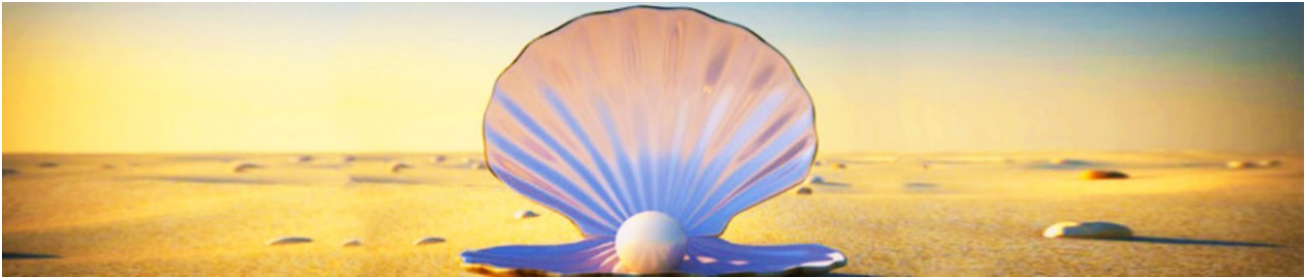


# Pearls and Irritations



## Sermons beginning again in Melbourne

By [BARNEY ZWARTZ](#) |

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*It's easy and cheap to insult sermons and sermon-givers, which of course makes it utterly irresistible to me.*

My children, now adults, love to remind me of a church of their youth where the minister would preach 50-minute sermons, including such sentences as “now for my fifth final point”. Oddly less enthusiastic than my wife and me, they were much more in sympathy with the Duke of Wellington who, asked by a country vicar whether there was anything he wished the sermon to be about, replied: “Yes. About 10 minutes!”

As Melbourne slowly unfurls its wings and emerges from lockdown, in which the only church attendance has been “virtual”, I have been thinking about sermons and trying to find the silver lining. At least Melbourne’s Anglican ministers, preaching online in empty churches, are spared the dubious delight of the great Anglican wit Sydney Smith: “When I am in the pulpit I have the pleasure of seeing my audience nod approbation while they sleep.”

You may be surprised that “bollocks” in 17th and 18th-century slang referred to a clergyman. Because they were considered to speak so much nonsense, the term came to mean rubbish, nonsense. It’s easy and cheap to insult sermons and sermon-givers, which of course makes it utterly irresistible to me.

Archbishop Richard Whately, the 19th-century philosopher, observed that he heard many a wandering discourse in which the preacher aims at nothing, and hits it. Sydney Smith said of a less than lively preacher: “He evidently thought sin was to be taken from man as Eve was from Adam, by casting him into a deep sleep.”

Not every preacher is so sanguine at such blatant clinomania (addiction to sleep). Robert South, preaching to the court of Charles II and incensed that many were audibly sleeping, shouted, “Lord Lauderdale, I beseech you, rouse yourself. Your snores will wake the king.”

Another clergyman, noting much of his congregation asleep, shouted; “Fire, fire!” “Where?” some cried out. “In hell,” he replied, “where all who sleep under the preaching of the Gospel will surely go.”

The problem of drowsiness on the pews was put more elegantly by an unknown member of a congregation, who rhymed:

*The ladies praise the curate's eyes –  
I never see their light divine;  
For when he prays he closes his,  
And when he preaches mine.*

A friend, sadly given to dissipation, likes to spend hours a day during lockdown listening to sermons, the longer the better. She could not agree with comedian George Burns, who claimed that the secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible.

But George Canning, very briefly Prime Minister of Britain in 1827, would have been in sympathy with Burns. Asked by a clergyman how he enjoyed the sermon, he replied: “You were brief.” “Yes, you know I avoid being tedious,” said the unfortunate cleric. “You were tedious.”

Lord Melbourne, the British Prime Minister of the 1830s who gave his name to my fair city, was affronted by a sermon for a different reason. Challenged by an evangelical preacher, he stormed: “Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade the sphere of the private life.” I love this elegant inversion of the modern secular understanding of religion, which is that it should be only private.

Many sermons reflect the obsessions of the preacher, rather than the Lord. As a convert to Christianity in my 20s, I tried many churches. At one Pentecostal church, which had worshippers giving prophecies in “tongues” during the service, I was amused to find that the Lord’s obsessions, week after week, exactly matched those of the people who provided the interpretation.

It is often alleged by non-believers that Christians have made God in their own image, which can lead to a rather unimaginative and petty deity. Sydney Smith observed acutely that “I endeavour in vain to give my parishioners more cheerful ideas of religion; to teach them that God is not a jealous, childish, merciless tyrant; that he is best served by a regular tenor of good actions – not by bad singing, ill-composed prayers, and eternal apprehensions. But the luxury of false religion is, to be unhappy.” To be fair, the luxury of the non-religious too.

Given this, and a few other issues, it is easy for Christians to lapse in their faith. But a great testimony to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints was provided by a verger at St Mary’s Oxford, the university church, where he heard vast numbers of “progressive” sermons. He said: “I have heard every sermon here for the past 30 years, and, thank God, I am still a Christian.”

I hesitate, given my Anglican links, to convey anything but the utmost respect for bishops, but I have to mention one of my all-time favourite Punch cartoons, from 1880, which depicts a bishop sternly addressing a page boy. Bishop: “Who is it that sees and hears all we do, and before whom even I am but as a crushed worm?” Page: “The Missus, my Lord?”

And, sadly, Anglican clergy themselves have occasionally lapsed. Sydney Smith remarked of bishops: “I have, alas, only one illusion left, and that is the Archbishop of Canterbury.” He also said: “I must believe in the Apostolic Succession, there being no other way of tracing the Bishop of Exeter to Judas Iscariot.”

William Inge, the 20th-century Dean of St Paul’s in London, was scarcely less scathing when he said of a bishop who stayed in office too long: “He has every Christian quality save that of resignation.” Of an archbishop, Inge said that he took a first-class single ticket on the line of least resistance.

And thus to my favourite anecdote about an Anglican bishop – not an Australian one, I hasten to add. The bishop, noted for the brevity of his sermons and conversation, brought the mayoress to despair. “Some tea, bishop?” “No tea.” “Some coffee, bishop?” “No coffee”. “Some whisky and soda, bishop?” “No soda.”

#### [Barney Zwartz](#)

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