

HUGH LATIMER
THE PREACHING PRELATE

Hugh Latimer speaks best for himself:

For preaching of the gospel is one of God's plough-works, and the preacher is one of God's ploughmen. . . Ye may not then, I say, be offended with my similitude, for because I liken preaching to a ploughman's labour, and a prelate to a ploughman. But now you will ask me, whom I call a prelate? A prelate is that man, whatsoever he be, that hath a flock to be taught of him; whosoever hath any spiritual charge in the faithful congregation, and whosoever he be that hath cure of souls. And well may the preacher and the ploughman be likened together: first, for their labour of all seasons of the year; for there is no time of the year in which the ploughman hath not some special work to do as in my country in Leicestershire, the ploughman hath a time to set forth, and to assay his plough, and other times for other necessary works to be done. And then they also may be likened together for the diversity of works and variety of offices that they have to do. For as the ploughman first setteth forth his plough, and then tilleth his land, and breaketh it in furrows, and sometime ridgeth it up again; and at another time harroweth it and clotteth it, and sometime dungeth it and hedgeth it, diggeth it and weedeth it, purgeth and maketh it clean: so the prelate, the preacher, hath many diverse offices to do. He hath first a busy work to bring his parishioners to a right faith, as Paul calleth it, and not a swerving faith; but to a faith that embraceth Christ, and trusteth to his merits; a lively faith, a justifying faith; a faith that maketh a man righteous, without respect of works: as ye have it very well declared and set forth in the Homily. He hath then a busy work, I say, to bring his flock to a right faith, and then to confirm them in the same faith: now casting them down with the law, and with threatenings of God for sin; now ridging them up again with the gospel, and with the promises of God's favour: now weeding them, by telling them their faults, and making them forsake sin; now clotting them, by breaking their stony hearts, and by making them supplehearted, and making them to have hearts of flesh; that is, soft hearts, and apt for doctrine to enter in: now teaching to know God rightly, and to know their duty to God and their neighbours: now exhorting them, when they know their duty, that they do it, and be diligent in it; so that they have a continual work to do. Great is their business, and therefore great should be their hire. They have great labours, and therefore they ought to have good livings, that they may commodiously feed their flock; for the preaching of the word of God unto the people is called meat: scripture calleth it meat; not strawberries, that come but once a year, and tarry not long, but are soon gone: but it is meat, it is no dainties. The people must have meat that must be familiar and continual, and daily given unto them to feed upon. Many make a strawberry of it, ministering it but once a year; but such do not the office of good prelates.¹

But now for the fault of unpreaching prelates, methink I could guess what might be said for excusing of them. They are so troubled with lordly living, they be so placed in palaces, couched in courts, ruffling in their rents, dancing in their dominions, burdened with ambassages, pampering of their paunches, like a monk that maketh his jubilee; munching in their mangers, and moiling in their gay manors and mansions, and so troubled with loitering in their lordships, that they cannot attend it.²

And now I would ask a strange question: who is the most diligentest bishop and prelate in all England, that passeth all the rest in doing his office? I can tell, for I know him who it is; I know him well. But now I think I see you listening and hearkening that I should name him. There is one that passeth all the other, and is the most diligent prelate and preacher in all England. And will ye know who it is? I will tell you: it is the devil. He is the most diligent preacher of all other; he is never out of his diocess; he is never from his cure; ye shall never find him unoccupied; he is ever in his parish; he keepeth residence at all times; ye shall never find him out of the way, call for him when you will he is ever at home; the diligentest preacher in all

¹ Latimer, *Sermons & Remains* (Cambridge: CUP, 1844), 1:60-62. All references to the sermons are from this edition, sometimes referred to as Latimer's *Works*.

² 1:67.

the realm; he is ever at his plough: no lording nor loitering can hinder him; he is ever applying his business, ye shall never find him idle, I warrant you. And his office is to hinder religion, to maintain superstition, to set up idolatry, to teach all kind of popery. He is ready as he can be wished for to set forth his plough; to devise as many ways as can be to deface and obscure God's glory. Where the devil is resident, and hath his plough going, there away with books, and up with candles; away with bibles, and up with beads; away with the light of the gospel, and up with the light of candles, yea, at noon-days. Where the devil is resident, that he may prevail, up with all superstition and idolatry; tensing, painting of images, candles, palms, ashes, holy water, and new service of men's inventing; as though man could invent a better way to honour God with than God himself hath appointed. Down with Christ's cross, up with purgatory pickpurse, up with him, the popish purgatory, I mean. Away with clothing the naked, the poor and impotent; up with decking of images, and gay garnishing of stocks and stones: up with man's traditions and his laws, down with God's traditions and his most holy word. Down with the old honour due to God, and up with the new god's honour. Let all things be done in Latin: there must be nothing but Latin, not so much as *Memento, homo, quod cinis es, et in cinerem reverteris*: "Remember, man, that thou art ashes, and into ashes thou shalt return:" which be the words that the minister speaketh unto the ignorant people, when he giveth them ashes upon Ash-Wednesday; but it must be spoken in Latin: God's word may in no wise be translated into English.

Oh that our prelates would be as diligent to sow the corn of good doctrine, as Satan is to sow cockle and darnel!³

These rich passages are taken from perhaps the most famous of Hugh Latimer's sermons, the "Sermon of the Plough," and are truly representative of this preaching prelate.

Hugh Latimer lived from about 1490 (the birth date is sometimes given as late as 1492) until 16th October 1555, when he was martyred with Nicholas Ridley (c. 1500-1555) at Oxford. His sermons are in the two volumes of his *Sermons & Remains*.⁴ The first volume is almost entirely sermons (thirty-three in all); the second contains fifteen sermons and some miscellaneous remains. With regret, our focus on the sermons means that we must pick up what we can of the *person* from our study of the *preacher*. Neither can we dwell much on his history as person or preacher, or the theology of his sermons, except incidentally.

The sermons span a period of about twenty-five years and three monarchs (1529 through to 1553 – two years before his death – and Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I). They are often grouped by time, occasion or place of preaching (e.g. "Seven Sermons preached before King Edward the Sixth, 1549" or "Sermons preached in Lincolnshire, 1552") or by their matter ("Sermons on the Lord's Prayer, 1552"). They are the productions of Latimer's heart and mouth but not necessarily of his pen, nor were they revised by their author (with the possible exception of the "Sermon[s] before the Convocation"). Rather, they were gathered by Latimer's friend and attendant, and one who himself became a gospel preacher, Augustine Bernher, "albeit not so fully and perfectly gathered as they were uttered; yet nevertheless truly."⁵ We must take into account that we have, in the language of the introduction to one, "the effect and tenor"⁶ of the sermon, more a full and careful sense of the substance than a transcription of every word. So we must exercise care in making absolute judgements while confident that we get our material from one who knew the preacher well, was sympathetic to

³ 1:70-71.

⁴ Sometimes referred to as Latimer's *Works*; they are readily obtainable online, or secondhand in the Parker edition from the Cambridge University Press.

⁵ 1:xvi and 455, fn 5.

⁶ 1:3.

his theology, was concerned to preserve his teaching accurately, and learned to preach – at least in part – from hearing Latimer. And, we might ask, who can capture the thunder and the lightning anyway?

Latimer is a man of his time, not least in his theology (it being more of a developing Lutheranism and therefore sometimes lacking the clarity of his reforming successors, and sometimes being simply inaccurate) and his sociology. As a preacher, he can ramble with the best (or worst!): one finds either a telling phrase of pith and moment, or must resort to a paragraph or two to get the sense and flow of some holy harangue.

His capacity for the unexpected excursus (or, to be more frank, the rabbit trail) is close to unparalleled. In one sermon, speaking of Jairus' daughter, he gives some pointed counsel on how to make sure that someone is genuinely dead before burying them, concluding, "Therefore, I admonish you not to be too hasty with dead corpses: as long as they be warm, keep them in the bed; for when a man is dead indeed, he will soon be cold."⁷ One might defend this on the grounds of pastoral or practical necessity while questioning whether or not it is entirely germane. Neither could we describe Latimer as an exegetical nonesuch (at least in the commendatory sense): we do not turn to him for a robust demonstration of the grammatico-historical approach. In terms of sermonic structure, he has a variety of approaches, none of them regular. We might kindly describe him as exegetically and homiletically untrammelled, with a style that is essentially natural and conversational.

He is not unaware of his idiosyncrasies. Some are deliberate, a part of his convictions concerning the pulpit and his concern for the people who hear him:

I have a manner of teaching, which is very tedious to them that be learned. I am wont ever to repeat those things which I have said before, which repetitions are nothing pleasant to the learned: but it is no matter, I care not for them; I seek more the profit of those which be ignorant, than to please learned men. Therefore I oftentimes repeat such things which be needful for them to know; for I would speak so that they might be edified withal.⁸

Despite well-intentioned nitpicking, we must acknowledge that Latimer is easy to read and to hear read. P. E. Hughes speaks of him as a man "who was the most remarkable preacher of the day, and indeed one of the greatest preachers the Church universal has ever had."⁹ Bishop Ryle is no more restrained:

Few, probably have ever addressed an English congregation with more effect than he did. No doubt his sermons now extant would not suit modern taste. They contain many quaint, odd, and coarse things. They are very familiar, rambling, and discursive, and often full of gossiping stories. But, after all, we are poor judges in these days of what a sermon ought to be. A modern sermon is too often a dull, tame, pointless religious essay, full of measured, round sentences, Johnsonian English, bald platitudes, timid statements, and elaborately concocted milk and water. It is a leaden sword, without either point or edge: a heavy weapon, and little likely to do much execution. But if a combination of sound Gospel doctrine, plain Saxon language, boldness, liveliness, directness, and simplicity, can make a preacher, few, I suspect, have ever equalled old Latimer.¹⁰

⁷ 1:537-8.

⁸ 1:341. I have to think that the fact that in three sentences he twice states that he is given to repetition for the sake of the ignorant is an example of the preaching tongue firmly in the prelatric cheek.

⁹ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Theology of the English Reformers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 127

¹⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Five English Reformers* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981), 106.

With such testimonies before us, rather than try to identify and examine a typical sermon (for I am not sure one exists), we shall attempt to draw from the complete corpus briefly to explore and assess the principles and practice of this preaching prelate.

Latimer's principles of preaching

The first demand that Latimer lays on all prelates – and he uses the word to describe any cleric of whatever rank in his system who have “a flock to be taught of him,” “any spiritual charge in the faithful congregation,” any “cure of souls”¹¹ – is that they be *diligent preachers*. As we have already heard, Latimer is unsparing in his denunciation of those in the office of preachers who will not preach. He has a ripe vocabulary and rich invective which he regularly unleashes against men whose pulpits are like bells without clappers,¹² men who should learn diligence of the devil if they will not heed the commands of God. But it is not merely formal disquisitions on set occasions that are to occupy gospel ministers. They are to preach whenever opportunity provides:

I would our preachers would preach sitting or standing, one way or other. It was a goodly pulpit that our Saviour Christ had gotten him here; an old rotten boat, and yet he preached his Father's will, his Father's message out of this pulpit. He cared not for the pulpit, so he might do the people good. Indeed it is to be commended for the preacher to stand or sit, as the place is; but I would not have it so superstitiously esteemed, but that a good preacher may declare the word of God sitting on a horse, or preaching in a tree. And yet if this should be done, the unpreaching prelates would laugh it to scorn. And though it be good to have the pulpit set up in churches, that the people may resort thither, yet I would not have it so superstitiously used, but that in a profane place the word of God might be preached sometimes; and I would not have the people offended withal, no more than they be with our Saviour Christ's preaching out of a boat. And yet to have pulpits in churches, it is very well done to have them, but they would be occupied; for it is a vain thing to have them as they stand in many churches.¹³

This insistence on preaching is the direct result of his convictions about the *God-ordained nature and effect of preaching*: “God's instrument of salvation is preaching”¹⁴ which is why “the devil wrestleth most against [it]: it hath been all his study to decay this office.”¹⁵ The minister of the gospel must go about his business in dependence on God without being dissuaded. He must issue the gospel call, but

can do no more but call; God is he that must bring in; God must open the hearts, as it is in the Acts of the Apostles: when Paul preached to the women, there was a silk-woman, *cujus cor Deus aperuit*, “whose heart God opened.” None could open it but God. Paul could but only preach, God must work; God must do the thing inwardly.¹⁶

He puts such convictions in the context of opposition to the truth, referring to a complaint against his preaching from a chaplain to his bishop (one cannot help but note how often Latimer is forced to begin a sermon with a defence of his previous one!). The bishop advised the chaplain to

¹¹ 1:60.

¹² 1:207.

¹³ 1:206-7.

¹⁴ 1:178.

¹⁵ 1:202.

¹⁶ 1:285.

“. . . let his unfruitful sermon alone.” “Unfruitful,” saith one; another saith, “seditious.” Well, unfruitful is the best: and whether it be unfruitful or no, I cannot tell; it lieth not in me to make it fruitful: and God work not in your hearts, my preaching can do you but little good. I am God’s instrument but for a time; it is he that must give the increase: and yet preaching is necessary; for take away preaching, and take away salvation. I told you of *Scala coeli*, and I made it a preaching matter, not a massing matter.

Referring immediately to Christ as “the preacher of all preachers, the pattern and the exemplar that all preachers ought to follow,” he asks,

And if he had no better luck that was preacher of all preachers, what shall we look for? Yet was there no lack in him, but in the ground: and so now there is no fault in preaching; the lack is in the people, that have stony hearts and thorny hearts. I beseech God to amend them! And as for these folk that speak against me; I never look to have their good word as long as I live; yet will I speak of their wickedness, as long as I shall be permitted to speak. As long as I live, I will be an enemy to it. No preachers can pass it over with silence: it is the original root of all mischief. As for me; I owe them no other ill will, but I pray God amend them, when it pleaseth him!¹⁷

However, in relying upon God Latimer is not ignorant of the human dynamic of the pulpit, and insists that the preacher be *adaptable*. Paul and Barnabas in Iconium “went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed” (Acts 14.1). Latimer likewise requires that a preacher preach to the people in front of him. He reports how he asked King Henry VIII to “give me leave to frame my doctrine according to mine audience: I had been a very dolt to have preached so at the borders of your realm, as I preach before your Grace.”¹⁸ So we find him wisely employing the tools of his ministerial trade: he moulds his language, illustrations, structure, humour and applications to the precise congregation to which he preaches.

However, such righteous accommodation to place, occasion, and congregation, can never, in Latimer, be mistaken for compromise. Preachers must be *faithful*:

I know that preachers ought to have a discretion in their preaching, and that they ought to have a consideration and respect to the place and the time that he preacheth in; as I myself will say here that I would not say in the country for no good. But what then? Sin must be rebuked; sin must be plainly spoken against.¹⁹

So, that recorded request about “framing doctrine according to mine audience” comes in a sermon to Edward VI, referring to an altercation with his unstable and dangerous father, Henry VIII:

In the king’s days that dead is a many of us were called together before him to say our minds in certain matters. In the end, one kneeleth me down, and accuseth me of sedition, that I had preached seditious doctrine. A heavy salutation, and a hard point of such a man’s doing, as if I should name him, ye would not think it. The king turned to me and said, “What say you to that, sir?” Then I kneeled down, and turned me first to mine accuser, and required him: “Sir, what form of preaching would you appoint me to preach before a king? Would you have me for to preach nothing as concerning a king in the king’s sermon? Have you any commission to appoint me what I shall preach?” Besides this, I asked him divers other questions, and he would make no answer to none of them all: he had nothing to say. Then I turned me to the king, and submitted myself to his Grace, and said, “I never thought myself worthy, nor I never sued to be a preacher before your Grace, but I was called to it, and would be willing, if you mislike me, to give place to my

¹⁷ 1:155.

¹⁸ 1:135.

¹⁹ 1:241.

betters; for I grant there be a great many more worthy of the room than I am. And if it be your Grace's pleasure so to allow them for preachers, I could be content to bear their books after them. But if your Grace allow me for a preacher, I would desire your Grace to give me leave to discharge my conscience; give me leave to frame my doctrine according to mine audience: I had been a very dolt to have preached so at the borders of your realm, as I preach before your Grace."²⁰

Later in the same series to the young Edward, he draws again on his prior experience:

You that be of the court, and especially ye sworn chaplains, beware of a lesson that a great man taught me at my first coming to the court: he told me for goodwill; he thought it well. He said to me, "You must beware, howsoever ye do, that ye contrary not the king; let him have his sayings; follow him; go with him." Marry, out upon this counsel! Shall I say as he says? Say your conscience, or else what a worm shall ye feel gnawing; what a remorse of conscience shall ye have, when ye remember how ye have slacked your duty!"²¹

Latimer preaches to kings as kings, and to particular kings under particular circumstances. It would be easy to rail at the carnal clergy or the corrupt nobility when addressing the poor and oppressed, or to complain of the laziness and superstition of the common man to the clergy and nobility. But not Latimer. He charges those before him with their particular sins – he is a master of "a nipping sermon, a pinching sermon, a biting sermon,"²² being persuaded that the man who "dare not rebuke sin and wickedness, no doubt he is not meet for his office"²³ – and declares to them their particular duties and entreats them to avail themselves of the grace of God. That "Sermon of the Plough" was preached in the Shrouds at St. Paul's Cathedral, probably a sheltered spot against the weather, but hardly a shelter for the clergy who would have been there to hear him. Thus we find him preaching to the convocation of the clergy before Parliament began (under Henry VIII) in the summer of 1536. In the morning, speaking as if from God himself, he tells them,

All good men in all places complain of you, accuse your avarice, your exactions, your tyranny. They have required in you a long season, and yet require, diligence and sincerity. I commanded you, that with all industry and labour ye should feed my sheep: ye earnestly feed yourselves from day to day, wallowing in delights and idleness. I commanded you to teach my commandments, and not your fancies; and that ye should seek my glory and my vantage: you teach your own traditions, and seek your own glory and profit. You preach very seldom; and when ye do preach, do nothing but cumber them that preach truly, as much as lieth in you: that it were much better such were not to preach at all, than so perniciously to preach. Oh, what hear I of you? You, that ought to be my preachers, what other thing do you, than apply all your study hither, to bring all my preachers to envy, shame, contempt? Yea, more than this, ye pull them into perils, into prisons, and, as much as in you lieth, to cruel deaths. To be short, I would that Christian people should hear my doctrine, and at their convenient leisure read it also, as many as would: your care is not that all men may hear it, but all your care is, that no lay man do read it: surely, being afraid lest they by the reading should understand it, and understanding, learn to rebuke our slothfulness. This is your generation, this is your dispensation, this is your wisdom."²⁴

Their lot does not improve after lunch, when – in addition to pointing out, with a modicum of social insensitivity, that a good number of those to whom he is preaching wanted to burn him at the stake – he asks as follows:

²⁰ 1:134-135

²¹ 1:231-232.

²² 1:240.

²³ 1:507.

²⁴ 1:38.

The end of your convocation shall shew what ye have done; the fruit that shall come of your consultation shall shew what generation ye be of. For what have ye done hitherto, I pray you, these seven years and more? What have ye engendered? What have ye brought forth? What fruit is come of your long and great assembly? What one thing that the people of England hath been the better of a hair; or you yourselves, either more accepted before God, or better discharged toward the people committed unto your cure? For that the people is better learned and taught now, than they were in time past, to whether of these ought we to attribute it, to your industry, or to the providence of God, and the foreseeing of the king's grace? Ought we to thank you, or the king's highness? Whether stirred other first, you the king, that he might preach, or he you by his letters, that ye should preach oftener? Is it unknown, think you, how both ye and your curates were, in [a] manner, by violence enforced to let books to be made, not by you, but by profane and lay persons; to let them, I say, be sold abroad, and read for the instruction of the people? I am bold with you, but I speak Latin and not English, to the clergy, not to the laity; I speak to you being present, and not behind your backs. God is my witness, I speak whatsoever is spoken of the good-will that I bear you; God is my witness, which knoweth my heart, and compelleth me to say that I say.²⁵

Such convictions are a rebuke to preachers who trim our sails rather than place our guns according to our congregations. We may win friends that way, but never souls. Fidelity to God and therefore to men compel a preacher to pursue what is often a thankless task. Latimer asks – with eerie premonition of his own fate – of those who call men to the gospel feast,

I pray you, what thanks had they for their calling, for their labour? Verily this: John Baptist was beheaded; Christ was crucified; the apostles were killed: this was their reward for their labours. So all the preachers shall look for none other reward: for no doubt they must be sufferers, they must taste of these sauces: their office is, *arguere mundum de peccato*, “to rebuke the world of sin;” which no doubt is a thankless occupation. *Ut audiant montes judicia Domini*, “That the high hills,” that is, great princes and lords, “may hear the judgments of the Lord:” they must spare no body; they must rebuke high and low, when they do amiss; they must strike them with the sword of God's word: which no doubt is a thankless occupation; yet it must be done, for God will have it so.²⁶

But is Latimer all blood and thunder? Is he all judgement and no mercy, all law and no grace? Not at all! Although it is plain that Latimer is persuaded that preachers are to expose unrighteousness and rebuke sin, the purpose of such is ultimately that men be brought to Christ. Accordingly, Latimer wants *preachers to be true ambassadors of Christ*. The Lord Jesus is to be held up and earnestly presented by his ministers as the Saviour of sinners:

This office of preaching is the office of salvation; for St Paul saith, *Visum est Deo per stultitiam praedicationis salvos facere credentes*: “It hath pleased God to save the believers by the foolishness of preaching.” How can men then believe, but by and through the office of preaching? Preachers are Christ's vicars: *legatione funguntur pro Deo*. “They are Christ's ambassadors.” St Paul saith, *Evangelium est potentia Dei ad salutem omni credenti*; “The gospel is the power of God unto salvation for every believer.” It is the mighty instrument of God.²⁷

We therefore find Christ woven into Latimer's sermons, and some of his highest flights of rugged eloquence are in the service of extolling the Lord Jesus. All preaching is to be carried out with this end in mind:

But how shall we come to Christ? How shall we have him? I hear that he is beneficial, as scripture witnesseth: *Copiosa est apud Deum redemptio*; “There is full and plenteous redemption by him.” But how

²⁵ 1:45-6.

²⁶ 1:468.

²⁷ 1:349.

shall I get that? how shall I come unto it? By faith. Faith is the hand wherewith we receive his benefits; therefore we must needs have faith. But how shall we obtain faith? Faith indeed bringeth Christ, and Christ bringeth remission of sins; but how shall we obtain faith? Answer: St Paul teacheth us this, saying: *Fides ex auditu*, “Faith cometh by hearing God’s word.” Then if we will come to faith, we must hear God’s word: if God’s word be necessary to be heard, then we must have preachers which be able to tell us God’s word. And so it appeareth, that in this petition we pray for preachers; we pray unto God, that he will send men amongst us, which may teach us the way of everlasting life.²⁸

Indeed, Latimer is greatly concerned for *the supply and identification of faithful preachers*. This is not an office to be entered lightly, not are preachers to be chosen for crass or carnal reasons (a warning that many congregations today would do well to heed):

Christ knew what a charge hangeth upon this necessary office of preaching, the office of salvation, and therefore most earnestly applied it himself. And when he chose his twelve apostles to send them forth unto this office, he first prayed all the night. He, being God almighty with the Father, might have given all gifts fit for this office; but to teach us, he would first pray all night. Here is good matter for bishops and patrons to look upon; and not to regard so little whom they give their benefice unto, or whom they admit to cure the souls they have charge of. A notable example: Christ prayed all night, ere he would send them forth, ere he would put them in this preaching office, this most necessary office of salvation. For he saw that they had need of great zeal to God and to souls’ health, that should take upon them to keep souls, and a bold courage and spirit, that should rebuke the world of their sin and wickedness. Many will choose now such a curate for their souls, as they may call “fool,” rather than one that shall rebuke their covetousness, ambition, unmercifulness, uncharitableness; that shall be sober, discreet, apt to reprove and resist the gainsayers with the word of God.²⁹

We should also note that Latimer is equally clear about the need for *faithful hearing*. Indeed, Latimer is so confident of the power of God’s Word and so determined for preachers to be effective that he would rather have people come to hear a sermon for a poor reason than not to come at all:

I had rather ye should come as the tale is by the gentlewoman of London: one of her neighbours met her in the street, and said, “Mistress, whither go ye?” “Marry,” said she, “I am going to St Thomas of Acres to the sermon; I could not sleep all this last night, and I am going now thither; I never failed of a good nap there.” And so I had rather ye should go a napping to the sermons, than not to go at all. For with what mind soever ye come, though ye come for an ill purpose, yet peradventure ye may chance to be caught or ye go; the preacher may chance to catch you on his hook.³⁰

Nevertheless, Latimer obviously desires that people would come with an ear to hear, because of the issues at stake:

Where ye may perceive, how necessary a thing it is to hear God’s word, and how needful a thing it is to have preachers, which may teach us the word of God: for by hearing we must come to faith; through faith we must be justified. And therefore Christ saith himself, *Qui credit in me, habet vitam aeternam*; “He that believeth in me hath everlasting life.” When we hear God’s word by the preacher, and believe that same, then we shall be saved: for St. Paul saith, *Evangelium est potentia Dei ad salutem omni credenti*; “The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to all that believe; the gospel preached is God’s power to salvation of all believers.” This is a great commendation of this office of preaching: therefore we ought not to despise it, or little regard it; for it is God’s instrument, whereby he worketh faith in our hearts. . . . Here I might take occasion to inveigh against those which little regard the office of preaching; which are wont to

²⁸ 1:418.

²⁹ 1:292. See also 2:26, where Latimer describes at greater length the kind of character required in the preacher, and the prayer required for choosing a godly and faithful man.

³⁰ 1:201.

say, “What need we such preachings every day? Have I not five wits? I know as well what is good or ill, as he doth that preacheth.” But I tell thee, my friend, be not too hasty; for when thou hast nothing to follow but thy five wits, thou shalt go to the devil with them. David, that holy prophet, said not so: he trusted not his five wits, but he said, *Lucerna pedibus meis verbum tuum, Domine*; “Lord, thy word is a lantern unto my feet.” Here we learn not to despise the word of God, but highly to esteem it, and reverently to hear it; for the holy day is ordained and appointed to none other thing, but that we should at that day hear the word of God, and exercise ourselves in all godliness. But there be some which think that this day is ordained only for feasting, drinking, or gaming, or such foolishness; but they be much deceived: this day was appointed of God that we should hear his word, and learn his laws, and so serve him.³¹

Latimer’s view of preaching is of a high calling to be humbly embraced:

But we preachers, we have a greater and higher degree: we are magistrates, we have the spiritual sword of God, in a higher degree than the common people; we must rebuke other men, and spare no man. Our office is to teach every man the way to heaven; and whosoever will not follow, but liveth still in sin and wickedness, him ought we to strike, and not to spare. Like as John Baptist did, when he said to the great and proud king Herod, *Non licet tibi*; “Sir, it becometh not thee to do so.” So we preachers, must use God’s word to the correction of other men’s sins; we may not be flatterers or claw-backs. Other people, that have not this vocation, may exhort every one his neighbour to leave sins; but we have the sword, we are authorised to strike them with God’s word.³²

The good bishop portrays for us the preacher as a man of fidelity and courage, with wisdom from God and insight into men, unflinching in his stand against sin and unstinting in his declaration of Christ. “The properties of every good preacher,” says Latimer, are

to be a true man; to teach, not dreams nor inventions of men, but *viam Dei in veritate*, “the way of God truly”; and not to regard the personage of man; not to creep into his bosom, to claw his back; to say to the wicked he doth well, for filthy lucre’s sake. Ah, these flatterers! no greater mischief in the commonwealth, than these flatterers!³³

By Latimer’s standards, I would suggest that there are a lot of people today who stand up in pulpits to talk who would be thoroughly denounced by this pulpit giant as no preachers but mere flatterers, and a great mischief in the commonwealth.

Latimer’s practice of preaching

Latimer’s practice of preaching, as befits a man with a reputation for integrity of character, is very much in keeping with his principles. We can identify several distinctive features, acknowledging that others could be chosen, or different divisions drawn and nuances identified, and that some necessarily overlap.

Firstly, Latimer is a *vivid and lively* preacher. He readily employs **anecdotes** about himself (for example, how he got locked out of a church building because it was Robin Hood’s day and the people did “prefer Robin Hood to God’s word”³⁴) and others (in addition to the napping gentlewoman,³⁵ we have a variety of visiting bishops,³⁶ complaining chaplains

³¹ 1:470-1.

³² 1:506.

³³ 1:292.

³⁴ 1:208.

³⁵ 1:201, see above.

³⁶ 1:207.

[who are usually complaining about Latimer],³⁷ traitorous Lord Admirals,³⁸ thieves on the gallows³⁹ and such like). His **illustrations** and imagery are rich and effective, ranging from a “captain and defender” charged by the king with the defence of “his town of Calais . . . against the Frenchmen especially, above all other enemies”⁴⁰ (one can almost hear the venom in his voice and the muttered satisfaction of his congregation), through the whole central conceit of the “Sermon of the Plough,” to an allegory of Faith as “a great state, a lady, a duchess, a great woman” who “hath ever a great company and train [of graces and virtues] about her,”⁴¹ or the Lord Christ’s work highlighted by a prisoner on his way to “the dungeon of Ludgate” whose friend becomes surety for him and so spares him his punishment.⁴² Neither must we bypass the **jokes**, for Latimer is a master of harnessed humour in the pulpit, whether the sarcastic aside about the possibility of a sincere pilgrim chancing “to visit pigs’ bones instead of saints’ relicks,”⁴³ the *faux*-wounded innocence when he reports that he answered challenges about the whereabouts of Jairus’ daughter’s soul between her death and rising with an innocent sounding, “I cannot tell; but where it pleased God it should be, there it was,” followed by the congregational nudge-and-wink, “Is not this a good answer to such a clerkly question?”⁴⁴ or the more developed tale, for example, concerning the

bargain that I heard of late should be betwixt two friends for a horse: the owner promised the other should have the horse if he would; the other asked the price; he said twenty nobles. The other would give him but four pound. The owner said he should not have him then. The other claimed the horse, because he said he should have him if he would. Thus this bargain became a Westminster matter: the lawyers got twice the value of the horse; and when all came to all, two fools made an end of the matter.⁴⁵

So adept is Latimer in this sphere that he has on occasion, when he has caught the imagination of his congregation with some apposite tale, to tell them, “It is no laughing matter, my friends, it is a weeping matter, a heavy matter.”⁴⁶ In short, Latimer knows how to catch and keep the ear of his congregation.

Secondly, and allied with that vividness and liveliness, Latimer is – in the best sense of the word – *popular*, having a thoroughly engaging grasp of the world in which he lives and the people to whom he speaks. He is not afraid to take events and habits in the world as the occasions of his sermons. In his Christmas “Sermons on the Card” he uses the common seasonal practice of card games to create his own game and deal out some sermonic “cards” from the pulpit. The illustration of Calais above would have been of immediate relevance to any right-thinking Englishman (and Latimer’s further hint that you could liken the French to the fiend⁴⁷ probably did him no harm in their estimation). He does not speak around or over his audience, but to them, engaging their esteem and affections, never unnecessarily insulting

³⁷ 1:154-55.

³⁸ 1:161-65.

³⁹ 1:163.

⁴⁰ 1:5.

⁴¹ 1:168.

⁴² 1:223.

⁴³ 1:53.

⁴⁴ 1:550.

⁴⁵ 1:89.

⁴⁶ 1:208.

⁴⁷ 1:5-6.

them. Consider the subtle wisdom of his address to a London congregation: “Now if I should preach in the country, among the unlearned, I would tell what propitiatory, expiatory, and remissory is; but here is a learned auditory; yet for them that be unlearned I will expound it.”⁴⁸

Drawing on his experience among the ordinary people, he readily puts himself in the shoes of his hearers:

But some will say, “Our curate is naught; an ass-head; a dodipole; a lack-latin, and can do nothing. Shall I pay him my tithes, that doth us no good, nor none will do?” “Yea,” I say, “thou must pay him his duty; and if he be such a one, complain to the bishop.” “We have complained to the ordinary, and he is as negligent as he.” Complain to the council. “Sir, so have we done, but no remedy can be had.” Well, I can tell where thou shalt complain; complain to God, he will surely hear thee, he will remedy it.⁴⁹

He knows that real people are before him, and so he deals in the known business of earth and the substantial realities of heaven.

Thirdly, this preaching prelate is always *direct*. He communicates in **plain language** which – even taking into account the distance of time and development of language – rarely leaves you asking what Latimer means. This does not mean his vocabulary is dull and his tone predictable. Rather, he has a knack for a ripe and telling turn of phrase that carries his meaning clearly. So in discussing the tension between two neighbours who are pretending to get on while one bears an ancient grudge against the other, he warns that “you may both laugh and make good cheer, and yet there may remain a bag of rusty malice, twenty years old, in thy neighbour’s bosom.”⁵⁰ There is an unembarrassed and manly vigour that lends itself to straight and sometimes earthy talking, which Latimer admires in the prophets:

Esay, that faithful minister of God, he is a good plain fellow; he telleth them the matter in plain, saying, *Argentum tuum versum est in scoriam, principes tui infideles, socii forum*: “Thy silver is turned to dross, thy princes are unfaithful, and fellows of thieves.” He is no flatterer, he telleth them the truth.⁵¹

Latimer calls on others to demonstrate what he himself exemplifies even in the very act of making that call:

Therefore, you preachers, out with your swords and strike at the root. Speak against covetousness, and cry out upon it. Stand not ticking and toying at the branches nor at the boughs, for then there will new boughs and branches spring again of them; but strike at the root, and fear not these giants of England, these great men and men of power, these men that are oppressors of the poor; fear them not, but strike at the root of all evil, which is mischievous covetousness.⁵²

Another strength is Latimer’s gift for **vernacular paraphrase**. He does it repeatedly, bringing Scripture and theology into common speech, but surely never so freely and boldly as when he is speaking on John 7 and quotes the Pharisees in verse 47: “Then answered the Pharisees, *Num et vos seducti estis?*” A fairly sober modern translation of the Greek will offer something like “Are you also deceived/led astray?” Latimer provides a personal and far riper

⁴⁸ 1:73.

⁴⁹ 1:304.

⁵⁰ 1:20.

⁵¹ 1:381-2.

⁵² 1:247.

paraphrase of the Latin: “What, ye brain-sick fools, ye hoddy-pecks⁵³, ye doddy-pouls⁵⁴, ye huddes⁵⁵, do ye believe him? are you seduced also?”⁵⁶ When we criticise Latimer’s homiletical structure (or lack of it), we must recognise that his strength as a homiletician lies in his memorable and easy style.

But this directness also shows itself in **searching applications**. Latimer pulls no punches. When speaking of the shepherds of Luke 2 to the servants of the household of the Duchess of Suffolk at Grimsthorpe, he makes plain that his hearers should

note the diligence of these shepherds: for whether the sheep were their own, or whether they were servants, I cannot tell, for it is not expressed in the book; but it is most like they were servants, and their masters had put them in trust to keep their sheep. Now if these shepherds had been deceitful fellows, that when their masters had put them in trust to keep their sheep, they had been drinking in the alehouse all night, as some of our servants do now-a-days, surely the angels had not appeared unto them, to have told them this great joy and good tidings. And here all servants may learn by these shepherds to serve truly and diligently unto their masters: in what business soever they are set to do, let them be painful and diligent, like as Jacob was unto his master Laban.⁵⁷

After a few more Biblical examples of such diligence, he asks, “But, I pray you, where are these servants now-a-days? Indeed I fear me, there be but very few of such faithful servants.”⁵⁸ (Never one to miss a sitting duck, he also has a few choice comments from the diligent shepherds for lazy clergy.) But we are not surprised to hear our preacher speak with equal force to men of all ranks. We find him before the young Edward VI, not only declaring to the scheming court the validity of a youthful king but also pointing out the sufficiency of the Scriptures for a king to live by, and descending to particulars:

In speaking these words, ye shall understand that I do not intend to speak against the strength, policy, and provision of a king; but against excess, and vain trust that kings have in themselves more than in the living God, the author of all goodness, and giver of all victory. Many horses are requisite for a king; but he may not exceed in them, nor triumph in them, more than is needful for the necessary affairs and defence of the realm. What meaneth it that God hath to do with the king’s stable, but only he would be master of his horses? The scripture saith, *In altis habitat*, “He dwelleth on high.” It followeth, *Humilia respicit*, “He looketh on low things;” yea, upon the king’s stables, and upon all the offices in his house. God is the great Grandmaster of the king’s house, and will take account of every one that beareth rule therein, for the executing of their offices; whether they have justly and truly served the king in their offices, or no. Yea, God looketh upon the king himself, if he work well or not. Every king is subject unto God, and all other men are subjects unto the king. In a king God requireth faith, not excess of horses.⁵⁹

The nobles receive their due instruction. When speaking to them of Jonah’s ministry in Nineveh, the parallels he draws are hard to mistake:

There were noblemen, rich men, wealthy men; there were vicious men, and covetous men, and men that gave themselves to all voluptuous living, and to worldliness of getting riches. Was this a time well chosen and discreetly taken of Jonas, to come and reprove them of their sin; to declare unto them the threatenings

⁵³ A hoddy-peck, hoddypeak or hoddypake is a blockhead or simpleton, although some suggest it may also indicate a cuckold.

⁵⁴ A doddy-poul or doddy-poll is a thickhead or dolt.

⁵⁵ Huddes are husks, offscourings or refuse.

⁵⁶ 1:136.

⁵⁷ 2:119.

⁵⁸ 2:119.

⁵⁹ 1:92-93.

of God; and to tell them of their covetousness; and to say plainly unto them, that except they repented and amended their evil living, they and their city should be destroyed of God's hand within forty days? And yet they heard Jonas and gave place to his preaching. They heard the threatenings of God, and feared his stroke and vengeance, and believed God: that is, they believed God's preacher and minister; they believed that God would be true of his word that he spake by the mouth of his prophet, and thereupon did penance, to turn away the wrath of God from them. Well, what shall we say? I will say this, and not spare: Christ saith, Ninive shall arise against the Jews at the last day, and bear witness against them; because that they, hearing God's threatening for sin, *ad praedicationam Jonae in cinere et sacco egerunt poenitentiam*, "They did penance at the preaching of Jonas in ashes and sackcloth," (as the text saith there:) and I say, Ninive shall arise against England, thou England; Ninive shall arise against England, because it will not believe God, nor hear his preachers that cry daily unto them, nor amend their lives, and especially their covetousness. Covetousness is as great a sin now as it was then: and it is the same sin now it was then: and he will as sure strike for sin now, as he did then.⁶⁰

We have seen him confront the clergy⁶¹ with language that is terse and penetrating: "Wherefore lift up your heads, brethren, and look about with your eyes, spy what things are to be reformed in the church of England. Is it so hard, is it so great a matter for you to see many abuses in the clergy, many in the laity?"⁶²

Latimer will never shy away from dealing with particular sins and calling for particular repentance and enjoining to particular duty, and in this he stands in stark contrast with many modern pulpits.

Fourthly, Latimer is appropriately *polemical*. While we recognise his readiness to take on sin in all its forms – preachers, like the Christ who rebuked his own mother, "shall not bear or comfort any man in his sins and wickedness, but admonish him; nor flatter him against our conscience, as some do, which will not displease, but rather allow things against their own conscience"⁶³ – he has two primary targets in this regard: false religion and injustice (including abuse of privilege and position). With regard to **false religion**, popery gets shortest shrift, as when Latimer offers the thought that

the devil, by the help of that Italian bishop yonder, his chaplain, hath laboured by all means that he might to frustrate the death of Christ and the merits of his passion. And they have devised for that purpose to make us believe in other vain things by his pardons: as to have remission of sins for praying on hallowed beads; for drinking of the bakehouse bowl; as a canon of Waltham Abbey once told me, that whensoever they put their loaves of bread into the oven, as many as drank of the pardon-bowl should have pardon for drinking of it. A mad thing, to give pardon to a bowl!⁶⁴

But Latimer also includes the superstition and paganism, often walking in lockstep with Roman Catholicism, that plagued Reformation England. Neither can Latimer abide **injustice**. Bribery sickens him, and he inveighs against it repeatedly:

It is very sure that they that be good will bear, and not spurn at the preachers: they that be faulty they must amend, and neither spurn, nor wince, nor whine. He that findeth himself touched or galled, he declareth himself not to be upright. Wo worth these gifts! they subvert justice everywhere. *Sequantur retributiones*:

⁶⁰ 1:241-2.

⁶¹ See above on the preacher's faithfulness.

⁶² 1:52.

⁶³ 2:118.

⁶⁴ 1:74.

“they follow bribes.” Somewhat was given to them before; and they must needs give somewhat again: for Giffe-gaffe⁶⁵ was a good fellow; this Giffe-gaffe led them clean from justice. “They follow gifts.”

A good fellow on a time bade another of his, friends to a breakfast, and said, “If you will come, you shall be welcome; but I tell you aforehand, you shall have but slender fare: one dish, and that is all” “What is that,” said he? “A pudding, and nothing else.” “Marry,” said he, “you cannot please me better; of all meats, that is for mine own tooth; you may draw me round about the town with a pudding.” These bribing magistrates and judges follow gifts faster than the fellow would follow the pudding.⁶⁶

Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest a rather grim remedy:

Cambyses was a great emperor, such another as our master is: he had many lords-deputies, lords-presidents, and lieutenants under him. It is a great while ago since I read the history. It chanced he had under him in one of his dominions a briber, a gift-taker, a gratifier of rich men; he followed gifts as fast as he that followed the pudding; a hand-maker in his office, to make his son a great man; as the old saying is, “Happy is the child whose father goeth to the devil.” The cry of the poor widow came to the emperor’s ear, and caused him to flay the judge quick, and laid his skin in his chair of judgment, that all judges that should give judgment afterward should sit in the same skin. Surely it was a goodly sign, a goodly monument, the sign of the judge’s skin. I pray God we may once see the sign of the skin in England!⁶⁷

He lists miscarriages of justice, and calls upon the king “to remedy the matter, and God grant you to see redress in this realm in your own person.”⁶⁸ Neither is he unwilling to stand himself against the expectations of the day: on one occasion he obtained pardon for an unloved wife whose husband used the death of their child as an excuse to rid himself of his spouse by accusing her of murder;⁶⁹ in the same connection he warns that “a man may sin deadly with his own wife, if he, contrary to God’s order, misuse her.”⁷⁰ Latimer’s life among the people before his elevation, both from his less privileged background and his visiting of those in prison, together with the perspective obtained from his appointment as a bishop, all inform an abiding concern for the poor and vulnerable, and a concern that, for them, justice should be done and provision be made. For those who are the victims of injustice, he has words of comfort:

You widows, you orphans, you poor people, here is a comfortable place for you. Though these judges of the world will not hear you, there is one will be content with your importunity; he will remedy you, if you come after a right sort unto him. . . . Thou widow, thou orphan, thou fatherless child, I speak to thee, that hast no friends to help thee: “call upon me in the day of thy tribulation, call upon me; *Ego eripiam te*, I will pluck thee away, I will deliver thee, I will take thee away, I will relieve thee, thou shalt have thy heart’s desire.”⁷¹

Fifthly, Latimer is *pastorally thorough and thoroughly pastoral*. Again, we should not imagine that – working within the confines of his own development as a theologian and the tools available to him – he is any way a careless preacher. This is the man who, according to his servant Bernher, “every morning ordinarily, winter and summer, about two of the clock in

⁶⁵ “Giffe-gaffe” seems to be personified mutual back-scratching.

⁶⁶ 1:140. Again, note that this is not preached to those who are suffering from these injustices, but to those who are committing them.

⁶⁷ 1:146.

⁶⁸ 1:189-91.

⁶⁹ 1:335.

⁷⁰ 1:343.

⁷¹ 1:142-143.

the morning he was at his book most diligently.”⁷² His series on the Lord’s prayer covers a lot of territory, and he clearly has an excellent grasp of his material. He works through the text verse by verse, commenting and applying, but in such a way as always to maintain the connection of the text with his congregation. There is never a theory in Latimer’s preaching that does not translate into practice, and that is not made to translate into the practice of the very people to whom he preaches. Today’s high-flying scholarly orations that never land on the earth of a man’s life are shot down in flames by Latimer’s solid cannons. Latimer never forgets that pastoral dynamic, that need to bring the Word of God into connection with the hearts of his people, and his preaching is governed by that sense of responsibility.

His searching applications and gospel comforts are intended to do people good as sinners and as saints. Again, it is evident that he knows them: their circumstances, their errors, their sins, their grievances, their ignorance, their needs. He sets out to meet them all in the course of his preaching. For those who wonder whether or not Latimer’s stinging rebukes can be considered pastoral, we might consider the demands of the times he lived in, and the demands of our own. A true shepherd cares enough about his sheep to keep them safe, and that sometimes demands a whack on the flanks as much as a tender embrace from the strong arms of the shepherd. Perhaps the problem lies not so much in the fact that Latimer has added so much to his conception of pastoral preaching and counsel, but that we have evacuated so much from ours.

Latimer wants none to wander and none to stray once brought in. So he rebukes, instructs, and entreats with a view to the present and eternal good of all who hear him. His evident concern readily overflows, and it drives all his preaching. Here is his encouragement to repent of sin:

You have heard how needful it is for us to cry unto God for forgiveness of our sins: where you have heard, wherein forgiveness of our sins standeth, namely, in Christ the Son of the living God. Again, I told you how you should come to Christ, namely, by faith; and faith cometh through hearing the word of God. Remember then this addition, “As we forgive them that trespass against us;” which is a sure token, whereby we know whether we have the true faith in Christ or no. And here you learn, that it is a good thing to have an enemy; for we may use him to our great commodity: through him or by him we may prove ourselves, whether we have the true faith or no.⁷³

And here are some more of his gospel comforts:

Call this, I say, to remembrance, and again remember that our Saviour hath cleansed through his passion all our sins, and taken away all our wickedness; so that as many as believe in him shall be the children of God. In such wise let us strive and fight against the temptations of the devil; which would not have us to call upon God, because we be sinners. Catch thou hold of our Saviour, believe in him, be assured in thy heart that he with his suffering took away all thy sins. Consider again, that our Saviour calleth us to prayer, and commandeth us to pray. Our sins let us, and withdraw us from prayer; but our Saviour maketh them nothing: when we believe in him, it is like as if we had no sins. For he changeth with us: he taketh our sins and wickedness from us, and giveth unto us his holiness, righteousness, justice, fulfilling of the law, and so, consequently, everlasting life: so that we be like as if we had done no sin at all; for his righteousness standeth us in so good stead, as though we of our own selves had fulfilled the law to the uttermost. Therefore our sins cannot let us, nor withdraw us from prayer: for they be gone; they are no sins; they

⁷² 2:xxi.

⁷³ 1:426-7.

cannot be hurtful unto us. Christ dying for us, as all the scripture, both of the new and old Testament, witnesseth, *Dolores nostros ipse portavit*, “He hath taken away our sorrows.”⁷⁴

Such, then, is the preaching in principle and in practice of the man who was, according to Sir Marcus Loane,

the recognised exponent of the moral teaching of the Reformation, and the practical character of his oratory was the surest means to arouse the conscience of his England . . . his was the voice of righteousness. . . . There was nothing crude or vulgar in his sermons; they were plain and opportune, shrewd and vigorous, with a touch of racy humour, and flair for homely illustration, and a magnificent verve, and a colloquial dash, that gave his words instant penetration.⁷⁵

And so it was that Sir John Cheke, the learned tutor of Edward VI, said of this preaching prelate, “I have an ear for other preachers, but I have a heart for Latimer.” I hope that we can now begin to understand why, and are perhaps more ready to ask the Head of the church to raise up men of God with integrity of soul, courage of conviction and penetration of speech for the pulpits of today.

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This lecture was the lunchtime lecture given at *The Evangelical Library* on Monday 28 November 2011 by Rev. Jeremy Walker, a Pastor of Maidenbower Baptist Church, Crawley and a trustee of the Library

⁷⁴ 1:329-30.

⁷⁵ Sir Marcus Loane, *Masters of the English Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), 147.