

Great Preachers of Today

Rev James Flanagan

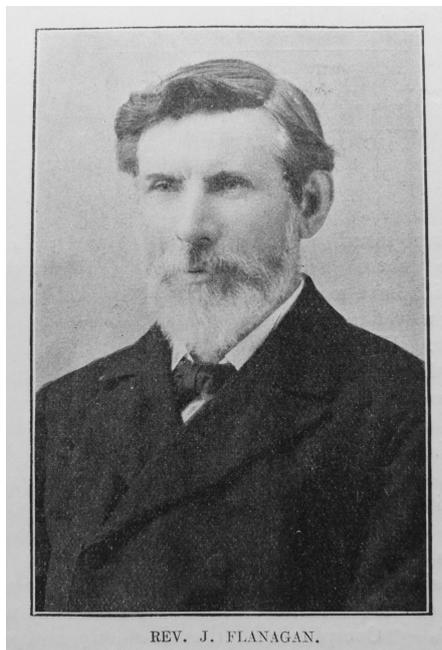
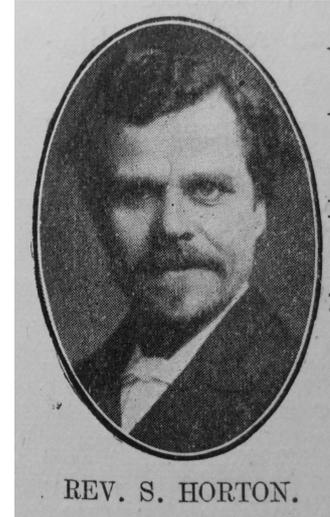
Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Rev. S. Horton

If I were asked to name the three sermons which have most profoundly moved me, I should say Dr. Watson's sermon to the Summer School at Oxford, Hugh Black's sermon on "Judgment," and James Flanagan's sermon on "Man's Quest." Again, if I were asked to specify the three sermons I have read, from which I have derived most profit, I should, with perhaps a little hesitation, name Dr. Robertson Nicoll's sermon on "Not Afraid of Sackcloth," Dr. Collier's "Overplus of Blossom," and Mr. Flanagan's on "The Beauty of Holiness."

I have heard Mr. Flanagan many times.

Someone once asked a Driffield man "if he had ever heard the Rev. Parkinson Milson preach?" He replied, "I should think so, *millions of times.*" Certainly not so many times as that have I heard Mr. Flanagan, but I know of no modern preacher whom I would rather hear. He has the vision of a seer. He touches the deeps of the human soul. Like Dante, he has had glimpses into Hell, and he has been on the Mount of Transfiguration.

In the slums of London, he has seen what the devil can do in the ruin of human souls; in many a glorious evangelistic service, he has witnessed the transformation God can work. He has stories to tell that thrill the soul; stories, too, that break the heart. He is no carpet knight, whose sword is sheathed in flowers. Like Horatius, he has bravely kept the bridge against unnumbered odds. It is his knowledge of life, gained at firsthand at infinite sacrifice, that gives his evangel the almost unequalled power and pathos it possesses. He speaks out of a full heart, and soul responds to soul.



It was on a week night during a mission that I quietly stepped, unobserved, into a back pew, in a City church. The body of the building was full, and when the missionary rose to announce the first hymn, there were but few seats to be found. Tall, gaunt, looking careworn and haggard, he began, in a low voice, full of music. It was like the sound of running waters on a summer's day. So sweet, so soothing, with a pleasing monotony, it fell gratefully on tired nerves and weary senses.

What a marvellously flexible voice – with an unusual compass – and every note full, round and musical.

The prayer after the hymn was to me the most wondrous and helpful part of the service. How simple it was, and yet how comprehensive. Hushed and awed, the congregation followed it, until the silence grew tense, and almost painful, as the

preacher talked with God as a man talks with a friend, face to face. At first, the most explosive part of the audience responded with "Amen" and other interjections, but these died away as the thanks for mercies past was followed by acknowledgment of sin and a wail of penitential sorrow. It was as if every soul was laid bare, and every sin brought to the light. And then, in pitiful tenderness, all broken lives were remembered - all despairing men and lost women - all little children who "soak and blacken soul and sense in city slime," all old men and white-haired women, whose feet were touching the waters of the deep, dark river. That prayer was like a glimpse I once got on a cloudy day from Mount Pilatus - of mountain, and plain, and lake, and city - a wondrous sweep of vision, all crowded into a few moments. I wanted the prayer to continue, but it closed with almost a shout of confident faith in God's answering love.

We rose from our knees with the words, "Thou wilt save," ringing like a trumpet in our ears, and the most doubting and pessimistic soul could scarcely forbear to believe. The reading of the Scripture was interspersed with illuminating remarks which lit up the passages, and made them full of new meaning.

The sermon was on the text, "And He spake this parable unto them, saying," and was a wonderful exposition of the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel.

"A parable," he said, "is a picture. It is abstract truth in concrete form. It is spiritual truth made visible. It is invisible things outlined in such simple colours and vivid forms that the ordinary mind can grasp and understand their meaning."

The arresting power of word pictures was beautifully illustrated. "A man may reason by the hour on the glories of the setting sun, but a moment's glance will do more than all his arguments. A miner whom I one day urged to read the Bible, retorted, 'I canna read t' Bible; there is only one thing I can read, and that's pictures.'"

Emphasis was next laid on the fact that the writer of the Gospel did not say, "these parables, but *this parable*. The singular number," he continued, "is used. With all due respect to the critics, one cannot help thinking that even the grammatical construction of some sentences in the Bible has been inspired. There is an inspiration of moods and tenses and terms, as well as doctrine. How subtle the distinction between the terms 'Son' and 'Citizen.'" This was finely elaborated in a series of illustrations, which were given with a dramatic effect that fairly held the congregation bound as by a spell.

My attention was diverted to a young man in front of me. At first he was indifferent, toying with a young lady companion, and shuffling restlessly on his seat. He was big, red-faced, fleshy; a man who cultivated what is below the shoulders, rather than what is above. His physiognomy plainly told that he would think more of a good dinner than of the finest sermon ever preached.

But, by-and-by, the preacher captured him. His eyes were staring, his face was set, and his mouth began to gape until it was wide open, and his whole figure expressed astonishment and self-forgetfulness.

It was a triumph of oratorical skill.

“How beautiful,” went on the missionary, “was the touch of Jesus in describing the act of the shepherd, ‘He layeth on his shoulders.’ In the Midrash there is a story of Moses, who while tending Jethro’s flock went after a lamb which had gone astray. When he found it, weary and bedraggled, he brought it back on his shoulders. And God said, because he had shown pity to a sheep, He would give him His own sheep to look after. It is the word ‘shoulders’ that arrests our attention. The prophet who foretold the coming of Christ, said ‘The government shall be on His shoulder.’ It is a trivial thing for Almighty God to carry the world’s affairs, but when man is to be redeemed, the whole Deity must stoop. It is ‘*shoulders.*’ ”

I should like to give an exhaustive outline of this remarkable sermon, but space forbids. It was a chamber of beautiful imagery. It flashed with radiant sentences. Epigrams full of wisdom and beauty fell thick as flakes of snow on a winter’s day. What an opulent mind the preacher possesses. What tremendous potency of mental and spiritual energy. When one remembers his beginnings, one cannot but exclaim, “From whence hath this man these things ?”

His reading was evidenced by quotations from Dr. Bruce, (with whom he ventured to disagree), Dr. Plummer, Balzac, Westcott, Tennyson, Browning, and many others. He is evidently well abreast of the latest criticism, and is not afraid of it. He has none of the intolerant temper towards the Higher Critics, which is so manifest in some evangelists. He welcomes all new light, so that it is light. But there is no hesitant note in his message, no living on the faith of yesterday. His grip of the Cross is firm. He knows in whom he believes.

His reading has evidently covered wide fields, and probably the writer who has influenced him most is Victor Hugo. Never shall I forget the overpowering effect of one of his illustrations taken from the great French novelist. It has haunted me ever since.

To return to the sermon. From the threefold picture in the parable, he went on to deduce the unity of meaning, human and Divine, in the great plan of redemption. “First, the human - there is to begin with the unity of number - one sheep, one coin, one man. Bishop Warburton says the care of Christianity is for particulars. The religion of the Cross stoops to the Unit, particularises the individual, halts to help the wounded traveller, and makes provision for his final restoration. Christianity is the only religion that does this. In the lost sheep we have man’s helplessness. He is a ruined angel. Sin has unmade him, unmanned him. In the lost coin a hint is given of man’s moral worth. The divine estimate of human life is higher than we dream. Contempt of the meanest beggar is the sign of a vulgar soul. Humanity is in the Godhead. Calvary is the Divine estimate not only of human sin, but of human worth, and some day it will be seen that humanity is worth as much as God paid for it.

“In the case of the lost man we have moral responsibility. Sheep can be carried, but not men. There must be self-recovery, as well as Divine willingness.”

The old story of the Prodigal Son was told as I had never heard it told before, told until men were weeping and women sobbing, and in many hearts resolves made to “Arise and go to the Father.” “To

cull illustrations out of the sermon would be like plucking roses in the wonderful rosaries of the South, where acres are given up to the queen of flowers. In vain I strove to take notes. The spell was on me, I could but listen, with moist eyes and a grateful but humbled heart.

Preaching! Yes, I too have preached, but what can I do after this? I felt like going home to burn my sermons, and then fall down on my knees, and ask for forgiveness for having preached so badly.

And now, weeks have passed, and my judgment has righted itself after the intoxication of the hour, I still feel the charm of that service. The fragrance still lingers in the vase of clay, and the memory of that hour, hallowed by sanctified genius, comes to me both as a warning and an inspiration.

I do not wonder that crowds go to hear Mr. Flanagan. I rather wonder that anybody should remain away. Like all great preachers, he has his moods, his mannerisms. He possesses what somebody calls "the tragic genius." He reaches his highest in descriptions of the dark underside of life. Life to him is terribly real. He has bound the world's sore heart to his own. He has learnt in suffering what he teaches in sermons. He reads books in the light of humanity, and not humanity in the light of books. He has studied the human document at first hand. He knows the people and loves them, and of him as of his Great Master, it may be said, "The common people heard him gladly."

References

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