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The Priority of Preaching¹

JAMES ATKINSON

Introduction

I shall approach my subject simply and historically: first by indicating what preaching meant to the men of God in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament culminating in Christ; secondly, by indicating what it meant to our great fathers and doctors whom God sent throughout the centuries to keep the church right, culminating with the great Reformation period. Finally, I shall draw some conclusions for what it might mean today.

A Preaching Religion

Christianity was born a preaching religion. By its message it stands or falls, and its message is from God. It is revealing to look at the part that preaching played in the Old Testament and I want to take two examples from the early stages of prophecy to its fulfilment.

Samuel was a young man given by God for the ministry in God's church. He came to a church that was corrupt and broken; a church in the hands of the aged Eli who was utterly incompetent. Samuel could not sleep at night and the old man Eli diagnosed the young man's difficulty; nowadays we would suggest a sleeping tablet and help the student to sleep. I used to say to my students when they could not sleep at night or find rest in church:

Hold on to those moments: they are precious moments of doubt and despair when God is active. God is active when He disturbs the human being from what he is to make him what He wants him to be.

This was the way with young Samuel. The old man Eli discerned the great spiritual secret. He said, 'I never called you.' He had realized that Another was disturbing him and said, 'Samuel, if this occurs again in your life say these words, "Speak lord, thy servant heareth."'

There indeed is the whole secret, not only of spiritual life but of effective preaching. We know that Samuel listened, and we know what God said to him and how dreadfully disturbing it was. The outcome is too well known to be detailed here. Samuel as a grown man was known from Dan to Beer Sheba. He was a man that let not one word of the Lord fall to the ground. The word of the Lord was very precious in those days and Samuel was sought as the one person to speak to the nation the Word from God. After his death, when the

nation was collapsing in war, King Saul could not find a parson to give them a word from God; he had to bring old Samuel out of the grave. What a testimony! 'Is there any word from the Lord?'—that is the beginning of prophecy. Samuel had waited on God, had listened to God and had given God's word to the people of God.

My second Old Testament example of preaching is from the lips of the great Jeremiah, the man of the Old Testament more like Christ than any other.

Jeremiah's ministry was unwanted. He was perfectly aware of the normal channels of grace as the priest, the wise man, and the prophet. God said to Jeremiah 'I ordained thee a prophet', and he was clearly told what it would cost him to speak to the nation the words of God. Jeremiah called his contemporary prophets windbags, (5:13), not an easy thing for a parson to say but secretly I have called them far worse. 'Windbags', he says, 'you prophesy falsely.' God set the very marrow of his bones on fire, he burned from within. To this gentlest of people, to this mildest of men, to this kindest of men, he said 'He that has a dream let him tell a dream but he that has my word let him speak. What is the chaff to the wheat?' (23:28). Again, when the nation was collapsing and the enemy at the gate, and despite all the great concourse of priests and prophets who had gone along with the king, not one had ever given the word of the Lord, and at the last moment Jeremiah was pulled from prison and the king looked at him and said, 'Is there any word from the Lord?' Yes, and what a bitter one it was. Those two instances I choose for you to understand what the word of the Lord, what the preaching of God's word meant, to the people in the Old Testament. But from there I want to move to the New Testament.

In the New Testament we find a similar picture. We see the whole result of the record of preaching. The gospels and the epistles are kerygmatic documents. We could actually say that the New Testament is no more than the result of preaching. In the gospels we read how Christ preached the kingdom and how in the cross and in the resurrection God sealed this preaching as the last eschatological confirmation. This is what the apostles preached. This is what they gave to the world and proclaimed, commissioned as they were by the risen Lord, and throughout the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles the word of the Lord is the preached word. The reason it was always effective lay not in any oratorical skill or ability of the apostles, though St. Paul himself was a genius in languages and in thought, but lay very much more simply on what God had done in Christ, and *that* was the word of the Lord. In the apostolic message we remember all the time that we are thinking of its context, what it contained, the voice of the living Lord is being heard.

The Early Fathers

We move now from the Old Testament and the New into tradition. We find the same kerygmatic zeal is traceable in the Apostolic Fathers standing as lights of the world in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. It is discernible in those passionate letters of Ignatius as he faced martyrdom. Abrupt, incoherent, none of the great Greek oratorical skills, but simply burning with a passionate joy, an overwhelming love of Christ and a passionate faith. Or you could come through the Apologists, the elegant Augustine warning the intellectual world with his masterly grasp of what God did for us men and for our salvation, or Irenaeus with his affirmation of the apostolic gospel and his understanding of scriptural revelation; or the great Tertullian, the fiery lawyer converted in middle age, wanting to know what Athens had to do with Jerusalem. What he had to offer was not men's learning or their ability but very simply the word of God and the message of God to the nations. We could run through Clement, Origen and Cyprian. We could look at Athanasius who drew the line that no man could cross and be saved. We could look at all our great Cappadocian fathers, look at the great John Chrysostom in Constantinople who would sit for sometimes two or three hours on his throne in his sermons preaching to the people who would not let him stop. They called him 'Chrysostom with the golden mouth'—what we would call the silver tongue. The Empress herself came; she could not resist this man although eventually he was exiled, punished and cruelly treated. They sat for hours and would not let him cease, because they knew that he was from God. He had the words from God without which all was lost and the whole church would fail.

This is a dimension we see of our great fathers. In the west we see it in Ambrose, the great orator, who warmed the heart of the brilliant intellectual Augustine and converted him. As a result Augustine's theology has converted every reformer and every great evangelist down to Billy Graham.

The Reformation

We could trace this line down through the great fathers and doctors, and not least in John Wycliffe who sent his students down from Oxford with very simple instructions. They had only to preach the gospel of Christ based on a Biblical foundation. All these men were preachers, all were called of God and all preached Christ and Christ only. This is our tradition and we are what we are because of what has happened in the past. We must always maintain this historical understanding of our position before we can ever move forward. I therefore turn now to the great reformers, and Martin Luther in particular.

Luther's pilgrimage is well known. Luther was a brilliant intellectual. He was born in 1483 and in due course went to university where he had a terrible experience of death. He realized that if he could not

face death he did not know how to live: a very profound thought for a young man. In order to find God he went into a monastery and there he learned the three great ways of finding God: by intellect, by prayer and by good works: and Luther found an extraordinary mystery. He found that he could never arrive at God by his intellect. Despite all the good works that he had done, no matter how endlessly, he was still an unprofitable servant. He found that despite all ladders of prayer he could never attain God and he asked his father confessors how was it that he, a monk who devoted all his time to the study of God, could never find God. What did he lack? What was missing? It was because he wrestled and sweated with this great difficulty that he broke through, as he said, 'into the gates of paradise'. He realized that it was not a matter of Luther and all his great works doing all he could to find God, the reverse was true. God had come all the way in Christ. Luther had nothing and was nothing and could do nothing to break this alienation both of the spirit and of the mind. This was a most important truth that came out in the wonderful phrase 'justification by faith'. But that was really an unhappy formula, because it is used today as a formula, as a theological position; but Luther and Cranmer always argued that it is justification in Christ by the grace of God: not justification by faith. Luther broke through to the gates of paradise, and from then on searched the scriptures and heard the word of God. His superiors realized that God had dealt with him and they commanded that he should become a professor and teach theology. But it is important to appreciate that when he heard the word of God it was not merely the letter and the text of scripture that he heard. He had felt the bite of reality. He used to say to his students 'Don't read the scriptures with your eyes; read them with your ears.' That was a complete change of the centre of gravity, it was a Copernican revolution. It is not studying the text, it is listening to God speaking in the text. Luther called it the *viva vox*. He called God the Living Word and the word that he could hear was as near and as real as his own hands, and his own breathing and his own friends. It is important to realize that when we read the Bible we are not reading just a book, we are being handled by God. This is the dimension into which we must bring all scholarship, all this brilliant textual and critical work, into what I call the evangelical experience. It is not easy to achieve. When Luther faced the reality at Worms in 1521 after the Emperor and all the emissaries from the Pope had sat down he said, 'it is on this ground I stand, I can do no other, and unless I am convinced by evident reason and the word of God, I cannot change. What else do you expect of me? Can I betray God?' It was a question of authority, not the authority of the Emperor, great as was his respect for him. Nor was it the authority of the pope and the church. It was the authority of the living God *handling him there and then*. This was the

crisis, the ultimate reality where the truth lies, and none could gainsay Luther his position. The authority had to lie in that pure word of God and the word preached, that living voice.

Luther was extremely sensitive to the danger of preaching men's ideas. He once said in a sermon:

A minister of Christ is a steward of the mysteries of God, he should so regard himself and insist that others so regard him as one who ministers to the household of God *nothing but Christ and the things of Christ*. In other words he should preach the true Gospel, that Christ alone is our life, our way, our wisdom, power, glory, salvation, and that all that we can accomplish of ourselves is but death, error, foolishness, weakness, shame, and condemnation. Whosoever preaches otherwise should be regarded by none as the servant of Christ or as a steward of the divine treasure. He should be avoided as a messenger of the devil.

Calvin, too, emphasized that a minister under the word of God, no matter how insignificant he be, was a messenger from God. God deigns to come down among us through his preached word. Calvin said:

'God's word was uttered by men like ourselves, by common men who may even be much inferior to us in dignity and social importance but when some insignificant little man, 'is raised up out of the dust to speak God's word he is God's minister'.

Calvin speaks here of preaching scripture in incarnational terms. Men could not bear the real presence of God and God in his mercy deigns to descend in words that they can understand. This is an important theological point to which I will refer at a later stage.

Luther expressed the same thoughts in different terms. He distinguished between the Bible as the word of God written and the presence of God in the word preached. Luther says he who merely studies the commandments of God, the *mandata Dei* is not greatly moved but he who listens to God, the commanding one, *Deum mandentem* is not reading the word, but hearing God speaking directly to him, as directly as He spoke to the boy Samuel. Anyone hearing God like that could not fail to be terrified by a majesty so great. That is the vital distinction between preaching man and preaching scripture. The debate between Erasmus and Luther is the same as the present debate between the liberalization of modern theology and the holding to the traditional Gospel. 'My dear Erasmus', said Luther, summarizing his argument, 'the difference between you and me is you sit above scripture and judge it and I sit under it and am judged by it.' Elsewhere he said 'if you take Christ out of scripture, what else will you find in it?' The continuing error of Erasmus and of many biblical scholars since is that they would look

upon scripture as the decrees of men rather than as the word of God. The impoverishment and the uncertainty within the Anglican church at the moment is a direct outcome of its preoccupation with sociological and political issues. It has virtually discarded its theology and is engrossed with social problems posed by men not by God. God did not give us this social programme, but what is worse, it handles them only in terms of an enlightened human conscience, no more than what every normal decent citizen would say. Last Easter morning I rose at the time when the disciples rose on Easter day when it was just getting light. I put on the radio for a time signal and to my horror the first item on the news was a message from the Bishop of Durham who made an attack on the Government's social security plan. I thought we had reached rock bottom when a most senior Bishop should talk about social security on the glory of Easter Day. What Christian thinking really is (and I speak as a fellow professor) is thinking rationally in the wake of the act and word of the living God. That is real theology. We are speaking of God's verbal intercourse with man and Luther expressed it in that way in his Genesis commentary. It is very significant that Luther found his message of salvation in Genesis and not only in the New Testament. In his Genesis commentary he says these lovely words:

Whenever and to whom God speaks, whether in wrath or in grace, that man is of a certainty immortal . . . we are such creatures that God wants to speak with us eternally and immortally.

If God has once addressed the human soul that soul already dwells in eternity. That is what Luther said to his students.

This brings me to the vital element to a preacher of a living congregation. Without that there can be no communication. In the latter part of my life I was always a visiting preacher, generally brought for special occasions. I used to know at once what the vicar was like as soon as I faced the congregation. Would they *expect* a word from me, or just put up with it? Once a congregation has really known the truth, it expects much of its preachers. John Milton said that if the English had taken John Wycliffe seriously we would never have heard of Luther or Calvin. But the State defeated Wycliffe, the University betrayed him, and he had to retire to Lutterworth where he worked furiously until he died in writing and preaching. It was the re-discovery of the word of God, inaugurated by Wycliffe, effected by Luther and Tyndale, a disciple of Luther, who translated Luther's commentaries as well as Luther's Bible. It was the re-discovery of the God of the Bible in the sixteenth century which involved the necessity of preaching. Men at last saw that Christ was a tireless preacher and that they had been commissioned by Him to preach the Gospel to the

uttermost parts of the earth. The Reformers saw that the primary function of the apostles was preaching and it was this function which had to be restored if the church of their day was to be renewed. A church that has ceased to preach the word and preaches human ideas is no church. The visible church we know from our own Articles is the congregation of faithful men where the pure word of God is preached and where the Sacrament is duly ministered. When the great John Jewel took his Bachelor of Divinity and preached in St. Mary's Oxford in 1550 or perhaps 1551 he took as his text 'if any man speak let him speak as oracles of God'. In that powerful sermon he said:

That we behold that light, that we have escaped out of bondage, we are accounted and indeed are the sons of God, all this we owe to the preaching of the word of God, . . . The victory was kept by the same means as it was obtained . . . Let us persevere with our task and leave the success to the Lord, for as it is our duty to instruct the people with words, so it belongs to God to join his word with faith and force. . . . Therefore the truth must be spoken, not lies; the scriptures, not fables; the precepts of the most high God, not the dreams of men; for religion must be ordered not by our judgment but by the word of God.

Cranmer with the help of others wrote the *Homilies* quite simply because there was a dearth of preachers. These men could take this thinking and give it to the congregation. When Elizabeth ordered her Archbishop Grindal to subdue his preachers he took a remarkable stand. 'We have homilies, madam, because we have no preachers', and as far as he was concerned, nothing could take the place of a godly preacher. He said to her, 'a godly preacher applying his speech according to the diversity of times, places and hearers can move his congregation in love in the way a homily could not.' 'Every flock', he said to her, 'must have a preaching pastor.' He was sequestered and lost his post for sticking to that position. In the first English Ordinal of 1550 the ordinand received as his instrument, the signs of his ministry, the Chalice, the Paten and the Bible. In 1552 the Ordinal was changed, the ordinand's sole instrument being the Bible. The Sacraments, quoting Augustine and Luther, became visible words, *verba visibilia*, to be included within the ministry of the word. That is all a Sacrament is. It is an expression of the word of God in water or in bread and wine. The great weakness of the church is that she slips back to a Sacramental position because people *like* to see lights, colours, candles, music and to take part. The preacher then is reduced to standing on the altar steps and saying two or three words while the children run round. We cannot prosper with this kind of theology and we must say so and act so. As it says in the Ordinal, the bishop speaking to the presbyter, 'Take thou authority to preach the word of God and to administer the Holy Sacrament.' The emphasis

on the priority of preaching is no different for a bishop. He is to be ready with all faithful diligence to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's word and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to do the same. For him the Bible is the instrument of his ministry. He has to read it, study it, preach it. His second rôle is to be a faithful pastor of God's people. Cranmer clearly saw that his task was the uprooting of sacerdotalism in any and every shape and form and the establishment of a ministry whose chief office was the setting forth of God's word truly to the people in preaching, and in the administration of the Sacraments and in pastoral work. Cranmer was perfectly clear on this. He associated the ministry of the word with a congregation faithfully gathered together—a penitent and believing congregation waiting on the word from its minister.

In his catechism Thomas Becon in stronger language describes it as the first and principal point of a Bishop's and a spiritual minister's office to teach and preach the word of God. He denounces the non-preaching parson as 'a Nicholas Bishop'. This referred to the little mock bishop that would be dressed up on St. Nicholas' Day. Thomas Becon, again:

There can not be a greater jewel in a Christian commonwealth than an earnest and constant preacher of God's word. Nor can there be a greater plague among any people than when they have reigning over them blind guides, dumb dogs, wicked wolves, hypocritical hirelings, papish prophets, which feed them not with the pure wheat of God's word but with the worm-wood of men's trifling traditions.

That is when men used language. If only we could recover that! Pilkington, the great Bishop, in his commentary on Haggai 1:13, the passage which described the Lord's messenger as an angel because it was God's messenger to the people, drew attention:

to the worthiness, authority and high title of the preacher Haggai. He was called an angel and messenger of the Lord, an ambassador. These names are given to preachers in scripture to set forth the highness of their vocation and the authority to which God had called them. They bring heavenly comfort from God. It is necessary for us to hear the trumpet of his word sounding continually in our ears. It is that that maketh new men. We may also learn what a pleasure it is to have God's word amongst us, seeing it is the ordinary way that he hath ordained to bring us unto him by, and what a grief it is to want the continual preaching of the same. For men fall quickly into heresies when they trust to their own wits and learning, forsaking or not submitting their wits unto God's wisdom contained in his infallible word and truth.

Churchman

Archbishop Sandys defined the preacher's duty, 'he may preach no other than he hath commission to speak, than is commanded him of God.' I often think of the occasion when George Foxe went to Lichfield Cathedral. He heard the sermon and waited outside for the preacher, and said to him, 'Did God send you to say what you said this morning?' The Canon, being an honest man, said, 'Well, I don't think I could claim that.' Foxe replied, 'For God's sake, why did you say it. Why?'

This is what Archbishop Sandys was saying:

What we are commanded of God we must say. We may not add to the written word neither take from it. The disciples must only Break those loaves unto the people which they have received at Christ's hands. It is the message not the messenger. Respect not persons, but reverence the matter. When thou hearest the minister preaching the truth, thou hearest not him but the Son of God, the teacher of all truth, Christ Jesus.

We could quote John Jewel again:

Preaching is the ordinary place where men's hearts are moved and God's secrets be revealed. Remember we are the sons of the prophets . . . It is not our doctrine that we bring you this day. We wrote it not. We found it not out. We are not the inventors of it. We bring you nothing but what the old father of the church, what the apostles, what Christ our Saviour himself, has brought before us.

Perhaps the greatest preacher that God ever gave to England, Hugh Latimer, lamented:

how few preachers there are in the land, too few, too few. The more is the pity and never so few as now.

He deplored the secularized non-preaching Bishops lording it over everyone. He said 'the apostles preached and lorded not, but now the Bishops lord and preach not.' He knew that preaching was not just an extra or an option, but a divinely appointed necessity for the church. 'Preaching,' he said 'was God's instrument of salvation but it requires God to give it the increase.'

Conclusions for the Preacher of Today

Our great forefathers in God said these things on preaching and in conclusion therefore I say that the Old Testament prophets, the apostles, the fathers, the doctors, the Reformers, above all Christ himself, were given us by God as the preachers of his word. Let ministers continuously make this their priority and let the laymen support such ministers. They will never know the cost such ministers

pay in high places and at conferences among Theologians. Love them, care for them, preserve them. Let them fulfil their calling both in the pulpit Sunday by Sunday and at all their classes, groups and meetings throughout the week and in their continuing pastoral care of the congregation. A listener once said of Luther's preaching 'When Luther had preached and there was silence he felt as if Christ himself had walked down the aisle.' This is the *real* presence: let sacerdotalists say what they like. The Church of England is under great threat less from without, more from within. There are two ways in which some seek to make Christianity more effective in the contemporary scene. The first threat is the liberalization of the Christian message which seeks to interpret it in modern scientific and secular categories. It is right when modern, scientifically educated persons raise these questions, perfectly right. I taught my students the capacity to raise the right questions. Most people raise the wrong ones. If we wrestle with the question, God will give the answer. The error lies in those who seek to give answers to those questions in the terms and categories which the people raise. There is no answering the questions if they lie outside the Biblical categories. We are left with human speculation and uncertainty. The gospel is not explained: it is explained away. When we lose our doctrine we lose our ethics. That is what happens in the Church of England. She cannot pronounce on simple problems like homosexuality and different areas because she really has no clear remembrance of what the doctrine is. The second great threat is the consuming desire to be relevant. The desire to be relevant guides one to sacrifice the divine message to the human concern: to social and political involvement; not that that itself is wrong. We should be concerned, but not at the cost of neglecting the divine. That way limits the Christian message to what the common man can grasp, or even worse, to what he wants. The Reformers, Calvin, John Chrysostom and the early fathers too, used a very different word in this context, the word 'accommodation' as God 'accommodated' his activity towards men, not by coming himself, (because man could not face the presence of God), but coming himself in Christ who is as much of God as human kind will ever understand, will ever extend to, ever want, and ever can have. That is what we mean by Incarnation. That is what we mean by the divinity of Christ. That is what we mean by the virgin birth. The condescension of God accommodates us in Christ. The present way he comes is through his holy Spirit, in the hearts and minds of penitent and faithful men and women, through the words of the preacher. It is a kind of parallel to the incarnation. I remember preaching in Sheffield, the church was almost empty and as soon as I began to preach there was a tremendous noise in the choir. I looked around and the choir boys were fighting. I said 'I came here to bring a word from God and no man will stop me and no choir either: if the choir

does not want to hear, please leave the building.' I could hear a hair fall. The vicar thought I must have done something to have so terrified them, but they had never seen a parson who had spent the week under God preparing what he had to say. I had not come to give them ten minutes' entertainment, but some very precious words from God. The vicar always spoke of the tremendous change in his congregation. Thus our relevance lies not in accommodating the truth to what man will want or understand or can grasp. The truth lies in recalling God's accommodation to us in life. What the preaching is attempting to do is to give God's answers to the questions that people raise, but the answers must not be those of the latest school of theology or the most sharp-witted professor of theology. He is as much under the word of God as we are and that is the article by which he stands or falls. He will only be remembered by the faithful in so much as he gave them of Christ. We cannot give them man's answer, but only God's answer. Preaching is analogous to the incarnation. As I stand to preach on the divine square yard under a terrifying responsibility, the word which became flesh and dwelt among us becomes spoken and is heard by us. As many as receive him, to them gives He power to become the Sons of God.

God necessarily communicates truth to us in a manner which is less than perfect. Ezekiel realized that it was in the *likeness* of the son of man. Even the great St. Paul said he just sees a poor reflection. The Biblical message comes to us in human language and in the thought forms of particular times, not because the writers recorded it wrongly or could not put it in any other way but because that was the only way God's word could come to such as us. There was no other way and in his condescension God chooses to submit his true self to being reduced to a humanly comprehensible level rather than to preserve it pure in heaven. That is the price that God paid and that is what all preachers and hearers must remember. It is a searching challenge to the preacher to believe that God speaks through his preaching and his preaching alone. Luther thought it was Christ's commission to him to go on preaching. Do not worry about who will listen. The world will be against you. Do not let that trouble you. There will be those who will listen to you and follow. You do not know them now but God knows them already. You preach, let me manage.

JAMES ATKINSON is the retired Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield, presently Director of the Centre for Reformation Studies.

NOTES

- 1 An address delivered at Church Society's Spring Conference, 1988, under the theme 'The Church under the Word of God'. The reader is requested to excuse the infelicities of literary expression which arise from the fact that the text is derived from a tape recording.