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Thirty Years in the Sermon Class.*

THE Sermon Class is the most venerable feature of the College Curriculum. On Monday, April 8th, 1811, the three students with whom the College began were given a text by William Newman, the first Principal and the whole staff, almost as soon as they had crossed the doorstep of "The Baptist Academical Institution at Stepney," and were told to produce a sermon on it by the end of the week. Other elements of the curriculum have varied from generation to generation, but the Sermon Class goes on for ever.

What is the Sermon Class? The painful memories of some who are present might suggest that it corresponds with the dissecting-room of a medical school; indeed, it has been said to a student who had preached a depressing sermon on the Parable of the Prodigal Son and had unfortunately called his divisions "sections," that he had really given us a post-mortem of the subject. It is not an easy task for the young student to preach, without the conditions of regular worship, to the critical ears of his fellow-students and College Principal; that is why he so often looks at the ceiling instead of his class-room congregation, as though invoking supernatural aid. But it is a good thing for him that his rhetorical exuberance and sentimental stories should be stripped off by unsparing criticism, in order that the residue of truth may be made the more apparent—whether truth of Biblical interpretation, truth of expression, or truth of contact with the realities of human life. He has to exercise his imagination in order to see his fellow-students as aged deacons or bright young people of the worldly kind. He has to learn patience whilst his critics express their feelings, so far as words avail. If the Sermon Class is made, as it ought to be made, more constructive than destructive, and is carried on, as I have always found it to be, in a proper attitude of sympathy—for will not the critics themselves eventually stand in the dock?—it is a most valuable feature in a College course. Incidentally, it may be said that the sermons of these young men throw some light on the kind of preaching which they have been accustomed to hear, and open a window to characteristic features of our Baptist Church life of to-day.

At such a meeting as this our usual practice has been to invite some distinguished preacher, that he may impart his secret to the students. But alas! he never does. So, for once, we are making a change, and allowing the students of the Sermon Class

* Address delivered at the Closing Meeting of the Session of Regent's Park College on June 10th, 1937.

to speak by the record of their utterances through the last thirty years. As I look at the six volumes of notes in which the experience of those utterances is enshrined, I might perhaps be forgiven for recalling the classical story of the verger of St. Mary's, Oxford, who had heard all the Bampton Lectures and thanked God he was still a Christian. But I do not want to say that; I would rather record the difference between a bad and a good sermon suggested by those notes. The bad sermon was one which was cold and lifeless, because it lacked the warmth of personal conviction, or dealt with trivialities to show how much the preacher could make of a very little, or one which, however good in substance, was not translated into the language and thought of the hearers, or one which, however interesting, important and popular, would have been out of harmony with the setting of Christian worship. The good sermon was that which uttered *the personal conviction of a great truth, intelligibly expressed and applied, and imparted with the dignity of a Word of God.*

1. PERSONAL CONVICTION. The writer of the book called *A Parson's Job* begins it very accurately by saying, "The main-spring of the job is conviction." Before we accept that statement, however, let us be sure that we know what we mean by "conviction." It is not mere opinion, and it is not simply intellectual assent to an argument. Its best definition is given through Richard Hooker's words, when he was asking those from whom he differed to reconsider their position: "If truth do anywhere manifest itself, think it your best victory when the same doth prevail over you." In other words, "conviction" means, both etymologically and in fact, being *conquered* by someone or something greater than ourselves. It means the surrender to an authority which we cannot dispute, so that we become its instrument and expression. It means the same thing as Phillips Brooks's well-known formula, "truth through personality." There is a contagion in genuine conviction with which nothing else can compare. Carlyle has told us, in his *Reminiscences* (Vol. II., page 204), how he went to hear the Duke of Wellington in the House of Lords. It was, he writes, "speech of the most haggly, hawky, pinched and meagre kind, so far as utterance and 'eloquence' went; but potent for conviction beyond any other . . . this hitching, stunted, haggling discourse of ten or thirteen minutes had made the Duke's opinion completely mine too . . . get a true insight and belief of your own as to the matter; that is the way to get your belief into me, and it is the only way!" That is always true, though we must not forget that no man can "get" a conviction by merely

desiring it; a conviction must get him, often against his own will. All that he can do is to put himself within the grasp of the realities of life, and the truth will do the rest, finding him and conquering him.

When such a conviction stands the tests that are brought by fuller knowledge, clearer reasoning, larger experience of life, then we may know that we are indeed *convinced*—conquered—by reality. We are no longer accepting conventions of the society in which we live, or echoing the opinions of others. Conviction by reality will stand every test that the laboratory of life can devise. Sir Francis Darwin has told us that “when science began to flourish at Cambridge in the ’seventies, and the University was asked to supply money for buildings, an eminent person objected and said, ‘What do they want with their laboratories? Why can’t they believe their teachers, who are in most cases clergymen of the Church of England?’”

No doubt we all must accept many things on the authority of the experts. But vital religion needs the vitamin of conviction, and most of all does the vital religion of one who would be an ambassador of Christ. Emerson, in a “Lecture to Divinity Students,” recalls how he once entered a church whilst the snow was falling. “The snow-storm was real: the preacher merely spectral, and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated or chagrined. If he had ever lived or acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession—namely, to convert life into truth—he had not learned.”

No doubt it will be said that the number of truths of which any one of us is thus profoundly convinced is necessarily limited, and can by no means cover the whole range of Christian truth. Why should it? Do we not sometimes forget, both as to preaching and as to service, that God has others to carry His message and do His bidding besides ourselves? Some ministers are too anxious to bring everything under their own hat. But the ancient name of our God—the Lord of hosts—still stands true. “Ye servants of the Lord, *each in his office wait.*” If I live with my mind towards the truth, the Spirit of God will surely convince me of whatever truth He would have to be preached by *me*. In fact, a minister can usually put all his genuine convictions into a dozen sermons. But he can go on usefully preaching that dozen sermons all his life, and they will convince others, because they have convinced him.

More than this, conviction is one of the necessary conditions

of being interesting. If a sermon is not "interesting" to the hearer in the deeper original meaning of the word, i.e. "important" to him, it is a failure. I am afraid many of the utterances of the Sermon Class have not been very interesting. They were honest, but there could not yet be that necessary contact with life which turns mere opinion into conviction. The preacher must be interested himself if he is to interest others, and our deepest interests are those which belong to the realm of our convictions. I have always been grateful to a fellow student to whom I confessed my uncertainty as to what I should take to preach on in a Sermon Class of long ago. He said, "What interests you most just now? Take that." It was good advice, on which I have often acted, advice which I have often passed on to others. If we have really been brought into contact with reality, and are not misled by mere fancies, then our own present interest is one of God's ways of telling us what to preach about.

II. GREAT TRUTHS. In the second place, good preaching must deal with great truths, and not with mere trivialities to display the cleverness of the preacher. I am thinking of the kind of sermon which was satirised by H. B. Swete, when he wrote, "Too many sermons remind one of a certain queen, who, when the enemy was at the gate, tired her head and painted her face. We remember her end; within half an hour nothing was left of her worthy of a decent burial." Of course, the style of preaching must change with the changing generations. To-day, hearers generally expect the more conversational style, and would not respond to the oratory of Robert Hall, though in his own day his preaching could draw a considerable part of his hearers to their feet in eagerly concentrated attention. But the good preacher of to-day is not less committed to great themes than was Robert Hall. Life can be interpreted only from above, and the preacher's unchanging task is to bring great truths—the great truths of the Christian Gospel—into relation with life, as its only adequate interpretation. An after-dinner speech, enlivened by wit and humour, and moving lightly over the surface of life, is one thing; a true sermon, though it need not be less interesting, is quite another, for it must plunge into the depths of man's sin, and rise to the heights of God's grace. I think that this is more generally felt to-day, both by preachers and hearers, than it was a generation back. There is more impatience with the trivial, and more readiness for the great themes, when they are handled competently, and are presented in close relation with life. Certainly that is true of the Sermon Class, as I have known its development through these last thirty years. The exotic plants of intellectual conceits do not thrive in the critical

atmosphere of the Sermon Class to-day. Students do endeavour to keep in sight of Christian truth. On the other hand, there is too much tendency to pitch their sermonic tents on the horizon of great truths, rather than to press inwards to the central positions. For that tendency, the student has more excuse than the minister. The student is just beginning to discover through the College curriculum the unsuspected implications and the unseen foundations of his faith, and is losing some of the facility with which a local preacher will often settle the doctrinal issues of many generations.

This is one of the reasons why unthinking people sometimes say that College spoils preachers, as indeed, it often ought to do, for a season. There is the record of a student of this College in the last century who demurred to handing in a statement of his faith to Dr. Angus on the ground that he was only in his second year, and had not yet received instruction beyond the doctrine of sin. Such an attitude, of course, springs from a wrong conception of what preaching is, as distinct from teaching. But I have often wondered, when listening to those who seemed to shrink from a central handling of the great themes, how much clear teaching they had heard from the ministers at whose feet they had been sitting. I know that doctrinal preaching can easily fail to be Gospel preaching, and can repel by its aridity. But I am also sure that the Free Churches to-day are all suffering more or less from the lack of clear doctrinal preaching, which has learnt to combine the warmth of the evangelist with the lucidity of the thinker. Protestant evangelicalism has always depended on the truths it proclaims rather than on the institutions it maintains. If those truths are held hazily and vaguely, if the real difficulties in holding them are evaded because preachers lack the courage and persistence to grapple with them as did their predecessors, if well-meant generalities replace the challenging assertions of the Gospel, there can be no lasting vitality in the Free Churches, and Protestantism might easily fall into the position of Catholicism after the Reformation, before the Counter-Reformation had given to Catholicism that new lease of life which it still enjoys. More than ever we need to listen to the words of John Ryland, when preaching before this College in 1812. He said :

Let [the student] view all truth in connection with its central point. Remember the import of those emphatic, scriptural phrases, The preaching of the *Cross*, The Truth as it is in *Jesus*, and The doctrine which is according to *Godliness*. Let every antecedent Truth be pursued till it leads your hearers to the Cross of Christ; let every conse-

quent Truth be deduced from the same point and enforced by evangelical motives.

Over against that ancient, but not superannuated exhortation, let me put some words published last year by Mr. J. B. Priestley, in which he vividly describes the hunger and thirst of this generation for something better than it is getting. It is taken from his book, *They Walk in the City*:

They are no longer children of God and are not yet contented and unwondering big bees and ants . . . they still feel that there are mysteries, vast unfathomable gulfs in which birth, love, death are created out of darkness and inexplicable light, but now they are out of touch with any possible explanation of these mysteries, any explorations of these gulfs; the old accounts of these things they instinctively reject, the new have not arrived; and no sooner does anything of real importance happen, something that a dynamo or an internal combustion engine cannot work, than they are back in the wilderness with only the bleached bones of prophets to comfort them. (pp. 34/5.)

It is because those who are responsible for the policy of this College are so conscious of the need for fully equipped ministers to cope with these modern needs—ministers who can be thinkers as well as evangelists—that they have committed themselves to the arduous task of raising a building in Oxford that shall house this College in the years to come, a task that ought to commend itself to every Baptist who can look ahead and see the needs of to-morrow as well as those of to-day. Education can never replace conviction, but it can always make it more efficient, by bringing into clearer light the great truths to which conviction should testify. This is the justification for the long and arduous curriculum of such a College as ours, maintained even from its earliest days, and for its refusal to countenance short-cuts into the Baptist ministry.

III. INTELLIGIBLE EXPRESSION. The third feature of a good sermon is intelligible expression—in which I include three things, viz. the *translation* of the preacher's thought into the vernacular of the congregation, the precise *application* of it to their actual circumstances, and those qualities of *delivery* which enhance the spoken word. Probably the most frequent cause of failure in preaching is to be found in one or more of these points. The preacher may have genuine convictions of great truths, but unless he has learnt by a good deal of trial and hard work how to "put it across" (as our slang has it) to his congregation, he will largely fail. Inexperienced speakers, like inexperienced

writers, hardly ever realise how much work has to be done simply in the translation of what they want to say into the thought and language of the hearer or reader. Stopford Brooke, writing to one of his children with literary ambitions, said, "What you children need to learn is that when you have an idea you must shape it, shape it, SHAPE IT." When we listen to a wireless talk by Sir James Jeans on astronomy, or by Sir William Bragg on physics, we may easily forget that the apparent simplicity is a work of great art, partly in the selection of illustration, partly in the choice of language. How the great masters have toiled over their language to get the exact expression of what they would give to others! Mendelssohn had in his possession Beethoven's original score of the "Emperor" Concerto. In one passage, Beethoven had pasted one alteration on another up to the number of thirteen. When Mendelssohn separated the slips, he found that the thirteenth and last was the same as the first. But those alterations were not wasted labour, for they eliminated the inferior expressions and left the composer confident that his intuition had found the right phrasing for the music heard by the inner ear. J. H. Jowett, who had the great quality of lucid simplicity in his sermons, was once called on to speak without preparation, and contented himself with a few words. His audience cried "Go on!" He said, "I cannot go on. God has not given me the gift of extemporaneous utterance. All I do is done with the most laborious preparation." I am inclined to think that, when people say of their minister that he is preaching "over their heads," what they really mean, or ought to mean, is that he has not learnt how to speak their language. It is not that his intellect is too great—I have yet to meet the minister with an intellect too great for his job—but that his sympathetic toil has been too small. I have often commended to the Sermon Class the study of Gustav Frenssen's *Village Sermons*, as an example of consummate art in this respect. Here was a preacher, who afterwards became one of Germany's leading novelists, taking constant pains to study his little congregation of a score or so. This is what he tells us about his sermon-making. "I take the text out of its ancient setting and plant it in our own life, and in our own time. My text, so to speak, saunters up and down the village street once or twice, with thoughtful eyes and meditative mind. It becomes accustomed to the village, learns to feel at home in it . . . as I write, I deliberately address certain definite people, Farmer L., Doctor M., P. the workman, and so forth . . . so I feel that my sermons are firmly rooted in actual life."

This quotation also illustrates the second feature of

intelligible expression, viz. application to the concrete circumstances of life. People do not really know what the preacher means, indeed, I do not think that he really knows himself, until the actual bearing of his words on life are indicated. Here I would like to quote again, and this time from J. M. Keynes's pungent words about President Wilson and his famous "Fourteen Points":

"The President had thought out nothing; when it came to practice his ideas were nebulous and incomplete. He had no plan, no scheme, no constructive ideas whatever for clothing with the flesh of life the commandments which he had thundered forth from the White House. He could have preached a sermon on any one of them, or have addressed a stately prayer to the Almighty for their fulfilment, but he could not frame their concrete application to the actual state of Europe."

That is a rather deadly indictment of much of our preaching, but it is justified. Whenever I hear vehement declamations about the world or the Church, which are by no means confined to young and inexperienced preachers, declamations which suggest that the preacher's own dictatorship would soon set the world and the Church in order, I think of that devastating description of Wilson.

As the third feature of intelligible expression, we must certainly put delivery. I am not thinking only of the minimum requirement of audibility. Some of the criticism about this comes from those who forget that speech cannot be adjusted to the needs of the deaf without becoming unpleasantly loud to the majority of hearers. But preachers ought to be audible without effort by the ordinary hearer, however difficult the task is made by the bad acoustics of so many of our churches. Beyond this minimum requirement, however, there is all that the living voice and manner can add to the thought by way of expression. The wireless is constantly bringing this out, and incidentally setting a standard of speech through the best exponents of wireless speaking, which is a new challenge to the pulpit. I am afraid that the majority of students do not take enough pains with the instruction in elocution which they receive. It seems to lie outside of the curriculum, and its value largely depends on daily and assiduous practice in the correction of faults. Then, well-meaning laymen do not help things by telling students to "be natural," as if naturalness in public speech were not itself the product of the highest art or the rare instinctive gift. The very conditions of the platform or the pulpit are themselves quite unnatural, and that unnaturalness has to be overcome by taking

thought and taking pains. How well worth while all this is! For here lies the particular power of the pulpit as compared with all printed words—that the man's personality is added in every intonation and look. This is what distinguishes the preacher's work from that of the journalist and the essayist. Even when television is added to the wireless audition, the combination will never be able to compete with the intensive influence of one whose living presence with us becomes a new channel of conviction.

IV. THE UNITY OF WORSHIP. The fourth and last point to be made is one which lies indeed in the background of the Sermon Class, yet ought never to be forgotten—that the sermon belongs to that unity we call worship and must have the fitness and dignity which characterise true worship. Neither preachers nor hearers always sufficiently remember what worship really is. It is "worth-ship," the humble and grateful recognition of God's worth. It depends, therefore, on what we give rather than on what we get. If the thoughts of the congregation as it individually bows the head on entering a church could be flashed on a great screen, we should have a test of the worship-value of that congregation. All the elements of the religious service ought to be subdued to the one central fact—that something is being offered to God. When we bring our petitions in prayer, we are recognising His power and His will to grant all that is good for us. When we sing His praise in our hymns, we are acknowledging that power and that will in the divine providence. When we listen to the Scriptures we hear of the mighty acts of God in the past and the declaration of His power and will to save and to bless at this present time. Where, then, does the sermon come in? What is its right to the prominent and regular place it has acquired in our Free Church worship? Let me find the answer in the words of one at whose feet I sat in my youth—A. M. Fairbairn. "Worship in its fundamental idea may be said to be the speech of God to man and of man to God. . . . The man who speaks to God in the name of the people ought also to be able to speak to the people in the name of God. It is here where the awful and solemn function of the sermon appears; it ought to come as the response of God to the cry of man." That is a very high ideal to set for the sermon; yet does not the custom of taking a text from Scripture endorse it? The sermon is professedly based on Scripture, either as exposition or application. It continues, under the professed guidance of the Holy Spirit, that dynamic quality of Biblical truth which refuses to be bound to particular generations and *their* needs. The Christian sermon declares Jesus Christ, the same yesterday,

to-day and for ever. In that declaration the preacher's humanity is offered to God as an instrument of the Spirit. The word of God becomes the hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces, the rock of which the lines of cleavage have already been fashioned by the Providence of God. If such a conception of the sermon exalts the office, it ought to humble the man. It ought to banish that miserable vanity that too often creeps out, that display of the preacher's knowledge (too often of knowledge falsely so-called), that self-complacent reference to the successes of his work or the importance of his personality. It ought to banish those offences against good taste which jar on the true worshipper—the cheap jest, the anecdote told chiefly to raise a laugh, the pompous language, the exaggerations of prejudice. It would exclude not a few of the subjects taken, however legitimate and necessary elsewhere. Preachers are like Churches—they are always being tempted to exercise functions beyond their true realm, and both preachers and Churches cross their proper boundaries at the cost of their peculiar power and influence. The properly severe standards of the Sermon Class hold these tendencies easily in check, but when they are removed the preacher may easily yield to the temptation. The safeguard is that both preacher and hearers should judge each sermon by its fulfilment of the place it claims in *worship*, and its right to be regarded as the message of God in response to the prayer and praise of His people.

Some of you may be inclined to say that, after all, the usefulness of a minister depends on many other things besides preaching, and that except for the rare pulpit genius, these other things may more than atone for limitations in preaching. I quite agree; if it were not so, thirty years in the Sermon Class might have made me a confirmed pessimist as to the future of Baptist Churches. It may also be said, with perfect truth, that the effectiveness of the minister in his own pulpit is never to be measured by the stranger, who knows nothing of the many over-tones and under-tones which faithful pastoral work lends to the spoken words. Preaching to a congregation is, after all, subsidiary to that individual relation of personal contact through which the profoundest influence can be exercised. The sermon itself will always depend on the *man* and on qualities beyond analysis. Yet the Free Church emphasis on the sermon is not wrong, if the sermon itself be right, and the severe discipline of the Sermon Class is justified, as an attempt to bring the sermon nearer to its ideal. It is worth while to concentrate on the intellectual side of the sermon under the abstract conditions of the class-room, in the hope that the very different conditions of worship may bring new warmth of emotion without loss of

what has been already learnt. There is miracle and mystery in the spoken word, when it is made sacramental by the Spirit of God, that should inspire us with reverence and with devotion for language itself, and should make men faithful students of the grammar and the dictionary, that they may be the more efficient ambassadors of the living Word. Preaching is not played out in our modern world. It never will be whilst the sermon is the personal conviction of a great truth, intelligibly expressed and applied, and imparted with the dignity of a Word of God.

H. WHEELER ROBINSON.

LONDON has always grown, and to provide places of worship has always been a trouble. The great fire of 1666 led to the seizing of all dissenters' meeting-houses for parish worship. When these were restored in 1687, dissenters dealt in earnest with the great population outside the city walls. Within twenty years they had eighty-eight meeting-houses there, while the Established Church had only twenty-eight parishes, with eighteen more chapels of ease. Convocation asked Queen Anne to help; she sent a message to Parliament, which in 1711 voted £350,000 to build new churches. St. Martin's-in-the-Fields is a fine specimen of one which replaced a poor place; James Gibbs had the spending of the coal duties which provided the money, and in the end about twenty-five fresh parish churches did arise. The problem is as great as ever. To-day Londoners sleep at Guildford, Southend, Clacton. Bishops and Free Churchmen cannot raise money fast enough to provide for Dagenham, Hornchurch and other new towns, which are soon stocked with public-houses and cinemas.

W.T.W.