**APOSTOLIC OPTIMISM AND OTHER SERMONS - SERMONS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**20. THE SECRETS OF EFFECTIVE PREACHING by JOHN H. JOWETT**

(An Address on preaching delivered before the Free Church Congress, Cardiff, March 1901.)

I AM happy to think that in the discharge of the duty which I have undertaken to-day there are two things which, even if I possessed them, would be sorely and painfully out of place. This is no occasion for the artifices of a swelling rhetoric, nor does our subject afford any welcome to the exercises of jesting. When a body of men is assembled for the purpose of considering the apparent inefficacy of their preaching, the proper atmosphere for such deliberations is to be found, not in the light excitabilities of a public meeting, but in the deep and awe-inspiring solemnities of public worship. We must approach the great theme in the attitude of groping supplicants, and not with the presumptuous steps of detached and distant critics. We shall see further if we are upon our knees. Our vision may be intensified by penitential tears. Our questions must be asked in the spirit of eager worship. Our self-examination must be made in the light of His countenance. We must "inquire in His temple."

The preacher, what is he? Behind the one word "preacher" of the New Testament Scriptures there are half a dozen original words, each with its own distinctive suggestion, each contributing its own item of colour to the description of the mighty office. The preacher is a herald, a public crier, a man with an imperial proclamation, charged with a message which must be announced from the house-tops with all the urgency of a sovereign command. The preacher is an evangelist, with a message which is almost a song, full of sweetness and of light, the speech of the wooer, laden with tenderness, and bright with the promise of glad- some days. The preacher is a logician, engaged in strenuous reasonings, seeking to gather together the loose and incoherent thoughts of men, and bind them into firm and well-knit spiritual decision. And the preacher is a conversationalist, who sometimes lays aside the spacious function of the public minister, and, discarding the formalities of linked and well-connected discourse, engages in homely intercourse, in fireside speech with his fellow-men Such is the variously coloured office which lies be- hind the complex and suggestive word "preacher." We must take the essential significances of a king's herald, a tender wooer, a strong logician, and a familiar friend, and in their wealthy combination we shall obtain a vision of the ideal preacher of the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The preacher, what is his function? Let us rehearse a classic passage from the Epistle to the Romans. "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear with-out a preacher?" Reverse the order of the sequence. How then runs the vital procession? Preaching, hearing, believing, calling, saving! What are the extreme terms of the series? Preaching, saving. The ultimate aim of all true preaching is the salvation of men. Salvation from what? Salvation from sin? Yes. Salvation from hell? Yes. Salvation from infirmity? Yes. From moral stuntedness and spiritual immaturity? Yes. From all arrested growth in the direction of the divine? Yes. The strenuous purpose of all vital preaching is to lift men out of the bondage of sin and dwarfhood, and to set them in the fine spacious air and light of the free-born children of God.

**1.**

Now, here let us begin our quest into the comparative inefficacy of our preaching, and may the Holy Spirit illumine for us the secret chambers of our life. Do we keenly realise the horrors of the bondage from which we seek to deliver men? Has sin become a commonplace? Does it no longer fill us with poignant pain? Has it shed some of its loathsomeness, and has our repulsion been relaxed? Can we now toy with terrors before which our fathers shrank aghast? The questions are surely not altogether irrelevant, and may be warranted by many of the conditions in which we are placed. There is proceeding in our time a certain toning-down of language, which may be wise or unwise, but which is not altogether without suggestion. We do not like some of the stern, bare, jagged words which our fathers used in their description of sin. And so we are very busy filing and smoothing the sharp edges, and diluting their somewhat loud and glaring colour. I am not afraid of changes in phraseology if the change do not indicate a degeneracy from decisive strength into a mincing dilettantism. The substituted word may be more cultured and refined, but if its content be thin and impoverished, I am afraid of the change. "Vile and full of sin I am." The word "vile" may offend my ears, but what is the reason of the offence? When I see the excision of the word "vile," and the substitution of the word "weak," I am afraid of the tendency, because it seems to suggest a relaxing of our conceptions of the enormity of sin. "A guilty, poor, and helpless worm, on Thy kind arms I fall." I may not like the severe and humbling term "worm," but what is the reason of my dislike? Is it that I have acquired a less stringent conception of sin, and are these graphic terms too bold and severe? Do we require a milder phraseology because our enemy is less appalling? Is the yearning for more exquisite refinement the expression of spiritual culture and growth, or is it the evidence of partial benumbment? The answer must be found in the secret places of the individual life.

There is a fountain filled with blood

Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;

And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,

Lose all their guilty stains.

I tell you frankly I don't like the figure which runs through the verse. There are many to whom it is almost offensive. Its elaboration creates almost a repulsion. But while I dislike the figure, I want my dislike to be safe and illumined. If I drop the particular phraseology, I want to retain the tremendous sense of sin which lies behind it. If I refine the word, I don't want to gild the sin. If I obtain a more cultured vehicle, I want it to express the same horrible and loathsome presence. I covet no phraseology which will lend respectability to sin. It is possible to obtain finer poetry at the expense of convicting power. We may intensify the polish and glitter and lose the lightning. Polished and dilettante speech will not satisfy us if we are profoundly held by a sense of the exceeding bitterness and loathsomeness of sin. Does that sense pervade our preaching? Do we impress the people with the feeling that we are dealing with trifles, or with blinding and appalling enormities? There is a word in the Book of Ezekiel which often rings through my soul when I am preparing the message for my people. "And he called to the man clothed with linen, which had the writer's inkhorn by his side; and the Lord said unto him. Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry, for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof." "Set a mark upon all that sigh and that cry" for the sin of the city. Upon how many of our foreheads would the man with the inkhorn set his mark? "That sigh!" It is a secret pain. It expresses itself in involuntary sighs. Whenever the thought crosses the mind, it throws a cold shadow over the heart. "And when He beheld the city, He wept over it." "And that cry." It shapes and colours their prayers. You can find their profound sense of the world's sin in the nature of their supplications. They cannot keep it out of their prayers. Are we so crushed and burdened by the horrors of sin? Is it the staple of our prayers? Is it the burden of our sighs? Does it ever cause the loss of an hour's sleep? Or is sin an unaffrighting and undisturbing commonplace with which we have become so familiar that it never startles us into pain? If sin has become a commonplace, our preaching has become a plaything. If we do not feel its horrors, we shall lose the startling clarion of the watchman. There will be no urgency in our speech, no vehemence, no sense of imperious haste. If we think lightly of the disease, we shall loiter on the way to the physician. If we do not feel the heat of the consuming and destructive presence, we shall not labour, with undivided zeal, to pluck our fellow -men as brands from the burning. If our sense of sin is lax, we may find in that laxity one of the causes of ineffective preaching.

**2.**

Are we possessed of a spirit of sensitive sympathy? I am not surprised that in his enumeration of the graces of a sanctified life the Apostle should put in the primary place a heart of pity. "Put ye on compassion." It is part of the essential equipment of every true preacher of the gospel of Christ, and it is a part of our equipment which may be most easily and perilously destroyed. It is one of the gravest perils of the Christian ministry that we are in such continuous and imminent danger of losing the power of our compassion. When first I entered the Christian ministry I used to have a wondering fear whether my untried faith would be able to bear continual revelations of suffering and sorrow and bereavement and death. Would my sensitive sympathy engender painful doubt and encourage spiritual revolt? But now the problem has been altogether changed. The searching question is not now whether my faith can persist through continued manifestations of the darker experiences of life, but whether my faith can keep alive through a calm and undisturbing familiarity with them. We have to be familiar with experiences whose infrequent visits bring benediction and softening influence to others. That which makes the rainy season in other lives constitutes our drought. An infrequent contact with sorrow may enrich the compassions; constant familiarity with it tends to dry them up. In my early ministry my heart used to melt at every funeral over which I had to preside. I could not read the burial service without tears. It may be that it is part of the gracious ministry of God that with the process of the years this burden should be eased, but I do not want the ease if it means the loss of a sensitive compassion. I would rather covet the tears, and the choked speech, and a body tired and drained twice and thrice a week, than enter into a familiarity with sorrow which estranges me from the sore and stricken hearts of my fellow-men. If our compassion fail, our power is gone. If we do not feel with our fellows, we shall never be their guide. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am nothing." If I lose my sympathy, I lose my vision. Sympathy is the parent of discernment; the finer the sympathy, the more exquisite the discernment. "When he was yet a long way off, his father saw him." That is the kind of vision which as a preacher I covet: the fine, sensitive sympathy which can discern the first faint stirrings in a brother man's heart when he is just inclining towards the divine. Before the divine movement in his soul is expressed in speech, before it is even registered in his face, nay, when the face indicates rather a sterner revolt than an incipient surrender, when the man is yet "a long way off," I want to feel the remote awakening by the power of an exquisite compassion. If men can feel that we know their very breathings, and that we thrill to the deepest and most secret movements of their spirits, they will suffer us to be their guides and friends. But if our compassions are dried, our people will know our benumbment, and our preaching will fall like a shower of hard gravel rather than as a shower of soft and refreshing rain. If our familiarity with the shadow has impoverished our compassion, let us get the stream renewed. "In His love and in His pity He redeemed them." A reverent intimacy with the Lord will deliver us from the hardening influence of ceaseless familiarity with grief. He will "come down like rain." He will "open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys." "The desert shall become a pool, and the dry land springs of water." If we have lost our sensitive sympathy, we may find in the loss some explanation of our ineffective preaching.

**3.**

Is the wooing note present in our preaching? -- If we do not realise the horrors of sinful bondage, and sympathise with the bound, the tender notes of the lover and the wooer will be absent from our speech. Is not our preaching too unbrokenly severe? Is there not too much that savours of the judgment-seat, and too little that breathes the winsomeness of the fireside? "Out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings." Yes; but out of the throne there proceeded also "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal," the soft, tender, healing, sustaining influences of grace. I think that in our teaching and preaching the thunder and lightning are apt to be more frequently conspicuous than the gracious shining river. We want more tenderness in our speech, the tones of love and of sensitive yearning. We want less scolding and more pleading, less driving and more wooing. "Compel them to come in." I am glad that the somewhat harsh word has been excised from the Revised Version, and that in its place we have the soft and welcome word "constrain." "Constrain them to come in." Woo them into the kingdom! Go back to your wooing days; think of all the little devices -- all of them legitimate -- employed in order to woo the affections of the one you loved. Think, too, of the little tendernesses paid, all the kindly abounding services rendered, when even the flickering response seemed to be a repulse. How you multiplied your attentions and nursed the gracious awakening! Every great preacher is a wooer. If we turn to the Old Testament Scriptures, we might expect the wooing note to be absent. Amos is severe in speech, stern in expostulations, multiplying his denunciations, yet you find that even stern, thundering Amos sometimes lays aside his thunder and begins to woo. And as for Hosea, he is the wooer from beginning to end. Turn to Isaiah, and at the end of the chapter in which there is poured out abounding denunciation and woe you will find that he lays it all aside and begins with, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." He was a great wooer. We need to woo our people. "Jesus, lover of my soul." Preacher, lover of man's soul! Let us speak a little more tenderly. Let us drop out the thunder and put in the constraint, and where the thunder has failed the lover may succeed. Not only in the Old Testament Scriptures, but right through the Bible, you will find this wooing and constraining note. I am perfectly sure it has been too absent from my ministry. Months ago I determined that there should be more of the tender lover in my pulpit speech, more of the wooing note of the Apostle Paul, more of the gentleness and tender constraint of my Lord.

**4.**

Let me ask one other question. Has our teaching and preaching the New Testament emphasis? You think I ought to put that first. I do not want to put it first, and I will tell you why. I do not want to give it undue emphasis, lest I appear to suspect my brethren. I do not think they are far away from the great cardinal verities of the Christian faith. I believe they are very near the centre, and they keep to what they conceive to be the primary realities of our religion. But even though we be agreed upon it in our own practice, there is no harm just here to re-emphasise our belief and practice. Wherever in the Scriptures the preacher has to proclaim great and imperative duty, it always finds its root very near to the Cross. When the Apostle Paul is proclaiming what appears to be a commonplace duty, he goes back for the roots right to Calvary's Tree. "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Churchy and gave Himself for it." And if he is talking about the eating of meats, he proclaims his injunction from the Cross. " Destroy not him with thy meat for whom Christ died. When he is proclaiming a duty he links it to the Crucifixion, to the crucified Christ. He drives all his duties home with the power of the Gospel of the crucified Christ. All his tools are armed with one handle. I do not know anything more ineffective and more provoking than to have a gimlet with no handle to it. You cannot drive a pricker far without a handle, and you cannot get a gimlet into the wood without a handle; and you cannot drive a duty, you cannot prick man's conscience to the very core, unless you handle the duty as Paul handled it, and drive it home by the power of the crucified Christ. And, therefore, I put the searching question, Have we got that emphasis in our teaching, and do we make it quite clear and apparent? When we have proclaimed a duty, is the dynamic just as manifest? When we present an ideal, are the resources as conspicuous? Do we link all our imperatives to the power of the Gospel of Christ?

One other question, and I have done. My brethren in the ministry, do we appreciate our own message? Do we look as though we revelled in it? There is nothing so helps a man to a good meal as to sit down with a man who enjoys a good appetite. And there is nothing so alluring to people, when we desire to show them how gracious the Lord is, as to let them see we revel in the diet. "Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord." And why is he blessed? Because his delight is contagious, his enthusiasm is catching. When we see a man bubbling over and delighting in God, we ourselves begin to be unsealed. A minister's enthusiasm will be found contagious among his people. "Thy word is sweet." When we say it, do we look as if we knew it? "Thy word is sweet." Do we proclaim the sentence with a sour face? "My meditation of Him shall be sweet." When our people see that we delight in the feast, they will sit down at the same table.

Let us, in conclusion, subject ourselves to a rigorous cross-examination. Do I hate all sin? "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil." Do I feel sin to be loathsome? Am I possessed of a tender sensitiveness, that can discern even the faintest movings in the hearts of my people, and which will reveal to me their inclinations long before they receive any outward expression? And, Lord Jesus, have I been a wooer, a lover, and are any in Thy kingdom because they were just enticed into it by the tender persuasiveness of my life and speech? And have I linked the proclamation of duties to the love of Calvary? And has my teaching had New Testament perspective and proportion, and have I evinced delight in my own message? May the Good Lord grant that to all these great questions we may be able to give an affirmative response!