

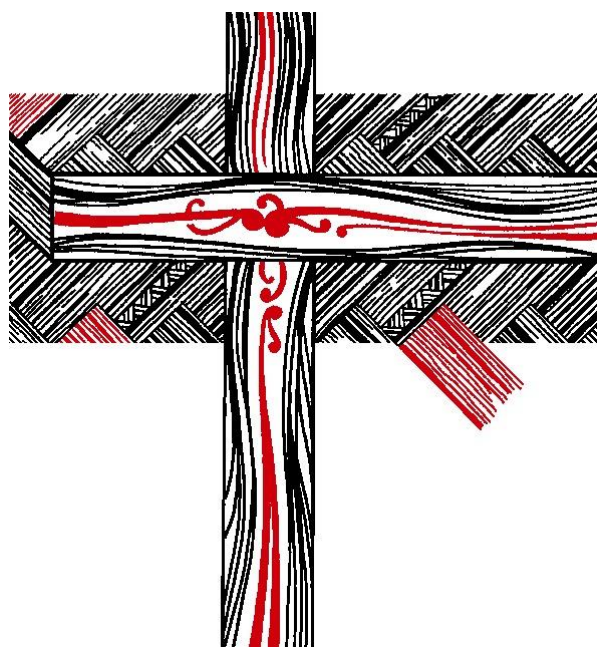
## BREAKING OPEN THE WORD (THE SERMON)

If you wonder what the 'the intersection of the sacramental and kerygmatic axes,' mentioned previously, is, it is the point in a church where a line drawn at 90° from the centre of the altar intersects with a line drawn at 90° from the face of the pulpit. A pulpit should not face up the length of a church but diagonally across the body of the people, so word and sacrament intersect. At the point of that intersection it is as if the 'Word-made-flesh' in scripture and the 'Word-made-flesh' in sacrament become one, and 'dwells among us, full of grace and truth'. For those of us who like a gospel procession, that is where the Book of the Gospels should be opened: Word, meet Sacrament (and do so in the midst of humans).

Many architects have forgotten this, over the years, but the older ones knew their stuff. It is a powerful symbol of the ways by which we can begin to get matters right in our faith: word, sacrament, an eternal dance.

But what is a sermon? As a form of intellectual instruction even the best sermons are largely ineffective. Studies show we rarely absorb more than five minutes of speech, and lectures

without note-taking disappear into the ether. Other studies suggest that only about 10% of oral communication is retained by the recipient, and about 20% of written communication (this document). Combine the two and it becomes 80% retainable. Multi-media approaches to preaching are clearly effective, though my own approach is simply to float ideas, tantalize, raise questions. If a sermon succeeds in that



then it is 'a word on target'. Perhaps data-projection *is* an answer, but it's not suited to all architectural contexts.

I am incidentally often amazed by those post-sermon conversations, when a former listener tells the preacher 'I love the point you made about ... such and



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such.’ As a preacher I will be surprised often by the points I’ve allegedly made – but that is the extra dimension. Who knows what that mysterious Third Person of the Trinity will do with the words we cast out in the midst of the people She enflames?



A sermon should always make connections between ancient scripture and contemporary society. To do less than that is to sell the gospel short. Karl Barth spoke of preparing a sermon with bible in one hand, newspaper in the other. In an age of keyboards and internet we might fine-tune the image, but his case still stands. What use is a sermon if it does not bring the piercing insight of scripture to the weighty troubles of the day? That too is the task of the Spirit.

The pain of dwindling markets, the fears of a dying planet, the vagaries of international politics, youth suicide, loneliness, substance abuse. Styles of sermon change (exegetical, exhortative, extempore, and other big and potentially meaningless words are applied!) but those ingredients, bible and news, should not be negotiable.



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