

“The Old Sermon.”

“I HAVE a nice little stock of six hundred sermons, so I generally give my people cold meat.” So spake our brother of the cloth. It was complacent. It was frank. It was amusing, and also pathetic. Cold meat! Such might be the estimate of some brutal critic, but when it becomes the parson’s own description of his homiletic bill of fare, it suggests that the fire in the parsonage study had burnt low. It suggests that a few new books for the parson’s bookshelves, above all a draught of fresh air from the wind of God, were badly needed to make the old fire burn and glow. The phrase appeals to our sense of humour. We can almost see the paterfamilias sitting down to his Sunday repast, and saying to his much-enduring spouse: “I hope you are giving us a good dinner, my dear; it was cold meat in church.”

But the words suggest some serious reflections. Have we never surveyed complacently our batches of sermon notes, wondering whether, in this age of insurance for everyone and everything, we ought not to insure these treasures of homiletic wealth? Was that complacency justified? Is all this, once the product of our thought and study—aye, and of our deepest longings and purest visions; once hot with the warmth of our whole mind and soul—is all this now no better than cold meat, to be served up on Sunday under, perchance, another name, but in reality a mere dished-up *réchauffé*? The old sermon—will it do?

Honestly we can assert that not every sermon has grown cold because it has grown old. Some of the old ones are the best. They are full of the old wine, *ὁ παλαιὸς χρηστότερός ἐστι*. But what is it about the old sermon which makes it often impossible to-day? We will not think of those wonderful productions whose acceptance by the Bishop set the seal upon our fitness for the priesthood, nor of those early masterpieces which, with all humility, we realized had settled for all time the interpreta-

tion of some text. We will rather think of the effusions of our first six or eight years of clerical life, some dated from the period of our delightful irresponsibility as the Rector's colleague, others which blossomed forth in the early years of our first blushing vicariate. Why cannot we preach them as they stand to-day? We thought much of them then. They were not lacking in real earnestness. Coming from young men, they were not unacceptable. By the help of God they were not unblest. Yet we look at them askance to-day. Why?

Our outlook has broadened. We are as firm believers as we ever were that 'twixt time and eternity there are but two ways—the broad and the narrow. We never felt more convinced than we do to-day that there is none other name but One through which we may obtain health and salvation. But we have found out that some people are walking in the narrow way that we had not espied then, and that there are other ways of expressing faith in Christ than in the phrases that seemed to us then to enclose and exhaust it. We have got to know men better, and have found here and there a spirituality that we had not suspected. We have got to know ourselves better, and have discovered that our own spiritual vitality was not measureable by our phrases or our feelings. We have learned something about "varieties of religious experience." Some sad incidents of ministerial life have convinced us that that religion is not always deepest which is most demonstrative, nor that most genuine which sounds most orthodox. The conviction has slowly possessed us that it is in the daily life that the Life is manifested, and that some whose lives are most often found reflecting "the Life which is the Light of men" would make but a poor show if asked to define their spiritual experiences. Thus added knowledge of the dealings of God with men, and of the modes and phases of the soul's uplift to God, has made us feel that we must soften some of the harshness of the old sermon.

Again, the disappointments of our ministry have made us more conscious of the limitations of the preacher. We were so

sure we could convince, we were so exuberant, so persuaded that our interpretations could not be regarded as other than adequate, so confident that our appeals must be responded to; there was such an air of finality with which we disposed of every problem! Then followed of necessity disillusionment, inducing first petulance, then chagrin, then mortification; then, by the mercy of God, some little measure of humbleness of mind, as with chastened spirit we began to gather some of the peaceable fruits of righteousness, and to see them in the gardens of our neighbours' souls. We read the old sermon, and experience teaches us to feel that it is too professional, too confident, not sufficiently human. Its spirit must be chastened as ours has been.

Wider experience of men and things has taught us that there are two sides to every question, and that no subject has been mastered till both sides have been studied. We are convinced that it is so with the wide range of questions connected with the critical and exegetical study of Holy Writ. We are not quite so sure as before that ours is the only legitimate theory of inspiration, or that Evangelical theology is summed up in Augustine and Luther. We are willing now to learn from other schools of thought beside our own. We are convinced that no one school or Church has a monopoly of the Faith, or has exhausted its meaning. In the political as in the religious world we are getting far more concerned for the welfare of the nation than for the victory of our party. In the wide sphere of social activity we are losing our prejudice against legal innovations, and our dislike to legislation of which we disapprove no longer blinds us to the good which the same legislators have effected. In Church and State we are less inclined to partisanship. We are more zealous to assert our common faith and aim, than to magnify and emphasize a gulf which seems to be fixed, and a cleavage which seems irreparable. So the old sermon appears to us now somewhat too narrow, too aggressive, too partisan in its tone and temper. It is the truth—yes, thank God!—but it does not seem to contain, as we thought it did,

the whole truth. It must not negative other aspects of truth. It must not foreclose other roads to truth.

There is a certain lack of humour, too, which is very evident in the old sermon. How we lectured our long-suffering hearers ! What a scolding we gave them ! It would have irritated them if they had not found it mildly amusing. But a young man's sermon is generally treated very leniently so long as it shows some real earnestness and genuine conviction. Polish is not expected ; breadth of view arouses suspicion ; crudity is easily condoned ; but the people like life and vigour in the young parson. " He got it off his chest fine," was the recent description by a Westmorland rustic of a curate's sermon, which was certainly a very dashing performance. " He's only fit for an armchair !" was the scornful comment upon the sermon of a great strapping parson, who may have had something good to say, but who did not take the trouble to let the congregation hear it. The " loud voice" of the Prayer-Book rubrics is a warning against a mumbled service, but a mumbled sermon exasperates the most amiable of listeners. Yet, looking at the old sermon, strong and vigorous as it was, we cannot but feel that its tone is not altogether that which we should now adopt towards our congregation.

It is the change in us which has altered the tone of our preaching. There has come upon us as the years have passed by a greater sense of the mystery of life. The great landmarks of revelation stand out as clearly as ever ; but while we used to think that every detail of the picture was plainly discernible, we now observe that the picture is full of atmosphere, that surrounding every prominent feature and enveloping the whole wide prospect is an atmosphere of mystery. We do not step in with quite the same boldness into regions " where angels fear to tread." A sense of wonder comes over us.

There is something unspeakably awesome about the eternal destiny which this little life is to determine. The scheme of the Divine purpose for the human race, both as regards its spiritual winners and its spiritual losers, and the vast mass of

mankind who never on earth have had the opportunity either to win or to lose the eternal prize ; the place, the function, and the service in the universe that is to be the portion of the glorified Church of Christ through the eternal ages ; the nature and object of human relationship when the great wrench has taken place from all things corporeal—in short, the mystery of the universe which has overshadowed us has coloured our thoughts and judgments, and has introduced into our sermons an element which was not there before. It has made us less disposed to dogmatize, less satisfied with the best of definitions of things and themes which are ineffable, more patient of a varied dogma and a varied standpoint where there is evidence of the life which is life indeed.

If there is more mystery perceivable in the background of the preacher's mind, there is also more sympathy issuing from the modern pulpit. The chastening effect of our own disappointments has brought us closer to our people in theirs. The preacher gets nearer to his people as the passing years bring to him experiences akin to their own. The growing fellowship between them cannot but influence the tone and character of the weekly messages from him whose solemn office it is to stand at once as God's ambassador and as the people's leader and servant. If the world is to be his parish, it can only safely become so by beginning with the parish as his world. He lives among his people, and in increasing measure their joys and sorrows become his.

As sympathy is born of increasing knowledge and fellowship, so also is charity. He is slower than of yore in passing judgments, slower in attributing motives, slower in estimating results. A deepening consciousness of personal shortcoming makes the shortcomings of others look less glaring. The knowledge that God alone knows his own heart's secrets restrains him from assuming that he knows all that is best of his people's. He remembers the old "Varsity days, when he and his coterie sized up the men of his year who professed and called themselves Christians, and classified them with great precision as

*keen* and *slack*. Their after history has falsified many of his definitions and surprised many of his expectations; so by degrees he has learned to "judge nothing until the Lord come." The old sermon was too censorious. If it is to do duty again, it must be clothed with the garment of love.

The added experience of men and matters has deepened the conviction that "God fulfils Himself in many ways." The modes of the operations of the Holy Spirit appear increasingly varied and complicated. The action of spiritual influences, whether holy or unholy, that play around the soul of man, the cumulative effect of a combination of agencies for evil or for good, the strife between the Spirit and the flesh which is going on, all unseen, within, and wholly screened from outside scrutiny, these are phenomena that baffle all attempts at analysis and foil all schemes of spiritual strategy. God must work His own will in His own way in the hearts of men. The seed will spring up he knows not how. He must sow his seed under the directions of Him who alone giveth the increase. He is not so sure now as when he first preached that old sermon that he can foresee the nature and manner of its effect upon his hearers; but he is more convinced than ever that God's word shall not return to Him void, that it shall accomplish that which He pleases, and prosper in the thing whereunto He has sent it. So the old sermon seems to him now to suggest certain limits and restrictions to the methods of the Holy Spirit's working that the preacher can no longer impose. It must not dictate the phases or the stages of the soul's awakening; it must leave room for many vistas of truth, many glimpses of eternal things, many pathways which lead to the one unchanging Door.

But before we lay aside the old sermon as something which gives an inadequate expression to our larger views of life, it would be well for us to consider whether, as compared with it, the newer sermon is all gain. It may even be imperative that we make inquiry with ourselves whether there has not been loss as well as gain; for to some there may come the crushing conviction that not only has there been loss as well as gain, but

that the loss has outweighed the gain. Does a sense of regret and shame, and even guilt, steal over us as we read the pages of the old sermon? Does conscience convict us of a loss of the sense of vocation? Do we see something in the old sermon that the new does not contain, but something which the accusing voice within us charges us with failure and guilt for omitting? Have we in these later years been dealing as faithfully as we used to do with the great verities of the Faith? Have we preached the great foundation truths of the Evangel with the old earnestness and plainness and conviction, or is it true that the topical sermon, the critical sermon, the social sermon, the up-to-date newspaper-inspired sermon, has ousted the Gospel of the grace of God? Is there to be found in it the old solemn appeal to conscience? Is it inspired by the old longing to bring the prodigal back to the Father's home? Is there the old holy ambition for definite spiritual results, the old yearning that the message may prove the power of God unto salvation?

What gain has it been that the sermon is more polished, if its message is less plain, and if its subject is less prominent? If an added breadth has blurred the old lines and obliterated the ancient landmarks, if the newer light and learning has made us ashamed of the Gospel, how stands the gain in comparison with the loss? The very ease of our sermon preparation and delivery may have been a curse and not a blessing. It is born with less travail. Has it, therefore, become a light thing to proclaim the truth of God? Has a fatal facility in construction permitted other things to deprive it of its unique place in our parochial ministrations? Has the cleverness of the modern sermon taken the place of the convicting and converting power of the old? If so, then it is time that the old sermon was taken from its resting-place and studied and preached anew, so that once more there may sound forth from the pulpit to eager, wistful hearts of needy men the old Gospel, simple and clear, bold and strong, the good news from Heaven to a longing world, the good news of a Saviour who is mighty to save.

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