

## St. Paul the Preacher

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FOR upwards of thirty years St. Paul journeyed from city to city and from country to country preaching in synagogues, churches and public places. Preaching in season and out of season he must have delivered thousands of sermons; but of those thousands we have the words of only four sermons. Of these four, one is very much like a legal plea, one is an effort to conciliate a mob and the other two are out-and-out sermons. The discourse before Felix could, perhaps, be given the title of sermon when the speech before Agrippa, which is very much akin to the address to Felix, is listed as a sermon. We might also accept as a sermon the farewell speech to the elders of the Church of Ephesus. But strictly speaking neither of them has the homiletical character: that to Felix is purely legal in its purpose and the leave-taking at Miletus is purely personal. In short, then, Paul the preacher has left us only four sermons. Of the four indisputable sermons, one was spoken in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, one at Athens in the Areopagus, one at Jerusalem on the steps of the Tower of Antonia and one at Caesarea before the court of Festus and Agrippa.

Responsible exegetes have even declared that the four sermons recorded in the Acts are merely summaries or abstracts of what St. Paul delivered. This may be true, but there seems to be no absolute reason why the sermons such as they came from the mouth of St. Paul should have been much longer than the accounts we possess. The curious Greeks, who came to hear some pleasant novelty, would hardly have listened to a long discourse that went to prove that their system of the deities was wrong from foundation to pinnacle; a wild mob of zealots would not have held their hands aloft for an hour while their prospective victim delivered himself of an extended address; and the account of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, as related before Agrippa, need not have been spun out any finer than the Acts of the Apostles report it in chapter XXVI. On

the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the sermon delivered in the synagogue at Antioch could very well have been much longer than the account presented in chapter XIII of the Acts. However, we accept the sermons of St. Paul as we find them and from the reports of St. Luke we must judge of the homiletic style of the Apostle of the Gentiles.

The first point that strikes the reader is the extremely unfavorable conditions which confronted St. Paul the preacher. Only the sermon at Antioch was delivered before an audience that cared to hear him. Of the other three sermons, the one at Athens was, indeed, upon invitation but before a captious, self-satisfied, frivolous, hypercritical audience. The sermon at Jerusalem was more of a harangue to an angry mob—the Roman guards holding at bay the frantic throng of Jews, while St. Paul torn and bleeding from his recent assault at the hands of the Jews, not as yet far from death, was trying to make meek and humble Christians out of the men who one moment before had assailed his life for the very reason that he himself was a Christian. The scene of the last sermon, the one at Caesarea before the court of Felix and Agrippa, was indeed the most inspiringly dramatic of them all, but not the most encouraging for St. Paul. He was pale and emaciated from two years of close confinement and in pitiful contrast to the oriental pomp of a puppet king and a haughty Roman governor. His audience came for diversion, not for conversion, and nothing short of a voice from Heaven could have roused their torpid souls.

Besides the unfavorable auditory which St. Paul had to face he lacked that captivating personal appearance which we associate in our imagination with the successful orator. His enemies at Corinth said that "his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible" (2 Cor. x, 10) and the description which we find of him in the Acts of Paul and Thecla show that "he was short, bald, bow-legged, well knit, his eyebrows met, his nose was large—." Like Moses and Jeremiah he lacked the natural qualifications of a preacher.

These obstacles to success, however, only make the genius of the Apostle more evident. The fury of the Jewish mob, the smugness of the Athenian philosophers, the complacency and rudeness of Felix and Agrippa but give St. Paul the more opportunity to show his skill in disposing of difficulties. His own poor exterior as contrasted with the marvelous results he achieved gives us the more reason to admire the inner man which could

operate so successfully through such an unpromising medium. In short, we must grant true eloquence to a man who without any other human aids than the tongue could manipulate minds, even confirmedly hostile minds, as St. Paul did.

St. Paul had the first note of an orator: he could gain and hold attention. Any man who can hold an audience all night long, even though one auditor does fall asleep, most certainly has the gift of interest. When St. Paul spoke in the synagogue at Antioch and in the court of Felix at Caesarea he did not need to seek attention; attention was had without the quest. But when he began his sermon in the Areopagus at Athens and his address to his persecutors from the steps of the Tower of Antonia he had to angle for attention. At Athens he used an anecdote, an urbane anecdote, the difficult personal anecdote, and without loss of time he grasped the interest of the audience and verily hurled them into the midst of his discourse before attention could wane or the favorable effects of his compliments could be dissipated. "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious-minded.\* For passing by, and seeing your idols, I found an altar also, on which was written: To the unknown God. What therefore you worship, without knowing it, that I preach to you."

At Jerusalem the task was much more difficult for he spoke to a hostile mob. Wild passion and mob spirit opposed him, racial prejudice and religious pride, the worst and blindest of rages, all cried out for blood and not for words. But St. Paul, the man whom they were persecuting because they believed him an enemy to things Jewish, stepped in front of his Roman captors, raised high his manacled hands and lifted up his voice; and what they heard was their own Jewish tongue—the language they used when discussing religious questions in the presence of outsiders—and what they saw was a fellow Jew bound with the chains of a foreign oppressor. With one small maneuver St. Paul appealed to their racial pride and national loyalty; and St.

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\* The Douay version of the Bible renders "deisdamonesteros" or "quasi superstitiores" as "too superstitious," but Msgr. Le Camus in his *L'Oeuvre des Apotres* (Paris, 1905) translates "singulierement religieux." In a footnote he adds: "The expression 'deisdamonesteros' signifies more accurately men who fear God. This fear of the divinity engenders piety and at times superstition. Thus the two meanings of the word. Xenophon, Aristotle, Diodorus and Josephus accept the word in the sense of 'religious.'" Thayer in his Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament offers the same opinion.

Luke tells us that the Jews "when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew tongue, they kept the more silence." (Act xxii, 2). Carrying out this strategy in words St. Paul launched out upon a relation of all the Jewish influences in his life.

The manner in which St. Paul herein reviews his life offers a fine example of his art in constructing an acceptable case: what is favorable he develops, what is unfavorable he suppresses. He says he was born in Tarsus but brought up in Jerusalem, thereby leaving his auditory to infer his preference for the Holy City over his native city; he was not only taught the Law, but taught it at the feet of the famous Gamaliel so that he became as zealous for the Law—as—as—and then for a model of comparison, he turns to his audience: "as zealous for the law, as also all you are this day." He calls the high priest as his witness and authority and thereby shields himself in borrowed reverence. Ananias, who had announced to him his mission, is a "man according to the law, having testimony of all the Jews who dwelt there," but nothing is said of him being a Christian. St. Paul relates his sentiments at the time of Stephen's stoning, but is silent concerning his subsequent remorse. A number of other points could easily be indicated, but these suffice to show that St. Paul had no mean skill in presenting the best side of a plea.

This sagacity in exposing his views was not the result of a cold astuteness that requires time to prepare a plan of campaign and is befuddled if taken unawares. St. Paul was one of these men who are never taken unawares. Let circumstances shape themselves as they will, St. Paul would quickly catch their drift and come out of the *melée* triumphant. In short, he was a quick thinker. When questioned by the Sanhedrim he cried out: "Men, brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees: concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question." And the meeting broke up in wrangling. When Festus rudely broke in on his discourse, St. Paul was not disconcerted but appealed for support to the equally high patronage of Agrippa in such a way that Agrippa could not gracefully commit himself against Paul. And when that haughty king turned his courtly irony into an uncalled-for jest: "In a little thou persuadest me to become a Christian," Paul caught up his very words and used them to advantage: "I would to God, that both in a little and in much, not only thou, but also all that hear me, this day, should become such as I also am, except these bands." Even a genial sense of humor can be read in that last phrase:

"Except these bands." And thus St. Paul, retaining both his dignity and his good rapport, brought to a pleasant close a perilous thrust of words that might have resulted sadly for his comfort.

This flexibility of mind so very near to repartee was only a phase of a broader permanent intellectual adaptability. St. Paul was no one-style man; he had many styles and each obedient to the demands of the occasion. To the Jew he spoke of their common fathers and heroes; to the Athenian he quoted their poets; with the Jew he reasoned from the Scriptures; with the Gentile he contended from a point of universal conscience, reason and experience. And whatever response his audience made to his words found Paul alert to adjust himself to the new situation. When addressing the Jews at Antioch he had three propositions to establish: the Messiah has come, He has risen from the dead, He is greater than the Law. The most inflammable of these propositions, that Jesus is greater than the Law, is placed last; the most alluring to the Jewish mind, that the Messiah has appeared, comes first. What pleases the Jews is given in high colors and with much assurance, and as St. Paul perceives their respectful and sympathetic attention he takes advantage of the situation to state his most dangerous truth with such rapidity that he forestalls their wrath.

This breadth and sprightliness of mind were the results of the cosmopolitan life of St. Paul. By blood and religion he was a Jew, by birthplace a citizen of the learned, polished city of Tarsus and by citizenship he was a Roman. Jew, Greek and Roman: religion, eloquence and government. He felt the hereditary pride of the Jew, he knew the Hellenistic mind and spirit and availed himself of the privileges of the conquerors. By inheritance St. Paul was, most probably, of some means; but by trade he was a tentmaker and labored with other manual workers. To top it all, St. Paul was a man of many journeys.

We have confined ourselves thus far to the matter of St. Paul and have said nothing of the delivery of his sermons. What was the actual manner of preaching employed by St. Paul, no one can state with assurance. But from many indications we can surmise with some probability.

St. Paul, as reported by the most reliable tradition, was small and wiry; and from the quantity of work he produced we may conclude that he must have been a man of rare energy. His lively imagination, his brilliant figures of speech, the abrupt



digressions in his epistles mark St. Paul as a man who would most probably speak with power, spontaneity and conviction. We may go even farther and state that he was an aggressive speaker. His comprehensive conviction of the justice of whatever cause he embraced, his conflicts during his missionary journeys with Barnabas, Mark and Peter, the fact that St. Paul must flee from Berea but Silas and Timothy could remain and teach the very same doctrines, and finally his willingness to argue with God when told that Jerusalem would not hear him, all these would justify the inference that St. Paul was the man to push his views with the utmost vigor. We can draw a further confirmation of the energy and persuasion of his words if we accept the Acts of Paul and Thecla wherein is noted the complete change that came over his whole being during his speeches: "He was gracious, sometimes he was like a man, sometimes like an angel."

In chapters twenty-one and twenty-two of the Acts we have an instance of his mastery of oratorical emphasis. When he asked the centurion for permission to address the Jews he said: "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city." And when he faced the Jews he repeated that he was born at Tarsus: "I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city." In both instances Tarsus is named as his birthplace; but when speaking to the Roman, Tarsus receives the emphasis and Paul appears to the Roman as a Tarsian, though when speaking to the Jews the emphasis of the speaker obliterates Tarsus and Jerusalem stands out with contrasted splendor.

It has been impossible to find space to speak of the personality of St. Paul; but this was undoubtedly a powerful, though subtle, influence in his preaching. First of all, he was a gentleman, whom Cardinal Newman calls the first gentleman, and a master of that most delicate art of gentle praise that never touches fulsome adulation; he was loving because he inspired the deepest affection in others, even to the point of tears; he was kind and gentle to mankind, even to a fugitive slave; and under all his speech ran a tone of human weakness which brought him near to his hearers. Whatever could be said in abstract of him would, undoubtedly, only be a feeble persuasion in comparison with his record as a preacher; he has labored more abundantly than the rest; and has remained to this day as the model and ideal Christian preacher.