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Plainness of Speech.

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IN taking *plainness of speech* for my title, I have no thought of defending the A.V. translation of 2 Cor. iii. 12 as against that of the Revisers. I use the phrase in the conventional sense that is attached to it. We connect it in our own mind with the words of our Lord, "To the poor the Gospel shall be preached"; we think of the simple language of His own teaching, which the "common people" heard so gladly. Such is the duty of the Christian minister—to speak so as to be "understanded of the people." His aim and ambition is to make plain the way of truth.

"I call that a good sermon which does no harm," said an archdeacon of the eighteenth-century creation to a candidate for Holy Orders. Doubtless the archdeacon would have set his seal to the sentiment of a well-known clergyman of the same enlightened period, who left on record his belief that, "mankind in general, if left to themselves, have little or no propensity to that most horrible of all vices called zeal." Our conception of the ministry and its responsibilities is very different from that of the archdeacon; and if our ideal of preaching were no higher than his, we should say "Least said, soonest mended," and look upon the opportunity of preaching as a thing to be avoided rather than welcomed. Our settled purpose, on the contrary, is to do all possible good by the sermons we preach.

My theme is the duty of *plainness of speech*; and it seems to me that there are three principal ways in which we may fail in this respect, and so fail to accomplish that whereto we are sent when we enter the pulpit; we may fail, namely, in our language, in our articulation, and in our subject-matter.

1. And first of language. We may clothe our thoughts and the message that we give in language that fails to make our

meaning clear. Both in the construction of our sentences and in the choice of our words, we must do our best to be *plain.*

To begin with, much of our *plainness of speech* depends on the structure of our sentences. The preacher should be sparing of parenthesis. Punctuation should have strict attention, and, whether the sermon be delivered with or without manuscript, commas, semi-colons, colons, full-stops, should be in their right place and be given their true value. The note of interrogation should be frequently heard, since it helps to make the message real and personal. Sentences should be, for the most part, short and crisp. Nothing, probably, tends more to drowsiness in the pew than the lengthy period. "That sentence," writes Mark Twain, "is Germanic, and shows that I am acquiring that mastery of language which enables a man to travel all day in one sentence without changing cars." Such mastery is the very last that the preacher should wish to cultivate. "Inharmonious periods" the pew will pardon, but long, involved periods it cannot away with. The educated dislike them: to the uneducated they are often a blank. "Read over your composition," said an eminent critic to a learned, but exuberant, writer, "and, whenever you meet with a passage which you think particularly fine, strike it out." I have heard and read sermons which would have been all the better had the preacher followed such advice. Simplicity of style is one of the great secrets of pulpit power. If sometimes, with good reason, the preacher is over the heads of his people in his matter, he should never be over their heads in his language and grammar.

And, as in the construction of his sentences, so in the choice of his words, the preacher cannot be too careful to be simple and unpretentious, especially in addressing an unlearned congregation. The vocabulary of the ordinary rustic is surprisingly limited. It sometimes turns out that the commonest words convey either no meaning, or quite a wrong one, to the uneducated man. Dr. Jessop, when a young curate, tried to console a farmer, who had suffered loss upon loss, by pointing out to him that these things were the dispensations of Providence. On this the poor

old man's face brightened, and he said with a smile, "Ah! yes, sir, I know that's right enough. That old providence has been again' me all along, but I reckon there's One above will put a stopper on him if he goes too far."

How pathetic to think of the pains with which the vicar laboured to impress his flock with the duty of consulting the *context!* Not once, nor twice did he use that word in the endeavour to make his meaning perfectly clear; and then that an old woman should have been heard to mutter as she left the church, "Bother them contexes! Give me the blessèd word!" Since I made the acquaintance of that aggrieved parishioner, I have never used the word *context* in a country church. Even bishops may be deceived. "I hope," said a certain diocesan to the vicar in the vestry, "I wasn't in any way above your people in what I said this morning." "As you ask me, my Lord, I am bound to say that I think you were a good deal above them." "Surely not," replied the bishop, "I cannot think that it was so." "Well," said the vicar, "here comes my churchwarden, a man of more than average intelligence. Ask him yourself." "I hope," said the bishop, after an exchange of courtesies, "that I made myself plain in my sermon, and that there was no difficulty in understanding me." "None at all, my Lord," was the reply, "and if at any time your Lordship should be drawin' inferences from them premises as you alluded to, I should be happy to lend my horses for the job." The bishop's premises were not his premises. We are apt to talk of analogy, similitude, theory, hypothesis, paradox, destiny (to give a few specimens of pulpit words), taking it for granted that such terms cause no difficulty. Nor would they to a vast majority of worshippers in a West-end church, but they convey little or no meaning to quite as large a proportion of country folk.

Careful, too, should we be in the illustrations and metaphors we employ amongst the unlearned. Archdeacon Julius Hare may have been a successful preacher before the University of Cambridge, but he was hardly such in his own parish, the quiet, agricultural village of Hurstmonceaux. "He spoke of the

danger of men 'playing at nine-pins with truth,' and they thought he was warning young labourers against beer and skittles. He likened fiery controversialists to men who 'walked about with lucifer matches in their pockets,' and the farmers thanked him for the zeal with which he watched over their farm-yards and stacks." Homely illustrations as could be, but beyond their power of application without comment or paraphrase.

2. Plainness of articulation. There are various ways in which defective articulation may weaken the Word that we preach. To begin with, I would say, avoid eccentricity. Eccentricity inevitably defeats the end at which it aims. It is so with eccentricity of pronunciation. The first word of advice I would give to the preacher is: Be natural, be yourself, eschew peculiarities of every kind. In the days of my youth there was an elderly clergyman in the northern parts of Lincolnshire who had conceived the brilliant idea that if he adopted the accent, the pronunciation, the vocabulary of the local preacher, he would have a better chance of drawing his parishioners away from the primitive chapel to the village church. Failure, I need hardly say, attended this strange device. The villagers were neither impressed nor attracted by the fact that their pastor besought them from the pulpit to "keep their sens from all evil waäys," and to use all diligence to "enter in at the straäit gaäte." The school children did not become models of industry because they were exhorted to "taäke paäins with their lessins," nor were fewer apples missed from the orchards because they were reminded that the Bible said "Thou shalt not steäl." It might be racy of the soil to talk to the people of their "addlins" (earnings) and their "clats" (household stuff), but instead of adding charm to his message, it only exposed the preacher to the charge of buffoonery. That, you will rightly say, is an extreme form of eccentricity; but, in its degree, the charge of buffoonery will be brought against eccentricity of every kind. And I suppose most of us have listened to preachers who have allowed themselves to slip into tricks of pronunciation which have seriously marred the effect of their message.

But eccentricity is not the only thing which has to be avoided in our articulation. There are preachers who so drop their voice at the end of their periods that every sentence is clipped and mutilated, and the unlearned hearer, whose slow-moving brain fails to supply the closing words, is defrauded, and kept out of his own. Again, there are preachers who give one the impression that they have never heard that if you take care of your consonants, the vowels will take care of themselves; and so *commandments* become *commanmence*, *steadfastness* becomes *steadfassness*, *gifts giffs*, and so on. I have even heard a text given out from the Book of Axe! Such lapses, even if they do not obscure the sense, are an insult to the English language.

A still graver fault is committed by those who mumble. I remember a sermon which opened with the really striking and impressive words, "The pulpit is the preacher's throne." The preacher, as he spoke them, looked forth with a mild, benignant smile upon his hearers. It was the first and last time that his eyes were raised from the manuscript. The monotonous voice grew feebler as the discourse proceeded, till it become a mumble, conveying no articulate sound to those who sat more than half-way down the church—not a large one. Whatever might be said of the pulpit, anything less suggestive of royalty on that occasion than the preacher himself cannot well be imagined. A Boston vicar, who flourished in the thirties and forties of last century, prided himself on his powers of elocution, and used to tell the following story in support of the claim. One Christmas morning he was taking duty for a neighbouring incumbent, but in the afternoon occupied his own pulpit. As the fates would have it, he preached the same printed sermon that his curate had preached in the same church, to very much the same congregation, three or four hours earlier in the day: "And if you'll believe me" (here was his point), "if you'll believe me, they didn't know it was the same." It may sound vainglorious, but I have listened to discourses which have prompted the unspoken thought, "If he had only let me preach it for him, it wouldn't have been half a bad sermon."

In striking contrast to the mumbler stands the shouter; and the latter may be as inaudible as the former. Whilst the voice of the mumbler does not reach halfway down the church, that of the shouter reverberates through the aisles, and is lost in its own echoes. There are preachers, moreover, of this class so ignorant of acoustics that, finding their voice returning with muffled sound to their own ears from every part of the building, they will raise, instead of moderating, their tones, to the complete stultification of their message.

There are two extremes which one has observed, the one as objectionable as the other—I mean the extreme of slowness and the extreme of rapidity. It cannot, perhaps, be said that the preacher who drawls is necessarily lacking in "plainness of speech," but he is not making the best use of speech—

> "Sweet sleep enjoys the curate in his desk,
> The tedious rector drawling o'er his head."

And if the curate sleep, how much more the congregation! On the other hand, the gabbler grossly offends against the principle of plainness of speech. There are many degrees in which this fault may be committed. There must be very few of whom it could be said, as it was of one whom I personally knew, that his greatest triumph as a reader was to run "caterpillars innumerable" into one syllable; but there are many whose message would be more effective if they gently applied the brake.

Is it sufficiently borne in mind by those responsible for the training of ordination candidates that men are very differently constituted, that, while one has a natural gift of elocution, so that, without formal instruction, he intuitively masters the principles of accent and intonation, instinctively knows, whether reading or speaking, how to give his message with persuasiveness and effect, another is so deficient in the dramatic and histrionic sense, that, left to himself, he will say what he has to say without force, expression, or vitality, and with an apparent lack of interest and enthusiasm, which cannot fail to be contagious? If a "good delivery" is not a natural gift, great

pains should be taken to instruct candidates for the ministry in the elementary principles of elocution.

3. I pass on to speak of plainness of speech in respect of matter. In ordinary preaching abstruse argument and technical theology should be avoided. There are occasions, no doubt, when the preacher is justified in delivering learned disquisitions, and plying his audience with argument not easy for even the well-educated to follow. One glance at a long row of Bampton and Hulsean lectures, as well as other volumes of profound divinity by Churchman and Nonconformist alike, on my own bookshelves, proclaims the fact that some of the deepest and best of our theology has emanated from the pulpit. But these may be taken as the exception that proves the rule. Plainness of speech is the rule, and the exceptions are comparatively few. Even the educated prefer plain and simple preaching as their staple fare. They come to church not to listen to argument, but to have their souls fed.

I am speaking, be it remembered, for the days in which my own lot is cast. Fashions change. From undeniable evidence we know that in the seventeenth century things were different. Our forefathers of that period would have been as intolerant of our fifteen to twenty minutes sermonettes as we should be of the hour-glass discourse that they loved to listen to. Nor is it only as to length that the twentieth century differs from the seventeenth. A preacher who to-day treated an ordinary congregation to quotations from Latin, Greek, and Hebrew writers would make himself ridiculous. In the days of Jeremy Taylor and Isaac Barrow they were expected and appreciated, and this even by rustics. In 1642 Dr. Edward Pococke, a pattern parish priest, as well as the greatest scholar of his time, was appointed to the Rectory of Childrey. His predecessor was in the habit of quoting scraps of Latin and Greek in the pulpit. That Dr. Pococke did not obtrude his erudition in this way seems to have been nothing less than a grievance. "Who is your minister?" asked a visitor to the parish. "Our parson," was the reply, "is one Mr. Pococke, a plain, honest man; but,

Master, he's no Latiner." Quotation from the classics was held to distinguish the scholarly from the illiterate preacher; and congregations were not satisfied with the possession of learning; they must have the display of it. "When the Church," says Canon Overton, "was restored with the monarchy the people looked upon it as their positive right to be regaled, if not edified, with sermons which had a good sprinkling of foreign languages in them."

That this taste was not universal may be gathered from the diary of John Evelyn, who writes under date May 20, 1687: "Our new curate preached, a pretty, hopeful young man, yet somewhat raw, newly come from college, full of Latin sentences, which in time will wear off." Evelyn, devout as he was cultured, did not go to church to hear Latin sentences and University logic, but to hear the gospel of the grace of God; and we doubt not that Sir Roger de Coverley, who strictly forbade his chaplain to quote from the ancient classics at table, would have insisted upon the same reserve in regard to the sermons he listened to. Is there a single churchgoer at the present time who would not enthusiastically side with Evelyn on this point?

To-day, as a general rule, the plainer the fare the better it pleases. The food is valued according to the amount of nourishment it contains. This is true of educated and uneducated alike. When F. D. Maurice was preacher at Lincoln's Inn he had barristers and benchers for his audience. It is matter of common knowledge that his great learning and philosophical attainments were regarded as far from an unmixed blessing by a large proportion of his hearers. Many gave expression to their discontent. "We have been taxing our brains to the utmost all the week, and we don't want them taxed on Sunday." A simpler diet is what they needed, and what, as a matter of fact, they desired.

And if it is a mistake to provide erudition for the educated, *a fortiori* how fatal is the folly in the case of the illiterate! Have we not heard of the Oxford don (the tale has been told

of Dr. Routh) who went into the country to take duty for a friend?—how he discoursed on the Descent into Hades, and how, half-way through his sermon, he raised his eyes from the manuscript before him, archly shook a finger at his flock, and said: "But at this point I can hear you say—there you have Irenæus against you." And we are quite sure that, instead of saying any such thing, they were fast asleep, or that, if they were thinking of anything, it was of their Sunday dinner.

The greatest compliment, or what I took as such, ever paid to me as a preacher, was paid by a washer-woman. It happened thus: A laundry-woman from the country was, for the purpose of convalescence, the humble guest of one of my Hampstead parishioners. In her native haunts she was a "Primitive," but as a point of honour, whilst in my parish, attended my church. This she did for three consecutive Sundays. Before leaving for her home, she opened her heart to her generous friend. "I had no idea," she said, "till I went to your church that the Church prayers was so beautiful. I'm sure I've quite enjoyed 'em; *and as for the sermons, why, anybody might ha' preached 'em.*" I knew what she meant; she had understood them, and I thanked God.

Dr. Samuel Johnson, in connection with a parliamentary petition which came before a Committee of the House of Commons, gave the following advice to one of the counsel employed: "This you must enlarge on when speaking to the Committee; you must not argue there as if you were arguing in the schools; close reasoning will not fix their attention; you must say the same thing over and over again in different words. If you say it but once, they may miss it in a moment of inattention." Not bad advice to the preacher, especially if he ministers to a rural flock. One of the most effective preachers to country folk that I have ever known, and who used to say that, when he went into the pulpit, he was as much bent on business as any of his farmers when they went to market (there doubtless lay the *main* secret of his effectiveness) on being remonstrated with for his frequent reiteration in the pulpit,

replied: "It's the last blow of the hammer that drives the nail *home*." For "plainness of speech" I never heard his equal. There was no danger of those who had sat under him saying to one another as they went home from church, "Whatever was he driving at?"

In thus pleading for simplicity in preaching, I am not prepared to say that care should be taken never to say anything that cannot readily be grasped by the average listener. On the contrary, it may have a salutary effect upon the congregation for the preacher to be, occasionally, a little above them, whether in subject or argument. Richard Baxter made it a rule in every sermon he preached to say something that was above the capacity of his audience. Such passages would arouse their curiosity, deepen their humility, and strengthen their sense of mystery in things Divine. True it is that there is another side to which Dr. Johnson, with his usual bluntness, calls attention, "They consider it a compliment to be talked to as if they were wiser than they are." Be it so: it may do them good to be thus put on their mettle; it may set them in the way of deserving the compliment of being reckoned among the wise.

Our main purpose, however, will be to give our message in language that cannot be misunderstood. When Ezra and his fellow-teachers stood upon the pulpit of wood in the street that was before the watergate, "they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading." Here is a lesson for the preacher taken from the Old Testament. We turn to the New. Circumstances have greatly changed, and the tongues which St. Paul had in mind are no part of the Church's present heritage, but there is still much for the preacher to learn from his words to the Corinthians, "Unless ye utter by the tongue speech easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken, for ye will be speaking into the air. . . . In the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that I might instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue." By every means it is for the preacher to cultivate "plainness of speech." Thus

will he "keep the simple folk by their right"; thus will he make the way of salvation plain before the feet of his hearers, proclaiming Him who is Himself the Way in such language as the simplest can comprehend. "An highway shall be there, . . . the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein."

Finally, to glance generally at the preacher's office, let those who are privileged to exercise it aim at realizing the poet's ideal:

> "Would I describe a preacher, such as Paul,
> Were he on earth, would hear, approve, and own.
> Paul should himself direct me. I would trace
> His master-strokes, and draw from his design.
> I would express him simple, grave, sincere;
> In doctrine uncorrupt; in language plain,
> And plain in manner; decent, solemn, chaste,
> And natural in gesture; much impress'd
> Himself, as conscious of his awful charge,
> And anxious mainly that the flock he feeds
> May feel it too; affectionate in look,
> And tender in address, as well becomes
> A messenger of grace to guilty men."