

There are two things you need to be certain of if you have been sent to tell somebody something. 1) That you have the person's full attention before you start holding forth and 2) You deliver your message in the clearest way possible.

Imagine that you're at the church May Fair and you have been given an urgent message to deliver to the new curate. What you absolutely don't do is sidle up to the curate who is somewhat distracted being told for the twentieth time the tale of what Leigh on Sea was like before the coming of electric light. You don't sidle up to him and blurt out the following message:

'Quick Father, they need you outside now! The Brownies are about to start pole dancing'.

The curate has not been in Essex more than a year, he's still finding his way amidst the culture shock of nail bars and spray tanning parlours AND he's been exposed to every Essex Girl joke known to humanity as soon as it was known he was to be sent to an Estuary parish.

How was I to know that nothing more alarming would greet me outside than little girls holding ribbons dancing excitedly round a maypole to the wheeze of an out of tune accordion? All innocent fun, nothing, as far as I know, like pole-dancing of the other variety and no doubt good training for dancing round handbags in a nightclub in later life.

So. If you need to deliver as message? Get their attention first; then make it clear.

There is generally more time allowed for a preacher to prepare to deliver his message than the poor May Fair errand-boy, but the principles are remarkably the same: Get their attention; make it clear.

Easy in principle, not so straightforward in practice, because invariably what a preacher is trying to do is to break open the meaning of that great gift of God's to his people, the Holy Scriptures.

The Bible, inspired by God, great; but, here's the downside written by humans. We all know what humans are like. Slow on the uptake, slow to understand, takes time to get through. You know this is true. Have you ever made a mistake? Ever done a typo? Ever found yourself not quite paying attention? We all know what humans are like. Each time those Scriptures have been copied, each time they are translated into a new language- because not many people in the world are native speakers of Hebrew, Aramaic or New Testament Greek- each time the murkiness multiplies. So despite the confidence with which the Bible is usually brandished, it isn't always crystal clear what the message it might be delivering actually is. So there are endless arguments over the meaning of our scriptures, sometimes over single words. That might sound petty were it not, sometimes, that words can lead to sticks and stones and then become quite literally, a matter of life and death.

Do not despair though, humble Bible readers. Yes, we would be wise to pause before making real-world arguments based on single words but we can still approach the scriptures with something like trust and certainty– if we lean back to look at bigger picture. Pretend you have the eyes of a 54 year old.

And if we lean back for our butchers, we will see that happily the Scriptures are not a series of single words sitting in splendid isolation atop gilded marble pedestals, but words joining together, bumping up against each other on the pages, jostling and tripping and tumbling, running apart and running around; corralled together, joking and arguing in a mad maelstrom of chapters and verses, sentences and phrases. When we see that, and step back to take the bigger perspective, we can see that certain messages run through our Holy writings like the nerves in our bodies, jolting, stimulating, guiding, directing.

If we're not taking the wider perspective and are just counting words, we might think that the most common theme of the Bible is something like 'Thou shalt not', but, that's because we would be counting the bricks and not looking at the building.

Love God, love your neighbour is the Bible in five words, but sometimes, day by day, we need to zoom in just a touch closer and the thread we might best draw out today is one of God's favourites, or at least I assume it is as He or his messengers seem to be saying it rather a lot in the Scriptures.

'Do not be afraid'

To the prophets in their visions, to the shepherds on the hillside; to Abraham in his tent; to Mary in her room; to the disciples in hiding and to Joseph in his dreams, God sends out the same message: Do not be afraid.

Good message.

Fear is strong, an emotion it is next to impossible to ignore. Perhaps love is stronger but it burns more slowly, it is rarely as immediate as fear. Nothing in love's repertoire resembles fear's party piece, panic. Fear is also a deep emotional response. No doubt the biologists can trace it back to the most primitive times in our ancestry. Not the 1970s, but back when we were fish or frogs or apes. Fear is highly unpleasant, and fear is in our DNA.

So how wonderful it is that when God speaks to his people, when God speaks to us, so often the very first words he says are 'Do not be afraid.'

On this this first Sunday of Advent, in this year of all years, these are words we need to hear. Advent certainly scares me. I don't mean the prospect of all the fretting and hassle and stress that preparing for Christmas seems to entail. That doesn't scare me, it just exhausts me before we've even started.

What scares me is what the Church will be trying to talk about over the next four weeks to anyone who can hear above the cacophony of Slade and Cliff Richard.

It might seem a bit strange, but that at the start of the Christian year the church is busy talking about the end. Not the end of the year, but THE END. That's the all-singing, all-dancing Twentieth Century Fox Busby Berkeley extravaganza E-N-D end. Though this show is the scary tripel 'X' rated director's cut. That's what Advent is inviting us to think about: the four last things, death, judgement, heaven and hell. Each and every one of us will face three of those four things, of that we can be certain. And if death, judgement, heaven and hell don't scare you, I guess nothing will.

So. Advent. We stand here on this cusp of time looking forward to the time when Christ will come again in glory; looking backwards to his first coming among us at his Nativity, and we need to hear loud and clear the words that will be spoken at the first Christmas, to Mary, to Joseph, to Zechariah, to the shepherds tending their flocks: do not be afraid.

Two thousand and twenty years or so later and the world is still haggard with worries, fretting with fears, torn with anxiety; and God is still speaking that message to any who can hear: do not be afraid.

Why should we not be afraid? One word. A most human of words: a name. Jesus' AKA. Emmanuel. God is with us. Do not be afraid. God is with us.

Death, judgement, heaven and hell. God is with us. Be careful. Be cautious. Kepp safe.

But do not be afraid.