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With respect to any final aim or end, the greater part of mankind live at haphazard. They have no certain harbour in view, nor direct their course by any fixed star. But to him that knoweth not the port to which he is bound, no wind can be favourable; neither can he who has not yet determined at what mark he is to shoot, direct his arrow aright.

COLERIDGE, *Aids to Reflection*

In my own day at College, we students had a withering scorn for what we called 'popular preaching'. We thought it good to be coldly intellectual—save the mark!—to reason rather than persuade, and to shun any exaggeration of statement or manner, as if it were an indecency. I remember even the cynical fashion in which we could raise our eyebrows when it was hinted that some man was a 'splasher'.

No doubt this was partly due to a shallow pride and a posturing type of mock intellectualism, summed up in that phrase of Coleridge, quoted in a previous lecture, that 'truth needs not the service of passion'. But as we saw, truth *does* need the service of passion! It generates its own glow. In practice it has driven some of its devotees to astonishing sacrifices. Even cold science—popularly supposed to be so remote and so detached that it has no enthusiasm—has left little mounds of bones at the poles of the world. Grim memorials to *the passion of truth!*

But perhaps our attitude was also due to a righteous and shocked recoil against that type of emotional and catchy preaching which reckons its success by the tears of its audience. This type of sentimental stuff turns many a man from the use of healthy emotion, in a saving fear lest he should exploit the superficial feelings of an audience.

But a sane view should convince us that there is no useful type

of preaching, for the ordinary congregation at least, which is not 'popular'. We desire surely to arrest and hold the average worshipper, and be understood by him with ease and assent. Our aim is to touch and move the will, mind, conscience and heart of all our people. We are preaching for divine results, for a verdict for God and the good life. Thus unless we are speaking on particular occasions or on special subjects, preaching must be popular in this fine sense. So long as we are speaking to the people and not to the gallery, for life and not for applause, we need not be ashamed of popular address and popular welcome. I cannot but think that there is often a slight touch of jaundice—or shall I say sour grapes—about our dis-esteem of popular speakers. We so easily affect to despise those qualities that are beyond our own reach, and we believe that it must be something cheap or meretricious that wins success. Remember, it is said of Jesus that *the common people heard Him gladly*.

In what respect can a legitimate study of manner and method, of speech and delivery, be unworthy of a serious-minded man in the Christian ministry? Since preaching is a form of speech, it should be subject to the recognised good laws of effective speaking. Since it is argument and pleading, it should be in conformity with the ordinary rules of thinking and reasoning. And since it is writing and composition, it should observe the rules of good style. Style and form of some sort, both in writing and delivery, are there, whether we will or no. Is there any reason why it should not be the best and most effective style within our range? George Herbert, in describing his ideal preacher, remarks, '*When he preacheth, he procures attention by all possible art.*' Why should he not? Art is good, if it is good art. I am quite sure that there is a call in our work for the development of legitimate graces and gifts, both of method and manner. The subject is well worth our best. To give less is a sneer.

In considering other types of oratory, we observe the toil and passion lavished on their profession by public speakers and actors. There is no study too arduous and no practice too strenuous, if only it leads to mastery: and in their view, perfection is its own sufficient reward. If we contrast this with much of our slovenly and indifferent preaching, it forms a reflection not only on us, but also on our view of the urgency of our message. Indeed, it is an oblique slur on the Gospel.

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In any case, it is surely an immense folly to concentrate a week's solid labour and energy on the preparation of a sermon, and give no time at all to its effective delivery. I agree with you that window-dressing by itself is a contemptible thing in the pulpit, manner versus matter. This type of work reminds me of Dean Swift's sketch of the man who wore elaborate lace ruffles to conceal the fact that he possessed no shirt! But on the other hand, as any good business man will assure you, if you have a fine stock of approved material, tasteful window-dressing will do it no harm. Generally, in considering preachers of similar training and ability, I find little difference in the material of their sermons: but there is a great gulf fixed between their methods of treatment and the play of their personality. How often have you heard of speakers with excellent matter, whose effectiveness has been lessened, if not spoiled, by an irritating lack of any art of presentation, or by offensive mannerisms, or by stilted and gawky ways?

To-day, I wish to speak to you about the duty of cultivating your personal gifts, as well as your sermons.

THE DAY OF UNBURDENING

We have come then to the day on which you are ready to deliver the message that you have so studiously considered.

You will not go far before you discover that the first thing that really matters in any service is *atmosphere*. Unfortunately, we ministers have largely to create our own atmosphere. In this we contrast strongly with some types of speakers. The politician usually has an audience that is electric—dry wood ready for the spark. Many of his hearers are as keen, for or against, as the speaker himself. I have been present at political gatherings where the thinnest witticism or the most limping joke was greeted with gargantuan laughter, and a meagre flashy point applauded to the echo. Why? The reason is obvious. The audience is as keen and as thrilled as the speaker himself.

Or take the actor on the stage. People come to the theatre, unless they are blasé, with a sharp expectancy. They bring their atmosphere with them, as one might carry a battery. They are ready to catch up, in a flash, subtle points and hidden meanings. The good actor has at his command an audience self-thrilled and auto-suggested.

THE MYSTERY OF PREACHING

Except on special occasions the minister has no such leverage for himself and his message. Sometimes a prominent evangelist or a notable preacher—in an audience more or less prepared or expectant—may count on this gracious atmosphere. That, doubtless, accounts for some part of his impression. But in stated preaching from Sunday to Sunday, you and I cannot reckon on any such helpful forerunner for our work. The people most likely have heard us before. Perhaps they know our ways of thinking and our ordinary methods of treatment. In any case, they are not there expecting great things. The general subject is presumed to be commonly known. Most of all, a large proportion of our people are at church from custom, and without previous preparation behind the ‘shut door’. Even when it is not definitely against us, by indifference or a critical spirit, we have to create our own atmosphere, through our use of the Spirit of God in and through our own personality.

I. ATMOSPHERE

In a later lecture I hope to speak to you on the conduct of Public Worship; but meanwhile I refer to this subject to show that we can use the whole service, reverently, for atmosphere—to create a receptive and expectant spirit among the people, so that when we come to our preaching, our sermon may be the natural climax of worship.

I should like to add, on the other hand, that you will be settled in a strange type of church, if you have not some few people who are surrounding you all the time with prayer. You can feel their prayers, as you might smell incense. This is one of the comforts no other type of speaker inherits. In your calling you are quite unique in this. I had an old elder in Forres who once gravely informed me that he had never heard a poor sermon in his life. I know this was not true—I was his minister! But it was true for him in this sense, that he came praying and expecting that God would have something for him, even amid a minister’s weakness and folly—an expectation that is never belied. You can count on this then, that amid many disabilities of triteness and lack of keenness, you will have devout souls who are praying you through to victory. Next to God Himself, the comfort of His people is our greatest asset.

The question of atmosphere is of such importance to the

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preacher—it means all the difference between receptiveness and dullness—that I shall venture to suggest one or two things for your consideration.

(a) Train your people by special teaching in quiet and worshipful ways. Preach an occasional sermon on the theory and purposes of worship. I have found it very helpful, for instance, to speak to the children on the items or parts of the Christian service. (One gain of a children's sermon is that you get home some shrewd hints for the older folk!) I took such topics as these—On the way to church: the first silent prayer: the meaning of the opening voluntary: why do we sing psalms and hymns?: the reading of the word: what is Common Prayer?: the public offering: the sermon: the benediction. You may easily find scope among these things for some useful teaching about worshipful and quiet ways.

(b) Instead of scolding people for restlessness or 'coughing'—remember, you *always* lose by displaying irritation!—ask your people occasionally to join with you for a few moments in silent prayer. Prayer in any case is the secret of atmosphere. I know nothing, psychologically and spiritually, that produces a reverent hush like silent prayer. Name some subject round which their prayers should gather—otherwise, many worshippers will only be conscious of an uncomfortable blank! This is not a device or an artifice. In any case, we do not have sufficient congregational opportunities for silent prayer on some timely need.

(c) Vary your order. An order is good, but with us it is not a pole to which we are tied. I remember being much impressed by one minister who began his service by saying, 'Let us worship God by hearing His own Word read.' I don't for one moment recommend such a rupture of the usual and approved order. But I mention it to show possibilities.

Do these seem *devices*? I do not mean them to be such. In any case, the surest secret for atmosphere is to have a praying-folk who come with expectation. On our part, it is our duty not to disappoint them.

2. THE NEED OF CONFIDENCE

That leads me to say that you should be strong in all decent confidence. You have many things behind you, precious things. You have your preparation, if it has been honest: your message: your own high purpose: your Christian conviction: your people:

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and your God. I said decent confidence. Any confidence that is indecent is—indecent! Nothing makes the average-minded man antipathetic to a preacher like self-assurance.

I believe, however, that a sensible young man suffers more from a prostrating and paralysing fear, arising from a healthy distrust of himself. That often accounts for what is awkward and gauche, and also for what is stilted and unnatural in manner and voice. As young preachers, you have a mingled fear of your audience and yourselves. If you are right-minded, you feel the weight and responsibility of the occasion. Well you may! Yet on the other hand, you have reason for good quiet assurance. Say to yourself something like this, 'I am not here because of myself, or my own cleverness. I believe I have something to say to my people that they ought to know, something that has done good to my own soul, something that the Spirit of God has whispered to me and laid on my heart. And quietly and yet as a herald of God's goodness, I am going now to declare it.' The success of your mission will lie in an assurance of your commission.

3. WHAT IS EARNESTNESS?

This should lead us to the one commanding note in all preaching, *Earnestness*. Earnestness or intensity is not something you put on, as if it were a recognised manner or style of address. There is no good telling a young preacher to be earnest or warm, as if that were a *fashion of speech* he should cultivate. This would only lead to a kind of pietistic insincerity. Earnestness, no matter what form it may take, is the result of one thing and one thing only, the pressure of the message on our own heart, our feeling of urgency, the urgency that marked the disciples. Its best expression is found in the saying attributed to Jesus, 'He who is near Me is near fire.' An earnest spirit is just the glow of an inner flame, kindled and fanned by the special needs of the occasion. For your own soul's sake, beware of affected warmth. Passion is something you feel—it is nothing if it is not *suffering*! That is why I have not much to say to you in these lectures about oratory. I am afraid of oratory in the pulpit, unless it be the natural oratory of a soul on fire. Don't try to be an orator, if you aren't one already! You might as well try to be a poet, without the soul of a poet. Oratory is so easily artificial, a hollow drum, a big manner, with studied effects and sounding declamation. Besides, in any case, I question if

oratory of the rounded form is as effective with our generation as it seemed to be with past ages. We are more direct and more simple in these things than our simple forefathers. I believe that an elevated and lively conversational manner is as effective as any style can be. People only smile nowadays at turgid rhetoric; they can't help calling it bombast! Earnestness is a different thing. It may be rhetorical—if rhetoric is natural to the man. But in its essence it is enthusiasm declaring itself, and the deepest note is *conviction*.

We feel that our message is a vital matter for people to know, and that without it, they are in the truest sense lost. Woe to me unless I preach this gospel! This feeling, that he is a bearer of good tidings from God's heart to man's heart, will give any man all the moral passion he needs. It will lead him, for his big purpose, to use himself and his gifts wisely, trained and consecrated, according to their own bent and bias. He may be a candle, a jet of gas, or an arc lamp: but at least he will be lit. With his own endowments—and the greatest sin is to be untrue to them, or to let them lie fallow, or to envy and imitate another man's gifts—with his own peculiar endowments, he will be at his own best high tension, what the Americans aptly call a live wire, a conductor of power. Different men do it in different ways, some by their quietness and some by their vehemence, some by their moments of flash and some by their sustained logic, some by their prose and some by their poetry. That is not the point. Do it in your own way, true to what is characteristic and natural in you. 'Neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God of that which doth cost me nothing.'

4. EARNESTNESS AND EMOTION

This suggests a natural corollary. What room should emotion have in our preaching? If we mean by emotion sloppy sentiment, induced pathos, or some tragic manner which we deem appropriate to the occasion—as if we were to scrawl opposite a passage in our sermon, 'Here weep!'—I should answer 'none'. But in the best sense, emotion is a bigger and purer thing than we commonly mean by our use of the term. It is simply the natural reaction of our soul to some big idea or vision: it is our response to truth. There is as fine an emotion of the mind as of the heart—sometimes more moving and generally more lasting.