A Concise Primer on Anglican Preaching
Or:
A Justification of the 2026 ATC Conference Theme

In these preliminary remarks, my only intention is to underscore something of "the breadth, the length, the height and the depth" of the subject at hand. And there is more than the sheer volume of material—sermons, after all, made up the largest part of the book trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The men of letters in the eighteenth century were frequently divines whose preaching belonged as well to their literary lives. And, even those who were not preachers by ordination thought nothing of writing sermons for those who were, witness Dr Samuel Johnson [+1784] who, having admitted writing forty discourses for the pulpit, suggested that it wasn't that hard: "I have begun a sermon after dinner and sent it off by the post that night"!

For there was a time when sermons were much in vogue, both as popular, public events, even despite mandatory attendance, and as more private considerations. No library, for instance, was complete without a great collection of sermons. Dr Johnson, again, remarks that "sermons make a considerable branch of English literature; so that a library must be very imperfect, if it has not a numerous collection of sermons."

Consequently, there is a vast quantity of sermons that fall within the view of "a history of Anglican preaching." And yet, the notion that sermons comprise "a considerable branch of English literature" introduces a far greater difficulty, the far more daunting enterprise of trying to understand the place and purpose of Anglican preaching as it appears in such a variety of modes, expressions, circumstances, and styles over a period of four centuries. To think of sermons, moreover, as a branch of literature may be a disturbing thought for many of us today, though it seems to me that Johnson means something rather different, perhaps, than contemporary attitudes about literary studies. I think that for him they belong to a confidence in the Christian character of eighteenth-century society, as *one* form of literary expression about that Christian character. As printed, they extend the pulpit into the drawing rooms and parlours, the libraries and gardens, even the pubs and palaces of his world and day. Richard Hooker [+1600], after all, had allowed that "Preaching is a general end whereunto writing and speaking do serve" (*Lawes,Bk.V,ch.xxi.4*).

That confidence in the Christian Gospel as ordering and maintaining a Christian society carried with it an equally important confidence in the particular form of proclaiming the Gospel. There was a confidence in what we might call "Anglican" Christianity. This goes a long way towards answering the question which, no doubt, cynically arises in our minds, namely, "Is there such a thing as Anglican preaching?" and, consequently, "Is there a history of Anglican preaching?". For Johnson—and may we not take him as more than ordinarily representative as well as gloriously illustrative of the eighteenth century?—there was a confidence in Anglican preaching which he proclaimed publicly in *The Idler* [1758-1760]:

> But our own language has, from the Reformation to the present time, been chiefly dignified and adorned by the works of our divines, who, considered as commentators, controvertists, or preachers, have undoubtedly left all other nations far behind them.

In 1765, John Langhorne's *Letters on the Eloquence of the Pulpit* would assert that "the Sermons of our Divines are allowed, by the liberal part of Europe, to be the best and purest compositions within the province of Theology." This 'Anglican' or English preaching, moreover, this preaching of "our divines", was understood to be distinct from the preaching of the so-called Puritans and Dissenters in England and her colonies abroad.

With this conscious pride in 'Anglican' preaching belonged, as well, an awareness of a history of 'Anglican' preaching—that is to say, a distinction of moments within the continuum of history. The great mid-century change in homiletical style and, as it seems to me, in content—at least in the sense of direction of purpose—was a known quantity to 17th century preachers and auditors. The shift from the 'witty' metaphysical divinity of the first half of the 17th century to the plain speaking, so-called "ethical" divinity of the second half and beyond, no doubt complemented the post-restoration aim of stability and order and provided impetus for the promotion of 18th century "polite society" following the Hanoverian accession. But beyond that, it was something publicly observed: in part, because so much of the high-powered, sustained argument, impassioned intellectuality and profound spirituality of Jacobean and Caroline preaching had been cheapened by hackneyed imitations; in part, because of the desire for a suitable style of imitation. This quality of imitation accounts in large measure for the success and influence of Archbishop John Tillotson [Archbishop of Canterbury 1691-1694], for instance.

I have referred to the 18th century not just to establish our subject, nor simply to acknowledge the large extent of its influence. Beyond that, it seems to me that there lies within it an inherent difficulty and a pressing necessity for us to try to understand. What belongs to its glories are equally its limitations. They show themselves in relation to what went before and in what follows from that century.

But let me attempt an historical overview, or at least, a sketch, though one which is, I fear, most tentative and incomplete, speculative and impressionistic, and not a little outrageous and arbitrary. One cannot help but be selective. It seems to me that 'Anglican' preaching can be said to be characterized by the reformed clarity and catholic expression of its *doctrinal sensibility*. The history concerns, first, the emergence of this doctrinal sensibility and, then, the various moments and ways in which it appears or disappears. There is an ebb and flow to the ways in which this doctrinal sensibility is expressed, even when it is subsumed into the background, buried in the past, or explicitly repudiated in the present. From such a standpoint, I do not wish nor intend to disparage the benefit or usefulness for souls seeking grace of sermons or preachers from any period. I am more interested in trying to identify the strength or weakness in the particular expression of

this principle of doctrinal sensibility, the extent to which it is hidden or illuminated by the modes, styles and concerns of particular periods in our history. The advice of George Herbert [+1633], poet and preacher, provides sound measure:

> God calleth preaching folly. Do not grudge
> To pick out out treasures from an earthen pot.
> The worst speak something good: if all want sense,
> God takes a text, and preacheth patience. (*The Church Porch*)

The first stage in this history would be the renewed emphasis on preaching as an office of salvation within the full pattern of the church's life of Common Prayer**.** Here I would note Hugh Latimer [+1555], Thomas Cranmer [+1556] and Richard Hooker, preaching in the 16th century reigns of Henry, Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth. The second stage is the doctrinal, scholarly and devotional preaching of the Metaphysical Divines, and the pastoral, liturgical, and catechetical preaching of Country Priests and Parsons during the Jacobean and Caroline periods, illustrated in such figures as Lancelot Andrewes [+1626], John Hackett [+1670], John Donne [+1631] and George Herbert.

The third stage marks the emergence of practical ethical preaching, first, in its rationalistic mode represented in Archbishop Tillotson, Robert South [+1716], Bishop Isaac Barrow [+1680], Bishop Joseph Butler [+1752], Bishop George Berkeley [+1753] and Dean Jonathan Swift [+1745], and, second, in its passionate mode represented in evangelical preaching influenced by John Wesley [+1791] and George Whitefield [+1770], though it should be said that some preachers, like Bishop Berkeley [+1753], already anticipate much of the warm tenor of evangelical preaching. The fourth stage is the practical, devotional preaching of both the Evangelicals and the Tractarians/Anglo-Catholics of the 19th century with their contrasting emphases on personal conversion and sacramental life, and their common stress on moral earnestness and personal holiness. "Holiness is the great end of preaching", said John Henry Newman [+1890], who was and was not, an Anglican of Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic persuasions.

The late 19th and the first half of the 20th century may be said to constitute the fifth stage. It brings to light a great variety of modes of preaching—social, personal, psychological, liturgical and devotional, as well as historical and expository—which have as a common *tendency* an undoctrinal, or even an anti-doctrinal outlook. This arises from the separation between Scripture and Doctrine in modern biblical criticism furthered by the dominance of a 'scientific' outlook. The sixth stage of the post-war period shows the predominance of an existentialist tendency in the fragmented array of personalist and institutionalist preaching—the vagaries of ideological impulses so familiar to us all—in which classical doctrine has been effectively dismissed as irrelevant to our future being created in our present.

The Gospel appears only as the occasion for auto-biographical display or as the instrument for promoting the policy programmes of the ecclesiastical institution. At the same time, there emerges, it seems to me, the beginnings of the recovery of doctrinal

preaching arising out of the spiritual exhaustion of the post-Christian existentialist ascendency. This, I would suggest, begins to be seen in Austin Farrer [+1968]. It belongs, in some sense, to where we are.

But, to return to our question, what is 'Anglican' preaching? Preaching is the proclamation of the mysteries of the Word of God; in short, the publication of saving doctrine. It embraces both the reading desk or lectern, and the altar or table—in other words, the liturgy as a whole—as well as the pulpit. "Receive thy holy word" includes the word read and heard, the word interpreted and applied, as well as the word celebrated and communicated sacramentally. It is important to underscore the subordination of pulpit preaching to the order of Scripture reading—the reading of Scripture, that is, according to its essential content.

Hooker takes pains to locate pulpit preaching within the larger content of preaching as the publication of saving doctrine:

> The end of the word of God is to save, and therefore, we term it the word of life. The way for all men to be saved is by the knowledge of that truth which the word hath taught (*Lawes,Bk.V,ch.xxi.3*).

Its essential content, the truth it teaches, is most succinctly expressed in the Catholic Creeds which come out of the Scriptures themselves and return us back to them in an order of understanding. It is this doctrinal understanding of Scripture which properly governs the liturgy and our liturgical lives, and, consequently, our preaching.

At the Holy Eucharist, the sermon follows the proclamation of the Gospel only through the publication of the Creed. Thus, the sermon properly stands under the authority of Scripture expressed in the Creed, that is to say, under the rule of Scripture doctrinally understood.

At Morning and Evening Prayer, the place of the sermon presupposes the whole pattern of prayerful meditation upon the Word of God by and in the words of God. It is not so much that the sermon is independent of the offices, as that the offices are complete in themselves in a way that sermons cannot be. It is humbling and necessary for us to realize that the liturgy is not intended to serve our sermons. As Richard Hooker makes clear, the public reading of Scripture is itself preaching, and, indeed, a form of preaching that is prior and fundamental to our sallies from the pulpit. It is not accidental that the first sermon in the first *Book of Homilies* [1547] by Cranmer is entitled *A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture*.

It belongs to the Word of God to be proclaimed and published as the necessary means of the communication of eternal life unto all. As proclaimed, it leaves in the understanding an apprehension and an assent to things divine, a knowledge and an acknowledgment of the fundamental truths of God, and of ourselves in God. The Word of God itself is the mediation between God and Man which "no otherwise serveth than only in the nature of

a doctrinal instrument. It saveth because it maketh 'wise to salvation'" (Hooker, *Lawes,Bk.V,ch.xxi.3*). Pulpit preaching belongs to the active mediation of the Word of God, but only as subject to the rule of doctrinal understanding. Thus, Cranmer's Homily places our sermons and our lives under the Word of God, but only so as to bring us into the living presence of God:

> He that keepeth the words of Christ is promised the love and favour of God, and that he shall be the dwelling-place or temple of the Blessed Trinity. (Cranmer, "A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture")

The renewed emphasis on preaching in the 16th century belongs to the reformed intent that the Scriptures be opened out to the Church as a whole. Crucial to that programme was a confidence in the doctrinal content of the Scriptures themselves. It constitutes a principle of Common Prayer. It is certainly the premise in providing a pattern of reading the Bible for everyone, clergy and laity alike. One, in fact, is saying that it belongs to the purpose of the Scriptures to be proclaimed and that what they have to say, namely, the things of Salvation, are, in principle, accessible to all. The Creeds, and even the order and pattern of prayer, are thus regarded, not as arbitrary and external, but as the logical expression and living form of the Scriptures themselves.

This doctrinal sensibility constitutes the essential character of 'Anglican' preaching. It is exhibited in the 16th century by the most popular preacher of all, the reforming Bishop and Martyr, Hugh Latimer, who perceives the activity of preaching as standing under the doctrinal understanding of Scripture, and the office of preaching as being an office of salvation, indeed, an apostolical office: "God of his goodness and almighty power might ordain other ways and means of salvation, but this office of preaching is it that God hath ordained."

It is ordained for the purpose of making known God's way, purely and clearly, and without confusion and complexity:

> So should we preachers be true men; preachers of God's way truly, truly, without regard of person: that is, for no man's pleasure corrupting the word, or mingle-mangle the word with man's invention and traditions.

Latimer's lively and delightful preaching, at once direct and compelling, conveys a renewed sense of the Scriptures as "God's Word written", "containing all things necessary to salvation"; preaching belongs to the publication of Scripture's teaching:

> 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. ("Sermon of the Plough")

The principle of doctrinal sensibility does not mean a restriction in the style of preaching, nor does it mean that sermons are to be simply expositions of scriptural texts. What it does mean is that the preacher's arsenal of images collected from the Scriptures, from literature, from nature, from history and from experience are made subject to the pattern of sacred doctrine. In other words, they must be brought to Christ.

The richness of thought and expression that this principle allows may best be seen in the metaphysical preachers of the early 17th century, such as Bishop Lancelot Andrewes whose sermons are deep, prayerful meditations upon the essential mysteries of the Christian faith. In his sermons as well as in the sermons of many others, for instance, John Hackett and John Donne, doctrine lives in devotion; everything comes to Christ and all is gathered to him:

> Christ applieth Himself to all, disposes all things, what every one is given to, even by that Christ calleth them. St Peter, Andrew, James, and John, fisherman, by a draught of fish. These that were studious in the stars, by a star for the purpose.
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> There is no star or beam of it; there is no truth at all in human learning or philosophy that thwarteth any truth in Divinity, but sorteth well with it and serveth it, and all to honour Him who saith of Himself *Ego sum veritas*, "I am the Truth". None that will hinder this *venerunt*, keep back any wise man, or make him less fit for coming to Christ. (Andrewes, Xmas, 1620)

In his wonderful explications of the mystery of the Incarnation, Andrewes will even employ the language of the Council of Chalcedon (451AD) and bring it to bear on our taking communion. John Hackett, in his sermons on the Transfiguration, draws into his argument the connection of that feast with the doctrine of the Resurrection and the Ascension as confessed in the Creeds. With these preachers, the living form of saving doctrine, the vitality of their doctrinal sensibility, comes through clearly and greatly. So much so that it has sometimes seemed that they are simply too much.

T.S. Eliot's observation that the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes "are not easy reading. They are only for the reader who can elevate himself to the subject", so they can be more properly applied to those who would seek to find a model for imitation in his sermons, a technique to be mastered, as it were, from which one could churn out sermons like sausages. Yet they cannot be imitated. They are more and, in fact, quite other than and beyond imitation, a point which even some of his contemporaries recognized, such as Nicholas Felton, Bishop of Ely[+1626], "who said merrily of himself: I had almost marr'd my own natural trot by endeavouring to imitate his artificial amble". There was, of course, nothing artificial about Andrewes' pulpit peripatetics; it was the natural measure of his doctrinal stride which few could match.

Those that could, however, would later opt for a different style of preaching and distance themselves from a metaphysical preaching that had become meretricious in the hands of less learned, less disciplined, less doctrinally adept, less capable preachers. The problem,

in part, is that as a model for imitation it leaves itself open to affectation, pretension, ostentation; as a method, it could become merely "clever wit". An amusing example of such cleverness of wit, I suppose, appears in John Dod's playful parody of himself as a preacher in his apparently apocryphal *An Unprepared Sermon on Malt* (Chandos,p.108/9), *circa* 1600.

Rightly or wrongly, aspects of this 'witty divinity' had become associated with Puritan preaching. Robert South [Public Orator, University of Oxford, 1660-1677]—himself one of the great preachers of the second half of the 17th century—remarks that "wit in divinity is nothing else but sacred truths suitably expressed". It's a nice line, but his concern, and the concern of his world and day, is with what constitutes "suitable expression." He shows us something of what had happened to the earlier metaphysical preaching in his fulminations against Puritan preaching also in 1660. He inveighs against those who exhibit "strange new postures" such as "shutting the eyes, distorting the face and speaking through the nose" and criticizes them for their "whimsical cant of issues, products, tendencies, breathings; indwellings, rollings, recumbencies and scriptures misapplied." The attempt to imitate an earlier pattern of preaching had ended in a gaudy show of unsuitable expressions.

The problem lay in imitation—in looking towards role models and moral examples. There is a warning here for us, I think. The second half of the 17th century rejected the early form of preaching as not being suitable for imitation. It inaugurated and embraced a style which was, precisely, imitable, and in their view more accessible to all, clergy and laity alike; in short, popular in the sense of its immediate reception.

It meant as well, however, that the essential emphases of the earlier preaching became simply subsumed into the background; there, but not there, assumed, but not attended to. The metaphysical preaching of the Caroline Divines gave place to the ethical preaching of those who would come to be known as Latitudinarians.

What appears to have secured Tillotson's greatness as a preacher is the perfection of his expression according to the standards of his own day. Charles J. Abbey observes:

> In the substance no less than in the form of his writings men found exactly what suited them - their own thoughts raised to a somewhat higher level and expressed just in the manner which they would most aspire to imitate. (*The English Church in the Eigthteenth Century*, C.J. Abbey and J.H. Overton, 1896)

The influence of Archbishop Tillotson was quite profound. I do not wish to declaim against it or against what followed from it in the various rationalistic modes of ethical preaching in the 18th century. As I have tried to suggest, there is a profound depth and spiritual weight, both present and presupposed, in such preaching; it belongs to a remarkable confidence in the Christian Gospel and its power to shape, form, and nourish a self-consciously Christian society. There is piety and learning in it, just as there is in the subsequent preaching of the 19th and 20th centuries.

What I think is the problem arises from a longer view—from the perspective of our own difficulties, or better, from the perspective of our contemporary confusions about the Gospel itself. From that standpoint, I cannot help but think it is significant that this 'ethical turn', so-called, carried with it an emphasis on style.

The doctrinal heart and core of Anglican preaching basically remains, but more or less in the background. Subsequently, and here I would caution against any direct causal relation, the principle of doctrinal sensibility becomes less prominent. The increasing emphasis on style and styles—isn't that what most histories of preaching concern?—is at the expense of this principle of doctrinal sensibility.

In our digital and social media world of celebrity culture, preaching easily becomes a matter of entertainment focused on personality. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* is a treatise on teaching and preaching. Written in four books, the first three (397AD) focus on what is to be known, while the fourth book (426AD), concerns "the means of communicating our thoughts to others;" that is to say: preaching. While acknowledging that the forms of "accessory knowledge", as George Herbert notes in *The Country Parson*, have their role and place, including in Augustine's case, rhetoric, both insist on the primacy of teaching and the subordination of such arts to sacred doctrine.

Augustine argues that "clarity in teaching" takes precedence over "eloquence in speaking" or, in our day, perhaps, the attractions and seductions of visual images. Such shifts in approach to preaching turn attention away from the necessity to think and proclaim 'saving doctrine' towards style and presentation. Content becomes irrelevant; style becomes everything. Perhaps what is needed is the conscious subordination of styles, images, and personality to the coherent pattern of doctrine; in short, a renewed discovery of *doctrinal sensibility* which is, I suggest, an underlying theme of 'Anglican' preaching.

Revised in 2016 by Fr David Curry, but first given as an address to:
The Brethren of the SSC, Sackville, NB, September 28th, 1991

NB: Fr David Curry (Windsor, NS) will be speaking on the Sermons of Lancelot Andrewes in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, on Wednesday, June 24th, 2026.