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“ MODERN SERMONS. ”

BY E. J. W.

“ SERMONS that mould history, epoch-making deliveries, are probably things of the past, the great prophetic preaching which shakes not only consciences but realms needs the Evangelic trumpet of a St. Bernard, a Savonarola, a Massillon, on the one hand and a listening nation on the other.”

So I quoted in a recent number of *THE CHURCHMAN*,¹ and I suggested some of the causes which have tended to what is often spoken of as “ the decay of the pulpit.”

I propose now to examine these a little more closely and to suggest where as it seems to me the modern sermon, speaking generally, is lacking.

One great cause of the “ decay ” (by which I imagine is meant the ineffectiveness of present-day sermons to produce upon their hearers the intended effect), is the advance in education. In the days of the great English preachers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries education was not widespread and the means of self-instruction by the printed page were not so readily accessible as to-day, and the general public largely received through the pulpit the information and instruction which is now supplied by the press and by books.

The change was gradual. “ The topical sermon,” it has been said, “ was succeeded by the pamphlet, and the pamphlet by the leading article, and the leading article by the platform speech, disseminated everywhere.” In the sixteenth century the influence exerted on the public mind by the preachings at St. Paul’s Cross and other homes of public oratory, and not least, by the University pulpit, was immense.

The topicalness of the sermons of those days, which no doubt gave them much of their interest and influence, was due in a great degree to the intermingling of religion and politics, the interpenetration of the one with the other—a condition to which we are strangers to-day. As things are now, it would be fatal for the pulpit to descend into the questionable arena of party politics. At the same time the enclosing of these two great interests of human life in water-tight compartments, so to speak, and thus breaking the homogeneity of life, is a distinct loss.

A second cause of the decay, more recent in its growth than that just considered, was ecclesiastical in its origin, and dates from the Tractarian movement. The greater emphasis which this movement laid upon ritual and ceremony tended to discount the sermon. The importance which the Puritans have always bestowed upon the sermon, was calculated in the estimation of the Tractarians

¹ April, 1931, p. 136.

to lead to the overshadowing of " the altar," the prayer-desk and the lectern, by the pulpit.

The result of this attitude is still seen to-day. In the majority of Anglo-Catholic churches the sermon is apparently of little importance—little care is bestowed upon it—the place of premier importance being accorded to " the Service of the Mass " or " the Sung Eucharist." This however is not universally true; some of the finest and most attractive preachers in the Church of England to-day are Anglo-Catholics; but it is sufficiently widespread to place the sermon, generally speaking, in an almost negligible position and thus act as a cause of the decay of preaching. What is not greatly valued will not receive great attention, or care, in producing it.

Yet another cause may be found in the marked characteristic of modern times—haste. We are straining every effort to increase the speed of things to-day—telegraph, telephone, motors, aeroplanes! We must cram as much as possible into every day and we are restive of anything which demands meditation, inactivity, quiescence. In accord with this attitude towards life there is a strong demand to cut down the length of the Sunday service. Dr. Shepherd's " Impatience of a Parson " could well be matched by the " Impatience of the Pew." Statutes require a certain amount of time for the Liturgical portion of the service, and even when we have gone to the limit of our consciences in " cutting down " the service the cry is still " Don't keep us so long." So in the economy of time the sermon is reduced to ten or fifteen, or at most twenty minutes, with, it has been said, " a leaning to mercy."

The difficulty of condensing a message worth delivering, and so worth listening to, into such limits must be apparent, and it is little wonder that under these conditions the temptation to give as little time as possible to preparation, so as just to get through the task fairly decently, is very great.

This question of the length of the sermon and the relative place it should claim in the Sunday services, is attracting a good deal of attention in various quarters to-day.

The Archbishop of York, in the Preface to his primary charge, " Thoughts on some problems of the day," evidently impressed by the value of the sermon, suggests that it should last at least thirty minutes. At the same time he recognizes the fact that people will not give the time necessary for such an exercise attached to the ordinary Morning or Evening Prayer, and therefore proposes a rearrangement of the Sunday programme providing for a service consisting of " Sermon (thirty minutes at least) with hymn and short prayers." This service to be at 11 a.m. Shortened Mattins at 8.45, and " Holy Communion (sung by the congregation), 9 a.m."

I am doubtful, however, if the general body of Church-people would take kindly to this alteration. Ingrained habits are difficult to alter, and those who are accustomed to, and like a service of combined prayer and preaching, would not readily accept a service containing only one of these features, and certainly would be most

unlikely to attend all the three a.m. services proposed by Dr. Temple, which they would have to do to get all the elements of worship they are now accustomed to. At the same time there is much to be said for a service where the sermon is the main feature. Many men's services with which I am acquainted consist of hymns, a few prayers and a sermon, the latter often extending to three-quarters of an hour without adverse comment on the part of those attending. Similar sectional services are also not unknown, so it is plain that there is an audience for such sermons where too great a demand for concentration is not made by a preceding or succeeding lengthy liturgy.

In a memorandum which has recently reached me on “ Youth—what Youth is thinking and saying,” which is a précis of the findings of a number of “ Youth Conferences,” compiled by R. Bevington of Bournemouth, it is stated in the findings of the Lay groups :

“ Two groups dealt with the proper length of sermons. It is noteworthy that the group which dwelt most on the lack of Gospel teaching and preaching laid down that a sermon should not be of more than ten or at most of fifteen minutes' duration.

“ Another group, while itself in favour of short sermons, recognized that there are people who like long sermons. It held that the clergyman should take pains to discover the feelings of his people on this matter.”

But I note that no help is given the unfortunate clergyman as to how he should act when he found, as he would be sure to, his congregation divided on this thorny question. Perhaps he might cut the Gordian knot by announcing “ Next Sunday will be long-sermon Sunday ” or “ short ” as the case might be !

From the same leaflet I cull from among the findings of the Clerical groups the statement :

“ That there was great difficulty in catering for the tastes and ideas of young and old people at the same time. This difficulty was especially serious in the matter of sermons. What would please the young would not please the old and vice versa. Old people, as a rule, were rigidly opposed to discussion in the pulpit of such questions as Evolution and the influence of modern thought and science on the Christian position.”

In both sets of groups, some were found to advocate the establishment of a special order of preachers on the ground it would appear that the same man did not always possess the pastoral and preaching gifts required for the due discharge of his office.

Whatever remedy may be proposed, it is at any rate clear that the present influence of the pulpit is not all it might and therefore ought to be, and pulpit oratory as an art is being neglected.

To the same result tends the increasing multiplicity of present-day organizations, so that much of the time which used to be devoted to reading and preparation is given to running about to attend committee meetings, diocesan and parochial. The time which the great preachers of the past spent upon their sermons would put many of us to shame when compared with the time and care given to the preparation of the modern sermon. Perhaps we might answer that the time allowed for the delivery of the sermon does not encourage or justify a great expenditure of time in preparation.

Still there it is. Dr. Donne, we are told, rose at 4 a.m. every morning and studied until 10 a.m. While it is said of Lancelot Andrews that his sermons were " thrice between hammer and anvil " before being preached.

These are some of the causes of the position into which the modern sermon has fallen. Is there any remedy, and if so, what ?

Why are people generally not interested in sermons to-day ? I think the answer is : Because generally speaking the sermon of to-day makes no direct appeal to them.

I never heard anyone complain of the length of Canon Liddon's sermons, and some of them ran to well over the hour, yet he certainly never lacked an attentive audience. The characteristics which attracted me, and, I suppose, others, in his sermons were their literary quality and their human touch. It is the latter quality, it seems to me, the modern sermon chiefly lacks with the direct personal appeal. It is said of the preachers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that " with a simplicity of view (they seldom saw more than one side at a time) went an amazing directness of speech and outspokenness of address." The modern sermon deals too much in generalities, and aiming at no one special mark, hits none. The advocate of the law courts who deals altogether in generalities will win but few cases. " The Apostles, poor mortals," said South, " were content to use a dialect which only pierced the conscience and made the hearers cry out : ' Men and brethren, what shall we do ? ' "

" When I hear other preachers," said Louis XIV to Massillon, " I am well pleased with them ; but when I hear you I go away displeased with myself." I reckon I have failed when a member of my congregation says : " That was a good sermon of yours this morning. It ought to do some people good." I know that in one instance at any rate it has missed its mark.

It so happens that in my *Commonplace* book I have, bearing on this matter, a note of the opinions of two eminent Nonconformist Americans expressed just after they had come to take charge of two of the most prominent of the London Free Churches—Dr. Len Broughton at Christ Church, Westminster Bridge Road, and Dr. A. C. Dixon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle.

Both were very emphatic in pointing out what appeared to them to be defects in our methods and organizations as compared with those that obtain in America. No doubt both are speaking chiefly, if not entirely, of the Free Churches, and also of conditions of some years ago (I have not the exact date) ; but I am sure their criticisms would hold good of the Church of England and of present-day conditions. Each speaks independently of the other, and they express themselves very differently, yet they are in practical agreement upon the chief defect of our methods.

Dr. Len Broughton lays especial stress on " Preaching methods and Sunday School equipment." The latter point is not germane to our present subject and we may leave on one side what he has to say thereon.

As to the other point—preaching—he thinks the ideal would be a blend of the American and English methods.

“ The American preacher is almost entirely given to application.” “ His absorbing thought is to clinch what he says. He is like a lawyer who cares little as to his method so long as he gains the verdict.” “ The English preacher,” on the other hand, “ goes in almost entirely for exposition.”

What is wanted, according to Dr. Broughton, is “ good sound exposition and good sound application.” “ And,” he concludes, “ the man who gives that will get the best constituency.”

I think the ideal is excellent. As to the estimate of Church of England preaching, my own experience of nearly half a century reinforced by some inquiry leads one to believe that except in the case of distinct Mission preaching, there is a very general absence of direct personal appeal in modern preaching. Indeed a young clergyman, in whom I was interested, told me that when he was examined for priest's orders in one of the London dioceses, the examiner—an Archdeacon—told him in reference to his specimen sermon that people did not want Homiletics (meaning, I gathered, personal application) in sermons, which should, he declared, be doctrinal, exegetical or simply expository in character. When the *Record* some years ago asked a few leading laymen what type of sermon they preferred, a majority, if I remember rightly, expressed a preference for the expository sermon. These were, however, principally ecclesiastically-minded laymen although Evangelicals and did not represent the “ man in the street ” whom we wish to draw into the pew. As to doctrinal sermons, it has been said, I think with reason, that most people do not care whether sermons are High, Low or Broad if only they are not long. Of course there is no reason why the expository sermon should not have its personal application, but I am distinctly of opinion that there is a somewhat too widespread idea amongst preachers that the personal application and individual appeal savour too much of the special Mission address, for general congregational use.

On the other hand, a lady remarked to me when trying to account for her not caring for the preaching of two clergymen, whose sermons were considered above the average : “ I don't know why it is, but they don't *grip* me.”

A knowledge of those preachers' methods made the reason of her feeling clear—there was nothing personal or direct in the sermons of either. They did not touch any note in her experience or appeal to her conscience in any way.

I fancy that much of the preaching in our churches to-day, while often excellent of its kind, fails to make any impression on those in the pews because so seldom any impression is aimed at or expected.

One of the worst evils in Church life to-day is the hardening effect of listening week after week with assent and complacency, but with practical unconcern, to sermons whose chief defect is that they do not do, and apparently are not calculated to do, that which should

be the primary object of the sermon—awaken the conscience of the hearer.

Dr. Dixon put the same thing in another way.

The fault he saw was "a lack of immediateness in the appeal of the preacher." "The Gospel is preached faithfully; but no one is expected to decide for Christ and confess Him now and here."

The omission is precisely the one we are dealing with—the want of personal application and appeal. Mere doctrinal exegesis or exposition "grips" no one. There is, in fact, on the part both of the pulpit and of the pew too little expectation of what the sermon might, and therefore should, do. It is too often regarded from both standpoints as a necessary duty but somewhat of a burden in its preparation and its reception, and rather a drawback to the rest of the service. Perhaps some of us need the exhortation Dr. Broughton reports a Dr. S. P. Jones to have given his students: "Boys, don't bother about your text. Stick to your crowd."

Rigorous self-judgment is absolutely the first requisite of the moral life. We need to cease talking about sin in the abstract or the mass and come down, as the phrase goes, to "brass tacks." To deal with specific sins and shortcomings as we see them and unmask them. A "lay sermon," which I read a few days ago in a leading daily journal, strikes the same note.

The text was 1 Cor. xiv. 19: "I had rather speak five words with my understanding . . ."

"The first nineteen verses of this chapter," wrote the preacher, "might well be printed separately as 'St. Paul's Epistle to the Highbrows.' They are a plea for what we need most in our religion to-day—plain speaking."

"Modern religion," he goes on, "has been too much like modern music. There has been too much scholarship about it and not enough meaning. There must be melody, a distinction in the sounds—a message, or the average man will want to know what it's all about, and that is practically the average man's reaction to the average sermon. . . . Personal testimony is demanded. Where highbrow eloquence fails, the simple language of shared experience succeeds."

This seems to me excellently said, yet how seldom does there ring through the agency of the modern pulpit in the heart and conscience of the man in the pew, complacent, self-satisfied, quite indifferent, the awakening and accusing voice: "Thou art the man"?
