

Hints from the Pew.

By Miss MAY JUST.

IN the course of my life I have heard, I suppose, somewhere between two and three thousand sermons, good, bad, and indifferent. One does not go through such an experience without forming some general impressions on the subject of preaching, and I want to beg the indulgence of those to whom I have so often listened in silent respect, while I allow myself for once a few criticisms, and help them to hear themselves as I hear them from my obscure place among the congregation.

We all realize, as Christians, the supreme importance, and the practical difficulty, of being good. So I rate most highly of all those sermons which aim directly at making me good, or at all events help me to realize the possibility of becoming better than I am.

This is the chief thing that we in the pews ask from the preacher. We want something to raise our lives, continually dragged down by the influence of sense. We want food for the spirit, starved often in the midst of material abundance. Everything else is comparatively unimportant. I believe it is not merely the isolated mystic who feels this want, it is the average person, especially the average young person; and the young matter most. I was almost startled a few days ago when a young girl whom I had always looked upon as altogether conventional remarked to me: "It is a pity our vicar somehow gives one the impression of being worldly. It is as though he went through the service merely as a formal duty, and one does not like to feel that." Yes; in spite of our own often sordid and frivolous lives, we of the laity have a high ideal for our clergy. We expect them to be spiritual.

Yet one feels it is a most difficult thing to ask of a man, that he should keep the flame of his own inner life always so clear and bright that he can at any time rekindle the drooping light of ours. Perhaps only the few are really capable of this.

But if all have not the mystical insight which is inspiration, surely all can be sincere. And sincerity is the one indispensable quality. We like to feel that the sermon is a true expression of the preacher's best thoughts, the outcome of his own experiences. A string of set phrases or of stereotyped religious expressions has no real meaning for us. We might as well be listening to a discourse in Basque or Flemish. Better, perhaps, for then no touch of irritation would interfere with its soothing soporific effect.

Next to the purely spiritual sermon, the sermon which helps me to be good, I enjoy the sermon which teaches me useful facts of any kind, and so aims at making me wise or learned. The facts may be of any order—ethics, psychology, philology, history—so long as they bear more or less directly on Divine things. In this class I should place a very charming and simple history of the English Bible, which I was privileged to hear one day lately, and some (though not all) missionary sermons.

I believe many of the clergy would be surprised and horrified did they know what utter ignorance sometimes prevails nowadays of the old Bible stories, of Church ordinances and traditions, and even of the life of our Lord Himself, among young people of the wealthier middle classes, brought up to live for games, pleasures, and a good time generally. Healthy and happy-looking for the most part, and faultlessly dressed, they are brought occasionally to church, as a sop to social prejudices. During the sermon their thoughts are far away; still, an occasional story, well told, might win their attention. Yet one feels how powerless is pulpit teaching, or indeed any sort of teaching at all, in the face of a home atmosphere of indifference and materialism.

It must chance sometimes that a preacher is conscious of feeling neither sufficiently spiritual to influence us to holiness, nor learned and original enough to make religion interesting on the intellectual side. Personally, I cannot see why in such a case he should not frankly present to us the work of some more competent divine. People will not sit down to read old sermons

to themselves, even those of famous preachers, but they might listen with interest occasionally to productions of this sort, suitably chosen, and well delivered in church, with a few words of introduction. And it would be more honest than the manufactured article occasionally met with.

After all, however, this is but a *pis aller*. A sermon depends for its real force on the personality of the preacher.

But if a sermon is always welcome which teaches some new fact, or which throws any fresh light on the problems of life, there is, on the other hand, nothing more annoying than an assumption of learning where the reality is absent. Had I had a companion, we should probably have merely shared a smile the day that a particularly superficial preacher referred to himself as "We Thinkers." Chancing to be alone, I am afraid I was weak enough to feel irritated. Then there was the would-be scientific cleric, who, wishing to direct our thoughts at Easter-time to the beautiful weather, began amid dramatic flourishes: "Day by day, at this delightful season, our little planet of Earth, bounding along on its orbit, is drawing nearer and nearer to the great source of light and heat, the Sun; and as we approach more closely to the splendid luminary, we feel its grateful warmth kindling new life," etc.

I knew this preacher pretty well in private. He was a frank and modest young fellow enough, of the open-air type, and not overburdened with education. It is a mystery to me that he should have held it necessary to pose in the pulpit as a philosopher and a scientist.

We do not require a clergyman to be an expert in natural science; should he by a happy chance combine two types of mind usually rather incompatible, we may, I think, trust such a man to use his rare talents to advantage. But pseudo-science in the pulpit is odious. Let us have truth at all costs, though it be the truth of honest ignorance. There is really no absolute need to drag in the Solar System, and perhaps it is more useful on the whole to reason of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come.

Another orator, of an equally florid type, and a good deal more self-confident, betrayed his own confusion of thought one day by a sermon in which he laboured to demonstrate at some length that the force of gravitation and the Mosaic injunction to refrain from stealing were equally "laws," and therefore to be placed in exactly the same category.

Most mischievous of all, perhaps, in the hands of the incompetent, are such themes as miracles, historical criticism, etc.—subjects which seem often to have a fatal attraction for them. We come out of church with a vague impression that not only are we all drifting rudderless on a shoreless sea, but also that the pilot in charge of our boat is doing his best to swamp it.

No one can be an authority on every subject, and I think that a man would generally do better to leave on one side those things in which he does not see quite clearly himself—unless, indeed, as happens occasionally, he is great enough and simple enough to understand his own limitations, and, perhaps, even to use them as an intellectual stimulus for his congregation.

I remember once hearing a very original sermon on love. "In most cases," said the preacher, "we find that the stronger and more concentrated anything is, the purer it is also. As, for instance, in the case of light. But with love the converse is true. That love which is most free from alloy is the love which is general, the type of love which we call charity. As love attaches itself to smaller groups, and again to particular persons, it grows more powerful, and at the same time less pure. I have not yet been able to solve this puzzle." I cannot solve it either, but the observation opened up for me a fresh vein of thought.

Still, I suppose it is only the few who care for psychological problems, while we are all of us glad to have any simple directions for the everyday duties of life.

But if an assumption of learning jars on one, still more so does an assumption of esoteric sanctity. When a man's attitude is that of the Christian, striving, through difficulties and with varying success, after an ideal to which he can never attain, he appeals to my respect and sympathy, and to my own experience.

I feel that here is one who knows what the struggle is, and can help me in it. But Sir Oracle, pronouncing from a platform of infallibility, whether personal or official, simply awakens my suspicion and dislike; and the more glibly and authoritatively he speaks, the more strongly I incline to suspect him.

After all, it is the man behind the words that really matters. It is the Christ, mirrored, however imperfectly, in His followers Who draws us now, as He has drawn the world through two thousand years. Englishmen are rarely orators, and deep feeling will sometimes make them almost dumb; but halting and broken phrases are often most eloquent of all. Each human being has his own individual life story, and it seems to me that, with prayer and careful preparation, almost any man should be able to utter some few truths which he has proved in his own spiritual development, and which may be of use for helping others through theirs.

We all get so much into the way of regarding the sermon as a mere part of a routine, that I believe a preacher would sometimes almost be surprised to know that among his ordinary respectable-looking Sunday congregation were any souls craving a word of guidance in the hour of difficulty, or perhaps even despair. Yet this may happen often; I know it happens sometimes. Tragedy is all around now just as much as in the days of old, though nowadays we screen it decently and try to ignore it. The sick and the sad still crave the healing touch of Christ.

I remember going one day to church in a mood of some perplexity, doubting, as one does so often, where duty really lay, in the conflict between one's own claim for fuller development and the denial of self for the sake of others. The sermon was on the Collect for the First Sunday after Epiphany, and the preacher began: "It is needless to waste much time over the first half of this Collect; we all know pretty well what our duty is; the difficulty is to do it." At the moment I envied him his simple outlook, but then again I felt chilled and discouraged at so superficial a philosophy offered in the name of the Church.

Some preachers make constant references to passing events. Presumably this is supposed to be "up to date," and to attract a congregation. But it seems to me altogether a mistake. We are weak creatures, and largely dependent on associations. To God the things that are God's. Let the church be a holy place. When we meet there, let us feel that we are really coming apart out of the world's life, that we can cast behind us every thought that is sordid and soiling to the soul. At the time of the "Crippen case" I heard the chase of the murderer used as an illustration in a sermon. It struck me as horrible.

One occasionally hears sermons so utterly unsuitable to the occasion that one can only marvel at any human being's having so little of the sympathetic instinct. I remember one such instance in a little district church in a poor neighbourhood. There were present, besides myself, the preacher's showy wife at the harmonium and equally showy groom in one of the back pews, seven or eight choir-boys, doubtless paid for their attendance, and about three old women with the professional devoutness of church-cleaners. Besides these officials, one saw half a dozen rather old and shabby-looking rustics, drawn to the service apparently by an agelong habit that had developed into instinct.

The sermon was on the love of riches. "Look, my brethren," cried the preacher, "at your great heaps of gold, at all these shining jewels! Why are you so much attached to them? You cannot carry them away when you die!" etc.

I thought of my own slender earnings, and the few forgotten trinkets in a drawer at home, and conscience upheld my conviction that none of these were likely to block my way to heaven. I glanced at the old women's pinched faces and rusty clothes. Did the preacher suspect any hidden hoards in stockings? Or could it be that the groom's princely salary. . . . It would have been really funny if it had not been sad.

My next instance was sad only.

In a great ward of one of our large hospitals all the patients who were able to do so had gathered for a week-night service.

Many joined in the prayers and hymns ; all heard them respectfully.

Then to the Church came her golden opportunity. These poor people, practical heathens many of them, victims of our pitiless modern industrial system, for once in their hard, hurrying lives, had an interval of peace, and had come of their own accord to listen for a message from God. They fastened hungry eyes on the preacher, looking for some small crumbs of consolation or encouragement.

They received a stone—an academic essay on Evolution.

I have never in my life felt so utterly ashamed for my Church, or so sad for the cause of Christ.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of such people pass through our hospitals every year. Surely at our hands God will require their souls.

And now, though hesitatingly, and with deference, I would mention the sermons I have heard regarding the Holy Communion.

There are some preachers who can so delicately play upon the strings of the heart as to make it impossible for one to turn away from the Table of Christ. There are others who insist continually on the duty of attendance, with a contrary effect. Speaking for myself, I do not believe that our Lord can greatly care for guests who accept His hospitality grudgingly or of necessity, and experience has led me to conclude any kind of compulsion in these things to be deadening to the soul. Nothing so surely drives ardent young spirits into covert or open rebellion against the Church, as the conviction that her most sacred mysteries are forms kept up out of self-interest and stupidity. They are apt to conclude in haste that religion itself is a mere wretched, despicable sham.

But there is another reason why we should not be urged too often to come to Holy Communion. Each celebration generally means a collection ; and in poor places each collection is of importance. Do not let the least suspicion of any sordid object defile the ideal of the sacred Feast.

The mention of collections brings to me my last point—the begging sermon.

It is painful to hear a sensitive man, a gentleman, and perhaps a scholar, appealing in public for money. I am ashamed when I think that our wealthy congregations, with handsome clothes on their backs and luxuries of every kind in their homes, should require Christ's ministers to humble themselves in this way before they will spare some single contemptible little coin towards His cause. Are we indeed Christians, or is the whole thing a farce?

There is perhaps just one excuse for us. Some of us have an uneasy suspicion that the whole system of Church finance needs readjustment, and that by helping to bolster up the present state of things we are delaying the adoption of any comprehensive and business-like scheme. We are a nation of shopkeepers, and like to feel sure that our money is being laid out to the best advantage; we are a just people, and require things to be quite fairly arranged all round.

I believe the more the clergy beg, the more they may. We get used to it, and become indifferent. And it is demoralizing both for them and for us. No; the more excellent way is never to beg if you can help it; but when you must, let your congregation see that you are in a false position, and make them feel ashamed of it. Personally, I should much like to see a voluntary church rate, levied for the common good.

In conclusion, I would beg my spiritual pastors to believe that I have criticized them and their work in no carping spirit. I recall with gladness and gratitude many useful lessons learnt from sermons, many impulses to good that they have given me; one or two sermons that have even made landmarks in my life—simple discourses, which, coming from the hearts of the speakers, reached my own. But I need not write about these. If no true service is ever lost, they are chronicled elsewhere.

