

On the Choice of a Text

IS THERE ANY DIFFICULTY IN OBTAINING TEXTS? I remember, in my earlier days, reading somewhere in a volume of lectures upon Homiletics, a statement which considerably alarmed me at the time; it was something to this effect, 'If any man shall find a difficulty in selecting a text, he had better at once go back to the grocer's shop, or to the plough, for he evidently has not the capacity required for a minister.' Now, as such had been very frequently my cross and burden, I inquired within myself whether I should resort to some form of secular labour, and leave the ministry; but I have not done so, for I still have the conviction that, although condemned by the sweeping judgment of the lecturer, I follow a call to which God has manifestly set his seal.

I was so much in trouble of conscience through the aforesaid severe remark, that I asked my grandfather, who had been in the ministry some fifty years, whether he was ever perplexed in choosing his theme. He told me frankly that this had always been his greatest trouble, compared with which, preaching in itself was no anxiety at all. I remember the venerable man's remark, 'The difficulty is not because there are not enough texts, but because there are so many, that I am in a strait betwixt them.' Brethren, we are sometimes like the lover of choice flowers, who finds himself surrounded by all the beauties of the garden, with permission to select but one. How long he lingers between the rose and the lily, and how great the difficulty to prefer one among ten thousand blooming lovelinesses! To me still, I must confess, my text selection is a very great embarrassment — *embarras de richesses*, as the French say — an embarrassment of riches, very different from the bewilderment of poverty — the anxiety of attending to the most pressing of so many truths, all clamouring for a hearing, so many duties all needing enforcing, and so many spiritual needs of the people all demanding supply. I confess that I frequently sit hour after hour praying and waiting for a subject, and that this is the main part of my study; much hard labour have I spent in manipulating topics, ruminating upon points of doctrine, making skeletons out of verses and then burying every bone of them in the catacombs of oblivion, sailing on and on over leagues of broken water, till I see the red lights and make sail direct to the desired haven. I believe that almost any Saturday in my life I make enough outlines of sermons, if I felt at liberty to preach them, to last me for a month, but I no more

LECTURES TO MY STUDENTS

dare to use them than an honest mariner would run to shore a cargo of contraband goods. Themes flit before the mind one after another, like images passing across the photographer's lens, but until the mind is like the sensitive plate, which retains the picture, the subjects are valueless to us.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT TEXT? HOW DO YOU KNOW IT? We know it by the signs of a friend. When a verse gives your mind a hearty grip, from which you cannot release yourself, you will need no further direction as to your proper theme. Like the fish, you nibble at many baits, but when the hook has fairly pierced you, you will wander no more. When the text gets a hold of us, we may be sure that we have a hold of it, and may safely deliver our souls upon it. To use another simile: you get a number of texts in your hand, and try to break them up; you hammer at them with might and main, but your labour is lost; at last you find one which crumbles at the first blow, and sparkles as it falls in pieces, and you perceive jewels of the rarest radiance flashing from within. It grows before your eye like the fabled seed which developed into a tree while the observer watched it. It charms and fascinates you, or it weighs you to your knees and loads you with the burden of the Lord. Know then that this is the message which the Lord would have you deliver; and, feeling this, you will become so bound by that Scripture that you will never feel at rest until you have yielded your whole mind to its power, and have spoken upon it as the Lord shall give you utterance. Wait for that elect word, even if you wait till within an hour of the service. This may not be understood by cool, calculating men, who are not moved by impulses as we are, but to some of us these things are a law in our hearts against which we dare not offend. We tarry at Jerusalem till power is given.

'I believe in the Holy Ghost.' This is one of the articles of the Creed, but it is scarcely believed among professors so as to be acted on. Many ministers appear to think that *they* are to choose the text; *they* are to discover its teaching; *they* are to find a discourse in it. We do not think so. We are to use our own volitions, of course, as well as our understandings and affections, for we do not pretend that the Holy Ghost will compel us to preach from a text against our wills. He does not deal with us as though we were musical boxes, to be wound up and set to a certain tune;