

All told, the sermon is not the most experimental form of communication; any medium where using Powerpoint slides is considered cutting edge and grounds to complain to the bishop can hardly claim the artistic avant garde.

Partly the medium is limited by where it is delivered and when: definitely no swearing allowed or anything too anatomical, no more than 10 minutes in length because 10 minutes is about the maximum amount of time anyone can effectively pretend that they're not bored to tears. Partly, the medium itself is limited and that discourages experimentation: it's not a conversation, it's not often interactive, something we can be involved in in that way, it's just one person talking and although you might think 'that's just like the TV' it's not, because at least on the TV they don't show the same picture for 10 minutes and if it's prime time ITV those 600 seconds will be broken up with at least two ad breaks. This is why almost all preachers will try to get your attention straight away, because if they lose you in the first minute, they won't get you back in the remaining nine. Hence why so many sermons start with a humorous anecdote or even a joke. You may have noticed.

Now there are only so many sardonic, sarcastic, satirical or farcical observations that can be mined from any one life, and neither my dog nor my in laws have done anything out of the ordinary stupid this past week, I'm going to fall back today on the not long ended Edinburgh Fringe and a selection of what the critics have voted as this year's 15 best jokes. Not relevant at all, but might be funny. Here goes.

I hate all change.

But he hesitated.

We're no good at naming things in our house.

'Oh my God, me neither!'

I don't want to do it.

You're not laughing, not even a nervous titter, and that's not because I have atrocious timing, or the sound system is playing silly again or even because I'm not nearly as funny as I think I am- they're not my jokes so that can't be the reason. You're not chortling because there are certain principles that have to be followed for any communication to be effective, certain principles that have to be followed for comedy to work and one of the most basic is that if you want people to laugh you can't just give them the punch line, you need the run up as well. It may be the punchline where people do laugh, but that's only because they've been prepared by the preamble. And of course what I read you this morning was the punchlines to some of the Fringe's funniest jokes. If you promise to listen to the end, I'll match them with their preambles. Then you can laugh.

When life's not a tragedy it's usually a comedy and the principles behind the effective joke telling spread through all of human communication- you need to follow the conventions people expect if they are to understand what you want them to.

Like if you want to share the good news of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of heaven and the salvation of humanity. With your fellow commuters. On a rush hour train in Wimbledon. It's a strange thing to want to do, but there are probably ways to do it if you put your mind to it. There are, however, definitely ways *not* to do it. You'll know that if you've been following the local news this last couple of weeks.

'Wimbledon station commuters flee train in 'Bible' panic' was the headline on 2nd October and what happened was that some would-be evangelist hopped on the train, opened his Bible and started telling his co-commuters that God disapproved of equal marriage and adultery, though I can't imagine there's much of that kind of thing goes on in the morning rush hour in Wimbledon except in the imagination of someone who's been to too many gospel hall meetings. After denouncing sinners he went on to note that death is not the end and to talk about the judgement to come. At this point the passengers self-evacuated the train, spilling onto the tracks and causing delays to the Southern railways that lasted the best part of the day. Though to be fair, that also happens when a leaf

to falls wrong side up on the track, the station manager sneezes too loudly or a butterfly lands on a sleeper.

Anyway, stopping the train and running onto the rails, rather than, say than tutting and hiding behind your newspaper or perhaps moving into the next carriage is, I'm sure you will agree, a somewhat OTT response to being stuck in a carriage with a brother from the swivelled-eyed side of the faith. If it is extreme, it is, however, not inexplicable. In a way not really seen in this country since the Civil war, religion scares people. Some of this must be because fewer and fewer people have any kind of clue what religion means, and what they do know is garnered from the news media which by their nature only ever show the extreme sides of piety, and, it has to be admitted there are quite a few of those.

Fear is not just, however, because people are ignorant of the realities of faith and could, in theory at least, be educated out of it. Like most things where people are involved, it takes two, and Bible panic is also very much the fault of people of faith. Because there is a certain approach to religious discourse that sees it basically as a one-way conversation. At its most benign (until last week anyway) it's an eccentric standing on a street corner with a megaphone or muttering on a train; at it's most malign it's some deluded idiot blowing themselves up on a train which, of course, what must have been foremost in people's minds as they panicked a couple of Mondays ago.

The one way shouting street is self-defeating if you want to tell people about God and your faith is the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible for the simple reason that experience tells us that that shouting at people seldom works and shouting the Bible at them never does.

The Bible is a special book: it is near the heart of all Christian belief, but in this sort of scenario we can be guilty of treating it like it is a sort of magic book: all you need to do is stand up and read out its spells, or print them on a poster or on the side of a bus and the miracles will happen. Except. Except they don't, because the only people who pay attention to someone reading out Bible verses are people who already respect the Scriptures and they are, by

definition not the people you are trying to reach. The speech that is big chunks of Bible quotes is a sermon you can only preach to the converted. Nobody who doesn't already believe is going to be impressed because we say something is in the Bible anymore than we're going to be impressed if we're told something is written in the Analects of Confucius, the Baghavad Gita or the Tibetan Book of the Dead. A book is only a book unless you already believe.

And yet, if your faith is the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible, you might, for the very best of motives, be tempted to keep up that one-way shouty conversation, because it's easy to read the Bible and think that that is God's preferred means of communication.

Why? Because speeches in the Bible are almost always one way: rarely do you get to hear the question; never do you hear anyone arguing back. Yet if you've ever had a discussion with someone else about religion you know that what doesn't happen is someone asks one question and then shuts up when its answered. Of course, the Scriptures are there to convey the important points of the faith and they do that by remembering the smart answers and the killer arguments not by being a faithful record of hours of conversational argie barginy. That process still happened. The Bible may not report the hours of to-ing and fro-ing, the years of pondering the deeper meaning, the glacially slow realisation over the centuries that there's a lot more going on than meets the eye and that lot more is called God. The Bible has surface, but it also has depth, real depth. If you just take the Bible at face value, not only is your view often unhelpfully two-dimensional, very often what you end up with is all the punchlines and none of the lead up. Which means you will never get the joke, which, in the end, is rather defeating the point.

Here's the is the point. Nobody ever came to faith by being shouted at, on a train in Wimbledon or anywhere else. They might sometimes be persuaded by an intellectual argument, more commonly some indefinable but definite emotional rightness, but what lets people know there is something behind your claims, something very real behind those words is when they can see the sort of person you *are*. It really matters not what your beliefs make you say. It barely

matters what you faith makes you do. What does make a difference is how your faith has transformed the person you *are*.

The Christian faith is not about a book, or a set of things to do or not to do; it is not a creed of statements to assent to; the Christian faith is a person. Jesus. Which in the end is why it ain't what you do. It ain't how you do it. It's how you are. A person trying to be like Jesus. Failing most of the time perhaps, but still trying. Which pretty much wraps it up for today. As I promised, here are the punchlines, with the bits in front. Finally, we can get the joke

I like to imagine the guy who invented the umbrella was going to call it the 'brella'. But he hesitated.

I have two boys, 5 and 6. We're no good at naming things in our house.

Whenever someone says, 'I don't believe in coincidences.' I say, 'Oh my God, me neither!'

For me dying is a lot like going camping. I don't want to do it.

I'm not a fan of the new pound coin, but then again, I hate all change.