



# The Princeton Seminary Bulletin

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## THE ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-SEVENTH COMMENCEMENT

NOTHING brings more cheer to all concerned with the progress of the Seminary than to witness the crowds that throng the old campus at Commencement time. Year by year the Commencement season becomes an ever more significant occasion. Alumni groups begin to vie with each other to have a large representation at reunions. The One Hundred and Twenty-Seventh Commencement was in every way a joyous and memorable event.

Exercises this year began with a Baccalaureate sermon by the President of the Seminary in Miller Chapel on the afternoon of Sunday, May 14. They came to a close with the conferring of degrees and an address by the Rev. Dr. Hugh Thomson Kerr, of Pittsburgh, before an assembly of nearly two thousand people, who crowded the nave and gallery of Princeton University Chapel. At this ceremony, which was presided over by the Vice-President of the Board of Trustees, the Rev. Dr. Lewis Seymour Mudge, fifty-nine students received the degree of Bachelor of Theology and twenty-six the degree of Master of Theology. Dr. Kerr's address on "The Miracle of Preaching," was most inspiring. We are happy to reproduce it in the present number of the BULLETIN.

If we except the impressive ceremony in the University Chapel, the outstanding event of this Commencement was the Alumni banquet on Monday evening in the University Gymnasium. A company of three hundred and sixty-six sat down to dinner which was presided over by the Vice-President of the Alumni Association, the Rev. Dr. Robert Brewster Beattie, of the First Church of East Orange, New Jersey. Among those present for their fiftieth reunion was Dr. Edward Mack, of the Class of 1889, who a few days later was elected Moderator of the Southern Presbyterian Church. In the course of the evening the Westminster Choir, under the leadership of Dr. Williamson, sang some choice numbers. As usual, an unforgettable feature of the gathering was the singing of old club favorites under the direction of that loved and inimitable conductor, Dr. Charles R. Erdman. Two brief addresses were given, one by the Rev. Harold E. Nicely '24, Pastor of the Brick Church, Rochester, New York; the other by the President of the Seminary.

The principal address of the evening was made by Dr. Theodore M. Greene, Professor of Philosophy in Princeton University. His subject was "The Gospel and Modern Man." This was one of the greatest and most significant discourses to which

## THE MIRACLE OF PREACHING\*

HUGH THOMSON KERR, D.D.

WHEN Karl Barth took hold of the bell rope in the church tower he struck a note that is still reverberating. "As preachers," he said, "we ought to speak about God. We are human, however, and cannot speak about God." There it is! As preachers we must speak about God. What else should a preacher speak about? But we are human and cannot speak about God. "No man hath seen God at any time." But as preachers we must speak about God. What then are we to do? What is the solution of the dilemma? There is nothing we can do. It is God who must do something. Into the arena of preaching God must enter or all our good texts, good diction, good outlines, good delivery will be as sounding brass and clanging cymbal. This is what is meant by the miracle of preaching. Preaching is the heralding of the fact that God has come into history. The herald is human but the message he proclaims is a miracle. It is something which God has given. Before the preacher gains his goal, God must enter the pulpit. There must be an intrusion of the Divine.

In the life of one of the greatest of English scientists the necessity of intelligent intrusion, even in humble things, is set forth in familiar language. The scientist has been thinking in terms of a mechanistic world:

"One night

When I was tired and all my mind a-dust  
With pondering on their atoms, I was  
called

To supper, and my wife placed before me  
there

A most delicious salad. 'It would appear,'  
I thought aloud, 'that if these pewter  
dishes,

Green hearts of lettuce, tarragon, slips of  
thyme,

Slices of hard-boiled egg, and grains of  
salt,

With drops of water, vinegar and oil,  
Had in a bottomless gulf been flying about  
From all eternity, one sure certain day  
The sweet invisible hand of Happy Chance  
Would serve them as a salad.'

'Likely enough,'

My wife replied, 'but not so good as mine,  
Nor so well dressed.' "

No, not so good. Somewhere in the mingling of hearts of lettuce, tarragon, slips of thyme, and slices of hard-boiled egg, intelligent purpose had entered. It is this intrusion of intelligence that is creative. When interpreted in terms of art, Browning calls it "the finger of God."

"Here is the finger of God, a flash of the  
will that can,

Existent behind all laws, that made them  
and, lo, they are!

And I know not if, save in this, such gift  
be allowed to man,

That out of three sounds he framed, not a  
fourth sound, but a star."

Something unpredictable had come out of somewhere to create something new. It came not out of the realm of sound but was something from another world and it brought forth something not in the realm of music and melody but something in the world of color. It was a miracle. Preaching is like that. If it does its work it operates in another world than belongs to words and gestures, to climaxes and anti-climaxes. It is creative, redemptive, supernatural, artistic.

\* Address delivered at the 127th Commencement, May 16, 1939.

It is our business as preachers then to speak about God; but being human, limited, finite, we cannot speak about God. "The duty of the clergyman," says Ruskin, "is to remind people in an eloquent manner of God." We may forget about the eloquent manner but the mandate is clear. As we look into the faces of the men and women that look up at the preacher Sunday after Sunday we read the question that is in their hearts. "Can you tell us something about God?" They probably know as much as they need to know about electrons and atoms, complexes and repressions, national and international, economic and financial problems. They are saying in their hearts: "I wonder if he can tell us something about God?" Voltaire is said to have sent his compliments to the medical profession of his day in these words of satire: "Medicine is the art of putting drugs of which we know little into bodies of which we know less, to cure diseases of which we know nothing at all." The medical profession has made that statement less than a jest. But what if the Church of today be guilty of ministering in ignorance in seeking to heal the souls of men! A bit critical of the Christian Church a modern penetrating scholar has said: "The spirit of man craves for a friendly God and you give him economics. He asks for immortality and you say: 'Be content, here is beer and bacon.' . . . As the tide of religion has receded, the tide of this creed, the only alternative, it seems, has correspondingly risen. . . . In the new Garden of Eden, when we enter it, there will be good roads and water supply, unlimited picture houses, unstinted soft drinks, excellent sanitation, and humane slaughtering, the best of schools and wireless installations for everyone, free concerts and lectures for all. But there will be no far horizons and invincible hopes. We shall cease to think of birth and death, of the infinite, of God, and the sublime secrets of the universe."

There is something in man that cries out for the Living God and will not be satisfied with substitutes. "What this parish needs," said Carlyle, "is a man that knows God other than second-hand." But how can we know God first-hand? It is our business to speak of God but we are human. We glory in the insights that come through mysticism, but the inner light and the reality of the numinous are variously interpreted. We glory in the new note of modern science that asserts that "the whole story of creation can be told with perfect accuracy and completeness in the six words, 'God said, Let there be light,' " but we need more than the first chapter of Genesis. We glory in the discoveries of modern psychology that spreads out before our wondering eyes the vast mysterious underworld where heaven and hell meet but with it all we confess, "Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself."

The question persists. How then can we speak about God? It is this perplexity that closes the preacher's mouth or opens it, for the answer lies in the realm not only of mystery but miracle. It involves the fact of revelation. This, of course, is the crux of modern theology but it is also the heart of the Christian faith. Has God spoken? Has He spoken for Christian preachers in a clearer, surer language than He has spoken to Hebrew prophets or to the priests of Hinduism? The New Testament asserts that God has so spoken. "God, who at sundry times and in diverse manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." In Him God spake and still speaks. He is both the Revealer and the Revealed. "It is admitted," says Nathaniel Michlem, "that God has revealed something of himself to prophets, seers, philosophers, and poets not in Judaism only but throughout the pagan world. He *spoke* to the prophets but in His Son He *came*." He is not only a man like God but He is God made man. His revelation is not

only in words but in power—that is in action. The divine action is summed up in the words, "God hath visited and redeemed his people." The Gospel is the story of something that has been done once and for all. It is not merely a message sent from heaven, an angel's song, a revelation, a revealing of the mind and heart of God. It is something that happened. It is something that took place in history. It is not some special spiritual teaching such as is crystallized in the Parables or the Sermon on the Mount. It is not a particularly fine piece of Mosaic consisting of selected spiritual truths. It is a fact. It is a mighty act of God. It is a cosmic experience in history. It is the story of something that was done. God has come near to us in Jesus Christ.

The incredulity of those who first heard the message is in the record and when we read it there is still wonder and silence, worship and glory. The story of the shepherds is burdened with it. "They said one to another, Let us now go over as far as Bethlehem and see this that has happened." Something incredible had taken place. Something had happened that had never happened before and could not happen again. Something was done that never could be done again. God in Christ had come near to men. This is the doctrine of the Incarnation, and this is the theme of truth as mediated through the personality of the preacher. This is a limiting and a liberating principle. "There is," says Phillips Brooks, "a painting of ivory miniatures, and there is a painting of great frescoes. One kind of art is suited to one kind of subject, and another to another. I suppose that all preachers pass through some fantastic period when a strange text fascinates them; when they like to find what can be said for an hour on some little topic on which most men could only talk two minutes; when they are eager for subtlety more than force, and for origi-

nality more than truth. But as a preacher grows more full of the conception of the sermon as a message, he gets clear of those brambles. He comes out on to open ground. His work grows freer, and bolder, and broader. He loves the simplest texts, and the great truths which run like rivers through all life. God's sovereignty, Christ's redemption, man's hope in the Spirit, the privilege of duty, the love of man in the Saviour, make the strong music which his soul tries to catch." When the Mass was surrendered by the Reformers they put in its place both the Sacrament and the Sermon and when we remember that a true sermon, like the Sacrament, is the breaking of the Bread of Life to God's hungry, the meaning of preaching as a miracle will be crystal clear.

But this is not all. This revelation must be communicated but it must also be received and the reception of it demands the continued operation of God's inspiring Spirit. The soil upon which the living seed is sown is unyielding and unpromising. Edgar Lee Masters has set it forth in a parable of the soil:

"He had studied  
The properties of soils and fertilizers  
And when he heard the field had failed to  
raise  
Potatoes, beans and wheat, he simply said:  
There are other things to raise; the ques-  
tion is  
Whether the soil is suited to the things  
He tried to raise, or whether it needs  
building.  
. . . The field is his, he said,  
Who can make something grow."

Is the soil suited to the things he tries to raise? The humanists say it is. The soil is good. They quote our Lord to the effect that the earth bringeth forth fruit of itself. They quote John Calvin to the effect that God has sowed the seeds of religion in every heart. Give humanity a chance

and the soul will blossom into holiness. "Not so!" assert the neo-realists. "The real basis," says a modern liberal, "for all the errors of liberalism is its erroneous estimate of human nature. The wise men of our day cannot gauge the actions of our strong men correctly, because they do not understand the tragic facts of human nature. They do not know to what degree the impulses of life are able to defy the canons of reason and the dictates of conscience." This is Calvinism finding expression. "The tragic facts of human nature" are still with us. "How childish," says a modern writer, "to think that the world's griefs are all of economic origin. Our world planners have great designs for the filling of empty stomachs. Let them ponder the more intricate problem—the filling of empty hearts. The troubles of the world have by the brilliant diagnosticians, like Robespierre or Marx, been assigned to a great variety of causes. Landor thought the best initial step towards the amelioration of its sufferings would be 'to strangle the last king with the entrails of the last priest,' or vice-versa. The giant or dragon to be slain is differently pictured in different generations. In one age monarchs are declared the public enemy, in another the aristocrats, in another the bourgeois class, or the capitalists, the bankers or the Jews. The millennium is not yet, however, in sight." And the reason is that man is not what the economists think he is.

Perhaps after all, the reason for our social and economic failures is to be found in the New Testament teaching concerning the nature of man. Perhaps with all our scientific advancement we may be compelled to accept as a fact of life and of experience the Pauline doctrine that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged." Perhaps the truly successful approach to man is to

acknowledge that he is a sinner, that he is dead—dead in trespasses and sins. Can the dead live? That is an old but a presently pressing question. Long ago Ezekiel raised it.

"Jehovah touched me with His mighty hand,

And bore me in the spirit to a valley,  
And in the midst thereof He set me down,  
And it was full of bones; and round and round

Among the bones He led me. And, behold!  
Thickly they lay upon the valley's face,  
Exceeding many and exceeding dry.

Then thus He spake to me: 'O Child of man!

Can these bones live?' 'O Lord,' I said,  
'Thou knowest.'

'Lift up thy voice,' He said, 'and prophesy  
Upon these bones, and in these words address them:

'Ye dry bones, listen to Jehovah's word.'  
Thus saith Jehovah to these bones, 'Behold!

I will breathe into you the breath of life,  
Sinews and flesh will I bring up on you,  
And I will cover you with skin, and put  
The breath of life in you: then ye shall know

That I am God the Lord Omnipotent.'

• • •

"So then I prophesied as He had bade me,  
And into them there came the breath of life;

As living men, they stood upon their feet—  
A mighty host and great exceedingly."

God is not the God of the dead but of the living. He is not interested in dead bodies. He is interested in dead souls and the message is to the souls of the spiritually dead. "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall shine upon thee." That is the way the Bible speaks. "This my son was dead and is alive again." "He that believeth on me, though

he were dead, yet shall he live." That is the miraculous message that sets the joy bells ringing around the world.

Every minister of the Gospel has stood at the death-bed of a man's soul. He has watched him slip into a coma. One must be blind if he does not see the forces of sin and materialism casting their spell of spiritual death over the souls of men. Things are happening today which twenty-five years ago would have stirred the moral conscience of the nation. Why is it that moral obligations count so little in government, in society, in the home, and even in the Church? We have the most complete educational system in the world and yet our people allow their convictions to be fashioned by the charlatan and the demagogue and crime moves on from novelty to novelty. We see men and women leaving the Church in which they were baptized, forsaking the loyalties in which their mothers trained them, leaving the faith of their fathers to follow infidel arguments and secular pursuits, until they think of themselves as machines that one day will wear out and be thrown like rubbish on the scrap-heap of the world. It is a confused and warring world in which the young men of this graduating class are to proclaim their message.

When the question is asked, "Can dead men live?" the only reply that can be made is, "O Lord, Thou knowest!" It is the answer of a man to whom the situation seems hopeless. It is the answer of many of our finest minds today. Can ideals be revived? Can hopes be realized? Can religion be enthroned? Can the Church be victorious? Can our nation become a God-fearing, reverent, worshipping people? Can these dry bones live? Can America get back its moral fiber? Can youth get back its reverence? Can people quit their cynicism and get back to faith? Can society quit bickering and biting and blaming and throwing stones and get back to good will and brotherliness? Can nations be con-

verted and beat their swords into plowshares and learn war no more? What a world that would be! No more lessons in bombing. No more courses in artillery. No more textbooks in tactics. Can Christians shake themselves out of their unconcern and awake to aggressive interest in what God can do for the world? Can preachers be aroused from walking in their sleep and begin to call dead men back to life?

"Can these bones live?" The world says, "No!" There are preachers who say, "No." Let the dead bury the dead. God says, "Yes." God says dead men can live again. The Lord Jesus Christ says, "Yes." He says, "I came to give life. I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth on me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." And this is the way He goes about it. "Thus said the Lord, Prophesy over these bones, and say unto them, 'O ye dry bones, hear the word of Jehovah.'" There was something for this man to do. It was not enough for him to shrug his shoulders and reply, "O Lord, Thou knowest." The Lord commissioned him to "Prophesy over these dry bones." He was to preach to them. That was what he was to do. "Preach to these dry bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of Jehovah." That is the Bible's definition of preaching. It is preaching to dead souls. It is a man crying in a cemetery and saying, "Awake, thou that sleepest and arise from the dead."

What a task it is! Is there any young man here who wants a task like that? Is there any business man here who will change places with the preacher? Is there anyone here who will accept the divine commission to go and preach to dead souls and say unto them, "Thus saith the Lord: Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live"? That is the preacher's commission. He does not make up sermons. He heralds a message. His task has been assigned him. If God says, "Go and preach to dry bones and say,

'Thus saith the Lord; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you,' then he must go even if he go halting in his faith. He is to preach to dead souls as if they could hear. He is to herald his message as if they would respond. And when the souls of men come alive to God a new order, a new society, a new world is born. "Prophecy over these bones," said God to John Calvin and God breathed into a corrupt and decadent Church the breath of life and a new Europe was born. "Prophecy over these bones," said God to John Wesley; and the breath of God brought forth the evangelical revival in England. "Prophecy over these bones," said God to Bunyan and Spurgeon and Jonathan Edwards, and the sun came up out of the dark clouds and the dead stood upon their feet a mighty army. It is always so. If we will speak the Living Word of God, then the breath of God will enter into the dead and dying souls of men and they will live. But the breath of God cannot come save as the Word of God is spoken. For the Word of God—the Logos of God, the Gospel—is a living thing, active, sharper than any sword with a double edge, penetrating even to the dividing of soul and spirit, quick to pass judgment upon the very feelings and thoughts of the heart. It is mysterious, miraculous life which is put into our hands. The adjectives are unnecessary, for all life is mysterious and miraculous. One of our poets tells how she visited a seed store and let the seemingly dead seeds run through her hands like grains of sand until her imagination awoke and she cried,

"In this dry husk a dale of hawthorn  
dreams;  
A cedar in this narrow cell is thrust  
That will drink deeply of a century's  
streams;  
These lilies shall make summer on my dust.

Here in their safe and simple house of  
death,  
Sealed in their shells a million roses leap;  
Here I can blow a garden with my breath,  
And in my hand a forest lies asleep."

What a miracle it is! What inspiration is in it! What a challenge it brings! What they said then, they still say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost: we are clean cut off." Therefore prophecy, and say, "Thus saith the Lord Jehovah: Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come out of your graves." Think of that! That is the miracle of the resurrection of the dead in this life. This is the miracle of preaching.

What a calling it is! It is yours to learn and to perfect the best methods by which this miracle can be mediated to men. You will need all you have learned of the human side of preaching. Labor as an artist that needeth not to be ashamed. Study, suffer, write, preach. Master your art and you will rejoice like an artist for art is creative, imaginative, realistic, inspired. Read the best books. Follow the great masters. Improve upon your failures. Forget your successes. "Feed the flock of God. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away."