

of preaching. Yet no word on preaching would be true if it did not firmly transcend aesthetic concerns. Preaching is an art, let us grant. As art it can be taken seriously. But the proclamation of the Gospel does not require aesthetic genius. A child can babble the old, old story. An unlettered parishioner can show it forth in a saintly life. Unless the preacher can discover (or re-discover) the meaning of the mighty acts of God and declare them before men, all the artistic triumphs of a popular pulpit can be to him damnation. "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!"

Evangelistic Preaching

Preaching for Conversion

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THERE are signs that preaching is coming back into fashion in the Church of England. It has always been prominent in the Free Churches, but the art has been allowed to decay in the Established Church. It is, I think, true that the general level of preaching in England is to-day higher than it was, though still far from good. But there is not enough Gospel preaching—and still less "preaching for conversion." Sermons can contain much good Gospel teaching, and yet not be truly evangelistic, resulting in conversions.

From one point of view all real preaching is evangelistic, for preaching to be preaching must be a declaring of the Word of God. This Word is about God's character and His purpose for man. This is the Gospel, for even in the judgment there is good news. God will not tolerate anything that frustrates His purpose to save man and to redeem His world.

While this is true, it is worth considering whether an ordinary, good biblical sermon differs from an evangelistic sermon. Differences there certainly are—both of content, and of technique and delivery.

I

The keynote of this kind of preaching is perhaps to be found in its note of urgent demand. A verdict is demanded, and a response must be made to the offer of God which is being proclaimed. In the mind of the preacher, as he speaks, there is an expectancy that God the Holy Spirit will do something in the hearts of the hearers. He expects "results." This attitude is often stigmatized as unworthy, and called a "looking for success." But in reality it is very different. There is nothing emotional or of "the flesh" in this. The evangelistic preacher believes that God means men to say "Yes" or "No" to the message of the Gospel. To some it will be a savour of life, to others a savour of death. Such a response is often visible—and this is what is meant by looking for results.

This question of "results" and the "verdict" is vital, because I

believe it is at this point that many preachers fail to be evangelistic. They are scared of making a demand lest nothing should happen, or lest they should not seem to be respectable. This inhibition of so many modern preachers is to my mind quite unbiblical. The early Christian preachers pressed their hearers for a response and they expected to see lives converted and transformed. It is, of course, true that the historical situation to-day is different from that of New Testament times. *Then* there was a background of belief in God; to-day a genuine and deep-seated secularism exists. Human nature, however, is still human nature, and the Gospel when preached does produce by the power of the Holy Spirit an encounter with God. At this point we have precisely the New Testament situation over again—and in this situation the Apostles expected results.

The evidence seems to me quite conclusive. Peter preached and saw some three thousand converts (Acts ii. 41). We read frequently of converts being "added to the church"—and they were not added invisibly: the results could be seen. People who were *not* there, now *were* there; they had been converted. Paul almost gloats over his converts; they were his joy in the Lord. When he was preaching to the Corinthians he believed that as he preached they would come to believe through the power of God, and that their faith would be in the Cross, which would now be real to them (1 Cor. ii. 5). Our Lord Himself used phrases which would encourage us to look for results. He likens evangelism to gathering in the harvest. You can always see the harvest when it is garnered! No farmer would be content to go on and on sowing if he never could reap. Our Lord said that henceforth we should "take men alive" (Luke v. 10). The catch is a visible fact; the fisherman can see what he has caught. He is disappointed if he catches nothing.

The whole atmosphere of New Testament evangelism suggests that results were aimed at and expected. They wanted to see converts won to Christ—and they saw that very thing happening. To-day we are indulging in excuses and escapism. A pretence humility says we must leave the results with God, and not be looking to see what is happening. There is the glorification of quiet, fruitful work—sowing the seed, it is called; but few expect to see the harvest and to reap it.

Of course there is the preparatory work; of course the faithful minister will often do much and see little result for a while. Nevertheless, we must expect results if we preach the Gospel—and where expectancy is, results usually follow. For expectancy has in it a large element of faith. There is far too little urgent, powerful Gospel preaching which fearlessly demands a verdict to be made and lives to be changed, not in the gradualness of a to-morrow, but in the decisive answer of to-day, in response to the Gospel which has been preached.

If we are agreed that preaching for conversion is a necessary part of the ministry of preaching within the local church, and that the atmosphere for such preaching should be an expectancy which looks for results, we must now consider what should be the content of such sermons.

It must be clearly understood, I think, at the outset that the proclamation of any piece of truth has within itself converting power.

It is the truth which God uses to convert. Christian experience affords many examples of men and women who come into true conversion through hearing a message of truth which was quite unsuited to their state of mind; but as they listened, for some unexplained reason, psychological or spiritual, this inappropriate piece of truth found its mark. They were awakened to discover through Christ their need and His meeting of their need. Faith was given and conversion began. This basic principle that God uses all truth to draw people to Himself is of cardinal importance. Every preacher should constantly remember it, for it will produce the underlying expectancy of attitude to which we have already referred.

II

It remains true, however, that in preaching for conversion there are certain aspects of truth which can be more generally emphasised than others. The main content of a converting sermon should, I believe, be the story of Christ. The Father has given Him to us to be the bridge by which we can pass over to reconciliation with God; let us therefore show people the bridge. It is, I am sure, more important to preach Christ than it is to preach about conversion or even the need for conversion, when we seek to give a converting sermon.

There is, I think, a certain amount of misunderstanding about this phrase, to "preach Christ". What do we mean when we use it? For some it may seem to mean always talking of one particular aspect of Christ and His work to the exclusion of many others; a reiteration which can be not only boring but even produce a hardening and a resistance to the Gospel within the hearers. Telling the Story of Christ is a large task. There is wide room within which to move; the theme is immensely varied. Preaching Christ, or telling the Story of Christ, is the stating of a story which has three chapters.

The first chapter, which is in two parts, is the telling of the story of the historical Jesus. The first part comprises the giving of simple information about the facts concerning Jesus Christ. So many who listen to us to-day have no knowledge of the simple, ordinary facts of His life and death. Preaching the Gospel means in part informing people of these facts.

The second part of the first chapter is explaining the meaning of the facts. For instance, simple information states that Jesus Christ died on the Cross of Calvary; but the interpretation follows when we try to explain that Christ died for our sins and that His death shows us God in Christ facing and bearing sin, loving us in spite of our sin, uncompromising in His righteousness when He confronts our sin, and finally, waiting to reconcile us to Himself with the gift of His friendship and eternal life. From this brief sketch it will be seen that when preaching Christ to a modern audience there is a great deal to be done before we have adequately exhausted the first chapter of the Story.

The difficulty really is one of communication. It is not sufficient simply to state the true interpretation of the facts about Jesus; we must state the interpretation in terms that our hearers can understand. In order to do this satisfactorily the preacher must know the subject matter of the Gospel extremely well. He must also understand the

idiom of the speech of his hearers so that he can put the Gospel story with illustrations and analogies that his hearers can grasp. It is for this reason that a good evangelistic preacher is generally a man who speaks with common people and mixes with them. Visiting and personal dealing help tremendously to prepare a man for preaching the Gospel.

The second chapter is an interesting one. It consists in telling what the living Christ has done in the world during the past two thousand years through His Body the Church. There is news value and interest here. In spite of many failures and much lack of enthusiasm, Christ has worked through His Church, and the signs are there for all to see. This chapter can be most convincing, as well as enthralling. The information will not be simply about individual people who have done great things for Christ, though that is a part; it will include the steady efforts of the Christian Church to alter society down through the centuries. Examples come to one's mind immediately, such as the influence of the Church in education, healing, and so on. There are also stories of what the living Christ is doing in our own day and generation, especially overseas. All this is part of the great second chapter. Here is genuine converting material. Men are holding back from God because they have not seen that Christ will make an effective difference to human life and to society.

The third chapter is an important one, though it should never be told without something from the other two chapters as well. It is the story of what the living Christ means to me personally—a story which only I can tell. This element of personal experience is essential in all true converting preaching; but it must be kept subordinate to the stating of the objective facts about Christ, and the main picture of His work in the world.

This is the main content of all true conversion preaching. We are presenting the object of faith, Jesus Christ Himself, by one means or another to the attention of our hearers, convinced that as they are enabled to see clearly the object, faith can be born within them.

III

While it is true that "preaching Christ" means presenting the Lord Jesus Christ in the fulness that I have set out—the historical Jesus, the living Christ within His Church, and the personal Christ indwelling me—yet we must be sure that the message is relevant to the needs of the hearers. In good Gospel preaching there must be a constant going backwards and forwards of the message; "Your need of Christ is . . ."; "Christ offers to meet this need thus . . ." To bring conviction about the truth of Christ's power to meet human need there should be much quotation from the New Testament, illustrations from our Lord's own ministry, and testimonies from personal experience. In this way the fulness of Christ is offered, and then, as it were, His offer is narrowed down to meet the particular need of an individual amongst the people to whom we are speaking; and then after this need has been dealt with, another need of another individual, and so on.

By such a presentation of the Gospel the Holy Spirit brings conviction to the hearers, stirring their consciences and applying the truth to their imaginations so that they can begin to believe that Christ can meet their need, if they will but receive Him. Until people are aroused and broken in their minds to see their utter need for Christ it is but little use to demand repentance and faith. Much preaching for conversion fails because this preparatory work is not adequately done. Faith is born out of man's despair of himself.

When in our preaching we have reached the point of saying plainly what Christ wants to do for the men and women who are listening to us, and made it equally plain that He wants to meet their needs now—to-day, and not to-morrow—then we must appeal for a verdict.

It is here that many a good Gospel sermon fails to be evangelistic. The preacher concludes with some pious platitude or kindly hope that everyone will realise their responsibility to give an answer to Christ. How often you hear the phrase: "So let us all now . . ." The bite and challenge is taken away completely from the message.

In this concluding part of the sermon there is need for simple, decisive language: a direct challenge to accept or reject the message of Christ. We should avoid sentimental stories to illustrate the need for decision. Such only arouse the emotions and are hardly worthy of the solemnity of the moment. Our words should be few and plain. I prefer Finney's great concluding paragraph; "The infinite God waits for your consent."

Here we can use most suitably the words of scripture—the great promises of the Word of God: "Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out." The great declarations: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." The great invitations: "Come unto Me, and I will give you rest."

Many preachers do indeed ask for the response of faith in the Name of Christ, but then for some strange reason spoil everything by the way they end the sermon. Certainly we shall avoid the gabbled Ascension at this point; nor do I think, personally, that we need a wordy prayer just here.

My experience suggests that the best way is to say quite simply, "Let us kneel and pray in silence." Only let there be silence in which people can pray. Don't interrupt it by pleading or further preaching. Two minutes' silence by one's watch is not too long. In this uninterrupted quiet the Holy Spirit really can and does work; we are giving Him a chance; and many people have told me that it was in this silence that they were able to believe in Christ and found salvation. After all, there is no formula for faith, and no technique by which people can receive Christ. They must meet Him face to face, and only when the Holy Spirit makes Christ real within a man's soul can that meeting take place.