

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 20th June 2021

There are lots of things you can learn in Church, and one of them is the very fine art of sleeping through someone speaking! In Church, they call that a sermon, of course, but the survival techniques are the same as they might be for the speech at a Rotary Club or a regional sales meeting. But, a word of caution here – the learning can be dangerous because there is nothing a preacher or a lecturer or an after dinner speaker dreads more than the sight (or worse, the sound) of someone sleeping through every syllable of poignant prose.

Believe me – I am speaking from experience here!

In my first parish, in the village of Neilston, there was a delightful lady called Miss Nellie Cunningham. Nellie had worked all her days in the local thread mill, and her wee house in one of the mill rows was pristine. Every morning of the week, including Sundays, she would be up polishing and cleaning before the rest of the world had surfaced. And every Sunday morning, in her seat in the gallery to the right of the pulpit, Nellie would fall asleep during the sermon! In those days, the Beadle would dim the sanctuary lights just as the sermon began, and no sooner was I in full flow, than Nellie closed her eyes and drifted off into the land of nod.

One morning, Nellie gave us quite a start, as, when the sermon was over, the lights back on, and the organist began to play the introduction to the next hymn, Nellie didn't rouse. Betty MacPherson, who sat beside her in the pew, shook her head at me. We thought Nellie had died – but with a gentle shake, she roused from her deep slumbers, stood up and joined in the hymn!

Nellie did say to me on one occasion as she left, “Mr Aitken, I want to assure you that when I close my eyes, I am not sleeping. I hear every word you say.”

I wasn't quite convinced of her assurance!

The best folk to talk about the art of nodding off are choir members. Especially in churches where the Choir is up front right behind the pulpit for everyone to see. To do it up there in the chancel, you have to be good at it.

Graham Girdwood was a past master at it in the Bass Section of the Choir at St Columba in Ayr. He put his right hand across his forehead, and his right elbow on his right knee – a wee bit like the sculpture called “The Thinker” by Rodin! It worked moderately well, but I was always rather afraid that if he dozed too deeply, he could pitch himself forward and find himself lying across Isobel Kelly's lap in the Contralto section!

The Revd Cameron Gibson, an Ayrshire man who was Minister at Nairn Old Parish Church a few years ago, had been a vet before he felt called to Ministry. Once, while discussing the question of euthanasia, he remarked, “When I was a vet, I used to put animals to sleep every day.”

To which someone promptly responded, “Now he only does it on Sunday mornings!”

One of my housebound members in the North Parish Church in Girvan told me one day when I was visiting that she did so enjoy getting the tapes of our church services to listen to at home. “I love to listen to the services when I am tucked up in bed at night,” she said, “many a night I drift off to sleep at the sound of your voice.”

I believe that she meant her words to be a sincere compliment, bless her, but, at the same time, I was very humbled to discover that my preaching served as the equivalent of a sleeping pill or a warm glass of milk!

In Church circles, there is a whole folklore around people sleeping through the sermon. These include comments such as, “If all the people who sleep through sermons in church were laid end to end, they would be a lot more comfortable!”

Have you ever fallen asleep in Church?

I think that if we are brutally honest, most of us would have to say that we have been there, and we have done that.

Do you remember seeing an item on the BBC News a few years ago when Pope Benedict XVI was caught on camera dozing off during a Mass on a visit to Malta?

In a Glasgow church there were two ladies who sat in the back pew every Sunday morning and as their Minister droned on for half an hour, inevitably one of them would fall fast asleep and waken just as he was finishing. One particular Sunday, however, she woke while he was still laying forth.

“Is he no finished yet?” she asked her friend.

“O aye, he finished a while ago,” came the reply, “but he canny stoap!”!

You know, I have a strong feeling that it is not what the minister or the speaker says that is important – it is what goes on in your head. Even a deadly dull presentation can turn into something creative if you turn on the imaginative juices and think of all the things that the Minister might have said about his subject.

Dull Ministers can't be dull all by themselves.

They need dull congregations to accomplish that.

Similarly, inspiring preachers can't be inspiring by themselves.

They need imaginative listeners.

I have always been convinced over the years that a congregation gets the minister it deserves!

I have witnessed that truth again and again!

So, pray for your Minister, pray for him or her as they sit at their study desks, preparing the sermon for a Sunday morning, that God will use their words to rouse and encourage and strengthen and comfort their listeners. Pray for yourself, that you will listen with concentration.

Some Sundays, of course, you are utterly worn out and maybe what you need more than anything else is a few minutes of peaceful shut-eye.

In that case, dear friends, it is perfectly ok to sleep.

But try not to sit in the front pew.

And please don't snore!

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister