Festival of Preaching Utrecht June 9, 2026

Preaching and Politics

Sam Wells

I have two kinds of sermons. The first I call exegetical and the second I call pastoral. When I prepare the first, I am captivated by a passage of scripture, almost always one of the set readings for the day, or given to me by the occasion or the person inviting me – almost never of my own choosing. I'm not always struck straightaway: but as I ponder, examine, and read up about that passage, either the structure, the terminology or the argument strike me, or sometimes just one phrase or sentence jumps out. Thereafter I seek to identify precisely what is so special about that passage, sentence, or phrase, and I prepare a sermon that is crafted to arouse in the congregation a thirst to wrestle with a conundrum or resolve a quandary to which that passage, sentence or phrase is an answer or a resolution. I almost never start with the passage, sentence or phrase itself – that would be like blurting out the punchline before you tell the joke. I don't usually introduce the passage in question until the congregation is already eager to resolve a tension that my opening remarks have identified. It may not be a tension the listener was aware of before; but in a few sentences or perhaps longer I seek to make the listener aware of it so acutely that the listener is on tenterhooks to know what the resolution will be. The sermon is satisfying to the extent that the attention and expectation aroused is to a degree in keeping with and on a theme precisely identical with the resolution the exposition of the passage, sentence or phrase provides. Most satisfying of all is on the occasions when at the very end I am able to return to a hitherto insignificant element of the material with which I began, and show that it has an even greater significance than was previously disclosed. Ideally that will be a Christological dimension that was abiding in the passage but had not been apparent until that point.

The second kind of sermon doesn't begin with a scriptural passage. It begins with a question in the hearts and minds of the congregation. It may be that something significant has come to pass in the congregation's life, planned or accidental – perhaps Giving Sunday, in the former case, a family tragedy in the latter. It may be that a major event has taken place in the national or global domain, anticipated or sudden – the hosting of the Olympic Games, perhaps, or the death of a noted politician. It may be that the church, locally or denominationally, is consumed with a pressing theological or ethical question. It may be that the wider culture is wrestling with a question that is so timely it simply demands homiletical engagement. Or it may be that there is a question the wider church and culture are not actively discussing that you sincerely believe they should be, and you wish to put forward some framework for the conversation. The way I do this is rather different from the first approach. I seldom start with a scriptural passage. I usually start with a theological insight. It may be from church history, or from a classic theological controversy. Sometimes it will be a careful procedural move, like the methods of overaccepting and reincorporation I discuss at some length in my own writing.[1] I then ponder where in the scriptures that insight is most aptly expressed. In almost every case the passage I arrive at has more interesting things to say than just the part I was thinking of, and so I pause to explore how there is more to say from this part of scripture than I originally imagined. Then I construct an argument based in most cases on an attempt at an even-handed overview of the issue, a move that draws in the existential and emotional depth and range of the question, and a recognition of where the pressure points lie. From this point on the two kinds of sermons are broadly similar, even though they have emerged from different thought-processes and serve different purposes. If I am seeking to address a pastoral issue on a Sunday morning, I shall almost always seek to do so from one of the texts set for the day. The only exception might be in the event of a major unexpected congregational or global crisis such as 9/11 or the sudden death of a very visible member of the community.

So-called political sermons fall largely into the second kind – occasions when a pastoral need makes it necessary or unavoidable to tread on contested ground, within church or world or both. If people like what you are saying they may call it prophetic; if not, they may call it misguided, unwise, inappropriate, taking advantage, imposing your convictions or venting. I want now to offer two examples of this more edgy kind of pastoral sermon, one exegetical, the other pastoral, and to provide a brief commentary on them, before summarising my suggestions. My hope is that the listener, if the listener is also a preacher, may find that, if they preach an edgy sermon and face criticism, they may if they follow the guidelines I offer, recognise the costs of ministry, and yet, if they don't follow the guidelines, acknowledge that they might have got it wrong this time.

The following sermon I preached a couple of months after President Trump's second inauguration.

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[1] Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos; London: SPCK, 2004) Second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker 2018).

God's Politics

Isaiah 55: 1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

A sermon preached at St Martin-in-the-Fields on March 23, 2025 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

When you want to change the world, you've got broadly three options. You can work *with* the powerful – not necessarily sharing their goals or methods, not always endorsing their slogans or ignoring their lies, but nonetheless patiently correcting their wrong turnings and softening their harsh judgements. Alternatively you can work *against* the powerful. You can campaign for the dignity of suppressed peoples and groups, you can highlight miscarriages of justice, you may denounce and upbraid and protest. But that choice, between a pragmatism that risks complacency and an idealism that flirts with self-righteousness, doesn't comprise the full set of options. There's a third approach. That is to seek to model what a better society might look like – to practise a renewed politics and try to inspire others to join you and in their own context do the same.

If you think about it, both the Old and the New Testaments assume that third kind of politics. The Old Testament is about the chosen people: a tiny nation buffeted from Canaan to Egypt to the wilderness to the Promised Land and later to Babylon and back. They have no pretensions to be masters of the universe. They're hard-pressed just to run their own society faithfully and protect it from invaders. The New Testament is even more limited in aspiration to conventional political power: this is a people seeking to model a transformed life, without any pretension to geographical territory. All they're looking to do is to live God's future now by sharing together the life they will enter eternally.

From time to time a society has to ask itself, What kind of a people do we want to be? A lot of people are asking themselves that question now as they see the post-war world order being dismantled in a matter of weeks and perpetual allies being treated like enemies and hostile nations being regarded as friends, and commitments, pledges and duties being tossed aside like an infant throwing food from a highchair. It's timely to recall that we're not the first generation to ask ourselves such a question. I want to look today at what's going on in Isaiah 55. This is a chapter written on the threshold between leaving the oppressive life in Babylonian exile and entering the new possibilities of life on return to the Promised Land. What old ways would they look to restore? What would they now do differently? What had they learned in Babylon they wished to keep?

Here's the vision Isaiah outlines for the returning exiles. There's five principles. Principle one is this: this society is for everyone. Twice in the first sentence we get this message: 'Hear, everyone who thirsts… you who have no money.' This isn't an exclusive society. The French Revolution set out the principles of a better world. It proclaimed equality and liberty. But what it didn't understand is that these principles aren't ends in themselves. They're both stages, usually but not always indispensable stages, on a journey to something more important. That more important thing is tucked away in the same famous revolutionary slogan. It's fraternity. These days we might use a more contemporary term. We'd call it belonging. Belonging means there's water for everyone who thirsts. Belonging means a society that has the things money can't buy.

Here's the second principle: this society's rooted in things of enduring value. This is Isaiah's penetrating question: 'Why do you spend your money on that which doesn't satisfy?' That's not a question specifically for the rich or the poor: it's a question for every one of us. If we were in a Being With group, we'd put it like this: 'Tell about a time you spent a lot of money on something that wasn't what you really wanted.' Or maybe like this: 'Tell about a time you felt deeply satisfied.' Or this: 'I wonder whether money has ever brought you deep satisfaction.' Money is only at very best an instrumental good – a way of getting us something else. We've become a society that can't talk about final goods, about things of truly enduring value, so instead we evaluate everything by money, because we assume with money, we can make good choices about things of enduring value. But the irony is, those things aren't fundamentally about money. We can invest in them *now*, with our time, our love, our commitment, our trust.

Here's the third principle: everything that matters involves relationships, and the heart of relationships is trust. 'I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.' Phrases like this make people nervous right now, because they highlight the particular status of the Jewish people.

Notice the difference between a covenant and an entitlement. A covenant is a statement of trust: God will not give up on us whatever befall. But we're made fully aware of what it means not to give up on God in return, and it isn't just lip service. The point of an everlasting covenant is you need never doubt God is with you; it doesn't mean you stop caring. This passage is full of wake-up calls – hear, see, listen, seek. There's a kind of politics around just now that assumes relationships are about transactional deals where you do one over everyone else. But Isaiah is saying instead it's about covenants that build trust. Exploitative deals make resentful enemies. Covenants generate long-lasting trust.

Here's the fourth principle: become the kind of society others would want to join. Right now people want to come to this country. We're being told that's a problem. To me it's saying, for all our faults, we must be getting something right. Do we want to become a country no one in their right mind would want to come to? And as it happens we need a lot of the things these people are bringing: energy, initiative, ambition, hope. Isaiah anticipates, 'Nations that do not know you shall run to you.' Just acting in your own narrow self-interest will leave you without allies and will deprive you of the goods that come with interaction and exchange. There's an appropriate kind of envy. Isaiah is saying the nations will admire you and will run to you and their envy will demonstrate that you have become a blessing to them. We may say, 'Things are difficult right now. We can't do everything we want to do, and some people are going to feel impatient or hard done-by.' But this is the point. Politics is hardly ever about arriving. It's about forming a story in which everyone can belong, you're seeking together things of enduring value, and you're fostering communities of trust. If you get those things right, you'll have a story you can believe in and others can aspire to. Arriving is a bonus – and an illusion, because there'll always be fresh challenges to face.

Here's the fifth principle: the people who have most to give are invariably those who've made mistakes. Isaiah says, 'Let the wicked and unrighteous return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.' Our biggest fear is that we can't be honest with one another, because if we were we'd face rejection. So we embellish our cvs, we use euphemisms and obfuscating jargon to describe difficult things, and in relationships and the workplace we struggle to articulate simple but troubling truths. It's often said, 'There's no failure; only failure to learn'; but we're becoming a society abrasive to transparency and truth. We're obsessed with our own moral purity, so instead of trying to persuade or gradually change the heart of a person or institution or country that attracts disapproval we instead have to boycott them or cut ties with them lest our name be associated with something impure. We're mesmerised by the illusion of moral perfection, so when a person or institution turns out to have made a mistake, we assume there must be resignations and people must be cancelled. And sometimes it doesn't really matter whether they actually made a mistake or not: we ignore such trivial details because we need a sacrificial lamb to assuage our anger and hurt. This sixth-century prophet takes away our biggest fear – which is that if God knew the truth we'd be eternally rejected – and engages our contemporary obsession, that by presenting ourselves as righteous we can fool everyone including God. Isaiah says, 'God will abundantly pardon.' That doesn't mean no accountability: it means in God you can never separate judgement from mercy. Why did we ever let them become separated among us?

As the bedraggled and bewildered chosen people make their way back from Babylon and ask themselves what kind of a society they want to belong to after the trauma of exile, these are the five principles of politics Isaiah offers them. It's about a society where everyone belongs. It's about shared things of enduring value, what Augustine calls 'common objects of love.' It's about building trust. It's about becoming a society others want to join. And it's about seeing the dynamism of giving people a second chance.

Those things seem pretty significant right now because, in a way that's alarming, they're being questioned at the highest level of global politics. Instead of belonging, we find exclusion and expulsion. Instead of enduring value, we have the exaltation of selfishness as a quasi-virtue. Instead of building trust, we have dodgy deals and hostile announcements and predatory declarations. Instead of appropriate envy, we find a world shuddering in horror. Instead of shrewd judgement and abundant mercy, we have instant judgement and no mercy. Isaiah points us to exactly what's wrong and precisely what needs to be different.

But I suspect Isaiah might be just as concerned about what's happening to our denomination. After all, doing justice, as we saw at the beginning, isn't primarily about denouncing others but modelling the good ourselves. I suspect Isaiah might be alarmed at a church that struggles to understand that everyone belongs, that seems captivated by numbers and money and public perceptions rather than the things of enduring value, that savagely turns on its leaders and undermines trust, that's becoming anything but a community others want to join, and that's forgotten God's abundant mercy in a frenzy of denouncing and cancelling.

Isaiah is pointing us not just to a politics for returning exiles, but to God's politics, a politics of world and church, where we seek as earnestly as possible to replicate and anticipate the joy of communion we long to share eternally. Isaiah isn't a perfectionist: these words are shaped by the humiliation and deprivation of exile and point to a sustainable and realistic future. They're as true today as when they

were spoken and written. And they're framed as an invitation: come, come, come, hear, listen, listen, see, seek, return. That invitation has perhaps never been as vital and urgent as now.

I hope this is a sermon that speaks for itself; but if not, I'll just highlight some of the moves I'm making. I start by assuming we're already engaged in politics, that we've already made commitments, and those commitments are rooted in what we understand as the normative position of God's people in the Old and New Testaments. I then make the preacher's assumption that through the text assigned for today the Holy Spirit is giving us everything we need to be the church. That may not be identical with everything we need to become the government, but it assumes our calling may not be to become, speak for, or advise the government – instead, to be the church. The major decision after that is not to name anyone: this isn't a personal attack on a particular politician, and if everyone has one in mind, it's more powerful to withhold the name. The art of preaching is about letting the congregation do some of the work themselves. Then finally, the sermon seeks to do two things most of my sermons do: to renew the church's sense of what it means to be the church, in this case rediscovering the appropriate politics of the church; and calling on the church to look in the mirror rather than be content to bewail and lament and denounce others. The sermon was preached only a few months after the forced resignation of Archbishop Justin Welby, and again the veiled reference to that sad event is more effective because it's not mentioned explicitly.

I now turn from the general to the specific. I imagine every preacher here will have wrestled over the three years of the Gaza bombardment about how to talk about the slaughter and its origins. The sermon I offer here was preached on Advent Sunday 2024, 14 months after the war began. The reading was the final scene in the story of Samson, where he slays more in his death, including himself, than he did in his life.

Eyeless in Gaza

Advent Sunday

A sermon preached at St Martin-in-the-Fields on December 1, 2024 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Of all the challenges of the last year, the one I've most frequently been approached to respond to is the horror of what's taking place in Gaza. I want to try to understand what's happening in Gaza and what it means for Christians.

When I sit with a person in distress and listen to their grief, I often start the conversation by saying 'Where does the story begin?' How you understand Gaza is significantly shaped by when you assume the story begins. Those who believe the destruction of Gaza is necessary and defensible, even appropriate and just, tell a story that begins on October 7, 2023, with the hideous slaughter of 1200 Israelis, and traces back to 1941, with the inception of the Holocaust, in which six million Jews were murdered, and beyond that to centuries of persecution of the Jews, leading to the inception by the Hungarian Theodore Herzl of the First Zionist Congress in 1897, which began to organise for what in 1948 became the State of Israel.

By contrast, those who see the death of tens of thousands of Palestinians in recent months as monstrous and indefensible tell a story that begins perhaps in 1995, with the assassination by a right-wing Israeli of Yitzhak Rabin, the signatory of the Oslo accords and the last man with the conviction and influence to deliver a secure Israel alongside a valid Palestinian state, and the subsequent extinction of all realistic hope for a future for Palestinians, resulting in increasingly extremist governments in the Occupied Territories. That story would trace back to 1967 with the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and subsequent annexation of the Golan Heights, to 1948 with the Nakba (or disaster) that followed the inception of the State of Israel, and to 1917 with the Balfour Declaration by which the British government decreed the creation of a Jewish homeland on Palestinian territory.

Why is this conflict so deeply problematic, compared say to the Syrian Civil War of 2012-17, where casualties were ten times higher, or the Second Congo War of 1998-2002, where deaths were a hundred times higher? Two secular reasons stand out. First, Jews are a race as well as a religion. As a racial group, their influence draws admiration but also sometimes fear and suspicion. The legacy of the Holocaust is of indefinite worldwide significance. The fate of modern Israel has been yoked to that of America almost since the state was founded. When Israel is in turmoil, America and to a large extent the West is in turmoil – to a degree perhaps beyond that in relation to any other non-European country. Second, the Palestinian cause is among the most widely recognised of longstanding international injustices, and its open wound is kept in vision by a host of movements globally, well beyond ethnic or regional alliances. While some of these organisations are deplorably antisemitic, the movement as a whole is rooted in a quest for liberation and dignity.

But for Christians the issues go beyond these two more general factors. For Christians, the story begins in Genesis and zeroes in on Romans 9-11. In Genesis 12, God pledges to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham's descendants; and in Genesis 15, God says, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates.' It's not clear to what extent these promises are modified

by the exile. Nonetheless in Romans, Paul insists that God's faithfulness to Israel is irrevocable. We cannot trust a God who goes back on such a covenant. Furthermore, Jesus was a Jew. He lived in Palestine and died in Jerusalem. These are holy places, to Christians, Jews and Muslims. And the church has persecuted Jews for most of its history, creating the circumstances that made the creation of the State of Israel necessary. Meanwhile there've been Christians living in the Holy Land continuously since the first century. And those Christians, like everyone whose ancestors have lived in the Holy Land all that time, are Palestinians. Christians in the West who feel a sense of identity with and loyalty to the State of Israel on grounds of faith or guilt invariably forget that many Palestinians are Christians – indeed Anglicans. They're as Anglican as St Martin-in-the-Fields. So Christians are hamstrung to criticise Israel, because the church's history of antisemitism is inextricable from the rise of Zionism. But their solidarity in the communion of saints lies with their fellow members of the body of Christ in the Holy Land, including Gaza.

I imagine everyone here has occasionally, often or permanently averted their gaze from Gaza because it's too distressing to behold the agony of bombardment, of hunger, cold and hostility without food, medicine shelter, let up or any end in sight. But it's important to perceive that what's happening is actually not just a military strategy or diplomatic policy but a theological shift. Israel positioned itself from 1948 as a David surrounded by the Goliath of the Arab world, punching beyond its weight and glad to narrate as miracle its triumphs in 1967 and 1973. It welcomed the world's sympathy and admiration, as a plucky and nimble cat, leaping and dodging the assaults of the snarling dogs around it. But gradually, from the Camp David settlement with Egypt in 1978 to the easing of relations with the United Arab Emirates in 2020, Israel was losing enemies while the Palestinians were running out of friends. Israel morphed from being David to being Goliath, while the Palestinian leadership in Gaza became increasingly desperate. But at this point the theological stance changed. Due to electoral fragility, the Israeli cabinet became populated not just by committed Zionists who believed passionately in the validity of the State of Israel, but by supremacists who see Jews not as humbly called to be a blessing to all the families of the earth but instead as positively superior to other races and nations. This is something very different from a devotional conviction that God will preserve the Jews. It's an insistence that Jews have an innate mastery of the earth and should anticipate their destiny as its leaders and guides. The Old Testament knows of no such conviction.

With this leadership, the State of Israel has set aside the world's abiding guilt, genuine sympathy, and consequent acceptance of the right of Israel to defend itself in the face of the Goliath of surrounding enemies, and gone to a place where its actions become hard for even its friends to uphold. Just as in the book of Esther it seems the Jews resolve that, since God won't help them, they must take matters into their own hands, so it appears the current Israeli cabinet has decided neither God nor the United States, still less the United Nations, will be its saviour, and it must consequently destroy everything that poses a threat. What began as a legitimate project of freeing the hostages and disentangling the hostile forces in Gaza from the general population seems to have turned into an unachievable quest to eradicate everything that might ever imperil Israel in the future. The result is that precious few of the 254 hostages have been freed, while antagonism has been seared into the Palestinian soul, guaranteeing hostility for generations to come. If this comes from theological conviction, it portrays a God it's hard to respect, let alone worship; while if it comes from military strategy, it seems destined to perpetuate conflict for decades to come. Israel had the world's sympathy on October 7, yet has jettisoned that goodwill – just as America did after 9/11. Of course, this direction of the Israeli government is not the position of all or even most Israelis; but in the horror at October 7, it can be hard to separate wisdom and faith from fury and fear.

What needs to happen now? This question has a specific and a general answer. The specific answer is that those bankrolling and arming the battle like America and Qatar need to bring about a cessation of hostilities, during which they can broker the return of the remaining hostages, a commitment from Hamas that it will not rearm with the intent of perpetrating another October 7-style attack, a withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, and the influx of humanitarian aid and reconstruction. Wars only continue when it's in at least one party's interests to pursue them; inducements need to be made to assert larger interests that only peace can advance.

The more general answer to the question 'What needs to happen now?' is a series of platitudes that should go without articulating but it seems still need to be said. Jews must be able to live without fear of massacre or subtler forms of oppression and threat. The world has to understand that October 7 embodied the worst fear of Jews everywhere – like a ritual enactment of a total nightmare – and recognise the trauma of that day has littered with landmines all reasoned paths to peace. Yet Palestinian aspirations to dignity, respect, humanity, and life itself are not diminished by the horrifying actions of extremists. It's hard to imagine any peace emerging that does not involve Palestinians having an identity and security and economy that comes through an independent geographical state. Better ideas may exist; but they have yet to appear in 75 years of imagining. Unless progress is made on this agenda, there will be no soil in which moderate Palestinian leadership can grow, and Palestinian authorities will be at the mercy of foreign backers that may not have their best interests at heart. The international community must gather its energies around these objectives. The foregoing seven sentences may seem

obvious; but they've all almost disappeared in the rage and dismay of the last 14 months, so I've taken the time to say them again.

> We all have a choice. We can invest in sustained practices of making relationships across difference, seeking understanding amid diversity, pursuing just processes with rigour, holding authorities to account, upholding equitable agreements, building durable institutions, ensuring suppressed voices are heard, and insisting no one is left behind. Or we can accept that there'll be explosions of rage and violence, in which power and might crush the vulnerable and truth and justice are cast aside. The first approach doesn't have a lot of doves, twigs, rainbows, or soft-focus reunions. But it's the basis for all the other social goods we seek and enjoy – and that, right now in Gaza, are nowhere to be found. Ephesians says of Jesus, 'He is our peace.' He breaks down the wall of hostility. He does it by his presence among us. By his attention to us. By his entering our impenetrable mysteries and delighting in our diverse company. By his participation in our struggle and partnership in our endeavours. By his enjoyment of our whole being. This is his glory. His cross tells us peace is not the easy road. But his resurrection shows us peace is our ultimate destiny. Let us commit this Advent to study the paths that lead to peace. Because Gaza is showing us the unspeakable alternative. And if we don't turn around the misery of Gaza, the horror of Gaza will become the reality of all of us.

Again, let me make just a few comments about what I was trying to do in this sermon. My congregation has within it around 15 people for whom Gaza galvanised a political consciousness in a way that seemed to obscure all other political questions. It seemed to result in demands for the church to make statements and take positions, some of which seemed to me and to the church council unhelpful and more about the heart than the head. The result was that a lot of anger was directed at the church leadership rather than at the targets where it perhaps better belonged. But at the same time there were a smaller number, perhaps four or five, who believed any criticism of Israel constituted antisemitism and Israel, despite being a secular state, was the focus of God's unbreakable promises and should be supported come what may. So speaking into this situation was challenging. What I tried to do was to tell the story from the two contrasting points of view, and try to explain why this particular moment was so significant, beyond the obvious fact of the slaughter. What I believe the church can add is a genuinely theological perspective on the terrible events, one that doesn't dismiss Genesis as irrelevant, but takes seriously the place of the Jews in God's heart. I didn't please everybody – several people walked out, I suspect before they heard the second half of the sermon. But I did try to enrich the conversation and renew the congregation's understanding of its own calling, beyond powerlessness and anger.

In conclusion, in a quest to enrich political preaching, offer in humility the following guidelines about taking on controversial subjects.

1. Get a reputation for your understanding and insight in scriptural exegesis, theological nuance, and pastoral depth before you take on edgy, divisive subjects outside the regular theological orbit. People really want to know about how to forgive and what to hope for when they die more than they want to know what a politician should be doing about climate change. Remember a sermon is almost always about God. Revelation is about the new thing that God is showing us. Sermons are about revelation. So a sermon is about the new thing God is showing us – who God is, who we are, how the two are inextricably linked, and what to do about it.
2. Don't take on a big, weighty subject (like Gaza) more than one time in ten. And don't keep on and on about the same things. To make every sermon an attack on a political leader isn't prophetic: it's boring and predictable. And it's the fact that it's boring and predictable that demonstrates it's not the gospel, rather than its politics. The gospel is never boring and predictable.
3. Don't be a 'Saturday night preacher' – show your edgy sermon to trusted critics who will be able to suggest ways your deepest points may be more clearly heard and enable you to jettison material where your heart has overruled your head; and to those preparing music and prayers so a rounded perspective can be presented in the liturgy as a whole. Do your best to gauge the views of a dozen diverse congregation members in advance, to assess their fears and learn from their own investment in the issue, integrating their wisdom anonymously as appropriate.
4. Publicise your sermon theme in advance through website, email and social media, so that those for who the issue is sensitive (e.g. on an issue such as abortion, should their life experience touch on it significantly) can keep their distance if they want or need to.
5. Avoid 'glancing blows' – i.e. don't make stray references to big subjects in sermons that distract from whatever else you're saying and can't possibly do justice to a complex issue.
6. Don't pretend to be neutral when you're not. Part of what you're modelling is how to be gracious and perceptive even you feel very strongly and are convinced right is on your side. If people are critical, courteously follow up with them and so discover ways in which you might be better able to understand and speak with your people.

7. Remember 'the personal is the political' – i.e. it's more helpful to empower people to reflect on small changes in their lives that together make a big difference than to call on faraway people who aren't listening to change the world all at one go.
8. If you are so passionate about an issue that you can't speak charitably about those who take a different view and can't in any significant way present another perspective than your own, it may be best to handle a difficult subject through a town-hall or open-microphone style meeting than through a sermon.
9. Never underestimate the diversity of even the most apparently monochrome congregation. Even when you are sure you are speaking 'for us all' you almost certainly aren't, and if you are indeed speaking for us all it may not be necessary to speak at all. You can't call it prophetic if no one's disagreeing with you. Be very careful about using the word 'we.'
10. It shows no insight and no humility to call on everyone else to change but yourself. An argument caries a lot more weight if you say, 'and I recognise to uphold this policy is going to require sacrifices from you and me.' Actions speak louder than words. Don't advocate for more liberal migration laws without at the same time cultivating a policy for welcoming, integrating or supporting migrants.

It's nonsense to make a spiritual-material distinction and thus insist that church is for the soul and politics or public life is for the body. These are distinctions unknown to the Old Testament prophets and unrecognisable to Jesus. The problem with political preaching is not that it's too often too political, it's that it's too often terrible preaching – not about God, not new, not good news, not interesting, little or nothing to do with scripture, not about our own transformation. If we get the preaching right, the politics will most likely look after itself.