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ARCHIVES

HOMILETICS

INTRODUCTION

Back to the question of whether sermons written down can or cannot communicate, whether once they are engraved in script or type on paper they would have to be ground up and scattered on drinking water before the dancing congregation would take anything at all.

Three examples, like three parts, should serve to set the matter before us. Consider an Easter sunrise service, held in a drive-in theater. "If we must," you say; and I agree you really should not, not to achieve communication nor to build community or achieve edification. But for this illustration, table your principles for a moment. You are to preach from the refreshment stand at the foot of the gentle slope toward which all radiators tend. Your words will reach the Easter pilgrims through microphone and car speakers. With you in the glass-enclosed refreshment stand is a small brass band and a congregational choir. Spring is late this year, and it is chill here in this modern garden on this first day of the week very early. Before the band has exhaled its overture the windows are steamed over and, like the great gulf fixed, there is no chance of your passing over by eye contact to them in their cars, nor any possibility that they might pass back a response from thence to you. You have a manuscript, and you have made its content your own by functional memorization. You had determined that they should hear of the Easter triumph not only by the hearing of the ear but by the seeing of the eye. But will you now gesture toward the steamy windows, or will you give personal attention to the brass band? Or will you read the sermon?

Part II. You are addressing three or four thousand young people at the evening devotions in an open-ended court of a quiet college campus at a youth convention in the Midwest. The clusters and couples and rows night after night spill out into the next block down the street. The PA men have done well—you can roar you a fierce lion or ever so gentle a lion. There you stand with your back against the dormitory door, almost completely hidden by a clump of Pfizer evergreens. The first two nights you are determined not to know anything but what can be delivered in an extemporaneous manner. But the third night, ardor flags and you determine to read the manuscript. Will the four thousand be the less fed? Will the bread of life all be remaining afterwards to be gathered up again in baskets, but for the moment, wasted? Will the message sound fishy, unbelieved, and so unbelievable? (I decided that night to give up and read. For your information, after two paragraphs some overzealous janitor turned off all the dormitory lights including the exterior entrance light with which I was reading the manuscript lying stealthily on the Pfizers. Which says something about the Boy Scouts' marching song and about knowing what you have written even if what you have written you plan to read. But it says nothing about our subject.)

Part III. You are the dean of the chapel at Valparaiso University. Yours is the highest pulpit in North American Christendom. The nave of your church is long enough for you to mull over your sermon two times during the processional. The acoustics are such that your delivery must be quietly inserted into the microphone and your words will drop down like righteousness from speakers directly above the heads of the listeners all over the chapel. As the people look up to hear the words of redemption drawing nigh, they cannot hope to see the intelligence sparkle in your eyes against the backdrop of the glittering chandeliers; no, they cannot even know whether there be any eyes in that small face trembling there below the great, brass preacher-snuffer. Will you read? And will they tell?

All of which is an introduction to this sermon by the Rev. Norman Nagel, dean of the Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana. It is the baccalaureate sermon of last year—and should make helpful reading as new school terms take up the drive to reach next spring's termination. Of this preacher and of his delivery it can be said, both are well read. Here is speech on paper as well as theology in delivery.

GEORGE W. HOYER

I once said to a couple in a wedding sermon that they must acknowledge that they were a pair of sinners, but sinners within the forgiveness of Christ and their marriage would be indestructible as they lived that forgiveness toward each other. The bride flashed daggers at me, and later she made it quite clear to me that they had not yet been to bed together. That is what the theologians call an atomistic conception of sin, and it also atomizes man.

It is not because we do the odd sin now and then that we are sinners, but because we are sinners we sin. A tree produces its own kind of fruit.

So when at the end of the day you look back on four years at Valparaiso there is none of it that you would hold back from inclusion within the forgiveness of Christ, none of you left outside His forgiveness, and so then all of you within His acceptance. Within His acceptance blessing, outside His acceptance the opposite. Without Christ we are done for.

Baleful predictions of doom have been coming with increasing frequency these last few years. We have almost taken to collecting them. One doom might shake us, but a series of them we can discuss, evaluate, and propose solutions for. There were so many financial crises in Britain after the war that nobody took them seriously any longer. It was the business of politicians out of office to paint lurid pictures of catastrophe and then propose themselves as the only ones who could save us from disaster. Sir Stafford Cripps was the most popular. The British just loved being given a stern talking to by him. We do love a good old denunciation every now and then, and if the church does not supply hell-fire preaching, others do. The flesh has a fondness for being berated. That is its own kind of language. "You are being soft, selfish, lazy, complacent, prejudiced, polluting." "Yes, I suppose I am. I really should feel a bit ashamed of myself

and try harder, and things *will* then get better." There is really nothing shattering in all this, for everything remains in the realm of man's capacities. He could make a better day if he would only try harder.

You may have noticed evidence in support of this in the way in which the term human is being used nowadays. Human is used as equivalent of good. Bad is inhuman or dehumanizing. To be fully human is then the ultimate good. God has been displaced, and theology gives way to anthropology, and a river cannot rise above its source. Now all this insistence on being human is good as far as it goes. Your generation has seen the things that destroy people with a ghastly clarity. You rebel against being fitted into the mechanisms of our society that are fueled with people's lifeblood. A man counts for more than the machines that enslave him; a pile of dollars is no sufficient price for a man's life. This "no" to the subhuman, the dehumanizing forces, we should cry and live out at full strength, but when we have done all that, we have not done, for there is more.

Hamlet: "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all."

"This goodly frame, the earth, seems still a sterile promontory."

"Between earth and heaven." We shall not know that unless we look up. If we look only down, we become like men in a disabled submarine. The forces of destruction are of a beyond-human scale. The ocean has no remorse for those it drowns. Can a corporation care, or a government have compassion? What is human is threatened and dwarfed, reduced to body count by the faceless forces below. And if we look up, do we see any friendly face? The beauty of sun and sky and stars, but also the rays that burn out the retina, the hurricane, the earthquake. We have gone to the moon and become an even

more unlikely oddity in an indifferent and inhuman universe.

Then we see a face in the crowd, unremarkable, ordinary, one like the rest of us, taking it all. He speaks to us. What He says and what He is are disquieting. But there is no dodging it. To turn away would somehow be turning away from what is at the heart of it all. He does not talk at us but somehow opens us up so we see ourselves and we know it is true. How can He do this to us? There is so much surrounding Him that puts us off, and His associates do little to recommend Him. Yet He says, "Follow Me," and we do. Why? We can only point to Him. He is why.

He talks and acts as if He were God. This is incredible, and yet we murmur, "my Lord." We are in His hands, Calvary-marked hands, Ascension blessing hands, hands that are God's right hand. We are using language here that we do not understand the size of, but that is the sort of language which is prompted by the Man from Nazareth.

"It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

Light, knowledge, glory, God—face of Christ.

When we pause in the struggle against all that dehumanizes from the subhuman below us and look up, the light, knowledge, glory, God are not some majesty beyond the stars. The divine is not experienced by tickling our nerve endings or poking about our brains to see strange shapes and colors. The divine is not inside us nor in nature romanticism nor in some blown-up projection of an idea. God is there in the face of Christ. Only there is He there for us. There

in the face of the Man crucified and risen for us. And now not anywhere else for us but as He deals with us with His words, and the water and the wine and the bread. He deals with His power everywhere, but only at these points is He there to forgive us, to accept us, and to bestow and nourish that life which nothing can destroy.

And so tonight you come holding back nothing of yourselves, of your Valpo years with their growth and denials of Him, your aspirations and plans, all, the whole lot. Lord, have mercy. Lord, forgive. Lord, give us life. And He says, "Take eat, this is My body, given for you. Take drink, this is My blood, shed for the remission of your sins. Go in peace." His size peace, shalom, wholeness, robust health and vigor—His working to bring you to completion, which comes as He uses you up. His way, there for one another, there for people as He is there for you all the way, as sure as His promise, as sure as Calvary and resurrection. You can only become human His way; never so long as you make your humanity the ultimate goal; only by losing our lives is life given us.

Come now to Christ giving to you. Come with all your hopes and aspirations, your piecemeal humanity, your uncertainties and your fears, your sin. Come to be totally embraced within His forgiveness, His accepting and enlivening you, so that means may never be mistaken for ends, becoming idols that enslave and destroy. Come to be made free and to receive the resources for living out your lives as Christ's men and women in the world. "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

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