

Preaching to the Times.

AN old Puritan preacher, who was once gently rebuked because he seemed studiously to avoid all reference to current events in his sermons, is reported to have justified his attitude by remarking: "While so many men are preaching to the times, at least one brother may be allowed to preach for eternity." Taken in the sense in which it was primarily intended, that reply may be regarded as setting forth a conception of the work of preaching with which no preacher with a genuine understanding of the needs and demands of his calling will quarrel. True, we need not go so far as the old Puritan and eschew in our pulpit ministrations all allusion to the events of the day. There is no valid reason why our sermons should lack what is termed "topical interest"; indeed, a very good case can be made out for topical preaching in this sense, since anything which enables us to make contact with the minds of our hearers is useful and legitimate. Nevertheless, there is a real danger lest we acquire what Prof. George Jackson describes as the habit of "suburban preaching," by which is meant "not preaching to people who live in the suburbs, but preaching that is itself suburban, which makes its home in the fringes and outskirts of Christian truth, rather than in the centre and the citadel." We miss the real essence of the Gospel and neglect the real business of our calling if we content ourselves with lecturing on the "topics of the hour," or with reading charming essays on matters of little importance. The danger of becoming "suburban" preachers is by no means a negligible one; and it was against the tendency most of us feel to succumb to the temptation to miss the central verities of our faith that the old Puritan preacher was guarding and protesting.

Yet when we come to consider closely the reply that he gave to his critic we see that it is invalidated by what may be called "the fallacy of a false antithesis." Surely it is possible for a man to preach to his own day and generation without thereby ceasing to proclaim the age-long and ageless truths of the Gospel. Surely the minister of Jesus Christ can address himself to "the times" without thereby ceasing to preach "for eternity." Indeed, what justification has he for preaching at all, unless in his preaching he is trying to relate the eternal to the temporal, the abiding to the transient, the everlasting truths of the Gospel to the needs and conditions of the age in which he lives? The business of the Gospel preacher is, in the language of Hartley Coleridge, "to bid eternal truth be present fact." He must seek to make the verities of the Gospel, which are independent of every age, effective and operative in the lives of the people of his

own age. The message of Christianity is *par excellence* the message of Eternal Life; and Eternal Life involves, as Dr. Forsyth was so fond of emphasising, "the conquest of time by eternity." And if it means this, it also most certainly means that the truths of the Everlasting Gospel be related, in our preaching, to temporal facts and existing conditions. The preacher must preach to "the times" as well as "for eternity"; and he has no mandate to do either unless he is doing both as integral parts of one supreme function or service.

Now this fact has an obvious bearing upon the work of the preacher in whatever age he lives. But the thing that concerns us is this: what is its meaning for us who are preaching to-day?

(a) Well, the first thing it means is just this, that we remember always in our preaching that we are living at the present time. If it is the duty of the minister of Jesus Christ to proclaim the Gospel to his own age, then it is our duty, living as we are in the twentieth century, to preach to our own day, and not to any preceding age. That means we must be modern (which does not necessarily mean "modernist") in our presentation of the eternal truths of the Gospel. We must translate those truths into the language of to-day, if we would make ourselves intelligible to the men and women of to-day. While we recognise that the great moral and spiritual principles revealed in the Gospel cannot be bound down to any particular age, we must also recognise that it is our duty to interpret these principles to the time in which we live. Of course, there is a danger in attempting to do this—the danger lest the minister become a sort of "religious weathercock," altering his message with every change of the winds that blow from the regions of modern science and philosophy. But we shall successfully guard ourselves against this danger, if we have laid firm hold on the unchanging Gospel in thought and experience. At the same time we must recognise that while the truth of God is immutable, the form in which that truth is expressed must be determined by the conditions of the age in which the preacher lives and does his work. The sane preacher does not alter his Gospel, but neither does he refuse to alter the presentation of the Gospel for the purpose of meeting the needs of his hearers. If he is wise, he will not speak in the antiquated language of by-gone generations, but will speak in the language of the people to whom he seeks to deliver his message. He will face the necessity—more than once stressed by Dr. Alexander Maclaren—of reminding the religious vocabulary of former days, so that the great words of the Gospel may once more be put into circulation in men's lives with the Divine image and superscription clearly stamped upon them. And that surely is the way of wisdom! We cannot fight an up-to-date

Devil with out-of-date weapons; we cannot hope to win the modern man for Jesus Christ, if our message is presented in language that he does not understand, for the simple reason that it is the unfamiliar and worn-out language of a previous generation.

(b) But it is not simply a matter of language; it goes much deeper than that. It is really a matter of understanding the conditions of the age in which we live and of trying to meet those conditions with sympathy, yet with conviction. And it is just here that those of us who are called upon to preach the Christian message to-day find most difficulty. It has never been easy to proclaim the Gospel; to-day it seems harder than ever. In the days when St. Paul spoke of the "offence of the Cross" men had to be won from heathenism to Christianity, i.e., from one form of religion to another and higher form. But at the present time we are faced with a very different situation. There are so many people—and they are an increasing number—who have no religion worth speaking of. They have renounced all allegiance to organised Christianity (and, for most of them, that means Christianity *per se*) and have lapsed into a state of non-religion. Several factors have contributed to this deplorable state of affairs.

For one thing, we are living in the backwash of the greatest war in the history of the race. Despite the glib talk about war being a precursor of religious revival, we are now far enough away from that tremendous social and moral upheaval to realise that the works of the Devil can never, of themselves, help forward the Kingdom of God. One definite outcome of the War is the uprush of a subtle practical materialism with which the Church is faced at the present time. Many people now-a-days seem to regard "the life that now is" as the only life that counts; with the result that they are entirely unconcerned about spiritual values. They have so camouflaged their fundamental spiritual needs that they do not recognise them; and so they have come to regard Christianity, not so much as untrue (about the truth or untruth of the Gospel they are not usually concerned), but as unnecessary. To them religion is an impertinence. It is entirely irrelevant to the kind of life they wish to lead; and the Church is an effete institution for which they have no further use.

Yet it is also true that there is a widespread feeling that modern scholarship has undermined the foundations of the Christian faith. People are aware, in a general sort of way, that the Christian documents have been subjected to the keenest scrutiny by the foremost scholars of the day; they have seen in newspaper and magazine articles references, none too happy, and

often quite erroneous, to the "findings" of various kinds of critics; they have read the religious "confessions" of leading novelists and scientists. The upshot of all this is that they have gained the impression that there is no longer anything to be said in favour of the Christian message.

Closely connected with this is the fact that so many people to-day do not know what Christianity really is. In their minds it is usually associated, or even identified, with antiquated views of the Bible and religion that have long since been exploded by Christian scholars themselves; and because they can no longer accept these antiquated views they think that it is Christianity itself they are rejecting. They confuse mistaken interpretations, and even caricatures, of the Gospel with the Gospel as Jesus gave it.

Now it is these intellectual and practical difficulties that we have both to understand and to meet, though it is usually easier to do the former than the latter. But there is no need to be unduly depressed by these conditions. They present the preacher with both a challenge and an opportunity; and he must not decline the challenge nor refuse to take advantage of the opportunity.

(c) But to do this work effectively and successfully there are certain qualities of heart and mind demanded. For one thing, the preacher must possess the power to sympathise with the intellectual and practical difficulties of his contemporaries, even when he can see how crude, or how unnecessary, these difficulties are. There is a good deal of genuine religious perplexity in the world, even though much that passes for "honest doubt" has its roots in moral delinquency and moral impotence; and we must try to meet this perplexity in a sympathetic and understanding spirit, never failing to exhibit what Matthew Arnold spoke of as "the sweet reasonableness of Jesus." Otherwise, with all the good intentions in the world, we shall fail to help those who need our aid, and may even drive them further into the wilderness of doubt and perplexity. It is said that when Lord Chief Justice Coleridge once confessed to Keble that he was sorely puzzled by the problem of inspiration, he received a most astounding reply. "Most people," said Keble, "who have difficulties on the question of inspiration are too wicked to be reasoned with." We may not be so foolish as to make such a wicked retort to people who are unsettled in their minds about religion, but it is quite easy for us to be impatient and unsympathetic. Against such a temper we must ever be on our guard. Nothing distresses discerning members of our congregation more than the cheap and easy dismissal of people's religious difficulties by the man in the pulpit; unless it be the

vulgar abuse of "modern knowledge" by a preacher who has obviously made no attempt to understand (which does not necessarily mean to accept) the various movements of thought in his own age.

From this it follows that the preacher must be able to present the Gospel against the intellectual background of to-day. The fact that the essence of the Gospel consists of eternal elements which time can never antiquate does not relieve the Christian messenger of the duty of interpreting the Gospel in the terms of his own age; indeed, it is this very fact that imposes this duty upon him. We cannot expect to win the twentieth-century man to Christ by the exposition of a theology that was shaped in a previous age. However sufficient such a theology may have been for the age in which it was formulated, it is inadequate for the spiritual needs of to-day. True religion is a form of life-experience; theology is the attempt to explicate and explain the specific experiences in which religion consists. The essential elements in religion are "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever"; theologies are temporary and transient forms of thinking which, to be vital and effective, must be relevant to the life of the age to which they are offered and for which they are formulated.

It further follows that the preacher must be able to distinguish between the essential and the unessential aspects of his message. There is much that is associated with present-day Christianity that is not really integral to the Gospel. Some things belong to the circumference of the faith, and others are quite outside the circle of genuine Christian thought altogether. It is disastrous, as well as absurd, to bring them into the centre and to regard them as belonging to the very heart of the Gospel. We may be able to make out a good case for the reliability of the patriarchal records of the Old Testament, and it may be that the story of the run-away prophet who found himself involved in a strange encounter with a great fish is literal history. But after all, the eternal validity of the Gospel does not depend either upon the credibility of Genesis or upon the edibility of Jonah; and we do not help men if we insist that these things are the very "bone and marrow" of the Christian Gospel. The "all or nothing" policy does not help us to make men into earnest Christians, as the history of the early years of the Oxford Movement proves. Newman, Keble, Pusey, Froude, and the others, demanded that men should either believe or disbelieve everything that was subsumed under the heading of Christianity as they understood it. They made no distinction between the accidentals and the fundamentals of the faith; they urged upon men the false antithesis "all or nothing"; and while they made

many converts, they also made more sceptics in Oxford than the whole of anti-Christian propaganda of the time put together. Preaching to the times certainly calls for the ability to distinguish between what is essential and what is merely accidental to the Gospel.

(d) One final thing may be said. We must meet the false philosophies of the present day with a philosophy that is definitely Christian, a philosophy that is based upon an adequate interpretation of the teaching of the New Testament and upon clear insight into the nature and meaning of that religious experience of which the New Testament is the primitive and classic record. We live in an age of false philosophies, though perhaps our age is not peculiar in that respect. On every hand, we are being offered "modern substitutes for Christianity," some of which are making a big appeal to an increasing number of people. The result is that men are bewildered; they know not where to turn. The needs of such people cannot be met unless we offer them an adequate Christian view of God and the world. It is no good simply girding at philosophers and scientists, and leaving it at that. It serves no useful purpose merely to pour scorn on men's religious perplexities, and go no further. Man is endowed with a "rational soul" (to use the language of the Schoolmen); God made him to think, as well as to feel and act; and no religion can long prove satisfactory unless it offer to men a reasonable interpretation of life. To deny that fact is to despise the work of the great thinkers of the Church—men to whom the Church owes far more than it has generally recognised, for it has often crucified its thinkers and usually canonised its ecclesiastics and evangelists. Where would the Church be today had it not been for the work of the great Christian apologists of the first three centuries—Aristides, Justin Martyr, Origen, and others? These men made it their business to re-state the Gospel in the language of their own day so as to win the thoughtful people of the age. And thoughtful people, let us remember, have souls to be saved, as well as those thoughtless people who never think, but who, when they think they think, are merely rearranging their prejudices.

Every age has laid upon it the necessity of working out, in its own terms, a Christian philosophy of life; and none the less is that true of our age. It is a duty that we must perform. And only by performing it as well as we are able by God's grace and the inspiration of His Spirit can we draw the sting of the anti-Christian philosophies that abound on every hand, and succeed in our task of bidding "eternal truth be present fact." We serve our day and generation according to the will of God by "preaching to the times."

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