

a plea for a return to Challoner. Far from it. His style was no doubt just right for his own day: for us, two hundred years later, much of it seems stilted, artificial and distracting. But even in the matter of style—to say nothing of the more important things I have referred to—we can learn from him. In our proper anxiety that the language of our prayer-books, missals and sacred writings should be natural and intelligible, we run some danger of toppling over into triteness and banality. Richard Challoner recalls us to dignity.



ON THE WORD OF GOD

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IN his book, *The High Church Tradition*, Canon G. W. O. Addleshaw makes an unfavourable comparison between the scholastic theologians of the Counter-Reformation and the seventeenth century Anglican divines. 'The theology of the Tridentine divines is embalmed in scientific treatises; the High Churchmen were content to expound theirs in sermons delivered to ordinary congregations.'¹ Men like Suarez and Bellamine, when they wrote as technical theologians, were not, however, trying to do the same sort of thing as the Caroline divines, and the comparison is hardly a valid one. The men who should be set beside John Donne, Lancelot Andrewes, or Jeremy Taylor are writers, preachers and priests like Bérulle and Olier, Bossuet, Bourdaloue and Fénelon. Dislike of our scholasticism and legalism is one of the commonplaces of the Anglican critique of Rome; we may think that others see over-clearly in us those things on which they lay least stress. We have our great men in the fields which the Church of England has most cultivated, and would like to set them confidently beside theirs in what the Abbé Couturier has called *émulation spirituelle*, that friendly rivalry in the race which we all run for the same prize.

1 Faber and Faber, 1941, p. 29.

I have chosen a sermon of Bossuet as an example of what our seventeenth-century divines could do. It will be seen how biblical and patristic his whole manner, as well as material, were; and those who too readily, for the sake of neatness, or from trying to give credit to both sides, regard Counter-Reformation teaching and piety as one-sided, will be surprised to see how balanced and complete he is. Protestant and Catholic can find common ground not only in the Bible or in pre-Reformation theology, but also in the writing of one who is regarded as an outstanding representative of the Counter-Reformation, and who took his theological cue from the Council of Trent.

This sermon, for the second Sunday in Lent, was preached in 1661 and again, in a revised form, in 1666. Bossuet was commenting on the Gospel for the day, the Transfiguration of our Lord, and took as his text the words, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.' (Matt. 17, 5). The sermon was divided into an introduction and three 'points'; a pattern familiar to any Evangelical. Bossuet described in turn three ways in which the Word and the Eucharist are linked; in both we approach Christ, in his teaching and in his flesh; in both we receive Christ, by hearing and by eating; and both reveal themselves in us, if we receive them worthily, by our changed lives. But Bossuet's hearers were not given a bare, logical treatise; he did not argue step by step, but rather took up and repeated each of these themes, with differing emphases, in each of his sections, approaching the mystery of which he was speaking from many different angles, rapidly sketching an outline and then going back to fill in details, retouch and make clear those things which he most desired to leave in the memories of his audience. The passages which I have chosen are given here in the order in which they appear in the sermon.

After explaining how the authority of the Law and the Prophets, represented at the Transfiguration by Moses and Elias, have given way to the supreme authority of our Lord, Bossuet spoke of the obedience which his words demand.

'Everywhere that the Gospel is preached, it is the words of the Son that are proclaimed; we take our stand beside Moses no longer, but, by the authority of Christ, we make known his words and his Gospel.

'There are two places in the temple of God to which we give

special respect and reverence: the altar and the pulpit. At the one Jesus Christ is worshipped in the truth of his body, at the other he is recognized in the truth of his teaching. There is a very close link between these two holy places, and the works accomplished at each are related in a most wonderful way; from both a heavenly food is given to the children of God; in both Jesus Christ teaches us; at the altar, recalling in our thoughts the memory of his passion and teaching us by the same means to sacrifice ourselves with him, he preaches without words; in the pulpit, his teaching is expressed in speech; and, if you want a closer relationship still, just as the gifts offered at the altar are transformed into the body of our Lord Jesus Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit and by mystical words the very thought of which must make us tremble, so, by the same Spirit, and, again, by the power of God's word, the faithful are transformed in a hidden way into members of his body.

'It is because of this wonderful relationship between the altar and the pulpit that some doctors of former times have not hesitated to preach to the faithful that they must approach each of them with the same reverence, and on this subject, my brethren, you will rejoice to hear some remarkable words of Saint Augustine. This is what that great bishop has to say:

Which of these two things seems to you the more important, the Word of God or the body of Jesus Christ? You will no doubt reply that the word of Jesus Christ does not seem to you less worthy of respect than his body. And therefore we must take as much care not to allow the word of Jesus Christ which is declared to us to fall from our hearts as we do to prevent his body from falling from our lips as we receive it; because he who listens carelessly to his holy word is as guilty as he who, by his own fault, allows the very body of the Son of God to fall.²

In the course of his exposition of the first point, the relationship between the word of the Gospel and the Eucharist, Bossuet explained the task the preacher must set himself:

'Preachers of the Gospel do not go up into the pulpit to make empty speeches for our entertainment. God preserve us from ever thinking that! They go up in the same spirit as they go to the altar. They go to celebrate a mystery, a mystery like that of the

² Appendix. Serm. CCC. n. 2. St Caesar of Arles, d-542?

Eucharist. For the truth of Jesus Christ is as really present in the preaching of the Gospel as the body of Jesus Christ is in the blessed sacrament. In the mystery of the Eucharist, the species that you see are signs, but enclosed within is the body of Jesus Christ himself. And in sermons, the words that you hear are signs, but the thought which produces them and which they carry into your minds is truly the teaching of the Son of God.

"The sort of eloquence worthy of being used in Christian speech is not to be acquired by over-careful study. It must come of its own accord, drawn forth by the greatness of the things with which it deals, and acting as interpreter to the wisdom which seeks expression. But what is this wisdom, which must speak out from the pulpit, if it is not our Lord Jesus Christ, the wisdom of the Father, who commands us in today's Gospel to hear him? And so the evangelical preacher is he who makes Jesus Christ speak to us. But he does not make him speak the language of men; he is afraid of clothing eternal truth in words which are unfitting; that is why he takes all from the Scriptures, from which he borrows the sacred words themselves, to be both the strength and the beauty of his speech.

"Every style or device is good, provided that it is a mirror in which Jesus Christ appears in all his truth, a source from which spring up in all their purity the living waters of the Gospel, or, if more life and movement are needed in the expression, a faithful interpreter which neither changes, nor deflects, nor adulterates nor weakens his holy word.

"You see then, Christians, what you must expect from preachers. I hear frequent complaints that there are few of that calibre; but, my brethren, if there are few, accuse no one but yourselves, for it is up to you to make them so. Here I declare to you a great mystery. Men do not become preachers by their own efforts. Do not imagine that one draws down the words of divine truth from heaven whenever one wishes. It is not the strength of genius, nor constant labour, nor violent effort which bring us the gift. One cannot force it, an excellent preacher has said, it must give itself to us. *Non exigitur, sed donatur.*³ God does not mean to speak every time we choose to demand it of him. "The Spirit blows where he wills" (John 3, 18), when he wills, and the word of life which

³ S. Peter Chrysologus, *Serm.* LXXXVI.

commands our wills is not controlled by them: *Donatur divinus sermo, non servit, et ideo non cum jubetur loquitur, sed jubet*. Do you want to know when God is pleased to speak? When men are ready to hear him. Search sincerely in sacred doctrine, and God will raise up preachers for you. Let the field be well prepared; neither good grain, nor labour, nor rain from heaven will be lacking. It is faithful hearers who make preachers of the gospel.

‘Love truth, then, Christians, and it will be declared to you; your appetite for the bread of heaven will be satisfied. Long to hear the words of Jesus Christ, and he will make his voice heard within your heart.’

Bossuet next spoke of the way in which the word of God must be received.

‘To understand properly what our way of attending to the divine word must be, we must print deeply in our hearts the Christian truth that besides the sound which strikes the ear, there is a secret voice which speaks within, and that these words of the Spirit within us are the true preaching, without which all that men say will be but a useless noise. *Intus omnes auditores sumus*.⁴ The Son of God does not allow us to take the title of master; let no one, he says, call himself master. For there is but one master and one teacher. *Unus est enim magister vester* (Matt. 23, 8). If we pay heed to that word, we shall find, says St Augustine, that none can teach us but God;⁵ neither men nor angels are capable of it. They can indeed speak to us about the truth; they can, so to speak, point it out to us; God alone can teach us, because he alone gives us the light of discernment. St Augustine makes this clear by making a comparison with bodily sight. We can have pointed out to us the paintings in this church, and the skill and delicacy of the drawing and the beauty of the colours can be described, but all would be in vain, we should distinguish nothing, if the sun did not shed its light on them. And so, whatever care we take to distinguish true from false among the many things which fill our minds, if he of whom it is written that he “lights every man coming into the world” (John 1, 9) does not send an invisible light upon those objects and upon our intelligence, we shall never be able to see the distinction. It is, then, in his light that we discover the differences between things; it is he who gives us a certain way

⁴ St Augustine, *Serm.* clxxix, No. 7.

⁵ *De Peccat. Mer. et Remiss.* Lib. I, No. 37.

of thinking which is called "the mind of Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 2, 16), by which we recognize and receive what comes from God; it is he who opens our hearts and says within us: "It is the truth which is being preached to you". And there, as I have said, is the true preaching. That is what made St Augustine say: 'Here, my brethren, is a great mystery: *Magnum sacramentum, fratres*; the sound of the word strikes our ears, the Master is within; the preacher is in the pulpit, the preaching is done in the heart. *Sonus verborum [nostrorum] aures percutit, magister intus est.*⁶ For there is but one master, who is Jesus Christ, and he alone teaches men. That is why our heavenly master has said so many times: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear".' (Matt. 13, 9.)

'And so, my brethren, to be attentive to the word of the Gospel, we must not direct our attention to the weighing of phrases, but to the ordering of our lives. The place of our meditation is not the place where we savour fine words, but where good desires take shape. It is not even enough to dwell in the place where true judgements are formed; we must be where resolutions are made. Finally, if there is any place deeper still and more hidden where the counsels of the heart are heard, where all our plans are laid, where all our actions are begun, it is there that we must be attentive to the words of Jesus Christ.

'God sometimes makes preachers say something which cuts through our tortuous ways and our complicated passions, finding out that sin which we hide away and which sleeps in the depths of the heart. . . . When that thrust comes, if it does not penetrate far enough, let us seize the sword ourselves and plunge it more deeply home. Please God we shall force it so deep that, cut to the quick, the blood of our wound will flow from our eyes, by which I mean those tears which St Augustine called so expressively the blood of the soul.⁷ But still that is not enough; as our consciences are pricked, so good desires must be born, which must turn into fixed resolutions and come to fruition in good works, so that, as we hear Jesus Christ, so we faithfully obey his word.'

In the last part of his sermon, Bossuet spoke of the fruits born from a true hearing of the Word.

'The Son of God has said in his Gospel: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood, dwells in me and I in him" (John 6, 57); that

⁶ In *Epist. Joann. Tract. III, No. 3.*

⁷ *Serm. cccli, No. 7.*

is to say that if we leave the holy table having lost our taste for the pleasures of the world, if a holy sweetness binds us constantly and faithfully to Jesus Christ and to his teaching, it is a certain sign that we really have tasted how sweet the Lord is. It is the same with the heavenly word, which has this last relationship with the holy Eucharist, that, as we do not know whether we have worthily received the body of the Saviour unless our state is such that it is apparent that we are nourished by divine food, so we cannot see whether we have listened to his holy word except by living in such a way that it is clear that we are taught by God. For often there rise in our hearts certain imitations of the true sentiments by which a man is deceived, so that we must not believe certain feelings of enthusiasm, or a few imperfect desires, and in order to recognize properly whether one is really touched, we must look only at our works: *Operibus credite*. (John 10, 30.)

“The learned St Chrysostom was afraid that his hearers came to his sermons in the same spirit as they went to the theatre, for they often appeared to be moved; cries and confused voices were heard in his audience, which showed that his words were stirring men’s hearts. A less experienced man would have believed that his hearers were converted; but he was afraid that these were no more than theatrical emotions provoked by tricks of rhetoric; he withheld his rejoicing until he saw changed lives, which were the certain sign that the word of Jesus Christ had been heard.

“In order that from now onwards we may be afraid of ever leaving the school of the Master without being better for it, let us hear how he speaks to those who do not profit from his holy precepts; *Ipsium audite*: listen, it is he who speaks to you: “If anyone listens to my words and does not hasten to carry them out, I do not judge him, for I come not to judge the world, but to save it” (John 12, 47-8). But let him not imagine that he is going to remain unjudged. “He who despises me and does not receive my words, has one who will judge him.” Who will that judge be? “The word that I have spoken to you will judge him in the last day.” That is to say that no excuse will be accepted, nor compromise sought. The word, he says, will judge you; the law itself will pronounce sentence, according to its own meaning, in its full rigour; and hence you must understand that it will be a judgement without mercy. That last word was needed to establish fully the holy authority of the word of God; this last link between sacred

doctrine and the Eucharist. This gift of God, coming close to men, comes to search consciences with the eye and the authority of a judge; to some it gives a crown, to others condemnation; and thus the divine word, this bread for our ears, this spiritual body of truth, judges those who are not touched, condemns those who are not converted, kills those who are not fed.

'My brethren, these mysteries are our friends; let us not be so bold as to break off our friendship. Let us adore Jesus Christ before he speaks to us; let us contemplate in silence and in awe the divine Word upon the altar, before he teaches us from this pulpit. May our hearts be opened fully to the teaching of Heaven by this holy preparation. Make that your practice, Christians, and then our Saviour Jesus Christ will be your teacher; and so I pray that the sacred waters of his Gospel may be poured into your souls and become there a fountain springing up to eternal life, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.'

It is said that Dr Micklem once visited Cuddesdon Theological College and asked them, before beginning his address, whether they used the service of Benediction or not. The answer was no; but that did not spoil the point he had to make, which was that just as the priest holds Jesus Christ up before the congregation in the Blessed Sacrament, so the preacher holds him up before his hearers. The Congregationalist minister and the Anglican ordinands would, I believe, gladly have listened to Bossuet.