

III

THE SERMON IN WORSHIP

Thesis I. The sermon is an integral part of the ordinary worship of the Church.

DIVINE WORSHIP is an eschatological event. Its whole procedure is a sort of echo of the incarnation and a prefiguration of worship in heaven. It is an echo of the incarnation in that it includes, like the ministry of Jesus, what one could call a "Galilean" moment—centred on the sermon—and a "Jerusalemite" moment—centred on the eucharist. These two elements, indispensable in the ordinary worship of the Church, are conditioned by one another. The preaching of the Kingdom could not have been properly understood if Jesus had not sealed it with His blood; but neither could the crucifixion have been understood if Jesus had not prepared it by His prophetic ministry. The same is true of the relation between sermon and communion.

A church service is also an echo of the incarnation by reason of its uncertain character. We need faith to see in it anything more than a voluntary meeting for spiritual instruction. Though it is the moment when the world to come demands acceptance by the present world, the service does not proclaim itself immediately and indubitably as the moment of this miracle: it can be an object of scandal; it has its part in the "messianic secret".

But the service is not only an echo of the incarnation; it also prefigures the worship of the heavenly Jerusalem. It not only makes us contemporaries of Jesus' earthly ministry; it also allows us a foretaste of "the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6: 5), it associates us with the innumerable hosts of the angels and the adoring procession of the Church triumphant (Heb. 12: 22). It has a share of glory.

It would therefore be as great a distortion to compromise the miracle of the liturgy by camouflaging our service in a welter of bad taste, disorder, improvisation and acceptance of the mediocre, as it would be to think ourselves capable of provoking the miracle automatically and indisputably by streamlined organization, pomp and an outward display of joy. We have here a dialectic both of whose terms must be

respected if we are to avoid catastrophe: if the wise men came to offer Jesus gold, frankincense and myrrh, the Lord whom they adored was a poor little baby; if Jesus made a royal entry into Jerusalem, it was nevertheless on an ass. Perhaps we could say, in a very schematic way, that the sermon guarantees the humility of the service, while the eucharist guarantees its glory. The sermon is therefore an indispensable part of the service. Let us examine this proposition more closely:

(a) Although it is an integral part of the ordinary service of the Church, the sermon must not upset its balance by introducing a discordant note. Certainly the sermon enjoys a measure of autonomy in relation to the liturgy. There should therefore be no question of its setting within the liturgy softening the sermon, changing its essential character from a solemn confrontation between God and His people to a mere act of contemplation with commentary. Rather sermon and liturgy must be complementary. The sermon is a meeting between God and His people, the words and acts which are exchanged when they come together; in order to avoid a dialogue of the deaf there must be a correspondence between the sermon and the prayers and hymns.

The question arises—should the liturgy be determined by the sermon, or the sermon by the liturgy? The answer is clear: as it is the eucharist which dominates the “Jerusalemite” part of the service, it is the sermon which dominates the “Galilean” part; it is therefore for the liturgy to adapt itself. The introit, collects, lessons and if possible the hymns will therefore be chosen with reference to the text of the sermon. The text, however, except in very unusual cases, will not be allowed Sunday after Sunday to model an order of service *sui generis*. It is a form of illuminism to forbid, on principle, a certain fixity of style in what is essentially a regular meeting. Besides, the ordinary sermon in a parish service cannot be exhaustive; it will not necessarily summon us every time to repentance, to thanksgiving, to the confession of faith—all of which elements are nevertheless necessary if the service itself is not to be dismembered.

(b) Though numerous parishioners will insist on making “service” and “sermon” identical (“that was a nice service”, that is to say the minister delivered a good sermon), the sermon is not the whole of the service. It must therefore have a time-limit. This problem is delicate, because in suggesting short sermons one risks being accused of cutting short the Lord’s Word, of thinking that what we have to say to Him is more important than what we have to hear from Him. I think how-

ever that the advice to keep sermons short can be justified if three conditions are observed:

First, that the sermon shall be part of a continuous undertaking. When, in front of the same congregation, one preaches in *lectio continua* a whole book of the Bible, or by *lectio selecta* a collection of texts which the Church has prescribed for her members, one does not need to start each Sunday at the Flood and end at the heavenly Jerusalem. It is permissible to be brief because one sermon is only a link in a homiletic chain; we can refer to what we have said on previous Sundays and announce what we shall speak about on future ones. The second condition under which a sermon may be short without being a sign of contempt for God's Word is that communion shall be celebrated. The table standing prepared dispenses us from a long sermon, because its aim is similar to that of the sermon: namely to permit a living contact (with the mutual gifts which such a contact implies) between Jesus and the Church. The last condition is of a character at once theological and technical: it is to liberate the sermon from the straitjacket of rhetoric (as well as from the embellishments of our learning), and not to count it as a fault if, instead of beginning with an introduction and a plan of the sermon, instead of prowling round the text, we plunge in and give a straightforward, down-to-earth interpretation and application. If these conditions are fulfilled, one need have no scruple in preaching for no more than a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes each Sunday. This brevity will also make it possible for the liturgy not to be hurried through, but read with calm and dignity; in this way the faithful will not have the impression of listening to vain repetitions, because they will be able to participate more fully.

(c) Has the sermon a fixed place in the liturgical procedure? Should it always be placed between the same parts of the service? The answer to this question is that it need not. The sermon has no unchangeable place in the service, and on fast days, for instance, one can well imagine the sermon coming before the confession of sins and the absolution. As a general rule, however, it is normal for the sermon to have its own particular place, and the one it occupies in our service is the right one. It is normal in fact for the sermon to dominate the first part of the service, and in any case to precede the eucharistic part. This precedence, however, is not one of value, but a logical precedence (which means that in a place of worship the pulpit must not overshadow the communion table). Further, to make clear that the sermon is not the whole service, but one of its two culminating points, it would be desirable

that, wherever the arrangement of the church allows, the liturgy should no longer be celebrated from the pulpit; both we and our parishioners would learn to appreciate the miracle of preaching better if it were done from a place exclusively reserved for it. The pulpit is not a platform; it is a place from which God's Word resounds. For the same reason lectures and speeches given in churches should not be given from the pulpit.

(d) We have said that the sermon is an integral part of the *ordinary* service of the Church, in which each Sunday the parishioners come together to meet their Lord, to listen to Him, to receive assurance of His grace and pardon and to rejoice in His presence, to humble themselves before Him, adore Him, confess Him, sing to Him and offer themselves to Him in the living and holy sacrifice of a catholic Christendom. The eucharist is by the same token an integral part of the ordinary service. But the Church can also come together for other services—for example the services of morning and evening prayer. These do not replace the ordinary service. They prepare for it and arise out of it; or else they recall, throughout the course of the week, that it began with Sunday, the day of the Lord. I think it is possible to maintain that if the *reading* of the Word must be an integral part of these extra-ordinary services, its *preaching* is not indispensable. There can be Christian services without preaching, but on condition that they have reference to the main service.

Thesis 2. The liturgy bears witness to the Church's participation in the history of salvation; the sermon bears witness to her temporal existence in the world.

There is not opposition between sermon and liturgy, but there is a difference in kind. This difference does not present the Church with a problem in her striving for faithfulness, but it demands to be respected. It is this tension between sermon and liturgy that we must now consider.

In schematic terms we may say that this tension illustrates the general tension in which the Church is placed between the ascension and the second coming of Christ. The victory has already been won; death has already been vanquished by resurrection; the Holy Spirit has already been spread abroad; the table of the messianic feast is already set up; a distinction is already apparent between those whom St. Paul calls the brothers (*οἱ ἀδελφοί*) and those whom he calls the rest (*οἱ λοιποί*); it is already possible to place in our own lives the moment of judgment

and salvation, and thus to oppose the “now” of peace to the “then” of rebellion.

But this “already” is also called in question by a “not yet” which reminds us that, if we are saved, we are saved only in hope. We still have to die; our flesh has not yet abdicated; the bread and wine remain ambiguous signs; the frontier between the Church and the world remains ill-defined, and our progress is not free from backslidings. The kingdom of God is at hand but has not yet ousted and replaced the princes of this world. There is an overlapping of the age to come and the present age; though we are no longer of the world we are still in it. Our true history is that of our salvation; that which is determined by the saving interventions of God, the reconciliation of the cross, the miracle of Easter, the glory of the ascension, and all the acts which prepare the way for these interventions and follow in their wake. But our true history is hidden, like the seed in the soil, in the history reported by textbooks and newspapers, and we are open to the charge of disobedience if we “unearth” the Church, if we tear it up from the ground.

The tension between the liturgy and the sermon corresponds to this tension between the two ages; not that the liturgy is exclusively a fruit of the world to come, or the sermon of the present world, but in the sense that, if the liturgy attaches the Church to the history of salvation, the sermon recalls to her that she participates in that history in the midst of this world. Two escapist paths are thus barred: escape towards a Church complacently practising a docetic liturgiolatry, sheltered from the world by her form of worship, and escape towards a Church indulging in breathless prophetic activity, cut off from the peace of God, from her eschatological rest (*ἀνάπαυσις*) by continuous homiletic exertion. The latter of these ways of escape would be no less disastrous to the Church than the former.

The liturgy connects the Church with the history of salvation; it thus contradicts the ephemeral nature of time. It unites the Church of all places and all times around the permanently decisive *magnalia Dei*. One could say that it adores God’s faithfulness. The sermon connects this history of salvation to the present moment and proves its present validity; it thus contradicts everything that could give the Gospel an illusory character. It reminds the Church of all places and all times of the vocation which God proposes for her here and now. We could say that it expresses God’s freedom.

Let us examine some concrete and practical implications of our thesis:

(a) First of all, the particular character both of the liturgy and of the sermon must be respected. If the liturgy attaches the Church of here and now to the Church of all places and all times, if it adores God's faithfulness, we shall best respect it by following considerations such as these: *we shall refuse to modify the liturgical texts* accepted by the Church and demonstrated by her to be in accordance with the scriptural canon. In particular we must not make the Lord's Prayer into a theme with variations; we must not modify it, any more than the creed, in accordance with our notions of dogmatic propriety. The Church prays God not to lead her into temptation but to deliver her from evil, and she confesses not the resurrection of the body (for what then will become of the soul?) but of the flesh, and consequently of the whole person. Certain prayers may seem burdensome to us in their length and verbosity, but we shall hardly persuade the Church to give them back their conciseness and brevity—and the joy and fervour of the Biblical style—if she knows that every minister submits them to his own personal variants.

Anyone who detects in this counsel to faithfulness a spirit of discipline which is out of harmony with the supposed freedom of the Reformed conscience will do well to consult, for example, the acts of the national Synods of the Reformed Church of France in order to be convinced that this is not the case. Respect for the specific character of the liturgy involves *acceptance of a certain measure of invariability*. On this point all our modern liturgies, with the exception of that of the Reformed Church of France, with its praiseworthy attempt at a brake on individualism, seem haunted by the fear of repetition, which amounts in fact to a fear of giving the Church a chance to participate in the liturgy, an unconscious wish to prevent our congregation being anything but listeners. Our liturgies are in effect not so much the Prayer Book of the Church as collections of liturgical texts for the use of pastors. Not only do the laity not possess the text, but if they brought it with them to the service they could not find their way about it. Now it is impossible to build up a Church by asking her to listen to the pastor's prayers; he should be the spokesman of prayers she already knows. In this respect our anti-liturgical spirit necessarily perpetuates the existence of an offensive clericalism. The rhythm of the Church's year, with on the one hand its special prayers, on the other the existence of one or two variants in its ordinary prayers, should be ample for the avoidance of monotony.

As long as we cannot bring ourselves to this decision, and the sacri-

fices it involves, the liturgy will remain something foreign to the faithful, a sort of faintly irritating clerical game. Respect for the particular character of the liturgy also implies that it must not be preached but *read*, and read in the most impersonal manner possible. It is not the concern of the minister alone, but of the whole congregation. In a number of confessions the liturgy is sung, and arguments of some weight can be put forward in favour of this usage. The "liturgical tone" should be as free as possible from dramatic inflexions, slow enough for everyone to be able to participate in the prayers, loud enough to be heard by everyone—and, above all, natural; we are not there to amuse the faithful with rhetorical inflexions of speech. We have already seen that it is a fitting way of respecting the particular character of the liturgy to read it *from the choir*, rather than from the pulpit, which is the place for preaching.

Let us now turn to the sermon. In the service it expresses God's freedom. It connects salvation with the present day, and thus the Church of all places and all times with the parish united *hic et nunc*. How can we respect the particular character of the sermon? First of all by *really running the risk involved in homiletic freedom*. Certainly it is the one, the eternal Gospel (Rev. 14: 6) that we are called on to preach here and now, and certainly it is desirable that we should repeatedly put ourselves to school with the great preachers of the Church; but we are not here to imitate St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine, Calvin, Bossuet, Saurin, Adolphe Monod or Walter Luthi; nor indeed should we ever manage to imitate anything but their faults. It is we ourselves, with our limitations, our prejudices, our cares and joys, who are charged with preaching the Gospel. That is why, once more, I draw attention to the snare which other preachers' sermons may become for our own. Either they make us despair because our own will never be as good as theirs, or else we founder in an imitation which distorts us.

Respect for the particular character of the sermon implies *an acceptance of the infinite variety* of the single Word of God. Though the sermon has only a single vital truth to communicate, it becomes bad as soon as it becomes monotonous, and it becomes monotonous as soon as the circumstances, preoccupations and personal characteristics of the preacher assume a vital role. The best remedy against this threat of monotony is to free the pastor, as far as possible, from the duty of choosing his own text. In conclusion, respect for the particular character of the sermon implies that it must not be read but *preached*; we must speak to the faithful in words and images that they understand, looking

straight at them, and in a tone of brotherly challenge. When we preach we are not giving them a lecture; we are intervening in their lives in the name of God to help them, to warn them, to threaten them, to console them, to set them tasks and to give them courage. This *viva vox Evangelii* neither allows us the laziness of improvisation nor forces us to learn our sermons by heart as one learns one's part in a play.

(b) Our thesis, which is seeking to place sermon and liturgy in relation to one another, is fortunately protected from excessive rigidity by two factors: intercession and the cycle of the Church's year. Intercession in the service prevents the liturgy from becoming detached from reality, and escaping into a mysterious world accessible only through ecstasy. It finally attaches the liturgy to the *hic et nunc*, to social and political events, to the joys and sorrows of the parish, since it brings together all these things to expose them to the patience, the judgment, the pardon and the peace of God. That is why it is so important that intercession should be as precise and concrete in its reference as possible.

The cycle of the Church's year, in its turn, prevents the sermon from losing contact with the eternal validity of the Gospel, from escaping into a breathless prophetic activity informed only by current events. It finally attaches the sermon to the unique events of the history of our salvation. That is why we should be glad to see our churches beginning once more to have some affection for preparing and celebrating the Christian feasts. These ensure that we return regularly, compulsorily, to that on which our salvation is founded, and tell our contemporaries what is meant for them by the annunciation, the coming, the life, the death, the resurrection and the triumph of Jesus amongst us.

But we must note that the cycle of the Church's year is not only a blessing: it can become a temptation for our sermons. For in fact it proposes themes rather than texts for our preaching, and this thematic treatment of our Sundays, if carried too far, risks making our preaching docetic, perverting our sermons into "discourses on religious subjects". Even if the theme is concrete, the very fact that it is a theme gives it an abstract character. Besides, multiplication of the number of feasts gives the Church a dangerous security, because it spares her surprises. It would clearly be docetism to ignore Christmas, the feasts of Passiontide, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost, and to refuse to prepare our parishioners for their commemoration. But it would be as clear a case of docetism blithely to celebrate a sick persons' Sunday, a mothers' Sunday, a Sunday for the fatherland, for peace, for the Reformation,

for the dead; once the cycle of the liturgical year departs from a directly Christological basis, our preaching is threatened.

Thesis 3. The worship of the Church is not complete unless the sacrament accompanies the sermon; for the sermon has as much need of the sacrament as the sacrament has of the sermon.

The sermon is an integral part of the ordinary worship of the Church, but so also is the sacrament. On this point it must be confessed that our Church is ailing and in error. But to cure her and reform her we must not merely accuse her, but explain to her the reason for the necessity of the sacraments (for she is less in doubt about the necessity of the sermon). To do this, we must be able to make clear the relation between preaching and the sacrament of the Word of God. The problem is a difficult one, and is also appallingly subject to the pressure of confessional traditions, which does not simplify the matter. Here we can only enumerate a few possible ways of explanation, which seem to be valid.

(a) There is not the preaching of the Word of God and the sacrament; there is the preaching of the Word of God and sacrament of the Word of God. That is to say that the Word of God is given to us in two forms: it is both preached and signified, and it becomes valid through this dual testimony (cf. Deut. 17: 6, 19: 15, etc.). This duality echoes the incarnation, and it is in this perspective that we must understand the relation between sermon and sacrament. I think therefore that it would be starting on a false trail to ask which—sermon or sacrament—carries the more weighty provision of grace. Perhaps it is possible to talk of a certain difference of intensity, but to approach our problem by positing a quantitative difference between these two means of grace seems to me to lead automatically to a preference for the one which is regarded as being more loaded with grace, and consequently to an unbalancing of the service and of the Church. We should stifle our curiosity and adore God who has chosen to communicate the grace of His Word to us chiefly through the sermon and the sacrament.

(b) Jesus did not preach the reality—present in Himself—of the kingdom of God without demonstrating the presence of this kingdom where “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up” (Luke 7: 22). He did not preach without giving a proof of what He preached; He did not promise life without fulfilling that promise by giving His life. Since He instituted the sacraments only for the time of His bodily absence there has been a