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## THE FOOLISHNESS OF PREACHING<sup>1</sup>

### I

THIS phrase is found in the first chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, in the Authorised Version. It constitutes one of the remarkable paradoxes characteristic of its teaching. Thus Paul writes of the foolishness of God and the weakness of God as far surpassing the wisdom and strength of men. In support of this assertion, he declares that the heathen world in its own wisdom had failed to attain to the true knowledge of God but that it had pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. It has been suggested that this arresting phrase is capable of a double interpretation, either as meaning the preaching of folly, or the folly of preaching. In the context there can be no question as to the correct exegesis. The Revised Version makes that clear. The phrase rendered by the Authorised Version as "the foolishness of preaching" must mean "the foolishness of the thing preached" as the marginal rendering reads. Indeed the translation, given in the Authorised Version, should more properly be regarded as an instance of these inspired inaccuracies which are one of its glories.

Jewels five-words long  
That on the stretched forefinger of all time,  
Sparkle forever.

If it be an erroneous rendering of the original, it is a wonderfully felicitous description of a phase of preaching with which the minister of Christ must always reckon, and never more so than in this present age. The man who essays to stem the tide of evil and to declare the remission of sins by preaching seems to be capable of being classed in the same category as those who would hope to bind Samson with green withes or new ropes. The method seems to be utterly disproportionate to the magnitude of the task. The foolishness of preaching appears

<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the Glasgow Baptist Ministers' Fraternal.

to be very foolish. In discussing that statement, we may consider on the one hand, the intrinsic foolishness of preaching, and on the other hand, the extrinsic foolishness of preaching.

Taking first the intrinsic foolishness of preaching, it is necessary that we should first make clear and plain to our own minds what that phrase exactly means. Preaching is one of many forms taken by oral communication in contrast to such limited and ineffective means of intercourse as signs, or writing, or actions, or facial expression. It thus shares in all the difficulties and drawbacks associated with oral communication in general. The person who adopts this means of imparting information cannot be sure that he has made his meaning absolutely clear, while he has no guarantee that what he has said has been accurately apprehended, remembered or transmitted. The best commentary on that observation is furnished by rumour, report, and gossip. Their inaccuracy of detail and untrustworthiness are notorious.

It will be objected at once that these remarks do not apply to preaching since its content is usually prepared with considerable care. But even then it is needful that the sermon be read, if all the pitfalls of speech are going to be avoided, and, while that is granted, it must be borne in mind that the discourse is read to the hearer and not by him, and that, ideally, it is only read once to the same hearers. Nothing is more alien to my argument than to raise questions as to the relative merits of sermons which are read or delivered extemporaneously. Dr. Chalmers was a mighty pulpit orator, and yet he almost invariably read every word of his sermons, which he would repeat again and again to the unending delectation and edification of the same hearers. On the other hand, Spurgeon preached extemporaneously, although not without adequate preparation. I only allude to this difference of method to emphasise the truth that the foolishness of preaching is a problem with which the pulpit must reckon under every circumstance. All preaching is encumbered with the defects which inevitably attend oral intercourse.

These are three in number, the liability to misunderstanding, the impermanence of the impression made, and spatial limitations. Passing mention has already been made of the liability to misunderstanding but it requires somewhat fuller discussion. The unsatisfactory character of verbal communication is a com-

monplace of daily life. In any transaction of importance an oral statement must be confirmed in writing. The business of the law-courts reveals daily the unsatisfactory character of statements unsupported by written testimony. There is, of course, nothing to be gained by traducing speech in this wholesale way. The Psalmist confessed that he spoke in haste when he said that all men were liars. These unavoidable drawbacks have been recognised for many centuries, and full allowance is made for them with the result that the affairs of men in word and deed go on their winding way with a remarkable degree of efficiency and success when everything is taken into account. The perils of oral communication are always present so that there is legitimate cause for wonder that the form of oral communication which we call preaching should be so highly esteemed in the New Testament. "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach except they be sent? even as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that bring glad tidings of good things" (Romans x. 14-15).

As for the impermanence of oral communications, the Prime Minister makes this pertinent observation in his biography of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill. "Speeches are—next to leading articles—the most impermanent of impermanent things." He was, of course, referring more particularly to political addresses, but his words apply with even greater force to pulpit discourses. They seem to perish with the breath that gives them birth, as this simple experiment will show. Every habitual churchgoer must have listened to scores of sermons, and yet, if he begins to sort out what he remembers of them, he will probably find it hard to do more than to recall the texts of a few outstanding deliverances. In that connection, it is fitting to tell again the story which is ascribed to two divines with the name of Smith. I refer to Sir George Adam Smith, and to Bishop Taylor Smith. It concerns an old disciple who was asked by her minister if she could remember the text of last Sunday's sermon. She said that she could not do so although she had derived great benefit from it. On her minister expressing surprise at such a thing, she observed as she pointed to the household washing strung out in the sunshine, that the soap and water had disappeared

from the garments but they had left their effects in the cleanliness effected. In the same way the sermon may be forgotten but its beneficial results remained. That parable will suffice better than many words and arguments to deal with the difficulty connected with the impermanence of sermons.

The spatial limitations, under which preaching must labour in the very nature of things, increases its appearance of foolishness. The numbers which can be reached at any one time can never be very great owing to the fact that the range of the human voice is restricted. This limitation seems all the more serious when we consider those periods in the world's history when there was no other means of disseminating the glad tidings, or of lands where the preponderating majority of the population may be illiterate. After all has been said and done, faiths like Islam and Buddhism have made tremendous strides by other means and methods of propagation. It is not suggested that preaching is never employed by the emissaries of these faiths, but it can be successfully argued that it does not occupy the central place which it does in the New Testament, or in the ministry of the Christian Church, for in these preaching has always been regarded as the principal means whereby the light of the knowledge of the glory of God has been noised abroad in the world, and yet its spatial restrictions seem to make it but an imperfect instrument.

The intrinsic folly of preaching is emphasised still further when its issues are kept in mind. Its themes are life and death, sin and salvation, time and eternity, the most momentous known to men. The preacher claims to be able to impart information of an authoritative kind on these issues of transcendent importance. Here it may not be inappropriate to recall that anecdote of Betterton, the actor. He was asked by the contemporary Bishop of London as to the reason why people could be so deeply stirred by the sham joys and sorrows of a stage play while they remained indifferent and unmoved by the preaching of the gospel. The actor's reply was that he and his fellow-players represented fiction to the public as if it were truth, and the preacher spoke of truth as if it were fiction. When we take into account the fact that the pulpit concerns itself with the truth of God par excellence, it is indeed strange that so much should turn on preaching which is inevitably attended by so many handicaps and hindrances.

## II

There is nothing new or original about these observations. Indeed, when they are stated in this fashion, they seem to be so obvious that it is surely unnecessary to elaborate them. On the other hand, it has been well said that one secret of progress in scientific research is challenging the obvious, for, in Truth, there is nothing so wonderful as the ordinary and the familiar. The fall of an apple from a tree, a commonplace incident in all conscience, is supposed to have suggested to Sir Isaac Newton the train of reasoning and experiment which finally led to the formulation of the law of gravitation. In the same way, preaching has long since become an accepted institution, ordinary enough on any showing, and yet when contemplated from the standpoint just indicated, it is a mighty mystery in view of all that has been accomplished by its agency in the history of Christianity, for it looks like the very apotheosis of foolishness.

These observations on the contrast which is offered by the seeming impotence and inanity of preaching, and the results which it has achieved, call for an explanation. Things do not happen by chance in this world of scientific law and order. There is always fire where there is smoke, and where there is much smoke, there must be much fire. Preaching could never have achieved all that it has done, unless there had been some good reason for it. Men do not gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles. As in the case of everything else, the explanation will be found to be of a complex character, a cord compounded of two or three strands.

One of these is unquestionably the power of the spoken word. These extremes meet. Nothing is surely so frail as speech, and nothing so powerful. "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" (Matt. xii. 37). In the same strain Confucius once observed that without knowing the force of words it is impossible to know men. The full significance of these sentences will be appreciated when we take into account the strange fact that great fountains of wisdom have largely depended on the spoken word. The classic example is Our Lord. He wrote nothing. He did not even suggest that written records of His words be made. He seemed to stake His cause and case almost exclusively on verbal propaganda. I am not unmindful of who

He was nor of what He did and bore. It is sufficient to remark that the space occupied in the Four Gospels by reports of what He said far exceed those of what He did. We cannot afford to do less than justice to what Our Lord said for one of His sayings forms the sixteenth verse of the third chapter of John's Gospel. The mention of the Fourth Gospel brings to mind the fact that that memoir of Our Lord, which is generally admitted to be the profoundest picture of Him, has much more to tell of what Jesus said than any of the other three, and that, not so much in the form of preaching, as in a more evanescent form still. I refer to conversation. Indeed the Fourth Gospel is largely conversational in form. This was the method followed by the Master of us all. He seems to have had implicit confidence in the spoken word, and that is all the more remarkable because in the Palestine of that day the written word was regarded with something verging on superstitious awe. Christ seems to have had no doubt at all that the foolishness of preaching is wiser than men.

In the same strain it may be said that Socrates does not appear to have written very much. I am not unmindful of the Platonic dialogues which purport to record the conversation of Socrates. These probably contain a great deal more of Plato than Socrates, but the indisputable fact remains that Plato thought it worth while to offer his teaching to the world in the form of dialogues. Dr. Johnson is the third remarkable example of the influence which speech can exercise. His books are unread, and yet he retains an assured and permanent position in the temple of fame as a kind of oracle due to the manifold reports of his conversation with all its perennial pungency and freshness as it may be read in the pages of Boswell. What Dr. Johnson wrote is deservedly forgotten, what he said the world will not willingly let die. In justifying the large place which he gives to Johnson's talk in his incomparable biography, Boswell quotes a saying of an ancient rabbi to the effect that the words in the First Psalm where it is written that the godly man is like a tree planted by rivers of water are capable of exegesis which is delightfully relevant here. Of the words that the leaf of that tree shall not wither, it is said that these typify conversation as fleeting as the leaf. Even the small talk of a good man will be imperishable. There is more in that than meets the eye. "The grass withereth, and the flower

thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you" (1 Peter i. 24-25). If such things can be said of anything so fleeting and ephemeral as conversation, how much more may it be applied to the preaching of Christ. Its power is in inverse ratio to its apparent foolishness.

Another factor which helps to account for this influence despite its façade of foolishness is the power of personality. Phillips Brooks' famous definition of preaching has often been quoted to the effect that it is the mediation of truth through personality. Man is so made that the concrete always appeals more strongly than the abstract with the result that principles must take flesh and dwell amongst men before they can enlist their allegiance. Macaulay illustrates that point by reference to Judaism with its lofty and austere monotheism. It was only when the Word of God was found in fashion as a man, weeping by the graves of His fellow-men, leaning on their bosoms, and carrying their sorrows that many were led captive with that captivity of the heart which is perfect freedom. In the same way the gospel only achieves its supreme triumphs when it finds a human conductor in and through whom it can burn and shine. For that reason alone, the task of the preacher can never be regarded as superfluous. He embodies in his own person, feebly and insufficiently, the gospel which he preaches. That, of course, is not confined to religion. It has been truly said that a political party sets more store by its orators than its newspapers. In schools and colleges oral instruction retains its pre-eminent place despite the abundance and excellence of the text-books which are available. There is always and everywhere a subtle magic about personality for which there is no satisfactory substitute, and, as long as that can be said, the pulpit will ever retain its place as a necessity of life, for man doth not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

There is yet another factor which helps to explain the power and permanence of the pulpit despite its seeming foolishness. It has already been mentioned in a different connection. That is concerned with the subjects of sermons. These are the greatest which can engage the mind and heart of man. I am thinking of such themes as sin and salvation, life and death, time and eternity, and above and beyond all, God and man. These are

of such a kind and of such an origin that they transcend all meaner limitations. Like fire they convert everything else to their own likeness. Even the humblest attempts to expound them gain dignity and sanctity from that very fact. They shine by reflected light. That can be illustrated in a very simple way. Let a comparison be instituted between different kinds of outdoor orators, from the vendor of quack remedies to the evangelist. Let us suppose that the man who earns his daily bread by the public sale of pills and ointment, which claim to be the cure-alls for human ailments, addressed himself to his task with the same lack of skill as the open-air preacher. The result would certainly be that he would sell scarcely anything, nor would he be able to attract and hold a group of people as he usually manages to do. Nevertheless the humble preacher of the gospel will collect a certain number of people despite his many handicaps and shortcomings by the sheer power of the message which he proclaims. As it is written, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John xii. 32). That is true of the Cross, and also, of the preaching of the Cross. It outweighs all other drawbacks and disabilities.

Turning to the extrinsic foolishness of preaching, it may be remarked at once that this phase of the subject is much the more important in these modern days. Preaching finds itself confronted with other claimants on public interest and attention, and with influences which tend to challenge its supremacy. These latter are not directly hostile, but their trend is in the direction of creating and conserving conditions which make it harder to expect such results from preaching as it once could achieve. Let me begin with the questions of education. Measured in terms of generations, popular education is comparatively recent. It was organised on a national scale about 1870, about seventy years, or two to three generations from the present hour. Thirty years ago, I remember travelling in the same compartment on a railway journey with an illiterate woman. She was an eminently respectable person, and she said that she was unable to read her railway ticket. Such a case is quite exceptional, and it is only mentioned to emphasise a point which I wish to make to the effect that it takes education a considerable time before it really affects the outlook of ordinary people. The harvest must not be sought after one generation,

or even two. It probably requires a prolonged period before national life is completely permeated with its effects.

### III

In addition, we must always bear in mind that the standard of general education is steadily and swiftly rising, and there is every reason to believe that it will continue to do so. The result will be the creation of a new constituency for the preacher, much better educated than that of former days. Nothing could be more alien to my argument than to suggest that there is anything incongruous and incompatible between preaching and education. The latter is one of the fruits of the gospel, since the fear of the Lord is the beginning and end of all kinds of wisdom, and wisdom is ever justified of her children. In due season the pulpit will prove itself again to be a fountain of living water, but it may well be that the ancient complaint of Jeremiah will be heard again in the land. "For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jeremiah ii. 13). In fine, the rapid diffusion of culture and education may well emphasise the foolishness of preaching by creating new and serious problems for the heralds of the Cross, not so much by overt and active opposition, or anything of the kind, but by the creation of a context inhospitable to public speaking, in general, not to particularise on the pulpit.

As far as preaching is concerned, these trends are accentuated by the irreligion which is so prevalent in these days. That is something bigger and broader than mere indifference to pulpit ministrations, but the greater includes the less. The preacher cannot be expected to wield his ancient power in a spiritual and intellectual atmosphere so utterly uncongenial. This problem can be seen in stronger relief if reference be made to a problem which is often raised and to which no adequate answer is ever given. It concerns the pulpit giants of last century, and the possibility of their drawing again the vast crowds which characterised their ministries. One thinks of such Victorians as Spurgeon, Liddon and Parker, and the question arises as to whether they would still prove to be the popular forces for righteousness that they once were. It is vain to argue

that conditions have changed. The truth of God does not change. Nor does the soul of man. It may very well be that if such men arose, similar consequences would follow. Multitudes would flock to hear their discourses.

But is there not profound significance in the fact that this present age is not producing pulpit orators? There is no lack of distinction in many other walks of life, notably in scientific research and discovery, but in preaching there is lack of outstanding distinction. Is that not symptomatic of a condition in which the foolishness of preaching is intensified a hundred-fold? It has often been said that a nation gets as good a government as it deserves. Is it not equally true that it gets as good preaching as it deserves? These observations are not intended as sneers at the present. Nothing is cheaper or nastier than to decry the present at the expense of the past or the future. We ourselves are the creatures of the present willy-nilly. While these admissions must be made, and made unreservedly, the fact remains that for the time being the pulpit does not appear to exercise the influence which once it did, a fact which surely throws into yet stronger relief the foolishness of preaching.

It must, of course, be remembered that similar situations have arisen before. Nothing which characterises this present age can compare with the conditions described by Bishop Butler in the Advertisement to his Analogy. "It is come," he writes, "I know not how, to be taken for granted by many persons, that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry, but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment, and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world." That is a true and faithful picture of the national attitude to the gospel in the earlier part of the eighteenth century, a state of matters which was revolutionised by the mighty preaching of Wesley and Whitefield.

The multiplication of cheap books and free libraries may emphasise to some extent the foolishness of preaching. Most people prefer to hear a sermon delivered than to read one in private. "A living dog is better than a dead lion" (Eccles. ix. 4). In the days when preaching was incomparably more

popular than it is now, there were plenty books on all manner of subjects, and plenty people to read them, including that elect minority who read as omnivorously as Gladstone, and yet, who, like him, counted it all joy to attend Divine service three times on a Sunday, and to listen with close and reverent attention to three discourses. I do not think that reading interferes with the desire for hearing. It might be more true to say that the one reacts beneficially on the other.

As for broadcasting, there can be no doubt that it has introduced a new factor into the problem. Many people regard wireless services and sermons as an adequate substitute for attendance at God's House, and attention to the fruitful ordinance of preaching. The implication is that a wireless sermon or address is not rated as preaching in the proper sense of the term, or that it represents an inferior level. It is hard to prove that proposition. Much might be said for preaching by wireless and yet one is slow to admit that it can be truly regarded as a new and hopeful development and extension of the ancient practice of proclaiming God's truth. Various analogies may be suggested. It is one thing to hear an orchestra on the air. It is another thing to attend a concert at which it performs. A telephone conversation is very different from a personal interview. A typewritten letter may be much more legible than one inscribed by hand, but it lacks the subtle flavour of one written by the sender. In all branches of industry hand-made goods are incomparably superior to those produced by machines. These arguments are not very convincing. It may be that this refusal to recognise broadcasting as preaching in the true sense of the word is an instance of prejudice and perversion, and yet it seems impossible for the personality of the preacher to have free course and be glorified by God in its working under such restrictions as those imposed by the microphone. Indeed the latter seems to intensify the foolishness of preaching. How can the average man hope to rival the broadcast discourse with all its elimination of so many disadvantages under which he labours. Indeed the question on the future of the pulpit in the face of such rivalry is a serious one. Will the preacher ever regain his ancient power when face to face with such competition?

Personally I am of opinion that the pulpit will always remain as a mighty power amongst the sons of men, and that

for various reasons. One is its past achievements. With the exception of the circulation of the Bible in the vernacular of every tribe, nothing perhaps has contributed so much to the spread of Christianity as preaching. From that unforgettable Day of Pentecost following Our Lord's Passion, when three thousand souls were added to the church of Christ in one day as the result of the preaching of Peter, down to this hour, the declaration of Divine truth by the living voice in direct contact with the audience has never ceased to be a weapon of immeasurable importance. The explanation lies ultimately in Divine appointment. That must not be understood as flight to the supernatural, *deus ex machina*, as this argument will show. After all has been said and done, the methods of nature cannot be changed or improved. They can be aided and controlled but substantially they are immutable. Even the miracles of modern medicine are no more than improved means of assisting nature. In the same fashion, preaching is the instrument which it has always pleased God to use in the propagation of His Gospel. It is impossible to think of a satisfactory substitute. There seems to be no other way so good as this old but not old-fashioned method. May we not then conclude that it is like the ways of nature, which remain the same yesterday, and to-day, and to the end of time. Shall we not then exercise new confidence in the ministry of the pulpit? If the preacher himself feels only too deeply his limitations, there is nothing limited about the gospel which he proclaims, as the motto of this great city proves. "Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of the Word."

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