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Expository Preaching

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A CONVERSATION that I had, some three years ago, with Dr. Welch, then head of the religious department of the British Broadcasting Corporation, often comes back to my mind. "I wish," he said to me in effect, "that in Theological Colleges, where so great attention is given (and rightly) to the seed, more attention were given to the soil in which the seed of the Word of God is to be sown." He spoke against a background of considerable study in anthropology and of years spent in the peculiarly difficult and delicate work of religious broadcasting. In reply, I reminded him that the so-called Parable of the Sower is really the Parable of the Soils. In it, our Lord is not concerned with the sower or the seed, except in passing, but He focusses His attention and ours on the different kinds of soil into which the seed falls.

Expository preaching—how one longs for a great resurgence of this throughout our land and in the lands of the younger churches! What might not happen if, in a thousand pulpits where hitherto "the sincere milk of the Word" had been adulterated, now in all its richness it were given to the people? But before that can happen, two things at least must take place. First, there must be a fresh understanding of the outlook of the generation to whom we preachers are sent. Secondly, there must be a fresh appraisal of the meaning of preaching in general and of expository preaching in particular. If this article deals at greater length with the former than with the latter, it is only because the soils have had less attention paid to them than has the seed (witness the long succession of books on preaching which, down the years, have appeared to our great profit).

I

The Word of God never comes to men in a vacuum; it is always conditioned by the circumstances and by the subtle 'atmosphere' of the life of the day. Consider the following list: the invention of the steam-engine, the industrial revolution, the abolition of the slave-trade, the discovery of anaesthetics, of the telephone, cinema and wireless, the use of aerial transport and warfare and of atomic energy, the researches of such men as Eddington and Jeans into the nature and structure of our universe, the rise and development of biblical criticism and of the study of comparative religions—a mixed and varied list. Not one of those things would have had any meaning for a reader two hundred years ago. More has happened in those two centuries—perhaps we might safely say in the last century—than in all the previous years of the Christian era. Man's whole life and outlook have been revolutionized by these things. It is true, indeed, that the seed is the same as it was in 1749, but the soil is entirely different. We must come to terms with this fact; if we do not, we may speak with the wisdom of a Solomon and the eloquence of a Chrysostom, but we shall not speak *to our age*—the seed will fall beside the way.

Before a doctor can prescribe, he must diagnose. Before we in our day can be evangelists and physicians of the soul, ministering effectively "the wholesome medicines of the doctrine" of the Gospel, we must consider the patient, the diseases of whose soul we are out to heal. What is his outlook on life? Viewing religion through his eyes, we inquire, How does he see it? For the sake of brevity and ease of reference, we will call him Tom. He is a normal twentieth century young man, let us say in his early thirties. If we make the following assertions about him, we shall not be far off the mark.

(i) *For Tom the Bible lacks authority.* His grandfather, though probably not his father, was content to live life in such and such a way "because the Bible said so," as he also believed certain fundamental truths "because the Bible said so." Symbolic of this attitude was the place which the Bible occupied on a central table in the drawing-room. It was enthroned there. Nothing was allowed on top of it. But it is thus enthroned no longer. In Tom's parlour the central place is given to *The Radio Times* or to *John Bull* or, if he is very up to date, to G. B. Shaw's *Buoyant Billions*. To say to him, "You must believe this, or live life in this way, because the Bible says so" does not ring a bell. We wish it did. But that does not alter the fact that it does not.

(ii) *Tom suspects that Christianity is narrow and confined in its origins and relevance.* He connects it (as a matter of fact correctly) with a particular *people*, the Jews (whom he dislikes). He connects it (as a matter of fact one seventh correctly) with a particular *day*, Sunday, which for him quite possibly has negative and prohibitory associations. He connects it with a particular and rather remote and intangible part of him, his so-called 'soul'. He, like all the rest of the people with whom he works, plays, and goes to the cinema, has very real problems connected with sex, and love, and money, and (increasingly) leisure. "But," he asks wistfully, "has Christianity in 1949 anything to say about *that* kind of thing?"

(iii) *Tom suspects that Christianity, concerned with beliefs about whose credibility and relevance he has many doubts, is not very concerned with social problems.* Sir Oliver Lodge got hold of a dangerous half-truth when he said that modern man is not worried about his sins. (We may contrast G. K. Chesterton who, on being asked why he was joining the Roman Catholic Church, replied "To get rid of my sins.") But whatever the truth may be about this question, Tom and his generation *are* concerned about social wrong and about the obvious dis-ease of the whole social order. He wants to know whether Christianity has a word to say about this. Or is he to think that secular Socialism alone is concerned with these things?

(iv) *Tom is vaguely aware of other faiths.* He saw them, though often at a distance, when he travelled in the Forces. He read about them in the newspapers, or may be he even side-glanced at comparative religion in his study of history at the university or at evening classes. His own faith being very thin and second- or third-hand, he is inclined to maintain that these other religions are only different versions of the same thing, and we shall all arrive at the same place in the end. He is not quite sure whether that is annihilation or that queer kind of

state where a Heavenly Grandfather reigns who would not hurt a fly and whose only wish it is that a good time should be had by all ; but we are all going in the same direction, though perhaps by different routes.

(v) *Tom thinks 'scientifically' rather than Biblically.* (The verb perhaps makes too great a claim, for much modern education does not produce thinking at all. The first adverb is used in the modern sense which forgets what Spenser referred to as " the Queen of the Sciences " and uses the term as referring only to the physical sciences.) He thinks secularly rather than Scripturally. He is at home with test-tubes but uncomfortable with the Psalms. Speak to him (if you can !) of hydrogen, of valves, amplifiers, coils and frequency, and he is on his own ground. Speak to him of salvation, of justification, sanctification and grace, and he is lost. Do not *blame* him for this. Do not shake your head and lament for the good old days. Get to grips with the *fact*. It goes very deep. It goes back to the *home*, where his grandfather went to Church but his father and mother did not (with all the suggestion that is thus made on a child's mind that Christianity is out-dated and only for the old folks). It goes back to the *school*, where the science laboratory with its apparatus and explosions was much more vivid and 'real' than the Scripture lesson (if he had one), which, often as not, was taught by an unconvinced, if not unbelieving or unintelligent, teacher. It goes back to the *University*, where the whole approach to history, science, ethics and so forth was more than likely secular in its atmosphere. He tends to equate the adjective 'old' with the adjective 'out-dated,' and his very superficial acquaintance with Bible and Prayer Book corroborates the equation in his thinking.

II

If this is not a totally false analysis of Tom's outlook, if it is a fairly sound appraisal of the intellectual 'climate' of his day, the preacher is faced with a problem of vast proportions and extreme delicacy. He dares not ignore what this article has so far been discussing. If he does, he will soon find himself preaching to a tiny handful of the elect whose average age is immense and whose funerals occur with alarmingly rapid frequency. He believes that in the Bible we have the record of God's revelation of Himself to man in his sin and need. He believes that the Spirit breathes upon the Word and brings its truth to light, making it a living Word of God to men. He believes this because the Spirit has done it (and continues to do it) for him, and because the history of the Church records that He has done it down the ages. This he believes. If he did not, he would cease to preach. But believing it with all his heart, he longs to become increasingly an *expository* preacher, to unloose and apply the healing power of the Word of God to Tom and the likes of Tom.

How is he to approach his task? I have no 'pat' answer to a question of such complexity, no panacea for the sickness of an age hard of hearing to the Voice which is always seeking to make itself heard to *homo viator*. But perhaps certain lines of approach may be sketched, suggested by the very assertions about Tom and his mental outlook which we made earlier in this article.

(1) If it is true that the Bible lacks authority for him, perhaps we should invert our method of approach. If the "Thus saith the Lord," which Tom's grandfather found authoritative, for him is so no longer, we must begin elsewhere and work towards that point where we can say, "But the Bible said so all along." We must work on that great principle of teaching whereby the teacher begins with the known and works towards the unknown. The unknown, in this case, is the Bible. He must start from facts which he can see and with which he is familiar, start from life and work towards the Biblical revelation. Let me illustrate.

Tom knows full well that one of the symptoms of our day is the recurrence, in all ranks of life, of nervous breakdowns. His newspapers and friends tell him that our mental hospitals and institutions are full. That is a fact which he cannot evade. Cannot the expository preacher begin *there*, and work from that undeniable fact towards the Biblical view which holds that, if a man lives his life without God at the centre, he is *eccentric* ("O God, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and we are restless till we find our rest in Thee")? On the basis of twentieth century statistics, he may expound the Biblical meaning of peace and of reconciliation and the Biblical doctrine of man.

Tom knows (did he not serve in the Forces?) of the incidence of venereal disease and of its consequences. Can we not, beginning with the 'known,' work towards what to him is the 'unknown,' namely, that our universe is so planned by its Creator that if we will work in harmony with Him, all will be well; if not, we must expect trouble. "You *hurt yourself* by kicking at the goad" (Acts xxvi. 14, Moffatt). "Men punish themselves by getting into disharmony with their own constitution and that of the universe; just as a wheel in a piece of machinery punishes itself when it gets out of gear" (Charles Kingsley). On that basis, the expository preacher will proceed to show that Exodus xx. 5, is not a piece of outworn legislation emanating from a blood-thirsty tribal deity, but rather a statement of fact observed by the Jews and noted as such. And St. Luke xx. 17, 18 is not a threat. It is a statement of sober fact, a picture of the man who seeks to live his life contrary to The Way.

"Look at life, Tom. Face the facts. But the Bible has been saying this all along. Oh, yes, it is very *old*. But it is not *out-dated*."

(2) What about Tom's suspicion that Christianity is narrow and confined in its origins and relevance? The Eternal is anchored in history. We cannot, and must not, avoid the "scandal of particularity," that the Word of God became flesh as a Jew in a particular town of a particular province under Roman rule; "*sub Pontio Pilato passus*." "Religion," said J. H. Newman in his *Apology*, "as a mere sentiment is to me a dream and a mockery." The roots of our faith go down deep into Jewish soil.

But we have something very definite to say in answer to his suspicion that we are concerned with his soul and that there our primary interest in him ceases. It is one of those dangerous half-truths which border on the lie. Somehow we must get it across to him that the Christian faith views him not as a soul but as a *whole*. We must bluntly face him with one of those paradoxes which go right to the heart of our faith,

namely, that Christianity is at once a fundamentally *this*-worldly religion and an *other*-worldly religion. Let us look briefly at these two facets of the faith.

(a) Christianity is a *this*-worldly religion. It rejects *in toto* the taunt of the Communist that Christianity offers its followers "pie in the sky when they die". It is the religion of Him Who said to the palsied man *both* "Thy sins be forgiven thee" and "Arise, take up thy bed, and go thy way into thy house" (St. Mark ii. 5, 11). That is to say, Jesus treated the man as an entity. To have said either of these sentences and to have left the other unsaid would have been to do violence to the essential one-ness of the body-soul relationship of the man in the story. Similar instances might be multiplied (*cf.* St. Mark v. 25-34).

(b) Christianity is an *other*-worldly religion. Being committed to a doctrine, not of the immortality of the soul, but of the resurrection of the body, it has much to say of the after-life, and does not blush to preach of heaven and hell, though it finds that both these terms need a very great deal of interpretation if their Biblical content is not to be radically misunderstood. It holds, with Keats, that this world is "a vale of soul-making". The fact that Christianity has this deep interest in the after life means that it meets a man at the point of his great need. For every time he passes a cemetery or looks into the grave where he has just buried his dear one, or—if he is philosophically minded—every time he considers the nature of the Universe, he is confronted by this problem. He may not realise this; or if he does, he may seek to drown the fact in an orgy of surrealist art or of hot jazz or of business fast and furious, but he needs the strong Biblical doctrine of the world to come. It is our task to rouse him from his "worm's-eye view" of the universe and to show him life as a son of the Most High.

Somewhere along the line of the 'marriage' of the two-sided view of Christianity as a *this*-worldly and an *other*-worldly religion will be found our answer to his suspicion that our faith is narrow and confined in its relevance.

(3) What are we to say about his suspicion that Christianity is not very concerned with social problems? I think it is a fact that, speaking generally, our generation is conscious of social wrongs and irregularities. May we not, and should we not, 'cash in on' this sensitiveness? May we not do so along the lines both of history and of the exposition of the Bible?

History will provide a multitude of illustrations to show that it has been the Spirit of Christ working through members of the Body of Christ which has been the very cause of the sensitiveness of conscience which has righted social wrongs. We may mention to him, almost at random, the names of the Earl of Shaftesbury, Albert Schweitzer, F. D. Maurice, B. F. Westcott, Canon Barnett, William Temple, and a score of others. If he has any sense of history, he will not be slow to realise that much, indeed most, of the social reform of which we are so rightly proud to-day had its birth within the Christian Church.

Exposition of the Bible will prove equally effective in answering Tom's suspicion. We shall point out to him that the Pentateuchal

legislation, with its detailed care for women, animals, the 'stranger', and so forth, all sprang from that religion where priest and doctor were one, and where God's concern for the least of His creatures was the *fons et origo* of all beneficent social activity.

We shall take him to the prophets, showing him passages whose print almost burns our fingers as we turn the pages, so strong is the writer's denunciation of international immorality, of sexual perversion, of the evils of drink, of the oppression of the poor, and so on. We shall take him to the Epistle of St. James, that most 'prophetic' of the books of the New Testament Canon. We shall turn his attention to the teaching of our Lord on social issues such as the State, the danger of money, the family and divorce. We shall expound to him the Epistles of St. Paul, the profundity of whose doctrinal teaching is only paralleled by the directness and force of his ethical teaching.

Straight from the heart of the Bible, direct from our expository preaching, comes the answer to Tom's suspicion. Indeed, as we proclaim to him the central doctrine of the Church as the Beloved Community, as the Body of Christ, we shall show that it gives expression to the fundamental Christian conviction that man cannot be treated just as an individual but as a member of the social order. That social order will only be 'whole' when it is impregnated with Christian life and insight.

III

(4) and (5). We may take together Tom's vague awareness of other faiths and his innate tendency to think 'scientifically' rather than 'Biblically.' He will only begin to see the supremacy of Christianity over other faiths when he begins really to understand Christianity. And he will only begin to think Biblically as well as scientifically, Scripturally rather than secularly, when we have done for him some serious interpretative work, translating for him the language of Scripture into his own terminology. Let me illustrate.

Salvation—here is a central Biblical concept. Both Old and New Testaments are full of references to the word. But it is true to say that no word is less understood than this to-day. Say to Tom or his friends, "Are you saved?" and he looks at you puzzled and hurt. And yet it is a matter of life and death to get across to him the real meaning of the word. Can we so expound the Biblical usage of the word as to relate it to modern life? I believe we can.

We may choose three of the ways in which the word is used within the pages of our Bible. Salvation is used (a) in a *military* sense (Exodus xiv. 13; xv. 2, *et passim*), when deliverance, rescue, from a foreign enemy is under discussion. *Victory*—Tom understands that; his memories of the war and our deliverance from Nazi domination are still fresh in his mind. And for all that he may aver, Tom knows something of moral defeat and the craving for rescue. (b) The word is used in a *naval* sense. The story of the shipwreck in Acts xxvii ends with the words "they escaped all safe to land" (v. 44). The word is the one under discussion (with a prefix added). Tom, if he was in the Navy, will readily understand, as we expound to him the Pauline doctrine of salvation, how it is that the Apostle can say,

"I have been saved : I am being saved : I shall be saved." Does not this triple approach to the doctrine remind him of the time when, after a ship-wreck, a hand was stretched out to rescue him, and he said, "I've been saved"? Within the boat, he could say, "I'm being saved", but still there was the aspect of future salvation, a rescue not finally completed till he reached the shore. No wonder that the Church was early likened to a ship. (c) The word is used in a *medical* sense. In the same passage in the Acts (xxvii. 34), when St. Paul bids the sailors take food, he says, "This is for your health (salvation)." Cf. Philippians i. 19 and ii. 12, where the word could be translated 'welfare' and 'full spiritual health' respectively. (Note also St. Mark v. 34 and St. Luke vii. 50). The word is similarly used in the papyri, and indeed in our liturgy.

Let us take another illustration of a Biblical concept where in our expository preaching a good deal of 'translation' work will be necessary. *Peace*—here is one of the big words of the Bible. It is used, of course, just as we used it four years ago when, the war over, a great sigh of relief went up all over the world; peace had come. It is the cessation of hostilities. Tom knows all about that. And from that 'known' we may proceed to the 'unknown', namely, the fact that man by his wilfulness is in a state of hostility Godwards, nor will he know peace till George Matheson's prayer has been answered in his case :

" Force me to render up my sword
And I shall conqueror be."

That is the military sense of the word. But there is another usage which, for want of a better adjective, we may describe as the psychological. What do we mean when we quote St. Paul : "The fruit of the Spirit is . . . peace"? Or when we say, "The peace of God, which passeth all understanding . . ."?

Let us start again with the 'known'. There was a man who in the twenties or thirties of this century had ruined his body and mind in the mad rush to 'get rich quick'. In his despair he went to a psychiatrist, who asked him what place religion occupied in his life. He was so surprised at the question that he could not find an answer. The psychiatrist went on : "There is one kind of patient I hardly ever find in my consulting room. It is the man at the heart of whose life is Christianity." From the 'known' we pass to the 'unknown.' We point Tom, for example, to the stories in the Gospels of two women in need who came to our Lord, one the woman with the hæmorrhage, the other the 'woman who was a sinner'. To both, the message of Jesus was "Go in peace" (St. Mark v. 34 ; St. Luke vii. 50). He integrated those two broken personalities; He made them whole. They passed from disharmony into peace, because of their contact with Him, the Lord of Life. We shall, on the basis of life around and of the Bible which we are expounding, point out to Tom that his generation and ours is faced with the alternative of "going to pieces" (of which there are many signs) or of "going to peace", that is, to life lived according to the mind and in the power of Christ.

Faith : Redemption : Blood : and a dozen other familiar terms—how much they mean to us ! How little to those to whom we are

sent ! But Tom and his friends will never know life at its fullest and best until they enter into the meaning of such concepts as these, until the language of Zion becomes real to them. But before that takes place, we expository preachers have translation work to do as radical in its nature as that which faced John Wycliffe in translating from the Latin into the vulgar tongue. Only too often, through our culpable laziness in failing to enter into Tom's outlook, we sin after the fashion of the Cambridge don of whom E. L. Mascall tells in his most recent book. He began his sermon to a group of Cambridge bedmakers, so the story runs, with the following words : " The ontological argument for the existence of God has in recent years, largely under Teutonic influence, been relegated to a position of comparative inferiority in the armoury of Christian apologetics."

No : it will not do. We must see life through Tom's eyes ; breathe his atmosphere ; sit where he sits. Then we must get busy with the work of translation. Our equipment ? A prayer desk ; all the apparatus that scholarship will provide ; a red pencil of large proportion as again and again we work through the drafts of our expository preaching. Our reward ? The light in Tom's eyes as it dawns on him that there is an authoritative Word of God for him and his generation ; that Christianity is concerned with him as a man in all the complexity of his manhood, concerned with him here and now, concerned with him hereafter, concerned with him as an individual and in the wider sphere of his social contacts ; that the Christian faith is the most relevant and up-to-date thing in the world ; that " God has spoken . . . to us . . . in His Son."