

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RHETORICAL ELEMENTS IN THE SERMON (CONTINUED)

SUMMARY

REASONS FOR EMPLOYING ILLUSTRATIONS IN THE SERMON

Illustration mainly useful as exciting the imagination. Why appeal to the imagination in the sermon?

1. The nobleness of the imagination.
2. The imagination is the faculty most readily reached.
3. It is possessed by everyone.
4. It makes the truth vivid.
5. It is constantly appealed to in Scripture.

II. THE VARIOUS KINDS OF ILLUSTRATION

1. Picturesque Words.
2. The Suggestion.
3. The Simile.
4. The Metaphor.
5. Full Description.
6. The Anecdote or Story.

III. PURPOSES SERVED BY ILLUSTRATION

1. Of substantial use to the preacher:

- (1) In the conception of the sermon;
- (2) In the composition of the sermon. Giving:

- (a) Freshness;
- (b) Clearness;
- (c) Economy of expression.

2. Of service to the hearer:

- (1) Illustration arrests attention;
- (2) Quickens the apprehension of truth;
- (3) Promotes conviction.

Illustration

WE come now to the most popular of the rhetorical elements of the sermon, namely, Illustration. It is not less important than exegesis and argument, but we put it last because ornament follows construction, and must not be suffered to usurp its place. One can live in a house without colored windows, but hardly in a house without foundations or walls.

I. Let us consider, first, some reasons why illustrations should be employed in the sermon

The main purpose served by an illustration is to excite imagination in the mind of the hearer. The disposition to despise this gift in preaching arises in part, no doubt, from the abuse of it by some preachers, but still more from an ignorance of its true office and mission. So that the question before us is not so much why a preacher should use illustration, as it is why he should appeal to the imagination (“*Essays*,” by R. H. Hutton, Vol. II., p. 211).

1. I ask you to consider, then, the nobleness of the imagination.

“The most boundless and restless faculty of the soul” is what Thomas Fuller - himself one of the poets of the pulpit - called it.

Napoleon, who knew how to appeal to it in order to kindle the enthusiasm of his soldiers, said, “Imagination rules the world”; and Carlyle placed it on the same height when he wrote in “*Sartor Resartus*,” “Yes, friends, not our logical, mensurative faculty, but our imaginative one, is king over us.”

Coleridge touches a point of special interest to the preacher when he affirms that imagination is “that power of the finite mind which as far as possible corresponds to the creative power in the infinite mind.” By this he means that it is the power to invent, which in man is equivalent to the power to create in God.

2. Consider, further, that imagination is the faculty which can be most readily reached in the mind of the ordinary hearer. By “struggling to idealize all objects of perception” (Coleridge), it clothes those objects with interest, incites our curiosity, or rouses our enthusiasm. What was before inanimate now lives.

No mere bare statement of fact as to the hours during which the builders of Jerusalem under Nehemiah toiled could set the scene before us so completely as does this one touch:

“So he laboured in the work, and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared” (Nehemiah 4:21; cf. “*Life of G. J. Romanes*,” p. 231).

Our experience as preachers will confirm the truth of Macaulay's words: "Logicians may reason about abstractions, but the great mass of men must have images" (*Essay on Milton*). So it happens that it is in imagery that discourse clothes itself in moments when "it rises above the ground line of familiar facts and is inflamed with passion or exalted by thought" (Emerson).

3. The reason why this element of illustration is so essential in the sermon seems to be that although often dormant or even suppressed, every one possesses imagination.

As Sainte-Beuve puts it: "There exists in almost every man a poet who has died in the course of his life."

A still more famous French writer illustrates the sway of the imagination thus:

The greatest philosopher in the world, passing over a precipice upon a plank a little broader than would be absolutely necessary for walking, though convinced by reason of his safety, would be overpowered by his imagination. Many a one could not even think of being in such a situation without sweating or turning pale. - Pascal's "Thoughts."

4. It is evident then, that imagination should be pressed into the service of the preacher if only for the help which it affords him in making truth vivid.

We may note here that 'the imagination appeals alike to the intellectual, the moral, and the spiritual parts of our nature. Its hold upon the intellect is seen if we consider imagination as "the use which the reason makes of the material world" (Emerson, *Nature*, Chap. VI., p. 57, edition 1889. See also Mrs. Orr's *Life of Robert Browning*, p. 409).

By exciting our sympathy and helping us to enter into the feelings of others it becomes a moral agency of vast influence. Bunyan, as some one has said, "saw principles like men walking in the street."

The definition of faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews illustrates its spiritual power: "**faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen**" (Hebrews 11: I).

5. In the Bible the imagination is constantly appealed to.

We may have remarked that the objection to the use of illustrations in sermons comes oftener than not from preachers who are themselves better versed in metaphysics than they are in Scripture.

A return to biblical preaching has always been marked by a return to the use of illustrations. The Puritans, who are the most scriptural of preachers, are also the preachers whose sermons are the richest in imagery. Indeed, to understand it aright, the Bible of all books needs the help of the imagination. Something must certainly have been lacking in the constitution of such a man as Bishop Colenso, when on being questioned as to the literal accuracy of parts of Scripture which were meant to be understood figuratively, he answered, "Shall a man speak lies in the name of the Lord?"

The burst of praise in the Psalms, the vigorous conception of the Almighty in the Prophets, the use which Jesus made of the world about him in his parables, the gorgeous pictures of the Revelation, are all appeals to the imagination, and without it to no one of them can we do justice. "Our Lord condescended to explain himself by allusion to every homely fact."

A preacher of our own time has made a practical application of his habit of appealing to the familiar objects in Palestine, which, especially if we be country pastors, may be of service to us.

Happy, I think, are they who living in the country and having these sights continually before their eyes, can avail themselves thereby of the silent lessons which by his precious bidding they are all made to teach; who hear in the wind the noiseless power; who see in the gentle rain and dew the sweet and kindly influence of the Holy Spirit; who never see the pruning of a tree, nor the sheep wandering on the down or folded in the night, or a stray sheep away from the flock; or the flowers of the field and their beauty; or the hen gathering her chickens under her wings; or any of these usual country sights, without calling to mind what the Lord of Heaven and earth had said of each of them, and how they all and each tell of his will, and of his power, and of his infinite goodness and love. - Moberly.

II. We proceed, secondly, to enumerate the various kinds of illustrations which may be used in sermons, confining ourselves to those which are the most used and the most useful

1. We begin with the preacher's vocabulary.

Give vitality to your sentences by the use of picturesque words. Train yourself to choose those which are concrete rather than abstract. There are preachers who without employing many illustrations gain all the effect served by them, and do so more economically, by this method. "Picturesque expression" is what Lord Brougham demanded in the plea of the lawyer, and an occasional visitor to the courts of justice says that he can never forget how a venerable judge in sentencing some youths to be hanged for murder expressed his pain that he, an old and feeble man, should send two into eternity before himself who were "in the gristle and not yet in the bone of manhood" (R. Gee, "*Our Sermons*," p. 222).

Who that is at all familiar with the pages of Jeremy Taylor has not remarked how they sparkle with gems? Even on a casual glance the eye is caught by words which at once make their impression and tell their story.

2. Next in order to picturesque language comes the Suggestion.

Here by a few rapid touches the desired effect is produced. The mind catches the illustration as it were at an angle, while it is giving its chief attention to the thing illustrated. Just enough is said to call up a picture, that and no more.

Demosthenes did not divert the thoughts of his hearers from the vote of a united community, but only intensified the impression of its irresistible power when he used one of the most striking suggestions in all oratory: "The people gave their voice; and the danger which hung upon our borders went by like a cloud"

This kind of illustration is very effective in poetry.

The insatiable craving of war for blood needs but one adjective, and we feel its force when the poet Gray, writes of the “*thirsty lance*” of Mars. All the mystery and pathos of the deepening twilight at sea are suggested by Tennyson in the single phrase, “evening bell” in one of the last of his poems;

Twilight and evening bell;
And after that the dark.

In sermons the suggestion is not very common, perhaps because to make it needs a richer and readier imagination than most preachers possess. Beecher illustrates the power when he calls the twenty-third “*the nightingale of the Psalms.*”

So does Dr. Maclaren in many of his happiest turns of thought, as when, for example, depicting the awful power of sin to perpetuate and increase itself he says: “Every sin tells upon character and makes the repetition of itself more and more easy ‘None is barren among them.’ And all sin is linked together in a slimy tangle like a field of seaweed, so that a man once caught in its oozy fingers is almost sure to drown;” or when he puts before his hearers one of the main characteristics of Paul in a brief statement and an equally brief illustration: “The apostle’s mind acquires force by motion, and like a chariot-wheel catches fire as it revolves.”

3. From the suggestion it is only a short step to the Simile, where one thing is likened to another.

To this class of illustrations belong the parables of Jesus (Matthew 7:24-27).

Patrick followed the example of his Master when to the barbarous Irish tribe he illustrated the doctrine of the Trinity by plucking from the green sward at his feet the three-leaved shamrock, and making it the text of his explanation and appeal.

Jeremy Taylor would be supreme in the use of similes were it not that he carries his preference for them too far, and becomes himself their slave rather than their master.

4. The Metaphor differs from the simile inasmuch as it expresses likeness without the signs of comparison.

- John the Baptist called the Pharisees and Sadducees “**a generation of vipers**”;
- Jesus revealed his knowledge of Herod’s character when he spoke of him as “**that fox**” (Matthew 3:7; Luke 13:32); and
- Paul used no qualifying clause when turning to Ananias he said, “**God shall smite thee, thou whited wall**” (Acts 23:3).

Carlyle, who himself used them with great effect, speaks of the “prodigious influence of metaphors.” In preaching, as in all descriptions of oratory, when well chosen they are most effective.

A suggestion as well as a metaphor can be found in the powerful imagery of Bishop Wilberforce, when to illustrate the tendency of one error to drive its victim into the embrace of another, which is seemingly its very opposite, he speaks of the man who is “borne on the wings of a boundless skepticism into the bosom of an unfathomable superstition.”

No elaboration could add form to Beecher’s contemptuous picture of him who is false to his country: “A traitor is good fruit to hang from the bough of the tree of liberty.”

5. The easiest of all forms of illustration, and the one which is the most affected by young speakers, is Full Description.

In composing your first sermons you may find that your difficulty is not so much to enlarge as to curtail. This does not arise, however, from the abundance of your thought so much as from the perilous ease with which descriptive passages are spun out.

If you will fearlessly go through the adjectives and slaughter those which really are unnecessary to the impression that you desire to make, and exchange the house-painter’s brush for a camel’s-hair pencil, and be content with covering a foot of canvas where now you cover a yard, you will have the satisfaction of discovering that any measure of thought there was in your sermon to begin with has survived the operation.

A great word painter, such as Thomas Guthrie, may be allowed to indulge in full description, and all the more so because he knew how to use his illustrations as arguments; but it is a dangerous practice for the most of us, and taking up too much of the limited space allotted to the sermon, leaves on the hearer’s mind the impression that he has been in a picture gallery rather than in a church.

6. A word or two will be sufficient for another class of illustrations, namely, the Anecdote or Story.

The story is preferable to the anecdote because it is not so apt to be personal to the speaker; but whether it be the story or the anecdote the preacher will do well to be on his guard against both of these easy methods of filling up the time and eking out the sermon. They are the snares into which indolence and incapacity fall readily enough.

However illiterate she may have been, the old woman was right at heart when she preferred staying at home and reading Spurgeon’s sermons to going to hear her own preacher whose sermons, she said, were “nothing but antidotes.” She needed something more solid and satisfying than a succession of stories.

That preacher is certainly on the down grade who suffers himself to fall into what John Wilkes so wittily characterized as his “anecdote.”

Probably it requires more skill to tell a story well, just at the right time, at just the right length, and with evident aptness to the subject, than to use any other kind of illustration.

Told with these precautions there can be no question but that it is often very effective.

Emerson, who himself uses stories very sparingly, yet found himself “struck and stimulated by a good anecdote, any trial of heroism, of faithful service.”

If there is one tendency more to be guarded against than telling stories and anecdotes, it is that to which this habit is very prone to lead, I mean appropriating to yourself the adventures or experiences of another.

A practiced orator says that the young speaker “should never tell long stories, and if he tell any story he should never say that it is a true story and that he knew the parties. This makes it a question of veracity, instead of a question of art” (Col. Robert Ingersoll).

The most serious objection to the practice is of course its dishonesty, and yet the evidence is only too convincing that many a speaker in the fervor and flow of pulpit address is tempted to commit this sin. The very power which enables him to realize the scene, persuades him for the moment that he himself was actor in it.

Although they are commended by many preachers we venture to utter a note of warning against what are known as *Cyclopedias of Illustrations*. To them in part it is due that an illustration originally fresh and attractive becomes threadbare and hackneyed, the very Wandering Jew of the pulpit, and travels the ceaseless round of a thousand sermons from January to December, never seasonable, and yet apparently always in season.

Who has not wearied of the green oasis and palm trees in the desert, and longed rather for the desolate stretches of sand whose monotony it was supposed to relieve? This much patronized illustration can certainly be traced back to the early part of the seventeenth century. Who has not wished that Michael Angelo had left the angel to slumber in the stone and said not a word about it?

One original illustration, suggested to your own mind by a walk in the country, or by the reading of a volume of poetry, or by a round of pastoral calls, is worth a whole cyclopedia of borrowed material.

What Robert Hall said of his friend Sir James Mackintosh is applicable, with a difference, to many a preacher who invests in a volume of this sort of literature and then proceeds to spread its contents in thick layers over his sermons:

“His mind is a spacious repository, hung round with beautiful images, and when he wants one he has nothing to do but reach up his hand to a peg and take it down. But his images are not manufactured in his mind; they are imported.”

III. What, it may next be asked, are the purposes served by illustration?

1. They are of substantial use to the preacher.

(1) The element of imagination needs to enter into the conception of his sermon. To himself imagination will be of service by virtue of a certain power to renew thought, indeed, almost to create it. He will look through forms, words, and even doctrines, and see in them as they are set in fresh lights so much fresh material. Ideas which are familiar and trite, will now come to him in new and rich clothing, invested with an unexpected charm.

(2) When he proceeds to compose his sermon, his imagination will continue to help him. It will give to his discourse the three advantages of freshness, clearness, and economy of expression.

How greatly he may profit by possessing a fresh way of putting truth is apparent if we remember that he has no new Gospel to preach, no new story to tell.

It is because “the preacher has an oft-told tale to set before his people that the subject-matter of Christian teaching pre-eminently requires illustration” (Andrew Fuller).

A sermon from the text “**I am fearfully and wonderfully made**” (Psalm 139:14), may naturally enough suggest a study of the five senses. A commonplace preacher will dilate upon this theme in a commonplace way; but listen to Bunyan as he puts it before us in concrete form:

The famous town of Mansoul had five gates in at which to come and out of which to go, and these were made likewise answerable to the walls, to wit, and such as could never be opened nor forced, but by the will and leave of those within. The names of these gates were these: Ear-gate, Eye-gate, Mouth-gate, Nose-gate, Feet-gate. - John Bunyan, “*The Holy War.*”

As to clearness so much has been already said about it that in this place it will be enough to remind the preacher that an effective sermon needs both definition and description - the one is the outline, the other the filling in of the picture. Now illustrations are the filling in of the picture; and they are essential to clearness because they quicken comprehension, and by appealing to imagination, open a wide door to the reason. An idea which cannot be painted is an idea which ought not to be preached. Almost certainly it will not be understood by a general audience.

Economy of expression is also attained by a wise use of illustration.

At once an impression is conveyed to the mind such as even a long and detailed description might fail to give.

When William Knibb, coming back to England from Jamaica to plead for the freeing of the slaves, threw down on the platform of Exeter Hall, in London, the very fetters and chains with which the captives were loaded, he instantly attained his purpose.

Here was visible history, and the audience was in a moment stirred to a passion of indignation which nothing short of emancipation could allay.

2. Equally serviceable are illustrations to the hearer.

(1) They arrest attention.

“An illustration has more authority than a command” (Prof. Austin Phelps).

Preaching on Abram, Bishop Wilberforce cannot fail to interest his congregation when he recalls this incident: Here we stand among the great progenitors of our race. Abram’s birth was but two hundred and eighty years after the flood; a shorter period than has passed since Queen Elizabeth sat under a tree, which is still alive in Hatfield Park, and saw the approach of the royal messenger who brought her instead of the expected warrant to a dungeon and a scaffold, the tidings of her succession to the throne of England.

(2) They quicken the apprehension of truth.

Dr. Guthrie, who assuredly deserves to be heard on this point, says:

“By awakening and gratifying the imagination, the truth finds its way more readily to the heart and makes a deeper impression on the memory. The story, like a float, keeps it from sinking; like a nail, fastens it in the mind; like the feathers of an arrow, makes it strike; and like the barb, makes it stick.”

Notice how even in enforcing the advantages of illustrating, Guthrie uses four illustrations. Who after reading these sentences can forget that illustrations float, hold fast, strike, stick?

So Emerson says, in praise of his friend, Thoreau, that “he knew the worth of the imagination for the uplifting and consolation of human life, and liked to throw every thought into a symbol.”

Who can forget Victor Hugo’s thought of his good bishop who “would comfort the grief that looks at a grave; by showing it the grief that looks at a star.”

(3) Illustrations promote conviction.

Remember that the resemblance on which an illustration turns, often suggested by the word “like,” ought not to be accidental. It inheres in the very nature of the things compared.

A really good illustration should have points of close resemblance to the truth which it illustrates.

Trench is justified in insisting that because of the subtle harmonies which exist between the natural and spiritual worlds, our Lord’s parables “are arguments, and may be challenged as witnesses” (Trench, “*Notes on the Parables*,” Introductory Essay).

To a friend who expressed to Sir William Hamilton his surprise that he, the most eminent of Scottish metaphysicians, should be so constant a member of Dr. Guthrie’s congregation, the reply was: “Dr. Guthrie has the best of all logic; there is but one step between his premise and his conclusion.”

“When metaphors,” said another admirer of the great Scotch preacher, “rest on the unity between God’s world and man’s nature, they are arguments as well as illustrations” (Dr. John Ker, see “*Life of Thomas Guthrie, D. D.*,” Vol. II., p. 359, ed. 1875).

Coleridge anticipated this statement when he claimed for painting, which is of course a form of imagination, that it is “the intermediate something between a thought and a thing.”

What Mr. Joseph Cook has said of Wendell Phillips is no doubt to a certain extent true of any speaker who has learned to use illustration wisely:

“The seer is the logician who melts his logic in the fire of his emotion, and Mr. Phillips in oratory was a seer. His epigrams, his historical allusions, his anecdotes, his powerful passages of invective, are often arguments on fire.”

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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