

JESUS-CHRIST,

THE PREACHER'S EXEMPLAR.

It is not the matter, but the manner of the instructions of the Christ, which I propose to consider. What first strikes me is the absence of any thing approaching to oratorical art. Jesus did not make sermons, he talked; I am almost tempted to add, his discourses were actions. There were no formal divisions, no premeditated arrangement, no preamble or peroration.

If then we are to take Christ as a pattern, we must talk in the pulpit, not dogmatize. This precept, so simple in theory, is extremely difficult in practice; because it requires a total forgetfulness of self, a setting aside of personal reputation and the absence of all pretension to effect. A truly regenerate heart will alone consent to this; and even !...

But I have no wish to judge others; I merely notice the fact, that Jesus did not *preach* in the

ordinary sense of the word. He spoke, sometimes to his disciples, sometimes to the multitude, occasionally to a single hearer, and his words are just as free and unconstrained on the one occasion as on the other.

The crowd, the apostles, and the Samaritan woman, are all spoken to familiarly and pointedly. The thoughts are not deeper, nor the style less simple in the parable of the sower, than in the conversation with Simon Peter.

If the absence of oratorical art is the prominent characteristic of the preaching of Christ, we are necessarily reduced, in studying his style, to observations of detail; but these are far from unimportant. I will class them under three heads: the preacher; the audience; and the subjects treated of.

I commence with the last, and cannot help remarking how our Lord instead of treating of subjects, treats of persons. He speaks less of salvation than of a saviour; he discourses, not of humility, but to the humble; he does not say that forgiveness of injury is a virtue, but rather "Love your enemies." In a word, he confronts, not ideas, but living beings. Notice for instance the sermon on the mount. Does Jesus enlarge on mercy, purity, humility, etc. ? Not at all; he at once refers to persons and exclaims. "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, the meek, the afflicted, the merciful."

This distinction appears to me fundamental, whether we consider the nature of the things themselves, or the object of preaching.

In truth, virtue and vice, doctrines and precepts cannot exist abstractedly. Take away saints and sinners, God and Satan, and all the rest is nought. There is nothing which is in itself redemption, but there is a Redeemer. The thief on the cross was saved by faith, though probably he had never heard nor uttered the word itself. These dogmatical expressions are the algebraic formula of language; they may give ideas, but not feeling; the knowledge of a system may be thus imparted, no salvation itself, and moreover the hearer is sometimes exposed to the temptation of thinking himself a christian, because he understands christianity.

If I am told that Paul has freely used such expressions in his epistles, I reply that I am speaking of sermons, not epistles, and moreover, that I would rather imitate the master than the servant. I might say more; often abstract expressions do not really convey ideas any more than sentiments. People listen to such, with cold indifference, whereas when we speak of persons, interest is immediately roused. The majority of men feel so strongly the necessity of dealing with living beings, that it

becomes requisite to imagine these beings, in order to communicate ideas. Jesus did so; witness his parables, where fictitious beings give life to doctrines.

Many modern preachers do just the contrary; they eliminate persons and facts from the Bible, leaving only principles and theories. To be convinced of this, you have just to take up a volume of modern popular sermons, and compare the table of contents with the headings of chapters in the gospels; you will be struck with the wide difference; on the one hand, ideas, on the other, facts. I take an example from one of our best writers. I open the volume, and I find these titles :

“ The look. ”

“ Minding the things of the Spirit. ”

“ The believer accomplishing the suffering of Christ. ”

“ Philosophy and Tradition. ”

“ The precautions of faith. ”

“ Imaginary perfection. ”

“ The stones of the Temple. ”

“ A People and Humanity. ”

“ Christian utilitarianism. ”

“ Jesus invisible. ”

“ Grace and faith. ”

“ Anger and prayer. ”

Now take the Gospel of St John, and looking for the discourses of Christ, you will perceive that he spoke, not of the new birth, but of the man born again; not of spiritual worship, but of those who should offer it; not of spiritual blindness, but of the spiritually blind; not of false doctrine, but of false prophets, and so on. When an abstract thought meets Jesus, he connects with it a living image : “ I am the door : I am the resurrection : I am the life. ” Instead of metaphysical disquisitions there is constant action, and illustration from life. Such I esteem to be the salient point in the ministry of our Lord. I need not dwell on it further; I write for intelligent readers.

From the subjects treated of, let us pass to the hearers. Though Jesus teaches invariably the same truth, he finds means indefinitely to vary the mode of imparting it; and his starting point is always the nature of his audience. He deals with them according to their measure of intelligence and morality; he considers their station and their prejudices, and by starting from their level, he induces them to walk with him; he does not carry, but lead them. Far from reproaching them with their ignorance and weakness, he lowers himself to them, looks at things from their point of view, and by following their own reasoning, gradually brings

them to the acknowledgment of error, and the discovery of truths which he has not yet declared. The Pharisees Jesus does indeed reproach, and condemn, but it is because he sees them irrevocably incased in hypocrisy.

One or two examples will illustrate my meaning. A young lord, strong in his own righteousness, comes to Jesus to ask what finishing work he shall perform to become perfect, and merit eternal life. Jesus well knows that every man is a sinner, and can only obtain eternal life as a free gift from God. Does he then say to this young man, “ You are deceiving yourself, you have never done really well, your motives were stained with selfishness and vanity, your good deeds have been performed only within the limits of your own convenience. You know nothing of love as a principle of self-denial, of self sacrifice; your best deeds need pardon, and the free grace of God alone can save you. ” I ask, was this the language of Christ? Far from it. Though the simple truth, it would not have been understood by the young man; it would have repelled by wounding his pride, and it would have left in darkness one whom Jesus wished to enlighten.

Our Lord then, takes his stand on the young man's own principle that salvation is of works, and

requires that he should fulfil the law. To make him fully understand the difficulty, the commandments are enumerated; and to make him feel the weakness of human nature, Jesus refuses for himself — here considered only as a Teacher or Prophet — the title of good. All this fails to open the eyes of the presumptuous youth, who supposes he has kept the law unbroken. At this point of the conversation how would one of our ministers have acted? He would probably have said, “Proud man, know that all men are sinners etc.” Not so Jesus. So completely does he enter into the feeling of the spiritually blind man, that it is said he loved him! Yes doubtless, he loved him as one loves and pities a man who is honestly mistaken. While keeping the right goal in view, Jesus still follows the wanderer on the wrong path, in order to shut him up to a duty, his shrinking from which must inevitably bring conviction home. “One thing thou lackest; sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor.” Now the object of our Lord is gained. He has made the young man feel powerless before the claims of divine right; he cannot fulfil this condition; either he must now seek the exercise of free grace, or he will carry away in his conscience a sting which may one day bring him back to the feet of Jesus, sorrowful and penitent.

Jesus sometimes goes beyond this, and replies to thoughts instead of words. He fathoms the hearts of those around, and brings to light things they would fain hide, perhaps even things of which they themselves were ignorant. He never seeks an acknowledgment of victory, but endeavours to prevail in reality; he silences, not by using authority, but by convincing.

More than once we are told that guessing the secret thoughts of the Pharisees, he made an answer quite unexpected by them : for instance in Mark, where the scribes asked *among themselves* why this man forgave sins; in Luke, where Simon the Pharisee doubts *within himself* whether Jesus were a prophet; in John, where Jesus knows that the disciples *desired* to ask the meaning of the expression, “In a little while ye shall not see me.”

I attach all the more importance to this observation, as too many of our modern preachers follow a very different course. They are much more anxious to confound than to convince; they reply much more to words than thoughts, even taking advantage of an inadvertent expression to gain the victory. And if they win applause, they are quite satisfied. Such conduct I do not hesitate to call dishonourable; moreover it shows an utter want of

love to souls; humiliation, not salvation is what the speaker aims at.

To this consideration for the mental position of his hearers, Jesus joined a manifestation of wisdom, I might almost say of skill, which I shall only point out in two circumstances.

The first in his meeting with Peter after the resurrection, near the lake of Gennesaret. Our Lord wished to reprove Peter for his threefold denial; not for the purpose of degrading him, but of deepening his repentance. To speak of the fault openly, would only be to silence the culprit, Jesus does not even name it, on the contrary, he turns at once to the love of the disciple and the charge about to be committed to him. “Simon, lovest thou me?” is the question asked. By repeating it a second time, Jesus implies he has some reason to doubt the affection of Peter; by repeating it a third time, he recalls unmistakably the three sad denials. Thus without a word of rebuke, our Lord awakens in Simon’s breast the recollection of sin, obliges him inwardly to accuse himself, and by this humbling remembrance provokes him to greater watchfulness for the future. How wonderful is the union here of tenderness and severity! How different is our mode of proceeding in the pulpit or out of it! In similar circumstances, how we

should have apostrophised our hearers! How readily we should have put ourselves into the place of masters and judges, we, professing servants of him who uttered not a word of a reproach to his faithless disciple!

Here is another instance. The Pharisees bring to the Temple a woman taken in adultery, and address to Jesus a question so insidiously worded, that answered in the negative, it will furnish ground for accusation before the High Priest, answered in the affirmative, it will bring him in guilty before the civil governor. Jesus discerns their intention. He might declare it to the assembled people, and bring his provokers to shame. But no; he succeeds in confounding them without replying to the question at all, and sends them away with wounded consciences, perhaps the germ of future repentance. He appeals to “the one that is without sin,” and as he had foreseen, reproved by the inward monitor, all left, convicted, not by the preacher, but by themselves.

Were I obliged to condense these observations on the preaching of Christ, into one phrase, I should borrow his own words, and say its general tone was, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine.” According to this profound saying, advance in the knowledge of truth

is in proportion to a man's love of holiness.

I say love, not life of holiness. Our Lord does not say, "Whoever *does*," but "Whoever *will* do." The desire must be there. The thief on the cross, blaming his companion, recalling and censuring their common misdeeds, showed his hatred of sin, and appreciation of holiness; consistently with this, we find him ready to acknowledge Jesus as the coming King.

We must then, in preaching, consider how far our auditors have this desire after holiness. To meet gross, open sinners with the spiritual law which condemns motives; to quote to infidels the words of the Bible, is to send arrows flying over the heads of our hearers, who will only smile at the inaccuracy of our aim. They will tell us that, according to their view the words we are quoting are not taken from the word of God, but from a book we choose to decorate with that name.

I know the sacred word has a power peculiar to itself; but this power when brought to bear upon the soul of man, only acts when there is some harmony between that soul and itself. Were it otherwise, did the words possess a magic efficacy, preaching were needless; it would be sufficient to mix up the verses in an urn, and then present one at random to each of our hearers.

But we have not only the example of Jesus in this matter, we have his direct words. After instructing his apostles according to their state and necessities, and inquiring if they had understood rightly, he adds, "Every scribe that is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven, is like unto a man that is an householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasures things new and old," that is instruction suited to the understanding and habits of his audience.

This rule is so obvious that it seems needless to insist upon it. Yes, but this rule would oblige preachers to break through routine, and though many may approve it in theory, few, very few, will practise it. It is so easy to fill a sermon with quotations and affirmations; it requires so little thought. It is true a skilful doctor applies a distinct remedy to every patient; but it is much more convenient to treat them all exactly alike; though a few may die in consequence.

In listening to some sermons, I have involuntarily asked myself what impression they would make on a stranger. I have endeavoured to put myself for a moment in his place, and forgetting my theological studies, imagined myself a worldly man seeking instruction. In this view, I positively declare I found nothing comprehensible,

nothing enjoyable; I have spoken to those who came for the first time to the house of God, and discovered that these were their feelings also. They had been arrested by some trifling detail which I had not even noticed; they had thoroughly misunderstood the speaker, and were leaving without the slightest idea of what the Gospel really was.

I may be asked; are we to neglect believers, and consider only the passing hearer? By no means; but there are certain subjects which interest all, and which might be treated with general profit. Each man possesses, more or less developed, heart, conscience and reasoning faculties. But if you take your arguments from the Levitical code, from the subtleties of logic, or the clouds of German philosophy, be assured you will be utterly unintelligible to the mass. And this, be it observed, is no reproach to them, it is your business to descend to their level, not theirs to rise to yours.

Here again how lovely is the example of Christ! How simple, how natural are his thoughts and words! After the lapse of eighteen centuries, is there a single reader who does not understand the parable of the Prodigal Son? Or the sermon on the mount? Did Jesus imitate, or even consult

the learned commentaries of the day? Never. The fields, the ties of families, the commonest usages of life, supply him with all the similes he needs. His sayings are deep enough to furnish sages with matter for endless meditation, yet simple enough to be comprehensible to the most unlettered. So simple in fact, that many modern preachers, Alas! would be ashamed not to go beyond them. Who preaches as simply as Jesus did? Which of us can say, there is not an individual in my congregation, whether peasant or servant, who cannot understand me? None. And why? Because none of us can forget ourselves, and throw our whole interest into our subject and its bearings on the people before us. This brings us to the third point we are to consider, *the Preacher*.

If ever it were permissible for a preacher to exalt his work and office, assuredly that right belonged to the Lord Jesus. It seems indeed almost indispensable that he should have done so, considering that he had to present himself not only as minister, but as Saviour. Yet in spite of his inherent greatness, in spite of the important part he plays — but what am I saying? important part? I mean in spite of the single glory which belongs to him as Redeemer of mankind, he always contrives,

when speaking of himself, rather to veil than exhibit himself. He speaks much of others, little of himself. He whom the Apostles call Son of God, styles himself Son of man; He declares that he does nothing of himself, and that if he would glorify himself, his glory would be nought; he speaks once of his own character, but it is to say « I am meek and lowly; » he bows his head to receive baptism from his forerunner; to Judas in the act of betraying him, he says « Friend, why camest thou? » to Satan himself, his replies are calm quotations of the word. Never does he even seem to say, see how well I think and speak! how devoted I am! On Calvary's cross, at the climax of self sacrifice how marked is the absence of all display! How different from us, who use our pulpits as pedestals for the exhibition of ourselves! Jesus has no need to dread a popular style; his discourses do not betray literary pretension. — If he colours and varies his instructions, or puts them into a narrative form, it is simply for the sake of his hearers, that he may be— not admired, but — understood by them.

On this subject, I should like to refer to the testimony of modern facts.

We have all admired the discourses either spoken or written, of a French preacher whom God has lately called to himself. But his last work, his

« Adieux » moved us more than all his others. Why so? Is it because they proceeded from a bed of suffering? This might influence those who saw him suffer, but not others. To what then are we to attribute the universal popularity of these last sermons? I can answer for myself, and perhaps for a good many others too; *Thé adieux of Adolphe Monod* edified me more than any other of his discourses because they were less elaborate and more simple.

In truth, when the interests of eternity are at stake we must be dealt with by men, not orators; we want to be instructed, not amused; we have come not to do homage to the preacher, but to give ourselves to God. And if unfortunately you make us think of your talent, the real aim of your office is lost : You make us advance your reputation, instead of your advancing our Salvation. And yet that christian pulpit was raised for the benefit not of you the preacher, but of us the hearers, and you are called our minister, our servant !

To resume : the three most remarkable points in the public ministry of Christ, are these :

1° He deals with living beings more than with abstract ideas;

2° He puts himself on a level with his audience;

3° He keeps himself in the background.

Of these, the last will be universally applauded; it is the one which will be the least followed — Here is my cause of dread; here is what may indeed render useless all I have written. Will preachers consent to relinquish the indulgence of petty vanity, in view of the welfare of immortal souls?

This important question may be addressed to two classes; those who have been regenerated by the Spirit of God, and those who have not. I shall conclude by a word to each, beginning with the last.

Under pretext of preaching Christ, you preach yourselves. You are anxious people should say, how well he speaks, how eloquent he is; this is the motive of your pulpit harangues. Let me tell you plainly you will never succeed. Your attempts will deceive no one. Even were you to adopt a simple, natural air, your auditors would immediately discern it was affected, and you would be none the less an actor to them. You are taking means to accomplish the very opposite of what you wish, you are inducing people, not to admire, but to criticise you, though possibly to you personally they may pretend an occasional compliment. Then what is to be done?

Simply yield yourselves up to God; you must

realize your sin and condemnation before him, and receive the free salvation of Christ; in a word, you must take to yourselves seriously the advice you have been long giving with too little seriousness to others, you must be *converted*.

But supposing you are already turned to God, do you ask for hints in exhorting your flock? I can give you none but those which I endeavour to follow myself.

The great secret of success is doubtless to forget ourselves entirely in the absorbing interest of instructing immortal beings. Could we but rightly feel the privilege of teaching for eternity, assuredly we should be simple and serious enough. But this disinterestedness is the gift of God, his grace may lead us through much conflict, to self sacrifice; but meanwhile, can we do any thing to avoid the failure which we dread from being simple? For this is the true cause of our affectation. We fear people would not be interested, were we to speak naturally instead of declaiming. If we thought we should be as effective without bombast, we should discard it. How can we be reassured on this point?

I believe in this way; by more full preparation for the pulpit—were our subject thoroughly elaborated, so that we possessed it, as it were, in all its component parts; if our plan were complete,

our ideas clear, our heart warmed by meditation, above all if the unction of the holy ghost was earnestly sought in prayer, we should enter the pulpit without fear; we should be under no apprehension of lacking matter or of failing to excite interest. The mind being calm and disengaged, we should keep our object strictly in view; our manner would be such as to ensure respect; and continually more master of ourselves, because as we advance more completely possessed by our subject, we should finally master the audience, and be led with mutual joy to the desired goal. If we succeeded we should be encouraged; if we failed we should try not to be discouraged. Happily a bad sermon last sunday does not prevent our attempting a better one next sunday. On the contrary; the fall stimulates to greater watchfulness and diligence. On the whole then, my advice is, let us be more fully prepared, we shall then be less exposed to be led astray by vanity, and more able to remain simple.

I have said much of the care to be exercised by the preacher; perhaps the reader may think I attach too much efficacy to study. If so, let me undeceive him. I believe real efficacy can only be obtained by fervent prayer for the Holy Spirit. If I have not dwelt on this, it is simply because

amongst Christians (and I write for such) this aid is understood as a matter of imperative necessity. However, to avoid all ambiguity, I wish in conclusion distinctly to express my conviction that without the direct intervention of the eternal Spirit all our efforts will be vain. and our best sermons but as tinkling cymbals.

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