

The Prophetic Function of the Christian Ministry.

II.—THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE PROPHET.

REGARDED even from the merely human point of view, there is nothing more remarkable about the prophets than the *amount* of their knowledge. I use the word "amount" rather than "extent" because I wish the term to include both breadth and depth. We frequently find knowledge which is certainly comprehensive, but at the same time shallow. On the other hand, we sometimes find depth accompanied by a certain narrowness of vision. We know what "people of one subject" are. But the prophets were neither narrow nor shallow. On the contrary, while the range of their knowledge is generally great, they have at the same time probed deeply into what they know. This is the reason for both the extent and the strength of their influence. The extent of their knowledge enables them to appeal to widely different classes of hearers; their penetrating insight gives them immense influence over the individual.

As instances of Old Testament prophets possessing a very large amount of knowledge, I should cite Elisha, Amos, Isaiah of Jerusalem, and also, though possibly not to the same degree, Zechariah. Elisha's knowledge of the affairs of his time—one extending far beyond the confines of Israel—is proved by the well-known answer to the King of Syria who, when he found the plans of his campaigns constantly forestalled, asked his servants, "Will ye not show me which of us is for the king of Israel?" You will remember that the remarkable answer to this question was, "Nay, my lord, O king, but Elisha the prophet telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bed-chamber." Here the knowledge was evidently both wide and intimate. Again, no one can possibly read the wonderful survey and condemnation of the conduct of six foreign nations, as well as that of Israel, in the first two chapters of Amos, without being struck with the immense range of that prophet's vision. Then, when in the succeeding chapters we study his scathing indictment of the moral and social conditions of his own countrymen, we

are equally astonished with the intimacy, the depth and accuracy, of the knowledge displayed. Amos furnishes one of the strongest proofs of the truth of the saying that "insight is the key to foresight." Because he knew so exactly how very evil the social conditions in Israel were, and how these were going from bad to worse, and because he was so firmly convinced of the importance of God's law of righteousness and of the inevitableness of God's judgment upon sin—the breach of that law—Amos foresaw the awful catastrophe which was impending upon the nation.

The same is equally true of Isaiah. In the first, third, and fifth chapters of his book he reveals, as clearly as Amos, the sins which were eating away the moral vitality of the people. Here his vision is deep and intimate. Then, in the seventh chapter, where we find the striking interview with King Ahaz, in which Isaiah reveals the rapidly waning power of both Rezin and Pekah, as well as in the thirty-seventh chapter, where he predicts the impending destruction of the army of Rabshekah, we see how wide was his vision over what was proceeding far beyond the boundaries of the kingdom of Judah. The prophet Zechariah is perhaps somewhat more difficult to understand; but this, I think, is clear, that in the visions of the earlier chapters of the book we have portrayed the results of various national sins—producing national weaknesses—and that these sins must be removed before the restored kingdom and city can do their true work of Divine witness. So far the prophet's knowledge is intimate or intensive. Then in such sayings as, "Behold, all the earth sitteth still and is at rest,"¹ and "Behold, they that go towards the north country have quieted my spirit in the north country,"² we have evidence of how Zechariah's vision extended over a far wider area than those of his immediate surroundings.

In the New Testament we need consider but two examples of this twofold knowledge. First and foremost there is that of our Lord. While it would doubtless be impossible to prove in any one of Christ's many utterances a direct reference to the foreign politics of His age, we cannot call to mind His predictions of the impending destruction of Jerusalem, or many of His sayings

¹ Chap. i., p. 11.

² Chap. vi., p. 8.

in the twenty-fourth chapter of St. Matthew, without feeling sure that He not only knew quite intimately the evil conditions existing within the nation, but that He foresaw the nature of the forces (the armies of Rome) which God would permit to be employed in bringing its separate political existence to an end.¹ When we turn from external relations to internal conditions we are at once struck by Christ's penetrating insight into these. Everywhere He manifests an insight revealing both the widest and the deepest knowledge, one based upon the most accurate observation. This double kind of knowledge is most clearly proved by the great variety of ways in which He approaches the representatives of the various classes of society. He evidently knows intimately the life of each one of these. It is the possession of this wide knowledge which enables Him to be so perfectly "at home" with them all. And they all feel that His knowledge of them goes down to the depths of their nature. The recorded words of one, in all probability, expressed the thoughts of all, "Whence knowest Thou me?"² Of all the avenues to wide influence, none is more powerful than this. If you would influence either individuals or a body of people, the first essential step is to show them that you understand them. This understanding may, of course, act in either of two ways: it may attract or it may create enmity. Christ understood the poor, the down-trodden, the sinners—all those whom the religious world of His own day despised. Here understanding led to sympathy, and so to attraction. But He understood equally well the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Both these felt that Christ penetrated beneath the surface of their religious profession to the want of any real religion beneath this. They felt that He saw through their hypocrisy. Therefore they hated Him and determined to destroy Him.

All this was true, though in a far less degree, of St. Paul. In him we find a similar combination of wide knowledge and penetrating insight. The fact that his various letters and speeches are so different in both content and mode of appeal proves his possession of both these qualities or endowments. He is equally at home with the peasants of Lystra and with the pseudo-

¹ St. Luke xix. 43.

² St. John i. 48.

intellectual idlers on the Areopagus. He understands the painfully narrow national and ecclesiastical atmosphere of the Jewish Sanhedrin ; he understands equally well the atmosphere, and so the temptations, of a great cosmopolitan city like Corinth. And he does not know only the various *classes* of society : like our Lord, he manifests a solicitous care for the welfare of the individual ; the great number of persons mentioned by name in his various epistles—*e.g.*, those to whom a separate greeting is sent—is a sure proof of this.

We find abundant evidence of this twofold knowledge—a comprehensive knowledge of various classes of society combined with an intimate knowledge of individual human characters—in all the great prophets of the Christian Church. Chrysostom knew how to expose and to condemn the fashionable worlds of both Antioch and Constantinople ; on the other hand, his *De Sacerdotio* proves how intimately he understood human nature. We have only to read Augustine's *City of God* side by side with his *Confessions* to see how the twofold knowledge of which I am speaking was his. Gregory the Great, through having occupied, previous to his ordination, a post of great importance in the civil administration of Rome, knew his age through and through ; on the other hand, few books show greater penetration of character than his *Pastoral Rule*. To come to our own countrymen, Latimer's sermons are brimming over with illustrations which show the breadth of his sympathy as well as the depth of his insight, and they are practically all drawn from actual experience. He speaks of what is going on round about him, and " in his homely lessons of loyalty, of industry, of pity for the poor, he touches upon almost every subject from the plough to the throne." Men listened eagerly to both Wesley and Spurgeon, because they felt that besides knowing intimately God's message, as this is contained in Holy Scripture, they also knew human life ; they knew the world in which they lived, with all its various needs, dangers, temptations, and also its many opportunities for both right and wrong.

If now we turn to the preachers of the present time, and consider both the qualities which make for influence and those which detract from this (and this is especially true of long-con-

tinued influence¹), we must, I believe, give a foremost place to the possession of knowledge. [Here I prefer to use the term in its widest application ; with its contents I will deal a little later.] We must remember that the first duty of the preacher is to interest, though certainly this is not his last duty. For unless he can interest people he will not draw them, and he certainly will not retain them ; and unless he can draw them, he can neither teach nor influence them. Had we listened to the old prophets we might not have agreed with all they said ; we might have strongly resented some of their rebukes ; but by no stretch of the imagination can we believe that they would have failed to interest us.

In all interest knowledge is a chief factor, and especially that kind of knowledge which enables new light to be thrown upon that with which we are more or less familiar. It is largely for this reason that the teaching of Christ and of the prophets is so intensely interesting. With the subjects of their teaching their hearers would generally be quite familiar ; but these subjects were shown in a new light, to have a new meaning and importance, with new connections and new applications.

If either the prophets or Christ called upon men to do their duty, they gave new and higher reasons for this. Two instances at once suggest themselves: first, the teaching of the second Isaiah upon Israel's duty to be a witness to the nations²—a witness for a higher and more righteous conduct ; secondly, our Lord's constant inculcation of the responsibilities of stewardship.³ It is not enough that we use what we have wisely ; we must do this because it is not our own ; it belongs to God, from whom we have received it ; in regard to it we are not possessors but stewards, and of our stewardship we must one day give an account.

First and foremost among all the subjects of the prophet's (or preacher's) knowledge must be that of God. This must be experimental ; it must be direct and immediate ; it must also be

¹ I have known several men of fervent evangelical spirit but with slender intellectual equipment who have been successful as "mission preachers"—*i.e.*, in rousing congregations from apathy ; but in order to "hold" a congregation year after year the capabilities for a "teaching ministry" are essential.

² *E.g.*, chaps. xlii. and xliii.

³ *E.g.*, St. Luke xx. 9 *ff.*

fed through every available channel or mediatory instrument. In every case it is "the vision of God" which is "the call of the prophet." Upon his power of retaining this vision depends the illumination of the prophet. But the prophet must not only enjoy the vision of the Divine, he must also possess the Divine power. He must be in communion (or communication) with God, conscious of God's presence and of the communication of God's power to himself. He must "go in the strength of the Lord,"¹ for he has to "set his face as a flint";² he has to be strong in order that he may give his witness without fear, and that he may make his influence felt among those to whom he has been sent.

In the knowledge of God it is needless for me to say that I include the knowledge of Christ and of the Holy Spirit—Christ being the revealer of the Father and the Spirit being the interpreter of Christ. After this personal knowledge of the Divine which comes from communion, we may conveniently divide the rest of the knowledge essential to the prophet of to-day under either of the two following pairs of heads: first that of books and of men, or secondly, that of the past and of the present. We frequently find a considerable knowledge of books side by side with apparently a very limited knowledge of human nature, and the exactly contrary is just as common. Again, we frequently meet with men whose knowledge of the past is extensive, while they seem to be extremely ignorant of what is going on around them. Here also we come across the very opposite condition; we find men who have a very considerable knowledge of the present, while they know hardly anything of past history.

In speaking of a knowledge of books, we must put that of the Bible first and foremost. It ought not to be necessary to insist upon the absolute need of a wide and deep knowledge of Holy Scripture. Yet unfortunately we must plead for this. I shall never forget how, many years ago, one who occupied a very foremost position among the most eloquent preachers of his day once exclaimed to me, "How few of the clergy have a really adequate knowledge of even the contents of the Bible, to say nothing of

¹ 1 Kings xix. 8.

² Ezek. iii. 8 f.

its interpretation !” There can be no substitute for this particular branch of knowledge, and the want of it is one of the commonest of all causes of failure in the pulpit. The “ Scriptural preacher ” may at times be dull, because, as Spurgeon says, his discourse may lack those “ windows of agates ” which let in the light upon what he is trying to teach ; but if he is earnest and intelligent, if he has taken the trouble to make his teaching clear and practical, he cannot fail to be edifying. Sermons which have but a remote and occasional reference to Holy Scripture are generally thin, and provide little real nourishment to their hearers. Occasionally one may find a preacher’s Bible buried too much amid a heap of commentaries, but this is a very rare experience in these days. It is much more common to find that far too little heed has been paid to those studies which elucidate the word of God.

In addition to the Bible, I am inclined to lay stress upon the special usefulness of three fields of study—namely, history, psychology, and Christian ethics—all of which deal directly with human nature and human conduct.

1. History is really enlarged experience ; it is experience extended through the centuries, and over the widest possible field. In the Hebrew Bible the long series of historical writings extending from the Book of Joshua to the second Book of Kings is placed in the same division with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. These historical books are much more than mere records of events. They are rather interpretations and applications of national history written—in all probability by “ prophetic ” writers—with a definite purpose in view. Also, the writings of the prophets themselves are full of allusions to past history, introduced to point out valuable lessons for the present. When we turn from the Old Testament to the New, especially in the Acts of the Apostles and in the writings of St. Paul, we find many an appeal to the history of the past, as supplying both warning and encouragement—“ these things were written for our admonition.”¹ Now, as ever, when rightly interpreted, “ histories make men wise.” And in these troublous times, when the faith of many is being sorely tried, the appeal to history—*e.g.*, how evil has never ultimately

¹ 1 Cor. x. 11.

or permanently triumphed—is one of the most powerful of all the many appeals which can be made to those who need a strengthening of their faith.

2. With the advantages of a knowledge of psychology, it is extremely difficult to deal briefly. The best proof of its usefulness is attested by the fact that no teacher is to-day regarded as trained who has not at least some knowledge of it. The clergy are called by their work to be teachers. They must appeal to both the minds and the feelings of their hearers. A teacher ignorant of psychology may be compared to a physician ignorant of physiology, or to a surgeon who has no knowledge of anatomy. A knowledge of psychology will reveal the reason of numberless failures, and consequently disappointments ; it will prevent our pursuing the paths which inevitably lead to these ; it will explain how people can and cannot be taught. The preacher who obeys the elementary rules of psychology will not be heard to complain that he cannot get his hearers to understand him.

3. Christian ethics is for the preacher the most immediately practical of all studies. That this is now being much more widely recognized is proved by the rapidly growing number of books devoted to this subject. Briefly, Christian ethics is nothing more or less than the application of Christianity—in the widest sense of the word—to everyday life and conduct. The prophets of the Old Testament are pre-eminently great ethical preachers, but their ethics—as all Christian ethical teaching must be—are based on a very definite theology. The same is true of the ethical teaching of both Christ and His Apostles. It is because “ ethics ” has too often been confounded with utilitarian or hedonistic ethics that the subject has been looked askance at by some. The best ethical teaching, as we find it, for instance, in Amos, Hosea, and Micah, and still more pre-eminently in every discourse of our Lord’s, as also in St. Paul and St. John, is really the careful application of the great truths and principles of revelation to the actual needs and circumstances of those to whom it is addressed. Sometimes we hear of “ individual ” and “ social ” ethics, as if the two were divisible even in thought, as if a man’s righteousness could be regarded independently of his discharge of his duties to his

fellow-men. Personally, I am inclined to regard "righteousness" as the right discharge of our relationships to others, in the light of, and in the virtue of, both our and their right relationship to God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

What are we seeing to-day both abroad and at home—abroad in this terrible war which is devastating the greater part of Europe, and at home in the labour troubles which have been at least one cause why our own country has not been able to throw her whole strength into the conflict? Both these conditions are examples of wrong relationships, the results of a failure to apply Christianity in practice. The ethics of Germany in the practical confession that Might is Right, in the assertion of "the will to power" in place of "the will to right," have become avowedly anti-Christian. Our own social ethics have become hardly less so. Our standard of life—as translated into practice—is actually, if not avowedly, materialistic. The object with which Germany began the war was to enrich herself at the cost of other nations. The object of all class warfare is that one side may obtain as much as possible of "this world's good" at the cost of the other. Here, at any rate in practice, we have a distinct disavowal of Christian ethics, as these are taught, for instance, by St. Paul in the fourth and fifth chapters of the Epistle to the Ephesians, and where by him they are clearly based on the great theological doctrines which he has expounded in the preceding chapters. I believe that much Christian preaching, through its failure to be plainly ethical—in other words, applied to everyday conduct—has failed of its primary object.

We can only proclaim what we know; we can only use such instruments as we have made ourselves masters of. It is for this reason I would plead for a careful study of these three fields of knowledge of which I have just written. History enables us to appeal to experience; psychology helps us to understand and to make use of the highest natural endowments; Christian ethics teaches us the necessity of translating into conduct the great truths of the Christian revelation. Unless this last purpose is accomplished we have failed to achieve the primary object we must always keep in view; our faith and our preaching are alike without result.

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