

EDUCATIONAL SERIES

JESUS AS AN ORATOR

(James B. Clayton, D. D., Washington, D. C., in the Homiletic Review.)

Jesus is entitled to the distinction of being the world's foremost orator. To His successes as a religious teacher He added the triumphs of the popular speaker; and that His oratory appealed strongly to the masses and was in some respects unique is indicated by many statements in the gospel narratives regarding His audiences and His popularity. The "innumerable multitude" "prest upon him," "thronged him," and "trode upon one another" when they "were gathered thick" to hear Him. We are not left in doubt as to the reception accorded Him. "The common people heard Him gladly," "and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth," "were astonished at his doctrine," and shared the opinion at least once expressed by His enemies, "never man spake like this man." While each of these statements has an individual value, they all unite in conveying the general impression that His oratory was not only unusual, but at times even sensational, invariably arousing both the bitter hostility of His foes and the enthusiastic commendation of His friends.

The utterances of Jesus may be grouped in three classes: His table talk, conversations, and public addresses.

Some of the most suggestive deliverances of Jesus were made as He ate with His disciples, friends, or beneficiaries. Among such utterances were His revolutionary remarks upon the forgiveness of sins, made in connection with the incident of the woman of the city breaking her alabaster box in His honor as He sat at the table of Simon the Pharisee; His parting words to His disciples before His crucifixion, spoken as they kept the passover feast in the upper room; and His final injunction to the same body of men to whom "he appeared as they sat at meat," and whom He commissioned to go into all the world and preach His gospel.

His conversation with the woman at Jacob's well on the spirituality of religion; His appeal to the rich young ruler to make God and not gold the supreme quest of life; His memorable interview with Nicodemus on the higher life of the soul and His greeting to Simon Peter by the Galilean Lake, will forever remain models of wise and affectionate counsels on the subject of personal religion.

Of His many public addresses, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the sermon in the synagog of Nazareth, we know, even from the brief notes in the gospels, that they were original in content, striking in form, and surprising in their penetrating appeal. He never left His hearers indifferent, but always evoked strong feeling and emphatic comment. He was too personal to be ignored and too impressive to be forgotten. While the rabbis were jealous of His popularity, His hold on the masses remained unshaken; and when the rulers plotted His overthrow, they resorted to trickery, making no attempt to take Him openly "for fear of the people," to whom His personality, works, and addresses had endeared Him.

Any discussion of the oratory of Jesus must take into account His opportunity, equipment, and message.

HIS OPPORTUNITY

The political, social, and religious conditions of His times presented a golden opportunity for the man of the hour to make Himself deeply and permanently felt. In addition to possessing an extraordinary mental and spiritual endowment, Jesus was a close student of His times, and the reach of His mind carried Him far beyond Judea and Rome, embracing, indeed, all mankind. His development was normal and gradual. Luke says that He "grew in grace and wisdom." The eighteen years of obscurity in the carpenter shop of quiet Nazareth developed His mind and gave Him the necessary opportunity for the careful formulation of His message into a compact system so that its presentation should be not only adequate to His own turbulent period, but be suitable to men in all ages and conditions of life.

Politically His people were divided into many sects and parties, and were weary, not only of Roman despotism, but of their own incessant

strifes. The three hundred years preceding His advent had been filled with popular uprisings and the coming of many messiahs. Caesarism had all but crushed the nation, though some hope remained, and the longed-for "Prince of the house of David," if He came, and possessed initiative and administrative genius, would be able to enlist the multitude under His banner.

Politically, conditions favored Jesus; and socially such a man was needed. The spirit of caste completely permeated the national life; those at the top were unwilling to assist or to co-operate with those at the bottom of the social scale; and pride of family, station, and purse, together with a self-righteousness which has probably never been equaled in the history of religion, made a unified society impossible unless a social revolution should intervene.

Religiously, the times favored a radical reformer. Worship had degenerated into formalism, and righteousness into paying tithes and saying prayers, the religious leaders being content, if the tithes were paid, to regard saying prayers as a work of supererogation. John the Baptist having preceded Jesus with his ministry of repentance, had opened the way for the second and greater preacher of a positive and constructive religion. Both of these ministries were widely different from any of the preceding Messianic movements, and they united in the idea of the immediate establishment of the kingdom of God among men through the regeneration of the individual.

The sum total of conditions, political, social, and religious, favored the advent and supremacy of a great popular orator, who, instead of being a caustic ascetic like John, should mingle with the people; and this social condition Jesus so far fulfilled that He was assailed as "glutton and wine-bibber."

His custom of regularly attending the weekly services in the Nazareth synagog during the eighteen years prior to His entrance upon public life, had thoroughly familiarized His mind with the ideas, hopes, and needs of His people. One of the first of His recorded addresses, that in Nazareth, was unsettling to His audience and resulted in as trying an experience as could befall a popular speaker. At first the people "wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth;" but when, in that same brief address, He appealed to their history to prove His position that God could not be confined to Judaism, the meeting broke up in an uproar, and ended in an attempt, the first of many, to destroy Him. But His opportunity had come; how should it be utilized? Should He conciliate narrow Jewish prejudices, or seize upon the occasion to inaugurate a propaganda for universal brotherhood?

HIS EQUIPMENT

The equipment of Jesus as an orator was never excelled. His utterances in public were dignified, and often sober to the verge of gloom; but He possessed a highly nervous temperament in an even more notable degree than Whitefield, whose impassioned declamation often produced bleeding at the nose and mouth; but, while He was a man of great range and depth of emotion, He was not one of that class, now happily almost extinct, a "crying preacher." He occasionally wept, often "sighed deeply in His spirit," and in the garden His mental agony was so great that He sweat blood. These indications point to a supernormal sensibility, through the multitude's many appeals to which He became "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

His supernormal sensibility was regulated by an inflexible will. Though He were "meek and lowly of heart," yet had He an unwavering purpose and the executive power of subordinating all things to it. No stress or strain weakened either His convictions or His will, which He regarded as being identical with God's will. He thought and spoke in the imperative mood: "I must" and "thou must" often fell from His lips. If the accidents of privation, temporary unpopularity, or the weakness of the flesh at times made conformity with His purpose difficult and perilous, He never faltered, but "set His face like a flint" in treading the path which He knew must end on Calvary. Neither suffer-

ing nor betrayal, hardship, nor the cross, altered His plans or paralyzed His faculties. He knew neither fear nor vacillation.

Whether Jesus was above or below the average stature is a subject of contradictory traditions, but His presence must have been dignified and even majestic, His general appearance being a fit expression of the kingly soul within, and especially noticeable in one of His humble origin and rank in society. He resorted to none of the cheap clap-trap of the professional agitator nor to any of the accessories of stagecraft for producing an effect upon His audiences, nor did He need to resort to such petty artifice for gaining the public ear. He spoke as one who loved God and men, so that it is not strange that "the common people heard him gladly," "came running together," "hung upon his words," and withal were "amazed" at the self-assertion with which He spoke.

His presence must also have been magnetic, as shown by the fact that women and children trusted Him, and that when He addressed such a man as Simon Peter with such simple words as "lovest thou me," and Matthew the tax-collector with the terse utterance, "follow me," the results were disproportionate to the language employed, and clearly prove that there must have been in His manner and tone an almost irresistible kindness. In addition to such effects there were others which indicate that Jesus occasionally excited alarm, and, indeed, terror, by the expression of His countenance. As He spoke of His death soon to occur in Jerusalem, His disciples were afraid of Him; and in the garden of Gethsemane He exercised that strange power, more than once resorted to by John Wesley, of quelling a mob by a mere look. There was that in His face that charmed the needy into trust; but there was also that which forbade undue familiarity, inspired respect, and even produced fear.

Of His movements while engaged in public discourse, we know but little. "He lifted up His eyes," and "stretched forth His hand" are about the only things said of His gesture or action; but fully taking into account the fact that He had complete control of Himself at all times, and so was usually calm in delivery, so emotional a man must at times have been very energetic in His discourse and assumed postures or indulged in movements that fittingly accompanied His speech. His conduct and His silence in dealing with the woman brought to Him to be condemned was dramatic in the extreme, and far more effective than words alone could have been in such circumstances.

Jesus frequently, and for many months spoke in the open air, and therefore certainly possessed a voice of great volume and compass, else He could not have endured the strain incident to such efforts. No small part of Spurgeon's popularity was due to his wonderful voice, which ranged from the highest tenor to the lowest bass, and was so penetrating that its whisper could be heard by thousands. So there must have been a charm in the voice of Jesus as well as great power. One can not imagine that it was monotonous or harsh. The transforming power of His gracious invitations and friendly appeals must have been considerably augmented by the tender tones in which they were spoken. When He spoke peace filled the heart of the abandoned and outcast; as He pronounced absolution, the midnight shadows of sin disappeared before His smile of welcoming love for the sinner, and morning breathed in the stifling souls of profligates; when He whispered Simon wept and John sobbed; and when He thundered, Lazarus came back from farthest shores and the waters lay down at the feet of the Lord.

The mind of Jesus was equal to His opportunity and the demands imposed upon Him by His unique position. This is proven by the quality, reach, and appropriateness of His sayings. His mind was comprehensive. The most superficial examination of the thought of Jesus shows that He grappled mightily with actual conditions rather than spent his strength on abstract theories. His parabolic form of teaching was peculiarly adapted to His hearers' mental qualifications, and to the purposes of popular oratory. At His death He had left unsaid many things which He desired His disciples to know but which they were then unable to bear; yet even allowing for such necessary restriction upon His teaching, He said enough to prove that His knowledge of the human heart was marvelously complete and that His mind had compassed the heights of truth, the depths of misery, and the breadths of love.

His mind was also clear as crystal. There were no shadows clouding His vision; no un-