to different people. Let this divine Person do His work in your life.

-- Turn the point of the sermon into a prayer and a commitment. The primary thought should not be whether I enjoyed (or did not enjoy) what the preacher had to say, but rather, what am I going to do about it. Pray for wisdom and strength to carry out what the Holy Spirit has revealed to you.

-- Talk over what the preacher had to say with others. If you are listening via the Internet, this may be members of your own household. If you have children, be sure to involve them in the conversation. In so doing, the message of the sermon will be clarified and strengthened.

In Mark 1:14, we read that "Jesus came preaching." Preaching is of singular importance. By it the faithful are strengthened, while the indifferent are stirred to commitment. Both those who preach and those who listen must be active participants. Whichever side the pulpit you find yourself on, resolve to do your part!

Almighty God, who pourest out on all who desire it, the spirit of grace and of supplication; Deliver us, when we draw nigh to thee, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with stedfast thoughts and kindled affections, we may worship thee in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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