

Preaching the Doctrine of Salvation

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NO one will be inclined to disagree if it is suggested that the very first duty incumbent upon a minister of the Gospel is to proclaim that Gospel. It is a triism which, however, is often overlooked and sometimes even buried beneath the myriad other activities which are also legitimate and important duties. But we cannot minister to the faithful unless there *are* some of the faithful; and without preaching there can be no faithful for "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God". At the bottom of all spiritual life is redemption; without that prayers are mere magical incantations, sacraments are meaningless, and good works but the outcome of our native Pelagianism. If we say with St. Paul, "I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified", it is because there is nothing else we can say.

At the same time it is equally true to say that the preaching of the Gospel is the most difficult of the minister's tasks. The very words and thoughtforms which are proper to it are frequently not understood of the people, while the need for redemption is often simply not recognised. When St. Paul speaks of men as being "dead in trespasses and sins" he is being not morbid and certainly not self-righteous, but terrifyingly accurate. P. T. Forsyth in *The Work of Christ* gives a brilliant exposition of a telling illustration which demonstrates the difficulty. He tells of a railway smash averted by the courage of a signalman. Two passenger trains were approaching from opposite directions at speed and the levers which operated the points would not move so that the trains could not clear each other. A signalman flung himself flat between the rails and held the tie-rods which set the points correctly. There he remained while the train thundered over him, in obvious peril. When the train had passed and the danger was averted he quietly rose and went back to his work. Forsyth then gives some pertinent comments.

1. In a very true sense that man died and rose again. His soul went through what he would have gone through if he had not risen from the track. He gave himself. "His deed had the moral value which it would have had if he had lost his life. It was a complete and acceptable sacrifice, even if at the last it was not demanded. And he surely rose from the dead for he went back to his post a better, more heavenly man."

2. The passengers owed their lives to that man even though they did not know it till they read it in the papers. And if they had never heard it would still have been true. That is true of the world of men. It owes its life to a death and a resurrection.

3. This man died in a real sense for people who would thrill to the act when they heard of it. Here is a difference from the death of Christ, for men do not know what He has delivered them from. Christ's was a death on behalf of people within whom the power of responding had to be created.

I

That is where the preacher of the Gospel must start. He must make men see how the death and resurrection of Christ is relevant to them. Plainly we must begin where men are. Words like "saved" and "lost" have for them no realistic meaning—we must give meaning to them. We must show men that to deny those words is also to deny Right and Wrong, Light and Darkness. It is to say that this world is essentially immoral; that if someone deceives us we should congratulate him, not censure him, and then try to do the same ourselves; that no act is worthy of blame and no course of action really culpable; that the only law which operates in the world is that of the jungle and the only condition of survival is fitness.

There is still time for us to proceed along such lines, for although there has been an obvious declension in morals and morality—almost a landslide—men are still not prepared to call Good bad or Bad good. There is still enough of the natural law in human nature to acknowledge that there must be standards because in fact there *are* standards.

If we can reach that point the next step is open to us. It is that men acknowledge the rightness of it by their own attempts at reformation. We may laugh at New Year resolutions and the like, but they are real indications of man's self-knowledge. There are few people indeed who do not from time to time make those efforts, even if they do not coincide with calendar dates. They are aware that they are not what they should be, and in some inchoate way are dissatisfied at their condition. And here is where they go wrong and where so frequently we preachers allow them to do so.

They persist in the optimistic belief that what is wrong is this and that specific thing, so that a little more moral effort, a little more concentration at that point, is all that is required. But even if a victory is won at that point almost inevitably they discover that defeat has occurred at another one: that the strengthening of the forces at one point has meant weakening at another. The moral life is like a ping-pong ball gone wrong; if we smooth out one crease another comes, caused by the very pressure which had eased the first one. It is for us to show them that supreme moral effort at every point could alone suffice, for which our own resources are totally inadequate. If they had been adequate in the first place there would have *been* no weakness. In short, what is wrong is not this or that specific thing but our very selves. We are morally impotent because it is our selfhood which is wrong, and it is our selfhood which is our only weapon. We cannot cure ourselves because it *is* ourselves that need the cure. I cannot say "I will be better" because it is the "I" that must do it. It cannot do the reforming because it itself needs reformation. It is literally true that what I need therefore is to be *saved*—to be rescued. It is equally true to say therefore that if I am not saved then I am lost; and if I am lost I can only be saved by being found.

If we can expose man to this, his moral dilemma, we are moving into the realm where the Gospel of Christ begins to assume an immediate relevance. When we speak of Christ we do not do so as though He were a teacher; much of his teaching can be paralleled elsewhere. We do not do so as though He were our exemplar; there have been

other heroic deaths. We speak of Christ as Saviour. Whatever Christ has done for men, in the simplest terms it is this : He has done for man what man could not and cannot do for himself and without which he is lost. But man, by his own attempts at reformation, shows quite inevitably that it is man himself who ought to do what needs to be done. How then can Christ do it for him? Only by Himself becoming man. No other way would be acceptable even to man. Plainly, then, all preaching about salvation must be rooted in the preaching of the Incarnation. We cannot speak with any relevance of what Christ has done until we have plainly declared that He is man. But as we have seen, what needs to be done *for* man cannot be done *by* man—not even by Christ if He is only man. Equally plainly then must we declare that He is God who became man. Because He is God he has the power to save us ; because He is man He has the right to do so—and nothing less will do. Men must be challenged at this point. Most men still speak of Christ in terms of admiration and will readily admit that he was the best man who ever lived. But it must be pointed out that if in fact He was not God, then He has no claim to being a good man. Either He is what He said He was, or He is a liar and blasphemer whose words cannot be trusted. *Aut Deus, aut non bonus*. If He is not God, then He is not good. If we admit His goodness there is nothing left for us to do but to accept Him as God, and that means to worship Him and obey Him.

What, then, has this Christ—who is God and Man—done? He has lived the perfect life—the life God means for every man ; but He has also died. He has shed His blood. How can we express that in terms which men understand? We can surely do so only if we speak about the blood of Christ in a way which relates it to life. Blood means life ; a blood transfusion is a means of life ; the life is in the blood. Thus we do not speak of the shedding of blood as a merely physical thing. It is a tremendous symbol of life. He gave His life *for* us—not surely just *instead* of us, but *for* us, on our behalf—i.e. that we may have it. By death, by the shedding of blood, that life is released, and it is released in order that we may have it. And we are to have it, in order that the life He lived in all its victory may be lived in us in all its progressive victory. Surely this is the true meaning of our Lord's last word from the Cross : "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit". It is much more than a final act of resignation ; it is a handing over to God of the spirit which was His, in order that it might be given to His followers. The spirit which had dominated His life and had led to the ultimate victory of Calvary was henceforth to be the Spirit of the Church ; and what the Church received at Pentecost was the Spirit of the Crucified.

Certainly that death, that giving of life, was vicarious, but it is much more than that. It is also representative. When Jesus called Himself the Son of Man He meant, "I am representative of man. I am doing for man, nay for mankind, what it cannot do for itself, but I am also doing it so that my life may become their life". When our Lord dies upon the Cross He is making that life available. It is not only that we should partake of the pardon which He has purchased ; it is also that we should partake of the life that He has lived. There was no

other good enough, for the more sinful a man is, the less he realises either his own sin or God's holiness ; only the utterly sinless who is also the utterly holy can make this offering. A sinner is crushed by his sin ; only Christ, the God-man, can bear it. And what was done once for all on the Cross of Calvary is in the Resurrection made everlastingly available, for death has been shown unable to claim Him, and at Pentecost is shed abroad for men to receive.

The Cross, the Garden Tomb, and Pentecost go inseparably together as the symbol of the love of God. He will not leave man in his moral morass, for man is the creation of the love of God. But we cannot say that sin does not matter, for that is an insult even to man. To wink at sin is to belittle both God's holiness and man's dignity. Sin *does* matter because *we* matter, and we matter because we are the crown of the whole creativity which is God's. And Christ will not only die but rise again because God is concerned not only with our past but our whole life, and the Spirit of God proceeding from the Father and the Son will be given because God's concern is for all generations, and only a Spirit unfettered by place and time can make that life perennially available.

II

It is *that* life, the real life which was always God's plan for men, that we enter into by faith. What do we mean by *faith*? In the very simplest terms it means saying Yes to Christ. It is to allow Him into our life in order that what He did *for* us on the Cross He may now do *in* us. As Irenaeus said, " He became what we are, in order to make us what He is ".

That is what we meant when we said that the death of Christ is not merely vicarious but representative. It is a delivering up of His life in a way which makes the offering of our life possible ; that is, to be identified with Christ, and that is what faith is (cf. Galatians ii. 20). When that takes place in a man's life then it may truly be said that he is saved. But that is not the whole story.

The Bible makes it plain, from the various kinds of imagery which it uses, that the act of faith which initiates salvation is precisely initiatory. That is to say, that while it is a complete act it is none the less part of a process still to be completed. When Bishop Westcott, in answer to the Salvation Army Lass's question " Are you saved? " said, " Do you mean σωζόμενος, σεσωσμένος or σωθησόμενος? " he was not merely being humorous. He was adumbrating a very real part of the doctrine of salvation. While it is wonderfully true that a man can say " I am saved ", he must also say " I am *being* saved ". Emphatically that is what the New Testament teaches and what it means by describing the new life in Christ in terms of initiation and of birth. Our Lord tells Nicodemus that he must be born again for two reasons : first, to underline the paramount fact that a decisive act is necessary, i.e. birth; and secondly to emphasise that the decisive act is of a kind which requires subsequent nurture and growth. St. Paul is being precise and accurate when he says to the new Corinthian Christians : " and I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto *babes* in Christ. I fed you with milk, not with meat ".

St. Peter is being likewise precise when he writes : " As *new born babes* long for the spiritual milk which is without guile, that ye may grow thereby unto salvation ". The writer to the Hebrews makes it even plainer when he writes of those who, having taken the decisive step, have regarded it as the only step and have made no progress in the path of salvation (see Heb. v. 12—vi. 3).

Plainly, then, in the preaching of salvation we must make those two steps clear : we must not separate them, nor confuse them, nor invert them. A man can make no growth until he is born ; that is what the article means when it says, " Works done before the grace of Christ and the inspiration of His Spirit are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace ". This needs plainly to be noted. Pelagius may have been condemned by Church Councils : by Englishmen he has been canonised. He is the patron saint of the West generally and of the Anglo-American world in particular.

On the other hand, though we must not invert the order of the two steps, we also must not separate them. The child only fulfils his destiny as he begins to grow to maturity, and the growth is a real part of the process. So too with the new Christian. The whole ministry is planned by God to be the agent of making both parts of the process clear—to bring to birth and to bring to maturity (see Eph. iv. 11-13). Perhaps the best way of making the two phases clear is to use the Pauline metaphor of adoption. The only way a man could become a prince would be by the King adopting him. Nothing that the *man* could do could bring this about. It could be neither learned nor earned ; it must be an act of pure grace on the part of the King. Yet when the man has been so adopted and become a prince, it is his duty to learn to behave like one. No doubt in this, too, the King will help him, but the man must make every effort himself. By adoption he is a prince—that is his status. He must now consider his condition and strive to live like a prince. In short, he is " to become what he is ". Why is this growth to maturity—spoken of as a process of ' being saved '—so essential ? It is because of the goal which is set before each and every Christian, that is, absolute likeness to Christ. We ought constantly to be reminding our people about this. The clue is in 1 John iii. 2-3. Absolutely nothing less than that is the goal. The difference between a new born babe and a full grown man is as *nothing* compared with the difference between the Christian and Christ. Yet that gulf is to be bridged and will be bridged, and all the journey in between is a process of being saved ; in a word, it is a process of " becoming what we are ". This is a most revealing thought, for it makes so much of the paradox and difficulty of life clear. The process obviously cannot be an easy one. When we consider ourselves and consider Christ, no one will expect the transposition to be easy. Much of the pain and sorrow and inexplicable suffering of life—the groaning and travelling together of the whole creation—is due to this very thing. Dr. C. S. Lewis explains this most vividly when he likens the Christian to an artist's masterpiece in contrast to a mere thumbnail sketch which is finished in a few moments. Just because he means it to be a masterpiece the artist will spare no pains to bring it to perfection.

Each Christian is God's masterpiece, and He will give us no rest until He can say of us, as He said of Christ, "Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased".

It is because I am saved—because I am a new creation—that I must keep on being saved: "whom he justified them he also glorified". We may call the two phases, justification and sanctification, though we would do well in the pulpit to forget the *words* and preach their *content*. It can be summed up by reference to 1 Cor. i. 30, which presents salvation in its progressive phases. As P. T. Forsyth says: "Certainly to be saved is to be delivered from evil. Hence the Lord's prayer; but to deliver us from evil is not simply to take us out of hell: it is to take us into heaven. Christ does not simply pluck us out of the hands of Satan. He does so by giving us to God. He does not simply release us from slavery, He commits us in the act to a positive liberty. He does not simply cancel the charge against us in court and bid us walk out by faith. He meets us at the prison door and puts us in a new way of life. His forgiveness is not simply retrospective: it is, in the same act, the gift of eternal life. Our evil is overcome by good. We are won from sin by an act which at the same time makes us not simply innocent but holy".¹ The act which is final and decisive is also a process; as Professor Cullman puts it, "We live between the decisive battle and the victory day".

III

But even that is not the end of the story. This process of salvation, though it is intensely personal, is certainly not individual. It cannot be followed in solitude. The very terminology of the New Testament descriptions makes that abundantly plain. Those who come to faith in Christ are called "the sons of God" and "the children of God", and their characteristic is that they live their lives in a family (see Romans viii. 14-17a). From every angle that is made clear. The basic prayer of the Christian life is a family prayer: we pray "Our Father". It would be the height of misconception to alter that to "My Father". The basic food of the Christian life is found in a family meal. It is not an individual packed lunch; it is a *communion*, a fellowship. From the beginning this has been so. The Church, which really begins with Abraham and which is energised at Pentecost, is no appendage to the Christian life; it is its home, its sphere. Consequently when after Pentecost others were saved and launched on the life which is the process of being saved, we read: "And the Lord added to them daily those that were being saved". What characterised them was that "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers". Cyprian was right, though not in the sense he intended, when he said, *extra ecclesiam nullum salus*. Nowhere is this more plain than in the very passage where St. Paul is speaking of the growth to maturity: Eph. iii. 14-19. All that fulness, all that maturity, is to be learned "with all saints", and it can be learned nowhere else. Whatever

¹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 204.

mind, only in the one Sacrifice once offered. Any suggestion " that the Church to-day is perpetuating by the activity of her priesthood the eternal offering of Calvary ", diminishes the glory of a completed work and must be resisted. Any suggestion that human mediators can be given a place beside the One Mediator appointed of God must be emphatically rejected. Any form of devotion that obviates or seeks to obviate the entire dependency by faith on Jesus Christ our Lord must be eschewed, as robbing Him of the glory which is justly His. While no Evangelical would depreciate the divine character of the Sacraments, he cannot assign to them the place that the New Testament appropriates to Faith as a means of salvation. It is the conscious acceptance, in adoring submission, of God's rich provision of Grace that is the kernel of Christian experience, and it is the conscious knowledge of sins forgiven that is the dynamic of Christian witness.

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metaphors may be used of the individual Christian, they are always organic ones and never separatist. He is a member of the body of Christ, a branch in the vine, a stone in the building, a son in a family, a brother. Look where you will, there are no other kinds of metaphor, for there is none other that is applicable. It really seems that those who framed a recent definition of Evangelism were right when they said that " To evangelise is so to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit that men will come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Saviour and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church ". When we do that simply but faithfully, we are in fact preaching the doctrine of salvation.