



For centuries, many Anglicans have taken authority in their church to rest on the “three-legged stool” of Scripture, tradition and reason, a concept whose origins are at least partly traceable to 16th century English theologian Richard Hooker.

PHOTO: MADY70/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Tali Folkins
STAFF WRITER

PREACH IT!

WHEN IT COMES TO SERMONIZING, CANADIAN ANGLICANS HOLD DIVERSE OPINIONS



Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath he taught the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his words had authority.

Luke 4:31-32



It's clear from the gospels that preaching has played a central role in Christian life since the very beginning. In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, preaching has taken on a new significance in many churches; arguably, it's more adaptable than other elements of worship to the internet. But what can we assume about Anglican preaching?

Perhaps not much. Even within the Anglican Church of Canada, diverse answers can be found to some of the most basic questions: Is there a distinctly Anglican style of preaching? How does preaching work—what is it that gives a preacher's words authority? Are Anglicans good at it? What is the importance of preaching in a service?

For centuries, many Anglicans have taken authority in their church to rest on the “three-legged stool” of Scripture, tradition and reason, a concept whose origins are at least partly traceable to 16th century English theologian Richard Hooker. This idea shapes Anglican

preaching, says the Rev. Anna Greenwood-Lee, rector of St. Laurence Anglican Church in the diocese of Calgary and bishop-elect, since Sept. 26, of the diocese of British Columbia.

“We're given permission to use the Bible as a jumping-off point, but it always needs to be in conversation with the tradition, and with reason and with the modern world,” she says. “Scripture is always supposed to be there, but it's not the only thing that's supposed to be there.”

The Rev. Ken McClure, priest-in-charge at the Anglican Parish of Haliburton in the diocese of Toronto, says the three-legged stool gives reason, in particular, a more prominent role in Anglican sermons; the Anglican approach to Scripture means asking questions about it.

“We will always be wrestling with it, arguing with it, in a way that perhaps isn't as exemplified in other traditions, because reason is not so much of a



We are almost charged with the task of looking at the difficult with the inspiring, and seeing what comes of that intellectual journey of faith.

*—The Rev. Ken McClure,
priest-in-charge at the Anglican Parish of Haliburton
in the diocese of Toronto,*



theological virtue outside of the Anglican tradition,” says McClure, whose sermons and songs, via Facebook, have attracted a following from countries around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We are almost charged with the task of looking at the difficult with the inspiring, and seeing what comes of that intellectual journey of faith.”

The role reason plays in Anglican preaching is essential, McClure says, because it’s through this process of asking questions about Scripture that we internalize it.

“That’s what makes Scripture a living thing,” he says. “If we don’t engage with it that way, Scripture becomes just a relic... Reason helps Scripture enter into our lives in ways that we can recognize.”

The role that reason plays in Anglican preaching, McClure says, gives it a unique potential to bring people back to Scripture—including those who drifted away from the church because they were not able to find satisfactory answers to their questions about God.

“I think it has an ability to reach people who have been sitting on the periphery ... and have allowed

their reason to open up questions for them about the traditional messages and proclamations and understandings of Scripture,” he says. “For the last 40 years, there’s been no small amount of those people who have been saying, ‘OK, well I’m out—the dealer folds.’ I think that the Anglican three-legged stool of theology, that approach, has the potential to be able to speak directly to a lot of their concerns, to give them the opportunity to have their questions validated.”

It seems intellectual engagement is something Anglicans expect in their sermons. A [2009 survey](#) of church members in New Zealand found that Anglicans “desired significant intellectual content and discussion of social issues” compared to their counterparts in the Elim Church, a Pentecostal denomination—though the same survey also reported finding that members of both churches responded to sermons in a mostly emotional, rather than cognitive way. (The paper also claimed that research from the previous three centuries had shown that sermons in any case have a “minimal” impact on their listeners!)



Ultimately the people want to know one thing, and they will know it as soon as you open your mouth: Does this woman, does this man know God?

*—The Rev. Michael Knowles,
Anglican professor of preaching at McMaster Divinity College, a
Baptist and interdenominational seminary in Hamilton, Ont.*



This understanding of Anglican sermons isn't universal, however. The Rev. Michael Knowles, an Anglican professor of preaching at McMaster Divinity College, a Baptist and interdenominational seminary in Hamilton, Ont., says he hasn't seen a more contemplative style in Anglican preaching. But the question is complicated, Knowles says, by the fact that Canadian Anglicanism is still struggling to articulate what sets it apart—and until it does this, it will be hard to generalize about Anglican preaching at all.

"I think there is still a debate going on about what is the nature of Anglican identity," he says. "And that being the case, we're not sure where preaching fits.

"The issue is less about 'What's preaching for?' than 'What is the church for?' Because only once we figure out what the church is doing and how the church functions—what it's meant to achieve—only then do we get, 'OK, so preaching can serve that aim.'"

The departure of some of the more evangelical-leaning Anglicans for the Anglican Network in Canada, he says, has left the Anglican Church of Canada relatively more focused on sacraments and social justice than preaching anyway. And churches that are heavy

on sacraments and social justice, he says, "tend to de-emphasize preaching proportionately," because they see the sacraments and the life of the community as the focus of divine action, rather than the preaching of the word.

Meanwhile, theologians continue to debate some of the most basic questions about preaching—how it works and what it's for, Knowles says.

When preaching is taught in seminaries, the focus is on teaching homiletic techniques—how to structure a sermon, for example. But Knowles says he believes the essence of preaching—what makes the difference for the people in the pews—is the knowledge of God.

"Ultimately the people want to know one thing, and they will know it as soon as you open your mouth: Does this woman, does this man know God?" he says.

In the New Testament, Knowles says, one only either enters or receives the kingdom of God—one does not build it. What this means for preaching is that preachers should not see themselves as agents of God.

"The way most preaching, and most ways of construing church, function is that God needs us to do his work for him," Knowles says. "I think that the primary purpose of the church is to worship, and to know God,



PHOTO: FREEDOM STUDIO

“I see the pulpit as a place of weakness, where we in our foolish words and our simplicity simply bear witness to something greater than ourselves, and we literally let Jesus do the heavy lifting.... And to be honest, I think Anglicans have kind of lost sight of that. We think it’s up to us.”

*—The Rev. Michael Knowles,
Anglican professor of preaching at
McMaster Divinity College*

and to celebrate the reality of God in our midst and not to make God happen. I don’t think we make God happen—God makes us happen.”

Part of the Christian knowledge of God, he says, is a radical vulnerability, a radical receptivity, in the knower. It’s the job of the preacher to invite people into this.

“I’m uncomfortable with us as persons of power exercising power over others,” he says. “I see the pulpit as a place of weakness, where we in our foolish words and our simplicity simply bear witness to something greater than ourselves, and we literally let Jesus do the heavy lifting.... And to be honest, I think Anglicans have kind of lost sight of that. We think it’s up to us.”

A highly thought-out sermon is not necessarily a good one, Knowles says.

“We’ve all heard sermons that were terribly clever and they were just non-memorable in the end,” he says. “We’ve also heard sermons that technically sucked, but were luminous because there was something going on here that was bigger than the person.”

Knowles is not alone in believing that Anglicans have room for improvement when it comes to preaching. The



If I'm 15 years old, I ain't going to an Anglican church—I'll be straight up. I'll go to a non-denominational, I'll go to a Baptist or Pentecostal before I enter an Anglican church, just on perception, on how you engage with me.... I think we've missed that mark tremendously.

—The Rev. Steve Greene, rector at St. Luke's, Cambridge, and St. Thomas The Apostle, Cambridge



Rev. Steve Greene, rector at St. Luke's, Cambridge, and St. Thomas The Apostle, Cambridge, in the diocese of Huron, says the church suffers from complacency—especially if it wants to attract new people. There seems a prevalent notion in the church, he says, that people will automatically show up to an Anglican service.

“Unfortunately, we still have that old mindset,” he says. “If I'm 15 years old, I ain't going to an Anglican church—I'll be straight up. I'll go to a non-denominational, I'll go to a Baptist or Pentecostal before I enter an Anglican church, just on perception, on how you engage with me.... I think we've missed that mark tremendously.”

Part of the problem as Greene sees it is that Anglican sermons are too abstract, and they often fail to present the essentials of Christianity, like the presence of sin in the world, and the infinite grace of God.

“It's very disconnected from the world, in a sense,” he says. “I'm thinking sometimes we've watered down the gospel.

“How many preachers have you heard speak about sin? ... How many of us actually take the word of God—whatever reading it is—and say ‘OK, this is happening

today, and we're not speaking on this. We're not fighting for this. We're not living in God's justice.”

Powerful preaching, he says, then moves to grace.

“Then you say, ‘You're redeemed, the shackles of death and sin have been broken by Jesus—now go run in this freedom, go and live this out,’” he says. “Here's grace now, here's this ocean that you can never swim. And it's so deep the Mariana Trench has nothing on it.' Do we actually speak on this, to ease the minds of the people living in shame and guilt to say, ‘We get it, and you can walk in freedom?’”

Part of the problem with Anglican services, Greene says, is that there's too much emphasis on the altar, and not enough on the word, so that sermons are too short.

“Romans 10:17 literally says faith comes by hearing, hearing the word of the good news of Jesus Christ,” he says. “If I'm a 15-year old—or I'm an 85-year old—and I do not know Jesus, I'm not coming to a church because I see an altar. I have no idea what the dude is doing, I have no idea what the guy is wearing or what she's wearing, but as soon as you talk about reconciliation, you talk about repentance, you talk



PHOTO: JAMES COLEMAN/UNSPLASH

about unconditional love, you talk about grace, the person is engaged,” he says. “The preacher speaks on these critical tenets of our faith; that engages them, and they say, ‘OK, now I want to get to the next step.... Who is this Jesus?’”

Greene describes his own preaching style as a “hodgepodge”—a vital ingredient of which is a call-and-response format, in the African-Caribbean and African-North American tradition. It’s essential, he says, for keeping people deeply engaged in the sermon.

Greene’s congregation is not predominantly of African descent, and this interactive approach, he says, was initially startling and seemed overwhelming to some of the people in his pews.

“The first couple of weeks, people were going, ‘What the heck is going on here?’ And they’re understanding, ‘Wow—I’m drinking from the fire hydrant right now,’” he says. “Some people do enjoy it; they’re like, ‘Yeah, OK, I want to get questioned on this. Others are like, ‘Please don’t look at me during the sermon!’”

Greene doesn’t have a script, and if he encounters moments when he’s not moved to speak, he won’t—

because the spirit, he says, can enjoin a preacher to silence as much as to speech.

“Sometimes I’ll stop. And they’ll be like, ‘What was that for?’ I say, ‘Why not? What’s prayer? It’s just a pause in God’s glory.’”

Of course, many Anglicans love the church’s emphasis on the table. Among them is Greenwood-Lee.

“One of the things I appreciate about Anglican worship is that the sermon is not the centerpiece,” she says. “It’s comforting to me that the sermon is not the last word but sacrament and symbol are,” she says. “Ultimately we’re speaking of the unspeakable, and so to have the sacrament after the sermon as the centerpiece puts our words in context.

“Preaching’s important, but I don’t think we should ever have so much hubris that we presume that we can capture the truth and beauty and grandeur of God with words,” she says. “We can point in the direction of that with words, but ultimately we come closest to it with sacrament.”

There’s also a role for the church in providing a place for the sacred—and for silence.



...I don't think we should ever have so much hubris that we presume that we can capture the truth and beauty and grandeur of God with words. We can point in the direction of that with words, but ultimately we come closest to it with sacrament.

—Rev. Anna Greenwood-Lee, rector of St. Laurence Anglican Church in the diocese of Calgary and bishop-elect, since Sept. 26, of the diocese of British Columbia



"There's no shortage of noise and words in the world," she says. "I think we need to acknowledge that and I think there's probably a movement toward shorter [sermons]. People need more silence, more sacrament, more beauty; probably more music, more space, than they need to be talked at."

Like Greene, however, Greenwood-Lee also finds fault in the "one-wayness" of conventional Anglican preaching.

"One of its downfalls is the tendency to be talking at people instead of talking with people," she says. "The sermon, I think, at its best, should be a conversation starter instead of the last word."

Greenwood-Lee has attracted [national news coverage](#) for the two-minute sermons she has been posting on Twitter since last March. She began tweeting her mini-sermons after a friend suggested it, and was initially skeptical.

"I wasn't sure the wider population was interested in sermons," she says. "But I've been surprised by how many people on Twitter actually watch them."

Some of her tweeted homilies have drawn close

to 10,000 views. The ones that touch on political issues, she says, tend to get the most.

The sermons, Greenwood-Lee says, are an important way for her to get the church's message to people—one she believes society still needs to hear.

"I think the church needs to rebuild its public voice and its social legitimacy," she says. "There are so many people who are just never going to walk into the door of a church—especially with COVID. But even before that, so many people had written us off as irrelevant. I think that there is a place for getting the voice of the church back out into the public sphere. And we do have something to say about the issues of our day, words of prophecy, and words of comfort and words of challenge."

Greenwood-Lee says it's a misconception that good sermons will bring people to the church—especially if they're never heard outside it.

"There are some very fine preachers who have very small congregations!" she says. "We need to get our voice out in the public sphere.... It's our role to be a prophetic voice in the culture, and the society and the world." ■