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Preaching the Gospel To-Day*

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EVERY minister seeking to preach the gospel in terms relevant for today has to be careful that he does not end by preaching that which is characteristic of today, rather than that which is characteristic of the gospel. It seems to have been no accident that fifty years ago, when humanism was at its flood and man was buoyed by the thought of his inherent capabilities, the emphasis should have been upon the human Jesus. Certainly an element of liberation from cold metaphysics came into preaching and the warm lovable Son of Man was made real to the congregation in a way which was not altogether unworthy. But only one aspect of the gospel was emphasised, the aspect which was agreeable to the outlook of the day. Within recent years the same tendency to conform to the "spirit of the age" can be observed. It is an interesting commentary on the pull of "today" that the most widely read religious book at present is *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale. In its title are the two key words or phrases characteristic of the modern outlook—"power" and "positive thinking." Our technological age, with its remarkable achievements in science and industry, is alert to the value and the danger of power. It is also keenly interested in psychology; it has been brought up on the doctrine of right attitudes. I remember on one occasion visiting the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at Boston and coming out dazed by the revelation of the vastness and scope of scientific investigation. As I stood on the steps trying to regain my wits I observed across the Charles River a large building surmounted by a massive dome. It was the Mother Church of Christian Science. It seems to me no accident that these two institutions face each other at no great distance. Together, despite all their differences in techniques and ideology, they typify the outlook of our present age. In their endeavour to meet the needs of today preachers find a constant pull upon them towards the proclamation of the power of positive thinking.

It is important, therefore, before preachers become too involved in "today" that they should consider what the gospel is which they have been commissioned to preach. Not once but constantly throughout his ministry a man has to ask, "What is the gospel?" To say that the gospel is Jesus Christ Himself is but to have only part of the answer. Rather, as P. T. Forsyth has pointed out, "The gospel is a certain interpretation of Christ which is given in the New Testament." What is this interpretation? Every preacher is in debt here to C. H. Dodd for his analysis of the *kerygma*, that is the gospel proclamation by the apostles. Dodd claims¹ that "the main burden of the kerygma is that the unprecedented has happened: God has

*Presidential Address delivered at the meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies held at Montreal in June, 1956.

1. *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, p. 33.

visited and redeemed His people." In other words the gospel of the New Testament is of God in action in Jesus Christ. "The Christian gospel is not of a God who waited for man to discover Him throughout the mazes of nature and history and is ready to welcome such brave travellers as may battle their way to the hidden shrine. He is the God who has revealed Himself in His Son, who died for our sins and has opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. He is the God who has come to us Himself in Bethlehem, and at Calvary, in the Resurrection and at Pentecost. All these are events of history but they are more. They are the characteristic actions and revealing acts of the Eternal God."²

A. M. Hunter, utilising Dodd's work, seeks to demonstrate that the pattern of the *kerygma* was threefold.³ First of all, the claim was made that the events concerning Jesus were the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. "This is that which hath been spoken by the prophets" (Acts 2:16); "to Him bear all the prophets witness" (Acts 10:43). Secondly, the *kerygma* gave an outline, however brief, of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. He was born of David's line (Acts 2:30); He went about doing good (Acts 10:37f); He was crucified on a tree (Acts 5:30); He was raised from the dead by God's power (Acts 2:24, 32, 3:15); He is exalted to the right hand of God (Acts 2:33) and He will come again as judge and saviour (Acts 2:20, 10:42). In the third place the *kerygma* gave a summons to repent of one's sins, to accept the forgiveness to be found in Christ and to be baptized, and thus enter the fellowship of the redeemed (Acts 2:38, 3:19, 10:43).

This is the gospel which the minister is expected to preach today. It will be observed that it has four main characteristics. First, by its emphasis on the intervention by God in Christ it cannot avoid raising the difficult and disturbing subject of the supernatural and its effect upon human interests and activities. Second, by its enumeration of certain details concerning Jesus, it is tied to definite historical events. Third, by its insistence on Old Testament prophecy being fulfilled, it seeks to interpret history. Fourth, by its summons to men to enter the redeemed fellowship by the doorway of baptism, it presents men with the answer to their search for a true community, namely the church.

I

There is only room in this article for a passing reference to the historical nature of Christianity. But it must be emphasised that no preacher is free to roam at will when he seeks to declare the gospel. All truly *Christian* preaching today must be focused on the biblical account of the life, teaching, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. No matter how much he may seek to utilise modern insights concerning psychology, sociology and the nature of the universe, the preacher must bring them all within the given

2. *Into all the World* (Church of Scotland statement on evangelism), p. 18.

3. *The Unity of the New Testament*, pp. 23-25.

historical pattern of the Bible record. If he fails here he succeeds merely in being a religious commentator and not a servant of the Word. Moreover, the record is definitive for him in that he must submit to what it says. In other words he must bring to the preparation of his sermon the objective appraisal of the historian. He does not begin with three illustrations, or even an idea, in search of a text. He begins with a text—whether it be a verse, a passage, a character, a biblical concept—and proceeds to examine all the critical-historical elements involved in that text before he makes any deductions concerning it. This does not tie him to declaring his text at the outset of his sermon, nor to giving a detailed examination of his critical researches. God forbid that the latter should be so! But it does determine his general approach to the task of preaching.

II

The great problem, however, in preaching the gospel today is the assumption of the *kerygma* that God has intervened in history in Jesus Christ. Modern men do not take kindly to the notion of supernatural intervention in the realm of nature or the activities of individuals. The ordinary person today is persuaded that everything that happens in this world can be understood in terms of cause and effect and that whatever does not appear to conform to these terms is either a fraud or an illusion. For him nature is a closely locked system with no possibility of interference from without, for, of course, there is no "without" and anything that cannot be fully understood now will ultimately be explicable in terms of the system. The gospel was foolishness to the Greeks and it is still foolishness to modern man: but for a different reason. The Greeks did not deny the possibility of divine intervention; they lived in an aura of an other-worldly faith. It only seemed incredible to them that the revelation of the Absolute Being, the prime mover and controller of the world, should have come through a man crucified on a cross. But modern man finds the gospel foolishness right from the start when it confronts him with God in Christ, activity from without the closed system within the closed system.

One has the feeling that it is this factor which is the essential motive for Bultmann's plea for demythologising the gospel record. In a real way Bultmann typifies twentieth century man. Despite his claims to an objective historical approach, he looks at the gospel through the subjectivity of an individual conditioned by the scientific and philosophical pressures of his age. It is not the gospel story which really causes problems for Bultmann. It is his assumptions. The assumptions are all the more dangerous because they are unconfessed and unrecognised. In this Bultmann is a symbol of our era.

A recognition of this fact helps to determine the preacher's approach to preaching the gospel today. He must give thought and time not only to an explication of the gospel but also to the typical assumptions of today and, so far as lies in his power, to undermining these assumptions. Apologetics

is an essential weapon in modern preaching. Fortunately he will find that science itself can be a useful ally. There are very few able scientists today who still think and write in terms of the determinism so typical of Victorian science. Modern science prefers to talk about "probabilities" and "statistical averages." Indeed Professor Andrade can even speak about the principle of indeterminacy in the atom. Evidently when a series of electrons is fired at an aperture most of them will veer, say, to the right, but there is always an odd recalcitrant individualist among them that veers to the left! No one knows why there should be this indeterminate principle in the atom, but it makes modern science cautious of making dogmatic statements in the *ex cathedra* fashion so characteristic of its immediate predecessor. The ordinary citizen, however, whose scientific ideas are always out of date, seems to have no awareness of this fact. It must be part of the strategy of the preacher to enlighten him.

But in his effort to drive home the truth of God's intervention in Christ the preacher must also employ another weapon. It is one of attack along lines which have a peculiar appeal to modern man. A blessed phrase in our day is that of "wish-thinking." Constantly it is levelled against the religious position. It is not always realised how vulnerable modern assumptions also are to this description and assault. This is particularly true of the assumption that man lives within a closed system immune to invasion from a mythical "without." Let us look at it in this way. Modern man may not believe in the God who intervenes, the living God, but nevertheless, being man, he finds it necessary to believe in some kind of a God. Therefore, he believes in God as the sum total of all that is, or as the energy behind the world's energy, or as the power which has set the machinery in motion and now has left it to itself. This is a safe kind of God in which to believe—a sum total, an energy, an abdicating power. *We* can add up sums, *we* can employ forces, *we* can utilise power. Such a God is within our comprehension, its movements, manageable. As C. S. Lewis has put it:

An "impersonal God"—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—still better. A formless life force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive . . . that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a *real* footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (man's search for God!) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us? So it is a sort of Rubicon. One goes across; or not. But if one does, there is no manner of security against miracles. One may be in for anything.⁴

Such is the God with which the gospel presents us, the living God, whom we do not control but who controls us and all that is. The more the matter is considered, however, the more it becomes apparent that it is only such an idea as this which can give any guarantee in respect of the regularity

4. *Miracles*, p. 114.

and the meaning of the universe. Unless there be behind and in this world such a living, acting and creating God then we have no assurance that "the laws of nature" mean anything. Apart from Him they may be no more than ideas in our own heads, interpretations we put upon a world which fundamentally is only the result of circuitous circumstance and has no pattern or rhythm. It is belief in the living, acting, creating God which saves us from the fearful abyss that any order which we find in the universe is no more than the reflection of our own desire to find such order.

But this understanding of the true guarantee of the regularity and pattern of nature's laws leads us to a new appraisal of the unexpected and the undefined. The living God is not bound by the world He has made. He is above it and can still create. He can create that, which, because of our limited knowledge, we cannot fully comprehend. "A miracle" as Augustine put it, "is not contrary to nature, but to what is known of nature."⁵ In other words, from the side of God a miracle is but part of His eternal pattern, fitting into His all-embracing purpose, of which the nature we know and comprehend is but another part. This the Christian believes to be particularly so when the miracle under consideration is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore to preach the gospel today with its emphasis on the divine intervention in Jesus Christ, is not to handle a notion which is out of date and of which one should feel diffident. Rather it is a theme which is relevant in that it makes sense of all modern scientific knowledge. The preacher should seek to hammer home the fact that it is only faith in the living, acting, unlimited God which gives men not only the assurance that they live in a coherent universe which can stand up to investigation, but also the guarantee that their very thinking and investigating are valid and fruitful.

III

When we consider the third emphasis in the *kerygma*, namely that the intervention of God in Christ is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, we are dealing with an issue which from the preacher's point of view has particular relevance today. Implicit in this emphasis is the assumption that history has meaning; it is under the control of God and the activities of nations and individuals subserve His purpose. It is an emphasis which must be in all modern preaching. For one thing, within Western civilisation there are many who can discern no meaning to what is happening in the world today. So far as they are concerned there is no pattern in world events; chaos is come again. To them in their tragic bewilderment there comes a voice which bids them see in the very chaos itself the clue to the meaning of history. Communism has a theory about history and a faith in history. It is, however, a this-worldly faith. Communism regards the process of history as an inevitable drive towards the triumph of the proletariat, and the chaos

5. *De Civ. Dei*, Bk. XXI, Chap. VIII.

of today as the death-throes of a doomed capitalism. This drive is for communism an immanent force. It needs no reference to any power without. The pattern has been written into the very constitution of the world's events and nothing can stop it.

The Christian gospel cuts across both this interpretation and the fear of those who think that history is no more than a blind stumbling in the dark. The gospel emphasis on the intervention by God in Christ is a reminder that history can only be understood from God's point of view. Where both the believing communist and the confused ordinary man go wrong is that they seek to interpret history from within history. Their theories are no more than human deductions. But essentially human beings by themselves cannot understand history. They are part of the flux and flow, subject to the confusions and the bewilderments of the events, and therefore fallible and liable to mistake in their judgments. In the final resort, what happens in this world can only be understood from outside this world, from a vantage point beyond the turmoil and confusion of the world. Obviously, however, no man can stand aside from the world or beyond the stream of time of which he is part. Before there can be any valid verdict upon history it must come from outside. The gospel claims that this has happened. God, who is above history and the world, has entered history and the world in Christ to reveal His purpose. "He hath made known to us," as Paul says, "the mystery of His will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: that in the dispensation of the fulness of the times he might gather in one (literally, 'bring to a head') all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth" (Ephes. 1:9-10).

This must be an essential theme in all modern preaching. The preacher must strive to make men understand it. It gives the only answer to one of the major problems of our age. The eschatological note, for so long slurred over in the proclamation of the gospel, has become dramatically relevant. It has always been relevant, but the very turmoil of our period, the very mixture of despair and hope, has lit up in a most startling fashion the power and the pertinence of the Christian understanding of history, namely that history moves, and is now moving, to a great climax under the direction and control of the living God who in Christ has intervened in history to reveal what its path and purpose are, namely that all "the kingdoms of the world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ" (Rev. 11:15).

IV

The fourth characteristic of the *kerygma*, namely the invitation to enter the redeemed community, does not altogether have an unwelcome sound in modern ears. Men today are making real efforts to establish true community. For one thing, on the national level, modern states no longer believe in rugged individualism. All of them, whether communist or capitalist, are committed to the idea that by legislation we should all bear one another's

burdens, so that in time of unemployment, sickness or old age none should be left destitute or uncared for. On the international level also the same search after community is to be discerned. The very existence of the United Nations Organisation is an indication of the awareness of the nations that they must either unite or burst in an atomic day of judgement. When the preacher speaks of community today he is dealing with a live subject.

Moreover, when he emphasises that it is of the *redeemed* community he speaks, he can still make contact. Society is beginning to recover from the naive belief that man "needs must love the highest when he sees it." It is now aware that if there is going to be established true community it will need a more fundamental element in its search than a faith in the reasonableness of human nature or in the ordinary citizen's horror of getting involved with the police. The waywardness of man has become today much more than an academic discussion point. It is the problem which haunts modern society in all its plans and hopes. The perennial claim of the gospel that man needs must be saved finds an answering echo today in the world. It is for the preacher by all the means at his disposal to drive home the gospel answer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and thy house" (Acts 16:31). Let him not forget the concluding part of that answer "and thy house." A proclamation of individual salvation does not do justice either to modern man's search for a true community or to the gospel view that the salvation wrought by God in Christ has a reference to the world in all its aspects and interests ("God so loved the *world* that He gave His only begotten Son" John 3:16).

In his proclamation of the gospel invitation to repent of one's sins, be baptized and enter the redeemed community the preacher has the inestimable comfort and help which comes to one who is not dealing with a merely theoretical issue but speaking from within a fellowship which gives reality and emphasis to what he has to say. What he preaches he does not preach as a lone individual, but as the representative and spokesman of the redeemed community. In a very real way the gospel which he proclaims is not his. It belongs to the Church, which throughout the ages has been the continuing witness to the great acts of God in Christ. No one can ignore the church today. It is the one answer to modern man's search for a community which will stand the assaults of time and the ravages of human tensions which thwart brotherhood. The church is not just another human organisation sustained by a spirit which rises no higher than merely human aspiration. It is the *ecclesia*, the assembly of those called and redeemed by God. It was God in Christ who made the church and it is His Spirit which has sustained it throughout the ages. All down the years the church has been attacked or ignored and yet it has survived, not because of its merits, but because God has a work for it to do. This work has always been relevant; today we are grasping how very relevant it is—that the middle wall of partition between individuals and nations be broken down (Ephes. 2:14).

It is from within the life of the church that the minister preaches the gospel today. He need not be ashamed either of the gospel or the church. Rather he should be aware that he and all those within the fellowship of the redeemed have a contribution to make to the healing of the hurt of the world, which no one else can make. It is a contribution not only of pertinent words and relevant ideas. It is, also, most vitally, a contribution of worship and life peculiar to those who have been honoured and humbled by God's saving grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.