

The Prophetic Function of the Christian Ministry.

I. THE IDEA OF THE PROPHET.

THIS paper and the two which are to follow it are upon the prophetic function of the Christian ministry. I have chosen the word "function" rather than "office" or "work" because this particular term lays stress upon the actual doing of a work rather than upon the office or official position of the worker.¹ It reminds us that he is an active instrument of a body which acts through him as a living part of itself. We speak of working as the "function" of the hand, of walking as the "function" of the feet, of speaking as the "function" of the tongue. That each function is performed by its own proper organ, but only when this organ is a vital part of the whole body. Then, while it is true that the Church is essentially a prophetic body, whose ideal is that each member should be a prophet, yet it is to certain members, divinely called and socially delegated, that the performance of the prophetic function is specially entrusted. Thus the word "function" lays stress rather on the special nature of the activity than on the *special nature* of the one discharging it. The hand, the ear, the feet, are of the same nature as the rest of the body; they draw their supplies of strength and activity from the same sources. I lay stress on this because we know from a sad experience the danger of regarding an official in the Church as possessing some peculiar sacredness in himself—a sacredness different in *kind* from that of the ordinary member. We know how this has led in the past to there being two standards of conduct, one for the priest and another for the layman, with the unfortunate corollary that the duty of seeking to live up to the highest life is not regarded or taught as a duty which is incumbent upon all.

The fundamental conception of the prophet is that of one to

¹ See Hort's "The Christian Ecclesia," especially p. 157 *et seq.*

whom God reveals His will, and who in turn makes that will known to men. A moment's reflection will convince us that here we have also a description of what should be the chief function of the Christian minister—the learning and the proclaiming of the will of God. He is, in short, one whom God has called to speak to man about Himself. The reason why he speaks and the authority with which he speaks are contained in the words, "Thus saith the Lord." There are other conceptions of the Christian ministry which contain a very considerable measure of truth, but none is so comprehensive as this, also none has been so enduring.

If we give a wide interpretation to the word "Christianity,"¹ if we include in it the preparation for the Incarnation—as revealed in the Old Testament—as well as its issues, we may say that this conception of the ministry is as old as Christianity itself. For instance, it was exercised or discharged by Moses; it is still discharged by every earnest clergyman, however humble his position, at the present time. Yet in spite of this function being the one pre-eminently discharged by Christ Himself, in spite of its being the one upon which He laid special stress in those whom He called and sent—in spite of all this, judged by the experience of the present, it must be admitted that it is widely disregarded in practice by those who profess to have given their lives to its fulfilment.

One reason for this, I fear, is that this conception of ministerial work is not only the most spiritual—where the term spiritual includes intellectual—but it is also the most difficult of all conceptions to express in conduct. The demands which it makes upon human personality are immensely exacting; and as the temptation to take what is actually a much more mechanical, as well as a much more materialistic, view of a clergyman's work is always present, we cannot wonder (however much we may regret the fact) that to this temptation many, otherwise quite earnest men, seem gradually to succumb. Among the many temptations which constantly beset the clergy-

¹ See my "Social Relationships in the Light of Christianity," p. 94 *et seq.*

man's or even the teacher's path I should give this a very foremost place.

The present is an age of machinery; the experiences of the war have added another to the many proofs of this. What advantages the Germans have had, as also what they have won, have been due to the excellence of their machinery, not only in the army, but in every department of the State. And, so far as we can see, where they are likely to fail lies in their apparent inability to see that there are far more important considerations, as there are far stronger powers, than the mechanical, even at its best. If by the term "psychological" we mean that which has reference to the soul (or the personality), then the psychology of the Germans has been either strangely wanting or remarkably at fault. Then we must remember that, while the Church of England has undoubted advantages from its wonderful system and its "incomparable liturgy," yet these very advantages carry within themselves certain dangers. The temptation to which all elaborate systems are subject is to trust too much to the system, and to forget that the system is only a framework. The danger in every fixed liturgy is the temptation, not merely to render it mechanically—to which the custom of intoning or monotoning almost everything strongly tends—but to treat such a liturgy as an all-sufficient means of intercourse with God. In the work of the true prophet there can be nothing mechanical. Where it is properly discharged there is not only the consciousness of perpetually fresh inspiration, but also the feeling of ever present and always changing needs. In one sense the message cannot change, for God does not change, therefore the principles upon which it is based are eternal; but in another sense it must always be changing; its contents must continually become enlarged through fresh accessions of revelation; also its form should change in order that it may be adapted to meet constantly new difficulties, dangers, and temptations, arising from constantly changing circumstances.

I propose to divide my subject into three parts, of which the first will deal with "The Idea of the Prophet," the second with

“The Knowledge of the Prophet,” and the third with “The Work of the Prophet.” It must, of course, be understood that it is impossible to deal adequately with any one of these three without to some extent entering upon the two others.

Christianity is essentially a revelation. To the term Christianity I would, as I have already said, give a wide interpretation. Briefly, it is the great Divine scheme or plan for man’s salvation, to whose beginning—when we read of “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”¹—it is impossible to fix any definite date. Of this revelation, prophecy is at once the essential feature as well as the chief instrument. Throughout the whole course of its history—including the life of Christ upon earth—we shall find that the revelation is given by God to man mainly *through* man. Also the revelation comes through the life and conduct as well as through the words of the prophet, a truth emphasized in the petition, “that they may both by their life and doctrine set forward Thy true and lively word.” I would also lay stress upon the continuity of this method of revelation. The revelation through the life of the Incarnate Saviour is not different in nature from the revelation through the prophets of the Old Testament dispensation, and there is no reason to think that since the close of the New Testament the mode of revelation has been changed. Prophecy, in the true sense of the term—a speaking on behalf of God the message which God has given to us, a speaking of this message in both word and conduct—is still the chief instrument of revelation. I am always thankful for the use of the present tense in the verse of the *Te Deum* which asserts that “The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets praise Thee.” We must also remember Christ’s saying: “I have yet many things to say unto you”;² and what Christ whispers in the ear we must publicly proclaim. With this saying we must combine the following: “He shall guide you into all the truth.”³ We cannot doubt what is to be the instrument both of the saying and the guiding. In both cases

¹ Rev. xiii. 8.

² St. John xvi. 12.

³ St. John xvi. 3.

it must be men inspired by the Holy Spirit of God and of Christ, men who have also complete faith in this inspiration, men whose motive is the Spirit of love, whose method is that of the "Spirit of wisdom and understanding," and whose object is to diffuse or implant the "Spirit of true godliness and of holy fear." When Christ—His nature, His life, and His teaching—is proclaimed and explained by Spirit-filled men in the light of growing knowledge and experience, then Christ will say to us and to them "things"—new and wider aspects of eternal truths—unsaid to our fathers. If I did not believe in both a continuous revelation and a constant inspiration to those who are fitted to receive these—in other words, if I did not believe in a present work of the Holy Spirit—I could not be a preacher of the Gospel. I believe the words of Amos are still true: "Surely the Lord God will do nothing but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets."¹ Only the prophets, or, to use the ancient Biblical word, the seers, must be fit both to hear and see; they must, so far as they are able, fit themselves; they must use all their faculties—indeed, every available means—for both hearing and seeing. If men are not taught, guided, and exhorted, if the word of the Lord is "rare"² in these days, the fault is not God's, but ours. And as the message comes through Spirit-filled men, so it must be an appeal to the spiritual faculties. Its object must be to awaken, to cleanse, to sharpen the conscience, also to guide and strengthen the will towards good; it must still be "by manifestation of the truth that we commend ourselves to every kind of conscience"—reason, thought, feeling, emotion—"of men in the sight of God."³

An adequate discharge of the prophetic function demands on the part of the prophet a clear conception of (1) the source and contents of his message, (2) of the object of his message, and (3) of the responsibility of his message. The prophet should be a theologian in the fullest sense of the word; he should know God and God's will so far as this has been revealed. The prophet should also have both a wide knowledge of and a deep

¹ Amos iii. 7.

² 1 Sam. iii. 1 (R.V. marg.)

³ 2 Cor. iv. 2.

insight into human nature. He must also have complete faith in his message, together with a strong sense of duty as to the deliverance of the message.

It has been said that there are three fundamental questions in regard to revelation: First, Is there a God? secondly, Is communion between God and man possible? thirdly, What is the nature or character of the God in whom we believe? The existence of prophecy is an answer to the first two questions; the contents or message of both Old Testament and New Testament prophecy answers the third. In regard to the nature of God, we must remember, first, the assertion of the spirituality of God—God is [a] Spirit; and, secondly, the repeated assertion of some likeness between man and God—“God made man in His own image”;¹ “He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father”;² also the assertion that Christ is “the very image of God’s substance.”³ Hence we can postulate certain faculties in God akin to the higher or spiritual part of human nature—for instance, thought and feeling, also such moral qualities as love and pity, justice, forbearance, patience, and perseverance. For these qualities man has been endowed with a power of appreciation. Hence the possibility of personal communion between man and God. This communion is the fundamental condition of prophecy, for how can we utter God’s will to man, how can we commend God, unless we first know Him?

The inspiration of all true prophecy is love. Love is the only sufficient motive of both creation and re-creation. It is in love that God makes known His will; it is in love that we must make known that will to man. The preamble to the Ten Commandments—a declaration of God’s will—which describes God as the Deliverer, declares the common motive of all the commandments; this is seen when we remember that each commandment of the Second Table condemns some form of selfishness, the opposite of love. “The testimony of Jesus”⁴—the great Deliverer and Saviour of man—“is the spirit of pro-

¹ Gen. i. 27.

³ Heb. i. 3 (R.V.).

² St. John xiv. 9.

⁴ Rev. xix. 10.

phesy." Without love for both God and man it is impossible to perform the function of the prophet. When love is perfected and realized in life, then prophecy will cease ; for its work will be accomplished. Knowledge of God, in the true sense, must lead to love of God ; and when this is universal, when "all know Him, from the least to the greatest,"¹ then the work of making God known will be no longer necessary.

There is one further mark or quality of the prophet, which at first sight would seem to have better been considered under "The Knowledge of the Prophet," but which so enters into the very idea of the prophet that it will best be dealt with here. All the prophets were essentially men of their own time. They had a wide knowledge and a deep insight into the conditions of their own day. They spoke its language, understood its thoughts, watched most carefully its tendencies and movements ; consequently they were able to foretell the often inevitable consequences of these. God's judgments are not arbitrary : they are in exact correspondence with man's evil doings. Hence the prophets, who knew both the will of God and the sin of man, could foresee the results of each sin. With the prophets insight is the key to foresight. It is the man who knows intimately the present, and so the direction in which its currents are moving, who can best declare the conditions of the future. It is because the prophets were so essentially men of their own day that the contents and style of their writings differ so immensely, that we have in them such a wonderful diversity of both matter and manner. We have only to think of the difference in the contents and style in the three parts of our present book of Isaiah, of the still greater difference between Amos and the first nine chapters of Zechariah, to see how true this is. No one can read the Gospels without being struck with our Lord's extraordinarily intimate knowledge of the thoughts and aspirations of those whom He addressed. Of recent years the authenticity of the Acts and of St. Paul's Epistles has been mainly re-established by showing that they must have been

¹ Heb. viii. 11.

written during the age in which tradition claims they were composed; for no one writing fifty years later could have possessed the knowledge they reveal. We shall find the same true of all the great preachers of the Christian Church in every age of its history. Chrysostom and Gregory the Great, Peter the Hermit and John Wicliffe, Hus and Latimer, Wesley and Spurgeon, knew intimately the age in which they lived and the people they addressed. The sermon that can be preached equally well anywhere or at any time, or to any audience, will probably be found to be equally ineffective in all.

This temporal and local application of prophecy is inherent in the very idea of the prophet's function. It witnesses to its directness and reality, to its intensely practical nature. It proves that it does not belong to one age or one race. It proves that God will still speak to this age as He has spoken in other ages, that is if men are found capable of proclaiming His message. When and where God's message is not heard implies now, as in the days of Samuel, that the men who should first hear it have not trained themselves first to hear it and then to declare it. They have not listened to God's voice, they have not qualified themselves to say effectively to others what God would say through them.

I am not asserting that the great prophets of the world spoke *only* for their own time. On the contrary, it was because they were so intensely men of their own time that they are useful for all time.

Human nature in all ages is wonderfully similar. But to know human nature we must know the conditions under which it is living, we must know the difficulties and temptations with which it is struggling, we must know the adverse forces with which it is contending. Unless a man knows intimately the conditions of the time in which he lives, he can be of little use to the men and women either of that or of any time. Again, what especially strikes us in the prophets is their insight into the real needs—which are not always the conscious needs—of those to whom they spoke. This insight was due to the keen-

ness of their vision, based upon the intimacy of their knowledge. They go down to the depths of human nature ; but these depths are, as I have already indicated, very much the same in all ages. Hence the prophets teach us how to reach these in every age.

The first and really most essential condition of all true prophecy, of all genuine speaking *for* God, is intimate communion *with* God. A regular hearer of one of the most spiritually influential preachers of seventy years ago was once asked wherein he considered the secret of the power of that preacher lay. The answer was as follows : " He always strikes me as one who has come into the pulpit straight from communing with God. He thus has a message from God, not merely one *about* God." This is the true secret of the adequate discharge of the prophetic function. It is one all too rarely discharged, because the conditions upon which it depends are so infrequently fulfilled. The wonderful light or glow that was upon the face of Moses when he came from communing with God should be remembered, also how quickly it faded away, and how the people disliked to see it departing. If the power or influence of the prophet is to be maintained, then the sense of the Divine presence must be retained. The people to-day are as quick as the Israelites of old to notice both its departure and its absence. That it is allowed to depart or that it is altogether absent is the true reason for so much of the ineffectiveness of modern preaching. It is only by cultivating the condition under which the prophets were able with truth to declare, " Thus saith the Lord," that the message of the pulpit can move men now.

I have just touched upon this last subject because it is essential to any adequate conception of the " Idea " of the prophet. I shall deal with it more fully in my second paper because it forms by far the most important factor in the contents of every prophet's knowledge.

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