Today I’m not going to practice what I preach. This sermon is going to be about why this isn’t a good sermon. This sermon, as usual, is written out, word for word. I’m playing safe; I’ve already got a script; there’s no room for improvisation and no space for inspiration. What I will say is fixed; there will be no surprises; no spontaneous asides; no digressions. I won’t get lost, or lose my train of thought or stumble over my words; but, then again, you won’t be on the edge of your seats, wondering what might happen next, caught up in the moment, sharing the open-ness, the excitement, the potential for new and extraordinary things that an extempore address might create. Unless I try hard I might well lose your attention, bore your socks off, and sound distant, disengaged, formal – worse - BORING!

The problem is that, having written everything down I’ve robbed myself of any freedom to respond or to react; I’ve put myself at one remove. I might well see your eyes glaze over; your hand come up to your mouth to smother a yawn; you might look puzzled or lost; I might realise that I’m losing your attention, your interest, your patience, but I won’t be able to do anything about it. I have to stick to my script or I’ll sink. In short, you might die of boredom but I’ll go wittering on. The choir know exactly what I mean. But what if? What if I threw my script away, had a few themes which I had reflected on and prayed about beforehand, looked you in the eye, seized the moment, and addressed you directly, as if we were having a conversation. What if you were able to respond? To finish quotations for me; to signal agreement; to register disapproval; to express your enthusiasm or boredom; your joy or sadness: to interject, to groan, moan, sigh or shout for joy; to say Amen, Alleluia and Praise the Lord?
It is a big if, isn’t it? It challenges a shared, complicit culture and sensitivity, based on long-established traditions and shared pre-suppositions. I expect that I would quickly lose confidence and falter; that you would feel acutely embarrassed (or highly amused).

But what if this was something we did every Sunday, which gradually became a matter of habit and unthinking practice. What if we could let go and allow ourselves to be carried away? I find the prospect a really exciting and exhilarating one. It makes me feel as I often feel when I encounter someone who is genuinely unself-conscious, able to forget themselves, throw themselves into something, and who addresses me directly, unafraid to show their feelings or embarrass themselves. I am, at the same time, embarrassed but admiring; uneasy and self-conscious but inspired by such open-ness.

I felt this when I listened to Michael Curry’s sermon at the Royal Wedding a few weeks ago. I listened to it with a smile which quickly grew into a broad grin, which then became chuckles of joy and incredulity and rejoicing that something so extra-ordinary was happening, live, and no one could interrupt or stop him.

This was a rare moment, made all the more striking because of the context in which it was taking place. A formal occasion, at which everyone had their place in a duly acknowledged hierarchy, stretching from the Queen to David Beckham, accompanied by all the pomp and ceremony and regalia we British are so good at, in an ancient chapel hallowed by the language of the prayer book and the glories of the choral tradition.

It was first of all a moment of pure evangelism: millions listened to the powerful call to discover anew the transforming fire of love which is given by God and unites us to each other and to Him.

It was a moment of sincere rhetorical brilliance: Michael Curry is a practiced preacher; he had prepared carefully; he had prayed, reflected and taken his text from the Song of Songs to heart; he knew how to express what was in his heart in order to convey it to the minds and hearts his listeners; to engage them, enthuse them, enable them to comprehend, embrace and act upon it.

It was a moment which was powerfully human and personal: he allowed himself to show emotion, to get carried away, to extemporise, to appeal to, relate to, identify with his listeners. We heard the voice of a person, not a primate of the Church.
It was a moment of humility. There were some revealing moments when the TV cameras moved into the congregation and caught them stifling giggles, looking bemused, unable to conceal a snobbish disdain, or, like me, beaming with an incredulous joy that something so utterly anarchic should be allowed to interrupt the po-faced formality which would have stifled the breath of the spirit which he set rustling through the congregation and the world.

Above all, it was a moment of inspiration. For Michael Curry’s humility was one which came from self-abandon: he was not relying on himself – how could he? – but on God. He had effaced himself, emptied himself, thrown himself upon God and God had caught him and inspired him and spoke through him. What we heard was the voice of the Spirit, able for once to blow where it willed. It certainly blew the cobwebs off those present in Windsor, the Dean of St George’s and the Archbishop of Canterbury!

Despite first impressions, this style of preaching is far from being a wild, charismatic moment of anarchic abandon (though, to be honest, that might be no bad thing). Rather it is a spiritual discipline: it depends on, and is the fruit of, prayer and meditation; it depends on practice – not just the practice of speaking extempore (that can be learned) – but the practice of faith and love; it is truly charismatic, in that it is a gift, a charism, inspired by God.

Think of a moment when you have been so caught up in what you are reading, thinking, or doing that you have lost any sense of time, or place, or self: time stands still; place is of no account; you forget yourself. These are liberating moments, when exciting things happen: our attention doesn’t wander; we are completely wrapped up in what we are doing; we are consumed by whatever it is we are attending to; we think and speak and act in way which has nothing to do with us and everything to do with what consumes us. They are undistracted, single-minded moments; moments when the timeless intersects time and we are caught up into eternity; when we become what we attend to.

It was from such a moment that Michael Curry’s sermon arose, but we can all have them. They are moments which his sermon was, in fact, describing: moments of love, when we forget ourselves, abandon ourselves, act freely, unself-consciously, spontaneously; when we are inspired, consumed, drawn by the object of our love.

They are moments which we can’t control, or deliberate over, or rationalise; they are the moments when we write poetry, dance, compose music, fall in love, make love- and preach decent sermons.
Regardless of our culture, our customs, traditions, habits and expectations, there is a place for such moments. If we allow our words, our actions, our relations to be inspired by love, then, who knows, we mind find *ourselves* acting uncharacteristically; letting go; getting carried away; speaking and acting freely, without fear and without self-consciousness, because love has liberated us. This is not something we acquire, but something we are given: it is the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, which unites us with each other and with Him.

We caught a glimmer of what this was like in Michael Curry’s sermon: let us not resist it! You won’t say it, so I will: Amen, Alleluia, Praise the Lord!!