

PREACHING.

A USEFUL book recently put forth by Mr. Housman, vice-principal of the Chester Theological College,* gives good advice to intending candidates for the ministry, and, among other things, has some excellent remarks on preaching, upon which we will base a few observations. It is hardly necessary to say—it is repeated every day in some form—that neither clergy nor laity are as yet fully alive to the importance of preaching. It used to be said that people “made too much of the sermon.” The real meaning of this, if it had any meaning, was that they did not sufficiently value the duty and privilege of public worship; of this last statement there can be no doubt. The reproach may, in part, be wiped away, but only in part. But it may be safely asserted that so far is preaching from being over-valued that its profound and immense importance is not at all recognized either by preachers or by hearers. Whether we consider the place assigned to the work in Holy Scripture, or remember that it is a testimony from God, or reflect that it is the exercise of the highest powers of man sanctified by the Holy Spirit of God; or whether, again, we call to mind the place which it has occupied in the Church of Christ, its power and influence in all the great crises of the history of the Church, we cannot fail to be impressed with its importance and power.

And yet how lightly is it thought of! Multitudes of lay-people regard the sermon as a necessary evil, which has to be endured, and of which the less we have the better; whilst many of the clergy seem to think of it as “a thing to be done”—not as a powerful instrument for good—and accordingly they begin, continue, and end the preparation and delivery of their sermons in a highly perfunctory manner. It is not quite easy to see how a better state of things is to be brought about, whether by the clergy providing better sermons and so leading the laity to value them more, or by the laity requiring better preaching, and so, by the demand, stimulating the supply. Probably the two things will go together if matters are to improve.

The writer of the book before us points out, as every wise writer on the subject has done, that a sermon has two aspects. It is a message from God, and it is a work of art. No one denies this, although many persons might express the same thoughts in different words. But these are among the truths which no one denies, but which very few, comparatively, regard as practically true and workable.

Let us, clergy or laity, recall the last half-dozen sermons that we have heard or preached. Messages from God, no doubt, in some sense they were. But even this thought was not urged upon us much, as we preached them or listened to them. Some of them we had preached or heard several times before; and they were given again unchanged. We are not

objecting to the repetition of a sermon—there may be good reason for that; but we confess we are totally unable to understand the habitual preaching of old sermons. What! we are inclined to ask, have you nothing fresh to say to us? Are you living, and reading, and thinking, and feeling, and holding intercourse with your fellow-creatures and fellow-Christians from day to day, and have you nothing to say out of all this life, and thought and feeling? Does no inspiration come to you from God, burning as a fire within you, needing to come out in words of tenderness and power? We believe that the preacher who studies the Word of God and the heart of man, beginning with his own, will never want for something to speak which shall, as a very voice of God, awaken a true response in the hearts of those who hear him. He who grasps firmly the principles of the revelation of God in Christ, and watches their operation in the world and in history, will be made to his fellow-men a revealer of the thoughts and intents of the heart. That this is so seldom the impression produced by a sermon is not the fault of the clergy alone. Of the Greatest it is said, “He could do no mighty works there because of their unbelief;” and the prophet cannot prophesy effectually unless the ears of the hearers are opened. If people came wanting to be entertained, or expecting to be wearied, the preacher will hardly be recognized by them as the Voice of the Eternal.

If the ordinary sermon does not strike us as an inspired message, it certainly does not usually impress us as a work of art. Has the ordinary preacher ever seriously thought of his work as an art? Has he carefully investigated its principles and laws? And has he endeavoured, in practice, to conform to these laws? These are questions which can be answered fully only by preachers themselves, and, perhaps, not altogether by them. This, however, we may remark, that, if the answers to these questions be affirmative, the results are very astonishing indeed.

“At once,” says Mr. Housman, “accept the axiom that to write sermons is a fine art, and can only be acquired just as any other fine art is acquired, namely, by diligent study of the great masters.” How is this advice realized by most preachers? Not very long ago a young clergyman remarked, in the presence of the writer, that he had never read a dozen sermons in his life! and he made the remark, as implying that there was something rather meritorious in his abstinence. He proceeded to relate that he never wrote a sermon. Another worthy man went so far as to say that he never thought of his sermon, sometimes not even of his text, before he went into the pulpit! Surprising must have been the sermons which were the outcome of such a method! There is only one other which is nearly as bad, namely, the habitual stealing of sermons, not from great masters but from the common place preachers of the theological school to which the stealer happens to belong.

May we offer a few words of counsel to young preachers on the preparation of sermons—read,

memorized, or improvised. We give no opinion as to the superior advantages of these different methods. To most men the careful preparation of the matter, learning the words to be improvised at the moment of delivery, will be the most effective. But others will find memorizing better; and others again will do better to read. But in any case, all should write sermons. We do not say that all should write the sermons which they preach. Sometimes this may be useful, especially when one is learning the art, but every one should practise the composition of sermons.

The great sermons of great preachers should be carefully studied and analysed. Among the great models, we might mention Bossuet, Bourdaloue, Lacordaire, A. Monod, H. Monod, Busier among the French. Of English modern preachers, Magee, Robert Hall, Henry Melville, Liddon, Maclaren, P. Brooks, and others. German preachers are seldom good for models; yet the sermons of Schleiermacher and Rothe are admirable; so are some of those of J. Muller, Luthardt, Kahins, and others.

Let the student take a sermon by one of these preachers and carefully analyse it, noting the arrangement and relation of the parts, and the development of the central thought or subject of the discourse. Then, from this analysis, let him construct a sermon of his own without reference to the original. After that he might make an outline of his own quite independently except in so far as the recollection of his model might influence him, and then he should write a sermon on that outline. A great deal of work is involved in such a method, and this is the reason why there are so few preachers of eminence. They will not take the trouble required.

Here are some hints to go on with. First, determine clearly the subject of your sermon. What are you going to preach about? Let your hearers be able easily to say what the sermon was about when they have heard it. Secondly, consider how you mean to develop your subject, how you are to start and what is to be your end, and by what means you are going to pass through the different portions of your argument. Your end must be the effect you intend to produce, your beginning must be something that will be conceded, and that is suggested by your text or your subject. Thirdly, make a full outline, sketch, or skeleton of your discourse. Fourthly, be careful of your transitions lest they be too abrupt, and so you lose the attention. This is specially necessary for the extempore preacher. Fifthly, let your thinking always be a little in advance of your speaking, otherwise you will be in danger of failing to convey your meaning, and, if speaking extempore, may suddenly come to a pause. Sixthly, let your conclusion be clear, natural, and forcible, carrying home the whole lesson of the sermon. In the case of extempore preaching it is well that the very words of the conclusion should be studied.

Many good works on the subject may be recommended; one of the most complete is the *Traite de Predication* by the Cure of St. Sulpice. For extempore speakers there is an

*Hints to Theological students by Rev. H. Housman, B.D., Skeffington, 1888. Price 8s.