

Fruitfulness on the Frontline Sermon Outlines

Reflections on the Central Texts used in the course

This is one of three sample sermon series outlines
prepared by Antony Billington & Neil Hudson
to support the Fruitfulness on the Frontline DVD course
The others are:

Fruitfulness at Colossae

Fruitfulness in the Bible

They can be found at
www.licc.org.uk/fruitfulness
together with further supporting material



FRUITFULNESS
ON THE FRONTLINE.

A Word of Orientation

We are preachers. We've been doing it for a long time now. After all these years, we've found our own voice. It took a long time, but it was worth the wait. It means we can preach out of who we are, not trying to imitate others. It means we can preach from our own engagement with Scripture, supported by the reflections of others.

So if we were reading these outlines as preachers, we would be suspicious and intrigued. We'd be suspicious because we don't want to pass other people's material off as our own - too much guilt lies that route! On the other hand, we'd be intrigued. We would look through the texts - many well-known - and wonder whether there was anything new there. We're aware there is still much to learn, and so would be interested to see how someone else was reflecting on them.

What follows is not a series of polished sermon outlines. They are not crafted as a finished product ready for preaching. Instead, what follows are the sorts of notes we might write for ourselves during sermon preparation. As such they are offered as part of a conversation with preachers - the kind of thoughts we would have shared with you if we had been able to sit together over a coffee and an open Bible. What are missing are your thoughts, the ones that start, 'Yes that's great, but did you see...' with the prospects of opening up further exploration. That's our hope anyway.

Overall, we trust that there are kernels of thought here that will enable you to engage with the biblical passages in fresh ways - for the sake of those to whom you minister - in ways that stir up the enthusiasm of the Spirit, the one who both makes possible the prospect of fruitfulness and promises that this will be the normal Christian life for all who remain in the vine.

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Introduction to These Reflections on the Central Texts

Each of the outlines below offers some suggestions of how to engage people in the light of their frontlines. This should be strongly implied in the whole process, but there are moments when we have been more explicit than others. In our own preaching, we're not trying to apply these texts to the lives that people are experiencing. We're trying to offer them access to the world of the Bible - not so much the ancient world of dusty roads and the rest, but the wild biblical world where God is at work and his people are willing to live faithfully for him (as well as succumbing to remarkable occasions of crash-and-burn!).

In most of the sermon reflections there is a suggestion of a film clip. It may be that you will want to use part of the films from the DVD in the service - particularly if the majority of folks are not in small group contexts where they might see them. On the other hand, we've also offered links to some other clips. These may not be applicable to everyone's tradition, nor necessarily desirable, regardless of your tradition. They might be helpful, though, if even to give you a sense of how some folks are trying to live out their lives as you prepare your sermons.

The outline for an eight-week series looks like this:

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2. Modelling Godly Character p.6
(Galatians 5:13-26)
3. Making Good Work p.7
(Genesis 1-2 & Colossians 3:22-4:1)
4. Ministering Grace and Love p.10
(Luke 10:25-37)
5. Moulding Culture p.12
(Matthew 5:13-16)
6. Mouthpiece for Truth and Justice P.14
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(2 Kings 6:15-17 & Matthew 28:16-20)

I. The Big Picture (Colossians 1:15-20)

This passage is such a highpoint of Paul's writing. It has a majestic view of Jesus, the church and God's plans for the whole world. It's a definite mountain top moment in the letter.

But ironically, perhaps because it is all these things, it can be difficult to preach in a way that doesn't seem to make it all a little more 'manageable', or, if truth be told, a little more boring - because we find it hard to find the equivalent words to express all that is contained here. Our voices can sound pygmy-like compared to what sounds like the roar of Paul's reflections.

So what can we do? In one sense, I'm tempted to say, just read it out - slowly. Read it so people catch all the meaning, read it so that it transforms them. Don't rush over it all, savour it, meditate on it, if necessary let music and art unlock the imagination, but somehow help people 'eat' this word.

And maybe you can do exactly that in your context. But you may need to say something as well. So what can you say?

I want to suggest that pulling the lens back a little helps us to read the passage well.

From 1:3, Paul is allowing the Colossians in on his prayer. His prayers are prayers of thanksgiving as he reflects on the fact that the gospel is bearing fruit all over the world - as it had in Colossae. It is transforming situations (1:6). So when Paul moves to praying for these Christians, what does he think is their greatest need? It is that they will be filled with the knowledge of God's will (1:9), so that they will live lives that are worthy of their calling and that they will bear fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, strengthened to keep going in their lives of faith (1:10-12).

Paul begins in this way, reminding them that they have been brought out of one way of life into a new way of life (1:13-14), and then moves into the big picture of 1:15-20.

In order to live lives that are worthy of the calling, in order that they will know what God's will is for them in their situation at this time, they need to have confidence in all that God has done, is doing and will do.

You have to have a big enough vision that the whole of the creation matters to God. When we fall into a sacred-secular divide that hints that some things are more important than other things, we reduce God's creation to less than he intended. And one of the reasons we may do that is because it makes life easier to deal with. It can give us permission to stop engaging with the difficult areas of life - those areas where things are unresolved, difficult, threatening. It can allow us to believe that God is not involved there, so maybe we should not expect anything to change.

If we are to live whole lives, we need to see that God's mission is about all things - not just some things. God has a desire to transform all things. The cross and resurrection are the realities that enable us to see that Jesus created all things in the beginning; he holds all things as the ruler of the universe, and God will reconcile all things through Christ at the end of time.

In the meantime, we live between the ages - part of the kingdom, but longing for the kingdom to fully come.

Whole-life engagement

The point of the big picture is that we can be reminded that all things matter to God - because the work of Jesus has changed things for everything and for everyone. There is nothing he didn't create, nothing that he doesn't hold together, nothing that will not be reconciled.

So people's workplaces come into this: it's always easy to see that the work that involves people is worthwhile - after all, God loves people. But there's more: there is creativity and beauty - so the work of painters and decorators and chefs matter to God; there is order - so IT consultants and mechanics find that their work matters; there is the work that allow others to thrive - accountants and therapists.

But for all of us there is a sense that for us to live with this big picture feeding our imagination, we need to offer our lives so that we live worthily of the calling - the calling that is embraced by the lordship of Jesus over every area of creation, the lordship that redeems, renews, recreates and reconciles.

Supporting resources

This is a very short clip that may help people understand what we are trying to encourage - Missional church: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arxfLK_sd68



2. Modelling Godly Character (Galatians 5:13-26)

Paul's concern for the Galatians is that they don't allow themselves to get side-tracked from their faith in Jesus. They were in danger of listening to those who suggested that Jesus was great and his death and resurrection were important - if only they stuck with the Jewish practice of the law as well. Paul wants to remind these believers that Jesus is enough. Our lives can be used by God because of all that Jesus has done - his work is sufficient.

So, as he closes his letter, he refocuses them on the blessings that trusting in Jesus has brought them.

The gift that Paul suggests is most in danger of being lost is freedom (5:1). That freedom is from the law on one side, but from sin on the other side. It's as though these two powers are wrestling for the Galatians. Paul wants them to walk a pathway between them. We are accompanied on that pathway by the Spirit. He is the one who guards us and enables the life of the Spirit to grow within us: the life that is wrapped up in a single command: love one another (5:13-14).

We can live in two ways: we can live for ourselves or we can live for others. The vices of the flesh (5:19-21) at first sight seem a random list of actions that fly in the face of God's commands and desires for humanity. What links them is that they all are actions that flow out of a desire to live as the centre of the universe: people are used for our sexual gratification; religion is used to manipulate situations to our own end; our relationships are full of strife; we take aspects of a good creation (like alcohol and sex) and use them for our ends.

The alternative way is to live a life shaped by the Spirit - the fruit of which is evidenced by the way that others benefit from our transformation.

The fruit of the Spirit sound to us as self-evidently good, but when Paul was writing that is not how some of his readers would have seen these qualities. Love, patience, humility, self-control have never been valued in contexts where the strongest survive, and where people feel that it's everyone for themselves. Paul was setting out a vision of a radically different set of community values. The churches were to offer a radically different vision of what it meant to be human in their own cultures.

And that is still the task we have. We can easily dismiss godly character as so obvious as to be not worthy of consideration. But it is much more than being nice. It is allowing this new way of being human to develop.

This is the work of the Spirit, but it will be tested and developed on our frontlines. The living out of these characteristics is both a fruit of the Spirit in our lives and, to the extent to which we allow this to happen, a mark of the fruitful Christian.

Things to reflect on

How do you preach this positively rather than just highlighting people's weaknesses? Can you help people reflect on the ordinary things of life - appraisals at work, arguments at home, frustrations with friends, challenging situations and people, confrontations that you need to have or that come to you, tedious situations, tedious people (!), etc. - all of which offer opportunities where these characteristics are both developed and allowed to shine.

People may get to the end of a day and feel that little has been done for the sake of the kingdom. In actual fact, the Spirit has been at work in us; the fruit of the Spirit, the outworking of God's life in us, has been on show for all to see. And all this has happened in the frustrations, joys and challenges of another ordinary day. This is no small thing: modelling a character that is being counter-culturally transformed.

Supporting resources

Yes, I'm the mechanic: <http://vimeo.com/73684887>

You might be interested in using this film as a reflection moment - you will see a man talking with humility about how he runs his business as an expression of his faith and how he wants joy to be the signature of all he does.



3. Making Good Work (Genesis 1-2 & Colossians 3:22-4:1)

What am I trying to do?

I want to remind people that working is part of being created, it's part of why we are as we are, and that although we live in a frustrated and fallen world that affects everything we are involved in, we still can work in a way that brings glory to God.

The sermon is a chance to set work in the big story frame of Scripture.

We were created to work - it's part of God's blessing (Genesis 1:26-28).

And we were created to work well - the 'rulership' of Genesis 1:28 can sound odd, and more than that, can sound like humans being given the right to throw their weight around with no regard for the consequences. But when we remind ourselves that being made in God's image is about bearing his likeness (ancient

Near Eastern kings set up statues of themselves, their image, so that the people would never forget who was in charge - even if they never set eyes on the king himself), we are reminded that we are called to follow the one who was the perfect likeness of God (Hebrews 1:3) who rules with love and mercy and grace.

All this can sound great - but it can feel a long way from our experience of life. For many of us, that is nearer to Genesis 3:17-19 - we keep working but it feels like things work against us, rather than with us. It's the reality repeated in Genesis 5:29, the reality that lies behind Noah's name.

But if we feel we work in unrewarding settings, imagine how people would have felt as they heard Paul outlining his directions in Colossians 3:22-4:1 to those who must have felt that they were living in some of the most difficult situations. Paul's challenge was to those then, as it still is to us now, who feel stuck in frustrating, limited work situations.

In 3:10 the Christians in Colossae have been reminded that their new identity has been established - remade and renewed in the knowledge of the creator - the one who created us for fruitfulness in the first place. We are therefore called to work differently - when we feel we are in the 'right place', doing the things we love as well as when we feel we are in the 'wrong place' doing the things that are a drudge.

There are a number of challenges here

Can I see these people I'm working for, or working with differently? Can I see them as created, loved, longed for by God?

Can I use these hands to work with faithfulness and skill to do something that can be offered as worship to God?

Can I work in such a way that reflects the restoring work of Christ - the one who will reward us for the work we do - because the work we do expresses something of the creator we serve?

Supporting resources

The best way to engage with this may be to interview people from your own congregation about their work - the joys and the challenges they face there and then pray for them.

You could think about whether commissioning people for paid work would be helpful. There are resources to help you do this in the Imagine section of the LICC website.

Alternatively, you might want to use a film to inspire people - What are you created for? <http://vimeo.com/55115788>



4. Ministering Grace and Love (Luke 10:25-37)

This is another well-known passage that can feel difficult to say anything new about. However, although it is so well known, I think that the parable of the Good Samaritan is often taken out of context and made into a very simple morality tale of needing to do good to those who might be an enemy. And whilst that is good gospel practice, I think Jesus is suggesting something far more radical.

In a context of being asked what God demands of us, Jesus points to the central action of lives that are shaped by acts of love - love towards God and love towards the people around us, our neighbours. That may have been unexpected; the law was being distilled to the principle of love. And then Jesus introduces his next surprise, when he is asked about the specific identity of our neighbour. Jesus widens the definition to include people who would be unexpected for most Jews at that time.

The story forced the lawyer to acknowledge that the man in the ditch, unnamed and anonymous but assumed to be a Jew, discovered that neither the priest nor the Levite were his neighbours. They might have had everything in common with him, but their actions betrayed them. The shock of the story was that he would discover his neighbour was a Samaritan. The man in the ditch received the grace and mercy offered by the last person he would have expected. Perhaps it's no wonder that when the lawyer answered Jesus, he couldn't even name the identity of the one who was the neighbour (10:37).

The man starts confident but ends uncomfortable. Life has just got more complicated for him. And then Jesus skewers him for one last time with the command: Go and do likewise. Jesus has told him to go and love God with all that he has - and love his neighbour - but to be aware that his neighbour could be very unsettling - someone who came from beyond the borders of the chosen people.

'Go and do likewise' presumably means: go and show the same mercy to those who would not expect it; to those who would feel that they were excluded by religious commitment, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, whatever it may be - go and minister grace and love to those who would least expect it from you.

Frontline focus

What does it mean to live unexpectedly? To minister grace and love to the last people who would expect it?

People can have very fixed views of what Christians can be like - how do you act and react in such a way that challenges their expectations?

What does grace and love look like in different contexts? Work, Family, Social contexts?

What stops us acting with grace and mercy? Fear? Pride? Being unsure how to act? Being too busy? Too distracted? What does it mean to have the discernment that helps us know how to see people - the people in the proverbial ditches? And what might it look like to receive grace and mercy from those who we might least expect it? Do we receive it with grace?

Finally, Jesus' point was - go and do it! What does that mean for us on our frontlines? Where will we begin?



5. Moulding Culture (Matthew 5:13-16)

The call to the Old Testament people of God had always been that they were to be those who would represent God's plan for the whole world. They would be different not for the sake of difference, but that they might reveal God's plan for the whole world. It's no surprise that when Jesus begins his sermon outlining how people of this new kingdom will live, he begins by establishing their identity.

This is the theme that stretches back to the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus calls his disciples to himself and then shares with them the characteristics of those who live according to the new kingdom. It's a blessing to those who *are* - at this point Jesus is not asking them to *do* anything.

So when he announces that these disciples of the kingdom are salt and light, he is urging them to see themselves differently. To everyone looking on, they might have appeared so ordinary. To Jesus, they are the ones through whom the love of God will be shared with the world. They act as salt in places that are missing a vital ingredient, and as light in places that are dark.

Salt was used for many purposes - as a preservative to stop food rotting, as flavouring to enhance flavours, as fertilizer to enable fruitfulness. Light is a metaphor that highlights the fact that in dark places, not only does light reveal what is there, but also offers a new perspective for everyone.

In this passage light is related to actions - the everyday actions that demonstrated that these people had a different view of life (5:16). Jesus suggests that people would see these and realise that there must be some other source for these lives. But it doesn't sound as though you need to work hard to live like this - it has the feel of it flowing naturally from your identity as God's people.

This life we have received is lived out in the midst of a culture that has decided it wants to live a different way, one that largely lives without any reference to God. How do you live in such a culture? How do you live alongside people who may think that belonging to church and believing in Jesus are somehow quaint activities, good for some, but not for them? How do you work for organisations whose practices may leave so much to be desired: using people, wasting resources, fearful of change, ruthless leadership?

How do we take what we know of the good news of Jesus and use it to help bring change around us? How do we act as the flavouring of a society - people whose creative reactions to situations change the experience for many? Or as light - offering new perspectives for others?

Jesus suggests that we act differently, but that it will begin because our identity is rooted in our relationship with God our Father. What might be possible if that is the case?

Supporting resources

The city of Detroit in the United States is well known as a story of a city that has descended into poverty and despair. But there are Christians there who have acted in ways that are beginning to change the culture of the city. This film is of a woman who has begun a string of market gardens as a means of changing the culture in her city - Gardening to make beauty out of blight:

<http://vimeo.com/59474340>

The other film that could be used as an alternative is of a property developer in Phoenix who is running his business in such a way that he is taking areas of cities and transforming them: <http://vimeo.com/50979863>



6. Mouthpiece for Truth and Justice(2 Samuel 12:1-13)

Speaking out about truth and justice needs wisdom and a right motivation. It's easy simply to speak out of anger or resentment or self-interest. In most contexts, to speak up is potentially costly because you are calling someone on their actions.

When Nathan appears, David doesn't realise that he's about to encounter a sermon. Nathan breaks through David's detachment, his wrong turns, his fear. He does this by telling a story that blind-sides David. He brings David to God and reminds David who he is - not a power-wielding king, but a man before God.

This is what being 'a mouthpiece for truth and justice' means - it reminds us all of who we are. It dethrones the powers that reduce us to less than we were created for and reminds us that there is so much more at stake.

It's worth reminding people of how the biblical narrator sets up the story.

There is a common theme of 'sending':

11:1 - David sent Joab

11:3 - David sent someone

11:4 - David sent messengers

11:6 - David sent this word to Joab - 'send me Uriah'... Joab sent him

11:14 - David wrote a note and sent it with Uriah

11:18 - Joab sent David a full account

11:27 - David had her brought

So far, David is acting as kings always act - with power, using resources (including people) for his own ends; he is in control, acting to cover up his private failings.

But 2 Samuel 12:1 starts a different story: the Lord sent Nathan!

The interesting thing about preaching from this passage is that normally people assume they are supposed to identify with David. That may be appropriate, but on this occasion you want them to ask whether they can see how Nathan operates.

In this moment he is God's person in the story. God wants to get David back on track. It's not just that David has acted badly - though he has! He is throwing away all that God can do with and through him. God works hard to get David's attention. And Nathan is asked to be the courageous mouthpiece in the action.

So Nathan tells his story - and when David gets on his arrogant high horse and demands justice be done, makes the courageous announcement: 'you're the man'. At that point he risks everything - because God had sent him.

It might be worth exploring when we know it is right to speak out, how to speak out, when to do so, how to trust God when we do.

Supporting resources

This might be too shocking for some contexts:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnAUNFQ6TTI>

It's an example of people taking a stand for truth and justice on large scale. Watch the faces of the men when they realise they are being confronted!

However, you may have examples of people in your own church taking their own stands for truth. Let them tell their story.



7. Messenger of the Gospel (1 Peter 3:15-16)

This passage comes in the context of Peter writing about the daily lives of believers. He has dealt with their attitudes towards rulers and authorities, and relationships in the home. In this part of the letter he leads his readers to reflect on the church.

3:8 concerns the nature of the church community - the community that allows us to grow in the virtues formed by the Spirit.

3:9 moves its focus towards the relationships we have with those outside the church. Peter particularly focuses on our relationships with those who would want to dismiss us, or silence us.

Instead of standing on our rights, he urges us to act in the opposite spirit - to bless, not curse. And to be determined to serve the purposes of Christ - to be more aware of that relationship than all the others we may have.

And then to be prepared to respond when people ask about the hope - the clear implication being that we will have been living in such a way that will intrigue people. So much that some of them will want to know why we act as we do. Why we are as generous as we are, as care-free, as forgiving, as hopeful, as gentle, as joyful?

When this happens, Peter says, we need to respond with gentleness and respect - no manipulation, no aggression, no bullying attitudes. No dismissing people. You are answering a person not an issue. When issues are raised, it's easy to jump on to them, but everyone raises issues for specific reasons. The more I take notice of the *person* involved, the more likely I am to respond well.

The habits we learn together in church are the ones that will allow us to act differently with people around us. There are numerous potential challenges here:

- The expectation that our lives will be spent amongst some people who will reject us because of our faith.
- The expectation that we will have a very different community in church together.
- The expectation that we will be asked about our hope.
- The expectation that God will use us.

Supporting resources

There are numerous resources that you will be aware of that relate to evangelism. One song that I think has the power to encourage people to see themselves as people who have something to offer others is the one below. It is important to let people see the lyrics as they express it all so well - Emeli Sande, 'Read all about it', it with lyrics: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaAVByGaON0>

8. The Journey On (2 Kings 6:15-17 & Matthew 28:16-20)

The real challenge in preaching from 2 Kings 6 is that this whole section of the Bible is, well, weird! It's a strange world where boys are returned to life, where miracles of provision take place, where military leaders get healed in acts of strange obedience, where nature stops acting like nature acts and gravity forgets what should happen to axe-heads. It feels a long way from our world.

But when I think about it, it's not a long way from the accounts of Jesus and the gospels. The accounts where Jesus heals people, raises the dead, defies natural laws by walking on water, calms storms with a word, feeds thousands from scraps of food. In both parts of the Bible, the Old and the New Testaments, God speaks to the powers of the day and reminds them that they are not in sole control - that there are areas of this life that are beyond their control. That God is God.

It is a challenge because most of us only see the world through the 'normal' lenses - the lenses that decide what can happen and what can't happen.

So we find ourselves to be closer to the servant of the man of God (6:15) than to the man of God, the prophet (6:16). The servant believes his eyes; the prophet sees beyond his eyes.

The wider picture is that the King of Aram wants to kill the King of Israel - but is thwarted at every turn by the prophet who acts as a saboteur due to his 'inside knowledge'. So when the King of Aram gets serious and surrounds the city, the servant is the reasonable voice whose only reasonable option is to lose hope. The prophet prays that he will be able to see the truth of the situation (6:16) and that those who are attacking would be unable to see (6:18).

When you read this text alongside Matthew 28:16-20 you are reminded that we are still called to live in this alternative world - the world of faith. Matthew 28:16-20 is not a text that is simply the rallying call to the church to put its ideas into action. It's a promise that the risen Lord will be with us - wherever we go: beyond the boundaries of our known worlds; beyond our comfortable relationships; beyond the expectations of culture to invite people to be reconciled with the God who created all this for his glory.

In preaching this, I would want to help people see that following Jesus is unsettling. He doesn't adapt his call to our expectations - he asks us to adapt to his.

For more materials on fruitfulness including two further sermon series outlines visit

www.licc.org.uk/fruitfulness

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