

Preaching the Word

Churchman 003/5 1881

Canon C. Clayton

The *ordinance* of preaching appears to have existed from the earliest times. St Jude tells us that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, testified against the ungodly deeds of his own generation, and that he prophesied of the second coming of the Lord Jesus to judge mankind. St Peter, too, speaks of Noah as a “preacher of righteousness.” After the Flood, heads of families instructed their respective households; and in subsequent times we find a regular succession of prophets and sons of prophets. It is accordingly written (2 Chron. xvii.), to the praise of the godly king Jehoshaphat, that he sent forth Levites and priests to teach in the cities of Judah. “And they taught,” it is said, “in Judah, and had the book of the law of the Lord with them; and they went about throughout all the cities of Judah and taught the people.” And what was the blessing granted to this national establishment of religion? The blessing granted was national prosperity, in accordance with the Divine promise. “Them that honour me,” whether nations or individuals, “I will honour.” “And the fear of the Lord,” it is said, “fell upon all the kingdoms and the lands that were round about Judah, so that they made no war against Jehoshaphat.” It appears that at and after this date the people were accustomed to assemble in appointed places on the sabbaths and new moons and other solemnities, to worship God and receive instructions from his prophets. Hence we read that, when the Shunammite asked her husband to send to her one of the young men and one of the asses, that she might go and see Elisha, her husband replied, “Wherefore wilt thou go to him to-day? It is neither new moon nor sabbath.” Four hundred and sixty years afterwards we find Ezra reading and expounding the Scriptures, and that, too, in very much the same way as prevails amongst ourselves now.

And all the people (Neh. viii.) gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding. And he read therein from the morning until mid-day. And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood which, they had made for the purpose. And the Levites caused the people to understand the law. So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading.

There was first the public reading of God’s Word and then the preaching, as is our own custom.

I need not mention how the Lord sent Isaiah, Jeremiah and all the prophets with messages to his people, and how the Lord says continually that the messages delivered were really His, and not theirs. And therefore we read “The Lord spake to Manasseh”—“I have spoken unto you.” The same was the case in the times of our Lord. All Christ’s ministers are sent by the Lord Jesus. “Christ sent me,” says St. Paul. First of all He sent forth his twelve Apostles. He afterwards sent out other seventy also, that they should go and preach in the cities and towns of Judsea. These He commissioned to send others. And of all these His ministering servants He says, “As the Father sent Me, even so I send you. He that heareth you heareth Me.”

The present dispensation may well, therefore, be called a preaching dispensation. John the Baptist, our Lord’s forerunner, was a preacher. He preached in the wilderness of Judea, and vast congregations assembled to listen to his bold and faithful exhortations. When asked what

he was, he replied he was a voice—"the voice of one crying in the wilderness." Our Lord, too, was a preacher. In the synagogue He opened his great commission by reading the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach." He then told the assembly that on that day that Scripture was being fulfilled. And the hearers wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his lips. On another occasion, John had sent, when John had sent to ask whether He were the Messiah or not, He gave as one proof of his being the Messiah that He was "a preacher"—a preacher to "the poor." The Holy Ghost set his seal to this ordinance of preaching. On that memorable day of Pentecost, when Peter was the preacher, the Holy Ghost applied the Word with power to 3,000 souls. On other occasions, we read, the Holy Ghost fell on all them that heard the Word. There are many serious mistakes made at the present day upon this subject. Some will tell us that preaching is all right and proper to convert sinners, but that the Lord uses other means to build up believers. Others affirm that preaching is all right and proper for the Christian missionary taking his stand among idolaters, but that it is not wanted in a settled Christian community. Now there are various texts in Scripture which serve to show that preaching is God's great ordinance for the conversion of sinners, and that it is as much needed by professed Christians as it is for Jews and heathens. In Rom. x. preaching is spoken of as the great means of *conversion*. The Apostle's argument is this: "How shall men be saved, unless they call upon the Lord Jesus? but how shall they call upon a Saviour in whom they do not believe? and how can they believe in Him of whom they have never heard? and how can they hear unless one is sent to preach?" We see the order: first preaching, then hearing, then faith, then prayer to Christ, and then conversion and salvation. In I Tim. iv. we have preaching brought before us as the means of *edification* to professed believers. Timothy was placed over a Christian community at Ephesus. What was St. Paul's solemn advice to Timothy occupying that position? It was this: "I charge thee before God and the Lord Jesus Christ—preach, preach the Word."

The same was the view taken by our Reformers as to this ordinance. In the 19th Article they say: "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached." The 23rd Article speaks of the "office of public preaching." And, as so few of the clergy at the time of the Reformation could preach, a book of homilies was prepared by Cranmer and others, "to be read in churches by the ministers, diligently and distinctly, that they may be understood of the people." In the Ordination Service ministers are exhorted "to teach and to premonish, to feed and provide for the Lord's family;" and a prayer is then offered that "God's Word spoken by their mouths may have such success, that it may never be spoken in vain." "We cannot be saved," cried Latimer, in one of his sermons before King Edward VI., "without faith; and faith cometh by the hearing of the Word. I tell you preaching is the footstep of the ladder of Heaven, of our salvation. There must be preaching, if we look to be saved. This is the thing the devil wrestleth most against. It hath been his study to deny this office. Through 700 years he hath set up in this realm a state of unpreaching prelacy. He hath made unpreaching prelates. He hath stirred up by heaps to persecute this office; and thus preaching God's Word hath been trodden underfoot." "Fifteen masses in a church daily," writes Bishop Hooper, "were not too many for the priests of Baal; and should one sermon every day be too much for a godly population and evangelical preacher?" These quotations will explain the high views taken by our Reformers of this ordinance. This, happily, is a preaching age; and as our Saviour preached sometimes in boats, sometimes on the sides of mountains, sometimes on the sea-shore, sometimes in the Temple, sometimes in synagogues, and sometimes in private houses, so in the present day Christ's ministers are seen preaching, not only in cathedrals and churches and schoolrooms, but also in factories and workshops, in mines and quarries, in the pleasure-fair and on the race-course,

and in any place where they can find congregations to listen. And a blessed sight it is! We may well exclaim:—

There stands the messenger of truth! There stands
The legate of the skies! His theme divine!
His office sacred! His credentials clear!
By him the violated law speaks out
Its thunders; and by him, in strains as sweet.
As angels use, the Gospel whispers peace.

Cowper.

The Lord the Spirit bless the Word so spoken, that sinners may everywhere be converted, and Christ's elect people be everywhere edified and comforted! I say, "the *Word* spoken." We are to preach, not our own views and speculations, but "the Word."

Let us ask, therefore, what is to be the *subject* of our preaching? The subject of preaching is "the Word," "God's Word written." Now in that Word there is an infinite variety. There need, therefore, be no sameness in the subject-matter of our preaching. The histories, the promises, the threatenings, the precepts, the prophecies—all in their turn may be handled to the hearers' edification. The preacher, too, must have the fullest confidence in the truth of this Word. Like his Divine Master, he must, in every part of his teaching, only be satisfied when he can say, "Thus saith the Lord;" "Thus and thus is it written;" "Well saith the Holy Ghost." Like St Paul, he must be able to regard Scripture as the voice of the Holy Ghost Himself. Remarkable are his words: "The *Scripture* hath concluded all under sin." "The *Scripture*, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith." I need not say, however, that as ministers have so few opportunities—in many cases only one in each week—for addressing their people, it is most important that they should choose, as the subject for that precious half-hour, the weightiest topics; not some little points, but topics bearing on the vital subjects of sin and salvation, repentance and faith—repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ. The "Word" is full of the sin of man and of the redemption by Christ Jesus. The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. "Search the Scriptures," said Jesus, "for they are they which testify of Me." It is the Gospel of his dear Son that the Lord makes the "power of God" unto salvation. We must, therefore, continually explain how the Word shows man's utterly lost and ruined estate by reason of Adam's fall. We must also as clearly explain how Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross is the only mode whereby the sinner can be reconciled to God. For this cause it was St. Paul's determination to know nothing in preaching the Word save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. We must make all our sermons point more or less to Christ. We may as well speak of a village having no road to the metropolis, as of any point of Christian practice or doctrine that has no reference to the cross of Christ. One of our good bishops, Bishop Reynolds, wrote sensible advice to his clergy, when he said, "Preach Christ Jesus the Lord. Let His name and grace, His Spirit and love, triumph in the midst of all your sermons. Let your great end be to glorify Christ in the heart and to render Christ amiable and precious in the eyes of His people, to lead them to Him, as a sanctuary to protect them, as a propitiation to reconcile them, as a treasure to enrich them, as a physician to heal them, as wisdom to counsel them, as righteousness to justify them, as sanctification to renew them, and as redemption to save them. Let Christ be the diamond to shine in the bosom of all your sermons." "Let there be much of Christ in your ministry," was the Missionary Eliot's advice to a young minister. "Let your sermons be dyed in the blood of the Redeemer," was the strong language of another devoted servant of the Lord Jesus. "People wonder," said good Mr Romaine, "why it is we are always preaching Christ. But the truth is, we have nothing else to

preach.” And so said the great Apostle: “Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” On the *subject-matter* of our sermons, however, I must say no more. On this a volume might be written.

I would only, in concluding this brief sketch, add a few words as to the manner of our preaching. The late Canon Conway was an eminent example of a painstaking writer of sermons. We may say of him, as it was said of Solomon, that he was wise, and still gave good heed, and sought out suitable food for his flock. As a preacher, he sought to find out acceptable words; and that which was written was upright, even words of truth. His words were indeed as goads, as nails fastened by a wise master of assemblies, all given, in answer to prayer, by the one Shepherd. After his lamented death one of his lay friends wrote:—

His sermons were “apples of gold in pictures of silver.” The precious truths were so admirably grouped, the expository and the practical were so blended, that it was a picture both composed and framed in a symmetrical form, without appearance of art, and all tending to solemn edification. The tones of his voice and the expression of his face imparted the fervour and freshness of devotion to his words; whilst the easy flow of his well-arranged matter took off all feeling of stiffness from the reading of his sermons.

Another friend, a clergyman, shows us the method which Canon Conway adopted in his pulpit preparation. After saying, “From his clear teaching I first understood the way of salvation,” he gives an extract from a letter which Canon Conway had written to him on the occasion of his ordination. The extract was this:—

I am sure you will find that your success in influencing others will be measured by the power which the truth has over your own heart. I have often prayed that I might not deal in *unfelt truth*. Let me strongly urge you never to stint time for sermon writing, and not to allow even fluency of utterance to detain you from writing, as a rule, one sermon weekly for many years to come. My plan always is, after choosing a text, to ruminate on it and chew it into its own natural divisions. . . . Attend carefully to the words of Scripture—the originals. I was much struck with Mr. H. Venn’s advice to me when a very young man: “Get up your Bible.” Be a deep reader of the Word, and your people’s souls will not fail to fatten on the food you give them.

As Canon Conway well observes, those who desire successfully to preach the Word must be “deep readers of the Word.” In doing this we shall become wise householders, bringing out of our treasures not only things that are old but also things that are new. May God, the Lord of the harvest, raise up many such preachers at home and abroad for our Zion! May we never cease to teach and preach Jesus! “A philosopher,” says Mr Cecil, “may philosophize his hearers; but only the preaching of Christ will convert them. Men may preach Christ ignorantly, blunderingly, absurdly; yet God will give it efficacy, because He is determined to magnify his own ordinance.” “My Word,” God says, “shall not return unto Me void.” If, like Ezekiel, we first preach the Word and then pray for the Holy Spirit to breathe upon our slain, those slain will live, to the glory of God’s saving grace.

In this matter, however, we must never forget how responsible is the hearer. While the Lord Jesus, the great Head of the Church, says to ministers, “Take heed what ye preach! See that ye preach my Word, and my Word only,” He says, at the same time, to the hearers, “Take heed what ye hear, and take heed how ye hear. The Word that I have spoken to you, by the mouths of my ministers, the same shall judge you at the last day.” A solemn reflection it is

that, while our preaching is to some of our people a savour of life unto life, it is made to others, by their continued impenitence, a savour of death unto death. It was this thought that induced a former Vicar of Bocking, in Essex, to compose for himself the following epitaph, which was engraved after his decease upon his tombstone: —

In yonder sacred house I spent my breath:
Now silent, senseless, here I lie in death:
These lips again shall wake, and then declare
A dread *Amen* to truths I published there.

How soon our opportunity of preaching Christ will be over! Whenever, therefore, we ascend the pulpit we should seek, by the Holy Spirit's aid, to have our feelings in full accordance with what were good Richard Baxter's, when he said—

I'll preach as if I ne'er should preach again,
And as a dying man to dying men.

“O sirs!” says Baxter again, “they are no trifles or jesting matters that the Gospel speaks of. . . . And for myself, I am ashamed of my dull and careless heart, and of my slow and unprofitable course of life. The Lord knows that I am ashamed of every sermon that I preach. When I think what I am, and who sent me, and how much the salvation and damnation of men is concerned in it, I am ready to tremble lest God should judge me a slighter of his truth and the souls of men, and lest in my best sermon I should be guilty of their blood.” “Take heed unto thyself,” writes St Paul to Timothy, “and unto the doctrine. Continue in them; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee.”

C. CLAYTON