Editorial

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE PREACHER

SIR GEORGE TREVELYAN, in his *Illustrated History of England*, speaks of the English language in pre-Elizabethan England as "moving forward from strength to strength and from beauty to beauty, until it fell into the perfecting hands of the man of Stratford. Since his day," Sir George goes on, "its adaptability to exact scientific statement has increased, and its poetic and literary quality has decreased, according to the changes in the mind and life of the people who use it." It is a cold douche for popular notions of progress that the course of English speech over the past four hundred years can be thus seen, not as marking a straight advance, but as showing loss along with gain. Science demands the precision to which Sir George Trevelyan alludes, its requirement exceeding the capability of words even at their best save as they are aided by mathematical formulae. The effort of language to answer this need of science has been accompanied, if we follow Sir George, by its decline as a literary medium. Our purpose in this editorial calls for another comparison, in which language is pictured as having avenged itself of this rigour science would lay upon it, by permitting to itself orgies of licence outside of science. Science would keep words in close partnership with perceivable facts, but those not subject to science make quite other play with words and their meaning.

So it is that the formal meanings of words often have feebler incidence than their theatrical overtones or the way in which they are emotionally charged. For two generations now, speakers have talked "crisis" in fair weather and in foul, till the world has come to have the impact of "wolf" in the fable. No doubt it has served for relief of boredom through playing to natural weakness for the exciting and tragic. Politicians have abetted this devaluing of words through their bandying of epithets and their affecting to see national ruin or the thin end of tyranny in policies of their opponents which to dispassionate observation might differ little from their own. Many would feel that in the recent exchanges of the leaders of powerful states we have reached the "summit" of this verbal distortion and irresponsibility. Mr. Khrushchev brought abuse and derision full circle in his onslaughts on President Eisenhower, to meet in certain American spokesmen similar vehemence in judgments of Communism as so purely evil as to warrant claims to superior rightness in those who have set themselves against it.

Sir George Trevelyan, in the passage cited, perceives a correlation of the trends in English speech which he has specified with changes in the life and mind of the users of it. In a similar way, we would note the connection of tendencies of speech and the people's mental attitudes, paying regard to the

effect of the tendencies we have been considering upon these attitudes. To the people, the speech practices hinted at above must seem to set results before integrity of the word spoken; to make speech a tool for gaining, if need be over your rival's discomfiture, your own group or personal ends. In place of Truth commanding loyalty in its own right, standards of this other order thus creep into the common reckoning. Words, instead of being for the just expression of thought, become the servant of interest whereby men seek in aid of that interest to impose their will on events, or to induce, in hearers' and readers' thoughts, feelings and fancied wants that favour not the hearers' but their own desires and aims.

The foregoing has been written with the thought in mind that in the condition we have been describing the preacher today has a big chance. For the preacher is one who does not deflect Truth to ulterior issues, since Truth for him is the Divine Word which prospers not in something external to it but in that whereto *it* is sent (Isa. 55:11). In the office of the Word the preacher may be less or more effective; that he may be more, he learns communication and persuasion—not, however, that his art may beguile men agreeably to his self-concern or to objects he and others have concerted, but that the Word itself may find lodgment and "not return void," as is God's design for it.

Not that the preacher always honours this rule. The pulpit, as any agency that men employ, can be used for self-advantage or given over to "scheme and plan." And let partizan altercation between political groups or world statesmen be all that we have said, the *odium theologicum* of the annals of religious controversy can still give points to it. But we speak of the preacher as he properly is; and of this *odium* one can say that it now seems on the wane before a growing feeling for the irenic and the ecumenical. A communion in the unity of the Faith is reconciling deep conviction of reality in one's special spiritual heritage and acknowledgment of others' fidelity to the essential Word. All in all, by his Truth's intrinsic sufficiency, and its present acceptance as a rightful possession for all Christians, not for one as against another, the preacher in our day has a unique call and opportunity: to challenge present proclivities to ill-considered and reckless utterance with the purity of Truth, and with the purpose and purity of words in relation to it, and to teach through example a forthrightness blended with simplicity and diffidence in the enunciation of it, to an age that needs the lesson as few have done.

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