

### Sermon Notes for Advent 3

*prepare and make ready thy way (collect)*

The collect places a heavy burden on the clergy, though no less than Paul had done. It is the giving of practical form to the Church. Evangelicals tend to see only God and the individual who is to be saved; but the wiser understanding is that Christ did envisage a Church, which is normally functional in the life of the Christian. And if, as Newman commented, a church without laity looks rather odd, a church without organisation and recognised leadership is even odder. So there are “ministers and stewards of thy mysteries”. What have you a right to expect of them? I am giving you parts of what Jeremy Taylor told his clergy.

For your life and conversation, it ought not only to be good, not only to be holy, but to be so up to the degrees of an excellent example. “Ye must be a pattern.” Ye must be patterns, not only of knowledge and wisdom, not of contemplation and skill in mysteries, not of unprofitable notions, and ineffective wit and eloquence; but of something that is more profitable, of something that may do good, something by which mankind shall be better; of something that shall contribute to the felicity and comfort of the world; “a pattern of good works.”

It must not be ‘a type’ or pattern to be hidden or laid in tabernacles, but ‘you must be exhibited’ and shewn forth, brought forth into action, and visibility, and notorious observation.

There is also another mystery and duty in this word. To Titus, St. Paul commanded that ‘he should give a pattern’ to the people; that is, the ministers of Christ must not be framed according to the people’s humour, they must not give him rules, nor describe his measures; but he should be a rule to them; the people are to require the doctrine at his mouth, and he is to become exemplar to them, according to the pattern seen in the mount, according to the laws of the religion and the example of Christ.

He must be a pattern “in all things:” it is not enough that the minister be a loving person, a good neighbourly man, that he be hospitable, that he be not litigious, that he be harmless, and that he be diligent; but in every grace he must ‘hold a torch,’ and shew himself a light in all the commands of God. These are the measures of his holiness, the pattern in his life and conversation.

Secondly; integrity of doctrine. The matter of the doctrine you are to preach, hath in it four qualifications.

It must be “incorrupt;” that is, it must be ‘according to the analogy of faith,’ no heretical mixtures, pure truths of God.

It must be ‘grave,’ and clean, and chaste; that is, no vain and empty notions, little contentions, and pitiful disputes; but becoming the wisdom of the guide of souls, and the ministers of Christ.

It must be “sound speech,” so we read it; the word properly signifies ‘salutary’ and ‘wholesome;’ that is, such as is apt for edification, “for the building men up in a most holy faith, and a more excellent charity” not feeding the people with husks, but with the bread of life, and medicinal plants, springing from the margin of the fountains of salvation. This is the matter of their doctrine; and this also hath some heightenings, and excellences, and extraordinaries: for, it must be so evidently demonstrated, that ‘no man shall be able to reprove it;’ so certainly holy, that no man shall be willing to condemn it.

And it must be ‘sincere,’ not polluted with foul intentions and little devices of secular interests, complying with the lusts of the potent, or the humours of the time; not biassed by partiality, or bending in the flexures of human policy: it must be so conducted that your very enemies, schismatics and heretics, and all sorts of gainsayers, may see that you intend God’s glory, and the good of souls; and, therefore, that as they can say nothing against the doctrine delivered, so neither shall they find fault with him that delivers it: and he that observes all this, will indeed be a pattern both of life and doctrine; both of good words and good works.

This was Jeremy Taylor's charge to his priests. It is right you should know what the “gold standard” once was. It remains appropriate. Who is sufficient? Perhaps it is better to have inadequate priests than few; sadly, both possibilities are being explored throughout the Western church. What can be done? Mere passing judgement will not help. Pray for the clergy, certainly. Challenge error both in doctrine and in living, yet with a view to improvement. Question and advise – no priest is so well equipped on every aspect of ministry that he cannot learn. But always try to build up the Church in this. Despondency is probably the worst danger for priests (and people) in these difficult days.