

The Need of a New Ideal of Preaching.

I THINK that we must all confess to the consciousness of a large measure of failure on the part of the Church. Some of us have been compelled to face the fact as we have never faced it before, through being confronted with the aloofness from sacramental religion, and the alarming ignorance of the elements of our faith, exhibited by so many of the soldiers to whom we have tried to minister. But this consciousness must not be allowed to depress us: rather should we regard it as the first step to revival, for it carries with it a readiness to see mistakes, to think things out afresh, and to change, if need be, our ideas and ideals.

Now while it is doubtless true that no single explanation will account for the failure to which we have referred, yet I am prepared to believe that a great number of people will concur in assigning a considerable measure of the responsibility to us clergy, particularly in respect of the use which we make of the pulpit, and of our attitude towards the ministry of the Word. St. Paul was able to point to his preaching as a proof of God's love and care for the people to whom he ministered, because it was accompanied by power and the Holy Ghost, and resulted in spiritual miracles of transformation and recreation (1 Thess. i. 4, 5, 9, 10). Why? What was the secret of his success? In so far as the responsibility lay with him, it was due to the fact that he preached with the consciousness that he had been entrusted with the goodness of God. Because of that consciousness his preaching was the fearless, sincere, purposeful, and persistent proclamation of revealed Truth, or as he himself styles it, "The word of God which worketh in you that believe" (1 Thess. ii. 1-13).

To how many of our pulpits could such a statement be truly applied? How often the preaching of our clergy is purposeless in character, and consequently poor in quality and barren the result! Putting on one side the obvious tragedies of clerical failure, where the lip gives the lie to the preaching, we have still to reckon with a great mass of pulpit ministry in which there is no personality behind the utterance, no suggestion of any desire or expectation of being used for the re-creation or renovation of minds and hearts, no indication of any consciousness of the possession of a revelation of God,

which constitutes a prophet's burden that can only be thrown off by utterance. "The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy" (Amos iii. 8). What would the prophet Amos say of much of the preaching to-day? "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you that ye also may have fellowship with us . . . These things write we unto you that our joy may be fulfilled" (1 John i. 3, 4). Do St. John's yearning to impart conviction and experience and to complete his own joy in doing so, represent the characteristic note of us clergy to-day? "We thank God without ceasing that when ye received from us the word of the message of God, ye accepted it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also worketh in you that believe" (1 Thess. ii. 13). Can we preachers to-day share in that confident thanksgiving of St. Paul?

This is not an attack on the use of a manuscript in the pulpit: if men can move, inspire, edify us through their writings, there should be no difficulty about a preacher doing the same, who has the advantage of adding personal utterance to his written words. But there is all the difference between a cold, lifeless, heartless, detached reading of an "essay," which has no apparent relation to personality, and the communication of the very flesh and blood of the preacher, through utterance which is the expression of conviction and experience, accompanied by the true emotion which they involve. I think it is generally true to fact to say that, where there is lifeless utterance, there is very little in the context of the sermon which could appropriately be spoken of as "The Gospel of God" (cf. 1 Thess. ii. 2, 4, 8, 9), or "the good news of the glory of Christ who is the image of God" (2 Cor. iv. 4). And this is the chief indictment which has to be brought against the modern pulpit: it is too often used for anything and everything except the main thing for which it exists, the preaching of the Gospel.

Fortunately for religion the ministry of the Gospel in public worship is not dependent on the pulpit alone. In addition to the reading of the New Testament, there is the witness of the Lord's Supper, with its constant testimony to the atoning death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ; there is the witness of the Creeds and the Prayer Book, securing the language of worship from being at the mercy of the individual minister; and there is the witness of hymns, through the singing of which we are able to

edify one another (Col. iii. 16) ; no one can eliminate the Gospel comfort from " Rock of Ages," or the Gospel appeal from " Art thou weary," or the Gospel challenge from " Fight the good fight," or the Gospel warning from " A few more years shall roll." Through that means there has been a perpetual proclamation of the Gospel, and presentation of the Saviour, and reminder of the truths by which we live. No pulpit failure on the part of the priest can rob us of these witnesses to the content of the Gospel of God, or deprive us of these instruments of its effectual working.

At the same time we must, I think, admit that if the Church is to rise to the opportunity which is now presented to her, one of the first necessities is that the clergy shall get a new ideal of preaching : a new ideal which consists of something much more fundamental than improvement in the art and technique of fuller utterance. What is needed is a rediscovery of the function of the Word in the ministry of grace. The old Three-decker, standing in its central position, undoubtedly encouraged a defective conception of worship : on the other hand, it symbolized a basic truth concerning the work of grace, which is determined by two fundamental laws of our moral being. One of these laws is that the heart holds the key of the life. Our Lord gave expression to it in the words, " From within, out of the heart of men, evil thoughts proceed, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, covetings, wickednesses, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, railing, pride, foolishness " (St. Mark vii. 21 f.). This law must be recognized as governing religion as much as every other department of our life and experience. We have the Lord's own testimony to this, when He summed up religion in the one word LOVE, " Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength " (St. Mark xii. 30) ; and in His repeated use of the same word to describe the essential relation of His disciple to Himself, " If a man love me " (St. John xiv. 15, 21, 23, 24, 25). St. John similarly identifies love and life because life is union with God, and " God is love " (1 St. John iii. 14 ; iv. 7 ff.).

Wouldst thou the life of souls discern?
 Nor human wisdom nor divine
 Helps thee by aught beside to learn :
 Love is life's only sign.

And here comes in the second fundamental law of our moral

being, namely, that the mind holds the key of the heart. For knowledge is essential to love, ignorance is fatal. It is only through the mind that there is any access to the heart. "Where your treasure is (that is to say, the thing that you set your mind upon) there will your heart be also." This law was also recognized by the Lord when He defined the life eternal as the knowledge of God and of Himself (St. John xvii. 3): a knowledge assumedly not of mere mental apprehension, but involving a heart relationship; and yet depending essentially on mental apprehension for its existence.

Now what does this mean but that the basic condition for the operation of sanctifying grace is knowledge of the Lord; and that the basic instruments for communication and reception are the Word of God (the revelation of Him, no matter how it comes) and faith. Whereby He is apprehended by the mind and accepted with the heart? For grace is not a kind of detached commodity resident in space, independent of personality, communicated by ordinance after the manner in which electricity is communicated by a wire; but it is the personal operation of the Holy Spirit upon personal beings: and consequently the mode of operation is determined by the laws which govern in us moral spiritual beings. The sacraments and ordinances of religion are true specimen means of grace to us, not because virtue is in some kind of unique manner connected with the physical elements, but because they are special means whereby the body can come to the assistance of heart and mind. The sacraments apart from the Word could never produce or maintain life: if you were to baptize a person and give him regularly the sacred elements of the Lord's Supper, but were to withhold from him the Word or the Knowledge of the Lord, no spiritual life could result. Why? Because you would be ignoring the fundamental condition for energizing the activities of the heart, its knowledge.

Space forbids the expansion of this interesting and important point, or the entrance upon any discussion of sacramental doctrine; it must suffice to say in closing, this: the new life, viewed as an experience (and not in its institutional or ecclesiastical expression), depends essentially both for its beginning and for its maintenance, not upon ordinances, but upon knowledge of the Lord. Ordinances are valuable and necessary helps, but necessary with a necessity

which is not absolute: the only absolute necessity is the knowledge which includes faith.

But while I confidently rely on the fact of life, as also upon the New Testament, as the evidence upon which this assertion is based, I have to admit that many of us clergy appear to believe and to teach something quite different. The dominating Clerical conception of normal means for the communication of grace seems to leave little, if any, place for the Word as the basic instrument. It is, I believe, to this fact that a great deal of our pulpit failure is to be attributed. And it is for the re-examination of the whole question of the mutual relation of the Word and the Sacraments that I appeal, as my contribution to the discussion about the needs and demands of the day in which we live (cf. St. Matt. xiii. 19 ff.; St. John xvii. 17; Acts x. 44; Rom. x. 9 ff.; 1 Cor. iv. 15; Gal. iii. 2; 1 Thess. i. 5 ff.; St. James i. 18; 1 St. Peter i. 23 ff.).

"We would see Jesus" is the cry of the world to-day, as it was of the Greek of old. Whether articulate or the unconscious pleading of circumstances, that appeal must be answered. Let the pulpits of our land give their proper contribution to the response to this appeal, and we may expect to see a new era of spiritual power and progress.

As a practical final word, I would say to the laity, make a better use of the Bible for the daily feeding of your souls. Remember that it is as you grow in the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ that you will also grow in grace and peace (2 Pet. i, 2).

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