

## I To-day is Not Yesterday

Change indeed is painful: yet ever needful: and if  
Memory have its force and worth, so also has Hope.

CARLYLE, *Characterists*

### INTRODUCTION

I understand that the intention of the founder of this lectureship is that a man from the active ministry, not too inexperienced and not too antiquated, should be invited here to discuss with you the common problems of our work. I accepted this charge with diffidence, for I remembered that my audience would be composed mainly of professors and students. Somehow, I early lost my fear of the professors. Experience such as theirs makes men wonderfully kind and tolerant. And further, if the truth be told, I recalled the hoary gibe that within a year or two every self-respecting professor forgets all he ever knew about preaching!

But I am still possessed by my fear of the student. Remembering our own thoughts in college days, I quail before your omniscience and your beautiful assurance. I remember, penitently enough, how easy preaching seemed to us in those days, how sweeping was our criticism of what we called 'futilities', how generous and wholesale were our easy schemes for the world's reformation, and especially with what tolerant scorn we regarded a lectureship on this special subject. Perhaps I am about to be hoist with my own petard, a type of poetic justice. But if it makes any appeal to you, not for me but for my subject, I should like to say quite frankly that I am a humbler and sadder man than I was twenty years ago.

My hope is to treat our subject as practically and helpfully as possible, in line with the founder's wishes. You are here not so much to acquire learning, as to use that learning, when acquired, for preaching purposes. If any workman in the world has a direct aim, you have: and let no false views of learning obscure this in

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your own mind. You cannot put too high a value on study and the pursuit of knowledge, unless you regard them as ends in themselves. For us as ministers, ambassadors for God, everything must subserve the higher end of usefulness, in making us more accurate thinkers, trained men, preachers and teachers of influence and power. A theological college must never be allowed to ruin a good preacher, or water down his enthusiasm. Unless your aim here is intensely practical in the best sense, this institution defeats its own purpose. A college, first and last, is a factory for preachers.

With this practical aim in my mind, I took two precautions. In the first instance, I thought it insufficient merely to recall the difficulties and problems which faced me at the beginning of my own ministry: for as you will understand, a man is only too apt to forget what puzzled him twenty years ago. So I busied myself with some enquiries among young ministers and students, asking them plainly what type of question my lectures should attempt to answer, almost as if we were sitting together round the common-room fire. Here, for instance, are some of the topics suggested to me which I shall hope to consider in our later discussion. 'What should I aim at in writing and preaching sermons?' 'Tell us how we can best use the material and the gifts we have.' 'Sketch how we should handle the Bible for congregational preaching.' 'Should I try, straightway, to preach without a manuscript?' 'How can I best gain confidence in myself and my message?' This last question, by the way, only from the very humble man: some people never feel the difficulty. These are the types of question I shall try to answer in our discussions, for I shall be of little service here if I do not face the problems which press on you in your opening years.

I took a second precaution. I asked some layfolk, men and women, to give me their views of effective preaching. I believe that the pew, our chief sufferer, should have something to say on a matter like this. I asked these friends to tell me what type and style of address they liked best as hearers, the qualities they valued most in a sermon or a preacher, their views on the great mystery of pulpit impression and effectiveness, and even their ideas on such questions as the length and place of the sermon.

I know, of course, that the value of such opinions depends entirely on the judgment and experience of those who express them. Some people's views about sermons are as useful as their views about astronomy. But on that score at least, I satisfied myself.

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Generally, as a result of this, I was struck with their appreciation of the high level of modern pulpit work. Some said—here we all bow our heads—that there are fewer unique preachers in our generation, men of arresting personality, but that the general plane of congregational preaching is immeasurably higher than ever before. I believe this is true. Principal Fairbairn once informed me that what impressed him most deeply in his holiday haunts was the general excellence of the average sermon he heard in the smallest country parish. As he himself put it, ‘You will hear as fine a sermon in a Perthshire village as you will get any day in Edinburgh or London.’

Incidentally also, if I may give some general results here, I was astonished but pleased to find an almost unanimous preference for what we call expository preaching, where a text, passage, incident, chapter or book is chosen and its central truths explained, expounded and applied. Even in America, where purely topical preaching has largely captured the market, I find that this preference exists strongly amongst most thoughtful people. This, by the way, is a great comfort to the average preacher, for it shows a fine taste and appetite among our best hearers.

Further, from these answers I gained this, that the preaching quality my friends valued most was not dramatic power, nor great brilliance of thought or language, nor logical argument, nor passion, nor eloquence, but what, from lack of a better word, they called *interest*. (I try to define what interest is in lecture 2.) They desired that the preacher should engage and hold the mind with some truth or aspect of truth that has interest and bearing on human life, and should treat it in a living and gripping fashion. This also is a great comfort. Many of the other gifts are as much beyond our reach as the stars, and to strive after them is like baying at the moon. But with diligence and patience, most of us, I believe, can cultivate real human interest. If we only study ourselves and our fellow-men, the passions and longings that are our common heritage, our desires and limitations and failings, the needs and sorrows of the world, our links with the best and the worst, we shall not be far from the mark.

Such as they are, these are the precautions I took, lest I should be speaking only of casual aspects of our work and things of interest to myself alone, or lest, worst of all, I should be beating the air.

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### I. OUR NOBLEST SERVICE

Our general subject then is preaching, its problems and difficulties, preaching as the great function of our ministry. My first remark is ordinary enough, but yet goes down to the root of things—that if our work is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well. Ours is a great and magnificent service, and deserves the consecration of any gift we possess. To do our work half-heartedly is sheer ruin, for that in the end is tragedy to the man and the people alike. I cannot understand the minister who thinks his preaching may be done anyhow, or who slackly fails to perfect each gift of mind and expression for this high end. Surely there is no talent in us too fine to be used boldly for God's work. As George Herbert remarks, 'It is an ill mason that refuseth any stone.'

May I ask you, therefore, to resolve early to make your preaching the big business of your life. Not of course, to the exclusion or weakening of any other aspect of your work. The fact is, your other work, faithfully done, is the only way to enrich your preaching. It will give your word direction and point and vigour: it will give it blood. Apart from those who are constitutionally ineffective, most of the failures of the ministry are due to some sort of mental or spiritual slackness. I know of no sphere of labour where honesty, hard work, and honour with oneself tell more. Indeed, the astounding thing in the Church is the condoning patience of the people. If only a man gives his best, he will experience from the hands of any average congregation a loyalty that shames him in his own heart, and a love from simple souls that should make him better than his own best. Give your ministry, therefore, in college and afterwards, every gift of mind and soul, of thought and speech, of method and manner, which you can bring to the altar. I do not know a single man who has been faithful to himself and his calling who has been without his sufficient reward.

### 2. THE PLACE OF PREACHING

Some of you, at this point, may question the value and place commonly assigned to preaching. It is fashionable nowadays to assert that the sermon is too obtrusive and conspicuous in our Protestant worship. Everything else is preliminary, and the sermon is central. Other churches, as strong and historic, place the general rites and sacraments of Christianity in a finer prominence, and relegate preaching to its due significance or insignificance. My only answer

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is, not that we lessen the sacraments (for I believe we give them a worthy place in line with New Testament ideas), but that our ideal for the Church, first and last, is to have an informed people, intelligent in their own faith and instructed in truth. When you consider that preaching is the only opportunity many people have of learning Christian truth, a mere matter of an hour or two per week, you will agree that this is little enough, in all conscience, to train any congregation in the ways and mind of God.

As for the common contrast between preaching and worship—‘Give us more worship and less preaching,’ you know the cry—as for that, it is merely a parrot-cry. If worship is confessing sin, praising God, and glorifying Jesus as Lord—and what is it if it is not that?—how better can this be done than in a reverent address where the thoughts of the people are uplifted, where conscience is stirred, and the sublime goodness of God is plainly exposed? It may be the fault of my training and heritage, but to me preaching is the finest and fullest worship. Carlyle says that the essence of worship is ‘transcendent wonder’. If so, then preaching is transcendent worship. It lifts men to God’s feet.

I wish then to speak to you about preaching. Necessarily, throughout these lectures, I have to treat our subject as an art and craft, something which, like every art, has laws and rules to be known and practised. But while I am speaking about rules, I should like to state early that all the rules and methods ever laid down will not make a man a preacher, any more than a knowledge of the laws of poetry or painting will make a man a poet or an artist. But a poet without any art or rule is just so much wasted material; and a preacher without knowledge of his craft may be criminally ineffective.

In our profession, therefore, it is needful to know the laws of our art: if they do nothing more, they will at least save us from crude and expensive mistakes. Roger Ascham remarks in *The Scholemaster*: ‘It is a marvellous pain to find out a short way by long wandering.’ The one gain of learning the art of preaching is that it may save us from this ‘long wandering’! In the end, of course, our finest teacher will be practice. I venture to say that you will learn more in your first three months as a minister than I or any one else can ever tell you. And perhaps, if you are men of open mind, your failures will be your finest tutor.