

It proved itself an instrument of real directing power; it was so living that it made a dying nation live; it was so true that it shadowed forth its own fulfilment; it was so human that it still enshrines the highest hopes of the whole world; it was so Divine that it saw "God manifest in the flesh" afar off. So, in the same way, one might dwell upon that inspiration of *sobriety* and *accuracy* which is such a marked feature of both Testaments. The same providential instinct which made the Early Fathers so careful to discriminate between Apostolic writings and their own marks the whole compilation of the sacred records. In spite of modern critics, to an ordinary reader 1 Kings xviii. bears such a stamp of sobriety and reality that it is simply impossible to accept it as non-historical. What Papias says of St. Mark might be said of each writer: "He wrote accurately all (that Peter mentioned). He made no error, for he took heed to one thing: to omit nothing of what he had heard, and to state nothing falsely in his record." From what source did that sobriety come?



A Good Sermon, But—

BY THE REV. CHARLES COURTENAY, M.A.,

Vicar of St. Peter's, Tunbridge Wells.

IT may possibly occur to my readers that, in presenting such a subject as preaching, I am appointing myself to a professor's chair and sitting in judgment on my brethren. I may assure them that that chair is quite vacant as far as I am concerned, and that the only parson I am venturing to sit in judgment on is myself.

Now, the phrase "a good sermon," is a very elastic one indeed, and may require a comment or two, because it is so elastic. "One man's meat is another man's poison," and a "good sermon" to one man may be a shockingly bad one to another. Tastes and standards vary. Besides, *moods* count for a good

deal, so that what to-day a man will pronounce excellent, to-morrow he may denounce. Much depends on the nature of his breakfast, the quarter from which the wind blows, or whether the home atmosphere that morning was calm or electric.

Not, however, that "the good sermon" itself is a variable quantity. If it be good it must be good under all conditions, and the judgments themselves are wrong, if adverse. But it is not necessarily good because somebody says it is, or because *we* think it is, or because it is very short, or very long; not even when it is received by a chorus of praise or by such exclamations as "Heavenly!" "Sweet!" or "Entrancing!" A very young man may be deceived by such rhapsodies. The older ones shiver under them, and wonder when such flatterers will be found "sitting under" somebody else.

For the sake of argument, however, let us call a sermon "good" when its matter is good, its arrangement is good, its delivery is good, and its spirit is good. If these elements are present any congregation may be reckoned upon to pronounce the sermon a good one, unless it be a very cantankerous and exceptional congregation.

But, we preachers are bound to be more exacting and critical over our own performances than any congregation can be. We are behind the scenes, among the machinery, and beside the furnace, and it often happens that, as the hearers stream out of the door with praises on their lips, the preacher goes out with a burden of self-accusation pressing heavily upon his heart, and feeling as if he could never preach again.

It is just here that the "*but*" comes in.

I. A GOOD SERMON, BUT— MIGHT IT NOT HAVE BEEN BETTER?

We know, and perhaps nobody else does, how much more time and thought and prayer might have been given to it. Sermons are like some dishes, they require a good deal of simmering to be of the best character; and, it may be, even our good sermons have been less good than they might have been

for want of it. The golden rule for pulpit cookery is a slow fire, long simmering, and then to serve up hot. Our tendency is frequently to look for the fire in the pulpit, and neglect it in the preparation. But we cannot make a sermon digestible if the pulpit fire is all that it has been subjected to.

2. A GOOD SERMON, BUT— WAS IT GOOD FOR SOMETHING?

Any rifle will make an explosion if there be powder in it. But what if the bullet be left out? Perhaps we, too, have been giving blank cartridges in the pulpit. Or, if there was powder and shot, all goes for nothing without an aim and a target. It may be that we, too, "have aimed at nothing and hit it," as Whately says. It is a poor sportsman, too, who "fires into the brown" of the partridge covey, aiming at all in general and at none in particular. Perhaps we have done that, too. I can only speak for myself. It is useless to expect conversions if we do not aim at them. It is the hits that count, not the misses.

3. A GOOD SERMON, BUT— WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

There is a great difference between watering our gardens with rain-water and tap-water. The one has the powers of heaven entangled in it; the other has not, it is flat and earthy. So there is a great deal of difference between sermons which come down and sermons which come up. There are sermons which smell of the depths—the depths of strong minds, if you like, the depths of our energetic selves, but still the depths—and there are sermons which have the smell of heaven in them, the smell of the heights of transfiguration, where we have been with God. We read on the title-pages of some volumes of sermons:—"Sermons by the Rev. So-and-So," and it is quite correct they are by *him*, scores entirely off his own bat, and by him and nobody else, God or man. "*My* sermons" he may call them proudly, but we beg to ask with all innocence, "Had God *nothing* to do with them?" They have come from the wrong place if God had no hand in them.

4. A GOOD SERMON, BUT— WHERE WAS THE GRIP OF IT?

A good sermon is like a good detective; it gets you by the collar, claps the handcuffs on, and hauls you before judge and jury before you know where you are. "Thou art the man," it thunders out all the way through. It is always seeking to get at you, and follows you about, like the eyes of some portraits on the wall. No sermon is really good for much which does not, among other things, grip the conscience, and when it grips, shakes it. You could not possibly sleep under it—no, nor even doze—any more than you could sleep in an earthquake. And the more we think over the grasping power of a good sermon, the more convinced we must be that it is no good at all unless it puts the hearers under arrest, and makes them feel as the fox feels when the hue and cry is after him. Where this grip is, congregations cease to pass on truths to their neighbours, and feel that there is something here for them personally. They, very probably, will not like it, but they cannot deny the truth of it.

5. A GOOD SERMON, BUT— WHY WERE THERE SO MANY DEAD FLIES IN THE OINTMENT?

Sermons, like ointment, are soon corrupted by the touch of dead things, and die through the contact. No sermon ever composed is proof against it. And this is why there are so many dead sermons in the world. Lay the dead hand of self upon the sermon, and the warmth of life goes without giving notice. Speak it with the dead lips of vanity or conceit, and these truths emerge like so many carcasses. Preach for human applause and you thrust a dagger into the very heart of your sermon, and let out all the warm red blood of it. A so-called nice and pretty sermon, full of poetry and decoration, uttered for nothing but to tickle the fancy and catch the crowd, reminds me of a pretty hearse, with its choice white flowers, bearing along a corpse to a cemetery, with the preacher as the undertaker. Probably, the very best of sermons have some self in them, but where it does not merely creep in and hide, but

stalks in with unblushing effrontery, as large as life, there it hacks and slays at its own sweet will.

6. A GOOD SERMON, BUT— CAN THE LORD USE IT?

If He can, He will; that is quite certain. But if He cannot, then the devil will, and great execution he will do with it. The fact that there are many sermons which have apparently been of no use to anybody is a sufficient commentary on the unusableness of them. There must have been some deadly flaw in them to be fit only for the waste-heap or the fire.

It is vital, therefore, that we should try to discover the sermons God *can* use. What are His conditions?

(a) The first, I think, is that we should “preach the Word”—not *our* words, but His; not many words, but one, Christ *the* Word. And he who preaches the Word will not give out a text and turn away from it straightway; neither will he choose a text *after* he has written his sermon, making it a powerless label for his own poor splash.

(b) The second is, I imagine, that we should preach it truly, be in sympathy with it, be bathed in it, be *en rapport* with it. Many a true sermon has been made false by the man behind the message being out of touch with his message. It is hard to keep your fire burning on an iceberg. A noble song may be spoiled by the accompaniment being out of tune most of the time.

(c) The third is that we should divide the word of truth rightly. If a preacher makes no distinctions in his congregations, but treats them all as converted and alive, he is leaving perhaps the larger part of them out, and lulling them into a sleep of security, which is more fatal than an opium slumber. Preaching smooth things is murder pure and simple. Unconverted souls are naturally complacent and satisfied, and need no preacher’s help to press them on in the ways of death. As for the charity of it, it is charity run mad.

(d) There is one other condition which seems to me essential if God is to recognize, own, and use it, and that is

that His Spirit should occupy us. "Ye shall receive power," He has promised. And when the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost, the power came, too. In a flash thousands were found at the feet of the Lord. Here is where all revivals begin, in the heart of the preacher; and it is useless praying for a revival amongst others until it has come to us ourselves. The inspiration of genius is very well; so is the inspiration of oratory; so is the inspiration of numbers; but the only legitimate inspiration which convinces and converts is that of the Holy Ghost—supernatural power for supernatural results. The energy of action, of voice, of machinery, are no substitutes for the energy of the Spirit of God.

There are, no doubt, other conditions of usability, but these appear to me to be the chief and the indispensable ones. Without these the preacher and his preaching must be outside the Divine zone of effectiveness and power.

7. A GOOD SERMON, BUT— MIGHT NOT THE SHAFT HAVE BEEN SUNK DEEPER?

There is too much surface-sweeping in many sermons, and too little delving. As a rule, I suppose, we never get at the best of a text until we have got to its heart. A text is like an onion, it has many coats; the outer a little familiar and a little browned by handling and the weather. We do not get at the best of it by presenting the outside only, do we? And so nothing makes so much for dryness and dullness as this presentation of the conventional and the commonplace. To take the first that comes, and to suspect nothing better beyond, is to qualify for the professorship of prosaics and dullness. But this demands the brooding mind and the brooding spirit, without which a sermon will be as mute and void as the world was before the Spirit brooded over it. It is astonishing how a commonplace text will break forth into brightness and glow when the warm heart is pressed against it, and the spirit of prayer wraps it all round. It is the Spirit touch which is the real divining-rod to find and reveal the water of life in a text.

8. A GOOD SERMON, BUT— MIGHT IT NOT HAVE BEEN
BETTER CUT AND BETTER SET?

A diamond in the rough is not unlike a common stone, but let an expert cut it and an expert set it, and it flashes brilliantly. What our sermons want is to reach the flashing-point. I am not referring now to the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the real Fashioner and Transmitter, but to that human element which He deigns to use for His own holy purposes. It is well to remind ourselves that a sermon has no more right to be disorderly than the preacher himself has; that we have no more right to discard the best words for our holy work than a numismatist has, when he chooses his specimen of coins, to reject the choicest and best cut; that as the picturesque appeals more to the ordinary mind, so our words should be as graphic as the English tongue will permit. A good sermon is not the worse, but the better, for having an air of distinction in its language, and standing out like a gentleman in an unwashed crowd.

9. A GOOD SERMON, BUT— HOW MUCH EXPECTATION
WAS THERE IN IT?

It makes all the difference in the world to the buoyancy of a sermon whether it be preached hopefully or not. Expectation is the cork which keeps it afloat on the surface of a congregation's interest. Despair is leaden, and depresses sadly. It may be thought that the preacher's inner feelings will be invisible, but they make an atmosphere for weal or woe. There is a lift in a hopefully delivered sermon which, like a pair of vigorous wings, bears it brightly along and aloft. If we had no right to expect fruit, then it would be allowable to despair, but when we are bidden to let down the net "*for a draught,*" and not only to *fish* for men, but "*to catch them,*" the case is different. It is not only impolitic and fatal, but it is irreligious, not to sow in faith and to expect results more or less immediate. At any rate, the fact remains that a sermon loses one of its chief ingredients when expectation is lacking; and the congregation is the first to miss it.

10. A GOOD SERMON, BUT— COULD IT NOT HAVE BEEN IMPROVED BY A DASH OR TWO OF RESERVE?

We cannot preach every aspect of truth in one sermon. Why try? Some truths are surely better kept in reserve for another time. We may allow some of them to peep out just to keep the balance, but to range them all in a row like bottles in a museum is rather too prodigal, and defeats the purpose we are aiming at.

And just as there should be a reserve of truth, so should there be a reserve of exuberance. The passion pitch is not for the whole sermon, or for most of it. Neither a sermon nor an engine should be driven with red-hot boilers the whole journey through. Besides, a man who keeps his heat back and well in hand is a mightier power for good than he who is always letting himself go. The hint of its existence is sometimes better than its expression.

And, just as truly, there should be a reserve of utterance. The voice has many tones and many pitches, and to run a sermon on one note is like playing on one note of a flute only, and that probably the shrillest of all. It is not interesting to a congregation and it is very wearisome to the preacher.

There are, no doubt, other "buts" which will occur to all my readers, but the list is surely long enough and depressing enough. They only emphasize the fact which we are all bitterly conscious of—that a really good sermon, good all through and good all round, is a simple impossibility. Perfection lies not on this side of eternity, and our ideals will never be realized here. All we can hope is that our sermons may be less imperfect, and approach the good a little more closely.

But, thank God, He can use imperfect agents for His great purposes, and only insists on our recognition of the faulty, and our dependence on Himself. "When I am weak, then I am strong," said St. Paul, as he clung to his strong Saviour, and we may surely say in the same strain :—"When my poor words come falteringly out, when my partial thoughts are but lamely

expressed, when I fail to convey the heights and the depths of God's truth, then I cast myself on God's mercy to forgive—on God's Omnipotence to use—on God's wisdom to convert—so that, after all, and in spite of all, hearts may be impressed and won by the living touch of even my poor fragmentary sermon. *My best is bad, but linked with God's best it must prevail.*"



The Temptation of Christ.

BY THE REV. H. M. SANDERS, M.A.,

Vicar of St. John's, Highbury, N.

"ABLE not to sin" (*Posse non peccare*), or "Not able to sin" (*Non posse peccare*). Which of these is correct? What do we mean when we say Christ *could not* sin? The question is no new one. It has been debated from Augustinian, and even from pre-Augustinian, days. It was a classical subject for discussion in the days of the Schoolmen, providing them with a metaphysical and psychological problem after their own heart. Nor was this to be wondered at when we remember that the exegesis of the Temptation then current was that, *e.g.*, of St. Chrysostom (see *THE CHURCHMAN*, March, 1909, p. 202). The problem of making the Temptation *real* to a sinless Christ was, and is, a difficult one if that Temptation is viewed as in any shape, however remote, addressed to His own personal, moral, or religious sense. What we mean will be the better understood if we consider for a moment the case of a Christian man well advanced on the road of holiness (*cf.* 1 John v. 18). Of such a man it is possible to say that "in Christ" he cannot be tempted with sin. So long as he is "in Christ," in *living, conscious union* with the Lord, he cannot, strictly speaking, be induced to evil at all. All his shortcomings are due to the victory, for the time being, of the old Adam over the new,