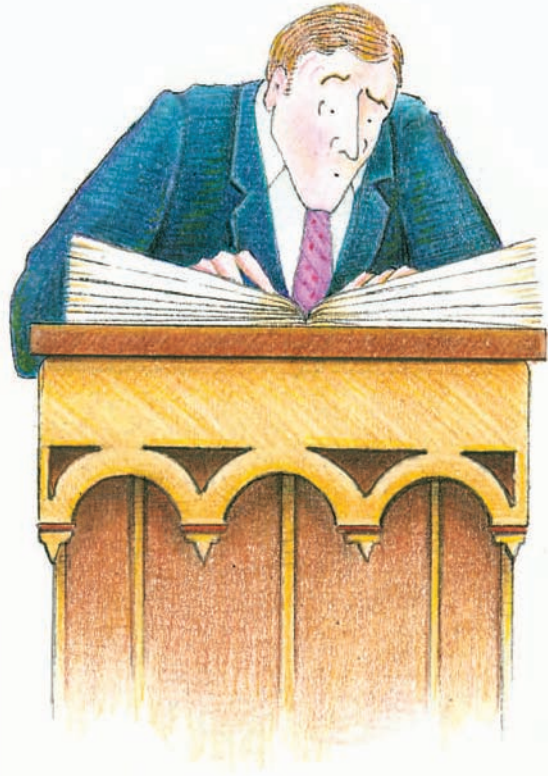


Practice, Practice, Practice

By Charlotte Johnstone



When it came to preparing for Forbearance’s various services, Rev. Hustisford was meticulous—no flying by the seat of his pants for him. Conducting services was perhaps his most visible duty and he felt an obligation to be thoroughly prepared. It was important to him that his services be thematically integrated and consistent with whatever sermon topic he had settled on—hymns, choral music and prayers were chosen with care. He “preached from the text,” plumbing the depths of scripture for homiletic insights pertinent to his parishioners. He was almost always worth listening to—not necessarily theatrical, not inclined to shout or flail, but solid, thoughtful and intellectually grounded. He was a thinking person’s preacher and no one who heard him felt it was time wasted.

Preparation was the key, he believed, and he was of the opinion that practice extended to the lay people chosen to read the Scripture passages, a tradition at Forbearance involving members of the session on a rotating basis. If there was one thing he couldn’t stand, it was for the scriptures to be read badly—and most people, he had discovered to his dismay, didn’t read Scripture passages well. People who could read a story to a child with expression, emphasis and color became strangely flat and vocally pedestrian when standing at Forbearance’s lectern—a voice that could animate Curious George’s

adventures inexplicably became a voice that could manage to make Moses parting the Red Sea sound like just another day at the beach. Some read as if they just wanted to get it over with as soon as possible, a few adopted a curious unctuous tone more suitable for the intoning of an obituary and one even succeeded in reducing the Creation account to something akin to “See Spot. See Spot run.”

There were exceptions, of course. Miss Lily, perhaps because she had been a veteran teacher, was particularly good with the Christmas narrative, telling the story as if for the first time, as if she couldn’t imagine how it would all turn out. And Frank Harper chronicled Good Friday through Easter as a tale replete with suspense, trauma and poignancy—freshly minted and dramatically told. Rev. Hustisford could count on Frank and Miss Lily to do justice to the text every time.

The others, however, were not such a sure thing and, because of that, Rev. Hustisford asked each of the session members, when his or her turn came, to study the text, rehearse the story and practice reading, at least once, into the lectern microphone. Surprisingly, once he explained why it mattered, most people were eager to oblige. The one holdout, however, was Curly Rumbaugh. Possessor of a booming voice and convinced of his considerable oratorical capabilities, Curly was an able

raconteur and popular master of ceremonies—an accomplished ad libber, who was insulted to be asked to rehearse like a junior high school student in front of his teacher.

He declined the offer, saying to Rev. Hustisford, “I’ve been reading the Bible all my life and there isn’t anything in there I can’t handle just fine. When Sunday morning comes, just tell me what you want me to read and I’ll take it from there.”

“Well, I don’t know, Curly,” Rev. Hustisford said. “I’ll call you Friday with the text references so you can be prepared.”

“Aw, don’t bother with that,” replied Curly. “I’ve got a busy weekend coming up and I’ll be hard to reach. I’m telling you—no sweat, piece of cake. Sunday morning is soon enough.”

After thinking about Curly’s response for a few days, Rev. Hustisford abruptly scrapped his well-laid plans for Sunday’s sermon and chose to proceed in another direction entirely. He decided to preach about family, about generations of the known and unknown and about how each was known to God by name even as we are known today. The more he thought about it, the more he liked it.

On Sunday morning, when Curly rushed in with only moments to spare before the service, Rev. Hustisford handed him a slip of paper:

Genesis 46:5–27
1 Chronicles 8:1–28
Matthew 1:1–17

As they entered the chancel, Curly said, “As I told you before—piece of cake.” Rev. Hustisford just smiled.

When it came time for the Old Testament reading, Curly strode to the lectern, flipped open the large lectern Bible, and began to confidently boom out the account of Jacob and his family’s journey to Egypt. He faltered only slightly at verse 9 with “Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron and Carmi,” but he began to realize he was in real trouble as he waded haltingly into the thicket of Jacob’s numerous progeny . . .

The children of Simeon: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar and Shaul . . . The children of Levi: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari . . . Er, Onan, Shelah, Perez and Zerah . . . Ziphion, Haggi, Shuni, Ezbon, Eri, Arodi, Areli . . . Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, Beriah . . . Heber and Malchiel . . . Bela, Becher, Ashbel, Gera, Naaman, Ehi, Rosh, Muppim, Huppim, Ard . . . Jahzeel, Guni, Jezer and Shillem . . .

He recovered slightly at the end with “All the persons of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were seventy,” but he knew that he had more Old Testament to tackle. Plunging on, he turned to Chronicles, where he had to introduce the congregation to, among others, Abihud, Abishua, Shephuphan, Abitub, Elpaal, Ahio, Elienai, Zillethai, Hananiah, Anthothiah, Iphdeiah, Jareshiah, Malchishua, and Merib-baal. By the time he finished his struggle with Jehoaddah, Azmaveth, Bocheru and Eliphelet, Curly was hunched over the lectern like a myope without his glasses trying to read a phone book in Croatian.

He understood that a rhetorical minefield had been laid for him and he desperately wanted to preview the text from Matthew he would be reading just before the sermon, but he knew he couldn’t gracefully haul the big lectern Bible back to his seat next to Rev. Hustisford. He couldn’t believe his own minister had done this to him, but he also knew he couldn’t escape.

“Son of a gun,” he whispered to Rev. Hustisford. “You set me up just because I wouldn’t come in to practice?”

“Might have helped,” Rev. Hustisford muttered. “But, hey, as you said—no sweat, piece of cake. By the way, you’re going to LOVE Matthew.”

And so it was with foreboding that Curly returned to the lectern to slowly work his faltering way through the genealogy of Jesus.

. . . Abraham . . . Isaac . . . Jacob . . . Aminadab . . . Nahshon. . . Rehoboam . . . Abijah . . . Asaph . . . Ahaz . . . Jechoniah the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerrubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim . . . Azor . . . Zadok . . . Achim . . . Eliud . . . and Eleazar the father of Matthan . . .

“OK, you’ve made your point,” Curly told Rev. Hustisford after the service. “I’ll practice before I do this again, but who at Forbearance would know how to say ‘Potiphera’ or ‘Paddan-aram’ or ‘Issachar’?”

“Why, Curly,” Rev. Hustisford said, smiling his most pastoral smile, “I thought you’d never ask.”

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