---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

# "OLD SERMONS."

By E. J. W.

THE psychological effects of repetition are varied and indeed often contradictory. On the one hand, the recurrence of some things is productive of the greatest pleasure. A favourite song, or other musical item is often demanded over and over again, and always received with welcoming applause. Indeed, we are being told that the "encore" habit has become a nuisance and concert programmes of popular items are demanded, not infrequently, practically twice over. So, too, a favourite poem or other quotation continues to please, no matter how often repeated—a beautiful piece of scenery, a picture or other work of art, which appeals to us, never seems to lose its power of attraction by familiarity—rather the pleasure it affords grows with each fresh renewal of acquaintance and hitherto unseen beauties reveal themselves.

But, on the other hand, a speech, a good story (except in the case of children who vigorously demand that their favourite stories shall be repeated with unfailing verbal accuracy), a sermon will not bear repetition; but must, to be effective, come red-hot, so to speak, from the anvil of its creation. A speech, however good, will lose a large part of its effectiveness, if some one says, "I've heard him say all that before." To call a story a "chestnut" robs it at once of its piquancy. There are few stories which achieve the lasting fame and laughter-provoking power as that of "Ould goose in the gun-room" which, according to Diggory, "we have laughed at these twenty years." But perhaps of these varied repetitions "Old Sermons" come in for most general condemnation. It is not uncommon to hear it said of a clergyman, "He has taken to preaching his old sermons," and it acts like a douche of cold water on the finest pulpit effort to remark, "An excellent sermon, but I've heard him preach it before," and the impression is created that if the preacher has not done something actually wrong, he has been guilty of something which takes away from the value of his address. Why it should be so, why there should be this difference in the psychological effect of repetition, we do not pretend to say and are not now concerned to inquire; we merely propose to comment upon the fact as it affects the preacher.

The first thought which strikes us in this connection is the suggestion of waste which seems to be incurred in the preparation of a sermon if it is only to be used once. This does not, of course, apply to itinerating clergy who are preaching constantly to different congregations, often separated by wide distances, or to, say, the confirmation addresses of bishops, which are not, as a rule, published in the Press or addressed more than once to the same hearers. A bishop, now deceased, indeed, told the writer that it was his habit to prepare only one new address each year and to deliver it to each set of

candidates he confirmed that year, but the thought must often be very present to the mind of the ordinary parish priest, who preaches to the same set of hearers perhaps twice each Sunday, year in, year out, and that for probably years on end. The amount of reading, research and thought which a conscientious parson must give to the preparation of his sermons is very considerable, although certainly such preparation is by no means all lost, for a store of knowledge is thus acquired which is always available. It was a true answer which an old and experienced preacher gave to a young colleague who asked him, "How long did it take you to prepare that sermon?" when he said "Sixty-four years," giving his own age and meaning, of course, that the learning and experience of his whole life had contributed to the preparation of the address. Still, every preacher, if in view only of the manuscript expenditure, will often wish that he could use, more than just once, in the exact form in which he has it at hand, former satisfactory work, and yet escape the charge of "preaching his old sermons"!

In the experience of the writer this desire has found expression in a variety of ways and many subterfuges have, within his knowledge, been resorted to, in order to escape detection in using old material.

One clerical friend provided himself with a set of manuscript sermons covering a three-years' course and preached them regularly in the order in which they were stored on his study shelves, confident, one may suppose, that they were not of such a striking character as to be recognized after a lapse of time. There was, of course, need that topical allusions should be carefully noted and omitted, or brought up to date. The cleric in question related how on one occasion he almost "fell into a hole," only just saving himself from referring a couple of years after her death to Queen Victoria as if she were still alive and reigning.

Another clerical friend kept and used his old sermons, making selections from the accumulation of many years, adding a few new ones from time to time. The old ones he freshened and brought up to date by a process he called, "adding new collars and cuffs," by changing, that is to say, the text, prefixing a new opening or adding a fresh peroration. He asserted, and, we think with considerable justice, that the ordinary hearer remembers a sermon, unless it be an exceptionally striking one, only by the text or perhaps by the opening or closing sentences which are more likely to be noted than other parts of the sermon unless indeed illustrations, which are often remembered when the point they were meant to illustrate is forgotten.

Some listeners make a point of marking in the margin of their Bibles the date when a text was used and the initials of the preacher. A friend on going to a new parish was warned that his squire was in the habit of doing this with a view to catching the vicar in preaching old sermons. After a time the squire remarked one day—"I notice, Mr. A., that you never use the same text twice. How is that?" "Oh," said A., "it has just so happened, I suppose, for I often do." Then he chose what he called a "meaty" text and for several successive Sundays preached a series of sermons upon it which could

not be held to resemble each other. Thenceforward he felt at liberty to preach his old sermons whenever he chose without any dread of being called over the coals, at any rate, by the Squire.

One wonders why, apart from the suggestion of laziness involved, the preaching of old sermons should be considered derogatory. In view of the fact that the aim of all preaching must differ but little from time to time; the same sins of commission or of omission have to be condemned; the same ideals of conduct have to be upheld; the same appeals to service and to generosity have to be made; the same correspondence between professed creed and practice has to be urged. So there was justice in the retort of the parson to a member of his congregation who complained that he had preached the same sermon several times: "Well, when I see you people beginning to carry out what I do preach, it will be time enough to set you fresh tasks"!

In this connection one of the great difficulties of the preacher's office is just this—to present in fresh and varying ways the same thoughts, and to view the same truths from different angles, thus "bringing out of his treasure things new and old."

The writer in the course of a long ministry has evolved, for himself at any rate, a fairly satisfactory solution. For the first twelve years or so of his ministry he wrote out all his sermons in full and read them from the manuscript. Then for some ten years he reduced the written sermon to pretty full notes for use in the pulpit. These notes consisted chiefly of headings with some sentences, especially the opening one, written *in extenso*. A half-sheet of note-paper generally sufficed for each sermon. Now for more than twenty years no note whatever has been used in the pulpit. The outline is prepared and thought out carefully; but the wording is left to the moment of delivery—Some may object—"I have not the fluency of language to trust myself to do this. I should stick for words." The belief of the writer is that the trouble is not poverty of words but of Thought. If there is in the mind a clear conception of something to be said the necessary expression will not be wanting, but the speaker must use the words that naturally present themselves and not hesitate and hunt about for what may seem the most perfect vehicle of the thought. Generally speaking, the words that occur most readily to your mind will best convey your thought to others. At any rate, using a mental outline only, it is found that the same sermon if preached again even the same day would not appear to be the same. The subject-matter would, no doubt, be the same, but the wording and the manner of presentation could be made, and most probably would be, naturally, different.

The writer was led by degrees to adopt the procedure he now follows by the experience that often a sermon written a few days previous to delivery, being read at the time of delivery in quite another state of mind from that in which it was composed, failed to represent the feelings of the preacher as he read it, and seemed almost like the work of somebody else, and its delivery tended to become stilted and unnatural. There was also the constant temptation to

leave the manuscript and interpolate some fresh thought, illustration or mode of presentation, with the possible consequent danger of not being able to return smoothly to the manuscript at the point of departure. The use of notes, to a certain extent, and now the thought-out outline obviate both these difficulties. There is room for expansion or curtailment, and the freedom in the choice of language allows the address to reproduce fully the feelings of the moment. Besides, there can be but little doubt that, given matter of equal quality, that which is delivered without manuscript and apparently spoken as the utterance of concurrent thought, is much more acceptable to and effective for the generality of listeners.

In speaking of "Old Sermons" we have hitherto had in mind only the productions of the preacher himself; but the phrase suggests also a reference to the sermons of other men. That there is a legitimate use for the pulpit of others' sermons we think must be unquestioned. The published sermons of others are as legitimate and profitable a grazing-ground for the preacher as any books of reference, commentaries and so forth, it being of course understood that due acknowledgment is made where this can be done without appearing pedantic. Even the most original thinkers will not only benefit by, but at times feel the necessity for, some help, not only in the choice of a subject but as to the best method of dealing with it. The late Rev. C. H. Spurgeon has some appropriate remarks in this connection, in the preface to his Sermon Notes.

"It is not always" [he writes] "easy to select themes for sermons. Even those who are able to give all their time to reading and study are sometimes glad of a suggestion by which they are directed to a topic. . . . I have prepared these frame-works not to encourage indolence but to help bewildered industry: and I hope I have not written so much as to enable any man to preach without thought, nor so little as to leave a wearied mind without help."

And later, speaking of the use of notes generally, he remarks:

"The preachers who can do without notes (in the pulpit) must be few. Some go on crutches and read almost all the sermon; this, as a rule, must be a lame business: yet the most of us need to carry a staff even if we do not often lean on it. The perfectly able man requires nothing of the kind. I am not one of these first-class brethren. With my staff, I passed over this Jordan and I hereby lend it to any who feel they can pursue their journey with it."

There must, we suspect, be a somewhat considerable number of men who either from indolence or incompetency do not preach their own sermons. We say this advisedly, for unless there were a remunerative market for these wares there would not continue to be offered manuscript sermons to the extent which exists. One clerical friend made no secret of buying his sermons. "Better preach another man's sense than my own nonsense," he used to say, and he would quote with a certain amount of self-depreciation—

They broke into my dwelling,
Stole my silver and my store,
But they couldn't steal my Sermons
For they were stole before.

Some preachers have even gone so far in labour-saving as to bring a volume of sermons into the pulpit and unblushingly read from the printed page. There is on record an instance of Nemesis in the form of detection overtaking one such malefactor. He kept a set of *Blair's Sermons* in his pulpit and when hard pressed for material would read one of them. Unfortunately for him a maiden lady of his congregation was also possessed of " Blair " and happened one Sunday afternoon to read the identical sermon she had heard in Church that morning. Thenceforward she kept her " Blair " in a box in her pew and as soon as the text was given out turned at once to the index to see if it were amongst those contained in her volumes. The culprit kept off Blair for a long time ; but one day, being especially hard pressed, he fell back upon his " stand by." The lady found the text in her " Blair," " but," said the parson, recounting the incident afterwards, " I got the better of her that time, for I began three pages on and she never caught me all the way through." Some readers may also have heard of the impostor—a professed convert from Rome who, now a good many years ago, was for a while a great vogue in Evangelical circles in Dublin, whose preaching attracted considerable attention and large congregations until the bubble was pricked by someone with a knowledge of homiletic literature who discovered his sermons to be those of Canon Liddon !

The mention of Blair, who was evidently very highly thought of as a preacher in his own day, causes us to wonder what the effect of one of his sermons would be on a modern congregation. The reading of it would assuredly provoke two criticisms. It would be dubbed " prosy " and " outrageously long " (Borrow's Sermon on " The King's Happy Return " runs to 14,000 words) and it would probably seem all the longer because of its dullness. And yet these old sermons, although their form may be archaic and their mode of presentation unattractive to present-day taste, contain valuable matter and are interesting as showing what changes have come over homiletic matter and method, and while, of course, it would be a fatal mistake to attempt to use these old sermons as they stand, their substance, if assimilated and reproduced in a modern dress, might prove very useful.

Bishop Walsham How has somewhere a word of warm praise for a sermon he heard preached by a young clergyman, which was a modernized version of one of Bishop Butler's sermons. Yet those of us who in days gone by had, for our sins, to make up Butler's Sermons for examination purposes would not readily turn to them as fountains of inspiration for addresses to our congregations to-day.

One wonders what purpose the many volumes of printed sermons which were to be found in many libraries two or three generations ago really served. Were they at all as widely read as they seem to have been printed and bought ? The father of the writer was a parish priest and a scholar of some eminence, his shelves contained many such books well bound in calf—Blair, Atterbury, Beveridge, Secker, etc., etc., some of them college prizes ; but a careful study of his manuscript sermons failed to show any trace of indebtedness

to any of these authors, and the sermons were nowhere pencil-marked as many of his other books were for reference or quotation. Indeed, the condition of the volumes suggested that they had been little handled and apparently not much studied, if at all. There are many old sermons which still merit the title "famous," but they draw their fame mostly from some historic fact or result connected with them or less frequently from some unusual quality in themselves of remarkable eloquence or spiritual power. "Sermons that mould history, epoch-making deliveries are probably," it has been said, "things of the past, the great prophetic preaching which shakes not only consciences but realms needs the Evangelic trumpet of a St. Bernard, a Savonarola or a Massillon, on the one hand and a listening nation on the other." The age of the pulpit has gone by, not indeed for pastoral purposes, but certainly as an engine of national or even of ecclesiastical conflict. Two causes have been at work, it would seem, in this direction. To-day the Press very largely discharges the office formerly filled by the pulpit. The part played in the struggles of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries by Paul's Cross and other public preachments was immense but can never recur, and in a later age the tractarians were somewhat disposed to disparage preaching, disliking emotionalism and the common overshadowing of the altar, the font, the lectern and the prayer-desk by the pulpit. The latter influence seems still to be at work in many Anglo-Catholic circles, though by no means all, where elaboration of ritual and attention to detail of ceremonial tend to place the sermon in the background. We believe, however, that the pulpit has, in spite of many hindrances to its fullest usefulness, still a great place in the religious life of our time. There is still need for the living voice of the spirit mediated through holy minds to quicken the written page of the Bible, to make it the sharp two-edged sword it should be. There is still need of the living human voice uttering the emotions of a heart beating with sympathy for the needs, the sorrows, the trials of humanity, to utter with persuasive tenderness the loving invitation to cast the care and sorrow where they will be assuaged and to point with personal assurance to the Cross, where the heaviest burdens of sin and sorrow may be left.

If we have seemed to write in the earlier part of this paper a little flippantly perhaps on this important subject of preaching, it is not that we think lightly of its sacred importance and the duty of its due discharge, but that perhaps the contrast of the performance of the great opportunity as it is sometimes found with its best ideal may lead us to think more deeply, and so attempt more earnestly and successfully to use to the utmost the great responsibility the pulpit lays upon us in seeking to "divide rightly the Word of God."