

Barbara Pym and the Sermon

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Barbara Pym had a keen and critical interest in sermons, as her diaries and novels attest. At the end of her first year at Oxford, she dismissed a University Sermon as “somewhat dull and full of blaa [*sic*] and waffle.”^[1] In her ongoing novelistic presentation of the Church of England she uses sermons to illustrate the characters of her clergy and to imply how they may starve or nourish their parishioners’ spiritual lives. I am sure that everyone here recollects Archdeacon Hoccleve’s sermon on the Judgment Day in *Some Tame Gazelle*. I want to look briefly at the development of the sermon within the Anglican tradition and at the popularity of the Judgment Day as a topic. Then I will address the Archdeacon’s handling of this theme and examine the sermons of the two priests he perceives as his rivals, Father Plowman and Mr. Donne. Barbara Pym continued to look narrowly at sermons in *Civil to Strangers* and in *Excellent Women*, presenting altogether four types: the literary sermon; the Scriptural exegesis; the instructional homily and the inspirational talk. If the sermons reported in the novels fail to satisfy her most reflective characters, a consideration of Barbara Pym’s own long-standing interest in John Henry Newman may offer insight into the kind of sermon that would have satisfied her and her creations. Be warned: I shall often speak of her characters as if they were real people listening to real sermons!

Early Christian Period

Let me step into Mark Ainger mode for a moment. Those of you who have visited the catacombs of San Giovanni Evangelista at Syracuse will have seen the altar there—a large flat stone, from which St. Paul is said to have preached during his visit to that city (Acts 28: 11-13). He may have made the first critique on sermons when he told the congregation at Corinth: “Seeing that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech” (2 Cor. 3: 12). John Henry Newman wrote that in its earliest three centuries, Christianity first developed worship, then a theology, and finally an “ecclesiastical polity”—the Church. For the young Church, as for the Anglican Church in Pym’s time, preachers were challenged to adjust Christian teachings to people of varying circumstances and education. Justin Martyr, a second century saint, described underground Sunday meetings at which there were readings from the “Memoirs of the Apostles,” or the New Testament, and from the writings of the prophets. These were followed by a homily by the presiding presbyter or bishop which contained the “admonition and exhortation “ to the congregation to imitate the noble things it had just heard about. “Homily” is from a Greek root meaning a “conversation” or “familiar discourse”; the Latin word “sermo” originally denoted a simple style as “distinguished from the rhetorical speeches of the heathen orators and philosophers.”^[2] When Mildred Lathbury hears a Lenten preacher at the bomb-damaged St. Ermin’s in 1946, she suggests that he used this plain, direct style and made her feel part of a community, such as that reported by Justin Martyr: “The preacher was forceful and interesting. His words seemed to knit us together, so that we really were like the early Christians having all things in common.”^[3]

Two centuries after Justin Martyr comes St. John Chrysostom, the “golden mouthed,” who wrote over 600 homilies. He chose to expound on all the books of Scripture rather than write topical discourses.^[4] The homiletic tradition in England goes back to the Roman Christian mission in 597, though the earliest surviving manuscripts of those written in Old English date from the tenth century. These preaching texts were probably adapted for use in the ensuing Norman period. At the service of Mass they were usually delivered after the reading of the Gospel for the day; they may have been the only part of the service spoken in the vernacular and thus completely understandable to lay people or religious who did not understand Latin. Surviving texts offer homilies that draw out implications of the Gospel text and homilies that exhort listeners to change their behavior or to repent.^[5] In one of the early years of the English Reformation, 1534,

Archbishop Cranmer sponsored a book of homilies designed to raise the level of preaching in the churches. This book included an exhortation against the fear of death and other homilies exhorting against such sins as idolatry, swearing and adultery. A second book, issued in 1563, gives model homilies on fasting, prayer, and the Passion.^[6] The Judgment Day is not dealt with specifically, although meditations and homilies on the Four Last Things—Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell—had been staples of late medieval preaching. Writing in 1522 on “The Four Last Things,” Sir Thomas More called daily meditation on these topos, or “herbs,” a “sure medicine against the seven deadly sins and ultimately eternal damnation.”^[7]

The Seventeenth Century Divines

By the time of Barbara Pym’s favorite poetic century—the seventeenth—the Anglican Divines were creating an important preaching tradition. While this was a various group, they shared veneration for the writings of the Fathers of the Church and a massive learning. Their theology centered on the Incarnation and many were strongly interested in liturgy.^[8] Their connection to the Reformed tradition ensured that the sermon would be primary at the main Sunday service. Whereas the homily was theoretically a short meditation, the Anglican Divines preferred the longer and often more free ranging discourses now associated with the word “sermon.” The Divines had usually been trained in classical languages and rhetoric, and so moved away from the “plainness of speech” recommended by St. Paul. After Rocky Napier leaves London, Mildred Lathbury seeks consolation inside her church, St. Mary’s, a Victorian building. She reflects that it lacks the canopied tombs of the Seventeenth Century, but asks herself: “Ought I not to be consoled by the thought of our first vicar...as by any seventeenth century divine (167)?” If the sermons of these men were often top-heavy with “conceits of fancy, plays on words, antitheses [and] paradoxes,” they were also “thoughtful and based on a solid knowledge of Scripture.”^[9]

The best-known Anglican Divine is John Donne whose eschatological sonnet “At the round earth’s imagined corners” vividly imagines the Judgment Day. It was a popular sermon theme with the Divines; representative among many are Thomas Goodwin’s “The World to Come” of 1655 and Andrew Jones’s “Doomsday, or The Great Day of the Lord Drawing Nigh” of 1665.^[10]

The tendency of some Divines to show off their learning, both sacred and secular, did not go uncriticized. John Wilkes, Bishop of Chester, was greatly concerned with preaching style and wrote in 1646 that “To stuff a sermon with citations of Authors [*sic*] and the witty sayings of others, is to make a feast of vinegar and pepper.”^[11] By contrast, Archdeacon Hoccleve would have agreed with Wilkes’s contemporary, Owen Felltham, who liked to see a sermon “well-dressed” in fine language.^[12] The Archdeacon seems to have had an earlier incarnation in a certain Francis Atterbury whose preaching has been characterized as “showy rather than profound” and of a “contentious and arrogant spirit.”^[13]

More on the Judgment Day

When his parishioners discover that Hoccleve’s Judgement Day sermon is to be just a mass of old quotations, many “tune it out.” Surely this can have nothing to do with *them*. He does not draw on the Anglican Divines, but mostly recycles poetry he read at Oxford. Hoccleve is obviously interested in this topic only as it affords him an opportunity to show off his ability to string quotations together. That he regularly relies on the words of others is suggested by Harriet’s remark as she and Belinda get ready for church on the Sunday of the Judgment Day sermon: “I never heard anything so depressing in my life as that horrid thing he read last Sunday—all about worms and such stilted language.”^[14] Several days earlier Belinda had seen the Archdeacon wandering among the tombstones in the churchyard (20), and his first words to her were about yew trees. The yew was used often, perhaps too often, in the eighteenth century as a symbol of death and melancholy. He might have quoted to her the words of Thomas Parnell’s “Night Piece on Death”:

Now from yon dark and fun'ral yew
That bathes the charnel-house with dew,
Methinks I hear a voice begin... (1722; ll. 53-55).

Though Pym does not use the quotation, she does use the name Parnell for one of her visiting librarians. While the figure of Death in Parnell's poem comes to reassure the living that death is not terrible, Hoccleve offers nothing but terror and denunciation in his sermon. According to Belinda, he works his way through the seventeenth century and then fixes on Edward Young's long philosophical poem, *The Complaint; or Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*. In 10,000 lines of blank verse Young reflects "on life, death and human nature" and defends the Christian faith on intellectual grounds.^[15] *Night Thoughts* enjoyed tremendous popularity at the time of its publication in the 1740s and for decades thereafter. Barbara Pym was "very fond" of it.^[16] Large swatches of the poem are addressed to a figure conventionally named "Lorenzo," her private name for Henry Harvey, the Oxford contemporary who used her affection but did not return it. His literary pretensions and self-regard are transmuted into the brilliant figure of the Archdeacon. Young paints Lorenzo as a pleasure-seeking man of the world who teeters between atheism and a mere natural religion. Thus the reader can enjoy the spectacle of the Archdeacon warning himself of the terrors of the Judgment Day. Belinda reflects that the Archdeacon "seemed to be implying that each person listening to him was little better than the unknown Lorenzo..." (111-12).

Young's picture of the last day in *Night Thoughts* gives "a moral survey of the heavens" that relies on Newtonian astronomy and suggests there is much we cannot know about eternity. By concentrating on the hortatory and denunciatory elements of Young and neglecting this philosophical sweep, the Archdeacon merely makes his congregants bored and resentful. The fires of the Last Judgment prompt only thoughts about the fate of Sunday roasts over-exposed to the flames of gas cookers. While amusement is the first note struck by the refracted account of this sermon, a deeper note is one of failure. The sermon demonstrates how the Archdeacon fails his parishioners through his condescension, tetchiness, and laziness.

Four Characteristics of a Good Sermon

Forty years ago, William Sadler collected together outstanding sermons from several centuries and prefaced them with his views on the four characteristics they shared.^[17] First, great sermons express conviction, a truth to which the speaker bears witness as he speaks. Is the Archdeacon really speaking—or performing—out of conviction?

Secondly, the preacher must be aware of his hearers, of the entire community of his congregation. While the Archdeacon's congregation contained a few who could savor his obscurity, his stream of old, abusive quotations without context were irrelevant to most of his congregants. Such irrelevant sermons had not been unknown in the "high and dry church" of the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries. William Ward, that important if infuriating Oxford Movement figure, remembered listening to a clergyman in a village church read a sermon that was full of phrases such as: "Hark, ye gilded voluptuaries," or, "Pause ere it be too late, ye butterflies of fashion."^[18]

Third, the sermon should teach something. The Last Judgment sermon fails here, too. Many members of the Archdeacon's congregation would have absorbed popular information about the great age of the earth and the vastness of the cosmos. Belief in a literal physical Hell had been challenged within the Church of England in the later nineteenth century by such books as *Essays and Reviews* (1860) and *Lux Mundi* (1889), which pointed to the position that damnation is a spiritual state chosen by the individual who wills separation from God. These ideas remained rich in intellectual and theological possibilities. However, the Archdeacon lazily brushes aside modern scientific knowledge and the concomitant theological speculation. Even loyal Belinda reflects, "one did not think of him as being clever in a theological kind of way" (21).

Finally, writes William Sadler, a great sermon is implicitly a sacrament. The catechism of the Church of England defines a sacrament as "an outward or visible sign of an inward or spiritual grace," but the sermon is not among the seven it recognizes. The Reformers elevated it to a central position in the worship

service, pronouncing that it too “imparted the bread of life.” In catholic tradition the sacrifice of the Mass had been the central focus of the main worship service. The Church of England looks to both traditions. While the sermon is not a sacrament, one of the prayers spoken by a bishop at an ordination service for priests stresses as co-equal duties their administration of the sacraments and the “dispens[ing] of the word of God.”

Hoccleve vs. Plowman vs. Donne

Subjecting the Archdeacon to his own sermonic “judgment day” in the light of these requirements for greatness may seem in the first instance like attacking a butterfly with heavy artillery. But what about the *second* instance? When Barbara Pym wrote the original version of *Some Tame Gazelle* she was an observant Anglican—and she remained one—a regular churchgoer who hoped to find this “outward sign” in the sermons she heard.

The Archdeacon’s arrogance manifests itself in his need to tear down the two priests he perceives as his rivals, Father Plowman and Mr. Donne. Though Father Plowman failed to take honors in theology and does not approve of literary sermons, “the elaborate ritual of his services was ample compensation for the intellectual poverty of his sermons” (42). The original version of the novel contains more detail: “Father Plowman worked hard and was a good man if somewhat unsubtle. Long years of practice had given him an aptitude for preaching simple sermons on the more obvious aspects of Christian teaching.”^[19] He gave his parishioners the opportunity to take communion frequently and to participate fully in the events of the liturgical year. Over the decades, this kind of Anglican worship would exert a powerful pull on Barbara Pym. While Harriet Bede’s spirit admires Father Plowman’s sermons, her ample flesh is not quite up to a commitment: “If it weren’t so far to walk, I should certainly go to Father Plowman’s church; he does at least preach good homely sermons that everyone can understand. He works systematically through the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes...” (21). She uses “homely” in its older sense of “plain” or “commonly known”—as when Wordsworth writes in his “Immortality” ode that “Nature is a homely nurse.”

Hoccleve’s stronger feelings of rivalry are reserved for his new curate, Mr. Donne. Belinda finds his sermons without intellectual substance (as we learn in the opening paragraph of *Some Tame Gazelle*) and admires the Archdeacon’s because his quotations recall their Oxford studies. Hoccleve equates the ability to wallow in quotations with intellectual weight (27). When the Hoccleves and Mr. Donne discuss the bluestocking appearance of Olivia Berridge, the curate gushes, “It’s what a person *is* that matters most, isn’t it?” This splendid sentiment, so often honored in the breach rather than in the observance, prompts this:

“Ah, yes, the clergy at any rate should feel that,” said the Archdeacon sardonically. “It might be an idea for one of your sermons, Donne. You could take the lilies of the field text and work it out quite simply. I’m not sure that I won’t take it myself though. It might be a way of reaching the evening congregations, they like something of that kind. Never waste your erudite quotations on them, they don’t appreciate or understand them.” (69)

The Literary Sermon

A century before, in 1831, John Henry Newman had preached on “The Danger of Accomplishments.” He addressed the common mistake of equating literary knowingness with theological or spiritual depth. Newman had deplored the desire to seek in literature, especially poetry, the consolation and substance of religion. He noted that learned men, and especially clergymen, often fail to understand that “ability of mind is a *gift* and faith is a *grace*.”^[20]

A clergyman who did understand this point, and one whom the Archdeacon might well have envied, was the formidable William Ralph Inge. In 1934, when Barbara Pym was writing the original version of *Some Tame Gazelle*, Inge had been Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral for nearly twenty-five years. He had previously been a professor of Divinity at Cambridge, and had written widely on mysticism and on Platonism in Christian theology. He wrote: “By tradition the Deanery of St. Paul’s is the most literary appointment in

the Church of England.”^[21] Inge was well known also for the syndicated newspaper columns in the *Evening Standard* that he continued to write until 1946. He enjoyed the nickname of the “gloomy dean,” as these writings attacked facile optimism about the progress of democracy and social justice. His works display a daunting range of learning, but it is directed toward illuminating the issue at hand. The Inges made their beautiful deanery an intellectual and social center in London. A man with the pretensions of Hoccleve might well have envied Inge, not only for his position but also for his ability to originate quotable remarks such as: “A nation is a society united by delusions about its ancestry and by common hatred of its neighbors.”

Inge was a presence in English life for decades, and it does not seem unreasonable to say that some readers of *Some Tame Gazelle* in 1950 might have found it irresistible to contrast him with the fictional Hoccleve. Inge’s sermons were literary events due to his own words, not the words of others. Despite his broad theological outlook—one of his books was entitled *God and the Astronomers* (1933)—Inge was uncompromising in preaching that the way of Christianity was the way of the cross. Writing forty years after Inge, Barbara Pym has Edwin Braithwaite in *Quartet in Autumn* reflect that congregations “wouldn’t stand” for the kind of preaching that dwells on sin and suffering.”^[22]

The Simpler Sermons of Mr. Donne and Mr. Gower

In *Some Tame Gazelle* we learn that on the Sunday after Christmas, Mr. Donne preached a very successful sermon on the text “We heard of the same at Ephrata and found it in the wood” (203). At first blush this is merely amusing. However, he is citing verse 6 of Psalm 132, a Psalm appointed for the Wednesday following the fourth Sunday in Advent. The Psalm begins with King David’s vow not to sleep or go into the Tabernacle “until I find out a place for the Temple of the Lord.” “The “field of the wood,” or city of the woods, is a place where the Ark rested for many years until David removed it to Zion, as recorded in 2 Chronicles 13:5. In his Jubilee Terrace lodgings, Mr. Donne probably had a library of “helps” for clergymen and might have come upon St. Augustine’s mystical and allegorical exposition.^[23] The untilled plain or field of the woods represented for Augustine “regions covered with the thorns of idolatry.” Yet in this region there is a place for the Ark. A sermon that combined Scriptural exegesis with a note of inspiration—the bare ground, the field of the wood—was an image of the faith to come, and delivered with sincerity, might indeed have been well received. Augustine also stresses the humility and meekness of David in this Psalm. Humility and meekness characterize Mr. Donne, unless he was playing a very deep game indeed, and these qualities may have enhanced his presentation of this particular Psalm.

Olivia Berridge says that she is going to encourage “Edgar” to make his sermons more literary. If we thought Mr. Donne capable of irony, we might suspect it in his confirming observation that she will help him to “outdo even the Archdeacon with obscure quotations from the *Ormulum*” (237). This 13th century poem of 10,000 lines consists of paraphrases of the Gospels as arranged for the year, supplemented by homilies. Would Mr. Donne read them in Middle English? After all, he is going to be the chaplain of an Oxford College. But this sort of material is not his forte, and the use of it will weaken whatever gift for preaching he has.

In terms of intellect, the positions of rector and curate are somewhat reversed in *Civil to Strangers*, the novel Barbara Pym wrote in 1936. Mr. Gower, the vicar, preaches about “The Game of Life,” or borrows Cassandra Marsh-Gibbon’s comments on tapestry work as the basis for another sermon type—the inspirational talk. Musing, his daughter contrasts to herself her father’s sermons with the curate’s “terrifyingly intelligent conception of God.”^[24] The wonderfully named Mr. Paladin starts off as something of a Newman figure, with a possible leaning to celibacy and a plan to preach an intellectually ambitious series of sermons on the theme of Holiness, a theme dear to Newman. But he soon becomes engaged to the unremarkable Janie Gower and thereafter expends little effort on his sermons.^[25]

In the original version of *Some Tame Gazelle*, where the characterizations of Belinda and the curate are somewhat different, she prepares to listen to him preach a sermon on the loaves and fishes. Knowing him to belong to the “modern school” of preaching, she anticipates that he will

...discuss in great detail what the loaves were like and what kind of fishes were used. She had heard it done many times before, especially in her school days, when that kind of thing had been especially favored by clergymen preaching to congregations consisting entirely of young girls.^[26]

Did Barbara Pym hear this sort of plodding exegesis during her boarding school days?

Preaching in Excellent Women

There are other methods that a clergyman could use in an attempt to be “modern.” In Pym’s next published novel, *Excellent Women*, Father Julian Malory tries to connect the Gospels to daily life. He preaches often about the value of doing “good work with one’s hands,” and finds from his repainting of the vicarage flat that such work requires skill and can teach humility (41). Julian has also tried to clear from his parishioners’ minds certain misconceptions about Roman Catholic practices. Mildred mediates some of this to her “daily woman,” Mrs. Morris, reminding her that he had explained why some Roman Catholics kiss the foot of St. Peter’s statue in the Basilica at Rome: “Don’t you remember Father Malory explaining about the Pope in his Sunday morning sermon last year?” Her question gives rise to the funniest comment about sermons in the Pym canon and leads us back to the concern about over-cooked joints in *Some Tame Gazelle*:

“Oh, Sunday morning was it?” She laughed derisively. “That’s all very fine, standing up and talking about the Pope. A lot of us could do that. But who’s going to cook Sunday dinner?”

Mildred adds that they both laughed, “a couple of women against the whole race of men” (23-24). These Marthas see their value to be as great as Mary’s.

From what we hear of Julian in conversation, his preaching style would probably have been unpretentious but a bit formal. A tantalizingly different case is that of the deceased husband of Allegra Gray. Sister Blatt, that unfailing source of information, tells Mildred that before he became an army chaplain, Mr. Gray had a parish:

‘They say he was a very good preacher, too, very slangy and modern. But I *have* heard,’ Sister Blatt lowered her voice as if about to tell me something disgraceful, ‘that he had *leanings*...’ (119)

These leanings were toward the Oxford Group, a movement that gained popularity in the 1930s. Despite its name—which we must take care not to confuse with the nineteenth century Oxford *Movement*—the leader was an Evangelical Lutheran minister from the United States named Franck Buchman. He came to England in the 1920s after an evangelical career in Asia and South Africa, and organized a non-denominational movement that preached the need for regeneration of society through individual conversions. “Groupers,” as some derisively called them, and prospective Groupers, participated in large meetings where they were stirred up to make public confessions. In the early 1930s, the Group organized many smaller meetings at country houses and hotels around Oxford, where single-sex groups explored sexual problems. The Movement held a mass meeting in Oxford in the early 1930s. These practices, and a certain lack of transparency about its sources of revenue, made “Buchmanism” a controversial matter within the Church of England.

One writer has characterized the methods of Buchman’s young proselytizers as “persistent, cruel invasions of physical and spiritual privacy.” This, clearly, was a form of religious activity Barbara Pym would not have found sympathetic and a direct contradiction of the Oxford Movement’s ethos of reserve in religious matters. When Buchman declared in the middle 1930s that Hitler might become a force for good if he “surrendered to the control of God,” his movement became even more controversial.^[27]

The Oxford Group was relaunched in 1938 as Moral Re-Armament and sought to include union and industrial workers. MRA crusades were notable for their pageantry and regimented marching, characteristics they shared with many extremist groups. Thus Sister Blatt and even Mildred feel it is “just as well that [Mr. Gray] was taken [died].” If Mr. Gray had “tendencies” toward this movement, he might well have adopted an emotional, informal style of speaking designed to win converts. Participation in this movement, in addition to parish work, could very well have absorbed all his energies and made him insufficiently attentive to his wife. Does all of this lie behind what Mildred learns about Allegra Gray’s argument with Julian: “She said she’d had quite enough of being married to one clergyman, and something about them not knowing how to treat women and no wonder” (214).

Beyond Some Tame Gazelle, Civil to Strangers, and Excellent Women

With the completion of *Excellent Women*, Barbara Pym had dealt with the four kinds of sermons I mentioned at the start: the sermon as literary indulgence in the Archdeacon; the sermon as instructional homily in Julian Malory; the sermon as scriptural exegesis in Father Plowman and Mr. Donne and the sermon as vaguely inspirational talk (Mr. Gower).

In *Jane and Prudence*, Pym chose not to dwell on Nicholas Cleveland’s sermons. Jane tells several women of the congregation that her husband is not “one of those dramatic preachers,” but perceiving she has sounded disloyal, adds: “Of course, he’s a very good preacher; what I meant was that he doesn’t go in for a lot of quotations and that kind of thing.”^[28] Jane’s saturation in seventeenth century poetry has not exerted the influence on Nicholas that Olivia Berridge hoped to use on Mr. Donne with medieval literature.

In *A Glass of Blessings*, Barbara Pym focuses on the ritualistic atmosphere of St. Luke’s. This church lacks outstanding preachers. Father Bode’s preaching is not even mentioned, and Wilmet is clearly not keen on Father Thames’s. She speculates to herself that while his library suggests he might once have been a literary preacher, that sort of things seems

...to have gone out of fashion, for all we got from Father Thames now was ten minutes’ rather dry preaching on such topics as “The Significance of Evensong,” or little nagging perorations about why we ought to go to confession. No doubt the modern way was better, but I could not help regretting the passing of the old.^[29]

In other words, Father Thames offers rather dull instructional homilies—modern perhaps in their utilitarian style—and reserves elaboration for the communion services. Barbara Pym fancifully makes Archdeacon Hoccleve a distant relative of Wilmet’s, and in *Excellent Women* he had delivered the Judgment Day sermon at St. Ermin’s, much to the amusement of Everard Bone. Does this recycling represent a conflict between Pym’s own enjoyment of obscure literary material and the sense that this kind of sermon wasn’t helpful to many churchgoers? The glamorous Father Ransome does no better in the pulpit than Father Thames: Wilmet describes his style as “full of limping platitudes” (168). Are these sincere? His social persona is one of slightly cynical world-weariness—at least in his dealings with Wilmet. His presentation about “visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction” sounds like the sermon as inspirational talk. Why does she portray this charming man as a poor speaker? Is it the issue of sincerity again? How will he manage to hold the congregation in the suburban parish he goes to with Mary Beamish? Perhaps she will provide enough sincerity for two.

Barbara Pym endows Mark Ainger of *An Unsuitable Attachment* with the forcefulness and sincerity she admired in a preacher. He tries to adapt his preaching to his congregation. Still, how are we meant to take the information that he was “too intelligent for the majority of his congregation so that the rather dry instructive sermons to which he inclined personally had to be diluted and sweetened to suit their taste”?^[30] His usual sweetener is a suggestion to his congregants that they imagine themselves at some exotic site most of them have not visited. Yet they accept these openings with “amused tolerance,” so they may have more intelligence than he credits them with. He regards Lenten sermons as a form of penance. When he invites Ianthe Broome’s uncle to give the series at his church, he opines: “If he isn’t much good it will be

all the better for us. I never see why people should expect *interesting* sermons in Lent” (71). When Randolph Burdon invites Mark to deliver the sermon at his own church’s dedication festival, Sophia invents a new category: the “sermon suitable for rich people” (229).

The sense of ecclesiastical fatigue that broods over *An Unsuitable Attachment* is even more marked in *A Few Green Leaves*, written fifteen years later. Many residents of the Oxfordshire village attend Tom Dagnall’s church only at the times of major festivals or for weddings and funerals. On the Sunday following the flower festival, Tom preaches on people’s ideas of heaven. Emma regards this as a “bold and imaginative ... subject,” though she cannot summon up any satisfactory vision for herself.^[31] Looking across the Pym oeuvre, we begin in *Some Tame Gazelle* with a sermon in which the egotistical Archdeacon implies that a literal physical Hell may be the destination of many of his congregants, and we end with a bland suggestion from the modest Tom that his consider their individual ideas of heaven. Throughout Barbara Pym’s novels and diaries, author and characters appear as connoisseurs of sermons, but seldom find preaching that meets their standards. What sermons could?

“In my string bag....” Cardinal Newman and the Sermon

“I am asked to lunch unexpectedly—the biography of Cardinal Newman in a string bag.”^[32] reads a Pym diary entry of 1949. We know how she transmuted that incident into Mildred’s meeting with Everard Bone in *Excellent Women*. As she tries desperately to make conversation in the pub, she tells him she is reading about Newman and has “great sympathy for him.” When Everard responds by speaking of the attractions of Rome, Mildred replies: “Oh, that wasn’t what I really meant... More as a person...” (141). And then she trails off. Hazel Holt has written of Pym’s long-standing interest in Newman, and Barbara Pym noted the major events of his career in her “Anglo-Catholic Diary.” The action of *Excellent Women* takes place in 1946, but she wrote the first draft in 1949.

Three biographies of Newman were published in the years 1947-1948 and more than one of them could have found its way into her string bag and then imaginatively into Mildred’s. The one that particularly creates tremendous sympathy for him is Maisie Ward’s *Young Mr. Newman*, with its rich account of his relations with his mother, sisters, two very difficult brothers and Hurrell Froude, his glamorous Oxford friend. All three offered vivid accounts of Newman as a preacher, based on testimony of those who had heard him in his Anglican days in the pulpit of St. Mary’s in Oxford. He rejected both the cold, intellectual sermons of the eighteenth century church and the subjectivity of the Evangelicals.^[33] His preaching stressed the beauty of holiness and the crippling power of sin. “Those who make comfort the great subject of their preaching... seem to mistake the end of their ministry. *Holiness* [italics his] is the great end.... Comfort is a cordial but no one drinks cordials from morning to night.”^[34]

Newman insinuated himself into the recesses of his hearers’ souls. Among the many accounts of his effect on those who came to St. Mary’s on Sunday afternoons between 1828 and 1843, this one must serve:

“The service was very simple, no pomp, no ritualism.... [T]he most remarkable thing was the beauty, the silver intonation of Mr. Newman’s voice.... His power showed itself chiefly in the new and unlooked-for way in which he touched into life old truths, moral or spiritual, which all Christians acknowledge, but most have ceased to feel.... He laid his finger, how gently, yet how powerfully, on some inner place in the hearer’s heart, and told him things about himself he had never known till then.”^[35]

Newman managed to be “both tender and stern.” Another element in Newman’s success was his ability to keep each sermon focused on one object: to concentrate on one fact or quotation and to unpick its possibilities.

In choosing one of Newman’s sermons to hold up as an example of excellence, I have, perhaps perversely, selected one he preached during his first years in the Roman Catholic Church. Barbara Pym’s

novels indicate on several occasions that Roman Catholic priests must preach simple sermons. Both Prudence and Fabian express this view in *Jane and Prudence*. Fabian considers all the local churches and rejects the Roman Catholic one, not on doctrinal grounds but because of “the simplicity of Father Kinsella’s sermons, intended only for a congregation of Irish laborers and servant girls” (54). When Prudence discovers that Fabian is going to marry Jessie Morrow, she self-consciously sees herself finding comfort in Roman Catholicism. She passes a church that offers introductory talks, but rejects the notion of attending a lecture “by a raw Irish peasant that was phrased for people less intelligent than herself...” (201). Even Mildred’s attitude implies this when she tells Julian that he surely won’t grudge the Roman priest Father Bogart “a couple of gentlewomen.... He hasn’t many such” (246).^[36] When an English monsignor invited Newman to spend the Lent of 1865 at Rome and told him he would attract an English audience more “educated” than the one that came to hear him at the Birmingham Oratory,^[37] Newman declined with barely concealed contempt and added: “The people in Birmingham have souls.”

“Preparation for the Judgment” is the title of a sermon Newman preached in 1848 to Roman Catholics in Birmingham. He takes as his text the parable of the laborers in the vineyard who come in the evening before their master to receive their wages (Matthew 20:1-16). The master is the Lord and Savior; the evening is the hour of death. Newman beautifully paints all the charms of evening, and the rest that often accompanies it. Then, invoking the Roman doctrine of the Particular Judgment that will precede the Last Judgment, he says that we will find ourselves “one by one in His presence.... Who will be able to bear the sight of himself? And yet we shall be obliged steadily to confront ourselves and to see ourselves. In this life we shrink from knowing our real selves....” There are many incisive passages in this sermon but most striking to me is how Newman drives home the substance of the parable. The Master in the parable was concerned only with what the laborers had done: “He did not ask what their opinions were about science, or about art, or about the means of wealth, or about public affairs; he did not ask them if they knew the nature of the vine for which they had been laboring. They were not required to know how many kinds of vines there were in the world, and what countries vines could grow in....” There is more, and then he delivers his final message about the Judgment: “When we come into God’s presence, we shall be asked two things, whether we were in the Church, and whether we worked in the Church. Everything else is worthless. Whether we have been rich or poor, whether we have been learned or unlearned, whether we have been prosperous or afflicted....”^[38]

Concerned with what is in the heart, Newman exhorted his audience about the General Judgment: “How different persons will then seem, from what they seem now!” I am not a Roman Catholic, but I don’t think you have to agree with the doctrine in this sermon to admire it. The language is transparent and unadorned, the focus clear, Newman’s acquaintance with the attractions and distractions of the world very evident. Could this be the quality of preaching Mildred found that day at St. Ermin’s, with the preacher who was “forceful and effective?” Does it bring home the wonders and terrors of the Judgment without the use of borrowed verbal finery? There is nothing here of the “blaa and waffle” that Barbara Pym had dismissed in 1932.

The current Lenten season is just behind us. During Lent 1843, one of the last he spent as an Anglican, Newman fasted rather severely, but described an important rule of his community at Littlemore: “There is no restriction on tea at any hour, early or late.... [I] have not felt any rule so light since I have attempted anything. This I attribute to drinking very freely of tea, as early as 8 or 9 a.m. with sugar in it.”^[39] We know Barbara Pym would have appreciated his sentiment. With that in mind, let us soon go and have ours—with or without sugar.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Frances McMeen. I would like to thank Beverly Bell and Rebecca Morris for their advice and assistance.

- [1] Barbara Pym, *A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters*, ed. Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), 14.
- [2] Philip Smith, *The History of the Christian Church During the First Ten Centuries*, The Students Ecclesiastical History (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883), 194 and n.10.
- [3] Barbara Pym, *Excellent Women* (1952; rpt. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), 51.
- [4] Smith, 322.
- [5] Mary Swan, "Old English Homilies," in *The Literary Encyclopedia and Literary Dictionary*, ed. Robert Clark, Emory Elliott and Janet Todd (The Literary Dictionary Company: 23 March 2003). <http://www.LiteraryEncyclopedia.com> 3 February 2005.
- [6] See Church of England. Homilies. *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth I (1547-1571)*... ed. Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas Stroup (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968). Text also available online: <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel>
- [7] This text is available online at <http://www.thomasmorestudies.org> The website uses the text of 1931, ed. W. E. Campbell (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode). The *Cordiale Quattor Novissimorum*, for example, was a popular collection of such meditations; it went into 73 editions throughout Europe between 1470 and 1501. For an illustration from the edition printed by Jacobus de Breda in 1492 and information about the popularity of such eschatological texts, see *A Heavenly Craft: the Woodcut in Early Printed Books...*, ed. by Daniel DeSimone (New York and Washington: G. Braziller and the Library of Congress, 2004), Item No. 32, 134ff.
- [8] For a detailed discussion of the Anglican Divines, the most accessible resource is G.W.O. Addleshaw, *The High Church Tradition* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941). See especially Chapter II: "The High Church Tradition." The full text is available at: www.anglicanlibrary.org Note that it was published by the firm in which T.S. Eliot was a partner.
- [9] Edwin Charles Dargan, *A History of Preaching* (1912; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), II:142ff.
- [10] The Bodleian Library, Oxford, holds nearly 21,000 sermon texts separately published before 1920. This number would swell considerably with the addition of collections of sermons.
- [11] *Seventeenth-century Prose*, ed. Peter Ure, Pelican History of English Prose; 2 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1956), xxxix.
- [12] Ure, 249.
- [13] Dargan, II:295-96. For more about Atterbury, see The Rev. Canon Overton, "Francis Atterbury" in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Stephen (London and New York: Smith, Elder and Macmillan, 1887), II: 233-238.
- [14] Barbara Pym, *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950; rpt. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1983), 20.
- [15] Isabel St. John Bliss, *Edward Young*, Twayne's English Authors Series (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969). See also the edition of NT edited by Stephen Cornforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- [16] She wrote to Henry Harvey in 1936: "Nobody will listen to me when I say that I am very fond of Young's *Night Thoughts*" (*Very Private Eye*, 61).
- [17] William Alan Sadler, J., ed., *Master Sermons Through the Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), My discussion of the characteristics of great sermons relies on his Introduction.
- [18] Quoted in Maisie Ward, *Young Mr. Newman* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 318.
- [19] MS Pym, 2/1, fol. 80, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- [20] Quoted in Charles Frederick Harrald, *John Henry Newman* (London: Longman's Green & Co., 1947), 252.
- [21] W. R. Matthews, "William Ralph Inge" in *Dictionary of National Biography: Supplement 1951-1960*, ed. E. T. Williams and Helen Palmer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 529-532. His *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930) is representative of his popular works.
- [22] Barbara Pym, *Quartet in Autumn* (New York: E. P. Dutton: 1980), 16,

- [23]“Psalm CXXXII” in *Expositions on the Psalms*. This text is most easily available at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>
- [24]Barbara Pym, *Civil to Strangers and Other Writings*, ed. Hazel Holt (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987), 43.
- [25]He first fends off Angela Gay by telling her that he is busy with his sermon preparation and, shades of Julian Malory, the “Lads’ Club” (52). Once he falls in love, his “sermons got written as if by magic, or even Divine Aid” (111).
- [26]MS Pym 2/1, folio 94, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- [27]See Tom Driberg, *The Mystery of Moral Re-Armament* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 55ff. Geoffrey Williamson’s *Inside Buchmanism ...* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955) provides a useful chronology of events, including the mass meeting at Oxford.
- [28]Barbara Pym, *Jane and Prudence* (1954; rpt. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), 31.
- [29]Barbara Pym, *A Glass of Blessings* (1958; rpt. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), 108. In a diary entry for 1955 BP records attending High Mass at All Saints, Notting Hill: “Father Twisaday, the vicar, is an elderly, dried up celibate, irritable and tetchy.... The sermon, urging us to keep Ascension Day as a day of obligation, was quite good. Then he remembered a notice about a meeting in the Albert Hall and began talking about that... how many tickets to send for... (*Very Private Eye*, 194). She used this free association technique for Father Thames’s parish letter in AGOB .
- [30]Barbara Pym, *An Unsuitable Attachment* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1982), 53.
- [31]*A Few Green Leaves* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), 87.
- [32]MS Pym, 40, Notebook 1 (1948-49), fol. 23, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- [33]Ward, 241.
- [34]Eleanor Ruggles, *Journey into Faith: the Anglican Life of John Henry Newman* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1948), 45.
- [35]R. W. Church, *The Oxford movement: Twelve Years, 1833-1845*, 3rd ed. (1892; rpt. London: Macmillan and Co., 1922), 141-1942.
- [36]In her unsourced essay, “Birds, Wormwood and Jesuits: Roman Catholicism in Pym’s Novels” (in Hazel Bell, ed., *No Soft Incense: Barbara Pym and the Church* (Hove, England: Pub. by Anna Brown Associates in association with the Barbara Pym Society, 2004). Joy Grant quotes without a date Pym’s observation: I though what a pity it was he [Ronald Knox] ever went over to Rome and how beastly it must have been for a priest to do it [an Anglican priest] and become a Roman priest” (32). She wrote in her diary for 1934 January 7: “I am reading *The Belief of Catholics* by Ronald Knox—but have not yet got far enough into it to know whether I shall become a Catholic or not” (VPE, 33). She does not comment on the Roman Catholic intellectual circle that was a part of the world of Knox and of Evelyn Waugh, his biographer. She did read Waugh’s published diaries in 1977 (VPE, 300). See Waugh’s *Life of the Right Reverend Ronald Knox* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1959).
- [37]John Henry Newman, *Prose and Poetry* selected by Geoffrey Tillotson, The Reynard Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 800.
- [38]“Preparation for the Judgment” Almost all of JHN’s sermons are available on line at newmanreader.org. This one is at newmanreader.org/works/ninesermons/sermon2/html The sermon with the intriguing title “The Church a Home for the Lonely” is also available. A totally different tone about the Judgment Day, but in its own way rather thoughtful, appears in one of Lucy Maud Montgomery’s “Anne” books. In the very late *Anne of Windy Poplars*, set in the early 20th century, the ever-complaining Ernestine Bugle whines: “They tell me the girls nowadays only wear one [petticoat]. I’m afraid the world is gitting [*sic*] dreadful [*sic*] gay and giddy. I wonder if they ever think of the judgment day.” The outspoken servant, Rebecca Dew, retorts: “Do you s’pose they’ll ask us at the judgment day how many petticoats we’ve got on?” (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1936), 162. Montgomery was the wife of a Presbyterian minister.
- [39]Quoted in Ward, 389.