

Things I miss in the Modern Pulpit.

A PAPER READ AT THE CONFERENCE OF THE RAWDON BROTHERHOOD.

NOT the least unfortunate thing about this paper is the title. It sounds censorious, it appears as if I, who am the least of preachers and not worthy to be called a preacher, were setting myself up as a judge over my fellow preachers. But as every philosopher knows, things are not what they seem, appearances are most deceptive. Thus is it with the title of this paper. I have chosen it simply because it permits me to have my say; it is a flagrant instance of the preacher's license; if I pass judgment upon any, I pass it most upon myself.

Perhaps a simple illustration will make my intention clear. We have all heard the solo entitled "The Lost Chord," some of us have heard it so often that we could wish it had never been found; and zoologists are still searching for the Missing Link, of whose discovery we shall all be interested to hear. Now it is of a few Lost Chords, or Missing Links, and New Testament Lost Chords or Missing Links, in the modern pulpit of which I desire to speak. Of course it will be a generalisation, even an exaggeration, the latter of set purpose, to increase the emphasis. And here let it be said, that if such Chords or Links are missing, then they have been lost or missed for the most part quite unconsciously, and certainly quite unintentionally. I wot that in ignorance we have done it, brethren. For if we have become all things to all men, then it was only that thereby we might save some; it is our very anxiety to commend the gospel which has sometimes blinded us to the fact that it is possible to cripple the Gospel.

And we must commend the Gospel, the preacher must always seek to relate his preaching to the thought of his age; make friends with the philosopher, scientist, and psychologist, whilst he is in the way with them, lest they deliver him to the judge, and the judge deliver him to prison, from which he shall not emerge until he has paid the utmost farthing in useless obscurity. But the preacher must never surrender to the philosopher, or scientist, not even to the psychologist, but he must remain Christian first and last; be more anxious to speak for eternity than to speak to his times.

To relate Christian convictions to modern thought needs must be done; to resign Christian convictions in the interest of modern

thought must never be done. For it is one thing to wash the baby in the bath with the freshest of water, another thing to pour away the baby with the water of the bath. And if the infallibility of the Pope of Rome is bad, then the infallibility of the German, or any other professor is even worse, for the first at least only speaks *ex cathedra*, whilst the second often speaks *ex prejudicio*.

Furthermore Christianity is an historical religion, not only in the sense that it is rooted in facts which occurred in the past, but also in the sense, that it must preserve unbroken links with the past. It must be ever old and yet ever new. The distinction between Modernist and Fundamentalist is false. We all ought to be Fundamentalists, or we are not truly Christian, we all also ought to be Modernists, or we are not truly intelligible. For although the Lord hath yet much more light and truth to break forth from His word, it is from His Word that He hath more light and truth to break forth to us.

There should not be any vital Lost Chords or Missing Links in the assertions of the modern pulpit and those of the first Christian preachers, or the pulpit will be lost and the Christian preacher will soon be missing among men. All this is very obvious, but all this is very important for the people called Baptists, for we claim to be loyal to the New Testament above all others. Loyalty to the New Testament, however, demands much more than the perpetuation of any one rite or sacrament. He is not a true Baptist who only practises New Testament baptism. But loyalty to the New Testament demands loyalty to the whole atmosphere and emphasis of the New Testament. Now it is just this atmosphere and emphasis so marked in the New Testament, and in Christian preaching in the past which I sometimes miss from the modern pulpit.

I.

I miss the note of *urgency*, the sense of men being in desperate need, utterly undone, and altogether lost. We are very much more charitable to-day, we are also very much too complacent; if we are less violent in speech than our fathers, we are also certainly less anxious about our souls. Indeed, anything savouring of moral or spiritual anxiety is thought to be morbid; whilst our fathers thought it to be the sign of a new creature, we think it to be the sign of a neurotic; whilst they would pray with a man anxious about his soul, we pay for him to consult a nerve specialist. Bunyan, with his sense of desperate spiritual need, would, I fear, be very uncomfortable among many Christian congregations and make them feel rather uncomfortable; of

them he would exclaim as he exclaimed of some of old—"But the Philistines understood me not." The direction of Evangelist, "Escape for thy life," has somehow escaped from the lips of the modern evangelist, the City of Destruction has long since disappeared from the theological map, and there is no longer any gateway to hell anywhere upon the pilgrim road. Pilgrims are no longer warned against missing the way, but only against putting down a complex.

Are we not in some danger of giving men the idea that they stand in no danger? "Fear," though found in the vocabulary of Jesus Christ, has almost disappeared from ours, whilst "Wrath," of which Paul speaks, we are apt to dismiss as being an unfortunate survival in his thought of an impossible Jewish theology. We emphasise reformation rather than regeneration, insist more upon development than conversion, but although the latter are indeed the fruit of the former, yet they are not one and the same thing; nor is turning over a new leaf the same thing as becoming a new creature in Christ Jesus. Sometimes I fear that our present interest in social reform is due to the fact we have lost the conviction of the need and the hope of spiritual regeneration. Unable to make men new creatures in Christ Jesus we build them new houses in the suburbs. But Suburbia, however nice and clean, is not equivalent to the Kingdom of God, or some of us have been mightily deceived; and important as it is to be concerned about man's lost opportunities, it is even more important to be concerned with man's lost estate. And the note of urgency, the conviction that eternal issues are at stake and presented in the Gospel, I am bound to confess I sometimes miss from the modern pulpit.

The reasons, of course, are manifold, false ideas of the doctrine of Evolution, and impossible ideas of past theologians being chief, but whatever the reasons, the loss is directly opposed to the atmosphere and emphasis of the New Testament, which it is our privilege and duty to make articulate to men. There urgency is writ large; the one thing upon which all its writers are agreed is, that apart from the Gospel all men are lost. And however difficult it may be to reconcile this conviction with modern thinking, and it is difficult, though not so difficult to reconcile it with modern history, yet we must preserve and utter it if we are to remain true Christian preachers. Indeed, if we cannot speak of a lost world, how then can we speak of a redeemed world? but I question if it be of much use to call men to go on pilgrimage to the Celestial City if there be no City of Destruction. Nor is it very convincing to portray Christ as the Good Shepherd going in search of the lost sheep, if the sheep in question is not nor ever can be lost. But the only thing which

gives any real meaning to the gospel of the passion of God for men is the conviction of the peril in which men stand; the only thing that makes the Cross tolerable, intelligible, is the terrible predicament of the world, since it is only desperate cases which require desperate remedies.

And if absence of the note of urgency is false to the atmosphere of the New Testament, it is certainly false to the profoundest religious experience. For all his impossible exaggerations and separation between man and God, history and revelation, nevertheless Barth is right when he declares that a sense of crisis, a conviction of being in desperate need, is central to all deep religious experience. We must recover this note of urgency if the church is to recover.

When thou hearest the fool rejoicing, and he says—"It's over and past
And the wrong was better than right, and hate turns into love at the last,
And we strove for nothing at all, and the gods are fallen asleep,
For so good is this world a-growing, that the evil good shall reap,"
Then loosen thy sword in thy scabbard, and settle the helm on thine head,
For men betrayed are mighty, and great are the wrongfully dead.

II.

I also miss the note of *certainty*, the insistence that we have a sure word from the Lord. Do we not speak too timidly and apologetically of the Gospel as if we were not quite certain it were a Gospel, give the impression like Micawber that we are waiting for something to turn up, whereas the New Testament gives you the impression that it could turn all things up? There is a lack of finality, of authority, in many of our utterances; the dictum of the psychologist is sometimes uttered with deeper reverence than the pronouncements of the apostles. We are over-anxious for the latest thing, so that we often give the impression that the Church is seeking a Gospel rather than entrusted with one, busy seeking a pilgrim road, if haply she may find it, rather than passing along it in triumph. Too long have we been better at criticism than evangelisation; too eloquent concerning the things which are surely doubted among us, too silent concerning the things which are surely believed among us.

Again the reasons are many; undigested Biblical criticism and cheap Comparison of Religion, are, I suppose, the chief. But although, of course, we must teach a different idea of how the Word of God came into being than that which was held by our fathers, yet we ought to be as certain as they, that we have a sure word of God. For authorship does not affect authority, and how a thing came into being detracts nothing from its worth when it is in being. The Word of God still stands, whoever uttered it; the promises of God are sure, whoever proclaimed

them, and no criticism of the way the Gospel came into being or of how it was given, detracts from the fact that the Gospel is in being, and has been given. Is it not time that the critic was heard just a little less in the pulpit, and the herald just a little more; time to analyse less and to assert more? For strange as it may sound, faith is still a Christian virtue, and that too, not only in the sense of making an adventure upon God, but also in trusting statements about God. Indeed how we are to call upon any to make an adventure upon God unless we first call upon him to believe certain statements about God, I fail to see; but the Christian life is only possible to those who hold the Christian creed; it begins at least by holding a form of sound words.

And granted that other faiths have a sure word from God, I have yet to learn that that fact detracts from the worth of the Gospel. It is questionable if even Gandhi is the superior of the humblest Christian believer, but peradventure he that is least in the Church of Christ is even greater than he. Personally, I am just a little tired of the enthusiasm of some pulpits for any gospel but their own, their assurance concerning every creed but the one they are expected to proclaim. It is possible to become so tactful as to become tasteless, so apologetic as to become ineffective. And once more it is utterly opposed to the atmosphere and emphasis of the New Testament. Whatever the apostles were or were not, at least they were not apologetic. But certainty, that there are some things which if only a man will believe he will be certainly saved, is central to the New Testament. For all their differences, its many authors unite to cry—"Eureka, we have found what we sought—we have found Him of whom Moses and the prophets did write." We must regain and retain this note of assurance, and with Paul exclaim, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation unto every one that believeth."

III.

One other thing I also miss, and that is the note of *ecstasy*. If we are not as certain of our faith as our fathers, I fear we are also less satisfied by it, but sometimes we give the impression of being Jews rather than Christians, of making a valiant attempt to keep a law, rather than rejoicing in the grace in which we stand; of trying vainly to get home from the far country, rather than enjoying music and dancing in the house of the Father. Do we not speak too frequently of the Hill Difficulty and too rarely of the Delectable Mountains? Certainly we call upon men to fight with Apollyon, do we introduce them to the Land of Beulah? If we are too critical, we are also too

little lyrical. Religion as a duty, and worship as an exercise, we do insist upon, but religion as a delight, and worship as an ecstasy, do we insist upon this?

"Thou, O Christ, art all I want, more than all in Thee I find," sang Wesley, we too sing it. "O Christ, Christ, now nothing but Christ was before my eyes," wrote Bunyan, we still quote it; but do we offer, insist upon, what these sublime confessions imply?

Are we sufficiently passionate in our declarations of the passion of God, and clear about the promises of God? do we praise as we ought? I am aware that both Wesley and Bunyan were religious geniuses of the first water, but to our measure we should be able to testify of the things of which they sang, for Christianity is a creed which ends in a chant, a theology which culminates in a doxology, and the Christian man should be able to exclaim, not only, "Thou hast put a new ideal in my heart," but more especially—"Thou hast put a new song in my mouth." And ecstasy, religion as an end in itself, and not only as the means to something other, we must maintain, if the Christian pulpit is to be maintained; we need to be possessed of enlightened faces as well as convinced minds; to sound the seraphic no less than the warning note.

And here I conclude, and I conclude with one more quotation from Bunyan. "So he had Christian to a private room where he saw the picture of a very grave man, and this was the fashion of it. It had eyes lifted up to heaven, the best of books in its hands, the law of truth was written upon its lips, the world was behind its back; he stood as if he pleaded with men, and a crown of gold did hang over his head."

It is a noble picture of the Christian preacher, drawn by one of the noblest of Christian preachers, and it is an embodiment of Urgency, Certainty, and Ecstasy, lacking which there can be no effective Christian preaching.

G. H. RUFFELL LASLETT.