The Three-fold Impression of a Pattern Ministry

By The Rev. G. B. Duncan, M.A.[1]

I WANT to base our thoughts in the closing moments of this Conference upon some words found in I John, chapter i, verse 1, where St. John records his threefold impression of the ministry of Jesus Christ. We read there these three suggestive phrases : " That which we have heard . . . which we have seen . . . and our hands have handled of the word of life ".

During this Conference quite naturally our minds and thoughts have been directed outwards in the consideration of some of the vital issues affecting both our Church and ourselves as ministers within it. But in these closing moments I want us to turn our gaze inwards toward ourselves. For one of the striking facts about the life of the Church is that again and again the key to any situation, in any Parish, lies with the vicar.

I recall reading of a psychiatrist who was called in to a home where disorder and confusion had come. His counsel to the family was very simple. He said to them : " Take it in turns to absent yourselves from home and we will discover in this way whose presence causes the most trouble, and in whose personality the root of the domestic problem is to be found ". In turn each member of the family went away, but it wasn't until the mother went away that peace descended. On her return and on the completion of the experiment the psychologist was able to place the blame for the situation unerringly upon the one to whom it should have been ascribed.

In the life of any parish it is strange to note how often a change of vicar leads to a change of spiritual prosperity.

So then let us together bring ourselves for these few moments before the pattern ministry of Jesus Christ. We are not here to listen to what any mere man may say to us, but surely in these last moments of this day we would prepare our hearts to see again something of the vision of the work to which we are called by Christ.

The three phrases which constitute our text each seem to indicate a slightly different emphasis in the mind of St. John as he recalled the ministry of Jesus Christ.

The first impression was concerned with That which was Audible. " That which we have heard." I would beg of you all that we should in no way sacrifice that which has been the pride and glory of the evangelical tradition within the Church of England, namely, the preaching of the Word. The first thing that St. John mentions in his recollection of the ministry of Jesus Christ concerns the spoken Word— " That which we have heard ". But when we turn to consider the place of the preaching of the Word of God in our own lives as ministers

[1] The substance of the Islington Conference Sermon, 1957.

of the Church, there are three aspects of this that we do well to keep in mind.

Firstly there must needs be (a) *The Securing of the Audience for the Message.* One of the sad things about the preaching of the Word is that so often so few hear it, and that so often it is the same few that hear it week by week, month by month, year by year. We must ensure that there are people to hear what we have to say, or rather what God has to say. In this securing of the audience the responsibility rests with the laity, or more accurately with the whole Church, for if the Church is the Body of Christ, the Body exists to execute the dictates of the mind and will, and therefore, the whole Church ought surely to be the executive agent of the redemptive Will of God in Christ.

This responsibility must be taught to our people. Far too often the laity think that the responsibility for bringing others in rests with the clergy, and in some parishes the clergy are busily engaged trying to do just that very thing, a task which is completely beyond the powers of the limited resources that the clergy represent. No, the task and responsibility for securing an audience rests with the whole Body of Christ. Far too often the Christian complains concerning the non-Christian, " He won't come to Church ". But Jesus Christ never said he would. The commission given by Christ to the Church was, " Go Ye," and I believe that God's complaint is not with the non-Christian who never comes, but with the Christian who never goes.

So in addition to the responsibility being taught, the opportunity must be given, and we do well if we give our laity an opportunity from time to time to fulfil this responsibility of bringing others in. Thus evangelism will find its expression within the normal programme of the life of the Church. Many congregations have adopted the monthly Guest Service as being in many ways an ideal way of affording an opportunity to the Christians to invite others in as their guests. The monthly Guest Service series thus serves admirably in that the opportunity is given regularly and yet not too frequently. The audience then must be secured.

The second aspect of the preaching of the Word which we do well to keep in mind concerns (b) *The Stressing of the Accuracy of the Message.* There has been the tendency in some quarters to decry the place of the sermon in the service of the Church. The emphasis, we have been told, must be on worship. I would make the strongest possible plea that we recognize that the Word of God rightly preached is in itself worship. Jesus Christ has laid down the golden rule concerning worship : " They that worship must worship in spirit *and in truth,*" i.e., we cannot worship God, giving Him His worth, unless we are thinking truly of Him, and are rightly related to Him. The whole purpose of the preaching of the Word is to secure these two objectives, and I believe with all my heart that for many people the highest point of worship in a service is found at the end of the sermon, when the soul bows down before the living God, knowing Him more truly and seeking to honour Him more fully.

In the message we shall be concerned with the truths that we utter. Our task is to be heralds of God, to proclaim the unsearchable riches of

Christ. We shall be concerned, too, with the tones we use. Our Lord was full not only of truth, but also of grace, and very often the truth we utter is unpalatable to our congregations because of the tones that we use. We do well to check ourselves from time to time with the question, " Would Jesus Christ ever have spoken like that ? "

And thirdly, concerning the preaching of the Word there must be (c) *The Sensing of the Authority in the Message.* We read concerning our Lord's spoken Word, " He taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes ". Here we do well to remind ourselves of the one factor in the preaching of the Word we must never take for granted, namely, the working of the Holy Spirit. For this sensing of an authority in the spoken Word is His work, " When He is come *He* will convince ". But the Holy Spirit will not work unconditionally and the conviction by the Spirit will depend upon the condition of the servant.

As Evangelicals we glory in the indwelling Spirit of Christ, but let us be careful lest even while we glory in the Presence of the Holy Spirit, at the same time we grieve His Person. " Grieve not the Spirit " is the Pauline injunction to which we must give constant heed. We grieve the Holy Spirit when we fail to allow Him to do in us that for which He has been given.

May God grant, then, in your ministry and mine, that one impression which will live long in the minds and hearts of our people will concern the spoken Word, the preaching of the Word, that which has been audible.

But St. John does not stop there, and we do well not to stop there too. Possibly one of the most subtle dangers and prevalent dangers within the circles of the Evangelical Church lies in the fact that so often we do stop at the spoken Word. St. John goes on to recall the impression of the Ministry of Jesus Christ, " Which we have seen ".

The second impression was concerned with THAT WHICH WAS VISIBLE.

We live in days when in the work of the Church we are concerned with the use of visual aid, and thus we acknowledge the fact that what people see is as helpful to them as what they hear, indeed the visual impression is sometimes more vivid than the audible one. And yet when it comes to the preaching of the Word we so often stop short. We want our people to listen, forgetting that all the time they want to look as well.

I have tried to think out in my mind what St. John was thinking of when he wrote the words, " That which we have seen ". It seemed to me that that phrase must have covered (a) *The Activity of the Love of Christ.* How ceaselessly active love is. Indeed, it refuses to be idle. When we read in John iii. 16, " God so loved that He gave," we have there just a glimpse into the action that God's love demanded. I wonder how far there is reflected in our lives, and in the lives of our professing Christian Church members, the activity of a Divine Love. Unselfish in the giving of its time, its love, its understanding, its sympathy, and unceasing in its willingness at all times, and under any circumstances, to spend, and to be spent, for others and for God. I always remember a striking tribute paid to a minister of whom it was

said that " whenever he crossed the street we thought of a shepherd in quest of souls ".

But in addition to the activity of the love of Christ I am sure that St. John also had in mind (b) *The Adequacy of the Power of Christ.* How varied the problems the Master met, and how transformed the people. We recall His own words. When John the Baptist sent His own disciples to ask if He was indeed the Christ, for the vindication of His claims He pointed them to the transformed lives He had left behind Him wherever He went, the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised up again.

I sometimes feel, too, the underlying challenge beneath the words of Christ when He was challenged by the Pharisees as to His right to forgive sins, when He said to them, " Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee, or to say, Rise and walk?". Of course, it is always easier to speak the words. The greater challenge lies in the producing of the evidence of the power of God in changed lives.

When our Lord was on earth there was no publicity to compare with this. Where lives were changed the crowds gathered, and I sometimes wonder whether or not part of the failure of our ministry lies just here. There seems to be so little evidence of the divine power, so few lives are really changed, so few needs are really met. Is it because of the lack of this evidence that people despise our message?

But surely there must have been one more thing in the mind of St. John as he recalled what he had seen. (c) *The Agony of the Passion of Christ.* St. John had shared that in Gethsemane and on Calvary and indeed all the way through, and if at first they had not fully grasped the significance of that Passion the understanding came later.

We sometimes think of our vocation in the ministry as the occupying of a position. For Christ His ministry was not a position, but a Passion, and if the significance was not at first clear the day came when the disciples of the Master looked upon the scars of His redemptive work for men upon the Cross and bowed down in adoration before Him, crying out, " My Lord and my God ".

Professor Gossip in one of his flaming sermons ends with words that burn almost at white heat, depicting the experience of the early Church of the disciples convinced of the reality of their Risen Lord, but confronted by the doubting Thomas who said, " Except I see in His hands the print of the nails, I will not believe ". Professor Gossip goes on to say how still to-day a doubting and unbelieving world confronts the Christian Church with the same plea, " Except I see in your hands the prints of the nails, we will not believe ". That which we have seen, . . . the activity of His love, . . . the adequacy of His power, . . . the agony of His Passion.

The third impression left upon the mind of St. John of the pattern ministry of Jesus Christ concerned THAT WHICH WAS TANGIBLE. " That which our hands have handled of the Word of Life." Here we come to the final and most searching consideration of the pattern ministry. Consider (a) *How close was the Examination.* In his introduction to his gospel John records, " The Word was made flesh and

dwelt among us ". For three years John had rubbed shoulders with His Master. They had worked together, they had lived together, he had seen Him in the crowds and alone. He had seen Him tired out, and fresh in the morning, in almost every circumstance John had been there with Christ.

In our ministry is it possible that one of our weaknesses lies in the fact of the distance we keep between ourselves and our people? They only know us at pulpit range. They have never lived with us in the fellowship of a house party or worked with us in close partnership. The relationship is one that we guard jealously, we being their vicar, while they remain our congregation.

How different it was with Christ and the Twelve. They knew Him intimately and found His character, like His robe, to be woven of one piece throughout.

Consider then (b) *How convincing was the evidence.* For after recording the fact that Christ had dwelt amongst them St. John went on to add, " And we beheld the glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth ". It was this evidence that finally convinced them. What somebody has described in other words, " The silent eloquence of a holy life ". Under every conceivable kind of pressure the Master never faltered. The glory shone unwaveringly and unfalteringly. With us it is otherwise, and possibly the reason why we keep people at a distance is that we dare not let them come nearer. For us so often the situation is one where " distance lends enchantment to the view ". For in the pulpit we may appear convincing Christians, but known intimately that impression is found to be illusory and false.

This may all seem depressing and discouraging, were it not for one final consideration concerning the tangible element of our ministry and the challenge of which we do well to remind ourselves, not only how close was the examination and how convincing the evidence as far as the ministry of our Lord was concerned, but (c) *How complete is the equipment for our own ministry,* that He has provided.

The promise has been stated unmistakably, " Ye shall receive power, the Holy Ghost coming upon you," and the power promised there is supremely the power for living and serving. If the promise is stated so emphatically then the presence ought surely to be sensed, that wherever we go, wherever we live, whenever we speak, we should leave behind in the minds of people a sense of Him, so that our ministry too, like the pattern ministry of our Lord, will leave this three-fold impression of that which is audible, that which is visible, and that which is tangible.