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The Ministry of the Word

BY HUGH EVAN HOPKINS

"THE Vicar was in good form this morning", says one choirman to another in the vestry, and the Vicar, who overhears the stage whisper, goes home to his lunch with a lightened heart. He could never quite curb his longing to be appreciated. "A bit off colour today" might so easily have been the words that were spoken too loud—in which case the clammy hand of depression would settle upon father as he sat down to the Vicarage cold meat and salad. In either event, two great errors have been made within a quarter of an hour of the end of the sermon. The hearers have judged the sermon as they would a lecture, a film, or a television feature—for its general interest and entertainment value—and the preacher has succumbed to their judgment.

This happens far too often. So long as the congregation regard the sermon, as most of them do, as a human composition, a discourse which the incumbent or curate has composed for their benefit, they will be listening to the voice and thoughts of a man. It is their much loved or greatly respected "Mr. Smith's" views that they expect to hear. In the vast majority of our churches, this mundane outlook prevails. Our people do not expect to hear *God* speak to them. If the preacher suggested explicitly that they were in the pews to listen to the Almighty through his words, they would begin to think him pretentious and "bigheaded". It never seems to strike them that for Mr. Smith to use the pulpit as a forum for his own views is itself at all pretentious. It is part of the set-up which is taken for granted. There has to be a sermon—the shorter the better. If they are lucky with their vicar, he may be "good at it". If he's not, then one very important reason for going to church falls to the ground, and a few more non-churchgoers are added to the great mass of "fringers". Meanwhile the true preacher, in the privacy of his heart, becomes seriously concerned. Why? Because he knows how large a place the sermon has in the mind of his hearers, how many of them judge the value of churchgoing almost entirely by it, how earthly is their measure of its value, and what a struggle it is to know how and what to preach faithfully.

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If this is at all a true picture of our Church today, an age which endures a continual barrage of religious addresses and talks over the radio and television added to the routine of regular preaching on Sundays, then we are in a parlous state. Until we can ourselves, with our people, ask of a sermon, "Is there any word from the Lord for us?" the ministry of preaching is not rightly understood. In the days of the prophets, men and women would gather round to hear what God had to say to them. They did not, as far as we can trace, discuss the eloquence, skill, intelligence, or vivacity of Isaiah, Jeremiah,

Amos, or Hosea. For them these men were simply the channel through whom God spoke to them—nothing less. The prophets themselves had the audacity to begin their sermons not with a timid invocation of the Trinity but with the words "Thus saith the Lord", "Hear ye the word of the Lord". These great preachers, as their New Testament counterparts after them, regarded their calling as a divine one. They stood up to declare and announce something which they had not themselves composed, but which had been given to them. No doubt the process which went before their speaking involved them in long hours of meditation and study of the sacred Scriptures. No doubt their own souls were searched time and again before they stood up to speak. But the source of their inspiration was God. It was by his Spirit that their hearts burned within them and their words caught fire. It was by his Spirit that these glowing messages enlightened the hearts of their hearers. It was all God's work. It should still be so.

Though our congregations are ignorant of the fact, and though many preachers seem to have forgotten it, every Anglican priest has been given authority not by the Church but by the Lord of the Church, to be a "faithful dispenser of the Word of God and of his Holy Sacraments." At his ordination he is handed a Bible and told, "Take thou authority to preach the Word of God." Prayer is made for each ordinand that "God's word spoken by their mouths may have such success that it may never be spoken in vain", and that the congregation may "have grace to hear and receive" what they preach as a means of their spiritual salvation. There is no suggestion anywhere in the Ordinal that the preacher's task is other than a divine one. When we administer the Holy Sacraments we often feel this sense of divine authority. But do we always carry it with us into the pulpit? Do we preachers regard the pulpit as *belonging to us* in a way that the Holy Table does not? Preaching will never come back to being a power unless and until we recognize the handling of God's Word in public to be as sacred a task as handling the elements at God's Board. The crying need of our day is not for more or shorter or better sermons. The ears of the listening public are bombarded with religious messages today as never before. What is desperately needed is for the words of men to be recognized, by preachers and hearers alike, as the very word of the Lord. Then, and then alone, will the multiplicity of sermons lead to dealings with God.

This sense of authority, which relieves the preacher of his burden in one way, lays it on him in another. The wearisome weekly task whereby thousands of clergy reach the end of every week desperately hoping that they have been able to scratch up or put together something which will get them by for the approaching weekend—becomes, when the sense of divine authority dawns on the preacher's soul, a quiet query, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to say?" The Word of God, with its plethora of ammunition provides the depot from which, under the guidance of God's Spirit, truths are withdrawn for use in the conflict with apathy, ignorance, and sin which every sermon involves. The Word is the Lord's and the delivery of it is dependent on his enabling power. A preacher's burden can be halved by this thought. On the other hand, in dealing with eternal issues, in bearing on his heart

the needs of his people, in loving the unlovely, and praying for the needy, the preacher is right in regarding his duty as a "burden". That was how Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many of the other prophets regarded the message of the Lord which they had to deliver. Preaching is a task no one dare lightly undertake, for the issues are those which touch on eternity. "Every time the message is told, the whole situation is charged with the supernatural", says J. S. Stewart (*A Faith to proclaim*, p. 45). The responsibility is heavy. The privilege is glorious.

It is, then, a burden, but a burden which is not, like our sins, intolerable. What is asked of the preacher is not great ability or striking success, but simply faithfulness. One does not have to be particularly gifted or well trained in order to be faithful. It is something we all can and must be. "Be a faithful dispenser of the Word." "He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully." (Jer. xxiii. 28). Paul refers to preachers as "stewards of the mysteries of God", and goes on to say, "It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful" (I Cor. iv. 1,2). He is to be honest with the Message entrusted to him, but he does not have to add to it, embellish it, or alter it at all. He passes it on as he receives it. Peter writes of the Ministry of the Word, "If any man speak let him speak as the oracles of God" (I Pet. iv. 11), suggesting similarly that there is a stewardship of speaking (v. 10) in which the work is God's, the gift is God's, and the grace of God avails for the speaker. The force of the word used by Peter (*lalein*) seems to be that the preacher is to be a channel for the living Word, not a mould to reshape or alter it. The Water of life has to be passed on intact and unadulterated. It is not plastic to be moulded and shaped. The preacher must, of course, understand it, but it is of too holy origin for him to dare to influence it. Preaching, in Calvin's view, is as much the Word of God as if men "heard the very Word proclaimed by God himself" (*Institutes* I. vii. 1; quoted by T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God*, p. 50). John Milton wrote that "when God commands to take the trumpet, and blow a dolorous or a jarring blast, it lies not in man's will what he shall say or what he shall conceal" (*Reason of Church Government*, 1641). God of course uses the personality and gifts of the speaker today as in earlier times—but no preacher has a right to rely on this, nor to allow it to distort the essentially divine nature of his calling. His words are the channel for God's Word. This becomes clearer as we note that Peter speaks of "the oracles of God". An oracle is altogether other than the one who hears and passes it on. It is totally independent of the channel of communication. In Acts vii. 38 Stephen uses the word "oracle" of God having given the decalogue to Moses—the divine authority of the law, something given from above, not locally worked out. Paul refers in the same terms in Romans iii. 2 to the Old Testament Scriptures, such an important part of the preacher's materials, whose significance as a living part of God's Word must be recognized. The writer to the Hebrews (v. 12) reminds his readers that even the first principles of Christian truth, to be taught to the ignorant, are yet divine oracles, which no man could have invented.

With this fundamentally important aspect of the Ministry of the Word in the back of our minds, the fact that our preaching is not ours but God's (see Gal. i. 10,11), we can consider certain features of the true sermon which may help us to pattern our preaching on higher standards than the average congregation is likely at present to expect.

First and foremost, as we have seen, a sermon must be Biblical. We are entrusted with what the Reformers called the *ministerium verbi divini*. "When we enter the pulpit, it is not to bring there our dreams and fancies," says Calvin. The task of the preacher, as our fathers in God at the Lambeth Conference recently reminded us, is to "make the Bible come alive"—not to assure his congregation that he has listened to the six o'clock news. Of course, part of the process of making the age-old Scriptures vital is to relate them to the days we live in. But that is a different thing from searching the concordance to find a text on which to hang a discourse whose main inspiration comes from the news of the world or the preacher's fertile imagination. Biblical preaching need not necessarily take the form of expositions of consecutive passages in the Bible, though the example of Calvin, Wesley, Spurgeon, and Simeon on these lines is not to be despised. Some preachers can hold a congregation week after week like this, but they are usually exceptional men and an exceptional congregation. Our people certainly need to learn the content of the Bible, and every parish should provide opportunity for this kind of serious study to be undertaken.

The second essential feature of a true sermon is that it must be relevant. Peter, in the passage already seen, written at a time of serious crisis, thinks of the divine Message more particularly as a word suitable for the hour. An oracle, in its classical usage, is essentially the divine answer to a special situation, the mind of God interpreted relevantly. Preaching, though divine in origin, has to come "down to earth". It is the vehicle by which the Lord gives his answer in the crises of people's lives. The Incarnation of our Lord was his coming down to earth. Preaching the Word of God by the power of God is, in a sense a reincarnating of the Saviour that men may see and hear him once more, and respond to him in the setting of their daily lives. We need to see with Francis Thompson "the traffic of Jacob's ladder pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross". Men want to believe in Christ "walking on the water not of Gennesareth but Thames". They have to learn the meaning of "Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us". That interpreting is the preacher's task. The language we use must be in terms the listeners can understand. The doctrines we teach must be in symbols they can appreciate. Preachers with an academic background and whose main hobby is reading theological books or highbrow papers taken by top people need specially to remember that the intelligence level of the average man and woman they meet is reckoned as fifteen years. No wonder Spurgeon had to remind his students that they were to "tend sheep, not pasture giraffes".

A true sermon then must present its esoteric Biblical truth framed in a contemporary setting, where it can be seen not as a mystery confined to the initiated, but a message which fits the pattern of its hearers'

lives. To do this well, the congregation have a part to play, into which they have to be drawn. "Patiently, prayerfully, persistently we shall teach that when the vicar or curate enters the pulpit, *the Church goes into action* in a great act of corporate worship", writes the Bishop of Bradford, (*Stewards of Grace*, p. 90). The better the preacher knows his people, and the franker they are with him, the more relevant will his sermon become. There is a two-way traffic of thought between the pulpit and the pew. If the words used are to bring back an echo of response they must touch on matters which concern those who listen. To do this, some clergy find it helpful from time to time to discuss with their people the substance and manner of their preaching ministry, and also draw from the laity ideas and material which they feel would fit a need. Preaching stimulated like this can become an activity of the Church. The Christian community has a spokesman in the preacher. Many of his thoughts can be formulated with the advice and help of the laity. They become more interested because they have had a share in this side of their parson's work. Their prayers are with him. When he opens his sermon he can sometimes draw out their sympathy and support by using the bidding, "The Lord be with you", to which they reply, with very real intent, "And with thy spirit."

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There is one danger to beware in seeking to draw the congregation into the making of a sermon. It is the temptation to want to please them. Many years ago Bishop Gore said that "the disease of modern preaching is its search after popularity". That may still be true. There is little trace of the "popular" preacher in the Old or New Testament. There were demands for soft, soothing, and "smooth words", but the Biblical prophets and preachers spurned such suggestions. When matters of controversy arose, when political or civic affairs came under the searchlight of the Word of God, the likely reception each sermon would receive was the last consideration of the preacher. Similarly today, those who on Biblical grounds try to deal relevantly with such topical subjects as nuclear warfare, race discrimination, discipline in sex, and honesty in business dealings, are quite likely to see their congregation thinning. Then they may be tempted to turn their longing to be approved of into a bitter impatience with the prejudice and passions of those who cannot agree with them. But the note of challenge must remain. Sermons must hit hard on all matters where biblical authority is undisputed. The true preacher only seeks to please his Lord, remembering there were times when the Great Preacher Himself saw the crowds dwindling away at His "hard words" (cf. John vi. 60, 66 ff.).

There is one more quality of the true sermon which should never be forgotten. How little feeling, passion, warmth, so often lie behind the words spoken! Would it be grossly unfair to suggest that the recipe for many sermons today might run something like this: "Take a teaspoonful of weak thought, add pickings from other minds, stir the mixture listlessly, water it down to taste, and serve lukewarm"? God forbid that we should stoop to any artificial stimulating of emotion

in preacher or congregation. But unless the speaker has himself felt the punch and pull of the truths he is handling, they will come across with a mildness which will leave everyone cold. Platitudes, however true, logic, however faultless, sentiment, however attractive,—none of these will send their hearers away saying, “The Lord has spoken to us. What can we do?” “When I mused in my heart, the fire burned.” It is when the preacher has himself deeply felt the truth and implications of his sermon, and when he can throw his whole personality into the delivery of it, that he will be saved from the dead hand of routine. His sincerity and the truth of what he has to say will be conveyed by the controlled emotion aroused. He will have put himself into his sermon. The preachers who carry conviction are those already themselves convinced. The preachers who move men to action are those whose hearts have already been stirred. Not only so. They will do so the more as their beings are moved not only by the truths of what they preach but by love for the persons to whom they are preaching. “Though I speak . . . and have not love, I am a tinkling cymbal.” The preacher’s love and care for his people will show itself in the warmth and feeling of his delivery. This it is which, more than anything else, will distinguish between the hollow ring of an ecclesiastical duty performed, and the challenging resonance of the trumpet of the Lord sounded by a modern prophet.