

THE YOUNG MAN AND THE PULPIT

– BY SENATOR ALFRED J. BEVERIDGE –

THE American people at heart are a religious people. They are practical and fearless, too. If you will listen to the chance conversations of the ordinary American you will find that the laymen of the nation have some very decided views upon the Pulpit, the man who fills it and the work he ought to do. In the breast of the millions there is not only a great need, but a great yearning, for certain things of the soul which it is for the Pulpit to supply. This paper is an attempt to talk as one of these millions to the young man who is about to mount to this sacred station.

"I have just come from Church," said a friend one day, "and I am tired and disappointed. I went to hear a sermon and I listened to a lecture. I went to worship and I was merely entertained. The preacher was a brilliant man and his address was an intellectual treat, but I did not go to Church to hear a professional lecturer. When I want merely to be entertained I will go to the theater. But I do not like to hear a preacher principally try to be either orator or play-actor. I am pleased if he is both; but before everything else I want him to bear to me the Master's message. I want the minister to preach Christ and him crucified."

The man who said this was a journalist of ripe years, highly educated, widely experienced, acquainted with men and life....

First, then, young man aspiring to the Pulpit, the world expects you to be above all other things a minister of the Gospel. It does not expect you to be primarily a brilliant man, or a learned man, or witty, or eloquent, or any other thing that would put your name on the tongues of men. The world will be glad if you are all of these, of course; but it wants you to be a Preacher of the Word

before anything else. It expects that all your talents will be consecrated to your sacred calling. It expects you to speak to the heart, as well as to the understanding, of men and women, of the high things of faith, of the deep things of life and death. The great world of worn and weary humanity wants from the Pulpit that word of helpfulness and power and peace which is spoken only by him who has **[R3839 : page 262]** utterly forgotten all things except his holy mission. Therefore merge all of your striking qualities into the divine purpose of which you are the agent. Lose consciousness of yourself in the burning consciousness of your cause.

But if you do that you must be very sure of your own belief. Any man who assumes to teach the Christian faith and yet, in his own secret heart, questions that faith himself, commits a sacrilege every time he enters the pulpit. Can it be that the lack of living interest in certain Church services is caused by a sort of subconscious knowledge of the people that the minister himself is speaking from the head rather than from the heart; that what he says comes from his intellect, and not as the "Spirit gives him utterance"; and, to put it bluntly, that he himself "no more than half believes what he says"?

"The man spoke as if he were bored with endless repetition of sermons," said a close observer of a weary parson. Certain it is that even in political speaking the man who believes what he says has power over his audience out of all comparison with a far more eloquent man whom his hearers know to be speaking perfunctorily. No matter how much the latter kind of speaker polishes his periods, no matter how fruitful in thought his address, no matter how perfect the art of his delivery, he fails of the ultimate effect wrought by a much inferior speaker whose words are charged with conviction.

He is like the chemist's grain of wheat, perfect in all its constituent elements except the mysterious spark of life without which the wheat grain will not grow.

If, then, you do not believe what you say, and believe it with all your soul – believe it in your heart of hearts – do not try to get other men to believe it. You will not be honest if you do. The world expects you to be sure of yourself. How do you expect to make other people sure of themselves if you are not sure of yourself?

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and behold, a beam is in thine own eye?

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

The world is hungry for faith. Do not doubt this for a moment. More men and women today would rather believe in the few fundamentals of the Christian religion than have any other gift that lavish fortune could bestow upon them. But these millions want to *believe*; they do not want to argue or be argued at. They want to believe so thoroughly that their faith may amount to knowledge. Doubtings are disquieting. We want certainties, we laymen.

For years I have made it a point to get the opinion of the ablest and most widely experienced men and women I met on the subject of immortality. In all cases I found that the subject in which they were more deeply interested than in all other subjects put together.

"I would rather be sure that when a man dies he will live again with his conscious identity than to have all the wealth of the United States, or to occupy any position of honor or power that the world could possibly give," said a man whose name is known to the railway world as one of the ablest transportation men in the United States.

"When I am by myself I think about a lot of strange things. Is the soul immortal, and what is the soul anyhow?" It is a politician who is talking now, and a ward politician at that, a man whom few would suspect of thinking upon these subjects at all.

So you see, young man, you who are being measured for the Cloth, all manner and conditions of men are thinking about the great problems of which you are the expounder, and longing for the answer to those problems which it is your business to give them. That is the condition of the mind of the millions.

But what is the condition of the mind of the young minister? A few years ago a certain man, with good opportunities for investigation and a probability of sincere answers, asked every young preacher whom he met during a summer vacation these questions:

First: "Do you believe in God, the Father; God a person, God a definite intelligence – not a congeries of laws floating like a fog through the universe; but God a person in whose image you were made? Don't argue; don't explain; but is your mind in a condition where you can answer 'Yes' or 'No'?" Not a man answered "Yes." Each man wanted to explain that the Deity might be a definite intelligence or might not; that the "latest thought" was much confused upon the matter, and so forth and so on. **[R3840 : page 262]**

The second question was: "Do you believe that Christ was the son of the living God, sent by him to save the world? I am not

asking whether you believe that he was inspired in the sense that the great moral teachers are inspired – nobody has any difficulty about that. But do you believe that Christ was God's very Son, with a divinely appointed and definite mission, dying on the cross and raised from the dead – 'yes' or 'no'?" Again not a single answer with an unequivocal, earnest "Yes." But again explanations were offered, and in at least half the instances the sum of most of the answers was that Christ was the most perfect man that the world has seen, and humanity's greatest moral teacher.

Then came the third question: "Do you believe that, when you die, you will live again as a conscious intelligence, knowing who you are and who other people are?" Again, not one answer was unconditionally affirmative. Of course they did not know. Of course **[R3840 : page 263]** that could not be known positively. On the whole they were inclined to think so, but there were very stubborn objections. And so forth and so on.

The men to whom these questions were put were particularly high-grade ministers. One of them had already won a distinguished reputation in New York and the New England States for his eloquence and piety. Every one of them had had unusual successes with fashionable congregations. But every one of them had noted an absence of real influence upon the *hearts* of their hearers, and thought that this same condition is spreading throughout the modern pulpit. Yet not one of them suspected that the profound cause of what they called "the decay of faith" was, not in the world of men and women, but in themselves.

How could such Priests of Ice warm the souls of men? How could such Apostles of Interrogation convert a world?

These were not examples, however; they were exceptions. Most preachers believe that they actually know the truths they preach....

Faith is infectious. James Whitcomb Riley, whose sweetness of character and nobility of soul equals his genius, gave me the best recipe for faith in God, Christ and Immortality I have ever heard:

"Just believe," said he; "don't argue about it; don't question it; simply say, 'I believe.' Next day you will find yourself believing a little less feebly, and finally your faith will be absolute, certain and established."

And why not, you of the schools who split hairs and dispute, and whose knowledge, after all, as Savonarola so well said, comes to nothing – why not? For, if you cannot prove God and Christ and Immortality, it is very sure you cannot *disprove* them; and it is safe – yes, and splendid – to believe in these three marvellous realities – or conceptions, if you like that word better.

The doctrine of *noblesse oblige* was one of the most beautiful of human conventions. It was based upon the propositions that a man being noble and the son of a nobleman could not do a mean thing – it was not good form. But if a man gets it into his consciousness that he is the child not of a nobleman, not of an earthly ruler, not of a great statesman, warrior, scientist or financier, *but of the living God* who presides over the universe, how large, how generous, how exalted and how fine his attitude toward life, and all his conduct, needs must be!...

Of course, everybody understands that preaching and faith and all that is not everything that the young minister must do for his fellow-men. "Faith without works is dead." Everybody who has read the Bible understands that. But this paper is on The Young Man and the Pulpit – an attempt to give him an idea of how the people to whom he is going to preach look at this matter, how they regard him and, above all else, what the people to whom his life work is devoted really need and really want above everything else in this world.

Don't preach woe, punishment and all mournfulness to the people all the time. Where you find sin, go ahead and denounce it mercilessly. But do your denouncing crisply, cuttingly, not dully, innocuously. Speak to kill. Do not forget that the Master told people of his day that they were "a generation of vipers."

But that was not the burden of his appeal. He knew that there were other things in the world and human nature besides sin. Mostly he spoke of "things lovely and of good report." Remember that his coming was announced as a bringing of "good tidings of great joy."

The Sermon on the Mount is the perfection of thought, feeling and expression. Make it your example. You will recall that it begins, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." It is full of "blessed" and blessings, of consolations and encouragements and promises of certainties. It radiates sense and kindness and prayer.

The One understood that most glorious truth of all truths – that there is some good in each of us, and that if that good only could be recognized and encouraged it would overcome the bad in us. You will remember the saying, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump."

So don't be an orator of melancholy. There is enough sadness in the world without your adding to it by visage, conduct or sermon. Besides, it is not what you are directed to do. The people would be very glad if you could say with Isaiah that:

"The Lord hath anointed me to preach *good tidings* unto the meek; he hath sent me...*to proclaim liberty* to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim *the acceptable year* of the Lord,...*to comfort all that mourn*,...to give unto them *beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.*"

That is the kind of talk that will cheer the people, and it is the kind of talk that will do the people good. There is nothing "blue" about that. And it is what the Book bids you tell the people. They want it, too, and need it – they *need* beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." Ah, yes, indeed, that is worth while! Your pews will never be empty if such be the fruit of your lips and the ripeness of your spirit. The people want to hear about something better than they know or have known.

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings!" Nobody likes a scold. Of course when it is necessary to scold, go ahead and scold. But don't make scolding a practice. Your congregation will not stand being abused; they will not stand it unless they actually need it. But they will then stand it. Unconsciously they will know that the stripes you lay upon them are medicine after all, and for their healing. Yet ordinarily we all have such a hard time that we all would like to hear about "a good time coming." Ordinarily we are all so tired that we would like to hear something like this: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." [R3840 : page 264]

The religion which you preach owes its vitality to the glorious hopefulness of it. The people want to know that, if they do well here, joy awaits them hereafter – and here, too, if possible. They want to hear about the "Father's house" that has "many mansions," and about him who has "gone to prepare a place" there for them.

They demand happiness in some form, if only in talk. If they do not get it in the assurances of religion, who can blame them if they say: "Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die"? For sure enough, they *do* die tomorrow so far as their world goes.

If you do not believe that religion means happiness, quit the pulpit and raise potatoes. Potatoes feed the body at least. But unfaithful words and speech of needless despair feed nothing at all. Put beauty, hope, joy, into your preaching, therefore. Make your listeners thrill with gladness that they are Christians. Even the men of the world have wisdom enough to make things profane as attractive as possible.

Think of the intimate and personal subjects of Christ's teachings. He spoke of prayer and the fulfilment of the law, of master and servant and of practical charity, of marriage, divorce, and the relation of children to parents; of manners, serenity and battlings; of working and food and prophecy; of trade and usury, of sin and righteousness, of repentance and salvation. Yet by means of all this he made noble the daily living of our earthly lives and gloriously triumphant the ending of them.

I do not think the ordinary layman cares to hear you preach about some new thing. The common man prefers to hear the old truths retold. Indeed there can be nothing new in morals. "Our task," said a clear-headed minister, "is to state the old truths in terms of the present day." That is admirably put. In science progress means change; in morals progress means stability. No man can be said to have uttered the final word in science; but the Master uttered the final word in morals.

But, after all is said and done, what the millions want from the modern pulpit is the fruitful teaching of the Christian religion. They want the fundamentals. They want decisions and certainty. Their minds are to be convinced, yes, but even more their hearts are to be touched.
