

## THE CALL OF THE NEW AGE TO THE PREACHER.

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IT is a truism that we who have been spared to see the end of the Great War are living in a new age. The face of the world has been changed in manifold ways. We are only too conscious that things are not what they were. The changes may be in our opinion for the better or for the worse ; but whatever we may think about them we cannot doubt their existence, and as modern men we have to reckon with them.

The preacher in his pulpit lives in the new age just as much as his lay brother in the pew, and if he is to be in any degree worthy of his high vocation to be a prophet of God, his preaching must be fitted to the new age in which he lives. It was a saying of a great Bishop of the last century that the preacher ought to burn all his old sermons every ten years. If that advice was sound before the war, there is still more to be said for it now. But the burning of old sermons means the construction of new ones, and it will not be lost labour if we try to think out what should be the marks of our preaching in these post-war days.

Let me begin with a preliminary word about the *limitations which I must impose upon myself* in this paper.

1. The work of the preacher cannot be separated in reality from the work of the pastor. No man can become an effective prophet of God to his people unless at the same time he is qualifying himself to be their priest by gaining an ever-increasing insight into and sympathy with their outward circumstances and the thoughts and motives which inspire their conduct. Some of the preparations for the sermon must be made in the homes of the people. But I must not stray into a discussion of the pastoral office.

2. Again, the preacher's words cannot be separated from the preacher's personal life, and the net effect of his sermon depends to a large extent upon the unconscious influence which his life is exercising. It has been said in a most important book, to which I shall refer more than once, Dr. Cairns' *Army and Religion* (p. 403) : " The life of the churches ought to be by far the greatest evangelizing force in the country. We shall never really meet the necessities of

the case until the churches are roused up to realize this." If this is true of the life of the churches, it is even more true of the life of the clergy, who stand before the world as pre-eminently the professors of Christianity. The war has hammered just one more nail into the coffin of the respect which used to be granted to a clergyman, at any rate in the South of England, purely in virtue of his official position. In the new age it is even more true than in the ten years before the war, that "what you are speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say." A man's words are valued according to his personal worth. I cannot and I am sure that I need not stay to emphasize this. It is sufficient to recall Horatius Bonar's moving lines:—

Thou must be true thyself  
 If thou the truth wouldst teach ;  
 Thy soul must overflow if thou  
 Another's soul wouldst reach ;  
 It needs the overflow of heart  
 To give the lips full speech.  
 Think truly, and thy thoughts  
 Shall the world's famine feed ;  
 Speak truly, and each word of thine  
 Shall be a fruitful seed ;  
 Live truly, and thy life shall be  
 A great and noble deed.

3. Once again, any study of the science and art of preaching will naturally fall into two main heads, one dealing with the subject matter to be set forth, the other with the mode of presenting it. Now I do not think that too much stress can possibly be laid upon the importance of the latter. Any discerning critic of sermons knows perfectly well that a sermon is often made or marred by its delivery. Some men present their thoughts in a dull, lifeless way ; their voices are monotonous and their manner uninspiring ; they never arrest attention or get to grips with their congregations. The manner of others is just the reverse, and even poor material is made to seem good because of the vivacity and force with which it is presented. Even more important than sermon delivery is sermon construction. I hope I am not hypercritical, but it seems to me that far too many preachers show little or no knowledge of the proper methods of sermon construction. Preaching, as I hold, is just one branch of teaching, and every preacher ought to conform in general to the canons of the teacher's art. The introduction wherein contact is made with the minds of the listeners, the presentation wherein the new matter is set forth in clearly defined and easily

remembered sections, the association whereby links are continually forged between new and old, the application wherein appeal is made to the emotions which are the springs of conduct and wherein definite activity is suggested—these are the more obvious parts of any properly constructed lesson, and they ought to exist no less in the sermon. They can exist without in the least restricting that variety which is the natural consequence of the range of our subject matter and the differences in our temperaments. Yet how sadly often are sermons preached from which the average person in the congregation can carry away for future digestion neither any definite teaching nor even a single definite impression. I am afraid that our Theological Colleges are not all blameless in the matter. But the literature of the subject is good and abundant, and there is really no excuse for failure on this score.

But I must not linger on this topic. What, I take it, the new age may be considered to affect is not so much the form of our sermons as their substance. What difference ought there to be, if any, between the things we talk most about now and the things we talked about before the war? What aspects of Christian truth now need to be more emphasized, or less? What doctrines need modifying? Upon which has new light been cast?

Now any talk of *modifying the substance of Christian preaching* in the light of the war may be met at once by *an objection* which perhaps I ought just to touch on in order that we may see the precise amount of force there is behind it. It will be said that the Christian Gospel is unchanging. We shall be reminded of certain very obvious passages of Scripture, "I am the Lord, I change not." "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day and for ever." "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." "Though we, or an angel from Heaven, should preach unto you any Gospel other than that we preached unto you, let him be anathema." "If any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life." We shall be told that it is precisely the unchangeableness of the Gospel which makes it a universal Gospel for all centuries and all countries. It meets the fundamental and unaltering needs of human nature. It is as good for the Englishman of to-day as it was for the Jew of the first century. It wins its way and finds acceptance and abundant justification, whether it is preached in

Central Africa or amid the hoary civilization of China. It suits as well the high caste Indian Brahmin as the despised outcaste with whom he will not endure the remotest contact. All this is gloriously true, but it is only half the truth. We can hold at one and the same time that the Gospel is unchanging, and also that it needs to be presented in changing phraseology, and that now one aspect of it, now another, needs to be emphasized and put first in order. There is good ground for holding this in the Bible. The Lord changes not, but the Lord repents. The Gospel changes not, but it comes out in different dress in the Epistles of James, of Paul to the Galatians, and of the unknown writer to the Hebrews. The new birth is one thing, but its explanation demands a wonderful variety of metaphor from different and even from the same New Testament writers. Hence there is no need to apologize for suggesting that Christian preachers will do well to reconsider the substance of the Gospel in the light of the war, in order that they may know how to present it in language really understood of the people, and especially of that large proportion of the people who hitherto have either tried to understand it without success, or have not tried to understand it because they thought it had no meaning or message for them.

Bishop Philipps Brooks has some wise sentences on this point in his *Lectures on Preaching* (p. 219) :—

“ There are the constant and unchanging needs of men, and the message which is addressed to those needs and shares their unchangeableness ; and then there are the ever-varying aspects of those needs to which the tone of the message, if it would really reach the needy soul, must intelligently and sympathetically correspond. The first of these comes of the preacher’s larger life, his study of the timeless Word of God, his intercourse with God in history, his personal communion with his Master, and the knowledge of those depths of human nature which never change whatever waves of alteration may disturb the surface. The second comes from a constantly alert watch of the events and symptoms of the current times, begotten of a deep desire that the salvation of the world, which is always going on, may show itself here and now in the salvation of these particular men to whom the preacher speaks. If we leave out the difference of natural endowments and of personal devotedness, there is nothing which so decides the different kinds as well as the different degrees of ministers’ successes as the presence or absence of this balance and proportion of the general and special, the world consciousness and the time consciousness.”

Now there can be no doubt that many preachers have somehow failed to attain this balance and proportion. They have not succeeded in giving the mass of the people of this country any clear

and useful idea of what Christianity is and stands for in terms of the present day. In Dr. Cairns' book there are some pathetic statements by chaplains and other workers among the troops with regard to *the hopeless ignorance of the men about Christian doctrine and ideals of conduct*. Let me quote two or three specimens. A C. of E. chaplain writes: "The soldier is quite amazingly ignorant of the Christian religion. I have had Confirmation candidates who did not know the names of the four Gospels" (p. 109). A lady hut-worker says: "One of the great difficulties in the way of belief, it seems to me, is the lack of education in general, and in scores of men the failure of their Sunday-school teaching to have given them any real foundation of Christian belief. I do not think the majority of men have any clear idea of what the Christian religion is, for we find that the simplest plain facts from the New Testament given them in an unecclesiastical and informal way appeal to them enormously, and they are genuinely interested, and come Sunday after Sunday to lantern services with just a few pictures, and a plain simple talk on morals and Christian living" (p. 109). An officer in a Hussar Regiment reports: "When I first joined the unit over two years ago, the thing that struck me was the ignorance of the men both on the dogmatic and practical side, particularly the former. Now, after becoming more familiar with the men, the point that strikes me is the materialism and complete absence of any recognition of the spiritual. . . . I suppose they have all had as much religious experience as all of us in adolescence and early manhood, but there being no dogmatic knowledge to explain this experience, or knowledge of the practice of religion to develop it, the faculty of religion has withered away" (p. 112). I am not saying that preachers are wholly and exclusively to blame for this ignorance. Much of the trouble is due to defective religious education in day schools and Sunday Schools. But, nevertheless, the fault lies partly in our sermons; and, at any rate, the remedy, so far as adults are concerned, must be found in improved preaching, supported both before and behind by improved pastoral work. What, then, are we to do?

I am going to refer in the rest of this paper to a few special points of Christian doctrine, but before I do that I want to make one general suggestion. It is on what Dr. Cairns happily calls *the vitalizing of doctrine*. What are the reasons for the extraordinary

vogue of spiritualism in recent years? Manifestly it has spread because of an inevitable reaction from the scientific and practical materialism of the last 100 years, and more particularly lately because it professes to tell men something which they very much wish to know, namely, the conditions of the future life. The doctrines of spiritualism profess to satisfy a human need, and hence men are interested in them and study them. I believe that we exponents of Christianity can learn from this. We must teach Christianity definitely and dogmatically, even though we teach it pictorially, and we must show the relation between all Christian doctrines and the thoughts and needs of men to-day, as they stand revealed in the light of the war. Let me quote again (pp. 264-5-6, 287) :—

“ The whole life of the Church depends on its fundamental faiths about God and the world and the soul, the Person and work of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, the Kingdom of God and the life to come. Now it is quite clear that this teaching . . . has never been taken home as a whole by the great masses of the manhood of the country. They have taken home parts of it, or these have been revealed to them for the first time by the experiences of the war, but they are broken fragments without unity or cohesion. This is in large part due to the fact that most of the men have never really understood the things that they have been taught. Where the Christian doctrines have been taught they seem to have been taught as something out of relation to their lives, which has to be believed as a duty rather than as a revelation which makes reason of the riddle of human life. . . . Now, if the present divorce (between the people and the churches) is to be overcome, it is absolutely vital that this should be set right. . . . The Church will have to put its very heart and soul into the work of restating the great faiths by which it lives and from which it draws all its inspiration, in terms which the men can understand. The frequent demand for ‘ interpretation ’ is in truth a demand for the vitalizing of theology, for the restatement of Christian doctrines in terms of life. This is a very different thing from abandoning these truths in order to make the Faith plausible and easy to believe, or to take the greatest common measure of the working faiths of existing Churches and men as representing essential Christianity. . . . How did the great truths of Christianity win their way at the first? Was it not because the life of the Church arrested the attention of men, and then to Jew and Greek and Roman these truths commended themselves as solving the great problem of life? . . . We shall never meet the real need of the men by simple moral exhortations. Most men know their duty already fairly well. What they need to know about are old-fashioned things, Grace, Dogma, Conversion. But they need to know about them in the language of to-day. . . . For the vitalizing of doctrine in our day we must discover in the case of each truth what is the practical spiritual need which it meets, and teach the truth in such a form as will enable men to see its practical bearing. We have to remove a vast misunderstanding that Christianity has little to do with real everyday life. . . . The one way to do this, so far as the great majority is concerned, is to show what the Christian ideal really is, and to teach each of the Christian truths relatively to the moral necessities which that ideal creates. We have so to state them that each one of them comes as a veritable Gospel of deliverance.”

So much for the general point regarding Christian doctrine and the Christian ideal of life as a whole. When we come to survey *particular doctrines*, I think we may well ask in each case, at any rate, three questions :—

1. How far has our statement of this doctrine been satisfactory? Does it need amplifying here, simplifying there, modernizing somewhere else?

2. Does the evidence show that this doctrine has been unduly neglected by the preachers, or at least not sufficiently grasped by the people, so that it needs to-day to have special emphasis laid upon it?

3. Is this doctrine likely to prove a useful point of contact between Christianity and men's minds. Ought we to set it in the foreground for the moment in order to arrest their attention and so lead them on to a fuller examination of all Christian truth?

I shall not attempt the impossible task of answering these questions in detail over the whole field of Revelation. But I will give a few examples which may serve to illustrate the rest.

1. Take the *fundamental doctrine of God*. How far do average men really believe in God? On the one hand, the materialism which encrusts their minds is too obvious to be overlooked. Men prevailingly take a material as opposed to a spiritual view of life. Whether they believe theoretically in a God or not, they act or profess to act as if they did not. On the other hand, the evidence is overwhelming that deep down in their hearts men do believe in God. In times of danger they cry out to Him. Fear may have been the immediate cause of many of the prayers which men poured forth when they were in a hot corner or were going "over the top," but, nevertheless, those prayers came from the bottom of their hearts and they revealed the deep foundations upon which much can hereafter be built. The impression is given that there lies on the mind of vast numbers of men and women a hard crust of materialism, beneath which there are great depths of religion, of idealism and of humanity. In times of crisis or difficulty the crust is broken and the deeps surge to the surface. What we have to do is to appeal to this instinctive belief in God, to call it out and to educate it. So far as there is any intellectual difficulty about belief in God, it is probable that for most men it is due far less to scientific discovery

than to the apparent conflict between the goodness of God as taught in Christianity and the prevalence of evil in the world. This, at any rate, was so during the war. I am afraid that we have assumed far too much in respect of popular belief in God. We need to devote considerable space in our sermons to a careful exposition of the Christian doctrine of the Fatherhood of God. We want to set forth a coherent view of God's moral government of the world, and of His Providence as working out a definite purpose in human life and history, and we must take care that our exposition is so full and balanced that it explains fairly all the facts of human life as men know it.

2. Then with regard to *Jesus Christ*. It is a matter for deep thankfulness that though vast numbers of men to-day are bitterly hostile to the Churches of Christ, and criticize them unsparingly, yet there is practically universal respect for Jesus Christ Himself. There are, of course, those who consciously or unconsciously are supporters of Nietzsche and the "will to power," for whom the ethics of Jesus are antiquated and absurd. But they are in a minority. Most men still hold with Lecky and J. S. Mill that Jesus represents, at any rate, the high-water mark of human life. But what makes this at once more remarkable and more hopeful is that the average man's knowledge, even of the human life of Christ, is both small and one-sided. A Y.M.C.A. hut-worker says: "I have not met the man yet who would point the finger of criticism at Jesus, but I am doubtful if He stands for more than a name to them. What do the men think about Christ? They do not think about Him at all, I believe" (p. 34). Where some knowledge is possessed, it is often one-sided. Certain children's hymns, such as "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild," seem to have left behind them a most unfortunate impression which has never been corrected. As a private in the R.A.M.C. wrote: "I feel certain that few men know Christ as a perfect man—complete in courage, love and goodness. There is a feeling that His doctrines, and therefore He Himself, are rather womanly. The teaching about humility, turning the other cheek, meekness, etc., seems distinctly weak" (p. 38). When we ask how much the average man really understands about the higher aspects of Christ's Person and work, the answer is by general testimony very discouraging. The general level of knowledge about His Divinity, His Incarnation, His atoning



sacrifice, His Heavenly life and present Resurrection power is very low indeed.

Our duty is plain. We have our points of contact in the vague respect for the human Christ and in the honest admiration for all things brave and strong and pure. I think we need to preach sermons which taken together shall give a clear picture of Christ as a man who is true to Tennyson's description, "Strong Son of God, immortal Love." An accurate, full and balanced portrait of Christ the Man is the proper premise which will lead logically to the belief in Christ the Son of God. It was always true that we needed to preach Christ. We need to do so more than ever now.

In the *Church Times* of November 23, 1917, there was a most interesting account of a sermon preached by a Tommy to a chaplain in a ditch at the Front, while the Germans chose to snipe a particular bit of road. I cannot help quoting two or three sentences. "Padres sometimes overlook the fact that they are talking and ministering to a large number of men to whom Christ is a name and not a fact—men unconvinced of His Person and power, without knowledge of His saving grace and of their need of Him. Men who do not know Christ and are not persuaded of His power to minister to the world's needs and to solve its problems, and who do not recognize that without Him they can do nothing, are not likely to see any reason why they should join His Church. . . . We need all the teaching you can give us. The clergy have rather let us down in this respect in the past. Teach us in season and out of season, but do not let your enthusiasms for the things which Christ commands through His Church or the Bible make you forget the importance of teaching us about Him." This Tommy was but repeating the words of Gladstone, "It is the preaching of Christ our Lord which must be the secret and substance, the centre and heart of all preaching."

3. Once again, consider the Christian *doctrine of the Holy Spirit*. We were all pained during the war by the way in which self-sacrifice and heroism could exist side by side in the same man with drunkenness, immorality, untruthfulness and dishonesty. What was the reason for this curious mixture? A large part of the reason lies in a general failure to realize that God can be a present power to save from sin. Evidence is abundant that men felt that there was no hope for them of realizing a nobler life. They had no idea that human nature could be radically changed. They dismissed the

Christian life as for them impracticable. The same fatal belief is only too common wherever we go up and down our parishes. Men recognize Christian morality as ideal, but say that since human nature is what it is, it is simply an idealist's dream. The breaking down of this terrible obsession about the impracticability of the good is essential to any real progress. We must preach constantly and clearly, in the pulpit and out of it, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit who is the power of God unto salvation here and now. Men *can* rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things if the flood tide of God's power is within them.

I must not linger over *other Christian doctrines*. But readers will remember the possibility of developing the crude terror prayers of the trenches into Christian communion with God. They will remember how fellowship was created between man and man in the camps and fields, and will consider that there is an all too sadly neglected Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints. They will have read of the extraordinary interest men took in France in Missionary exhibitions and live stories of Missionary work, and will see here some glimmer of hope that the parochialism of the village pump may yet be overcome. They will know that men do long for a reign of righteousness and peace and love on the earth, even though they are tragically ignorant that this is the Kingdom of God. I have done what I set out to do if I have shown that there is real need for a revision of the form and substance of our preaching in the light of the war, and that we must not let our faith in the unchangeableness of the Gospel make us deaf to the imperative call to modify our language and change our emphasis. Dr. J. H. Jowett has said that we need "apostolic preaching which shall awaken the wonder of men, lead them into holy awe, brace their spirits and immeasurably enlarge their thought and life." May God help us all to stand in the true apostolic and prophetic succession of those who have a living message from the living God to living men.

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