THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER TEN

PARTS OF THE SERMON

SUMMARY

The Introduction compared to:

(1) The prelude of a poem;
(2) The preface to a book;
(3) The portico of a building;
(4) The opening of a law case.

I. PURPOSES SERVED BY THE INTRODUCTION

1. Draws attention to the text and to the theme:

(1) Addresses the whole nature;
(2) Exegesis most fitting at this stage in the sermon.

2. Brings preacher and hearer into touch.

COUNSELS as to manner, tone, and spirit.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTRODUCTION

1. Should be pertinent:

(1) No matter to be admitted which is foreign to the text;
(2) Or to the theme;
(3) In few words should indicate the line of thought to be pursued.

2. Should be brief. Introduces text and audience. Five minutes sufficient.
3. Should be natural:

(1) Avoid a florid style;
(2) Avoid complicated sentences;
(3) Avoid exaggeration;

(4) On an easy level of discourse;
(5) The tone of voice, clear, calm, deliberate.

4. Should be worthy of engaging the hearer's attention:

(1) The subject a serious one;
(2) Jesting and frivolity to be avoided;
(3) Yet thought may be put in a fresh way.

I. The Introduction

THE introduction to the sermon presupposes that the discourse is a complete structure and not a disjointed fragment. In this it is not singular, but takes its place in line with other forms of composition. We shall more readily understand the true nature and purpose of the introduction if we illustrate this remark by three or four comparisons.

1. It may be likened, for example, to the prelude of a poem which has to bear some proportion to the poem itself.

"*Paradise Lost*" is introduced by only twenty-five lines of stately verse. The magnitude of the subject does not admit of dallying on the threshold. So ought it to be with the sermon. "**The King's business requires haste**."

2. Or it may be compared to the preface to a book; and indeed many preachers carry the resemblance in this instance so far that the introduction to their sermon is the last part of it to be composed, perhaps on Pascal's principle - only with another application- that the last thing a man finds out when he is writing a book is how to begin.

Yet if the sermon has been carefully developed it is tolerably certain that during the process the introduction, in common with other parts, will have suggested itself.

The man who knows the rooms of a house is likely to be familiar with the front door. And we venture to counsel that, as a rule, if no introduction suggests itself while you are developing the theme, it will be safe to assume that none is needed. Then have none. There is no law obliging every sermon to have an introduction, as there is no law obliging every book to have a preface. The charm of surprise will sometimes be given to a sermon by beginning it at once without any kind of preamble.

3. What has just been said reminds us that an introduction may be further likened to the portico of a public building, and here the resemblance is even closer.

The portico should be of the same style as the main structure, it should be harmonious with it in design, it should be modest in its proportion, and severe rather than florid in its character, and it should not attract too much attention to itself, but rather lead at once into the building. To fail in any of these particulars is as unfortunate in homiletics as it is in architecture.

4. No less apt is the comparison which sees points of resemblance between the introduction to the sermon and the opening of a case in law.

A well-known authority gives some sound advice to young advocates which is equally applicable to young preachers, and indeed to older ones as well, if they be not past profiting by it: “Slow, sure, and short is a good motto. A long opening is wearisome and unnecessary, and it can only be made so by repetition” (Richard Harris, “*Hints on Advocacy*,” p. 442).

Nowhere are compactness, rapidity of approach, directness, and singleness of aim more admirable than in introducing the subject of discourse. What we have to say as to the introduction of the sermon may be arranged under the two divisions of the purposes which it answers and the characteristics by which it should be distinguished.

I. We first consider the purposes served by the introduction

1. It should arrest and insure attention to the text and to the subject of discourse.

(1) To do this let the preacher as far as possible address the whole nature.

You have to speak to a variety of faculties. Have a word therefore for the intellect, for the moral nature, for the soul. In the few moments at your disposal make the theme of the sermon quite clear and in a natural way lead to the divisions of your discourse.

(2) Nothing is so likely to do this as exegesis; and although exegesis should not be confined to the introduction nor the introduction to exegesis, yet it is nowhere so happy as here. A sermon by Dr. Maclaren on “*The Glorious Gospel of the Blessed God*” (I Timothy 1:11) is aptly introduced by an explanation of the words “**glorious**” and “**blessed**,” putting the apostle’s thought in this new and striking form: “*The Gospel of the Glory of the Happy God*.”

Then the divisions of his subject grew out of the exegesis:

(1) The revelation of God in Christ of which the Gospel is the record is the glory of God;
(2) that revelation is, in a very profound sense, the blessedness of God;
(3) and lastly, that revelation is the good news for men.

2. A second purpose which the introduction should serve is to bring the preacher and his hearers into touch with one another.

Here and at once the personality of the preacher should be felt. The man back of the sermon must be recognized now, although he may perhaps fall into the shade later on before the higher interests of his theme; as the architect is seen at the ceremony of laying the foundation stone of his building, and after that may be seen no more. It is of importance that our hearers be interested in us not so much for our sake as for the sake of our mission and message. The voice of John the Baptist loses nothing of its impressiveness, because a few touches give us the gaunt figure and simple life of the forerunner.

A preacher's manner; his tones, his attitude even serve to introduce him to his hearers and to enlist their interest in him. He may repel or attract his auditors before he has been speaking five minutes. Let him take a graceful and dignified posture, let him avoid all gestures at first, let him be courteous, conciliatory, and respectful in tone, and in spirit modest, unassuming, and earnest, and almost before he has opened up his subject he has gained the first step which counts for so much.

A noble illustration of both these purposes which should be served by the introduction will be found in the opening sentences of the first sermon which Massillon preached before Louis XIV., of France. For even the worldliest courtier present it must have been hard indeed not to feel interested alike in the subject and in the preacher of the discourse. His text was "*Blessed are they that mourn*" (Matthew 5:4).

What more natural than that he should begin with reference to his Choice of text, which must already have repelled an audience little accustomed to connect sorrow with happiness?

"Sire, if the world were speaking here, instead of Jesus Christ, assuredly it would not address your majesty in the same language."

After picturing the flattering words with which it would approach him, the preacher suddenly changes his tone:

"But, sire, Jesus Christ does not speak as the world speaks. Happy, he says to you, not He who wins the admiration of the present world but who is occupied with the world to come, and lives in a contempt of Himself and all that passes away, because to Him belongs the kingdom of Heaven. Happy, not he whose reign will be immortalized in history, but he whose tears will have blotted out the history of his sins from the remembrance of God himself, because he shall be comforted forever.' '**Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted**'" ("Quarterly Review," October, 1884; Art., "*Massillon*").

II. We pass from the purposes of the introduction to consider its prominent characteristics

1. Evidently the first of these is what we may call pertinency. The introduction should be applicable to the theme of the sermon, and to its occasion.

(1) No matter should be found in it which is foreign to the text; any tendency to divagation must be severely put down; the hearer's attention must be seized, and the direction of his thought determined.

To go wrong so early will be to imperil the whole discourse, and Mr. Ruskin's maxim, that it is the first half-dozen strokes that determine the portrait, holds good in preaching as much as in painting.

(2) Nor, for the same reason, should any matter which is foreign to the theme be admitted. Side controversies must not at this point be considered.

(3) Employ your introduction wisely, and with a few strokes you can carry the audience at once into the heart of your subject. If text and theme be kept in view in the introduction, the special line of thought which is to be pursued in the sermon may be readily indicated; and sometimes the divisions can even be formally mentioned.

How admirably is this managed in a sermon by one of the most imaginative preachers of our time! (Mark Guy Pearse)

He proposes to tell once more the parable of the Prodigal Son. “Doctors,” he begins, “take violet to make physic of them; preachers take the Lord’s stories, and make sermons of them. Well, the process is much the same, spoiling the beauty to get the good. One wishes we could keep the violet and have the physic still; one wishes we could keep the story and have the sermon still. I would almost venture to-night to try and enlarge the Lord’s story without letting it lose its story form.”

Then he goes on to suggest this division:

(a) what the lad asked for, or what all sin is;
(b) where he went, or what all sin does;
(c) how he came home, or how all sin is remedied.

2. Secondly, the introduction should be brief.

The rustic when he obtains possession of your hand knows no better than to retain it for five minutes and keep it going like the pendulum of his grandmother’s clock. When he learns better manners he finds that a momentary grasp is sufficient even to cement the friendship of monarchs.

In your introduction take the theme by one hand and the audience by the other, make them acquainted, and then drop the hands and get to work as soon as possible.

The introduction, in other words, must bear a modest proportion to the sermon itself. An old woman who listened to John Howe, the Puritan, a preacher very partial to long introductions, said that “he was so long in laying the cloth that she began to despair of getting any dinner.” Five minutes out of the thirty granted to the sermon should be ample. You have not to expand ideas, but only to indicate them. The preacher who expatiates in his introduction will be insufferably prolix in his sermon, if he preserves any proportion in it (See Scripture models: Matthew 13:3; Acts 7:2; 17:22).

3. Thirdly, the introduction should be natural.

Avoid even more carefully here than later on in the discourse a florid style.

(1) As a rule it is not wise to begin with an appeal to the imagination or to the fancy. “In an opening speech” (such is the counsel given to lawyers), “illustration should be utterly abandoned, Fact, and fact alone, is the strength of an opening speech” (Harris “*Advocacy*,” p. 29).

(2) Of course there have been preachers who in this as in other matters were a law unto themselves. Dr. Guthrie could afford to open with a vivid picture, but he was the prince of illustrative preachers, and has perhaps no legitimate successors (E. g., "*Speaking to the Heart*," Sermon II).

(3) The sentences with which the discourse begins should be brief, well compacted, and carefully composed.

When a preacher opens his sermon by saying, "The most wonderful, the most comprehensive, and yet the least regarded and perhaps the most mutilated text in the Bible is before our attention this evening" (Mark 16:16), we make no mistake in deciding that we have also before our attention a speaker who has yet to learn how to be at the same time less positive and less superlative.

By starting with four assertions in one breath he makes any further attention almost impossible for hearers whose minds are constructed on ordinary principles. Who among us at once and simultaneously can concentrate his thought on four general statements, anyone of which lies open to serious challenge?

(4) By all means let the preacher keep clear of hyperbole at a time when he has not the fervor of oratory to plead in extenuation. Exaggeration is not vivid or impressive in an introduction. It is only weak and irritating, as all forcible feebleness is apt to be (Harris, "Advocacy," pp. 39-41).

Moderation may often be combined with force, but exaggeration never.

(5) It is natural to add that the sermon should begin on an easy level.

Do not start out at an ambitious elevation, lest you discover how fatally facile is the descent. Your hearers must join you, and in order to do this you will have to pick them up. By and by you can mount with them; but even a balloon soars from a level and not from a mountain top.

(6) This simplicity of thought should be accompanied by a tone of voice befitting it. Be clear-toned, calm, and deliberate.

The young speaker, often through sheer nervousness, commences his discourse in a strident note, or in a tone which is magisterial and authoritative, or with a rapidity of utterance which deprives his first half-dozen sentences of all meaning, and leaves a proportion of his congregation behind at the very start. The chances are that so they will remain; for by the time they have regained their breath and are prepared to listen, the preacher is already far on in his first division.

4. Fourthly, the introduction should be worthy of engaging the attention of intelligent hearers.

It should befit a serious subject. When Massillon began his funeral sermon on Louis the Great with the words, "My brethren, God only is great," everyone felt that at once a deep chord had been struck.

By all means, therefore, avoid even the semblance of jesting or frivolity.

This would be to prelude an oratorio with a few bars from a comic opera. The ambassador for Christ has no ambition to be like Laurence Sterne, who often opened his sermons with a quip, and of whom it was said that all the while he preached he seemed as though at any moment he might fling his wig in the face of his congregation. Although our art be far inferior to that of Sterne, who was without any question one of the great masters of exquisite style, still we may often succeed in putting our thought in a way so fresh and impressive that the interest of the congregation shall be aroused from the very first sentence. Yet this should be done with so much simplicity and sincerity that no doubt remains on the part of our hearers as to our spirit and purpose.

Chrysostom had every ear attentive when preaching just after an earthquake he began his sermon, “Do you see the power of God? Do you see the benignity of God? His power because the solid world he has shaken; his benignity because the fallen world he has supported” (Phelps, “*Theory of Preaching*,” p. 262).

While entirely free from any suspicion of sensationalism this was timely and novel.

Remember, then, that nothing is so impressive as simplicity. A natural manner, an easy level of tone and of language, and a clear but vigorous line of thought are features which should distinguish the introduction.

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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