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Preaching 9
Illustrations for the Sermon

In Scripture and History

While preaching on one occasion to a vast congregation George Whitefield was depicting a blind man with his dog approaching the edge of a precipice. Each step took him nearer and nearer to the fatal edge from which he would immediately hurtle to his death below. So graphic was the description and so acute the tension among the hearers that suddenly Lord Chesterfield sprang up and exclaimed "Good God! He's gone!" "No, my lord," replied Whitefield "he is not quite gone; let us hope that he may yet be saved." So Whitefield with his typical genius made crystal clear the point that human reason and worldly wisdom lead the soul downward to its destruction but faith in Christ brings deliverance and leads men heavenwards.

While regrettably very few preachers have Whitefield's remarkable gifts of imagination and vivid description, surely all should confess that the art of illustration is something which they can never afford to ignore. Indeed, says Sangster, "... with our Lord's example before his eyes only a combination of vanity and blasphemy could convince a man that the matter was beneath his notice."

The Scriptures themselves abound in pictures and metaphors which light up the eternal truths which they teach. In the Old Testament they are constantly found, especially in the psalms and the prophets. In the New Testament epistles there are examples taken from the natural world, characters and institutions of the older covenant, the Greek games, parts of the human body, soldiering and a Roman triumphal procession. But it is particularly in our Lord's own teaching that imagery and illustration abound. Scenes from the home, the family, the weather, agriculture, current public discussions and business practice meet the reader on every page. The parables of Jesus are repeatedly based on domestic or everyday incidents with which his hearers would have been thoroughly familiar. No wonder "the common people heard him gladly" and others affirmed "No one ever spoke the way this man does".

Down through church history, from the patristic period through Reformation times to the present day, preachers have consistently recognized the value of metaphors, pictures and stories to enrich their ministry and to enhance their power in presenting the truth to the minds of men. Some of the finest examples of superbly illustrated sermons are those preached by Spurgeon and it might be mentioned in passing that among the rich diversity of his illustrations are numerous stories about Irishmen!

If abstract truth is to make an impression on the average mind it must be transformed into concrete terms. To dismiss illustrations as undignified and puerile is the mark of the intellectual snob who most likely spends more time speaking himself than listening to others. Furthermore, it is simply not true that the fewer the illustrations, the deeper the thought – as the sermons of the great masters of the pulpit readily testify. While a few men never mastered the art of illustration, the effectiveness of the vast majority was due in no small measure to their skill in painting pictures and describing incidents for their hearers.

This matter is particularly urgent because of the age in which we live. Nowadays we increasingly realize that the truth is more readily understood if it enters through the eye gate as well as ear gate. The Arab proverb proclaims, “He is the best speaker who can turn the ear into an eye.”

In their turn, members of the congregation are usually quick to appreciate the preacher who shows himself sensitive to their limitations by making his teaching as clear as possible. As long as he does not do so in a superior or condescending way, the preacher who accommodates himself to the capacity of his hearers and so shows his concern for their spiritual perception, will be warmly welcomed.

Purpose and Place

The most obvious function of illustrations is to throw light on the doctrine or duty which is being taught and especially to make a difficult concept clear and vivid to the mind. Illustrations bring the unseen and eternal within the comprehension of the ordinary man and woman, and set forth spiritual truth in the language of the senses. They relate ideas to human experience, demonstrate the practical difference which the truth should make in daily living, stimulate the reasoning faculty and arouse the feelings. As a result, the unfamiliar is pictured in plain terms, the abstruse becomes meaningful and the vague general statement is transformed into something precise and practical. And once the truth is firmly grasped, its challenge cannot be so easily side stepped – unlike the abstract concept whose very obscurity is an invitation to ignore it. Weakness in illustration is one of the principal reasons why preachers fail to earth their sermons and relate them to every day living. An old writer spoke of reasons as the pillars of the fabric of the sermon, while similitudes were windows which let in the light. And it takes little imagination to realize that a building without windows resembles a prison rather than a house.

The sermon with telling and appropriate illustrations will not only gain in intelligibility but it will also become more interesting to the hearers. Practical examples help to banish the dullness which undermines the impact of so many sermons, and also enable the preacher to restate in an arresting way familiar truths which are frequently greeted with a yawn.

Again, illustrations help to ease a congregation. It must be remembered that people can normally follow consecutive thinking and sustained argument for only a limited period, and then their attention will wander. If concentration is to be maintained to the end they need to take occasionally a mental rest or – changing the picture – to take another breath in preparation for the next point in the preacher’s argument.

However much it may wound the preacher’s vanity, he ought to face the undoubted fact that many people forget his doctrinal teaching more quickly than he likes to think. But the illustration, on the other hand, normally remains in the mind when all else has disappeared. If, in recollecting the illustration, people also remember the point it was designed to make, that picture or story will not have been in vain.

But it is not only the main part of the sermon which is served by illustrations as they make the truth clear, rivet the attention and recall wandering thoughts and distracted minds to the matter in hand. They can also play an important part at the beginning and end of the sermon. Some congregations cannot take solid instruction immediately and an introductory illustrative story helps to prepare them for what is to follow. And a concluding illustration can summarize the message of a sermon and drive it home like a nail.

Finally, the educational value of illustrations deserves to be recognized. Biblical allusions confer no small blessing on a congregation. In days when a knowledge of the Scriptures is rapidly declining, accounts of Biblical incidents will fill in many a gap and hopefully will whet the appetite for more instruction from the Word. Furthermore, many who know very little about the history of the Christian church and the triumphs of former days will grow in their appreciation of the past as they hear of the examples of saintly lives, the heroic faith of martyrs and missionaries, the examples of great leaders and the achievements of ordinary men and women who were in Christ before them.

Collecting and Arranging

Sermon illustrations are of many kinds. They include similes, metaphors, analogies, parables, historical incidents, current affairs, biographical details and personal reminiscences. Equally, the sources of sermon illustrations are many – as the preacher who goes through the world with an open eye, listening ear and the alert mind, will soon discover.

Some men, unfortunately, place much value on what has been described as “canned goods” or “the last refuge of a bankrupt intelligence” – in other words, the book of illustrations. It was once suggested that these books should be burnt or the paper sent back to be repulped and put to better use! So many of the stories in these books date quickly and are so hackneyed and threadbare that the only interest they give congregations is the variation in detail which different preachers introduce as they tell the same old story. The best illustrations are always those which form the harvest of a man’s own reading and observation. There is nothing like the thrill of personal discovery as he is alive to what is going on in the world around him. In addition to this, he gains immense satisfaction in using material he has gathered at first hand.

The Bible must, of course, be the prime source of illustration for it teems with pictures, characters and life situations which reveal the ways of God with man, and man’s relationship to his fellows. Christian literature and biography are another fruitful source of illustrative material as they set forth the outworking of Christian truth and ethical principles in daily life. Secular literature frequently holds a revealing mirror to the human heart and its motives. Books which abound in metaphor and simile help men trying to improve their own style. For some, the world of nature and scientific discovery yield many helpful analogies.

Quotations have their place but since a sermon is not an academic thesis, they ought to be brief, clear and to the point. It is obviously valuable sometimes to quote a recognized authority when dealing with a controversial subject, or to pass on the opinion of someone making the kind of statement which he would not normally be

expected to make. Biblical quotations are always of value for they are unique, containing an authority and awesomeness which are unrivalled. Quotations from hymns, which are naturally more familiar to the congregation than poetry, also can be very useful since they are usually simple and direct, and express Christian experience. The daily newspaper, with which the congregation is usually well acquainted, when read with Christian discernment, provides another rich supply of practical examples. The man who has bothered to discover some things about local history and events connected with the place where he is preaching will be sure to rouse the interest and appreciation of the congregation. There is also a place for mentioning localities visited and people met during the course of travelling or during holidays, but these incidents need to be handled with great care lest they are overdone. It is said that there are some churches where they rue the day they ever sent their man on a holiday to the Holy Land. They have never heard the last of it for every time he opens his mouth they have to be reminded of it again!

Finally there is also the place for the personal reminiscence and experience. But this area also is full of pitfalls for congregations rapidly and rightly get so weary of hearing about a preacher's illustrious ancestors, charming wife, precocious children and learned friends. And why must the preacher always have to be the hero in every story that he tells about himself? Does he never lose an argument, and is he never floored by his opponents? When personal illustrations are used, a man ought to examine very carefully his motives for including them for they can easily be a subtle form of self-display. The fewer personal references there are, the better, and then when they are used they will make a particularly significant impact. On the other hand, personal testimony to the grace and sustaining power of God in the adversities of life is immensely valuable when preaching on such subjects as suffering or bereavement.

In educating his intuition for sound illustrations, a preacher will discover an abundant supply as he remains alert during the course of his reading, as he is awake to all that is going on around him and as he maintains his interest in people. He will not have to go searching for them because they will be crowding in on him from every quarter. Or as Sangster's well known phrase has it, "As one sails through life with a trawling eye what fine things come into the net."

But however careful the preacher may be in noting illustrations, his work will be of little value unless he takes steps to conserve and organize his discoveries so that they are available when required. While he may have confidently promised himself that he will remember an incident, the chances are that he will either forget it entirely or else have only the vaguest recollection of it after a short while.

One man's method of noting and arranging his material will differ from another's. The main thing is that the arrangement should be simple, clear and accessible. Some compile a preacher's index containing information about the illustrative material at the back of each of their books. A commonplace-book is then used for facts gathered during travel and pastoral work. Envelopes, each labelled by a key word, can be used for newspaper cuttings and reports. All the information from these different sources is then transferred to a master index. The subjects listed at the back of a Chain Reference Bible can provide a convenient foundation for this index. Other preachers arrange their material with the aid of a series of loose-leaf notebooks, with each page

representing a subject, or else they use a card index system. Each preacher must find the system which serves him best but always seek to avoid the extremes of disorganization and an overly complicated system.

Uses and Abuses

But vital as illustrations are, they ought not to be accorded a place in the sermon to which they are not entitled. They are there to serve the message and not to rule it; they are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. However vivid they may be, if they are not strictly relevant and do not make a real contribution to the message they ought to be rigorously excluded. It is utterly wrong to drag them in needlessly or use them to fill in time, to show off the preacher's cleverness, to entertain a congregation or to call attention to themselves. "I have seen" says J.H. Jowett, "illustrations that were like pretty drawing room lamps calling attention to themselves. A real preacher's illustrations are like street lamps, scarcely noticed, but throwing a flood of light upon the road."

It is easy for illustrations to get out of hand and a sermon which is merely a string of anecdotes with the barest minimum of teaching is scarcely worthy of the name. Particularly reprehensible is the practice of collecting a number of illustrations and building a sermon around them. Said one preacher, "I've got three dandy illustrations and I'm looking for a good text!" James Black who tells the story aptly comments, "That, of course, is the last ditch. Many of us would like to die before we reach it!"

If it is a mistake to omit entirely illustrations, it is equally a mistake to overload a sermon with them even if it does contain solid matter as well. The house requires a window here and there but it should not be transformed into a Crystal Palace. A happy medium needs to be achieved here as everywhere else.

Illustrations should throw light on one thing only otherwise the congregation will quickly become confused. They ought to contain material which is familiar to the people, and if they ever need to be explained at all they are clearly quite useless. Such a situation prompts the story of the lady who said she understood Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress and was hoping in due time to understand the explanatory notes as well! Another danger to avoid is, of course, the mixed metaphor. Some of these at times make it difficult indeed for the congregation to keep straight faces. But hopefully the following famous example was apocryphal – "I smell a rat; I saw it floating in the air; I'll nip it in the bud."

The illustration should be recounted briefly and contain only those relevant points which lead directly to the punch line. It deserves also to be handled with delicacy and sensitivity. A very frank illustration which might be especially relevant for a student audience could be unnecessarily embarrassing to a very mixed congregation on a Sunday morning. Accuracy and honesty are also required in the telling of illustrations. When preachers are too lazy to check up their facts or never bother to consult the experts over matters of which they are not sure, they will frequently be guilty of many inaccuracies, which will only irritate some members of the congregation. Not everybody in the congregation will receive with equanimity the news that Henry VIII reigned in the 18th Century or that New York is the capital of the United States. Furthermore, it is quite extraordinary how often preachers foist the same story on to

Martin Luther, John Wesley and C.H.Spurgeon. And once the preacher ventures into the realms of science or medicine he needs to be doubly sure he knows what he is talking about. If he is discovered to be inaccurate in his illustrations, the knowledgeable members of the congregation will naturally begin to wonder whether he can be relied on when he is dealing with the spiritual message which he wishes to impart.

Again it is quite inexcusable for a preacher to attribute to himself something which has happened to someone else. There is simply a straightforward question of truthfulness at stake here, and once a man is found out he will never readily be trusted again. If a man can lie to make a point will he also lie to make a convert? And if he feels it necessary to invent a story let him begin with "Let us suppose" and not suggest that it is a historical fact. Since it is ultimately the preacher himself who is the most impressive illustration of all, the sooner a man who transgresses against the demands of common honesty gets out of the pulpit, the better.

And finally some Homework:

Spurgeon gives some very helpful advice to encourage preachers in the art of illustrating their messages. He suggests that the preacher should close the door of his study with the determination that he will not leave it until he has worked out at least half a dozen illustrations. Alternatively he can walk through the fields, work in the garden, look into a shop window, listen to a conversation or visit the sick in order to find as many illustrations as he can. He ought to resolve, "God helping me, I will teach the people by parables, by similes, by illustrations, by anything that will be helpful to them; and I will seek to be a thoroughly interesting preacher of the Word."

Another piece of very practical advice Spurgeon has for preachers is that they should teach a Sunday school class if they would learn to hold people's attention by the art of illustration. He remembered from his own experience a particular boy who used to say "This is very dull teacher; can't you pitch us a yarn?" And then comes his application, "I dare say that some of our hearers, if they were allowed to speak out during the sermon, would ask us to pitch them a yarn, that is, to give them something to interest them." And finally in noting the extensive use made by Puritan preachers of the common place-book, he urges his hearers to do likewise, "or else I am afraid you will get to be very commonplace yourselves".