

Reading the Books of Homilies Today

A Report by the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission

10 August, 2018

Preamble

On 4 May 2017, the Archbishop wrote to the chairman of the Doctrine Commission requesting that the Commission “explore the import of Article XXXV of the Articles of Religion for today.” As the Archbishop went on to explain, he had “received reports of concern from certain quarters that the Homily on the State of Matrimony in Book II at certain places is couched in language which might not be described as conveying ‘godly and wholesome Doctrine.’” He also noted that the Article speaks of the Homilies as being “necessary for these times” and so wondered “to what extent this necessity translates to the times of the 21st century, as well as the judgment of the authors of the Article that they be ‘read in Churches by Ministers, diligently and distinctly, that they may be understood of the people.’”

The following report is a response the Archbishop’s request.

1. The Content of Article XXXV

The text of Article XXXV of the 39 Articles of Religion reads as follows:

Article XXXV: Of Homilies

The second Book of Homilies, the several titles whereof we have joined under this Article, doth contain a godly and wholesome doctrine and necessary for these times, as doth the former Book of Homilies which were set forth in the time of Edward the Sixth: and therefore we judge them to be read in Churches by the ministers diligently and distinctly, that they may be understood of the people.

Of the Names of the Homilies

1. Of the right Use of the Church
2. Against peril of Idolatry
3. Of the repairing and keeping clean of Churches
4. Of good Works: first of Fasting
5. Against Gluttony and Drunkenness
6. Against Excess of Apparel
7. Of Prayer
8. Of the Place and Time of Prayer
9. That Common Prayers and Sacraments ought to be ministered in a known tongue.
10. Of the reverend estimation of God's Word
11. Of Alms-doing
12. Of the Nativity of Christ

13. Of the Passion of Christ
14. Of the Resurrection of Christ
15. Of the worthy receiving of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ
16. Of the Gifts of the Holy Ghost
17. For the Rogation-days
18. Of the state of Matrimony
19. Of Repentance
20. Against Idleness
21. Against Rebellion

2. The Nature and Purpose of the Homilies in the 16th Century

- 2.1. The two books of Homilies were issued in 1547 and 1563, respectively, in order that ministers might read them “diligently and distinctly” to parish congregations in the Church of England (Article XXXV). The First Book of Homilies (1547) contains six primarily doctrinal Homilies followed by six primarily pastoral Homilies. The Second Book of Homilies (1563) contains twenty-one further addresses and has a greater focus on issues of church services and order. Much of the content of the second book is adapted from a range of Reformation or pre-Reformation sources.
- 2.2. Article XXXV states that the Homilies “contain a godly and wholesome doctrine and necessary for these times.”
- 2.3. “The Preface” of the First Book of Homilies, as it was originally published in 1547, states that by this instrument the people will be delivered from the previous “diversity of preaching” and will instead hear “the true setting forth and pure declaring of God’s word, which is the principle guide and leader unto all godliness and virtue.”¹
- 2.4. The Homilies also enabled “all Curates, of what learning soever they be,” to “have some godly and fruitful lessons in a readiness to read and declare unto their parishioners for their edifying, instruction and comfort.” Moreover, they contain “certain wholesome and godly exhortations, to move the people to honour and worship Almighty God, and diligently serve him, every one according to their degree, state and vocation.”² That is, the Homilies ensured that true preaching of God’s Word would be present in the churches, and that it would be practically applied to the lives and situations of the 16th century hearers. This would take place regardless of the theological views, pastoral skills, or homiletic ability of the parish ministers.
- 2.5. The preface to the Second Book of Homilies encourages each minister, in the light of his own pastoral insights and sense of necessity, prudently “to choose

¹ Gerald Bray (ed.), *The Book of Homilies: a critical edition* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

out such Homilies as be most meet for the time and for the more agreeable instruction of the people committed to your charge.”³

- 2.6. The character of the Homilies in their original context was that of sound doctrine applied practically to the lives and concerns of the 16th century English congregations.

3. The Nature and Purpose of the Homilies in the 21st Century

- 3.1. How then do we read these Homilies in the 21st century, conscious that they “contain” sound doctrine but are also expressly seeking to apply that doctrine to the issues and necessities of the 16th century?
- 3.2. The purely doctrinal Homilies were and remain a faithful expression of Reformation teaching and of the foundational faith of the Anglican Church. Thomas Cranmer’s Homilies on *Salvation, Faith, and Good Works* repay careful reading almost 500 years later.
- 3.3. However, the closer the Homilies get to a specific application the more the contemporary church needs to re-express the truth in our context. The doctrinal truth contained in the Homilies still describes our reality, but we need to use language that effectively communicates that truth in our own context.
- 3.4. For example, the *Homily of the State of Matrimony* contains both wholesome doctrine on the purposes and nature of marriage, but it also applies that doctrine to a context very different to our own and uses language that we would seek to avoid in the 21st century. This cultural gap is understandable when we note that most of the second half of the Homily is a translated and abridged sermon by John Chrysostom (349-407). Although the God-ordained purposes of marriage have not changed since the 4th century, the context in which a preacher seeks to carefully apply that truth to his congregation has certainly changed.
- 3.5. In regard to the pastoral Homilies, we act in a way faithful to the nature of these sermons as originally given when we seek to understand the doctrine contained therein and apply it thoughtfully to the necessities of our own day. Such an approach is also consistent with a full assent to the Thirty-Nine Articles.

Mark Thompson

On behalf of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission

³ Ibid., 204.