

Seeing it for yourself

Countless Christians read their Bible every day without it doing them very much good. Why is this? It is because there is always some distance between the print in the Book and the experience of their souls. The Word on the page does not become the Word in them. This is tragic, because there is an intimate connection between the Word in me and my becoming a spiritual person (see Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18-19).

Imagination

When we understand something, when we really grasp it, we say 'I see.' This is no mere accident of language. This is what actually happens. We see something in our mind, although it is not detectable by the physical senses. We picture it. We form a mental image of it. It is an experience we call imagination.

Sometimes the picture we form does not correspond with the reality we are considering. This is because our understanding of it is either defective or incomplete, or because the subject in mind is so new to us that we have no memories to draw on which will help us to make the mental image we need. It is also because our imagination, like all God-given faculties, has been spoiled by the Fall.

But this does not mean that we should stop using our imagination. In fact we can't, even if we try. There will always be mental images in our minds. We can't stop them. So we had better make sure that they are the right ones and that they correspond with the truth. It is time to stimulate our imagination along better lines.

Imagination and Bible reading

The believer who understands the importance of imagination becomes inseparable from his Bible. He finds, yet once more, that the Heavenly Book is different from every other book he has ever read. Its narratives are told in the simplest language, and are free from the exaggerations and excessive descriptions which are found in uninspired literature. But just enough detail is given to excite his imagination. Nothing more. In this way, as he reads, he sees the incident for himself, and in a way that no one else sees it. His reading therefore becomes an intensely personal experience.

I recall once being in total darkness. There was nothing to be seen and everywhere was silent. Then I heard a terrifying voice which was also too gentle to describe. It said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light! There before my eyes was the whole universe and, plain to see, the earth without form and empty. What awe and wonderment took hold of me as I witnessed the six days of creation!

Of course, I was not really present when creation took place (see Job 38:4). But by meditating on the Holy Book until I could see what it was saying, I knew the humbling wonder of being a spectator as the Eternal spoke all things into existence. God, who gave us the precise words of his revelation, has also given us the power to imagine. As long as it is his Word alone which directs us, it is safe and right to use our imagination. And so it was that my soul was nourished by the first page of Holy Writ and filled with dread and joy.

Feeding the five thousand

It is a long time since I felt any jealousy towards those who witnessed the feeding of the five thousand. This is because John 6:1-14 is in the Book of Books. I have seen the crowds, the green grass, the perplexed disciples, the small boy, the sitting groups, the satisfied faces and the twelve basketfuls of crumbs. I have heard the expressions of hunger, the Lord's commands and giving of thanks, and the crowd wanting to make him king. I have felt the warm sun on my arms, the grass underneath me, and the people jostling. I have tasted the bread and fish. And I have smelt the countryside and the humidity

of the lake — and all this without ever leaving my modest house in inner Liverpool! But I have not seen the Lord. Imagination can sin, and this is what it would be doing if it made a picture of him.

I have the Scriptures and I have an imagination. When the first rules the second, and the second serves the first, my soul is touched. Sometimes it dances and sometimes it weeps. But it is never unaffected. Bible study, even of propositional passages, can never be a chore again. It is no longer the mere passing of sentences through my head. It is seeing things for myself.

Imagination and preaching

It is the stifling of imagination which has made so much modern preaching boring. The congregation hear plenty of words. But they don't see anything. And many preachers, in their un-Christlikeness, don't seem to care.

I am not pleading for visual aids or the use of overhead projectors. These have a certain usefulness, but it is very limited. Their only use is to give a picture of what the hearers cannot yet imagine. For example, a group of children may have no clue what houses looked like in first-century Palestine, and so be unable to appreciate a number of allusions in the Gospels. Other people are impoverished because they cannot imagine the Roman soldier's armour to which Paul is obviously referring in Ephesians chapter 6. They need to see what such armour looked like.

Good preaching does not kill imagination by using pictures. It stimulates it by using words. This was our Lord's way. He spoke of sunsets, wild flowers, crops, vines, birds, animals, household objects, servants, lords, soldiers and kings, and people saw them in their minds. In doing so, they also saw the spiritual lessons which he was illustrating. When the preaching was over, it was in their heads that they carried away everything they needed to know. No visual aids were left behind in the classroom. The idea was that they should reflect on what they could now see, so that it could percolate down to their hearts.

God-given faculty

The New Testament epistles are similarly filled with illustrations, although our superficial reading often fails to notice them. The same is true of the sermons of most great preachers, whatever century they may have lived in. Luther, Spurgeon and the Welshmen of the eighteenth century were masters in the sanctified use of imagination. So where did the idea come from that word-pictures are an optional extra to be used by preachers who have time to think about this matter?

Sadly, the imagination of modern adults and children has been savaged and mutilated by too much exposure to television. But the God-given faculty is still there. In men and women made in the image of God, it cannot entirely die. Imaginative preaching, directly presented in the power of the Holy Spirit — this is the great need of the hour. It is as compelling as ever.

So, preacher, pray for the Spirit. Speak bluntly to your hearers. But don't stop there. Use your imagination!

Stuart Olyott