

6-9-2013

# What did Anglican Preaching Look Like 200 Years Ago?

Robert H. Ellison

*Marshall University, ellisonr@marshall.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://mds.marshall.edu/english\\_faculty](http://mds.marshall.edu/english_faculty)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Ellison, Robert H. "What Did Anglican Preaching Look Like 200 Years Ago?" Trinity Episcopal Church. Huntington, West Virginia. 9 June 2013. Lecture.

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact [zhangj@marshall.edu](mailto:zhangj@marshall.edu).

**What did Anglican Preaching Look Like 200 Years Ago?**  
**Robert H. Ellison, Marshall University**

**Delivered at Trinity Episcopal Church**  
**Huntington, West Virginia**  
**June 9, 2013**

Good morning. I bring you greetings from Centerpointe Church in Hurricane, my home congregation, and the English Department at Marshall University. I know giving up one's preaching time is not something that a clergyman takes lightly, especially when the guest will not be delivering a sermon, so I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you today.

The reason I will not be delivering a sermon is that I am not a preacher. I have, however, been studying preaching since my graduate-school days nearly 20 years ago, giving most of my attention to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Church of England. I've taken as my topic, then, "What did Anglican preaching look like 200 years ago?" There is no shortage of materials we can use to try to answer that question; the Victorians published scores of preaching manuals, periodical articles about preaching, and sermons themselves, both in separate pamphlets and volumes of collected works. When I first began my research, I had to rely on microfilm, interlibrary loan, and trips to distant archives; now, in an age where just about everything has been or is in the process of being digitized, access to these materials is just a click away.

The challenge, then, is not finding what I need, but rather in narrowing it down. To make things a bit more manageable, I have focused on the Anglo-Catholic, or "High Church" end of the spectrum, and that will be the frame of reference for my remarks today. I hope, though to be able to paint a decently representative picture of all of the Victorian Anglican tradition.

Let me begin with some of the Anglicans' own words about the nature of the preaching office. I'll focus on John Keble, who was both an academic and a parish priest, vicar of the

Hampshire village of Hursley and Professor of Poetry at Oxford. In 1823, Keble preached one of his many sermons before the Oxford community. In keeping with his text--1 Thessalonians 5:19-20, “Despise not prophesyings; prove all things; hold fast that which is good”—he cautions preachers against reducing a sermon to “a mere literary amusement” and the people against “undervaluing, the public instruction of God’s ministers” (*Sermons, Academical and Occasional* 47-48). In the same sermon, however, he laments that “sermons are far too much thought of, in comparison with common prayer, the administration of the sacraments, and other parts of the public worship of God” (47). He develops this point further in a sermon entitled “Final Meeting of Pastors and People,” preached sometime before 1842:

Surely there can be no doubt that most of us regard instruction as the chief work of the Christian ministry.... But what says Holy Scripture? We are ministers and stewards of the Mysteries of GOD, that is, chiefly of the holy Sacraments.... These two most holy Sacraments [baptism and the Eucharist] are the means appointed by our LORD himself, whereby his people may be in communion with HIM. Catechizing, teaching, preaching, even prayer itself, are but as means to that blessed end. (297)

Saying something is a “means to an end” may seem somewhat dismissive, but that’s not necessarily the case. If the destination is important--and what can be more important than communion with God?--then it follows that the steps one takes on the journey are important as well. Sermons and sacraments, then, complement each other rather than competing with each other. As John Henry Newman, perhaps the most famous and influential Anglican of the Victorian Age, said in 1836, the “great object” of both is “to foster into life...what is true and holy” and thereby “save the elect of God” (*Parochial and Plain Sermons* 161).

Imagine, then, that you were in an Anglican church--Keble's All Saints in Hursley, Newman's St. Mary's in Oxford, or just about any other church in any other parish—sometime around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What would you see and hear? First, the sermon would likely have been read from a manuscript, much like I'm reading my text today. There was a fairly vigorous debate among the Victorians about the best way to deliver a sermon. To use a political phrase, the arguments broke down roughly along “party lines,” with Dissenters advocating the freedom of extemporaneous speech and Anglicans, especially those who preached before the universities and other highly-educated groups, preferring the precision of thought and language that required a fully-written-out text.

Reading may be precise, but it's not always the most interesting or engaging thing to do. I haven't been in many churches where the sermons are read, but I have heard many papers read at academic conferences, and I can attest that it's often done very badly indeed. There is plenty of evidence, however, that these preachers had little trouble keeping the attention of their congregations. Perhaps the most famous statement to that effect was written by Matthew Arnold, a leading poet and critic and, interestingly enough, something of a skeptic when it came to orthodox Christianity. Regarding Newman's preaching, he wrote,

Who could resist the charm of that spiritual apparition, gliding in the dim afternoon light through the aisles of St. Mary's, rising into the pulpit, and then, in the most entrancing of voices, breaking the silence with words and thoughts which were a religious music,--subtle, sweet, mournful. (*Discourses in America* 139-140)

Similar statements were made about many preachers of the day. What I find most interesting is a general consensus that these preachers were appealing not *because* they read, but

rather *in spite of it*. How was this the case? The ancient Greeks might say it was because they had a special kind of *ethos*; our charismatic friends might say they were “anointed”; I’d probably say that it was the fruit of their devotion and deep walk with God. Whatever words we use, it seems to be the case that while these men were not naturally gifted *speakers*, they had well-earned reputations as unusually effective *preachers*.

There was a lot of conversation about *how* to preach, but not much was said about *how long* a sermon should be. We do have some evidence, however, of how long they actually were. Statements range from only about 15 minutes for younger clergymen (Frederick Arnold 21)—who, presumably, had not yet fully developed their techniques—to well over an hour for someone like E.B. Pusey, who, as his first biographer rather unkindly wrote, “could not easily express himself other than at length” (qtd. in Chandler 27). One person noted that a typical Anglican sermon ran for about 25 minutes (Mulock 34), which may be a bit on the high side. Most of the parish sermons I have read range from 8-10 pages long. It takes me about 2 minutes to read a sample page, which gives us 15-20 minutes total, or a little longer than I have for this talk today.

I’d like now to offer an overview of the things Victorian Anglicans liked to preach about. Earlier I mentioned that they saw sermons and the sacraments as more or less going hand in hand, so it should follow that the sacraments were often the subject of their preaching. That is in fact the case. A scan of the sermons in my personal library turns up many sermons such as “Infant Baptism,” “Regenerating Baptism,” “The Gospel Feast,” “The Eucharistic Presence,” and “Attendance on Holy Communion.” It may not be immediately evident from the titles, but the sacraments are the central focus of “God Will Be Served in Fear,” “God’s Family, a School of Good Works,” and “St. Peter’s Repentance” as well.

This emphasis upon the sacraments is a hallmark of Victorian Anglican preaching in general, and of the group of preachers I study in particular. Today they are known as the leaders of the “Oxford Movement,” after the city where their group was formed, or “Tractarians,” after the series of ninety “Tracts for the Times” they published between 1833 and 1841. One of their early labels, however, was “Puseyites,” after E.B. Pusey, who was one of the central figures of the movement and continued as its leader after Newman converted to Rome in 1845. Sometime around 1840, Pusey identified six core beliefs of the school of thought that had come to bear his name. In addition to “High thoughts of the two Sacraments,” they were a “High estimate of Episcopacy, as God’s ordinance”; “High estimate of the visible Church”; “Regard for ordinances...such as daily public prayers, fasts, and feasts”; “Regard for the visible part of devotion, such as the decoration of the house of God”; and “Reverence for and deference to the Ancient Church...instead of the Reformers, as the ultimate expounder of the meaning of our Church” (Liddon 140).

As we might expect, these topics often appear in Tractarian preaching as well. Some of the many sermons along these lines are Keble’s “Primitive Tradition Recognised in Holy Scripture”; Thomas Keble’s (John’s brother) “Saints’ Days and Daily Service,” and “The Apostolic Church”; Newman’s “Keeping Fast and Festival” and “The Church Visible and Invisible”; and “The Holy Catholic Church,” “All the Articles of the Christian Faith,” and “The Church Prayer-Book a Safe Guide” by Isaac Williams, who was Keble’s student at Oxford, Newman’s curate at St. Mary’s, and the author of a number of important sermons, poems, hymns, and tracts.

But not all of their preaching fits nicely into one of these six categories. One of the projects I’m working on is a database of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British preaching, which people can use to

search for sermons by scripture text, location, occasion, and other important fields. So far, I've cataloged about 550 sermons by 10 different preachers—barely a drop in the bucket, but a starting place for drawing some tentative conclusions. What I've found so far is that they preached on nearly every book of the Old and New Testaments, with the top being Psalms, Matthew, Luke, John, Romans, and 1 Corinthians. In addition to identifying the scripture texts, I'm trying to assign each sermon at least one subject heading; not counting the topics I've already mentioned, the most popular topics include repentance, faith, prayer, self-denial, judgment day, perseverance, important dates in the Christian year, and various aspects of the life of Christ.

They talked about many topics, but their goal was always the same. Earlier I mentioned that there was some disagreement over whether sermons should be read. There was debate about other topics as well, such as whether sermons should be divided into what they called "heads," clear divisions like the "first," "second," "third," and "finally" that I often see in freshman essays.

Preachers in every denomination, however, agreed about at least one thing: the ultimate purpose of a sermon. A sermon was not meant just to pass the time on Sunday, or to give the congregation some interesting things to talk about when they got back home. Rather, the sermon was to be a very practical discourse, teaching people how God expected them to act and inspiring them to live that out over the week to come.

We see this very clearly in a collection of sermons I discovered very early in my research. Many of the sermons I've alluded to today are part of the *Plain Sermons, by Contributors to the "Tracts for the Times,"* published in ten volumes between 1839 and 1848. In Victorian vocabulary, "plain" meant "simple," just as it does today, and the word was used, along

with other terms such as "village" and "parochial," to refer to sermons preached in parish churches rather than university groups.

The "Advertisement"--or what we would call the introduction or preface--to this series made two important points. The first is that the doctrines to be found in the sermons would be consistent with those promulgated in the tracts, which had begun publication 6 years earlier. The second is that they would not be exclusively doctrinal. The contributors were pleased with the "extensive reception" of the *Tracts*, but they were concerned that some who embraced Tractarian doctrines "in theory" appeared to be "at no pains to realize them in their daily practice" (1). The sermons were, accordingly, published "in order to show that the subjects treated of in the 'Tracts' were not set forth as mere parts of ideal systems," but were rather "truths of immediate and essential importance, bearing more or less directly on our every day behaviour" (2). The guiding principle of the series is thus found in a very practical verse, one that strikes the necessary balance between knowledge and action: John 7:17, "If anyone *will* do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God" (2).

How, then, can we briefly describe the entire body of their work? When I think about this question, I'm reminded of conversations I often had when I taught at another school. Before I came here, I taught for a number of years at a Baptist college in a town called, interestingly enough, Marshall, Texas. People would sometimes ask what was distinctively "Baptist" about the school, and I'd have to honestly answer "I'm not sure." It had the word "Baptist" in the name, it received some financial support from the state convention, and I'm pretty sure the president and upper-level administrators had to be members of a Baptist church (all other employees were expected to be Christian, but not necessarily Baptist, or even Protestant). Beyond that, though, I wasn't sure what to say. The atmosphere was certainly Christian, with

required chapel attendance, prayer at the beginning of classes and meetings, moral expectations for students and staff, and so on, but I'm not sure any of that could be considered uniquely "Baptist."

The same could be said of a lot of the sermons I have studied. Many of them bear a distinctly Anglican stamp, but many others could perhaps be fairly described as "broadly Christian." If Dissenters were to attend a Victorian Anglican service—which would have been especially likely in Oxford, given Newman's virtual celebrity status in the university, community, and throughout the country—they might not be familiar with the liturgy, but there's a good chance that they would have found useful instruction in the sermon.

I don't mean to be critical of either my former institution or of Victorian Anglicanism. The school down in Texas had the best of both worlds: the rich heritage and identity and that come from being affiliated with a specific denomination, coupled with the diversity that came from having many traditions reflected in the faculty, staff, and student body. The same can be said of the preachers I've talked about today. They were a tightly-knit group bound together by very deep convictions, but they were able to speak to large numbers of people outside their "inner circle."

I've run across several 19<sup>th</sup>-century testimonials to these preachers' broad appeal. I've already quoted Matthew Arnold's famous tribute to Newman's preaching. When he offered it in the early 1880s, they were about as far apart theologically as two people could be: Newman had entered the College of Cardinals a few years before, while Arnold had declared that the tenets of orthodox Christianity were no longer tenable in the modern age, publishing poems and essays declaring it "a dead time's exploded dream" and asserting that "Two things about the Christian religion must surely be clear to anybody with eyes in his head. One is, that men cannot do

without it; the other, that they cannot do with it as it is” (“Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse”; *God and the Bible* xi). These differences, however, did not keep him from recognizing, even admiring, the extent to which Newman had helped shape religious life in Oxford during his Anglican days.

Similarly high praise was given to Pusey by a man named James Harrison Rigg, who lived from 1821 to 1909. He and Pusey would not have been as far apart as Newman and Arnold, but as a Methodist minister and author of an 1857 critique entitled *Modern Anglican Theology*, he was likely not sympathetic to Pusey’s Tractarian views. He was nonetheless an admirer of his work, and in 1883—the same year Arnold made his statement about Newman—he went so far as to compare Pusey to the founder of his own denomination:

Pusey’s great business as a preacher was to awaken his hearers to a sense of sin, that they might be made to feel their need--their deep and pressing need, their daily need--of resorting to those anointed earthly mediators whom Christ had, according to Dr. Pusey’s gospel, appointed and commissioned to declare to penitents the remission of their sins. In this work his stern fidelity might remind us of John Wesley preaching from the pulpit of St. Mary’s to the same University, especially Wesley as he was before his conversion. (50)

And let’s not forget that I’m here speaking to you today! One of the axioms of my discipline is that “literature” is literature because it has “stood the test of time.” That’s a cliché, but things become clichés because they contain at least an element of truth. Some might argue about whether sermons ought to be considered “literary” texts, but the fact that people are still studying them after 150-200 years suggests that they have passed that test. And this study is not confined to seminaries or divinity schools; that a Baptist, teaching English at a public university,

can give a talk on a Sunday morning in an Episcopal church, is, I think, a wonderful statement about their broad appeal and staying power.

I hope this talk has opened a bit of a window into church history for you. I want to close by telling you something I'm sure you already know: as part of the Anglican Communion, you are heirs to a very rich tradition of pulpit discourse. That's one of the reasons I've chosen to specialize in this area. People who know I'm a Baptist who works on Victorian preaching sometimes infer—logically enough, I suppose—that I'm a Spurgeon scholar. If I had gone that route, though, I'd spend my time studying more or less the same things I hear at church each Sunday. Focusing on a different tradition has enabled me to encounter other ideas and experience—albeit vicariously, as I live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century rather than the 19<sup>th</sup>—other ways of looking at the world through Christian points of view. My professional life—and, for that matter, my spiritual walk—is richer as a result of that diversity. Thank you very much.

# Works Cited

- “Advertisement.” *Plain Sermons, by Contributors to the “Tracts for the Times.”* Vol. 1. London: Rivington, 1839. 1-2.
- Arnold, Frederick. *Our Bishops and Deans*. Vol. I. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1875.
- Arnold, Matthew. *Discourses in America*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1885.
- . *God and the Bible: A Review of Objections to ‘Literature and Dogma.’* New York: Macmillan, 1883.
- . “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse.” Bartleby.com. Web. 17 May 2013.
- Chandler, Michael. *An Introduction to the Oxford Movement*. London: SPCK, 2003.
- Keble, John. “Final Meeting of Pastors and People.” *Plain Sermons, by Contributors to the “Tracts for the Times.”* Vol. 4. London: Rivington, 1842. 294-301.
- Keble, John. *Sermons, Academical and Occasional*. Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847.
- Liddon, Henry Parry. *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey*. Vol. 2. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893.
- Mulock, Dinah. “Sermons.” *Cornhill Magazine* 9 (1864): 33-40.
- Newman, John Henry. *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. New ed. Vol. 4. London, Rivington, 1868.
- Rigg, James Harrison. *The Character and Life-Work of Dr. Pusey. A Sketch and Study*. London: T. Woolmer, 1883.