

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-

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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