

radiant woman. But if we find St Luke writing of our Lady in such a way as to refer to texts of the Old Testament where Jerusalem is personified as the Daughter of Sion—

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Sion . . .

Ló, your king comes to you. (Zach 9, 9)

we are halfway at least to the liturgical application of the former text. There is at any rate an affinity between the method of Luke and the way in which the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, makes use of the scriptures in the liturgy.

THE SUNDAY SERMON: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?

ROSEMARY SHEED

FROM the sonorous periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the friendly intimacy of Billy Graham, preaching has always held a central position in protestantism. The sermon, for many, is the major attraction of the service, and often the quality of a man's preaching seems the chief determining factor in the size of his congregations. The clergymen of detective stories are so often in their studies on Saturday afternoon preparing the next day's sermon that we should suspect the worst if we found them doing anything else. But though we are quite accustomed to priests' excusing themselves from our dinner parties to finish their Office, I think most people would be astonished if a priest said he must leave to work on a sermon. Somehow, apart from special occasion sermons (such as weddings and funerals), most of us don't seem to take preaching very seriously. Many Catholics will make quite an effort to get to a mass without a sermon on Sundays—nor are they necessarily those who only go because the Church says they must: many of them are the daily mass-goers.

The chief reason for this state of affairs, I imagine, is that we all know the mass to be what matters—English Catholics perhaps more than most, since it was the centre of attack in penal days.

The priest has got such tremendous things to do in saying mass and administering the sacraments (and he would hardly have time to prepare a sermon on Saturday anyway, with so many confessions to hear), that we have all slipped into a way of thinking that whereas, in the mass and sacraments, Christ is acting through him, when he preaches the priest is simply another man talking to us in his own person. And I think it is largely this sense of a human interlude in the middle of a divine action that accounts for the resignation with which we all clear our throats and shuffle ourselves into comfortable positions in which to endure the boredom we expect. We behave rather as though this were the advertisements flashed on to the screen between showings of a film. Little wonder, then, that we generally *are* bored; it would take a couple of altar-boys wrestling in mud to break through to us.

Yet in fact, of course, the priest preaching to us is not simply another man talking to us in his own person: the Church, in him, is fulfilling her duty to teach us, to expound to us the mystery of God made man. As surely as the passage from the gospels which precedes it, the sermon is God's word to us; it is no accident that has placed it between the gospel and the creed.

But I think we all tend to be somewhat infected by the protestant notion of God's word as having been given us once for all in the Bible, complete and needing only to be accepted—though for us Catholics it is 'the Church's teaching' which becomes this inert, monolithic source of reference. We forget that the Church's teaching is what she is teaching now and what she will teach in the future, that God's word comes to us through the living voice of Christ's mystical body. (Surely Newman's *Development of Christian Doctrine* should be required reading for all Catholics.) The Church is Christ revealing himself to us now. And our acceptance of her teaching must also be a living thing, growing as we grow in ability to understand, developing alongside our other mental and emotional activities.

This is why one views with special alarm the tendency to feel that so long as children know their catechism, and have had religious instruction up to when they leave school, their future as Catholics is assured. For in fact, even if all Catholics left school with the optimum theological formation possible for their age, they must still continue to develop their knowledge and understanding if they are to 'put away the things of a child' in

religious as well as secular matters. No one would contend, after all, that even a first-rate grounding in English literature at school would enable one to appreciate Shakespeare at forty without at least *some* re-reading. To have a child's understanding of religion alongside an adult's understanding of politics, sociology, art, literature and science is as tragic as to have a child's mind in an adult's body; the personality will be mutilated in a similar way. And even apart from the importance *for its own sake* of a living understanding of what we believe, the knowledge and insight of a sixteen-year-old will not be enough to see anyone through the temptations of the adult. 'The Church forbids it' is not really an adequate bulwark for anyone who knows no more of what the Church is than he knew as a child; particularly as he does not generally realize that there *is* any more to know. Non-Catholics sometimes accuse us of clinging to dogma at the expense of charity, whereas in fact the average Catholic knows almost no dogma. What he does cling to, often by the skin of his teeth, is the Church, with a love of God, unsupported by understanding, which must command our admiration.

For great numbers of Catholics, the only further knowledge they ever get as adults is derived from the Sunday sermon—and they only get that because it comes in the middle of mass.

But they *do* hear that. Once a week, priests have the chance of helping those who are hardest to help because they do not realize they need help at all. We all realize we need the sacraments and the mass—but the word of God? We know our catechism, we read our Sunday gospel (we almost know that by heart, too); we can say with the girl in the musical, 'I knowed what's right and wrong since I been ten'. I have even known people who have not been to church for years but who, having been brought up as Catholics, are quite convinced that they 'know' what the Church teaches. Yet this lamentable attitude can perhaps be in part explained by the number of sermons which seem to imply that the congregation do in fact know all they need to know, and need only be reminded of their moral duties, or inspired to greater fervour in prayer. It is as if one said, 'You had all your protein when you were a child; all you need now is carbohydrates'. It seems to me, speaking indeed temerarily as a laywoman, that the prime object of preaching should be to make us realize our hunger for truth, to make us *want* to know more theology.

I don't know if there still exist priests who don't think it good for the laity to know too much; I have never met one. But quite a lot of priests seem to have come to despair of ever being able to teach them anything, either because they are simply not interested in learning, or because, with no theological training, they are not capable of it. Much of the trouble, I am convinced, dates back to a childhood in which doctrine and catechism-learned-by-heart were taken to be one and the same thing. ('We've done the incarnation; now for the sacraments: what are the matter and form of baptism?') I think that if more people came to realize that the corpus of doctrine is a living body and not a dead one, a body growing in itself and in us, they might start to feel more interest in it. It is fascinating the first time one studies how a given doctrine grew into what it is today. We are inclined to take for granted papal infallibility, for instance; this is clear, we say, from the fact that Christ said, 'Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church . . . etc.'. Yet it was eighteen hundred years before the pope's infallibility was defined; it can't have seemed as clear as all that all the time. The incarnation, too: 'Two natures with one person', we say happily; few Catholics know the excitement of seeing how this doctrine was gradually hammered out amid the heresies that split Christendom. We find it incredible to read of triumphant crowds marching through the streets crying out that our Lady was truly *Theotokos*, as they celebrated the condemnation of the Nestorian heresy. And though Christ himself said, 'I am the vine, you are the branches', and St Paul told Christians they were the body of Christ, the doctrine of the mystical body is one which is still being developed most richly.

Often as one has heard the parable of the mustard seed explained in terms of the Church's development in size and organization, few people seem to see that it is also a parable of the Church's teaching: the seed contains all the elements of the full-grown tree, but how different they look! And it seems to me that this going back to the beginning and showing how the thing has developed also provides the answer to the problem of how to make people with no theological training understand theological ideas. For though theology has now acquired, and indeed needs, a precise language of its own, particularly where subtle points of definition are concerned, the theologians who wrote the New

Testament did not know it. St John tells us that the Word was made flesh—it was not he who coined the phrase ‘hypostatic union’; he tells us that in heaven we shall be like God ‘because we shall see him as he is’—only later did this come to be called the beatific vision. Even those technical phrases people do know from their catechism have often become so familiar as to provoke no conscious reaction to their meaning any more. (Just as the gospel passage we read each week is so familiar as to be more of a lullaby than a meaningful word from God.)

Our religion has become something we ‘have learnt’ and now ‘practise’—almost like the piano. We think of our ‘spiritual life’ as something quite apart from our ordinary life as human beings in the world. Therefore the other great need I think the Sunday sermon should fulfil is to show the relevance of what we believe to the whole of our lives. To many people, the only difference that being a Catholic makes in the daily business of living is that we are subject to certain duties and (still more) prohibitions which non-Catholics are free of—like going to Sunday mass or not joining the Freemasons. And while we often hear sermons upbraiding us for missing mass, or being late, or kindly reminding us that under certain circumstances it is not a sin at all—very seldom are we told what the mass is, how the Church’s life as a whole and ours as individuals are summed up in it, how we can unite our whole lives with it even if we unhappily cannot go on a given occasion. (Priests often tell mothers of young children that they are not obliged to come if they have no one to leave the children with; sometimes one almost feels that their main concern is the crying of the children in Church, rather than the mothers’ *need* of mass.) Yet the mass is one of the most fascinating subjects for what we may call historical treatment—the idea of sacrifice, the sacrifices of the old covenant, Christ’s sacrifice on Golgotha—the only text needed is the epistle to the Hebrews. And once people have come to realize the mass properly, there will be no need for priests to urge their flocks to ‘come to communion at least once a month’—as though the two were separate devotions.

Another subject which badly needs positive treatment is sex. We hear from the pulpit of the dangers of immodesty and impurity, of contraception, abortion and divorce—all, of course, quite true. It may well be difficult for a celibate to talk of marriage,

especially if he sees it as God's way of making sex (necessary for the continuation of the race, but something he personally has no concern with) legitimate and indeed noble. But I think that this is starting at the wrong end. Father Vincent Wilkin, in his wonderful little book, *The Image of God in Sex*, shows that masculinity and femininity in human beings reflect God's activities in creating and sustaining, and the love and power in the life of the Trinity. And sex in man is more than simply the physical power to beget children. The person vowed to virginity is using his sex as well as the person who marries, but in a different way. Father Durrwell points out in his book *The Resurrection* that marriage is holy because it reflects the mystery of the union of Christ with the Church in this world, whereas virginity is a foreshadowing of our union with God in heaven. A sermon along these lines would be far more helpful than the occasional reminder that the Christian family should be modelled on the holy family ('Them and their one', one parishioner is said to have muttered rather sourly after hearing this.)

And a third subject upon which I think a positive, theological approach is needed, is our Lady. Many people who might be rather alarmed at the idea that they were being preached theology, will listen joyfully to anything about our Lady; the knowledge that she is our Mother is one of the most precious things the Church gives us. Yet some of the things one hears said about her are rather surprising—I once heard a priest say that the *most* wonderful thing about going to heaven would be that we could sit at her feet. Surely the most important thing about our Lady is that everything we know of her leads from her to her Son (how fascinating it is that we know *nothing* about her personally except what links her with him). In so much popular Catholic piety our Lady has been reduced to a cosy, motherly figure, whom we are urged to imitate for her modesty and her humility; all that has thus been lost—the true splendour—could be given back to us in the Sunday sermon. It would be one of the easier tasks, because an interested congregation is guaranteed by the subject, and the gain in bringing the reality of Mary and her relationship to us into our lives would be immeasurable.

Once people come to realize that being a Catholic means not so much a set of prohibitions as a whole coherent view of life, and that the doctrine they believe as Catholics is a continuing revela-

tion from Christ, then I think they will listen avidly and grow in understanding. That people *will* listen avidly to 'straight' theology is the experience of anyone who has done Catholic Evidence Guild outdoor speaking; crowds will stand by the hour, listening—not just to snappy interchanges with hecklers about papal morals or the sale of indulgences, but to talks on the mystical body, the mass, the Trinity. And indeed, I am sometimes tempted to think that the best way to break out of the vicious circle of congregations who expect to be bored, and priests who expect them to be, would be for all priests to try a little outdoor speaking; if a man can learn to hold an audience that is free to leave, he will know he can hold the *attention* of an audience that is not. And so much of the simple technique learnt by 'tub-thumping' would be equally effective in the pulpit. One learns, for instance, to make certain that one has made each point as clear as one is capable of making it before going on to the next; to make contact with one's audience the first criterion of success; to avoid using any phrase without having a precise meaning for it (the outdoor heckler will instantly pick on it—but the silent listener may also be puzzled); and, above all, to keep away from the Latinized language of traditional teaching as far as one possibly can. (I once heard a priest read St Paul's great passage on charity, using the word 'love' each time, and the effect was electric.) Although I realize this would not be a practicable step for most priests to take, all those I have ever known who have done outdoor speaking have regarded it as being of the greatest value to their other work; so this rather wild suggestion is not a completely idle one. It would also be a wonderful thing for the whole Evidence Guild movement, but that is not what I am concerned with here.

One practical step which I myself think would make a great difference would be to avoid having the sermon come as a weary third after the parish notices and the reading of the epistle and gospel in English. I have been in churches where the epistle and gospel are read by an altar-boy or a man in the congregation while the priest is reading them in Latin. This seems a more sensible plan, in any case, particularly as so many people nowadays have got missals, and it seems to fit in far better with the dialogue mass which is happily becoming a more general thing. And in my own parish, almost all the notices are on a multigraphed sheet handed out at the end of mass—surely this would also be very useful in

parishes where there are several priests, or visiting priests, who find the notices hard to decipher!

Once we can come to realize that the sermon, like the mass, is something that only the priest can do, that it is an integral part of his ministering to us the Truth and Life of Christ, then I think we will come to treat it with the seriousness that is its due. Our saying of the creed will be the natural sequence to our having listened to the word of God, our acceptance of Christ revealing himself to us now through the voice of the Church.

TEACHING THE FAITH

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THOSE of us who are called upon from time to time to teach the faith to children are often perplexed about what we should in fact teach. The Catholic faith, of course; the catechism seems the obvious choice, it is clear and easy to learn. But then what are we to do about the scriptures? It is not always very clear how we can combine the two, they follow their own rhythms.

When I was sent to teach at a Catechism Camp last summer the problem was very much in my mind—the very name ‘Catechism Camp’ seemed to indicate the method; and yet I had found, the previous year, that catechism teaching is far from satisfactory in itself. The children know the answers on the whole, and the meaning behind the answers tends to confine one to the logical steps of a remote theology. It was, therefore, a relief to find the December 1957 number of *Lumiere et Vie* very concerned with just this problem, particularly an article by R. Girault on *Four Centuries of Catechism* which shows that the catechism first appeared in an official form at the Council of Trent, and was conceived as a means of explaining the scriptures. There can be no doubt about the emphasis the conciliar fathers put on the importance of scripture as the primary source of teaching. In