

Trollope on Preaching: A Spectator Seeing More of the Game

Unlike those of us who try to write polemically or dialectically, the novelist can be blunt (though hiding behind fictional characters), and tell it as it is. And get away with it. And, perhaps, gain more ground.

In 1992, two UK politicians had a meal together. During their conversation, Jim Callaghan told Roy Hattersley that he ‘must write a big political novel’.¹ Hattersley was not impressed: ‘It’s just not what I want to do’, he replied. ‘I [it?] wouldn’t be any good’. Callaghan came back. As Hattersley noted: ‘Jim’s reply could not have been more frank’:

I never thought of it being any good. But it would be accurate. You know what goes on – times, places, that sort of thing. In a hundred years’ time people would say: ‘It’s not much of a novel, but you learn a lot about twentieth-century politics’. That’s what I meant.²

In 1857, Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) published his *Barchester Towers*. The following extract³ from that novel concerns preaching. Alas, but only as to be expected, it is full of Christendom-speak and religion.⁴ For my purposes, however, I hope we can see beyond that:

There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilised and free countries than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has,

¹ Both men were Labour politicians, Callaghan having been Prime Minister, Hattersley later to become Deputy Leader of the Labour party.

² Roy Hattersley: *Who Goes Home? Scenes from a Political Life*, Little, Brown and Company, London, 1995, pp312-313.

³ Which I have slightly edited, but not always noting small changes.

⁴ Words, phrases or concepts such as ‘clergyman’, ‘public worship’, ‘church attendance’, ‘house of God’.

in these realms, the power of compelling audiences to sit silent, and be tormented. No one but a preaching clergyman can revel in platitudes, truisms and un-truisms, and yet receive, as his undisputed privilege, the same respectful demeanour as though words of impassioned eloquence, or persuasive logic, fell from his lips. Let a professor of law or medicine⁵ find his place in a lecture room, and there pour forth simplistic⁶ words and useless empty phrases, and he will pour them forth to empty benches. Let a barrister attempt to talk without talking well, and he will talk but seldom. A judge's charge has to be listened to by none but⁷ the jury, prisoner and gaoler. A member of parliament can be coughed down or counted out. Town councillors can be tabooed. But no one can rid himself of the preaching clergyman. He is the bore of the age, the old man whom we Sinbads cannot shake off,⁸ the nightmare that disturbs our Sunday's rest, which⁹ overloads our religion and makes God's service distasteful.

Trollope raised the obvious objection: 'We are not forced into church!'. He had his Christendom-answer ready:

No: but we desire more than that. We desire not to be forced to stay away. We desire, indeed, we are resolute, to enjoy the comfort of public worship; but we desire also that we may do so without an amount of tedium which ordinary human nature cannot endure with patience;¹⁰ that we may be able to leave the house of God without that anxious longing for escape, which is the common consequence of common sermons.¹¹

⁵ Trollope had 'physic'.

⁶ Trollope had 'jejune'.

⁷ Trollope had 'A judge's charge need be listened to *perforce* by none but...?'

⁸ The reference is to Sinbad the sailor, who never gave up. Trollope evidently wishes he could get free of the kind of preaching he is criticising, but he knows he never will.

⁹ Trollope had 'the incubus that'.

¹⁰ As Winston Churchill said: 'The head cannot take in more than the seat can endure'.

¹¹ Trollope allowed an exception to the charge of boredom – the notorious sermon of the odious Mr Slope who abused the pulpit to launch an attack upon his 'enemies': 'There was, at any rate, no

All good knockabout stuff, no doubt. Nothing to do with us, of course. It allows us a good laugh at the expense of nineteenth-century Anglicanism – if that is really what we want to do. But, as I say, it has nothing to do with us.

Oh? So I have been wasting my time – and yours – on such a trivial purpose? Far from it! I have a very serious matter in hand.

Is there a whiff of truth in what Trollope said – concerning us, I mean? Indeed, would a modern Trollope even think it worth his while to waste ink on preaching? Who, among his readers, today, would be interested?¹² I go further. Unless our preaching improves, why should people be interested? Pagans, in particular – does our preaching command their attention? Does it merit it? Indeed, most Christians – for all their elevated protestations of its worth – seem to get a pitiful amount from it.

Let me be specific. And blunt. Are our sermons – more often read (or virtually read) lectures, if that – are our sermons not infrequently boring? Are a growing number of preachers mastering the art of spicing them up (I could use stronger terms!) with PowerPoint and distributed-notes laid out with

tedium felt in listening to Mr Slope on the occasion in question. His subject came... home [too smartingly] to his audience to be dull, and, to tell the truth, Mr Slope had the gift of using words forcibly. He was heard through his thirty minutes of eloquence with mute attention and open ears, but with angry eyes, which glared round from one enraged parson [person?] to another, with wide-spread nostrils from which already burst forth fumes of indignation, and with many shufflings of the feet and uneasy motions of the body, which betokened minds disturbed, and hearts not at peace with all the world’.

¹² In the 1982 BBC production (but not, as far as I can see, in the book), the nearest I can find is the jokey way Dr Vesey Stanhope referred to the threat held over him if he did not quit Lake Como and come back to Barchester forthwith: he would be condemned to an eternity of listening to his own preaching!

clever alliterations, but, in truth, the sermons accomplish little?

My answer must be obvious.

I am not alone in my low opinion of current preaching. Edward Donnelly, himself quoting Trollope, could not have been more explicit:

Such was Trollope's assessment of preachers in 1857, and if they [that is, preachers] are not resented as much today, it is only because they have been marginalised in society. Instead of being irritating, they are now pathetic.¹³

I go further than Donnelly. I think he was using 'pathetic' to describe the world's view of preachers and their preaching. I am sure he was right. But, I am afraid, the word really does apply to much of today's preaching, full stop! It is not just the world's assessment; it is mine. I know I live in this particular glasshouse, and I know I must take my own medicine. But if we wait for a perfect man to speak out, we shall have a long wait. Speak out, therefore, I must.

So strongly do I feel this, I say that we want a good dose of the spirit of Amos, Malachi or Ezekiel in our pulpit labours. Or John the Baptist. We, as preachers, need to be injected with what fired them. And what about Christ? 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild'! Really? Take a look at Luke 10 and 11 and see! Ask the early first-century Pharisees, and inhabitants of Bethsaida and Korazin, what they thought of Christ and his preaching. What would Trollope have made of *that*? More important: What would Christ and his preaching have made of *Trollope*?

My point is that Trollope's sentiments cut close to the bone for us today.

I talked of 'want'. 'Need' is more like it! We *need* – we must have – a return to the type of preaching we find in the Bible:

¹³ Edward Donnelly in Philip H.Eveson (ed.): *The Gospel Ministry Today...*, Evangelical Press, Darlington, 2005, p66.

Spirit-filled preaching, prophetic preaching, confronting preaching, persuasive preaching, preaching with power. We need preachers of that stamp. Now! The words ‘want’ and ‘need’ may be short. How about a four-syllable adjective to keep them company? *Desperately* need! We desperately need biblical preachers.

I have not published this because Anthony Trollope was an expert on preaching. Quite the opposite! As far as I can judge, he was not even converted. He certainly passed through, or, at least, brushed against, various phases of Churchmanship – High Church, Evangelicalism, the Oxford Movement – but *Essays & Reviews*¹⁴ and John William Colenso¹⁵ turned him into a liberal, moderate Anglican of the Broad Church school. I know of no evidence that he ever came to trust Christ for salvation. No, I don’t publish this because Trollope was an expert on gospel preaching, well-fitted to give us positive advice. Not at all! Nevertheless, he was a perceptive observer, a candid observer, one who was prepared to commit his observations to print. He was, as my subtitle has it, a spectator who saw more of the game than many of the players,¹⁶ one who saw something which many believers of his day either failed to see, or did not want to see.

And that is my purpose in publishing this now. As I have made clear in other works,¹⁷ and as I am reiterating here, I am convinced that we have reached a low-point in preaching today, and I am determined to do anything I can to raise awareness of our sad condition, and thus encourage a change, even if it means quoting Trollope. I do so, working on the principle of using ‘all means’ (1 Cor. 9:22) in the spirit of the sacred preacher’s injunction:

¹⁴ Published in 1860, it advanced higher criticism.

¹⁵ The Bishop of Natal who wrote against biblical infallibility.

¹⁶ Charles Haddon Spurgeon was the most notable exception.

¹⁷ See in particular my *Preaching Today: Food for Action as well as Thought; Sowed Much, Reaped Little: Why? The Sermon: The Gap between the Claim and the Result*.

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good (Eccles. 11:6).