

MODERN PREACHING.

The Decay of Modern Preaching. An Essay. By J. P. Mahaffy. New York: Macmillan & Co., 1882.

Mr. Mahaffy's Essay is mainly negative and critical. Its object is to exhibit the decay, not to attempt the reform of modern preaching. The author has specially in view the Church of England; but he has raised a question of increasing interest, and much that he says applies to modern preaching as a whole. By many, however, the title of his Essay will be regarded as a begging of the question. They will point to the fact of the spread of churches and increased activity in ecclesiastical work, and that the average sermon of to-day in many respects is an improvement on its predecessors. Multiplicity of churches, however, does not necessarily imply increasing pulpit influence. Nor can it be denied that with the spread of a higher culture, the former relative positions between a preacher and his audience have been changed, and the church's influence in the formation of the world's thought and life proportionately lessened. As a sign of the times it is significant that the greater number of the best students at the Universities ignore the pulpit. "How few men of talent turn to preaching," writes Mr. Mahaffy with authority. "We cannot but conclude that the abler young men of our day do not adopt this profession, and that our preachers, as a body, are below even the average in intellect." The other learned professions, the newspaper press, literature, politics, science and art, absorb much of the talent that would formerly have found its way into the church. The higher material inducements held out by them will not altogether explain the fact. They offer a better medium as a rule for the expression of the best thought of the age, and a larger audience to those who wish to leave their impress on contemporary life. In a profound sense, therefore, it is true that modern preaching has decayed. The preacher is no longer an oracle whose words are final. The test is simple: who are moulding the thought and life of the world, and where are they found?

The causes of this decay are sufficiently obvious. To a large extent the church has become divorced from the affairs of every-day life. Its preachers fail to awaken interest because their sermons bear no vital relation to the experience of their hearers. The stereotyped platitudes of which a modern discourse is to a large extent composed sound like words of an unknown tongue, familiar by repetition, but possessed of no real significance. They are no longer living words of truth from one who is himself consumed by them. It is absurd to urge that piety alone without intellectual power is all-sufficient. If so "we may give up the case as 'lost,'" writes the learned author of this Essay, and he adds:—"Want of brains is a capital defect, and no amount of moral excellence will make a stupid man a preacher." Nothing is more calculated to help on the decay of modern preaching than the existence of a half-educated ministry, ignorant of the nature and extent of the moral and intellectual forces working in society. Such men are out of sympathy with the age in which they live. Having received all their own ideas at second hand, they are not in a position to understand the difficulties of others who are thinking for themselves. The falsely so-called *safe* men of the church are its greatest danger. They are a drag upon its progress, causing it to stand still while the world and its life are for ever moving. The church is an organic unity or it is nothing; and if its life is arrested by being cast into enduring forms, theological or ecclesiastical, decay and death must necessarily follow. "The man who avoids unpleasant doctrines, and avoids all bold statements of his own opinion, who keeps within the narrowest bounds set him by the theological public, and takes no lead in the march of opinion, will never be a good, far less a great, teacher. These are what we call the *safe* men in the Church. They may appear safe at the moment; in the long run they contribute to the ruin of the Church they represent. For they are essentially cold, and they repress in their surroundings all the glow and fervor of enthusiasm. I repeat it again on account of its importance—the so-called *safe* men in a Church are among the surest causes of its decay." (p. 130.) Each age has its own peculiar difficulties, and its own solution of them to work out. These may be old as thought itself, or change with the changing years; but if the church is to exercise any real

influence for good, it must ever keep in close contact with the great currents of life, not content to lag behind them but anxious to shape their course. It cannot long afford to exclude learning and men of culture from its ranks; and it can only retain them by keeping pace with the progressive spirit of the age, by perfect toleration in matters of opinion, and by proving to the world that it is not identical with, but infinitely more than any sect or party merely, however numerous or pronounced. If it is not able to understand the anxious questions that disturb the minds of thoughtful men; if it can offer no solution to the great problems modern times have made their own; if men cease to find in the pulpit any recognition of the perplexities with which they are beset, and find instead only the cold repulsive attitude of a self-conceited ignorance, the result is inevitable: men of culture will gradually withdraw both from pew and pulpit, and the church, given over to the domination of a narrow party, become the synonym of a namby-pamby sentimentalism destitute of any living power.

Mr. Mahaffy despairs of preaching: "I confess that among the better classes, and with educated congregations, I think its day is gone by. They no longer want instruction from the pulpit when they can find it in thousands of books; nor will they be led by the opinions of men who are not superior to themselves in intellect and culture, often not even in training. They will, no doubt, continue to attend sermons for years to come, by way of occupation on an idle day,—it may be from some intellectual interest in special preachers, or as an example to young people. But the days for any average minister to lead and influence such people by his preaching are gone by." (p. 155). But it need not be so of necessity. The Church has the remedy in its own hands. And, as Carlyle has well said: "The Speaking Function,—this of Truth coming to us with a living voice—with all our Writing and Printing Functions, has a perennial place. That a man stand there and speak of spiritual things to men—it is beautiful!"—could the speaking one only find the point again. The Church has still an exalted mission to fulfil, would it only rise to a worthier conception of its nature. Never was a greater work demanded of it, nor a better opportunity afforded for doing it. Although the present is an age of criticism, of so-called scepticism, men were never more earnestly seeking for true light and guidance. Moreover, with the inestimable privilege of the Sabbath day and pulpits erected in every town and hamlet, the church has access to the hearts and consciences of men in a way such as no other institution can hope to rival—were these only used aright. The representative of the spiritual elements of life, "the lifter up to the nations of the banner of righteousness," holding the key to the solution of many of the problems of the age, social as well as moral and intellectual, going forth to save the world from the gross materialism that threatens to engulf it, and preserve society from the dangers that menace its very existence, the Church has a work to do in the nineteenth, as great, as arduous, as full of blessing to humanity, as that of any century preceding.

THE MAKING OF ENGLAND.

The Making of England. By John Richard Green, M.A., LL.D. New York: Harper & Brothers, Franklin Square, 1882.

The "Making of England" covers the period from the beginning of the Saxon conquest to the union of England under Egbert, in A. D. 829. Hitherto comparatively unknown, such a period possesses great importance to the student of English history as "the age during which our fathers conquered and settled on the soil of Britain, and in which their political and social life took the form it still retains." To the elucidation of it the author brings talent and capacities of a high order. Possessing a brilliant historical imagination, a patient industry that leaves no source of information neglected, a critical acumen that enables him to distinguish between the relative importance of events, and a charming literary style, Mr. Green has succeeded in reanimating the dry bones of the past, and investing them with warm flesh and blood. His "Making of England" is a valuable contribution to the existing state of knowledge of an obscure period of English history.