

THE METHODOLOGY OF PREACHING.

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The solemn fact is that most preaching is uninteresting. Indeed, preaching and dullness are often synonymous terms. The fault doubtless rests a great deal with the preacher. A certain quality of personality is necessary to the life of any public deliverance, but even an unmagnetic temperament and manner are not able to quench the luminousness and effectiveness of a really good homily. I am convinced that the fault lies with the material rather than with the man. Cicero in his *De Oratore* says, "Often indeed, as I review in thought the greatest of mankind and those endowed with the highest abilities, it has appeared to me worthy of inquiry what was the cause that a greater number of persons have been admirable in every other pursuit than in speaking. For which way soever you direct your view in thought and contemplation, you will see numbers excellent in every species, not only of the humble but even of the highest arts. Who is there that, if he would measure the qualifications of illustrious men * * * would not prefer a general to an orator? Yet who doubts that we can produce from this City alone almost innumerable excellent commanders while we can number scarcely a few eminent in speaking?" After speaking of the difficulty and possibility of mastering philosophy, mathematics, music and grammar, "though the whole substance and matter of those sciences are almost boundless", he continues: "Of all those who have engaged in the most liberal pursuits and departments of such sciences, I may truly say that a smaller number of eminent poets have arisen than of men distinguished in any other branch of literature: and in

the whole multitude of the learned among whom there rarely appears one of the highest excellence there will be found * * far fewer good orators than good poets." Two other remarks of Cicero will show the critic in the artist and fairly launch me upon my subject. Writing to his brother Quintus, he says: "You are at times inclined to dissent from me in our disputations on this matter inasmuch as I consider eloquence to be the offspring of the accomplishments of the most learned men, but you think it must be regarded as independent of elegant learning, and attributable to a peculiar kind of talent and practice." Then it seems to me he touches the exposed nerve of the whole matter when he says in the same connection: "For a time as being ignorant of all method, and as thinking there was no course of exercise for them, or any precepts of Art, they attained what they could by the single force of genius and thought." The lack of method has always been the most conspicuous fault in preaching, and this lack can never be supplied until preaching takes its rightful place among the other fine Arts. A willing mind, ready hands and plenteous materials are no sure guarantee of the production of a work of art. A stored pantry does not make a meal, and piety, industry and learning may not make a sermon. The whole matter is one of *disposition*. The root of the word Art means to put together and he who knows how to put together a meal, a garment, a jurisprudence, a solar system, a symphony or a sermon is an artist. All art is one, and the essential principles which apply in one kind of art, whether fine or useful, will assuredly in the main apply in all the rest. If we define art as "unity in diversity," we shall not be far from the truth, for it is the conspiracy of all the different elements to produce a single sharp impression. It is this subordination of the parts to the whole that characterizes every great masterpiece. In Michael Angelo's Captive you are smitten at first sight by the sentiment of despair

which every line of the figure proclaims, whereas in the Burial of Atala you are distracted by the exquisite drawing of the artist. In a poem, a drama, a sermon, then, it is the unity of impression through a diversity of operations that establishes its claim as a work of art. It is not enough then, that a sermon shall contain truths. Those truths must be so disposed as to come home to the "business and bosoms" of men with the force of a compelling *truth*. Little fault may justly be found with the ideas which most preachers dispense. It is the lack of truth to art with which they are presented that renders their preaching too often nugatory.

If, then, preaching is one of the fine arts, and if, as has been often proved, all art is one, would it not be reasonable to ask what are the essential principles which underlie all art, and to apply them to the art of preaching? To put it in a word, all artistic creation takes its rise in the emotional nature. It leaps full-armed not from the head but from the heart of love. Every creative movement in the race, whether of invention, action or expression, has proceeded from this source. Viewed more narrowly there are three great factors in this creative heart-mood; namely, the idea, the feeling and the form. Of these I shall speak in detail presently. Just now it will be sufficient if we group these three in their main aspects. They are joined together in such indissoluble, vital union that the creative passion which they produce cannot exist if each element is not preserved in its proper proportion and affinity. It is like those delicate chemical compounds which depend for their existence upon the minutest details of affinity, temperature and atomism. Each element though necessary in itself, must be utterly subservient to the common end, namely, the molecular fusion which issues in the compound, itself a new entity. Everywhere throughout nature there is the evidence of this artistic arrangement.

By idea I mean the thought, the conception, the sentiment which the artist seeks to portray. Obviously, these must be of a certain magnitude. If the thought is trivial, the portrayal is likely to be so. If an apparently trifling idea in the hands of a great artist is made to seem important, it merely shows the falseness of our categories; the thing was always important, though it took a seer to discover it. To us it seems an isolated thing—to the artist, it is seen upon the background and in vital relationship to the greatest truths. The preacher is an artist. His first requisite is that he somehow be possessed of a cycle of great ideas. The artist-soul broods and so must his. No amount of acceptedly great truths will do for him. Out of them he must, by meditation, fasting and prayer, so to speak, evolve the things that are his. There is here absolutely no place for authority or theological censorship. The highest plane of human experience is that on which the sovereign human mind meets as for parley upon a "Field of the Cloth of Gold", the received truths of the ages. "I think, therefore I am", said a great philosopher. "Here I stand", cried the Monk at Worms, "I cannot do otherwise. God help me!"

To portray other men's great ideas is cheap photography. To wrestle with them in the back side of the desert, means a burning bush and the voice of God. Out of the universe of great ideas must come to the artist the ideas that are his own—as Paul would say, out of *the Gospel, my Gospel*. The very achievement of this is the fulfillment of the second quality of the creative passion, namely, the *feeling*. The vision of a truth insures elation. The two occur simultaneously. The heart-strings are swept by the breath of other worlds. The glorified soul cried out in the words of rhapsody, "The Lord is in this place! This is the gate of heaven!" If this seems an unusual experience, it will explain the fewness of great works of achievement in all the arts. A fireless furnace

can do nothing with even the finest materials. The great public utterances of men from Demosthenes to Lincoln were not merely made, they were the immaculate conception and birth by the union of idea and passion.

Of course, feeling alone, though necessary to creation, cannot assure achievement. Passion more often destroys than fulfills, more often dissipates than organizes. Emotion must be controlled to the point of adequate expression. Wordsworth's definition of poetry is "emotion recollected in tranquility." Streams in freshet turn no wheels—they sweep them away. Emotion uncontrolled can never record its vision. Lessing in the opening pages of "Laokoon", quotes from Winckelmann the following: "As the depths of the sea always remain calm, however much the surface may be raging, so the expression in the figures of the Greeks, under every form of passion, shows a great and self-collected soul." Given such a self-collected soul penetrated by a great idea, and the third element of *form* emerges. Neither great ideas alone, nor emotion alone, nor yet the combination of both, can guarantee the production of a work of art. There must be expression which shall be adequate in all ways, to the idea. Substance and passion are helpless unless form provide them with organs. These three great elements combine to produce one greater thing, namely, *Art*. Like the musical notes of Abt Vogler "out of three sounds he frames, not a fourth sound, but a *star*."

I believe with Cicero, that eloquence is one of the greatest of all arts, and if that be so, surely preaching is the most important department of eloquence. We shall have better preaching when preachers come to view their work as an art, and not till then. Surely all of the three elements have abundant opportunity for play in the field of preaching. Where else in the wide world is there such a storehouse of great ideas as in the Bible, in Christian history and in the tremendous situations in which the

Church finds herself in this and other ages? If nature and intuition and history have furnished materials for great art, what ought Revelation not provide? Is there not something of all this, which the preacher can seize and transmute unto his very own, which he can give life to by the transfusion of his own heart's blood, and which he can utter, at least in part, in terms appropriate to its substance? There is a sense in which every sermon may take rank with poetry, painting, sculpture, and all the rest of the fine arts, and when preachers come to consider the execution of their task in the preparation and delivery of sermons in the same light as the artist considers his, there will be less ground for asking the question, "Has the pulpit lost its power?"

This, you will say, is a splendid ideal but how shall it be realized? Is not art the offspring of genius and can man acquire genius? Undoubtedly, natural gifts have much to do with the matter, but I repeat with Cicero that even the genius will fail in his art if he does not discover and use perpetually a method. There is a kind of genius, moreover, which we may all possess, and which will solve most of the difficulties of the preacher of average abilities, and that is the genius which is defined as the capacity for hard work. The plain fact too often is that the preacher knows so many good things to say, because the system of truth which he teaches has had twenty centuries' start of him, that he imagines that a good measure of them thrown together in any sort of way, in more or less profusion, (generally more) will meet the needs of the situation. Yet he wonders why thoughtful men tire of him, why his church is no fuller than it is, and why he is accused, along with his class, of preaching platitudes. The truth is that he is not taking his art seriously. He does not realize that in the field of preaching as in the field of painting, there is a distinct methodology, or science of method, with which he must become familiar.

Like Quintus, quoted above, he thinks preaching "must be regarded as independent of elegant learning and attributable to a peculiar kind of talent and practice." If a preacher's utterances could be recorded visually, like the daubs of paint upon a canvas, and he could examine them in all their naked realism, the need for method would be as apparent to him as it is to the artist. This word 'methodology', first used in our language in 1800, has come to be one of the greatest of all words. Professor Shed in his "Study of Christian Doctrine" says: "Methodology, or the Science of method, is never more important and never yields greater fruit than when applied to historical studies. At the same, it possesses an independent value apart from its uses when applied to any particular subject. Treating as it does of the scientific mode of approaching and opening any department of knowledge it is a species of *prima philosophia*, or philosophy of philosophy, such as Plato and Aristotle were in search of. This, in their view, was the very highest kind of science, for the reason that it is not confined to some one portion of truth, as a specific science is, but is an instrument by which truth universally may be reached. * * * If now we conceive of a science of investigation that should stand in the same relation to all particular investigations that logic does to reasoning generally, we shall have the conception of the Science of Methodology."

The first item therefore in the methodology of the preacher is this: His message is the application of a *prima philosophia* to all learning. It is his peculiar and difficult function to generalize upon the investigations of all sciences. "A knowledge of a vast number of things is necessary", says Cicero, "without which volubility of words is empty and ridiculous." The orator or preacher is constantly drawing his illustrations from the truths in other fields than his own. He does not profess to be a specialist in those fields, yet he is not disbarred from

using that element which bears a similarity to some phase of truth in his own. This is merely the application of his *prima philosophia*, his method, to the results of others' work. The limit of his privilege in this matter is that he may take from another field only that which he can by careful adjustment fit into the essential principles of his own science. Like the poet, no sphere of knowledge is closed to him so long as he transmutes it into the material of his art. It is this position, as it were, above all the sciences, which the preacher, in virtue of his high function is forced to occupy. Let him become entangled in the details of any other science, and he abdicates his sacred office. The preacher too often descends from his high position to enter the lists in partisan controversies in this science or that. He is rarely trained for this and usually discredits himself and his office. A preacher, for instance, is not primarily a natural scientist and when he enters that field he is at a disadvantage. There is a juncture, however, at which he fails to exercise his high prerogative, if he refuses to be concerned with the truths of other sciences. That juncture is at the point where a specific science impinges upon philosophy. An illustration will make my meaning clear. With the methods of natural science the preacher has little to do. The results which those distinctive methods of investigation produce must be accepted as final. It were sheer folly to dispute the plain phenomena revealed by scientific experiment. Also, the theory of the scientist to account for discovered fact must be regarded as the judgment of an expert, and on that account given first consideration. When, however, he attempts to fit his facts and theories into a scheme of the universe, he becomes a generalizer, a philosopher, and the protagonist in a free arena. The preacher, possessed of his method, his *prima philosophia*, which brings into review all the tangent sciences, is of all men the one who has a right to generalize. He may not

be expert in the details of scientific investigation, yet by his very training he is the man of all men to grasp a special truth stated in terms of the general truth. With the discovery of the facts of science as such, the philosopher or the theologian has nothing to do—with the framing of facts into a universe, he has everything to do. The variation of plant and animal life is a fact—the evolutionary origin of species by natural selection is a *doctrine*. This view of the relation of his own science to all other sciences is of primary importance to the preacher and is an essential item in his method. Let him acquire the habit of looking at things in this large way and an unconscious attitude will issue in large things.

Another thing strongly hinted at above needs special emphasis for the preacher's method. If there are some things common to all sciences, it must be of first importance to discover them. These are the universal truths of which Aristotle never tired of talking. In the *Poetics* ch. IX, he says: "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical thing than history, for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of given character will on occasion speak or act, *according to the law of probability or necessity*; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages." There are certain elements that are common to all the sciences. Reduce a given science or art to its lowest terms, so to speak, and it will speak the languages of all other sciences or arts. Specialism can flourish only on shallowness. Dig deeper and the common center will be found. Medicine and Psychology now at each other's throats will be lambs of the same fold in a generation. Science rightly understood and religion, still in some places suspected of being at war, have never even fallen out. Blind votaries of each have caused all the rumpus. Philosophy and theology are branches of the same great science and will ul-

timately be living together in peace. The search of the preacher, like that of the poet, is for the universal truths. His concreteness based on anything else will be trite and temporal. He goes to the bottom that he may come to the top again. He presents his details with all the flavor of the universal. To be sure preacher and poet in their portrayals must not be abstract, but the faithfulness and force of their particulars must rest firmly upon general universal truth. Coleridge says (*Biog. Lit.* II: 41) "Say not that I am recommending abstractions, for these class characteristics which constitute the instructiveness of a character are so modified and particularized in each person of the Shakespearian drama that life itself does not excite more distinctly that sense of individuality which belongs to real existence. Paradoxical as it may sound, one of the essential properties of geometry is not less essential to dramatic excellence and Aristotle has accordingly required of the poet an involution of the universal in the individual. The chief differences are that in geometry it is the universal truth which is uppermost in the consciousness; in poetry, the individual form in which the truth is clothed." Professor Butcher, commenting on this same passage in Aristotle, says: "The poet seizes and reproduces a concrete fact, but transfigures it so that the higher truth, the idea of the universal shines through it." Professor Santayana, in a volume just published, called, "Three Philosophical Poets", has this to say of Lucretius (p. 61) "But it is the ruin of idealism taken as a view of the central and universal power in the world. For this reason Lucretius, who sees human life and human idealism in their natural setting, has a saner and maturer view of both than has Wordsworth, for all his greater refinement. Nature for the Latin poet is really nature. He loves and fears her, as she deserves to be loved and feared by her creatures. Whether it be a wind blowing, a lamb bleating, the magic

of love, genius achieving its purpose, or a war or a pestilence, Lucretius sees everything in its causes and in its total career. One breath of lavish creation, one iron law of change, runs through the whole, making all things kin in their inmost elements and in their last end." And at page 91, speaking of Dante, he remarks: "We are too often kept from feeling great things greatly for want of power to assimilate them to the little things which we feel keenly and sincerely. Dante had in this respect the art of a Platonic lover: he could enlarge the object of his passion and keep the warmth and ardor of it undiminished."

It is this note of universality that is generally lacking in preachers. What they say is true but often trivial because unrelated to or unbased upon the universal. They talk in terms of details, rather than in terms of principles. A detail is in its nature incidental and may be temporary—a principle is eternal and everywhere applicable. The points of a sermon outline while true to the particular incident or statement, often fail to convince because universal principles are not stated. In the interview with Nicodemus, for example, it is generally the most obvious things that are pointed out, the failure of Pharisaism, the unusual nature of Jesus, the necessity of conversion; whereas Jesus seeks to establish the faith of an honest doubter by appeal to universal principles. The mystery and fact of regeneration are paralleled by the mystery and fact of science. "The wind bloweth—thou canst not tell"; the inductive method is validated in the statement "He that doeth the truth cometh to the light"; the appeal to testimony and to experience takes the place of special pleading. I report that it is not the abstract truth or the naked principle that we are to preach but the concrete ideas made living and final by projection upon the universal. It may truly be said of the homiletic imagination in the words of Sir John Davies:

“Thus doth She, when from individual states
 She doth abstract the universal kinds,
 Which then re clothed in divers names and fates
 Steal access through our senses to our minds.”

The preacher's method thus far consists in his visualizing his work as an art—in his grasp of universal truth, and in his acquiring a method, a *prima philosophia*, which shall place the results of all other sciences at his disposal.

It remains to speak somewhat in detail of the work of art itself, the sermon. Like the poem, it must be substance fused into adequate form. The matter of a sermon bears much resemblance to the plot of a poem or play. It is the group of ideas to be portrayed. If the drama is the imitation of an action, surely the sermon is too, to some extent. The difference between the actor and the preacher is that the actor impersonates his characters while the preacher must *be* the character he usually represents. It might be profitable, therefore, to interrogate Aristotle on this point. In the Poetics ch. VI., he says: “Tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament * * * in the form of action, not of narrative, through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of the emotions.” Is it not a fair accommodation of this to say that preaching is the imitation of action or the truths of action, that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude, expressed in language and gesture appropriate to the ideas, through pity and fear, effecting the proper purgation of the emotions? The elements in this statement which find parallels in the preacher's art are the plot or analysis, the form and the object to be attained. What the great philosopher says of tragedy may apply with undiminished force to the sermon: “The most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation not of men but of an action and of life, and life consists in

action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Again, if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which * * * has a plot and artistically constructed incidents. The same is true of painting. The most beautiful colors laid on confusedly will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait." It is this lack of unity in diversity which preaching often displays. The points of the sermon are treatises on different subjects—they do not work toward a common end, because they do not grow out of a common germ. Like the girl George Ade describes in one of his Fables: Her features were separately good but they lacked team-work.

This is Aristotle's summary of the matter: "A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles." The sermon, like other works of art, must be a unity of such a magnitude as to "be easily embraced in one view." Completeness, too, often means exclusion of germane material. Judicious selection and vital fusing of parts are among the first requisites. Twice recently I have heard a preacher who occupies one of our most prominent pulpits. He was each time smothered under his material. A true method takes a man deep into his subject, but it provides also a way to get out, that he may report what he sees. For the preacher the structure is the thing. If once he can grasp Aristotle's meaning, brood upon it and try experiments with it, the result is

certain. Facility and richness of materials are the bane of the preacher. Tremendous waste occurs in the pulpit as well as in the kitchen because of ignorance of the thing to be produced. The preacher and the cook must learn how to handle their tools and dispose their material to a well defined end. I find this in the "Treatises" of Benvenuto Cellini ch. 2, on "Filigree Work": "Those who did the best work in filigree were the men who had a good grip upon drawing * * * for everything that you set to work upon requires first of all that you think it out as a design. And though many have practiced the art without making drawings, first because the material in which they worked was so easily handled and so pliable, still those who made their drawings first, did the best work."

Of form I can do little more than point out its real meaning and significance. It is not the shallow word it appears to be at first sight. Form is the necessary mold into which an idea must be cast if it is to have its just expression. It is not external at all—it is the heart of the internal. It is the difference between Chaos and Cosmos. "The earth was without form and void and God said let there be light." The one, confusion; the other, order—each in its rightful place. It is not the end but the beginning of all creation. Says Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 6, 7, 4.) "From art are generated those things of whatsoever there is a form in the soul. But I mean by form the essence or very nature of each thing." And again (*Ib.* 6, 9) "Art is form." The new English Dictionary defines form as "the essential determinate principle of a thing; that which makes anything (matter) a determinate species or kind of thing; the essential creative quality." For the artist and the preacher there is a great truth here. Involved in the substance somewhere, somehow, is the form, from which the substance sprang, and into which it may again be cast. The angel is still in the marble and patient loving hands must release her. This is the search

of the preacher, a mighty business, indeed. It can be compassed, for it has been compassed. We can at least do our best, and keep trying till the true method arrives. Says Cellini (ch. 6) "I consider that practice has always come before theory in every craft and that the rules of theory in which your skillful craftsman is accomplished are always grafted on to practice afterward." One word only as to the object of preaching. For poetry, says Aristotle, it is *ἡδονή*, pleasure, upon which Butcher remarks: "Art in its highest idea is one of the serious activities of the mind which constitute the final well-being of man. Its end is pleasure but the pleasure peculiar to that state of rational enjoyment in which perfect repose is united with perfect energy." The end of preaching, too, is the feelings of mankind. We may learn the lesson which men in other fields teach us. They, by their art, have reached the hearts of men. Perhaps if we knew their method, or better still, could, from their method, educe one of our own, we, too, might be more creative. "I have seen Michael Angelo", says a contemporary of the great artist, "at work after he had passed his sixtieth year, and although he was not very robust, he cut away as many scales from a block of very hard marble in a quarter of an hour, as three young sculptors would have effected in three or four hours—a thing almost incredible to one who had not actually witnessed it. Such was the impetuosity and fire with which he pursued his labor that I almost thought the whole work must have gone to pieces; with a single stroke he brought down pieces three or four fingers thick, and so close upon his mark that had he passed it even in the slightest degree there would have been danger of ruining the whole, since any such injury unlike the case of works in plaster or stucco would have been irreparable."

It is some such method as this which the preacher cruelly needs. If he be a puppet, it is enough that he re-

peat the sanctions of Organized Opinion decently and in order. If he be a man of intellectual self-respect, all his materials are raw materials. History, tradition, theology, and science in all its variety await his artist's touch, to issue in forms compelling and beautiful. Science already half-converted by its own advance into new fields; the pagan world, eager and inquisitive as never before; social conditions which often reveal a reverence for Christ and a hatred of His Organized Church, demand of the preachers of the age a statement of the essential elements of the Christian religion, which shall be final in its universality, adequate in its inner and outer structure, and effective because alive with the passion of the prophet.