

EDITORIAL

CHRISTIAN preaching began on the very birth-day of the Church, the morning of that feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to the Apostles and their companions in the upper room. When they came out into the streets of Jerusalem St Peter and the eleven stood, and like men filled with new wine proclaimed the good news of salvation in Jesus of Nazareth to the people. So immediate and so forcible was the impact of that proclamation upon the assembled crowds that their hearts were filled with compunction, and three thousand of them, acting on St Peter's injunction, did penance for their sins, were baptized and added to the number of the faithful that very day.¹

Ever since that time the ideal of the Church has been a preaching that proclaims salvation and converts. The Acts of the Apostles is full of sermons; St Stephen's sermon, St Peter's sermons and St Paul's, nor must we forget that the rest of the New Testament is sermon matter too; the reduction to inspired writing of the current oral proclamation of the Word of salvation. The gospels, once looked upon as biographies of our Lord or chronological accounts of his doings and teachings, have now come to be recognized by scholars (and this at least lies to the credit of *form criticism*) as traditional matter arranged and developed with the express object of proclaiming the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, the message of salvation, in such a way as to convert the heart, filling it with compunction for sin, and the urgent desire to be saved from sin's power.

The preaching found in the pages of the New Testament originates from within the Church and is conditioned by its authority. *They were persevering in the doctrine of the Apostles, and in the communication of the breaking of bread and in prayers.*² Following the example of their Master we see the Apostles preaching in the Temple court, the place of sacrifice, and in the synagogue, the place of worship through and instruction in the Scriptures. Very soon this was to be replaced by preaching in the Christian assembly, where the eternal sacrifice of the Body broken and the

¹ Acts 2, 41.

² Acts 2, 42.

Blood poured out was offered by the New Israel, the People of God, in the Breaking of Bread. We have, perhaps, an intimation of the beginnings of this change in the account of St Paul's long preaching at the Sunday assembly of Troas when the young man Eutychus went to sleep and fell from the third loft of the upper chamber and was taken up dead.³

The primitive preaching of the early days was profoundly Scriptural, as we realize in reading the sermons in the Acts. It laid great emphasis upon God's dealings with his People, upon the mighty acts recorded in their Sacred History by which he had constantly preserved them, delivering them from their enemies and from the results of their own disobedience. This recital of the evidence of God's merciful power reached its climax in the proclamation of the good news of the final and eternal deliverance wrought by Jesus the Messiah through his life, death and resurrection, of which all these earlier acts of God on their behalf were the type and the foreshadowing.

In process of time the Liturgy took shape. Its centre was from the beginning the Breaking of Bread as the Lord had broken it on the night before he suffered. This was to be the perpetual showing forth of his death till he should come again. It consisted, as it does today, of the offering of the gifts of the people, and of the solemn consecration of those gifts that they might become the sacrificial and sacrificed Body and Blood, to be distributed as spiritual food in Holy Communion; a feast upon a sacrifice. But around this central core was built up in course of time selections from the scriptural and historical record of God's dealing with his People, the record not only of his wrath and judgment but of his mercy and loving kindness, his forbearance and his patience, all pointing to the mighty act of love which was their culmination, commemorated and perpetuated in the Mass.

To this came to be added the Apostolic preaching in Epistles and Gospels. The latter recited the teachings and the redemptive acts of Christ in the days of his flesh, the former proclaiming the Apostolic witness to the meaning and power of those words and acts. Thus the Liturgy itself, in so far as the People of God entered into it by active participation and lively understanding, served constantly to renew in them a vivid sense of being one with Christ in the life of his Mystical Body, of assimilating to

³ Acts 20, 7-11.

themselves and re-enacting in their own persons the power of Christ's redeeming love. In this way the life of Christ's Mystical Body has been communicated down the ages in and through a worship both sacrificial and sacramental.

But within the Liturgy also, and as an integral part of it, there has always been present in the person of the Bishop, the successor of the Apostles, the living voice of the Church to expound in urgent existential terms, and with Christ's immediate authority, the message of salvation embodied in the Scriptures and the worship of the Church. This is the office and purpose of Preaching. At first it was the Bishop alone who carried out this office, and the breviary contains many examples in the patristic homilies of the way they fulfilled it. As time went on and the Church expanded, priests were appointed by him, as at present, to assist him in his work. But the priest stands in the pulpit, on every occasion, only as the representative and delegate of the Bishop. The Bishop himself is directly the representative of Christ, he proclaims the gospel in Christ's name with apostolic authority.

Unfortunately there came a time when the Bishops of the West became great feudal Lords and statesmen who delegated many of their pastoral duties to others while keeping episcopal authority in their own hands. Thus the urgent responsibility of preaching the redemptive power of Christ in the assembly of the People of God was often neglected and tended to fall into disuse. It was in part to remedy the lack of preaching that the great mendicant orders were founded. The parochial clergy on the whole did not shoulder this responsibility; they were often, though by no means always, without the necessary capacity and lacked theological training. The mendicant friars on the other hand, though they often travelled far and wide on their mission of preaching, were relatively few in number and they developed in time a specialized form of sermon which sometimes bore little relation to the systematic expounding of the Faith which should have been part of the celebration of the Liturgy.

Meanwhile the Scriptural elements of the Liturgy, from the ninth century onwards, were in process of becoming embalmed in a language which to the majority of the people was dying or dead. The understanding of Latin was restricted to the small educated handful of society, mainly clerical; the rest were without books or the capacity to read them. It is a significant reflection on

the lack of preaching at the time of the Reformation that the Reformers of Elizabethan times, though anxious to have a preacher in every parish, were quite unable to secure this for several generations, as is evidenced by the Books of Homilies, which were issued by authority during that period and ordered to be read in Churches; they did not fall into general disuse for more than a century.

In the later middle ages the laity were on the whole perhaps uninstructed and ignorant because the Faith was seldom expounded to them, and over a long period they had been increasingly cut off from active and intelligent participation in the meaning of the Liturgical texts, which had once been the privilege of the faithful. When the revival of preaching began towards the end of the sixteenth century as a result of the reforms of the Council of Trent, the biblical elements of the Liturgy had long been inaccessible to the laity as a medium of active participation in the offering of Mass; they lay buried in the Latin language and there were no missals for the laity. The Bible itself moreover had become a dangerous book, because of its misuse by Protestant interpretation. Even though made more widely accessible by printing, the private reading of it, if not altogether forbidden, was certainly not widely encouraged; this was a distinctively Protestant habit. In consequence scriptural knowledge no longer formed a direct and substantive element in the religious education of Catholics and in particular of Catholics who could not read; and this at a time when it had become the very foundation of all forms of Protestantism.

The age was an age of catechisms and manuals of theology. These were inclined by nature to use the Bible as a source of proof-texts, confirmatory indeed of the definitions and credal statements of the teaching magisterium of the Church, but quoted in isolation and detached in consequence from the depth and richness to be found in the wholeness of their scriptural sources. In this way the *lex orandi* which delights to penetrate these sources by spiritual understanding and which is specially fostered by full participation in the Liturgy, tended to become relatively impoverished.

Today we are only just emerging from this state of things which the historical process had imposed upon western Christendom during many centuries reaching back to the age of Charle-

magne. At certain points it has resulted in the almost complete disappearance from practice of much that the Church of the first five centuries would have taken for granted, and notably active lay participation in the Liturgy such as can directly supply the Scriptural basis and background of worship, doctrine and Christian living. These things however are still there; the structure of the Liturgy still presupposes the active participation of the faithful and classical Catholic theology, exemplified supremely by the writings of St Thomas Aquinas, is still, and claims to be, no more than the effort of human reason to elucidate the depth and richness of the Scriptural revelation upon which the Word God has spoken and still speaks to men ultimately relies as its source.

To say this is in no way to disparage theology, the high purpose of which is to assist the mind towards a deeper insight into the mysteries of faith and to safeguard their proclamation from perversion. This is the function of creeds and definitions; though they enable the mind under the influence of the Holy Spirit to penetrate deeply into the Faith, the definitions themselves do not exhaust the depth of the mystery or the richness of its scriptural expression. Theology which makes definitions and compiles creeds works in abstract terms and calls philosophy to its aid; it is analytical in its approach and rightly so, for the human understanding can work in no other way. But though faith is an act of the mind it is governed by the will and is the possession of the whole person, the thinking, feeling, loving person. Its object too is not a proposition or a statement but God himself, the Trinity of Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The very heart of faith is the union of persons in a relationship of knowledge and love; the person of the baptized Christian, the child of God, with the persons of the Godhead, in and through Christ our Lord, God made man, Redeemer and Saviour, the firstborn of many brethren.

The whole purpose of the Church in preaching the Faith is to convert, to bring about this union of knowledge and love in God which Christ effects in his members. But this cannot be done merely by teaching the Faith in the abstract terms of catechisms and definitions; these have their use and will be fruitful, but only on condition that this union has already been effected. All preaching and teaching must be concrete and personal before abstract thought about the truths of faith can be living thought. Christ

must be presented as he was in the days of his flesh and as the Scriptures present him. His redeeming work must be made manifest as the Church presents it in Sacrament and Liturgy. For too long much of our teaching and preaching and consequently much of our learning in school and seminary has remained in the realm of the abstract and needs to be transposed into the concrete and personal. The Bible must stand at both ends of our theology. Theology must be drawn from the Bible and must be put back again into the Bible to be prayed and preached.

'What is grace?' says the catechism, and its answer is: 'Grace is a supernatural gift of God, freely bestowed upon us for our sanctification and salvation.' Explain that clause by clause to a class of children or an adult congregation and, however skilfully you do it, their response will be almost negligible. But show them the giver of grace in the person of our Lord, as the Church shows him, not by explaining that he is a Person, the person of God the Son, having two natures divine and human, but by setting forth the things he did and now does for us, and so allowing them to see him and what he is. Then the response will be far different.

The best way, and indeed the only way, of making real to others the person of the Giver of grace is to be, at least in intention and urgent desire, a grace-filled and grace-possessed person oneself.



THE PULPIT PRESENTATION OF THE FAITH

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THE subject-matter covered by this title is so wide in extent that we are in danger from the outset of being lost in generalities. For this reason I propose to explore one corner only of its extensive field, by confining myself to the parochial apostolate. I think you will find that the more general principles will emerge.

Let us begin with a quotation:

'Television is a blessing', an American Bishop said recently. 'Spiritually radio and television are beautiful examples of the inspired wisdom of the ages. Radio is like the Old Testament