Fulfilling the Law

Preaching Matthew and Moses
The challenge of connecting with young people

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As a university student I studied on a very small campus with fewer than a couple of hundred students as colleagues and probably fewer than twenty lecturers. One of the lecturers was renowned for his utterly boring approach to his subject. He was a skilled practitioner and had good academic credentials, yet entering his classroom was like entering a twilight zone where the mind wandered and even counting bricks became a chore.

For many, preaching to a congregation that contains young people may be somewhat similar – except that the preacher stands in my lecturer’s shoes. The uncomfortable shuffling, the glazed looks, the loud whispers demanding to know ‘when this will be finished’ or the heads bowed in prayer to the iPhone betray the fact that, at least in their perception, the young people have entered a twilight zone of their own. If you are like me this is not what we want to happen! However, there is undeniably a challenge in connecting with young people in our preaching. How can we share the great things spoken of in Matthew’s Gospel and the books attributed to Moses in a way that excites and inspires the young people in our midst just as it has excited and inspired us?

In attempting to answer this question, initially I set the parameters of our task by touching on some of the challenges in connecting with young people, then I explore some themes from Matthew’s Gospel that connect with young people. Finally I consider some methods that allow us to connect with the young.

Challenges in connecting with young people

One of the key challenges faced when preaching to young people is that ‘young people’ means many things. The relatively short period of time between birth and the end of adolescence is crammed full of growth and development. One only needs to observe an infant lying beside a toddler, standing beside a pre-schooler or a primary school student or a high school student to see that enormous differences exist between young people whose ages may be separated by only a few years. Whereas adulthood offers a relatively stable progression in growth, infancy, childhood and adolescence are characterised by their instability and by transition.

The natural growth of an infant to adulthood is compounded by personalities and the various roles that young people play as part of their social development. Consequently the preacher must not only ask, ‘where are these young people up to in their development?’ but also ‘who are these young people today?’ This developmental variability should influence preaching by focusing attention on the activities of choosing what material to present and the ways in which it is to be presented. The young people in front of me are not like me! So what is it they need to hear?

We live in an era when the way that people collect, process and act upon information has changed from the not-so-distant past, and is changing almost daily. This rapid and continuing change is particularly noticeable in people born since the early 1980s. One outcome of this emerging reality is that young people are no longer familiar with the genre into which preaching fits. At no other time in their ordinary life are they expected to listen to an extended monologue in which a sustained analysis and exposition of an idea, or in our case text, is presented to them. Young people generally have grown up, or are growing up, in an environment in which text, image and speech are accessed together in a mosaic of information. In this environment young people expect to ‘play’ with data and interact with the various sources of that data. Unfamiliarity with the genre of preaching can lead young people to become easily distracted when listening to a preacher.

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One response to this challenge is to place the onus for maintaining attention back upon the young person. In some regards this is not unreasonable, as boredom and inattention can be traced back to a lack within the bored individual rather than something intrinsic in the surroundings. However, the young people with whom we desire to connect have lived their entire lives immersed in an environment rich in multi-layered sensory stimulation and certain ways of responding to the world. Theirs is a technological world; data comes to them in ‘tweets’, ‘clips’ and interactive ‘wikis’. Although we usually preach in the same language as the young people in our congregations speak, the activity is foreign to them. Consequently, just as we would not expect a visitor from a different land immediately to grasp the nature of an Aussie social event but would initiate them into the event, so we must not underestimate the cultural distance involved when preaching to young people. A degree of initiation into the activity is needed.

Unfamiliarity with the activity of preaching is, in the experience of many young people, compounded by unfamiliarity with the content of preaching. Most young people living in Australia attend church or engage in an activity related to the growth and maintenance of a Christian spirituality so rarely that they have not had opportunity to develop a sense of acquaintance with Scripture. Even young people who have grown up within the church do not generally have the Biblical literacy to be able to participate intuitively in the intertextual, historical and theological process required of a well-crafted sermon. For preachers, the challenge presented by low Biblical literacy is to uncover how to present the fullness of Scripture without assuming prior knowledge. This can be difficult, particularly when one is preaching to a congregation with different levels of Biblical literacy. The result of not doing this, however, is that those with a low Biblical literacy can ‘switch off’ when the intertextual, historical and theological connections being assumed in the sermon are not understood.

To conclude this exploration of the challenges of preaching to young people we need to consider briefly the aim of preaching. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore fully the nature and dynamic range of preaching. I employ the *via negativa* to try to place what we are doing when we preach within a framework that allows us to address some of the challenges outlined above.

**Preaching**

- is not lecturing, in that it is not merely the orderly presentation of information;
- is not merely an intellectual activity, yet it is not merely an emotive or affective activity either;
- is not a true conversation in that each member of the congregation is not free to interject and shape the direction of the sermon at any time, yet it is not an activity of the individual as it assumes that sermon delivery is to a congregation;
- is not simply a demonstration of our exegetical skills, yet is not an opportunity for unattached ‘ideas’ to roam loose; and
- is not detached from the run of everyday life.

In this framework, ‘connection’ becomes a key rubric by which we may understand our task, particularly as we approach preaching to young people. In spite of its somewhat artificial nature, preaching is primarily about connecting: connecting people with God, connecting the world of today with the Kingdom of Heaven, even connecting ourselves as preachers ‘sent of God’ with those to whom we are sent. If this is so, the methods we employ as preachers must be examined to see that they achieve their goal.

**Themes that connect**

Having sketched some of the challenges in connecting our preaching with young people we now turn our attention to some themes, particularly from Matthew’s Gospel, that find connection with young people. We touch upon three themes: fulfilment, inclusion and passion.

**Fulfilment**

While the external issues that prompted instability and insecurity in Jesus’ time were quite different from those experienced today by young Australians, we all share an unstable world. By the first century CE the people of Israel had experienced centuries of foreign rule. This was expressed in a longing for the appearance of Messiah. With the coming of Messiah the instability of the world and the subjection of the hopes of Israel as a nation to others would end. This would result in a sense of fulfilment for the people through the fulfilment of the blessings promised in the Abrahamic covenant.
In this context Matthew clearly presents Jesus as Messiah, come as part of the continuous line of blessing initiated by God in the Abrahamic covenant and sealed in the Exodus. Matthew represents Jesus as the rightful heir to the anointing of the Jewish nation and the fulfilment of that anointing. Eleven times Matthew uses the formula of fulfilment (πρόεδρον) to capture the full import of an activity or a saying of Jesus. While the origin and meaning of these statements is contested, it is argued that in placing Jesus so clearly alongside the heritage of Israel in this way Matthew is underlining the nature of promise and fulfilment in the first Testament and drawing our attention to Jesus as the ultimate fulfilment of promise in the second.

Matthew's presentation of Jesus as the prophetic, eschatological fulfilment of God's promise in the world begins with a surprising twist. From the first chapter of the Gospel, Jesus is shown as the fulfilment of God's promise not only to the people of Israel, but also to the world. The genealogy of chapter one of Matthew's Gospel may elicit groans when set as the reading for the day. It is notable, however, for the significant place that surprising people play in the human line that would bring Messiah. The monotonous regularity of the text is broken by people who, we might imagine, should not be included in such august company. Indeed, Tamar, Rahab (masquerading as 'the mother of Boaz'), Ruth and Mary do not conform to the mono-cultural, mono-gender and mono-social stereotype of appropriateness that the rest of the genealogy seems to portray. This example of the inclusion of others in the fulfilment of God's promises is echoed throughout the Gospel as those from outside the people of Israel approach Jesus and are given welcome. Matthew concludes his Gospel with Jesus famously commanding the remnant of his followers to 'go into all of the world' in their disciple-making commission. In this sense Matthew 'book-ends' his narrative with the reminder that Jesus is inescapably Jewish - he is indeed Messiah - but he is also God's 'Yes and Amen' to the promises he has made to the whole world.

Young Australians live in a competitive and often-times vicious world. They have assumed the right to an autonomous life, but also bear the weight of expectation that comes with true autonomy. For many young people the achievement of happiness, found in intimate relationship and positive self worth, is the extent of their dream for life. Yet this dream is based upon the vulnerable foundation of personal ability and opportunity, and on flimsy family and social networks. Within this context an exploration of the sort of comprehensive, robust and universal fulfilment that Jesus provides in the midst of competing pressures and instability can be a winsome and freeing activity.

**Inclusion**

As already demonstrated, inclusion naturally follows the theme of fulfilment. For Matthew it seems that the outcome of the promise/fulfilment complex of the first Testament is inclusion of surprising others. This theme has the potential to touch young people deeply. I have already noted that young people bear competing desires. They desire to be able to make their own choices in life as autonomous individuals yet desire to be connected to others in a deep and significant way even as they live in an unstable world. This means that the very relationships they desire are subject to extreme fragility and their own dispositions are shot through with vulnerability. They yearn for the sort of relationship in which they are fully included. Similarly, from an early age young people are attuned to injustice and the cause of those 'on the outside,' the other. Ironically one of the reasons young people give for having little patience with the Christian churches and, I suspect as a corollary, our preaching is perceived intolerance of the other.

I have suggested that Matthew has given us ample material from which to draw lively discussion regarding the possibility of inclusion into the realm of God's promise and fulfilment. Yet the evangelist pushes us to the inescapable conclusion that the inclusion on offer is a particular sort of inclusion, and the community into which one may be included is a particular sort of community. Although Matthew paints a vivid picture of the possibility of even the most other of people finding a place in the promise and fulfilment of God's Kingdom, he does not pull any punches when presenting the demands upon those within the community. Jesus' requirement for the righteousness of a true disciple to 'surpass even that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law' (Matthew 5:40) and to 'be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48) indicates no mere laissez faire unity but inclusion into the community for whom the righteousness of God was the rallying point. This is indeed the community formed thorough the promise/fulfilment activity of the God who is declared 'perfect' in Moses' Leviticus. At face value this seems to be antithetical to the very cry to unity I am claiming for young people. It would be disingenuous of me to pretend that at one level to proclaim this high bar would meet with rapturous applause and ready acceptance. However, we lose the significant answer to
the deeper yearnings of young people for a just and fulfilling relationship if we refuse to deal with this material in our preaching. Yes, Jesus does seem to say throughout Matthew that inclusion has certain moral consequences and yes, this is a bitter pill for many young (and the truth be told, not-so-young as well) people to swallow. Yet the moral consequence of inclusion is related directly to the constituting person of the community. In affirming the law of the first Testament, but pinning its value to relationship with the righteous one from whom the law flowed, Jesus was able to criticize the empty display and false values of the world manifest in a form of law-keeping that ‘neglected the more important matters of the law-justice, mercy and faithfulness’ (Matthew 23:23). This form of law-keeping was in its way more like a laissez faire unity promoted by a lazy ‘judge nothing-ism’ than like the sort of inclusion being promoted by Matthew. Both the law-keeping criticised by Jesus and the laissez faire unity we may be tempted to preach to young people end up allowing people just like me in. If it was pedantic and self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law whom Jesus had in view then, it is people who will allow me to do my own thing today. Jesus’ concern for justice, his ‘more important matters of the law’, when tied to the persons of the Trinity, become a call to discipleship.

If we are prepared to work patiently and carefully through an exposition of Jesus’ call to God-self with young people, new vistas will emerge not only in their lives but also in our community of faith. As discipleship unfolds within the community hearing the words of Matthew’s gospel, in which the ‘more important matters of the law’ are struggled with and applied, the possibility of inclusion within that community of people who are not like me, that is other, grows. It is the community concerned for the justice of God who will allow other-person-interest to over-ride self-interest, for it is within God that we find the resources to move outside of ourselves and find the great ‘Yes and Amen’ to the world that God has made.

In my experience, arriving at this conclusion with young people can be one of the most exciting experiences we are privileged to share in ministry. It seems counter-intuitive, but grasping the utterly committed call to discipleship emanating from the Gospel of Matthew frees a person, and in this case a young person, to transcend themselves. Far from constricting horizons in mere law-keeping, to yearn after the things of God allows the creative potential of the Divine to break forth in a life; in a sense it allows true humanity. But what of failure to live up to this call? What happens when ‘the devil and all his works, the empty display and false values of the world, and the sinful desires of the flesh’ prove too difficult to withstand?

**Passion**

The final theme, passion, speaks to these concerns. If fulfilment and inclusion are one side of the coin, if they set a high bar and hold forth the promise of comfort in an uncomfortable world, then passion speaks to the flip side. By passion I am referring to several things: the need for young people to find passion, to find something to set their hearts upon; The Passion, although it is not as pronounced as in Mark’s Gospel (it could be said that Matthew’s is a passion narrative with an extended introduction since the weight of almost the last half of the Gospel is heading towards Jesus’ suffering and death); or a meaning of passion that combines the two, not in an idea but in a person – Jesus, the man of passion.

Young people, particularly as they move through adolescence, are ‘hardwired’ to develop affection for things. I am sure that we can all imagine some young person with an obsessive attachment to something. Maybe we imagine the teenager with the bright red hair, studiously torn clothes, sneer and passion for punkish music. Maybe we imagine the ‘horsey girls’ who wish that The Saddle Club was real life and not a television show. Maybe we imagine the Buffy/Twilight devotees swooning over the pallid blood sucking hunk, or maybe we imagine the boy who can only speak in binary code. Neuroscientists have found that during adolescence the brain is particularly active in recruiting the emotions to help a young person set their heart on something or someone, and that the passions set at that age endure for life. In a real way young people are crying out with the band Queens of the Stone Age, ‘I want something I can die for to make it beautiful to live’.

In Matthew’s Gospel we have the perfect opportunity to put Jesus as the man of passion under the microscope. We may present him not simply as an object of study, but as a person worthy of our affection. We have already noted that, from the first chapter, Matthew is concerned to locate Jesus within the prior work of God as the ‘Yes’ to all divine promises. We have also noted that Jesus calls those who would follow him to follow him into the ‘Amen’ of God’s Kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven with its just ethic derived from the God who is perfect. But across the Gospel we also see Jesus make his triumphant journey through the existing people of God acting as Yeshua Ben David – Messiah. We see him setting his kingdom aright, feeding
his hungry people, driving sickness out of the land, banishing the forces of
evil, confronting religiosity that would bind rather than free, teaching with
authority rather than simple nuance. We see this climaxing in his righteous
suffering as the Son of God (Matthew 27:54) who did not stay dead but rose
and went ahead of his people (Matthew 28:7). Already we have seen how,
within the death of this ‘Man of Passion’, both final ritual desecration and
the possibility of cleansing and restoration are found. While not wanting
to drive a Pauline theme roughshod through Matthew, we cannot help but
see the paradox of God’s grace being found in the midst of justice, poured
out on, in and through Jesus the Messianic Son of God. In this real person
we can discover the ‘someone’ who is worthy for us to follow as the bearer
of the Kingdom of Heaven and the ‘someone’ who can be trusted to provide
inclusion in the Kingdom. Was it not Jesus who said, ‘come unto me all who
labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11:28)?

For young people seeking to set their affections on something true
and beautiful, the potential for fulfilment and the hope of inclusion in the
just society that we preach must be held together by this person. If we do
not hold out Jesus the passionate, then the promise of fulfilment becomes
wishful thinking or anemic self-help and the hope of justice and inclusion
becomes either unattainable law-keeping or a loose and ultimately abstract
laissez faire unity. In Jesus, fulfilment and inclusion cohere and we can offer
not simply notions about life, but the substance of life itself. Indeed we have
‘someone we can die for who does make it beautiful to live’.

Methods that connect

Having thought about some themes from Matthew that connect with young
people, we now leave the Gospel to think a little about the mechanics of
preaching to young people. We touch on these aspects: how developmental
issues can and should affect our preaching, some issues to do with our
current context and the relationship between complexity and profundity.

Developmental issues

The rapid growth and development young people undergo makes it vitally
important that we know the congregation to whom we are speaking. Whereas
an older, more developmentally established congregation may be more like
you or me as preacher, and thus more likely to share our hopes, dreams, fears
and assumptions, a younger rapidly growing group will almost certainly be

concerned with different things. It can be helpful to read literature dealing
with growth and development in children and adolescents. However this
will only give a theoretical grasp of what your young people may be like,
so do not get caught up in it. Be curious about the young people in your
congregation. What do they do? What are their passions? What do they
fear? What do they spend money on? One does not need to be young to
inquire, but engaging in this sort of curious observation and engagement
is a matter of the will.

I first became aware of an adult who put himself out to find out about
adolescents when a teenager myself. The deputy headmaster of my school
had been called out of retirement to provide some mentoring support and
expertise to an otherwise-inexperienced staff. I recall that although this
teacher was most unlike us, he was the one whom we respected and found
compelling. I learned that each Saturday morning he would watch the
music video program we all watched on television, not because he liked it
but because it gave him a window into our world.

When addressing young people it is tempting simply to water down a
‘proper’ or ‘adult’ sermon. However, we must not assume that young people
are mini-adults. They have particular challenges and ‘life tasks’ which they
are addressing and therefore different things they must engage with or dif-
ferent ways they may engage in the life of faith if they are to grow well. The
other side of these different needs is that young-people can and do offer
fresh insight and vitality to the learning and faith relationship. They have
an amazing ability to pay attention while not paying attention and to grasp
big concepts. In my desire for the young people who made up the youth
group in my first charge to grasp a sense of the majesty of what God has
done in Jesus, I would get worn down and discouraged by the apparent lack
of response to my teaching. It was then a great comfort to me when many
months later they would express something I had taught them, but I was
sure that they had ignored. So if your sermon does not seem to connect
in spite of your best efforts, do not despair. Young people have their own
needs, but they also have amazing capacities!

Contextual issues

As we consider preaching to young people we must also think about how
contextual factors influence the effectiveness of our sermons. Young people
are unfamiliar with the genre of preaching. There is no other time in a young
person's life when they are expected to sit still and listen to a monologue. If we want to keep young people with us as part of the community of faith, sharing the preached message, we also need to consider how the sermon is presented. Aspects of preaching such as length, format and even number of parts may be the subject of experimentation to find the optimal mix for the congregation. As an example, it may be possible to present the sermon in two parts: a creative 'kids talk' and a shorter 'sermon'.

Following their unfamiliarity with the physical demands of listening to preaching, young people have become accustomed to having the ability to 'play' with the information they receive. In most spheres in which they operate young people can choose the medium through which they receive information, can move forward or back in the logical chain of thought, and can even react to and contribute to the body of information. In simple terms young people interact with the information that is being presented to them. Preaching is not simply the presentation of information. As we think about the way we expect young people to engage with us as preachers we also need to think about how they expect to digest and ruminate upon what it is we say.

I have found it helpful to remember that preaching comes within the context of worshipful life. At times the sermon can be overplayed and the package of corporate worshipful life underplayed. While preaching is vital, it is part of a package that carries the opportunity to teach, encourage, confront and inspire in many different ways.

'Ooh think of the thinks we can think!' Finally, when preparing to preach to young people do not mistake complexity with profundity or, to put it a different way, do not mistake simplicity for 'simplistic-is-ity'. Although young people are on an accelerated phase of growth and development and although they may not yet have the capacity to express grand abstractions, it is a mistake to underestimate their ability to capture profound thoughts. Rather, when connecting with young people be excited by the possibilities for them to explore the people, themes and concepts of Matthew as they bring their fresh eyes, forthright questioning and even their low Biblical literacy to bear. There are so many 'thinks we can think' together (to use the title of Dr Seuss' book), allowing Jesus the man of passion to shape their growing spirituality.

Conclusion

I return to the story from my university days about my notoriously boring lecturer. One day he outdid himself. In fact he outdid just about all of the lecturers. We were walking into the dreaded twilight zone when the smell of freshly roasted chicken wafted into our poor, underfed student nostrils. At the front of the room stood our lecturer calmly tearing apart and eating the chicken. We sat down wondering what was going on and he began lecturing, eating the chicken piece by piece. Was he going to share it? Did he forget his lunch? Why on earth was he doing this? The lecture was about the myoglobin and protein levels in different types of muscle fibre. Just so you know, white fibres have less protein and myoglobin and twitch slowly, whereas the fast twitch fibres have higher concentrations, are dark and so taste sweeter. You can tell this when you eat a chicken; taste and see! Ask me about his other lectures and I would not have a clue what he taught us.

Unlike his other lectures, this week our teacher had thought about what he wanted to convey and about how to engage us effectively. He proceeded to connect with us. You may not want to start each sermon by devouring a roast chicken (I'm not even sure which Matthean passage would lend itself to this device) but thinking about your young people and how to connect them with the great person and the great themes of which Matthew writes may take you there!