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JMJ

U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love Thee, save souls

O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

VOL. 4 - THE CHRISTIAN'S STATE OF LIFE

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

How One Should Hear Sermons

“They bring to him one deaf and dumb.” St. Mark 7:32.

To be both deaf and dumb, how miserable is the condition of such a man! He can neither make known his thoughts to others, nor hear or understand what they say to him. Our divine Lord, moved with pity, as we read in to-day's Gospel, freed one of those unfortunates from his unhappy condition, and gave him speech and hearing together. How many are deaf and dumb nowadays where the hearing of the Word of God is concerned! How many there are who come to sermons and hear and understand as little of them as if they were deaf! How many there are who listen to them and are yet as little capable of interpreting them for their own advantage as if they were dumb! To remedy this twofold deplorable misery I will show how sermons must be heard in order to profit by them. Namely

- I. *One should hear them with continued attention and recollection; and*
- II. *With an earnest desire to profit by them.*

I. If a great man, or any one, is speaking to us of important matters, we must be very attentive. Even in ordinary conversation, amongst men of the same condition, it is very annoying to find that the person you are speaking to allows his mind to wander, and does not pay the least attention to what you are saying. Now, what are we doing when hearing a sermon? For what object are we all assembled? Is it not to understand what God wishes to say to our souls? Could any one ever speak with us poor mortals who would be more deserving of reverence and respect than God, who speaks to our hearts by the mouth of the preacher? And of what does he speak to us? Of things that are necessary to our eternal salvation, or, at least, helpful to it. He tells us how we are to live according to the end of our creation, what we are to avoid in order to escape the eternal fires of hell, what we are to do and to shun that we may gain a victory over the enemies of our souls, who are on the watch at all times, in all places, to betray and ruin us, how we are to increase daily our merit and our treasure for eternity, and, finally, how we are to enjoy ourselves with him in his eternal kingdom. This is the end of all Christian sermons and instructions. Could any business be of greater importance or necessity to us? And it is for that very object that we come to sermons; at least, such is the ostensible object of our coming.

Therefore it is evident that the great Lord who speaks, the important business of which he treats, and our own intention, desire, and wish, all exact from each one of us the closest attention and recollection during the sermon, so that we may know and understand what is spoken of; otherwise it would be better for us to remain

away, for the very walls and benches of the church would form just as good an audience as we should if we merely allow the preacher's words to strike the ear and nothing more. I am afraid that there are some who do not trouble themselves about paying the necessary attention. Every one seems to attend, the people are all sitting quietly in their places, and no one speaks a word. That is true; but what about the disposition? Where are the thoughts? There are enough who bring their ears to the sermon, but not their hearts or their minds. These are distracted with all kinds of thoughts and cares, at home or elsewhere; or, if their thoughts remain in the church, they are caught up by some chance object that offers itself, such as, for instance, to see who is coming in or going out, to admire others, and sometimes even to feed their own wicked desires; so that when the sermon is over they are not able to say what it was about. Nay, sometimes they throw the blame on the preacher, and say they could not understand him or his way of speaking. I should not dare to accuse people of such things did I not know from Christ himself how the devil tries to prevent the fruit of the Word of God from coming to those who hear sermons. He presents all sorts of objects before their eyes, he distracts them with a hundred imaginations, he makes them tired and sleepy, so that they will either understand very little, or will receive no profit in their hearts from what they have listened to distractedly and with a divided attention. Christ says: "The devil cometh and taketh the word out of their heart, lest, believing, they should be saved" (St. Luke 8:12).

If there are only a few who are willfully distracted and pay no attention, there are perhaps many more who, though not wanting in attention, yet do not take the same notice of everything that is said. The saying of the Wise Man is full of meaning: "A fool receiveth not the words of prudence, unless thou say those things which are in his heart" (Prov. 18:2). If anything ludicrous or novel is said, then all are eager to listen; but in other things the attention is not so much strained. See what happens in a theatre: when the curtain is raised there is complete stillness, and all eyes are directed to the stage to see what is coming on; in half an hour's time curiosity begins to languish, the people talk and laugh with each other, so that it is sometimes difficult to hear what is said on the stage. This is especially the case if the subjects represented are of a serious character and occupy a considerable time, although they may be necessary to the understanding of the play. But the people do not trouble themselves about the latter point. As soon, however, as there is a change on the stage, a new piece, a dance or a comedy, then the attention of the audience is aroused again, and they listen with admiration and pleasure. When the novelty is over they commence to talk again about what they have seen. Oh, they say, that was fine; how well she danced, what a clever play. Ah! how is it that I am forced, by the sluggish desires and weak appetites of many Christians for the food of their souls, to compare the preaching of the Word of God and of eternal truths to a vain and idle play? Yes, God himself was forced to do the same by the prophet Ezechiel: "Thou art to them as a musical song, which is sung with a sweet and agreeable voice; and they hear thy words and do them not" (Ezech. 33:32). And the same thing happens nowadays among those to whom God orders his truths to be preached. In the beginning of the sermon, when they who come in time are still in their first fervor, they are all eagerness to hear what the subject is, but bye and bye they grow indifferent; I know what he is going to say, they think to themselves, and they allow their eyes and their thoughts free play, and show by their behavior that they are inattentive. If some story is related, or a striking simile brought in, then they are all attention; they listen open-mouthed, so that it is easy to see that they have become quieter; but when the story is at an end some of them allow their heads to sink down again; they relapse into their former distraction, or begin to think of the story they have heard, without paying any attention to the conclusion to be drawn from it, which is, after all, the real truth that God wished to imprint on their hearts in that manner. "Thou art to them as a musical sound." They hear the Word of God as if it were a play or a profane song!

But is that the way to treat God, who is speaking to us, with proper reverence and respect? I feel ashamed when I think that, if an earthly sovereign speaks to us, we observe a most reverent and humble demeanor, and pay the greatest attention to what he says; although we might easily allow ourselves to be distracted, for no matter how powerful earthly kings are, they cannot see what is passing in our minds. But God is present in the hearts of every one of you, when we are preaching his Word to you, and he knows their inmost recesses. What does he think when he finds your minds so distracted that they are wandering here and there in search of enjoyment and pleasure, and your hearts so cold that you hear everything as if you heard nothing, and allow the principal parts of the sermon to escape you? What does he think when he sees that you are so carried away by distractions that your senses are occupied with other things, while his voice passes by you unheeded, while your

thoughts are filled with vanities and sinful imaginations? Certainly the Almighty has reason to complain, as he did long ago: These people assembled before me to hear me, “but their heart is far from me” (Is. 29:13).

He who loves his soul and his eternal happiness pays the greatest attention, that not a single word may escape him; he sits, like Magdalen, at the feet of Jesus Christ, to hear his teaching and instructions. How motionless, how attentively, how eagerly did not that zealous soul listen to her Lord? Her sister Martha came up and asked her to help in the work of preparing food for Christ: She said, Lord, dost thou not see that I must work alone, while my sister sits idly there? “tell her, therefore, to help me.” And what did Magdalen do? She remained where she was, enraptured with the words of her Lord. She made no answer, not even a gesture of displeasure, although she could easily and modestly have replied: Go away; I have no time now. No, says St. Augustine, speaking of this matter, she did not wish to say even these few words, for fear of interrupting her Lord: “If she had given any answer she would not have been able to listen so attentively.” And therefore she remained silent and immovable, for she knew very well how important it was for her to hear always with the greatest attention whatever her Lord had to say to her.

II. The Word of God, explained in sermons, is the food of souls, by which they are to be maintained in their strength, health, life, and zeal in the divine service. Christ says: “Not in the bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God!” (St. Matthew 4:4.) It is a much more necessary and strengthening food than eating and drinking are for the body; because corporal food, no matter how strong it is, could not raise a dead body to life, whereas the Word of God can raise the dead to life; that is to say, it can move to sorrow and repentance, to confession and penance, sinners whose souls are dead, and it can thus restore them to the life of grace. But now, suppose that there is a table spread with all sorts of viands before me, what good is it to me if I only look at the different dishes, without eating any of them? In the same way, what advantage is it for my soul if I hear a sermon with attention, but do not apply it to myself? “A man of sense will praise every wise word he shall hear, and will apply it to himself” (Ecclus. 21:18).

1. There are three classes of people who fail in this particular: the first consists of those who are like the carvers at a table, who have nothing to do but cut up the meats and place them before others, while they eat very little themselves. So, there are some who apply to others what they hear in a sermon, and keep nothing for themselves. Ha! they think, how well that fits such a one! Quite right; it is just what that other wants! He is getting his share of it now! What a pity that such a one is not here; this sermon is just the thing for him, and so forth. But do we come to sermons only to apply what we hear to others, and that, too, often with a rash judgment? What good is it to you that others should be warned of their duty if you yourself receive no fruit therefrom? You come here to look after your own soul, and not to pronounce judgment on others. Christ says of the good: “They hear the Word and keep it.” Although it is impossible to treat of every subject in one and the same sermon, yet, in every truth that is preached, he who is earnestly intent on his salvation will certainly find something good that he can apply to himself with profit.

The very same people who trouble themselves so much about the affairs of others, if their own vices are even barely alluded to, commence to get vexed, to murmur and complain, as if they thought it wrong to allude to them in such a way. If you throw a stone amongst a number of dogs the one you hit will begin to howl. As long as these people are not interfered with they think the sermon a very good one indeed. They wish others to hear the truth; they do not want to hear it themselves. The unjust and avaricious are quite pleased when they hear the impure and the intemperate condemned; but speak to them of giving alms, of restoring ill-gotten goods, or of withdrawing their hearts from the things of earth, and they get quite angry and displeased. On the other hand, a libertine or an impure man listens with pleasure to every sermon as long as there is nothing said of impure love, dangerous company and occasions, mortification of the flesh and of the senses. If the sermon is against drunkenness, it pleases the women, because they are anxious to have their husbands cured of that evil habit, and they think the preacher cannot talk severely enough about it. If, on the other hand, some subject is introduced which touches them up on some sore point, for instance, the vain and frivolous fashions of the day, obstinacy, self-will, disobedience, jealousy, credulity, unfounded suspicions of their husbands, the wasting of precious time, unnecessary visits, the habit of gambling, dangerous meetings, speaking of the fault and failings of others; oh, then they do not like the sermon at all, and there is no end to their complaints about it. They think that the preacher does not know how people in the world must act.

2. The second class of people who do not hear sermons properly comprehends those who, failing in a different way altogether from the former, act like guests who take their share of everything at table, whether it is good for them or not, although they thus overload the stomach, to their own great inconvenience. There are some who apply to themselves, with a scrupulous anxiety, everything they hear in a sermon, although there is not the least reason for them to do so. So that sometimes a preacher hardly knows what to do, or how to treat of a subject. If he preaches, no matter how carefully, of some consoling doctrine, he cannot reprove the sins of the wicked; if he denounces sin and represents its malice and the way in which it is committed, he disturbs the consciences of the pious and innocent, who take to themselves that which was meant only for others. Alas! they think, full of fear and anxiety, perhaps I have done that, too! Oh, my God, what shall I do? I may not have made a good confession in my whole life! If such is the case I shall never go to heaven; and any number of such absurdities. Although this is a sign of a good and tender conscience, yet it often prevents the proper advantage being derived from a sermon. Perhaps I have done that, too? Yes, perhaps, and perhaps not. What is the good of this perhaps? None, but to fill you with unnecessary fear and anxiety, which will completely disturb you, and make it impossible for you to understand other parts of the sermon that are of real use to you. First of all, you should pay attention to what is said. If an uneasy thought or a scruple comes into your mind, wait till the sermon is over; you will have plenty of time then to think it over and see whether you are really guilty or not, and if you are guilty you can amend your fault. Otherwise you must not take to yourself what is meant for others; it belongs to them, not to you. St. Augustine furnishes us with a beautiful simile here: he says we must hear preachers and apply their words to ourselves, as if they were letters sent us from heaven. Now, suppose you went to the post office to look for a letter; you ask if there is anything for you, and you are told that you must look for your letter yourself. You do so: there are hundreds of letters lying on the table; you take up the first one, and, after seeing the address, you throw it away, and the same with the second and third and fourth. And why? Because, you say, my name is not on those letters; none of them belong to me. You continue your search, and, at last, you find one addressed to you, and you say at once, this letter is for me, and you take it home and read it. You must act in the same way when you hear a sermon. I know that I am not guilty in this matter, this letter is not for me; here is something in which I must amend my conduct, that I must bring home with me and think over.

3. The third and last class embraces those who resemble guests that neither eat anything themselves, nor carve for others: they occupy themselves in talking, or in admiring the rare dishes. People of this class who hear the Word of God do not, it is true, apply it to others, but neither do they apply it to themselves; their only concern is to hear something new, beautiful, or interesting. What would you think of a sick man, suffering from fever, who, when the doctor comes to bleed him, would occupy himself only with looking and wondering at the surgical instruments of the latter? Oh, what a beautiful lancet! Where did you buy it? Who made it? How much did it cost? Ah, my good friend, the doctor would say, that is not the question now; I am come to restore you to health; it is no matter to you whether the instrument is a beautiful one or not, whether it has cost much or little; the only thing that must trouble us now is to take away the poisonous blood from you: you need not concern yourself about anything else. Some of us are, perhaps, suffering from a spiritual malady; we are all liable to the fever of evil inclinations and desires! The fever from which we suffer is ambition, or avarice, or lust, or pride, or drunkenness, or impatience, or tepidity. Now, God wishes to make or to keep you healthy by sermons. He uses his divine Word as an instrument to detect the weakness of your soul, to cleanse it from evil inclinations, and to provide it with a remedy against vices and the dangerous occasions of sin, and to draw its desires away from earthly, in order to direct them to heavenly things. Therefore let it not be your sole care to see whether the sermon is a fine one or not; it is not for that you come: your only intention should be to seek the profit of your soul by the truths you hear, to amend your evil ways, and to become more zealous in the service of God.

I conclude with the words of the Wise Man: "A man of sense will praise every wise word he shall hear, and will apply it to himself." Let each one, therefore, ask himself at the beginning of a sermon: "Why am I here?" Why did I come to the sermon? Was it not to draw profit out of it for my soul? Therefore I must pay attention to what is said, and I must and will apply to myself the truths that I have heard and understood. Amen.

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