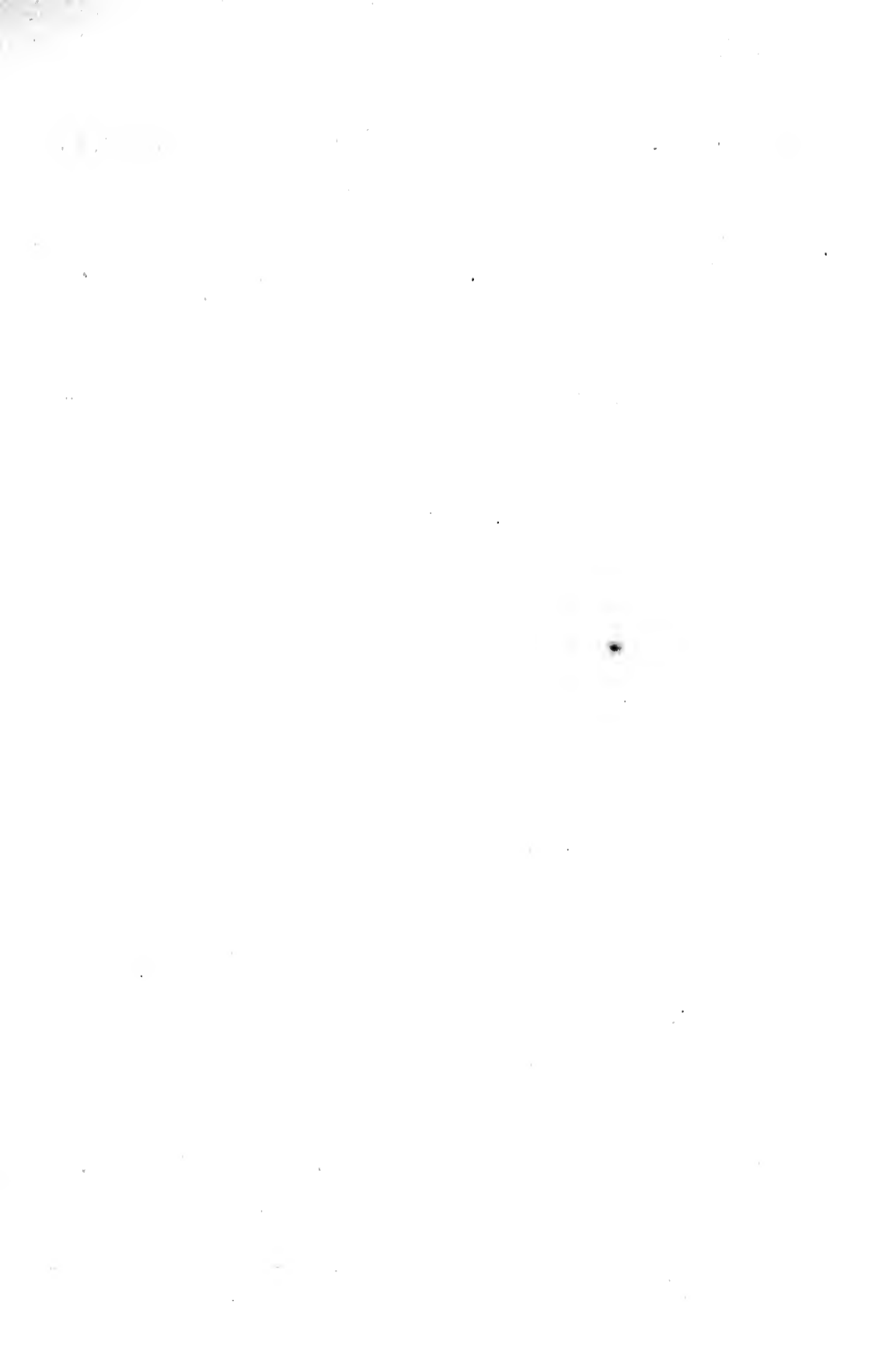


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SERMONS.

A Paper

READ AT THE CHURCH CONGRESS, BRIGHTON,
OCTOBER, 1901.

BY THE

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S E R M O N S .

THE subject which I am charged to speak about is one which, whatever may be the case with others, must be to the thoughtful clergyman full of anxious and, perhaps, painful interest. It is, of course, notorious that in certain quarters it is now fashionable to make little of sermons, or, as the cant term is, "preachments." I desire to repudiate with all the energy I have this fashion of belittling the highest function of the Christian ministry. If it be the case, and no doubt it is the case but too often, that sermons merit the scorn which they provoke, then I submit that the reason lies in that low conception of ministerial duty which makes preaching a trivial and despised thing. Consider what the sermon means in the scheme of the clergyman's duty. So far as the mass of his congregation is concerned, his ministry as teacher and as pastor must be fulfilled in those brief moments during which he speaks to them face to face in his Master's Name. I am not, of course, suggesting that this is a satisfactory state of affairs. Preaching can never adequately express our obligation as teachers and pastors. Baxter's declaration probably sums up the general experience:—"I know that the public preaching of the Gospel is the most excellent means, because we speak to many at once, but otherwise it is usually far more effectual to preach it privately to a particular sinner; for the plainest man that is can scarcely speak plain enough in public for them to understand, but in private we may much more. In public, we may not use such homely expressions, or repetitions, as their dulness doth require, but in private we may" (v. Gildas Salvianus c. vi., Works ed. Orme, vol. xiv., p. 276).

But, as a matter of fact, there will be no other way of teaching than the sermon, so far as the mass of the congregation is concerned, and such opportunities of private instruction as come to the clergyman will almost invariably grow out of his preaching. Pastoral visitation is, no doubt, a most precious instrument of spiritual influence, but the circumstances of modern society do not always, or generally, permit its use. Visitation of some sort will, no doubt, always be possible, but not pastoral visitation. The social conditions assumed by the great masters of pastoral theology—George Herbert, Baxter, Jeremy Taylor, Bishop Burnet—have disappeared over much of the country, and will soon have disappeared altogether. However reluctantly we may admit it, admit it we must in the end, that our hold over the people depends mainly upon our sermons. It must be our interest, as it certainly is our duty, to set a high standard of preaching before us, and to resist as an insult and a peril the modern fashion of belittling the pulpit.

Now, it cannot be questioned that the influence of the pulpit has fallen to a very low ebb. Publishers with one voice assure us that

there is no market for sermons. This fact is a fair index of unpopularity. When men crowded to hear sermons, they were eager to purchase them. Now they are zealous neither to hear nor to possess. Sermons were once events, they are now hardly episodes. After some consideration, I cannot recall the name of a single preacher now living—and I do not forget that we have among us on and off the Episcopal Bench many respectable orators—whose sermons make the slightest ripple on the surface of our public life. Probably at no time in our history were sermons more numerous; certainly never were they so ineffective. It might be plausibly maintained that the preacher has waned with the religion of which he is the accredited exponent, but I think this is not the true explanation. Popular interest in theology has dwindled, but not popular interest in religion. The immense sale of religious romances cannot be explained on the supposition that religion has ceased to be interesting. The same disposition of mind which moved a former generation to buy Tillotson's sermons now makes it worth a publisher's while to print a first edition of 100,000 copies of a semi-religious romance. The sermon, in fact, has ceased to be the popular instrument for religious discussion; and the spiritual popes of the hour are not fashionable preachers, but sentimental and speculative novelists.

Let me premise that I do not propose to speak of mission sermons. The conditions under which the mission preacher discourses are altogether extraordinary: he cannot be reasonably supposed to be subject to the rules and considerations which ought to control the normal exercise of the preacher's gift. I desire that you will understand that nothing in my paper is intended to have reference to mission sermons. I confine myself to ordinary preaching, and shall consider the sermon under its two aspects—didactic and pastoral. Incidentally, I shall make some observations on the composition and delivery of sermons.

I.—Fuller quaintly describes a notable Puritan preacher of Elizabeth's reign as one who "brought the schools into the pulpit, and, unshelling their controversies out of their hard school terms, made thereof plain and wholesome meat for his people." These words express not inaptly an essential part of the preacher's duty in every age, and most of all in an age of religious transition, such as the present. I need not remind this audience that during the last thirty years a change, of which it is scarcely possible to overstate the gravity and magnitude, has passed over the Church. Biblical criticism has come in on us as a flood, and perhaps we were in a special degree unprepared to meet it, because of the excessive dependence on the text of Scripture in which we had been trained. Christianity had been very generally bound up with a certain view and treatment of the Scriptures, and when these were disproved and disallowed everything seemed to be lost. It is, I think, too plain to be denied by any that the first result of biblical criticism has been a large unsettlement of faith, and in some quarters the appearance of what may be called a temper of theological despair. This situation may easily develop in a very disastrous way, either towards a fanatical orthodoxy, which, by resolutely closing its ears to novel and disturbing truth, ensures in the future a rough and ruinous awakening, or towards a prompt and precipitate abandonment of

Christianity, which, since for the moment it has become doubtful, is hastily concluded to be probably false. This situation appears to me to constitute the opportunity and the trial of the Christian teacher. If we follow the line of least resistance and echo the formulæ of traditional belief, so long as they are generally popular, we shall purchase immediate peace and, perhaps, even applause, by the ultimate forfeiture of our legitimate authority. I submit that it is our high and solemn duty to stand before our congregations at this juncture as mediators and interpreters, fulfilling with respect to the new truth of our time the function which our Master sketched in His description of the "scribe who hath been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven" as "a householder which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." Sermons, composed in obedience to this conception of the preacher's task, and directed deliberately towards the problems which are actually exercising the minds and troubling the consciences of our people, will have that aspect of relevance and that ring of honesty which are but too generally absent from discourses, not in other respects undeserving of audience. It is not the least service rendered to the Church by my dear friend and honoured colleague, Canon Gore, that he has set an example in the pulpit of Westminster Abbey of such cogent and courageous preaching. The immense congregations which in season and out of season gather to his sermons, prove, if proof be needed, that he has not, in this respect, misunderstood the necessities of the time.

It may, however, be said, and with evident justice, that this didactic task assumes a knowledge and ability of which many clergymen are destitute; that the discussion of critical problems by ill-equipped and inefficient preachers could not assist truth and might easily minister to error; that the arduous parochial work to which many parish priests are necessarily committed, hardly allows them to pursue any regular and systematic study.

I must say plainly that I think very many of the clergy preach too much, and some ought not to preach at all. The issue of a separate preacher's license to the clergyman seems to suggest that in theory the Church distinguishes between the priest and the preacher. In practice all priests are licensed to preach. Except for the faint suggestion of discipline which it conveys, and which we cannot afford to lose, the preacher's license is a futile form. It is much to be wished that reality were restored to this part of our ecclesiastical system, and that grossly ignorant and incompetent clergymen were restrained from preaching and required to read suitable sermons set forth by authority.

In this connection, I would say something on the ancient controversy as to the mode of preaching. Ought men to read their sermons or to preach extempore? I think it is a grave blunder to discuss these methods as mere alternatives. To read your sermons compels you to prepare them, and thus chains you to a certain measure, it may be a very modest measure, of intellectual effort; to preach extempore is always in some degree to preach without preparation. As the fatal facility of continuous utterance develops the temptation to intellectual indolence grows apace, and, in the sequel, preachers who at one time deserved the popularity they gained sink into the veriest ranters. Archbishop Whately discouraged,

though he did not condemn, extempore preaching. "At all events," he said, "if a man does preach extempore, he should have a store of written sermons in his possession laid up against the time when his powers may fail. I once heard an old clergyman preach extempore who, I was told, had been in his day a man of considerable talent and eloquence. The sermon I heard from him was absolute twaddle." In describing some extempore preachers, he said, "You might quote Bottom's answer to Snug the joiner in 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' when Snug asks him if the lion's part in the play is written. 'You may do it extempore, for it is nothing but roaring!'" ("Life and Remains," p. 401).

Bishop Wilberforce advised his clergy to write at least one sermon every week, and himself preached written sermons for fifteen years after his ordination, and so anxious was he to discourage the practice of extempore preaching that on one occasion when himself preaching without notes, he had a MS. upside down before him "for the benefit of the younger clergy" ("Life," Vol. III., p. 96-7).

I know that it is maintained that written sermons are commonly so ill-read as to be ineffective, whereas extempore preaching better arrests and holds attention. It may be so, though I confess that, for my part, the defects of both modes of preaching seem to be roughly equal. If the read sermon is monotonous—the extempore discourse is as often noisy; if the one is sometimes inaudible, the other is occasionally offensive. Burnet's counsel is sound, though he inclines too much to extempore preaching:—"The great rule which the masters of rhetoric press much can never be enough remembered, that to make a man speak well and pronounce with a right emphasis, he ought thoroughly to understand all that he says, be fully persuaded of it, and bring himself to have those affections which he desires to infuse into others. . . . And, therefore, such as read their sermons ought to practise reading much in private and read aloud, that so their own ear and sense may guide them to know where to raise or quicken, soften or sweeten their voice, and when to give an articulation of authority or of conviction; where to pause and where to languish. . . . Those who read ought certainly to be at a little more pains than for the most part they are to read true, to pronounce with an emphasis, and to raise their heads and to direct their eyes to their hearers; and if they practised more alone the just way of reading, they might deliver their sermons with much more advantage" ("Pastoral Care," c. ix.).

Even more important than the delivery is the composition of sermons. Dr. Johnson "observed that the established clergy in general did not preach plain enough, and that polished periods and glittering sentences flew over the heads of the common people without any impression upon their hearts" ("Works, II., 268, ed. Birrell).

Dean Swift, in his incomparable "Letter to a Young Gentleman lately entered into Holy Orders" dwells on the "frequent use of obscure terms, which by the women are called hard words, and by the better sort of vulgar fine language, than which I do not know a more universal, inexcusable and unnecessary mistake among the clergy of all distinctions, but especially the younger practitioners." His remedy, perhaps, is even yet worth considering:—"I believe the

method observed by the famous Lord Falkland in some of his writings would not be an ill one for young divines. I was assured by an old person of quality who knew him well that when he doubted whether a word were perfectly intelligible or no, he used to consult one of his Lady's chambermaids (not the waiting-woman, because it was possible she might be conversant in romances), and by her judgment was guided whether to receive or reject it. And if that great person thought such a caution necessary in treatises offered to the learned world, it will be sure at least as proper in sermons, where the meanest hearer is supposed to be concerned, and where very often a lady's chambermaid may be allowed to equal half the congregation, both as to quality and understanding" ("Works," Vol. I., p. 233, Dublin, 1751).

Burnet's rule that "a preacher is to fancy himself as in the room of the most unlearned man in his whole parish" is rather an assertion of principle than a counsel of practice. More serviceable is his advice that "there should be but one point in a sermon, so that one head, and only one, is well stated and fully set out."

I have always thought that simplicity in form and arrangement is much more helpful to the poor than studied simplicity of phrase. In striving to be intelligible the preacher sometimes sinks into colloquialisms and vulgarities which dismay and alienate more persons than they enlighten. A simple, lucid style ought to be within the reach of every educated man who can think clearly. Most commonly the root of confused and stilted composition is muddled thinking. And here again the practice of writing sermons is advantageous. Nothing discovers mental confusion so quickly as the necessity of setting down one's thoughts on paper.

II.—Hitherto I have spoken mainly of the didactic aspect of the sermon; let me now turn to the pastoral. The sermon has in the case of the English clergyman to serve the purpose which in former times and in other Churches is served by the confessional. The parish priest stands in his pulpit as "Ductor dubitantium"; he has to solve cases of conscience publicly in his sermon. Always for the most part of his people, often for all of them, the pulpit is his sole sphere of moral guidance, of "direction." The preparation for pastoral preaching is not primarily intellectual, but devotional and practical. By the self-knowledge gained in the solitude and conflict of personal religion, the parish priest discovers the key to unlock other hearts and open out the secrets of other lives; but this self-knowledge must not stand alone. It must be chastened, enlarged, interpreted, corrected by experience gained in the faithful and constant study of his people. I believe the knowledge of life, painfully gathered in the manifold contacts and labours of parochial duty, is worth much more as a basis of moral guidance than the study of casuistic manuals or the much-vaunted wisdom of the confessional. For in the parish human life is seen under normal conditions and in natural proportions, but in the confessional it is studied only in its morbid moods and darker aspects. The sermon, then, viewed as the instrument of pastoral duty, is to reflect the knowledge and insight of the parish priest and to be directed to the actual circumstances of the persons to whom it is addressed. I do not believe that any natural gift of eloquence, or any acquirements

of theological science, or any labours of preparation can compensate for the absence of that personal contact with normal life which is the special, perhaps the only, advantage of the parish preacher. The vital qualities of sympathy and thoroughness can hardly belong in like measure to the lucubrations of the student, the rhapsodies of the recluse, or the artificial eloquence of the rhetorician. But what tact, and wisdom, and self-restraint are demanded in such pastoral preaching if it is not to miss its aim altogether and sink into the provocation of personal reference and the insolence of satire!

Can so delicate a ministry be entrusted to the risks of extempore speech? Does not prudence unite with modesty in suggesting that such sermons should be written? Archbishop Leighton, whose name marks an epoch in the history of English preaching, dwells on the "holy guile" which ought to mark the ambassadors of Christ:—"A kind of guile they may use, but it must carry their King's impress. It must be a holy guile and such the ministers of the Gospel not only may, but ought to, study. Fishers of men they are, and why may they not use certain baits and diversity of them? But as their catching is not destructive, but saving, so must all their baits be. They must quarter dove-like simplicity and serpentine wisdom together, as He commanded them that sent them on this embassy" ("Works," Vol. V., p. 101, London, 1808).

In conclusion, I revert to the point at which I started. The sermon is of primary importance as the principal instrument of didactic and pastoral duty. It cannot be despised or neglected without injury to the Church and a lowering of the ideal of the ministry. I will venture to add that in view of all the circumstances of the hour—the intellectual confusion of our people, the tendency to repudiate religious observances, the strange reluctance of our educated youth to enter the ranks of the clergy, the contempt for the pulpit openly expressed in many quarters—it is high time that a worthier spirit of responsibility marked the exercise of the preacher's function in the National Church.



