

Part 1 of a series on the Preaching of the Word

## Preaching in Scripture

The Revd James Philip

Minister of Holyrood Abbey Church, Edinburgh

Attempts have been made to trace the origins of Christian preaching as we know it to, and link it with, classical oratory. But while it is true that the influence of the classical schools of rhetoric may have been considerable in different ages of the Church, and even in the most prominent of its preachers, P.T. Forsyth<sup>1</sup> is nevertheless right when he maintains that preaching is quite different from oratory.

*The pulpit is another place, and another kind of place, from the platform. Many succeed in the one, and yet are failures on the other. The Christian preacher is not the successor of the Greek orator, but of the Hebrew prophet. The orator comes with but an inspiration, the prophet comes with a revelation. Insofar as the preacher and prophet had an analogue in Greece, it was the dramatist with his urgent sense of life's guilty tragedy, its inevitable ethic, its unseen moral powers, and their atoning, purifying note.*

It is a matter of fact, more than of opinion, that the earliest Christian preaching, that recorded in the discourses in Acts, was basically influenced by the Old Testament prophets in their general mode of address. 'Unless Paul's discourse at Athens (Acts 17:22-31) be an exception', observes Dargan, 'we can detect little if any trace of influence from the ancient classical oratory.'<sup>2</sup> It is to the Old Testament, therefore, that we must first of all turn, to find the true antecedents of Christian preaching.

The relation of Christian preaching to the Old Testament may be traced in a twofold way: more immediately to the service and worship of the synagogue, and, more profoundly, to the ministry of the prophets. So far as the apostolic *kerygma* is concerned, the New Testament preachers stand in a genuine prophetic succession: their proclamation was truly a "Thus saith the Lord", a declaration of the mighty acts of God in Christ. Both in the Old Testament and in the New, preaching took place because God put a living message and word into the mouths of His servants: and the Church clearly made the same high claims for its message as the prophets had made in their time. As Brilicth observes in this connection, 'The Christian preacher's claim that he is a bearer of the Word of God and not merely an expositor, and the veneration for the spoken word which is an essential characteristic of the Christian life of worship, would hardly be imaginable without the pattern of prophecy.'<sup>3</sup>

One very clear and obvious evidence of preaching as exposition of Scripture is found in post-exilic times, in the synagogue service which came into its own during the

*For a quarter of a century James Philip's preaching ministry has drawn and influenced crowds of young people who add themselves to his congregation during years of study and training in the Scottish Capital.*



exile as a substitute for the Temple and its worship. The famous passage of Nehemiah 8 records how Ezra the Scribe 'stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose, and read in the book of the law of God distinctly and gave the sense, and caused [the people] to understand the reading.' Our Lord Himself stood in this same tradition, when He ministered in the synagogue at Nazareth, and expounded the well-known messianic passage in Isaiah 61 (Luke 4: 16b-21)

Later still, in Acts, Paul and Barnabas were invited by the leaders of the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia to speak a word of exhortation to the people (Acts 13:15). Indeed, all of Paul's ministry to his own countrymen was clearly of this sort, and fulfilled in such a context (Acts 9:20, 13:5, 14:1, 17:2). The sense of continuity between the Old and the New is very evident.

But preaching in this sense goes back considerably further than the Exile. Apart from the distinctive prophetic activity in the centuries preceding it, the historical books of the Old Testament contain numerous examples of teaching ministry. In 2 Chron. 17:7ff we find King Jehoshaphat, in the context of widespread national reforms, instituting a programme of teaching throughout Judah, in which the book of the Law was expounded to the people. Earlier still, the end of the period of the Judges, God raised up Samuel and made him His mouthpiece to Israel, and the word of the Lord came to the people through him in a prophetic ministry that changed the face of the land. Still earlier, we find Joshua uttering his farewell discourses to the assembled congregation in what could fairly be called Sermonie form, based on the fact of God's dealings with them in the past, and the reality of the covenant into which He had entered with them. Indeed, from Exodus onwards, those who spoke for God based all they said on the fact that the Lord in whose name they spoke was the one who had delivered them out of the land of Egypt and the house of

bondage. The Book of Deuteronomy is likewise a series of addresses by Moses repeating and expounding much of the legislation given earlier to the people. In the time of Moses, when the elders were appointed to help him, it is

**This ancient lineage in Scripture for preaching lends credence to Calvin's view that the preaching of the Word belongs, with the institutions of marriage and government, to the natural order, or order of creation.<sup>4</sup>**

said that 'The Spirit rested upon the 70 elders so that they prophesied and did not cease'. In patriarchal times the blessings of Isaac and Jacob constitute solemn religious addresses; Noah is termed 'a preacher of righteousness', and 'Enoch, also the seventh from Adam, prophesied.'

This ancient lineage in Scripture for preaching lends credence to Calvin's view that the preaching of the Word belongs, with the institutions of marriage and government, to the natural order, or order of creation.<sup>4</sup> For from the beginning God has revealed Himself as a speaking God, a God who wills to have communion with His creatures, making Himself know to them in grace and love. There is little doubt that from the earliest dawn of revealed history the divine means of communication with man has been preaching in some form or another, that indeed the communication of the divine grace has been in this way. R.S. Wallace<sup>5</sup> maintains that Calvin sees in the prominent place given to the preaching and hearing of the Word of God within the Church, a restoration of the true order of nature, for we were given the power to communicate with one another "not simply to buy boots and shoes and bonnets, and bread and wine, but to use our mouths and ears to lead each other to the faith which rises heavenward to the contemplation of God Himself." This is borne out also in the Old Testament conception of the family, in which the father became the 'priest' who ministered to the family God's Word, bestowed the divine blessing upon the firstborn, expounded the mercy of the covenant to his children, and assumed the responsibilities of the priesthood before a formal priesthood and cultus was established in Israel.

In New Testament times, our Lord's own preaching pattern is definitive and decisive. A twofold emphasis is clearly discernible in His ministry. On the one hand, He continued in the already existing tradition of synagogue preaching. The well-known incident recorded in Luke 4:16ff, in which he expounded Isaiah 61 to the people, and claimed that it was fulfilled in their ears, is an important indication of our Lord's continuity with the old order. It was not in this sense that His preaching constituted 'a new thing' in Israel: rather, what impressed the people so deeply, and what was such a radical departure from tradition as such, was the authority with which He spoke. This was something completely new.

Within the synagogue tradition, though, He ministered in the context of the Jewish cultus, the impact of what He said was such as to break through its rigid framework, like new wine bursting old bottles. He taught, Luke tells us, as one having authority, and not as the Scribes. And the nature of that authority is that in His teaching a confrontation took place, in which He, the Lord of Scripture, met with His hearers and challenged them as the rightful Lord of their lives. It is this that was destined to become the pattern for all New Testament preaching that was to follow.

On the other hand, our Lord's preaching in the open air — on the mountains, by the seashore, in the wilderness, by the roadside, in parable, proverb, paradox, hyperbole — shows a freshness and variety and freedom from tradition that readily explains the verdict of the common people who heard Him gladly: 'Never man spake as this Man.'

Above all, however — and this is of supreme importance from the point of view of the establishment of an apostolic pattern of preaching — our Lord's ministry was steeped in Scripture. It could be said that in the truest and deepest sense He lived *by the Word*. In so doing He was simply being true to Himself, for of these Scriptures He said 'these are they which testify of me'. After the Resurrection He expounded to the disciples 'in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself . . . opening their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures.' (Luke 24: 27, 45)

Whether or not the disciples followed His pattern on the one or two occasions during His earthly ministry when they were sent out two by two by Him to preach — there is no reason to suppose they did not — it is certain that after Pentecost they did so, as the recorded 'sermons' in Acts make clear. They consist of a brief account of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus *according to the Scriptures*, and in fulfilment of them, on the basis of which the proclamation of the good news of the gospel of forgiveness through His Name was made. Two things may be said about this: on the one hand, this was the 'pattern' on which the gospels themselves were written: on the other, it follows with great accuracy the development of our Lord's own ministry in the days of His flesh. For it can truly be said that His ministry consisted of two parts, bisected by the great watershed of the Caesarea Philippi confession: before that point His concern was, by miracles, wonder and sign, by word and action, to show that He was the Messiah promised by Scripture; after that point He was intent on teaching, again from Scripture,

**The apostolic proclamation of the gospel belongs to an entirely different world from that of classical rhetoric, and that the two worlds do not really touch one another at any point.**

that the Son of man must suffer and be crucified. The faithfulness of the apostolic proclamation to this twofold emphasis is impressive, as may be seen from the description of Paul's habitual practice given in Acts 17: 2, 3: 'Opening and alleging that the Christ must indeed have suffered, and risen again from the dead, and that this Jesus, whom I preach, is the Christ.'

It is in this connection that W.F. Mitchell makes the curious comment: 'Such "speeches" by the Apostles as are reported in the Acts are of this nature. They abound with "proof texts" — another ominous influence — and show no recognition of even such simple devices of rhetoric as men of limited education learn gradually from practice.'<sup>6</sup> Mitchell concedes that this avoidance of rhetorical device was not entirely due to the ignorance of the first apostles, but in adding that it had its origin in the Jewish detestation of rhetoric, he seems to betray a complete misunderstanding of the fact that the apostolic proclamation of the gospel belongs to an entirely different world from that of classical rhetoric, and that the two worlds do not really touch one another at any point.

To maintain, therefore, as Mitchell does,<sup>7</sup> that the preachers of the gospel — by which he presumably means the post-apostolic fathers — were compelled to turn their attention to the study of rhetoric, and, in order to make the appeal of the Cross in the chief seats of learning and governmental power, to adopt the oratorical devices long familiar to the Greeks and Romans, is precisely to advocate what Paul so expressly disavows in his famous warning about 'the enticing words of man's wisdom'. (I. Cor. 2:4) If therefore, as seems certainly to be true of the sub-apostolic age onwards, the canons of classical rhetoric 'take over', this represented not an advance from a more primitive and untutored method to a sophisticated and educated one worthier of the gospel and enhancing its power and appeal, but on the contrary a declension from a biblical pattern which led inevitably to the impoverishment of the Church's life. There is more than sufficient evidence to indicate that this alliance between the biblical message and classical rhetoric, due to a basic misunderstanding of the issues involved, has bedeviled the life of the Church down the centuries, through the devaluation of a truly biblical method in the interests of promoting a classically oratorical pattern which Mitchell maintains 'was in the early Christian centuries a term synonymous with higher education.'<sup>8</sup>

It is not without significance that the same writer can state of the post-Reformation era: 'In the course of the [17th] century, it is possible to say, the sermon passed from a period in which its form and content were governed by certain rhetorical and homiletical ideals to a period when it became almost a province of literature, in so far as conformity to the prevailing literary standards was required also from the preacher.'<sup>9</sup> Brilioth confirms this last point in a fine perceptive analysis of the influence of the French classical sermon in French Reformed preaching: 'Unquestionably it contributed mightily towards a heightening of the prestige of spiritual oratory since it was not until the nineteenth century that sermons ceased to be classed as literature.' Still more perceptives the comment that follows: 'We may raise the question whether or not this influence was sound, whether or not it rather led preaching astray.'<sup>10</sup>

This is the danger of which Paul was obviously aware, as is evident in his emphasis in I Cor. 1:17 — 'not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ be made of none effect.' How could anyone intent on remaining true to the apostolic pattern think that the conscious adoption of the principles of classical rhetoric was an advance or advantage? It was certainly not by accident that, at the time of the Reformation, the Reformers, especially Calvin, resolutely broke away from the long established pattern in favour of a return to the simple biblical and apostolic practice.

No: the apostles were preachers of the Word. And inherent in this very concept is a certain simplicity that is integral to the true biblical doctrine of preaching. Nowhere is this seen more clearly and graphically than in Acts 8, which may well be taken as a fair indication of the apostolic practice: 'they went everywhere preaching the Word' (v. 4); Philip 'preached Christ unto them' (v. 5); 'they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God' (v. 12); 'they preached the Word of the Lord, . . . they preached the gospel' (v. 23) 'Philip . . . began at the same Scripture, and preached unto him Jesus' (v. 35).

It is fair comment on the situation depicted here to say that it was one *dominated* by preaching. It can hardly be gainsaid that for the New Testament Church preaching was the most important of all its activities, that it was central to its life, and that it was the course of its spiritual vitality and well-being. This has its own message for those ages of Church history, including our own, in which the Church has lost the vision of the power and effectiveness of preaching, and losing it has lost sight and use of a weapon of spiritual warfare which is mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds.

1. *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, Independent Press, 1907, p.1.
2. Dargan, *History of Preaching*, I, p. 25.
3. Brilioth, *History of Preaching*, p. 4.
4. Calvin, Sermon on I Tim. 2:12-14.
5. *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, pp 143, 4.
6. *English Pulpit Oratory*, p. 46.
7. *Ib.*, p. 47.
8. *Ib.*, p. 48.
9. *Ib.*, p. 136.
10. Brilioth, *op. cit.*, pp 147, 8.