

I

THE MIRACLE OF PREACHING

Thesis 1. Our preaching continues the past preaching of Jesus, and looks forward to the Word which He will speak at His return. That is why God Himself is at work, at this present day, when we preach.

GOD IS NOT so much the object as the true source of Christian preaching. Preaching is thus speech *by* God rather than speech *about* God. Certainly preaching also has for its aim to reveal God, to present Him to men; but when we preach, our role is not that of the impresario presenting a star to the crowd. We are not there to explain to men that God is eternal, that He knows all things and is capable of all things, that He loves us and wants us to love Him in return. We are there in order that, through our preaching, He may say these things Himself. In other words, revelation is not something within our personal power, it is the concern of God. That is what makes our ministry at once so awe-inspiring and so comforting: awe-inspiring because God Himself chooses to speak through our words, comforting because we do not have to invent what we are to say, we have only to listen and to pass it on. God is thus at work in our preaching (Phil. 2: 13, 1 Thess. 2: 13), so that to reject preaching is to reject God Himself (1 Thess. 4: 8). Preaching is an event in which God acts.

Nor is it an event without a context. The preaching of the Word is governed by two historical reference points, between which, all down the centuries, it is situated, and which it is its duty to make present: in its reference to the past, preaching makes present the Word which God pronounced to the world in sending His Son to live, act, die and conquer among us; in its reference to the future, it makes present the Word which God will pronounce when He puts an end to history by the return of His Son, and gives His last judgment on all men and all things. An echo of the humble and despised incarnation of the Word, an anticipation of the indisputable glory of that same Word—that is, essentially, the nature of our preaching. It makes our hearers, and us with them, into contemporary witnesses of what God said and did—in the Biblical perspective it is impossible to oppose these two verbs—

between Christmas and the Ascension, and also of what He will say and do at the Parousia. It is one of the means which God has chosen whereby His Son's unique first coming may remain valid through the centuries and not have to be repeated, whereby we may prepare ourselves in repentance and thanksgiving for the unique event of His second and last coming.

This introduction, which seeks to place preaching in the context of the history of our salvation, requires four further explanatory remarks:

(a) What we have seen so far shows first of all that there is no true preaching unless God is at work in it through His Holy Spirit (Rom. 15: 19, 2 Cor. 3: 3, Matt. 10: 20, Acts 2: 4, 1 Cor. 2: 4, 13, etc.). The Holy Spirit, indeed, has as His chief ministry to make effective today—with all that that implies—what Jesus Christ said and did, and also what He will say and will do. Christian preaching cannot therefore be understood apart from the doctrine of the Trinity: on the basis of the past work of His Son, and in the perspective of the work He is yet to do, God the Father gives us today, through the Holy Spirit, faith in the salvation which has been accomplished and hope in the salvation yet to be revealed.

(b) This interpretation of God's work in our preaching establishes its connexion with the sacraments, and consequently—contemporary homiletics insists ever more strongly on this—recognizes in preaching a sacramental aspect. This is one of the many reasons why we should not suggest any opposition between preaching and the sacraments, why we should rather, in view of the miracle of the incarnation, give the doctrine of the Word of God an interpretation which is at once homiletic and baptismal or eucharistic. We shall have frequent occasion to return to this point.

(c) What we have seen also helps to define our work as “ministers of the Word of God”: we understand how God, in commanding us to preach His Word, is graciously taking us into His service as agents in the history of salvation. If this is something that must make us tremble, it is also something that must fill us with joy at a time when, outside and even inside the Church, our ministry is in such need of a justification which will make us happy and free.

(d) Finally we understand why these homiletical notes should begin with a discussion entitled “the miracle” of preaching. A miracle exists not only when God proves His freedom in regard to illness, death and the contingencies of His created world, but, more essentially, when His

THE MIRACLE OF PREACHING

kingdom of life, pardon and justice is made known to us. If preaching preserves its intimate reference to the great interventions of God the King, to the story of the incarnate Son and to the proclamation of His triumph, then it is a miracle.

Thesis 2. Through preaching God brings together and builds up His people. But if preaching is the chief means of bringing together the Church, it is not the sole means of building it up.

Through the Word of God we are born again (1 Pet. 1: 23, John 1: 13); it gives life to those in whom it dwells; it is the Word of life (John 6: 68, 1 John 1: 1). The Word—and therefore its preaching also—is the foundation of the Church, which it brings into being; but it also enlightens, accompanies and protects the Church. It begins by bringing her together and then continues to build her up. And these two functions of the Word—and consequently of its preaching—must not be confused; for to do so would be to deny that the Church lives in time and in history.

Just as Jesus Christ came to gather together the scattered people of God (cf. Matt. 23: 37, Acts 18: 10), and just as, at the Last Judgment, He will send forth angels to gather together His elect (Matt. 24: 31), so the announcement of the Gospel, the *kerygma*, gathers together in all nations and in all ages that eschatological people which is the Church. This is missionary preaching—though the mission is really less an extension of Christianity than a garnering of the elect: if the Word is sown it is so that it may be reaped; if the net is cast it is so that it may be drawn up. This Word which brings the Church to life has, as its sacrament, baptism.

But the people thus assembled must remain in the Word and draw nourishment from it. Until Jesus Christ returns, the threat of dispersion is always present; it is therefore important that this gathering shall not be compromised, that the faithful shall persevere in it. That is why we must still preach the Word, be instant in and out of season, reproving, rebuking and exhorting, with all long-suffering and teaching (2 Tim. 4: 2)—in short, building up by the Word of God the Church assembled by the Word of God. The sacrament of this Word which builds up is the supper.

God's miracle resides no less in the preaching which builds up the Church than in the preaching which gathers her together; for, by the preaching which builds up, the Church learns from her Lord to continue steadfastly in the apostles' teaching (Acts 2: 42), to remain that

people at once so different from and so close to the world out of which God has called her and into which He sends her. To protect and train God's people is no less important than to assemble them.

To gather together His people, to call them to Him, God's chief means is preaching (1 Cor. 1: 17), even though this preaching may assume widely differing forms, as the history of evangelism reminds us. On the other hand, preaching in the strictest sense is not the only means by which the Church is built up; this is also achieved by the eucharist, the liturgy, the cure of souls, discipline, ecclesiastical acts, catechism, Biblical studies, the works of the diaconate, the witness of her members, and so on.

What we have just seen has the following three implications:

(a) The institution, by Jesus, of the two sacraments of baptism and the supper fully justifies and explains the distinction that has been made between the preaching which gathers in and the preaching which builds up. There is one sort of preaching which leads from unbelief to baptism, and another which leads from baptism to the Lord's table; there is one preaching of conversion to Christ, another of growth in Christ. There is Moses fighting to save the children of Israel from Egypt, and Moses leading that people across the Red Sea to the promised land; there is Jesus calling to Him, to give them rest, all that labour and are heavy laden, and the Jesus—we forget Him too easily—who summons His disciples to talk to them in private. There is the Paul who founds churches and the Paul who visits and writes to them.

In our Church, where the lack of an awareness of history so often leads us astray, and where the further absence of a living integration of the sacraments into parochial life is so cruelly evident, we are in great danger of preaching as though baptism still lay, and always would lie, ahead of us, as if we were condemned to pace the Egyptian shore of the Red Sea, as if God had not translated us out of the power of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of His love (Col. 1: 13 f.). I am certain that if our Churches are so frightened of exerting themselves in the good works for which God intends them, it is because we do not take sufficiently seriously the baptism of our members. And it is also very probable that, if attendance at worship leaves something to be desired, it is because our sermons do not draw our congregation along in the movement of the history of salvation; a movement which advances, which requires epoch-making decisions, which allows continuous growth, rather than encouraging an existential despair in which everything has constantly to be started afresh, where we must allegedly

always "set out" from the same point (which is the best way of condemning oneself to immobility). A Christian is not a brother of Sisyphus!

(b) Our normal preaching is not that which gathers the Church together—missionary preaching—but the preaching whose duty is to watch over that assembly, to safeguard it and to give it its full meaning—the preaching which builds up. It is with this sort of preaching that we are concerned here. Certainly we have reason to regret that in our Church, because of the practice of baptism, missionary preaching is only a marginal duty of our ministry; but it would be an insult to the grace of baptism to admit the Baptist position by calling in question, through continual missionary appeal, the fact that our members have already entered into the body of Christ. Conversion must be recalled, not proposed; the Church is to be awakened, not founded; the aim of our preaching is not to make our parishioners take baptismal vows, but to insist that they confirm those vows by conduct which bears witness to them. The fact of their baptism, indeed, is what gives us the right to enrol them in the building up of the Church. No one will deny that our Churches are suffering from a *malaise*; but this will not be cured by a *kerygma* which refuses to admit as real and valid the baptism of those whom God entrusts to us.

Here—as throughout the whole of our ministry—we cannot give too much importance to the story of the Exodus of Israel. We are in the desert, with the temptations of Egypt behind us, and the promises of God before us. It is our duty, in our preaching, to prevent God's people from scattering in a rout which would spell their death. Through our preaching, then, God wishes to take His people in hand, to protect them against Amalek, to feed them and quench their thirst with His grace, to strengthen them against impatience and despair, to light their way and to teach them how to show, in terms of actual behaviour, that they have been rescued from servitude.

(c) The preaching which builds up is no less a Word of God than missionary preaching. We should not, therefore, through a humility which would here be out of place, fear to preach and announce the Word of God, and be content simply to meditate upon it. Where the Church is truly built up she is not invited to give herself private exhortations, to address herself in pious monologues—that can be done elsewhere and by other means than in public worship; she is brought face to face with the living God who has saved her and who is leading her to salvation.

Thesis 3. *Our human words are the vehicle which God has chosen to make His own Word resound.*

"He that heareth you heareth me" were Jesus' words to the seventy, when He sent them out to preach (Luke 10: 16). He thus made them, in the legal sense, His apostles; that is to say His plenipotentiary representatives, for whose mission He assumed responsibility, and who were to be among men what He Himself had been (cf. Gal. 4: 14). Nor is this an isolated notion in the New Testament; it reflects the general and normal way in which the announcement of the Gospel is understood: the Lord Himself speaks through those who preach. The later Helvetic Confession (1566) is scrupulously faithful to scriptural evidence when it says—not in a dialectical spirit—"The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (chap. 1).

To measure this miracle—for here again is a miracle of preaching—we have no better rule than the Chalcedonian Christology: true God and true man, unconfusedly (*ἀσυγχύτως*), unchangeably (*ἀτρέπτως*), indivisibly (*ἀδιαίρετως*), inseparably (*ἀχωρίστως*). Just as, in Jesus Christ, God remains fully Himself in a man, without that man being in consequence dehumanized; and just as this duality of nature does not infringe the unity of the person: so, in preaching, the Word of God resounds in, under and with the words of its messenger, without those words ceasing in consequence to be completely human. The story of the burning bush is the clearest and most striking Biblical illustration both of the greatness and of the scandalous character of this miracle (Exod. 3): scandalous in that the vessel of the Word of God seems to contradict its content, so weak and fallible is it (cf. 2 Cor. 4: 7).

True Word of God, truly human word. It is to the realization of that miracle that God intends and invites us, in charging us to preach His Word with our own words. We are thus enrolled in the succession of apostles and prophets, since Holy Scripture itself can be explained only in this light.

Let us attempt, in the three following comments, to expand what we have just seen:

(a) Our human word is chosen, justified and sanctified by God in order to communicate His own Word. It is not for us to inquire whether it is part of God's glory to hide Himself in human reality; for we are sinners and cannot meet Him directly before death; or whether He does it because He is the Creator and does not wish to address us without remaining faithful to His own work. What on the other hand is important is to emphasize that it is by God's initiative that preaching

is the miracle which it is. He *takes* a man to be bearer of His Word, as Jesus *took* bread to mean the real presence of His body broken for the salvation of the world. He chooses our words in order to address Himself to us, and by this very fact He justifies the human word and gives it at once its true content and its true reference. And He sanctifies these words, that is to say distinguishes them from everything else that is said, with the same vocal instrument, among men. He is the source of our speech.

In preaching His Word with our own words we do not therefore become masters of that Word; we are its instruments, its ministers. That is why to add to the Word of God, or to suppress some part of it, compromises that Word and makes us guilty. When we preach we are sharing in a miracle; we are not magicians. For if God remains faithful to His promise to speak to men through our mouths, He is also free to let us talk to no purpose. His name must not be taken in vain.

(b) For our preaching to be what it ought to be, it is absolutely essential that our words remain completely human. We must not tolerate the slightest hint of docetism in Christian homiletics. And this fact provides our greatest incentive not to preach fearfully, but freely. Certainly we must purge our words of anything which is against the purpose for which God intends them; we must pray that we may be obedient and lucid instruments in God's service. We shall always do well to remember the words of Origen: "Announcing the Gospel is a priestly task. Just as the ancient priests, when they officiated at the sacrifice, had to see that the victim was spotless, so he who performs the sacrifice of the Gospel must make certain that there is no blemish in his preaching, no error in his instruction, no fault in his doctrine; and to this end he must first of all offer himself as a sacrifice, and make his limbs dead to sinful impulses, so that, not only by his doctrine but also by the example of his life, he may make his offering acceptable to God, and hence work the salvation of those who hear him" (*Comm. Rom.* 10: 12). We must therefore enter with heart, head and limbs into our consecration to God's work; our preaching must be a part of the witness which, as pastors, we are called on to bear.

But this acquiescence in our vocation must not be allowed to affect us adversely as persons. This means first of all that, in spite of our necessary apprehension at the idea of the miracle we administer, we must put enough trust in God's choice of our words not to withdraw, not to resign, not to take refuge in a meditation *on* the Word of God;

for this would not involve the Lord, whereas He wants us to preach *His* Word. Such a humility, fine though it may be, would be a retreat, a rejection of the confidence God has placed in us, a botching of our ministry. Preaching does not express an uncertain hope, any more than baptism does, or the eucharist; it is declaratory and brings about that which it proclaims. In this sense, while we have a pious trust in God's own participation, it also involves us, to the full, in the necessary risks of our condition as servants. Putting ourselves entirely at the service of God, who chooses to speak to His people and to the world through our mouths, also implies that we must not distort our own natures. Like Gideon we must go out with the might that is ours (Judg. 6: 14). We must not try to appear more intelligent, more profound, more lucid, more decisive, more pious, more affectionate or more cultured than we really are. Nor must we imitate other preachers (which, by the way, is why published sermons, though they may be useful to our parishioners, are a snare rather than a help for us). In the Bible itself, the prophets and apostles do not all have the same penetration, the same style, the same *pectus*. Perhaps in different circumstances different advice would be in place; but in general, in spite of the view too widely held in certain Church circles, we are less threatened by clerical pride than by scrupulosity, inferiority complexes, a lack of freedom and joy.

Let us therefore take this marvellous opportunity which God gives us—and which is in fact a command—to be ourselves: a bit sad, a bit stupid, a bit timid, a bit talkative; and let us try to master ourselves to such an extent that what we are does not adversely affect the work which God entrusts to us. Here we could enter at length into a discussion of pastoral manners of speech, for example of that terrible habit we have with our voices of “changing gear” as soon as God calls on us to transmit His Word to men. This way of trying to “transubstantiate” our speech, in order to make it worthy of the Lord, both falsifies us and compromises the Word of God. Though good diction is certainly necessary, our vocal schooling should be rather that of the popular singer than of the operatic artist. *Ὁμιλέω*, from which the word homiletic comes, does not mean to shout oneself hoarse, nor to take on an unctuous tone, nor to be hypnotized by a concern for eloquence, but to speak in the tone of ordinary conversation. When the Reformers required that services should be conducted “in the vulgar tongue” they also had this in mind. God has not commanded us to declaim in front of people, but to say something to *His* people. Let us therefore learn to rejoice that the bush that we are is not consumed by the flame which