

LECTURE XXIII.

MODES OF PREPARATION.

THE last subject of discussion touching the sermon is the mode of preparation. Three modes are recognized as allowable—writing, writing and memorizing, and extemporizing. I will speak of each of these in turn.

Reading a manuscript to the people can never, with any justice, be termed preaching. Even if the matter and style are rhetorical, the action cannot be, but it is almost impossible that the structure either of thought or language should be such, when the invention is performed in solitude and at the writing-desk. Some men of powerful genius have indeed, by long practice, acquired the talent of so representing to themselves the circumstances of public discourse, while engaged in solitary composition, as almost to overcome this obstacle; they do indeed write as an orator should speak. But these are the exceptions. In the delivery of the sermon there can be no exception in favour of the mere reader. How can he whose eyes are fixed upon the paper before him, who performs the mechanical task of reciting the very words inscribed upon it, have the inflections, the emphasis, the look, the gesture, the flexibility, the fire, of oratorical action? Mere reading, then, should be sternly banished from the pulpit, ex-

cept in those rare cases in which the didactic purpose supersedes the rhetorical, and exact verbal accuracy is more essential than eloquence.

Yet there is a use of the written sermon in the pulpit, which has given us many respectable and some powerful preachers. These write, with the greatest possible care and with rhetorical structure, a manuscript having two-thirds the length of the intended sermon. After the final verbal corrections, they spend many hours of the intensest toil, not in committing to memory the words written, but in learning the ideas and their exact order. They even fix in their memory the geography of their manuscript (if I may so apply the term), in order that they may know, without search, on what part of any page to find the beginning of a given paragraph or thought, in case the ardour of delivery shall have carried the eye and mind for a season away from the paper. For this purpose they go over their sermon eight, twelve or even twenty times, until their recollection of the order of thought is indelible, and until the whole soul is possessed and fired with the subject. They then take the manuscript into the pulpit and open it before them. The knowledge that they can recur to it at every moment sets them at ease from the fear of losing their thread or hesitating for words. The whole train of thoughts and the face of the manuscript are so fixed in the memory, that few and rapid glances enable them to give almost the very words of the writing; but they do not make any conscious effort to adhere to, or depart from those words. They feel that they can do the former at any instant, for the words are before them, and they were selected with

care, for their appropriateness; but if an impulse possesses them to modify the language of any passage, it is also easy to do this. They select with facility either of these alternatives which the awakened and impassioned mind prefers at the moment; and in many places, where nearly the exact language of the manuscript is, in fact, retained, yet the utterance really has the quality of *extempore* eloquence, because there is a process of invention at the time. They use these words not at the mere dictate of eye and memory (they are not mechanically read from the paper, and they had not been memorized for the purpose), but at the dictate of their conscious fitness. They also indulge freely the impulse to add new thoughts and images, suggested chiefly during the faithful study of the completed manuscript. Their thorough familiarity with the whole structure of the sermon, and the quickened condition of their own powers, enable them to venture these additions with safety. They experience also that ennobling *momentum* which Cicero compares so beautifully to the progress of the ship after the oars are dropped.¹ The career acquired from the delivery of the parts carefully prepared bears their minds through that which is added *impromptu*, and enables them to give it coherent elegance and vigour of expression. The result is, that the manuscript of thirty minutes' length is expanded to forty-five. In such a use of the manuscript, also, the eyes are but little occupied with it, and the preacher is at liberty to hold much converse of look and countenance with the auditors.

¹ De Orat., L. i., c. xxxiii., § 153.

Now, this process is manifestly not reading: it is free from many of the objections made against that indolent and slovenly practice. *If the liberty of eye and thought and emotion which I have described can be acquired, then this method approaches very near the merit of the best *extempore* preaching.

The second method is that of writing a discourse and committing it to memory *verbatim*, to be recited in the pulpit. I should object to this way, as I did to the read sermon, that the structure and style would seldom be truly rhetorical. Nor can we expect the action to be good. The mind, painfully occupied with the toil of verbal recollection, cannot realize to itself the subject, or feel the emotions which it should inspire. The air is almost unavoidably constrained, and the utterance artificial. The mechanical labour of committing to memory is sure to entail some mannerism, which is fixed as firmly on the preacher's habits as the words are in his mind. Hence, preachers who have spoken *memoriter* have all displayed some trick or foible, from the famous Père Bourdaloue, who always declaimed with his eyes fast shut, to the present day. This method, like any other which fixes both matter and language in advance, robs the speaker of all those advantages that I shall point out as belonging peculiarly to *extempore* speech. Unless one has a remarkable verbal memory (a gift which I have never seen sufficient reason to regard as indicative of vigour of mind), the exact memorizing of the very words of a long discourse must cost a great amount of labour, and that of the most wearying and irksome kind. The main objection to this method may be practically summed up

in a single question: How deficient must that man be in the mastery of his mother-tongue, who judges it necessary to replace that attainment (which should be so fully the orator's) by an expedient so toilsome and injurious? No man is entitled to call himself a master-workman in the rhetorical art, until he has made language his facile tool by polite and correct conversation, by good reading and by careful composition.

By the last remark I have intimated already my opinion that the true method of speaking is the *extempore*. But do not understand me as sanctioning the delivery of a sermon without premeditation, save in extraordinary emergencies. The extempore sermon is least of all *impromptu*. I mean by it a discourse in which the thought has been perfectly prearranged, but the words, except in cardinal propositions, are left to the free suggestions of the moment. The preparation of the ideas may even be by reducing them regularly to a written form, provided the words written are not imposed upon the memory. Some have recommended that the *extempore* speaker should prepare thus, but, as I conceive, unwisely; for the verbal dress of the writing-desk, always unrhetorical to some degree, will thus be associated with the ideas just sufficiently to embarrass the speaker, in seeking at the moment of utterance, for the right words. I am so far from recommending *extempore* preaching to you as an expedient for saving labour, that I regard it as demanding the most thorough preparation of all. This is doubtless the reason that it is not more practised by ministers of education who address cultivated audiences.

But the advantages of the *extempore* method are de-

cisive with the man who has a true ideal of oratory. I believe that no man makes his nearest approximation to that ideal except when he speaks *extempore*, or in a manner which is equivalent to it; for then is his oration a true action, which it never can become by mere reading or recitation. The capital advantage is, that the mind is required to perform over again the labour of invention, during the actual delivery of the discourse. It is thus aroused and nerved. The condition of its success is, that it must again represent to itself in a living form the whole thought and emotion of the discourse; that it must, in a word, recreate it in the act of delivering it. It is only such a discourse, actually born in its delivery (if it is a second birth), a living progeny of the soul, that has true movement. But he who reads or recites is only delineating the dead outline of what once feebly lived in his mind. The ill-starred experience of all of us teaches us, that it is possible to do this without having the matter of our discourse penetrate any deeper into our own souls than the memory, and therefore they cannot penetrate the souls of our hearers; for the speaker can only affect them with the truth as he affects himself with it. Eloquence is not the mere communication of a set of dry notions; it is a sympathy, a spiritual infection, a communion of life and action between two souls, a projection of the orator's thought, conviction, emotion and will into the mind and heart of the audience. Nothing, therefore, is a true oration which is not a life, a spiritual action, transacted in the utterance.

From this position you can easily understand the advantages which are usually and correctly claimed in the

books of rhetoric for *extempore* speech. It institutes a commerce of eye and countenance between the speaker and his hearers, by which they mutually stimulate each other. The mind thus roused, having the advantage of its previous premeditation and thorough knowledge of the subject, grasps it with more vigour than it had ever done in solitude. Indeed, all the powers of the soul are now exalted—reasoning, memory, imagination, suggestion, sensibility. More direct and luminous views of logical truth now flash athwart the subject, like beams of sunlight. Glowing illustrations and images now teem in the imagination. More appropriate and burning words now arise unbidden than he could ever have excogitated in cold blood. The emotions of the hour dictate an action natural, flexible and animated. But were the preacher confined to his manuscript, these suggested words and feelings must have been excluded. If there has been a thorough previous training, when the words are furnished from the impulse of the moment the structure of sentences will be more simple and direct. The natural animation of the orator's mind will deliver him from monotony, give flexibility of style, and protect him from tiresome artifices of intonation. The justice of these views is evinced by that fact which has been so often remarked, that only the *extempore* method is ever attempted in the bar, the senate and the popular assemblage. The good sense of mankind rejects the idea of reading or reciting discourses here, as little short of an absurdity. Another forcible argument for cultivating the power of *extempore* speech is found in the fact, that the preacher is often required by duty to proclaim the gospel in places and times where

written preparation is impossible, and where it could not be used if it were provided. The man who remains unable to perform his appointed function efficiently in such circumstances is simply recreant to duty.

But there are serious obstacles in the way of true success in *extempore* speech. I shall not count among these the difficulty of finding words when they are not premeditated, nor the danger of wandering from the right line of discourse, nor the impossibility of having a correct style. These are not the serious obstacles. You will find that mere fluency is the easiest and cheapest of all gifts to which the public speaker aspires. And when I say this, I include in the term fluency not only abundance of words, but a certain degree of correctness in their connection. The orator's difficulty is that it is too easy to be fluent. The difficult thing for the *extempore* speaker is to make his words scarce. You will find (what you may not now suppose) that abundant verbiage will come to you in *extempore* speech with far more facility than the direct, apt and simple structure, and that your constant temptation will be to employ the former for hiding and supplementing your poverty in regard to the latter. You will be tempted to pour out forty words because you cannot, as you are conscious you ought to do, express the thought in twelve. In a word, the great difficulty in the way of *extempore* eloquence is to avoid verbal redundancy, and to make the style compact, nervous and clear. To the inexperienced it seems perhaps paradoxical to affirm that the half-trained preacher finds it easier to construct *extempore*, a long and complicated sentence which shall contain no glaring grammatical error, than a short and direct one

which shall adequately express his sense. But it is true, and this is his great temptation. The reason is plain to a little consideration. A complex sentence with many members offers the speaker many alternative ways of protracting and concluding it. Hence, if he cannot on the instant recall the preferred phrase or structure, he can procrastinate the issue, while he discovers some other of these numerous ways for getting creditably out of the labyrinth. But the simple, brief, compact sentence (which is the proper form for oratory) is exacting. It demands the right phrase by its very directness, and demands it at once. It requires to be concluded without dallying. The main obstacle you have to overcome, young gentlemen, in order to speak *extempore*, is redundancy and intricacy.

The danger of becoming confused, and totally losing the thread, is one which can always be overcome by diligence in preparation and by use. The tendency of our self-confident and garrulous age is not in that direction. Would that it were more so! I should hail it as a positively good omen, in these days of self-sufficiency, to see an overweening young speaker break down utterly, as did the great Robert Hall in one of his early essays, and stand dumbfounded before his audience. Far better this, than the self-possession of shallow conceit, the uniform prognostic of triviality and weakness. Such a mortification might cure his vanity and spur his indolence, and teach him something of that solemn diffidence appropriate to so responsible a task. The danger of wandering from the right line of thought may also be easily overcome by diligent preparation, and the self-command it confers. The *extempore* speaker

will freely admit new suggestions into his plan : this is one of the privileges which gives its value to the method ; but for all that, he will not lose sight of his plan nor forget the due proportion between its parts. The unity of his projected discourse has already that control of his own mind and heart which he designs it to acquire over his hearers, and this will very certainly bring him back from all his oscillation to his main intent, like the needle to its pole. If an *extempore* speech is more rambling than the written, it is only because the speaker has neglected his preparation. Nor is negligence of style a difficulty very hard to overcome. It ought surely to be no impossible thing for an educated man to acquire such a command of his mother-tongue, as to be able to form it readily into simple sentences without error of syntax, especially when the mind is invigorated by the excitement of public address. If you are truly masters of your thoughts, you will have no lack of correct words.

The great danger which attends the *extempore* preacher is that he will, after a time, abuse his facility. The capacity for fluent speech is one which is very easily expanded after the first successes. The multifarious avocations of the pastor often furnish a pretext for self-indulgence, and tempt to the neglect both of general study and of special preparation. The fluent declaimer can, for a time, cover his deficiency of matter by his readiness of speech. He avails himself of this unlucky resort, and further indulges his indolence. His fecundity of mind is lost, his freshness is exhaled, he gradually comes to that final state in which the mind can do nothing but run the dull round of its little circle of

commonplaces. Whatever may be the text, the sermon is substantially the same. The Church presents but too many illustrations of this danger. They are sad, and should be awakening to our souls. You see here and there those clerical drones who have long ceased to interest or control any one, and who are only endured by churches which are dying by inches under their charge; yet those who are older than you can remember the bright auspices under which these very men began their ministry. Fluent, animated and energetic, they were followed by admiring crowds; their preaching seemed to be blessed of God; their friends prophesied for them a splendid career. But they learned gradually to abuse their facility, and to relax their studies: the end is what you see. The young minister might well pray, were it lawful, that a premature death might cut him down in this auspicious springtime, rather than that he should reach his autumn, only to disgrace his early promise by this crime. One safeguard against this abuse of the *extempore* method is the constant use of the pen. Every minister must write much, whether he carries anything into the pulpit or not. The best system for most young ministers, perhaps, is to write half their sermons, to make the manuscripts as perfect in every respect as their utmost abilities and care can effect, and then either to leave them in their desks, or use them according to the method I described first. Let the other half of the sermons be premeditated as thoroughly as is possible, until nothing remains to be added to the mental preparation of the matter, and then preached *extempore*. But the constant practice of writing is not a sure safeguard; for you will soon find

that there may be *extempore* writing as well as *extempore* speaking. The only certain defence is religious principle, a conscience tender and honest, and a devoted heart, which shall make you continue faithful to your studies to the end.

It remains that I shall state the means by which *extempore* ability is to be acquired. The first upon which I insist is careful writing.¹ The abundant and painstaking use of the pen is necessary to give you correctness, perspicuity and elegance of language, and to make these easy to you. No man ever learns to compose a sermon at his desk in rhetorical language save by speaking *extempore* under the rhetorical impulse; so no man ever learns to speak well *extempore* save by learning to write well. I have already said that the use of this writing is not to prepare words in the closet to be delivered in the pulpit, but to prepare the mind for clothing its thoughts with right words without premeditation of language. This species of training cannot be omitted if you would speak well *extempore*.²

¹ Cicero de Orat., L. i., c. xxxiii., § 150. "Caput autem est, quod (ut vere dicam) minime facimus: est enim magni laboris, quem plerique fugimus; *quam plurimum scribere*. STILUS OPTIMUS ET PRÆSANTISSIMUS DICENDI EFFECTOR AC MAGISTER, neque injuria."

² Quintil., L. x., c. vii., § 29. "Ac nescio an utrumque, quem studio et cura fecerimus, invicem prosit, ut scribendo dicamus diligentius, dicendo scribamus facilius. Scribendum ergo, quoties licebit; si id non dabitur; cogitandum."

M. Bautain, *Art of Extempore Speech*, ch. iii., § 4. "The pen is the scalpel which dissects the thoughts, and never, except when you write down what you behold internally, can you succeed in clearly discerning all that is contained in a conception, or in obtaining its well-marked scope. You should therefore begin by learning to write, in order to give yourself a right account of your own thoughts, before

Your whole education, reading and social intercourse are, in a certain sense, a preparation for *extempore* eloquence. All should tend to furnish you with ideas, to train your literary taste, and to give readiness and versatility to your powers. Here let me urge that you make every sentence you utter, in your most familiar conversation, a drill in correctness of speech.¹ Speak always with propriety, that it may become as natural and easy for you to speak thus as to breathe. You will, of course, not apprehend me as inciting you to the affectation of clothing your familiar converse in stilted and pedantic phrase: this would be silly in the pulpit also; but you should speak always clearly and properly, allowing in yourself no grammatical errors, no slouched and involuntary forms of expression. But the other great means is constant and untiring practice. The man who is training himself for the pulpit should scarcely allow a day to elapse without an exercise in continuous *extempore* speech. Do you ask me how a student shall find an audience daily? I answer: Let him speak without one: let him go into the forest, let him select a cluster of trees as his imaginary auditors, let him state audibly and connectedly to them, without book, some series of thoughts with which his mind is

you venture yourself to speak. They who have not learned this first, speak, in general, badly and with difficulty, unless, indeed, they have that fatal facility, a thousand times worse than hesitation or than silence, which drowns thought in floods of words or in a torrent of copiousness."

¹ Quintil., L. x., c. vii., § 28. "Ne id quidem tacendum, quod eidem Ciceroni placet, nullum nostrum unquam negligentem esse sermonem; quicquid loquemur ubicunque, sit pro sua scilicet portione perfectum."

charged: it may be a narrative which he has read, the outline of an argument he has just learned from his text-books, a line of thought which has been unfolding itself in his mind. Of course he will not attempt, in such an exercise, to work himself up to any oratorical fire (unless it comes spontaneously he will have none), but his object will be only to cultivate readiness in correct expression. He should discard all ambition and pomp of language in these exercises, and make it his chief aim to be perfectly grammatical, intelligible and direct. He should frame no sentence which is not clear, simple and manageable to his own mind. It would be better that he should begin with sentences of a single member, like those in which children make their earliest essays in narration, provided they were correct, than that he should permit himself ever to utter a sentence in whose intricacies he became entangled. Let your practice be always guarded by the wise caution I have already cited from Cicero (p. 339, note): "*Perverse dicere homines perverse dicendo facillime consequi.*" You should speak to your trees audibly and continuously, refusing to yourselves any stoppage, and also consulting propriety of utterance as far as your attention enables you. These exercises, perpetually repeated, will at length make the powers pliable or supple for their work, like the fingers of a practised artisan. Indeed, he who would be an orator must drill himself, until his mastery over classic speech shall be as ready, as easy, as versatile, as that of the accomplished musician over the keys of his instrument. To this untiring private practice should be added such public exercises as circumstances permit. Every proper occa-

sion should be seized to speak *extempore* to an actual audience, but it should be only with the severest preparation. It were better to have no practice, than that which fixes your faults of style and utterance into habits.

The *extempore* sermon, as I have urged, is not less diligently studied than the written, as to its matter. There will be no difference in the manner of collecting and arranging the materials for the two classes. I have, in a previous note, explained to you the convenient expedients for assisting the mind by written *memoranda* in the work of comparison and arrangement. It is an excellent practice to write out the plan of the *extempore* sermon in a "brief," or extended and methodical *syllabus*, where all important ideas are briefly stated in their intended order, but not in the language which is to be employed in preaching. The divisions and subdivisions of this brief should then be indelibly fixed in the memory. Remember in this part of your task, that when the work of recollection is to be performed you may be embarrassed, excited, and perhaps confused. You must stamp your outline on your memory so deeply, that it will be impossible for you to fail in its prompt recall. And especially must the relation of every part to the central idea and dominant impression of the sermon be distinctly apprehended. Then it will be a matter of small moment whether this brief be carried into the pulpit or not. Perhaps the better way will be to accustom yourself, from the first, to dispensing with it, and to facing your audience entirely untrammelled by paper. But if you carry this or any other form of manuscript into the pulpit, you will find

the handwriting a thing of no small practical moment. You should write remembering that it must be read by a rapid glance, and the characters should be large, the ink-strokes strong, the words well separated and block-like in arrangement, and the capitals marking the beginnings of paragraphs and sentences prominent.

You will find a number of books of plans, or skeletons of sermons, obtruded upon you as helps in your preparation. These you may safely regard as usually rubbish. They are the work of inferior men, as one might surmise in advance; for a true genius could hardly fail to find something better to do with his powers, than to construct these pulpit crutches for lazy and incompetent people. But whatever the merit of another man's plan, it cannot be borrowed by you. If you attempt it, you will find to your cost that it is the most unsatisfactory of follies to attempt to build a sermon on it. The idea of the plan must be your own conception, or to you it cannot have life. Its invention in your own mind can alone give spirit and interest to your discussion. But when you consider the effect of these illicit helps in enervating your own powers by suspending their functions, you will agree with me, that the habitual use of them is positively criminal. I would warmly recommend, on the other hand, the study of some sermons of the great masters, such as Samuel Davies, John M. Mason and Robert Hall. You should analyze them in every direction, to detect the elements of their power. It would be useful to you, after two or three careful readings of a sermon, to prepare a syllabus of its members and divisions, as a training for yourself in this part of your own work. Imbibe their taste, seek to have

your powers suffused with their spirit and quickened by their energy and devotion. The contemplation of a noble model ennobles the soul.

I wish to close this discussion of the different modes of preparation with one remark, which is the most important of all. Whatever may be your method, excellence can only be the result of strenuous effort. He who labours most on each sermon is usually the best preacher. Let me impress you with the high responsibility of ascending the pulpit, and beseech you to form a lofty ideal. He who proposes to sway the souls of a multitude, to be their teacher, to lay his hands upon their heart-strings, to imbue them with his passion and will, makes an audacious attempt. But nothing less than this is true preaching. It behoves the man who attempts this high enterprise to have every power of his soul trained and braced like an athlete, and to perfect his equipment at every point, with the painful care of the commander who is about to join battle with a powerful enemy. He begins the adventure with a solemn awe, an anxious diffidence, whose palpitations nothing but a heroic will controls. The great Athenian statesman, Pericles, the model upon which Demosthenes formed himself, was wont to say, that so solemn did he deem the act of speaking, he could not ascend the *bema* without an anxious invocation to the immortal gods for their assistance. Surely, the minister of a divine Redeemer should mount his pulpit with a more holy dread, by as much as he discusses a more sacred theme and more everlasting destinies. To preach a sermon is a great and awful task. Woe to that man, who slights it with a perfunctory preparation and a careless heart!