

THE FOOLISHNESS OF PREACHING

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The Foolishness of Preaching.

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LET me magnify the office of the Christian prophet. And let me do it in connexion with one of the issues most warm to-day, the idea of miracle. And let it be done by an attempt to rescue the gospel from either the speech on the one hand, or the sermon on the other. It is the sermon that people are tired of rather than the gospel.

The gospel of God's holy love in the form of forgiving grace is the greatest miracle in the world. It is the most wonderful, inexplicable, and supernatural thing in the world that the holy should forgive the unholy, the anti-holy. And it is the most supernatural of acts to believe it. Nothing less than a miracle is needed to make a man a thorough Christian—or shall I put it more safely, and say to make mankind thoroughly Christian? Forgiveness is, in the same act, regeneration, which is the monopoly of God. 'Ye must be born again.' We need not wait to grasp the psychology of the new birth before we own the reality and necessity of it. The most essential thing, as the war shows, is a change of heart, beyond human power. Miracle of some kind is more essential to religion, and is more at home in it, the more religious and the more inward it grows. Real preaching is more than persuasive, more than kindling, far more than interesting. It is at bottom regenerative. And in consequence it is 'folly.' It is miracle. If not irrational, it is superrational. In conversion it expects a miracle. And he who would preach a miracle miraculously must live one.

In all true and effective preaching of the gospel there is a miracle of a moral kind far more searching for the conscience than the most imaginative impressionism from the miracle of the Mass. That is very great. And were our object but impression we should have to come back there; we should return to the Mass, which is more impressive than most sermons. But real conversion is a greater miracle than transubstantiation. And the gospel which produces it is so impressive because it is more than impressive—it is creative. Conversion is not (as James puts it) the eruption of the subliminal, it is the miracle of the new creation.

When this gospel of moral redemption is duly preached the case is quite different from the delivery of a speech or an address; and many succeed in the one who fail in the other. The speech is an expression, as profound or passionate as you will, of human judgment on a situation or an idea. But the gospel is both uttered and owned, with whatever aid from human genius, as the one action and the one judgment of God on the world which is required by its moral case; it is an utterance and agency of God; it is the action of His judgment-grace. The one, the speech, makes convictions, the other, the gospel, makes souls. The one moves us to take a step, the other to the great action of worship and the life obedience which is faith. The preacher may persuade, but God in him creates. It is God who speaks in the apostle's message, though not in every view or statement ventured in the course of the message. The burthen of that message is God's judgment passed on the world. It is God's estimate of what was called for by our crisis. In the Cross God's act of holy judgment has as much to do with the saving of the world as love's act of sacrifice. Christ is not just the divine symbol of sacrifice but our propitiation, our sin-bearer. God's reaction, His retaliation on human sin, His judgment on the world, was Christ. If we might put it so, we struck God with sin and He retaliated with—Christ: with Christ made more than flesh for us, made sin. Christ shows both God's opinion of man and His sentence on him. God dooms us in Christ—to the greatness of the new creation and Eternal Life. Such is His judgment passed on us—His saving Cross and expiation in Christ. And our response is the judgment we pass on God's—not an opinion, but a verdict, a choice, a life decision, and one of the like wondrous kind. It is an act of committal, and not only a sentiment of appreciation. It is not a matter of disposition, but of self-disposal. It is an act and judgment of faith which feels and treats grace as the moral miracle. And such faith holds of the miraculous itself.

Hence when we treat the gospel not as a speech for God but as the Word from God, when we so

confess and preach it, that is an act miraculous in its nature. The Holy Ghost takes a hand. Miracle answers miracle, deep calls to deep. Psychology has not subdued that experience to its province—yet. It cannot. That would reduce religion to science. But evangelical faith is an ultimate paradox. It makes the evangelical pulpit as miraculous as the Roman altar. I put it that, in the psychology of the matter, it is a miraculous act we do when we answer Christ's gospel by living faith, however we may treat sermons—when we answer it as the intervention and rescue of us by a present God—when we treat it not as the view or surmise of man, not even as Christ's view of God (for that might be mistaken), but as God in Christ, God acting in the miracle that chiefly makes the Incarnation miraculous. That is the miracle not of Christ's birth but of Christ crucified and risen as the creative *reality* inside His impressive *value*. How we pass from the impression on us by Christ to the reality, of God's action there is one of the most vivid interests of theology, and I have discussed it elsewhere (most recently in the *Hibbert Journal*, July 1918) as landing us in the deepest miracle in our faith and its chief authority. It is a miraculous thing when we thus abolish time and recognize God speaking and acting to-day by the same real presence of Christ as two thousand years ago walked the earth. It is the miracle in the Sacrament that the old historic Redeemer should stand in our midst, making nothing of time, and stand there *qua* Redeemer and not merely as a benign presence; that His one eternal act should function ever anew within the Church's act and rite (the Church not living, but He living and doing in it); that He should be giving in detail there what He gave in the gross in the upper room, and making over to us repeatedly what He did with God on the Cross compendiously, perfectly, finally, eternally; that He should keep giving to men by a rite what He gave once for all to God in His death; that He should act, within the Church's act, in a way that transcends and abolishes the years, and makes time run back to find its reality in a superlative person and an incredible, eternal act, which no time can exclude, wither, or stale in its infinite variety. It is a miracle of the moral kind that the crucified should be bodily (*i.e.* personally) here, so that time and place fade and make no barrier

between then and now, but that we partake of His flesh and blood as He partook and partakes of ours. All that is one form of the vital miracle at the centre of the Christian life. It is the standing miracle of an incarnation more moral than metaphysical, more redemptive than even adorable, of a holy Eternity in Time, of God acting in Christ, of Christ moving in each day and year, of the far future *goal* and finality of things working by anticipation as their immanent and self-evolving *ground* always.

The bird of dawning singeth all night long.

Hamlet, I. i. ¹

It is the miracle of Eternity as simultaneous succession. It is the moral paradox of Christ made sin for us and not merely made flesh.

Such is the philosophic, the mystic miracle, as we might call it, in the gospel's action. But it, involves also the psychological miracle of the new creation in us, far deeper and diviner than any reinforced amendment or subsidized improvement of ours, even if the help is God's. And at the height and heart of it all is the moral miracle of grace, that the absolutely holy should so much as touch the unholy, to say nothing of His touching to heal, redeem, and save into His Kingdom.

It is a current demand (and a valuable) that more should be done in the way of psychologizing religion, of using for its intimacy some of the skill in winding ourselves into the recesses of the soul which is shown, for instance, in the modern novel with so much power and with varying effect. But it is still more necessary that religion should be moralized, that its ethic should be adjusted anew to the moral miracle of our forgiven freedom. We should come to feel that where religion is most deep, in Christian or Pagan, so much the more at home it is in the region of moral miracle, however critical it may be of miracles in particular and detail. For religion is mystical *action*, it is not brooding on mystery, nor absorption in it. It is not spiritual imagination or elevation alone. The greatest miracle in the world and the least imitable is the love of enemies. It is Christ's chief miracle, and it takes another miracle to reproduce it. To those who believe Christ is thus precious. If they cannot do a miracle they *are* one, and one of His. They are more than conquerors, they are redeemed.

¹ By the way, is this not one of the most liquid and musical lines in English poetry?