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ART. I.—MODERN PREACHING.—PART II.

“ I AM convinced,” writes one of my lay correspondents, “ that the bulk of our weekly sermons are not really studied and properly prepared, either by the competent or the semi-competent preachers. The absorption of time in other pursuits is doubtless one great reason for this, but it is not the only reason. Self-sufficiency and the disinclination to take great trouble, especially among those who have the dangerous gift of fluent, *ex tempore*, preaching, are also partly responsible for the uninterestingness of ordinary sermons. How different is the preparation of the young preacher from that of the young barrister! It would surprise the clergy if they could hear the opinions commonly expressed by the laity, among themselves, of the ordinary Sunday sermon. Really great preachers may be few, but if only the *one* talent were made the most of, what a change would take place in the opinion of the laity concerning sermons, and what an immensely powerful engine for good the pulpit would very speedily become !”

There can, I am afraid, be little doubt that, as my correspondent says, the self-sufficiency of the preacher is sometimes fatal both to the preparation and the power of the sermon : for preaching is a dangerous privilege. As admission to the priesthood leads men into the temptation to hierarchical autocracy, so the commission to preach is beset with the peril of display. The wasp distills its deadliest venom from the sweetest and most fragrant flowers, and it is out of the very beauty and gloriousness of the ministerial office that those poisons of vanity which inflame the preacher and injure his preaching are sometimes distilled. Vanity is destructive of persuasiveness. It gives an appearance of hollowness to the speaker, and arouses a sense of antagonism in the listeners. Humility is the best advocate of every high and sacred cause. It is absolutely essential to deep and strong preaching. For

the pulpit is the platform of God, and when man stands on God's platform, in what other vesture can he be fitly clothed except the vesture of humility? A vain man, full of himself, never appears such a monstrous spectacle as when standing and speaking from the platform of God.

On the other hand, no man will preach well who, while abasing himself, does not highly exalt his office; for the office of preaching is indeed a great and splendid office. "What occupation," asks a quaint writer, "could be nobler than that of teaching? that is, feeding hungry minds, clothing naked understandings, visiting and enlightening with the torch of knowledge those who are in prisons of ignorance, not only showing them what to see, but also giving them eyes to see with." To do any duty well, it is necessary to be convinced of the importance of that duty, and no preacher who undervalues the duty of preaching will make his pulpit either a fruitful source of power or a radiant source of light. The true preacher both minimizes himself and magnifies his office.

Within recent years, and particularly within the pale of the English Church, there has grown up a fashion of depreciating not only ordinary sermons, but the very office of preaching itself. This fashion has run even to the length of inducing persons to leave church—not occasionally, but regularly—at the close of the prayers and at the commencement of the sermon. Several reasons have been assigned for the growth of this fashion. It is said to be a protest against the length and feebleness of sermons. It is regarded as a way of emphasizing the importance of prayer and praise. It affords great conspicuousness of contrast to the Nonconformist habit of considering that preaching is the principal element in the public worship of the Sanctuary. And in cases where persons do not come to church till the sermon is ended and the celebration of the Eucharist has begun, the intention evidently is to exalt the value of the Eucharist by depreciating the value of preaching. No doubt, also, there are numbers of persons not unwilling to make manifest their own self-importance by habitually marching out of church at the commencement of the sermon. Their exit is the sign of their opinion, either that they do not care to know anything which the preacher has to say, or else that they already know everything which the preacher can communicate. Indifference and vanity are probably large elements in the maintenance of the fashion of leaving church at the opening of the sermon. Moreover, as the collection comes after the sermon, it is to be noticed that in escaping the sermon, the collection is also escaped. Vanity is thus often allied in this instance, as in so many others, with want of generosity and with selfishness.

The fashion, therefore, of habitually leaving church before the sermon is a fashion partly founded on respectable reasons, and partly on reasons unworthy of respect. When the sermon is regularly forsaken either out of indifference, or vanity, or selfishness, then the habit is not worthy of respect. But when persons regularly leave church before the sermon in order to magnify the great importance in worship of the elements of prayer and praise and Sacrament, then, although the habit is erroneous, yet the motive is not wrong. It is a reaction and rebound from the former miserable condition of things, according to which a big, ugly pulpit obscured the Lord's Table from view, and preaching usurped the throne of worship, to the great depreciation of prayer and the Holy Communion.

Still, after making every allowance for the just influence of reaction, it is yet difficult to understand how churchmen can under-estimate the importance of preaching, without disloyalty both to the Bible and to their own Book of Common Prayer. The teaching of the Prayer-Book upon the importance of sermons is most explicit. It is also noteworthy that in emphasizing this importance the Prayer-Book makes particular mention of children. Those who leave church before the sermon sometimes justify the habit upon the plea that they omit the sermon, not so much for their own sakes as for the sake of their children. Sermons, they say, are a weariness to children. Sermons give children a distaste for church-going, and engender a reluctance towards all manner of worship. Nor is this plea entirely baseless. For sermons suited for adults are seldom suited for children. The preaching which interests and edifies the mature, rarely interests or edifies the young. It far more often utterly wearies them. Great strength of patience—enduring patience, which is one of the rarest virtues of the modern age—is, indeed, sometimes produced by the severe discipline of weariness. Yet, seeing that weariness often produces disgust rather than patience, it would seem to be a justifiable habit to withdraw children from sermons principally intended for persons of stronger minds and riper years.

But if it be wise to withdraw children from sermons intended for adults, it is, according to the Prayer-Book, a plain duty for the clergy to provide, and for parents to cause their children to attend, sermons especially adapted for the young. In the exhortation addressed to God-parents, at the close of the Baptismal Office, it is very distinctly laid down as the part and duty of those entrusted with the religious training of children to call upon them to "hear sermons." The Church of England, therefore, in one of her Sacramental Offices, enumerates the hearing of sermons among the main elements

in the right up-bringing of children. Whether sermons to children should be chiefly catechetical in their form is not the question now under discussion, but merely the simple fact that loyalty to the express ordering of the Church plainly and imperatively requires that sermons be provided for children, and that children be called upon to hear sermons. The neglect of this duty, either on the part of clergy or parents, is the neglect of an obvious injunction of the Church of England—a neglect from which true Churchmen should most carefully shrink.

Nor is it in reference to children alone that the Church of England, in the pages of the Prayer-Book, insists upon the sacred importance of the office of preaching, and upon the enormous issues dependent on the right discharge of this sacred office.

At his ordination, every deacon, kneeling before the bishop, receives, under circumstances of the utmost solemnity, a commission to read and preach the Gospel in the Church of God. And nothing is more pre-eminent in the office for the Ordering of Priests than the great importance attached by the Church of England to the duty of preaching. The priest is “a messenger of the Gospel,” no less than a watchman over souls and a steward of the mysteries of Christ. It is “his weighty charge to teach and to premonish, to feed and provide for the Lord’s family.” He is, moreover, admonished that his most excellent and difficult office—an office pertaining to the salvation of man—cannot be discharged, “but with doctrine and exhortation taken out of the Holy Scripture.” Among the solemn promises and vows to which every priest pledges himself is the teaching of the people with all diligence—the determination to instruct them in the way of eternal salvation. Into the hands of each newly-ordained priest is delivered a copy of the Bible; and, as the Bible is delivered, the Bishop imparts the responsible commission: “Take thou authority to preach the Word of God, and to minister the Holy Sacraments.” The Church’s conception of the ministry of Christ, therefore, is that it is the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments. Not a ministry of the Word without the Sacraments; nor a ministry of the Sacraments without the Word; but a ministry of both Sacraments and Word. Indeed, it would appear from the arrangement of the Communion Office that, according to the original design of the Reformed Church of England, there may be in public ministrations a sermon without a communion, but not a communion without a sermon. The modern fashion, therefore, of exalting the communion at the expense of the sermon is not a fashion grounded upon loyalty to the Prayer-Book. For both in the office for the administration of

the Sacrament of Baptism, and of the Sacrament of the Eucharist, as well as in the Ordering of Deacons and Priests, the ministering of God's Word is regarded as a duty co-equal and co-essential with the ministering of the Sacraments of Christ. And in the Form for the Consecration of Bishops and Archbishops, the Church still further emphasizes the great importance of spreading abroad the Gospel—the glad tidings of "reconciliation"—to the edifying and making perfect the whole body of Christ. The Church of England's own definition of the visible Church of Christ is "a congregation of faithful men in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered." "No sacraments, no Church; no preaching, no Church" would thus seem to be a kind of definitive formula of the Church of England. All undervaluing of the ordinance of preaching is in effect, therefore, whether on the part of clergy or laity, disloyalty to the authority of the Church, and a plain contradiction of the Church's mind as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer.

And when we pass from the teachings of the Church to the teachings of Scripture, we find it altogether impossible to recapitulate, within our available space, the numerous declarations which Scripture makes, concerning the value and the necessity of preaching. Indeed, as in other matters, so also in its estimate of the importance of preaching, the Prayer-Book is but the mirror and the echo of Holy Scripture. Nowhere in the Bible can any word be found depreciatory of preaching. All through the Bible preaching is exalted as one of the great instruments and powers of God for the salvation of men. The feet of the preacher are said to be beautiful. One of the principal testimonies of his Messiahship enumerated by Christ for the assurance of St. John the Baptist—a testimony co-ordinated with the cleansing of the lepers and the raising of the dead—was the testimony of the preaching of the Gospel to the poor. Both in the temple and from house to house the Apostles ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ daily. St. Paul declares that God had separated him from his mother's womb to preach the revelation of Jesus Christ. How can men believe, he asks, without a preacher? He reminds Titus that it is through preaching that God manifests the hope of eternal life to men. He tells the Corinthians that both Christ and the preaching of Christ are, to them that perish, foolishness; but to them which are saved, both Christ and the preaching of Christ are the power of God. That Jews and Greeks should despise the preaching of Christ seemed natural to St. Paul; but that Christians should undervalue the ordinance of preaching would have seemed to him worse than unintelligible. To the glowing hearts of the primitive

Christians no words were so sweet, so vital, as the words which told them of their crucified and ascended Saviour. To be cold towards the preaching of Christ would, to them, have appeared the same thing as coldness and deadness towards Christ Himself.

And, indeed, the witness of all ages of Christian history confirms the testimony of the Bible and the Church both to the importance of preaching, and to its value as an unerring measure of the vitality and affection of Christian disciples to their Master, Christ. The ages of the exaltation of preaching have been ages of spiritual progress and religious reform. The ages of the depreciation of preaching have been ages of religious apathy and spiritual decadence.

The chief Apostles were great preachers. St. Peter and St. Paul and St. John never ceased to teach and to preach "Jesus and the resurrection." They were instant in season and out of season in heralding the things which they had seen and tasted and handled of the good Word of God. The torch of the primitive Church was carried into the dark places of the earth by the hands of illuminated preachers. The primitive Church owed its erection and expansion to the Divine influence manifested through preaching. The sub-Apostolic age was an age of earnest preachers. Not a few of the primitive bishops were chosen to their office because of their signal power to preach. In the Apostolical Constitutions we are told that "the office of preaching was, in the first place, the Bishops' office." It was a necessity of the bishop's qualifications, in each Christian age, that he "must be apt to teach." St. Chrysostom calls the Bishop's throne "the preaching throne," because "preaching was so necessary a part of the bishop's office that he could not be without it."

The great Fathers of the Church were all incessant preachers. From St. Clement in the second century to St. Bernard in the twelfth century, the greatest Fathers of the Church were the Church's greatest preachers—men mighty in speech and power. The power of preaching is an essential, and very extensive element both in the conception of the individuality, and the measurement of the influence, of such conspicuous leaders as Athanasius and Ambrose, Basil and the two Gregories, Jerome and Chrysostom, Augustine and Bernard. And although Sozomen relates of the Church of Rome in his time "that they had no sermons either by the Bishop or any other," yet this must have been an exceptional experience even for the Church of Rome in her pure and palmy days, for some of the greatest popes have also been the greatest preachers.

And from the earliest to the most recent Christian ages the periods of great preaching have also been periods of great

awakening. Or to put the fact in its converse aspect—periods of great awakening have also been periods of great preaching. The Crusades owed much of their fervour to the fiery eloquence of crusading preachers. No institution of St. Dominic was more potent and far-reaching than the institution of the Order of Preaching Friars. The precursors of the Reformation—John Wycliffe, John Huss, and Jerome of Prague—were powerful preachers. It is difficult to understand by what means the Reformation could have been accomplished, if from its resources the factor of preaching had been eliminated. And within the last hundred years the names of men like Whitefield, Wesley, Chalmers, Guthrie, Robertson, and Newman furnish of themselves abundant evidence that the influence of preaching (wherever preaching is clear, and able, and deep) is in no wise diminished, but probably increased, by the spread of education and the ubiquity of the press. No pulpit in the world has ever had such an audience as the audience that now listens to the printed words of Robertson and Newman, Liddon and Westcott, Lightfoot and Maclaren, Brooks and Church. Though dead, these preachers wield an ever-increasing power.

Thus the teachings of all ages of Christian history conspire with the teachings of the Bible and the Church to magnify the office of preaching as a powerful instrument in controlling the destinies of mankind. And it is one of the first duties of every true preacher to endue himself, by an earnest study of these teachings, with high conceptions both of the nature of his office and of the responsibilities belonging to it. No man will ever preach well who is not deeply convinced of the importance of his preaching. The ambitious man will preach ambitiously, the vainglorious man will preach vaingloriously, the indifferent man will preach indifferently, the learned man learnedly, and the ignorant man ignorantly. It is only the man of apostolic mind and heart—the man exalted by the height of his calling and debased by the sense of his own insufficiency—who will preach really well. However chill may be the atmosphere in which such a man lives, however deterrent may be the influences by which he is surrounded, and in despite of all fashionable inuendoes and habits intended to depreciate the value of preaching, he will yet strive and toil to make his preaching a living reality. Abasing himself, he will magnify his office. He will summon to his aid every art which can make his preaching tell. Beauty and force of diction, copiousness of illustration gathered from every department of knowledge, pathos, logic, declamation, appeal—all these he will press by devoted zeal and unwearying work into the service of his preaching; for all these things will help him to cast a glow of modern interest around the old, unchanging truths of

religion. They will enable him to invest the topics of common life and the duties of daily toil with the apparel of an uncommon, a heavenly radiance.

But who is able and sufficient thus to preach? Ordinary men have not the gifts, and busy parish priests have not the leisure which such ideal preaching imperatively and continuously requires.

An order of preachers should, therefore, be dedicated to the office of preaching; not, indeed, that the regular minister should be stripped of his ministry of preaching. To do this would be to ignore an essential characteristic of the office to which he has been ordained, and to imperil one of his greatest opportunities for usefulness. No minister can be loyal to the commission he has received, or true to the obligations into which he has entered, who does not use all diligence both to teach and to preach to the utmost of his power. Careless and infrequent sermons are a violation of his ordination vows. Moreover, who is so well fitted to speak to the people on Sunday as the pastor who has been moving in and out among them during the workdays of the week, holding their hands in sorrow, listening to the tale of their trials, their difficulties, their wants, rejoicing with their joys, weeping with their tears? A house-going preacher will have a sermon-hearing people. "Let the very same speech or sentiment come from two persons, and it has quite a different meaning according to the speaker, and takes a different form in our minds. We always judge of what meets us by what we know already. There is no such thing in nature as a naked text without note or comment."¹ "Words which will go clean over the heads of strangers will pierce the hearts of friends."² Well-tended sheep do not yearn for the voice of a stranger. Well-nurtured children love their father better than an alien.

The weakness of the modern pulpit is in no wise due to over-much diligence in pastoral visitation. Multitudinous committees, the keeping of innumerable accounts, the getting up of bazaars, "the serving of tables," may weaken a pulpit; but daily personal intercourse with the people upon spiritual things strengthens it. A pastor need never be afraid of damaging his preaching by the ceaseless house-to-house visitation of his flock. Only let such a pastor be careful to limit his preaching to the topics which he thoroughly understands. If his pastoral charge is too heavy to leave him time for extending his researches to the realms of literature and science, and obliges him to limit them to "the reading of Holy Scripture and such subjects as help to the knowledge of the same," let

¹ Newman's *Essays*, vol. ii., p. 252.

² *Ibid.*, p. 282.

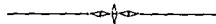
him not be vainly ambitious to dilate upon literary or scientific topics, but humbly confine himself to terse expositions of Scripture, illuminated by illustrations from experience. Congregations will gratefully accept such expositions, if so be they do not attempt to compensate their obvious deficiency in learning by an equally obvious development in length. A preacher is feeble in so far as he discourses upon things of which he is ignorant, and powerful in proportion to his knowledge of the subjects with which he deals. The weakness of the modern pulpit has partly sprung from its discussion of secular subjects concerning which it knew nothing, and its dumbness upon spiritual subjects concerning which it is the accredited organ of public utterance.

At the same time, a reading and well-informed age may reasonably require a supply of sermons dealing ably and exhaustively with the social questions, the intellectual doubts, the political interests proper and peculiar to itself. Such an enterprise lies beyond both the scope and the power of the ordinary preacher. Who can expect an ordinary minister, with the limited leisure, the limited library, the limited talents at his command to prepare and preach two notable sermons every Sunday throughout the year? It is beyond the range of human possibility to accomplish such a task. No politician could deliver a hundred great speeches in the year, no scientist compose a hundred great lectures, no philosopher evolve a hundred great speculations. And although the ordinary minister is strictly and sacredly bound by consecrating some portion of every day to reading and composition, by preparing his sermon early in the week and thinking it well over after it is prepared, to make each one of his yearly hundred of sermons as good as it lies in his power to make it; yet, except in rare instances, great sermons can proceed only from special preachers—preachers elaborately trained for their work (and even ordinary preachers need far more training, both in knowledge and utterance, than they receive), preachers gifted with faculties of eloquent speaking and original thinking, preachers secluded from the distracting bustle of a many-sided life, preachers abreast with the most recent literature and researches of the day, preachers with a profound and long-studied acquaintance with things human and divine, preachers whose brain is steam, whose tongue is fire, whose soul is magnetism. In every great town there should be at least one such preacher—either stationary or itinerant—able to wield his sceptre over the intellect and hearts of the most highly cultured of its inhabitants. The Temple Church, St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey, are proofs of the power which a pulpit thus replenished would assuredly exercise. The day of the

pulpit is not yet gone by, but what is wanted is to make the pulpit equal to its day. The weakness of the modern pulpit will be transfigured into strength directly its special sermons are so multiplied as to become co-ordinate with the special requirements of the modern age.

What is needed, above all things besides, to strengthen the modern pulpit's weakness and enlarge the modern pulpit's power is more hopeful faith and more living prayer. The current of the hour is setting against prayer; but if the modern preacher is borne away by this current, his preaching will drift into mere brilliant show—the show of self, with an absence of spiritual power. Of course, prayer of itself will achieve nothing without work. Indeed, prayer without work is not truly prayer. He who most earnestly prays over his sermons must also most earnestly work at their preparation, else his prayers will be little else than idle hypocrisy. It is one of the many beautiful sayings of St. Augustine: “*Sit orator antequam dictor*”—Let a man first pray, then preach. And the saying is just as true to-day as it was fourteen centuries ago. None but those who live within the veil can go forth with lips anointed from the altar of God. The primary, and most pre-eminent, requirement of the modern pulpit is a greater plenitude of effectual prayer—prayer both by clergy and people. Without incessant prayer its ashes will never be converted into beauty or its weakness into power. Let congregations and preachers combine together in prayer, and the one will speak, and the other will hear, with a quite new and resistless grace. And in praying, their first plea should be for a self-renouncing simplicity, because in every age, whether primitive or modern, the simplicity of the preacher has proved to be the power of God.

JOHN WILLIAM DIGGLE.



ART. II.—THE OLDEST COMMENTARY ON THE PSALMS.

STUDIES IN THE “MIDRASH TEHILLIM.”—No. III.

ONE very serious difficulty which confronts the Christian reader in his attempt to become acquainted with the literature of Israel lies in the highly technical character of the phraseology which is adopted in it. He needs an acquaintance, not only with the two or three languages employed, and with their respective grammars and dictionaries, but also with some of the peculiarities of Jewish thought and life. This