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First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Kevin Mayhew Ltd
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9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

ISBN 978 1 84867 784 5
Catalogue No. 1501480

Cover design by Rob Mortonson
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Illustrations by Steve English
Typeset by Angela Selfe

Printed and bound in Great Britain

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About the author

Brought up in Southend-in-Sea, Essex, Nick Fawcett trained for the Baptist ministry at Bristol and Oxford, before serving churches in Lancashire and Cheltenham. He subsequently spent three years as a chaplain with the Christian movement Toc H, before focusing on writing and editing, which he continues with today, despite wrestling with myeloma, a currently incurable cancer of the bone marrow. He lives with his wife, Deborah, and two children – Samuel and Kate – in Wellington, Somerset, worshipping, when able, at the local Anglican church. A keen walker, he delights in the beauty of the Somerset and Devon countryside around his home, his numerous books owing much to the inspiration he unfailingly finds there.

Nick has had over 130 books published by Kevin Mayhew. For further details, please refer to our website: www.kevinmayhew.com

Introduction

I will never forget the day at Bristol College when I received the orders of service prior to my first preaching engagement and saw leaping out at me two words: Children's Talk. Clearly this was viewed as an integral part of the service, but what exactly was expected of me, still less how I could deliver it, I had no idea. My experience in talking to children was, to say the least, limited, and there was little I had learned up to that point which had prepared me for the task. Had I but known it, no formal training was to be offered in this field anyway, the learning process essentially consisting of being thrown in at the deep end.

I squirm with embarrassment when I look back on some of the early 'children's talks' I delivered, the content simplistic if not down-right patronising. Numerous congregations must have exercised enormous patience as slowly I developed my technique at their expense. Yet, strangely, the person who taught me more about the art of successful communication than anyone else was not a member of any single congregation, nor one of my college tutors, but an elocutionist I saw for a few brief sessions during my time at Bristol College. His advice consisted of three simple tips:

- always begin by asking a question or using an illustration that involves your audience in what you are saying;
- always end with a simple challenge or question that puts in a nut-shell everything you have been trying to say;
- keep the middle short, simple and to the point.

In every address I have given since then I have kept that advice in mind, not following it slavishly but attempting to apply the essential principles whenever possible. They have stood me in good stead. While I have never considered myself a particularly gifted preacher, still less a natural

communicator, the talks I have given throughout my ministry seem generally to have been well received. Why? Partly perhaps because my talks were always short, but most of all, I believe, because listeners could always find something to relate to.

Having said that, every talk is different. The style of a sermon is quite unlike that of a lecture – at least it should be! The style of a wedding address is nothing like that of a funeral oration. Similarly, the style of a children’s talk – or family talk, as I prefer to call it – is totally different again. When young people are present in church you are immediately talking to a wide age-range, spanning two, three or even four generations. It is essential not to talk down to children, and equally important that adults get something more from the talk than a pleasant sense of indulgence. This is all the more important if my suspicion is correct that many adults actually prefer listening to a family-type talk than a sermon, the latter often being pitched so far over their heads that their thoughts soon wander to such matters as the state of their Sunday lunch or yesterday’s football results!

So what makes a successful family talk? There is no one answer to that, but for me the following are all vital ingredients:

- an element of fun
- appropriate visual aids
- ‘audience’ participation
- all-age relevance
- brief applications
- thorough preparation
- attractive presentation.

Let me deal with each of these in turn.

Fun

With any audience a little light-heartedness goes a long way towards establishing a rapport. When talking to young people this becomes all the more essential, as there are so many other attractions in our society competing for their time. Too often I have

attended services in which the ‘talk to the children’ is little more than a mini (or not so mini) sermon, and the ineffectiveness of this approach has been eloquently testified to by scarcely suppressed expressions of boredom. Not only do such talks fail to get the message across but, far worse, they effectively drive young people away from our churches.

Visual Aids

My own preference has always been to include some sort of visual aid in a talk, even if this is simply key words stuck to a board. Indeed, words and words games, as you will see, figure prominently throughout this book. It is a fact that what we see stays in our minds far longer than what we simply hear.

Audience Participation

Young people (and many older ones too) like to be involved in a ‘learning process’ rather than simply being talked to. Games, word-searches, quizzes and other such forms of participation offer an effective way of including the congregation in what you are saying. We need to promote an atmosphere in which people feel part of what is going on.

All-age Relevance

As I have said already, many adults are actually far more receptive to a talk geared towards a younger audience than they are to a sermon. Many also enjoy participation as much as children, if not more so! Even if this were not the case, we owe it to any congregation to ensure that a talk is able both to stimulate and challenge.

Brief Applications

I have always believed that the secret of a successful family talk is to keep the application – the serious bit at the end – as short and simple as possible. Ideally, the message you are looking to put across (and this ought to be one message, not several)

should speak for itself through the illustrations and visual aids you use, though some expansion of what this means is usually necessary. Overdo the application and you will pay the price. Which of us hasn't witnessed the sudden glazed looks the moment the 'religious' part of a talk is reached. Whatever you do, don't try and ram the point home; if you haven't made the point through the fun part of your talk, you won't make it afterwards.

Thorough Preparation

There is no getting away from it: talking to young people takes time. There were many occasions during my ministry when I spent longer preparing a single family talk (even one lasting a mere five minutes) than two full-length sermons. In this book I have attempted to do most of the spadework for you through suggesting ideas and ways of presenting these, but to deliver most of the talks you will still need to spend some time in preparation. Don't be put off by this. The effort may occasionally seem out of proportion to the time taken up by the talk during the service, but I believe the results will more than justify it. What you put in, you will get out.

Attractive Presentation

In this sophisticated age, young people as much as adults are used to slick, glossy and professional presentations. While we cannot emulate these, it is important for visual material to be as clear and well presented as possible. Home computers and modern technology make this far easier to achieve than it once was, as well as saving huge amounts of time. While material can be written out by hand (for many of these talks I did just that), I would strongly recommend the use of a PC word-processing package if possible. When it comes to displaying material, my own preference, arrived at after several years of trial and error, was to use a magnetic whiteboard in conjunction with magnetic tape

(available through most office stationery suppliers), with the back-up of a second whiteboard (magnetic or otherwise) and sticky tack. If you choose this method, you will need easels for these, as light and portable as possible. A supply of thick coloured marker pens (in washable and permanent ink) is a must for many talks, as is a copious supply of thin card and/or paper. Many of the talks nowadays could be delivered using an overhead projector and screen if this is preferred to board and easel. Adapt to your available resources. On a purely practical note, make use of a radio microphone if this is available. Family talks often involve a degree of movement, and it is all too easy to stray from a standing microphone so that you become inaudible, or, worse still, to trip headlong over the wires of a halterneck model! (The younger members of the congregation will delight in this, but for you it can prove embarrassing and even dangerous.) Each talk in this collection is set out according to a basic framework:

- a suggested Bible passage which should normally be read publicly prior to the talk
- a statement of the aim of the talk
- details of preparation needed beforehand
- the talk itself.

This last section includes instructions relating, for example, to the use of illustrations, together with a suggested application of the talk. The talks will work best if, having read and digested these paragraphs, you present them in your own words. This is particularly true where the congregation is invited to respond, and developing and incorporating their ideas and answers into the talk will require a measure of ad-libbing on your part.

Each of the talks in this booklet was used in public worship during my time in the ministry. No doubt many are flawed in places and could be considerably improved – I do not offer them as examples of how it should be done, but rather as a resource which may be of help to you. Of all the

comments received during my ministry, few have gratified me more than those when young people have referred in conversation to talks I delivered three, four, even five years back. Whether they remembered the point I had been making I cannot say, but, whatever else, they clearly enjoyed being in church and carried away positive associations of their time there. That in itself was always sufficient motivation to spend further time and energy devoted to getting the message across.

Nick Fawcett

LENT

Don't Waste It

Reading Luke 12:42-48

Aim This talk, designed for Shrove Tuesday (so, strictly speaking, outside of Lent), picks up and enlarges on the significance of making pancakes, asking what lessons this tradition might have for us today.

Preparation Make three pancake shapes out of modelling clay, Plasticene or playdough, and then, using more modelling clay of another colour, mould some letters to spell out RESOURCES, GIFTS and LENT. Press these down (making one word for each) into the 'pancakes'. Place the two 'pancakes' labelled GIFTS and LENT into a large mixing bowl and the one labelled RESOURCES into a frying pan, word facing downwards. Position the mixing bowl and frying pan on a table at the front of the church. Conceal a box of eggs, a pint of milk, a bag of flour, a container of salt and a pat of butter somewhere around the church.

Talk Depending on the time/day of the service/talk, ask how many people had or will be having pancakes today/this week. Ask if anyone can tell you why pancakes are traditionally eaten on Shrove Tuesday. Explain that pancake-making is a particularly English tradition, originally started to use up stocks of fat, butter and eggs, which, along with meat (not used in pancakes!), were all foods forbidden during the period of Lent, when Christians traditionally fasted to mark the 40 days Jesus fasted in the wilderness before facing temptation. These food items would not keep for 40 days, but poor people particularly couldn't afford to waste precious provisions, so they used them up in the pancakes, enjoying something of a feast in doing so.

In some places, Pancake Day races are still held, such as in the Buckinghamshire town of Olney, where races have taken place ever since 1445, when,

so the story goes, a woman was cooking pancakes and, hearing the church shriving-bell summoning people to confession, rushed to church in her apron, still clutching hold of her frying pan.

Ask if anyone can find the ingredients of pancakes that you have hidden around the church. As they are brought forward to you, explain their meaning:

- eggs – symbol of creation
- milk – symbol of purity
- flour – the staff of life
- salt – symbol of wholesomeness
- butter – used as a fat to cook the mixture in.

Tell the congregation that you want to focus particularly on the idea behind pancakes of avoiding waste. Place these 'ingredients' (still in their containers) into the mixing bowl on your table; as you do so, place the modelling-clay pancakes labelled GIFTS and LENT on top. Tell the congregation that you are going to make three special pancakes for them, and that you will need three volunteers to toss them for you. Give your first volunteer the frying pan to hold, and ask him or her to toss the 'pancake' inside it. Afterwards, hold this up, revealing the word RESOURCES. Of all the things we cannot afford to waste, resources are perhaps those most often in the news today. We are increasingly coming to realise that supplies of commodities like fuel, minerals, timber and much else are limited and therefore need to be used thoughtfully and wisely, and recycled where possible. As Christians, we have a responsibility to be at the forefront in stewarding this world's resources.

Take the 'pancake' marked GIFTS, place it in the frying pan, and ask a second volunteer to toss it, once again displaying the word on the pancake afterwards. If there's a danger of wasting resources on a global scale, there's equally a danger on an individual level – namely, wasting our gifts. We

may be gifted in science or languages, maths or literature, music or graphic design, or perhaps in sport, carpentry or metalwork. Do we make the most of such gifts, developing them to their full potential? Equally, there are gifts in a wider sense: things like health and education. Again, do we make the most of what God has given us?

Ask a third volunteer to toss your final 'pancake', this time revealing the word LENT. Not as many Christians fast today during Lent as was once the case, but many still observe the season in some way. Some make time for prayer or quiet reflection, some meet with Christians of other denominations in study groups, some attempt to kick a bad habit, while others deny themselves certain 'luxuries', giving the money they would have spent to charity or other good causes. Lent marks out 40 days distinct from the rest of the year – once again, we should not waste it.

The simple pancake, as well as providing a tasty meal, has much to teach us. Its lesson is summed up in the last verse of our reading:

'From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded' (Luke 12:48).

Whatever God gives you, don't waste it.

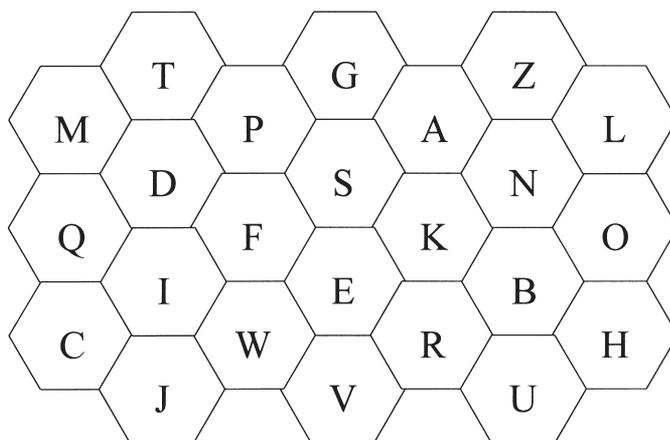
Choosing the Way

Reading Matthew 3:13-4:22; ensure this is read BEFORE the talk.

Aim To emphasise the importance of choices in life and to explore what might help us in coming to the right decisions.

Preparation This talk is based on the old TV programme *Blockbusters*. It requires a considerable amount of work, but the enjoyment it gives makes the effort well worth it.

You will need to prepare a grid of hexagons similar to the one below, and to write a different letter of the alphabet in each of the hexagons. I have not used the letters 'x' or 'y', so no questions are provided for these letters. *Blockbusters* used a smaller grid, but this larger size offers scope for more questions.



The lettered grid can be prepared in various ways. You might wish to mark it directly on to a whiteboard, you could draw it on a large sheet of card or paper, or you could prepare it on an acetate sheet or computer ready for overhead projection. Alternatively, you could cut out individual hexagons (24 in all) and fix these to a whiteboard using sticky

tack. This takes more time but has the advantage of allowing you to reconfigure the board for a second game. Whichever way you choose, you will need to have some way of highlighting hexagons once a correct answer has been given. Unless you are using some kind of projection method, cut out individual hexagons using pieces of blue and pink card (a different colour for each team/ participant). When someone answers correctly, cover the lettered hexagon with the appropriate coloured hexagon. If using the projection method, you will need to shade the hexagon with a piece of coloured acetate, or use 'fill' on a computer.

The original *Blockbusters* is a game for two individuals, but I recommend dividing the congregation into two teams. This is more likely to hold the attention of all and allows everyone the chance to participate. Always ensure, however, that younger people have the chance to answer before older folk leap in.

Talk Divide the congregation into roughly two halves, telling them that you have devised a game along the lines of the television programme *Blockbusters*. Display the grid you have prepared and explain that the aim of the game is, through correctly answering questions related to today's Bible reading, to turn letters to the colour of your team in a continuous sequence from the top to the bottom of the grid.

The first person to put their hand up (it may be worth enlisting the help of someone to spot each time who this is) will get to answer the question. If a wrong answer is given, the other team have ten seconds to come up with the right one. The answer in each case begins with the letter chosen. Should no correct answer be given, another question beginning with the same letter is asked. When a team answers correctly, it has the choice of the next letter.

Select the blue team to start, and ask them to choose the first letter.

Beyond Comparison?

Readings Isaiah 40:18-26; 46:5-7; 2 Corinthians 13:13

Aim To emphasise the truth that the only way we can do justice to the wonder of God is through recognising him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Preparation No special preparation is needed for this talk.

Talk Ask the congregation if they can define what a simile is (i.e. a word that compares one thing to another, using the word 'like' or 'as'). Ask if anyone can supply the missing word from each of the following well-known similes:

As common as ?	<i>muck</i>
As bald as a ?	<i>coot</i>
As tough as ?	<i>nails (or old boots)</i>
As meek as a ?	<i>lamb</i>
As bold as ?	<i>brass</i>
As ugly as ?	<i>sin</i>
As cool as a ?	<i>cucumber</i>
As fit as a ?	<i>flea (or fiddle)</i>
As daft as a ?	<i>brush</i>
As flat as a ?	<i>pancake</i>
As light as a ?	<i>feather</i>
As warm as ?	<i>toast</i>
As good as ?	<i>gold</i>
As mad as a ?	<i>hatter (or March hare)</i>
As pleased as ?	<i>Punch</i>
As pretty as a ?	<i>picture</i>
As clear as a ?	<i>bell (or as mud or as crystal)</i>
As red as a ?	<i>beetroot</i>
As safe as ?	<i>houses</i>
As snug as a ?	<i>bug in a rug</i>
As dull as ?	<i>ditchwater</i>

As straight as an ?	<i>arrow</i>
As keen as ?	<i>mustard</i>
As stubborn as a ?	<i>mule</i>
As white as a ?	<i>sheet</i>
As busy as a ?	<i>bee</i>
As clean as a ?	<i>whistle</i>

When it comes to God, comparisons are not just difficult but impossible, for every metaphor or simile we may use can, at best, point to a fraction of the truth, each concealing as much as it reveals. However many words we may pile up to speak of his power, love, grace or goodness, they will always be inadequate, for he is infinitely greater than all of them put together. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, 'To whom, then, will you liken God, or with what likeness will you compare him? An idol? It is cast by a workman and a goldsmith gilds it and casts silver chains for it. The one unable to afford this selects wood that will not rot and seeks out a craftsman to create an idol that will not topple over' (Isaiah 40:18-20, own translation). Or as the Psalmist asks, 'Who on high can compare to the Lord? Who among the heavenly host is like the Lord, a God revered in the assembly of the holy ones, great and awesome above all those around him?' (Psalm 89:5-7, own translation).

So does this mean that God is beyond comparison? Almost, but not quite, for though no words or image can hope to express his greatness, three terms give us some kind of picture of who he is: the terms 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit'. The first reminds us that God is the giver of life but at the same time likens him to a father; one, in other words, who loves and cares for all his children. The second reminds us that God in Christ has shared our humanity, walking our earth and experiencing both life and death, and thus revealing God's nature and purpose through word and deed. The last reminds us that though we do not see him we experience God's presence

within us, at work in our lives and in the world, nothing able to contain or limit him.

Trinity Sunday reminds us that we need to keep a sense of God's greatness that is beyond comparison, yet to recognise also the way we experience that God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So, along with the Apostle Paul, we not only can say with our lips but can also mean in our hearts: 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all' (2 Corinthians 13:13, own translation).

A Sense of Proportion

Reading Ephesians 3:16-21

Aim To stress the importance of Trinity Sunday in reminding us of the overwhelming scale of God's greatness.

Preparation Print the following riddle on a large piece of card/paper, in large, bold letters.

My first is in MEGA as well as in GREAT,
My second's in WOW but not UNDERSTATE,
My third is in WONDER and found in ADORE.
My whole calls forth worship expressing our awe.

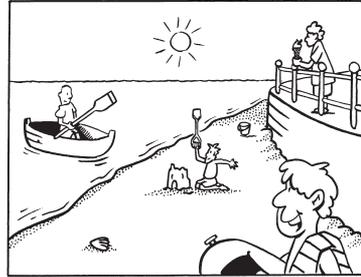
Print the riddle again in microscopic letters on a tiny piece of paper.

Talk Tell the congregation that you have a simple riddle for them to solve. Stick the tiny version on to a whiteboard, and ask who can solve it. Of course, no one will be able to because no one will be able to read it! Ask what the problem is, and then display the larger version. This time, the congregation should have no problem in solving the riddle to reveal the word GOD.

Often in life we need to get the bigger picture before we can understand what's going on, and the same is true when it comes to God. Our picture of him is often far too small, disproportionate to the reality. To illustrate what I mean, take a look at the following picture:



Ask what's wrong with the first picture, and allow people to identify all the features that are out of proportion. Afterwards, display the 'corrected' picture, as follows:



(Larger versions of these pictures may be found on pages 113-114.)

When drawing, we need to ensure that we keep things in their proper proportion, and the same is true when it comes to thinking about God, as we see in our reading today. Paul grasps at every proportion imaginable to express the wonder of God's love in Christ. 'I pray,' he writes, 'that Christ may so dwell in your hearts through faith that you will be able to grasp with all the saints the breadth, length, height and depth of the love of Christ; and that you may know this all-surpassing love in such a way that you will be filled with the very fullness of God!' (Ephesians 3:14a, 17-19, own translation). This love, says Paul, is beyond measure, bigger than anything we can ever begin to comprehend and reaching out in any and every direction, nothing and nowhere being outside of its scope. And if that's true of God's love, it's all the more true when it comes to describing or defining God himself. However great we may believe he is, he is always greater still, on a scale that leaves us gasping in amazement. The only way we can begin to express that wonder is through the three labels, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Why? Because those three persons point to his presence above, beside and within us, different dimensions of one reality. Overemphasise a single aspect at the cost of the others and our picture of

God becomes distorted and unbalanced. We need a sense of God's majesty and splendour, an awareness of his constant companionship and friendship, and an experience of his power and presence deep within. All are part of the picture but none are the whole.

Don't let your picture of God be too small or out of proportion. Learn the message of Trinity and glimpse a little more clearly the breadth, length, height and depth of who God is and what he means.

