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Lenten and Easter Meditation: Voices of the Passion: Foreword, 1944

O.P. Kretzmann
Valparaiso University

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FOREWORD

The great continuing task of the Christian ministry in every age and every circumstance is the preaching of the Word. To men and women in the mainstream of historic Christianity this is a truism. Strangely enough, however, it is often ignored, either willfully or regretfully, under the pressure of twentieth century living. The preacher often forgets that the sermon is the climax of his entire life and activity. As a result there is little power in our preaching. We have forgotten how to speak as dying men to dying men. We have failed to remember that in the divine economy the spoken Word is the vehicle of the life and death of the Savior and the means through which the Holy Spirit calls and enlightens the souls of men.

It is generally agreed that the twentieth century ministry is complex and bewildering. There can be no doubt that it makes great demands on the conscientious pastor. His tasks are many and varied. The statement, however, that the modern ministry is more complex than the ministry of previous generations is only partially true. It becomes bewildering only when we succumb to the confusion of routine, or when we lose sight of our one great task. When the work of the ministry is stripped down to its bare essentials, there is still only the charge of St. Paul to Timothy: "Preach the Word." If anything in our ministry helps the preaching of the Word, it should be done; if anything gets in the way of the preaching of the Word, it should be eliminated from the life of the Church. Unceasing preaching of the Word is finally the only standard by which the ministry can be measured. We have not been placed into the world to do a thousand different tasks, to build organizations, or to become good fellows. Our task is simple, straight, and significant. It is to preach

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the Word.

The most difficult type of preaching is the faithful Sunday after Sunday appearance of the same pastor in the same pulpit. Our great preachers are not the occasional orators who dust off a brilliant effort, change the introduction, and recite the same sermon eloquently from Coast to Coast. They may draw crowds, but they are not the great preachers of any given generation. On the other hand, the man who preaches to the same people every Sunday, quietly and relentlessly building them into eternity, has the qualities of true greatness. When he ascends his pulpit on Sunday morning he knows all the problems and weaknesses of the individual members of his flock. In the rear seat is John, who is having trouble breaking himself of the drinking habit. To the right is Mary, who is unhappy with an unbelieving husband. Back in the corner is young Bill, who is getting into bad company. To these men and women, close and dear to him, he preaches every Sunday. His task is to bring them a little closer to heaven, to make their eyes a little clearer and their souls a little cleaner. This is far from easy. It is, however, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, a glorious work, and in the final balance of the books of God, a singularly rewarding task.

What is required for this central task of the Christian preacher? First of all, faith! He must believe in the power of his message. He must have faith in the capacity of the reborn soul to come closer to the Yehs and Amens of God. He must be certain that the individuals to whom he speaks, no matter how weak and wayward, can walk in the way of the Cross and climb the steeps of heaven. His sermon must be a helping and encouraging hand.

Good Sunday after Sunday preaching requires work. No good sermon

was ever shaken out of a sleeve. Behind it is always a long period of living with God and His Word. It requires much study and reading of the Bible. It demands a profound and sympathetic insight into the mystery of the human soul. No science or knowledge of man is foreign to a good sermon. A single sermon may be the result of many years of work.

Technically, vast changes have come over our preaching during the past fifty years. The florid, oratorical style of the nineteenth century has given way to a new simplicity and directness. Undoubtedly the radio has had much to do with this change. The twentieth century man and woman is no longer interested in the shouting, arm waving preacher. They want a man to stand up and talk. They want their preacher to be a man in the Way talking to the man in the street.

The readers of this volume will understand that these addresses are not sermons in the usual and accepted sense of the term. The authors are deeply conscious of their shortcomings if they should be measured by sermonic standards. They are rather meditations whose form and content were dictated by the comparative brevity of a Lenten devotion and the cosmopolitan character of audiences consisting of a cross-section of American life, many college students, and a large number of visitors. The seven meditations on the Words from the Cross were prepared for one of the three hour devotions which many of our pastors have been arranging for Good Friday. It should be noted also that all the meditations were presented in a parish which includes the members of a university. Such a situation presents unusual difficulties and opportunities. To arrest the attention of the younger generation, especially of our college youth, is always a difficult task. The administration of Valparaiso University is deeply grateful to the Lord

of the Church for the remarkable work of Pastor Oldsen in whom the University has found a man of deep devotion to his work, of sympathetic understanding of the intellectual and spiritual problems of youth and of unusual power in the pulpit.

It is our hope and prayer that this little volume will add a small and humble note of devotion and praise to the holy name of our blessed Redeemer.