

## *The Substance of St Paul's Preaching*

Of St Paul's preaching we have in the Acts three examples, the sermon at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13. 16-41), the speech at Lystra (Acts 14. 15-17), and the speech at Athens (Acts 17. 22-31). We have also five incidental references to its substance: a description given by the soothsaying girl at Philippi (Acts 16. 17), a summary of his teaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica (Acts 17. 2, 3), a note of the points which struck the Athenians in the Agora as strange (Acts 17. 18), an assertion with reference to its tone and character made by the Town Clerk at Ephesus (Acts 19. 37), and a reiteration of its fundamental elements by St Paul himself in his last address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20. 21). Besides these, we have an account of his preaching at Corinth given by St Paul himself in his first Epistle to that Church (1 Cor. 2. 2). These accounts are naturally divided into two classes: the preaching in the synagogue, and the preaching to the Gentiles.

The account given by St Luke of the preaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica<sup>1</sup> exactly agrees with, and naturally recalls, the sermon in the synagogue at Antioch, of which the main outline is set before us at some length, and it is unquestioned that that sermon so set forth is, and is intended to be, a type of all St Paul's teaching in the many synagogues to which he went.

The sermon is divided into three parts by dramatic appeals to the attention of his hearers. In the first, St Paul builds upon the past history of the Jewish race and shows that his Gospel is rooted there, that in his message there is no casting away of the things familiar, no denial of the truth of the old revelation made to the Fathers; but rather that the whole history of Israel is the divinely ordered preparation for the new revelation in the Messiah. In the second, he sets forth the facts of the coming and rejection of Jesus and His

<sup>1</sup> Acts 17. 2, 3.

consequent crucifixion. Here it is startling with what simple and unhesitating directness St Paul faces at once this great difficulty, the difficulty which has at all times everywhere been the most serious hindrance in the way of the acceptance of the Gospel—the rejection of the missionary's message by his own people. He does not shrink from it, he does not apologize for it, he does not attempt to conceal its weight. He sets it forth definitely, clearly, boldly; he makes it part of his argument for the truth of his message. It is the fulfilment of prophecy. Then he produces his conclusive proof, the Resurrection, witnessed by the apostles, foretold by the prophets, the fulfilment of the promise. In the third part, he proclaims his message of pardon for all who will receive it, and utters a solemn warning of the consequences which will follow its rejection.

We may see here five elements and four characteristics of St Paul's preaching in the synagogue. The five elements are these:

(1) An appeal to the past, an attempt to win sympathy by a statement of truth common to him and to his hearers. This statement of common belief creates naturally a bond of union. It ensures that the speaker starts with the agreement and approval of his hearers. It also prepares the ground for the new seed. The new truth is shown to grow out of, and to be in harmony with, truth already known and accepted. It does not appear as a strange and startling assertion of something at variance with all that has before guided and enlightened life.

(2) There is a statement of facts, an assertion of things which can be understood, apprehended, accepted, disputed, or proved. There is a presentation of the concrete, tangible, homely story, of something easily grasped, the story of life and death. It is indeed the story of a divine life and a divine death, but it moves on the plane of earth, with which all alike are familiar, the injustice of rulers, the fluctuating passions of crowds, the marvellous recovery, the Divine act of the Resurrection.

(3) There is the answer to the inevitable objection, to the instinctive protest, that all the wisest and most thoughtful and most judicial minds among the speaker's own people have decided against the claims here made. There is a careful presentment of the proof, the evidence of trustworthy men, the agreement of the new truth with the old which has already been acknowledged.

(4) There is the appeal to the spiritual needs of men, to the craving for pardon, and the comforting assurance that in the new teaching may be found peace and confidence.

(5) Finally, there is the grave warning. The rejection of God's message involves serious danger. The way of salvation may be refused, and is commonly refused, but not without peril.

Those are the elements. The characteristics are these: (1) Con-

ciliatoriness and sympathy with the condition of his hearers, readiness to recognize all that is good in them and in their doctrine, sympathy with their difficulties, and care to make the way for them as plain and simple as possible. (2) Courage in the open acknowledgment of difficulties which cannot be avoided, and in the direct assertion of unpalatable truth. There is no attempt to keep the door open by partial statements, no concealment of the real issue and all that it involves, no timid fear of giving offence, no suggestion of possible compromise, no attempt to make things really difficult appear easy. (3) Respect. There is a careful presentation of suitable evidence, there is an appeal to the highest faculties in man. St Paul speaks to men as naturally religious persons, and appeals to them as living souls conscious of spiritual powers and spiritual needs. (4) There is an unhesitating confidence in the truth of his message, and in its power to meet and satisfy the spiritual needs of men.

These four characteristics of St Paul's preaching we shall find everywhere. The elements are not always the same. In particular, there is one element which is very prominent in the preaching to the heathen which has no place here. There is no demand for a break with the old religion. The Jew might become a Christian without abandoning any of the forms of Judaism. A Gentile could not become a Christian without a definite repudiation of his early faith and a definite renunciation of its practice. The break for the Jew was internal only. He ceased to seek his own righteousness in the careful observation of the Law; but outwardly he might still keep the Law. For a Gentile to continue as a Christian to observe the outward forms of his old religion was, to St Paul, impossible. It is also noticeable that there is not here the same insistence upon the imminence of judgment which holds an important place in the preaching to the heathen. The other elements we shall, I think, find more or less prominent in that preaching. With the two exceptions to which I have just alluded, there seems to be a closer agreement between the preaching in the synagogue and the preaching outside than is sometimes allowed.

Of the preaching to the heathen we have two examples given us at some length, the speech at Lystra and the speech at Athens. If these were typical examples of St Paul's preaching to heathen, they would certainly make us think that there was a great gulf between his preaching in the synagogue and his preaching outside. The sermon in

the synagogue at Antioch is, comparatively speaking, complete. It contains a real account of the Person and work of the Saviour; the speeches at Lystra and Athens are only preliminary to any teaching about Christ. But as I think we shall see, these are not really typical examples; they are speeches made under exceptional circumstances at dramatic moments in St Paul's career. They are to be compared with 'the Speech on the Stairs'<sup>1</sup> to the crowd in the Temple rather than with the sermon in the synagogue. The speech on the stairs is not a typical example of St Paul's preaching of the Gospel to Jews, neither are these typical examples of St Paul's preaching of the Gospel to Gentiles.

The speech at Lystra is an extremely simple address, designed to check an excited crowd which proposed to do sacrifice to the apostles under the belief that they were gods. It begins with an explanation of the position of the apostles as messengers of God. It contains a simple statement of the nature of God the Creator, and of His personal care for His children, and of the folly of idolatry, with an exhortation to turn from it. Then an answer is given to the natural objection that, if this were true, God would not have left His children so long in ignorance; and proofs are given, drawn from the familiar course of nature, the succession of the seasons, the rain, the harvest.

For all its profundity of tone and philosophic garb, the speech at Athens is singularly like that at Lystra in its actual teaching. Here too St Paul begins with the declaration of the nature of God as Lord of Heaven and earth. Here too he brings out in sharp contrast the contradiction between idolatry and the nature of God; only, in speaking to highly educated men, he tries to draw their sympathy by using quotations from their own literature in support of his argument. Here too he answers the natural objection to his teaching that it is new and that in the past God had left men in ignorance of it. Here too he insists upon the need of repentance. But here he adds, what he has elsewhere specially noted as an important element in his preaching,<sup>2</sup> judgment at hand, with its proof that the Judge has been appointed, and His appointment ratified in the sight of all men by the fact of the Resurrection.

These speeches are chiefly important as illustrations of St Paul's

<sup>1</sup> Acts 22.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 2. 16.

