CHAPTER EIGHT

CATECHETIC HOMILETICS: ÆLFRIC’S PREACHING AND TEACHING DURING LENT

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INTRODUCTION

When, in a sermon for Easter Sunday, Ælfric explains the symbolism of the first Passover lamb, he reminds Christians that ‘godes cwydas sind to smeagenne mid swa micelre carfulynsse. swa þæt ealle his beboda mid andgite. and weorce beon asmeade on nihte ðises andwerdan lifes. ðær ðan þe se endenexta dæg. þæs gemenelican æristes æteowige’. 1 The call to ponder God’s word and put it into action may strike us as odd considering that the majority of lay folk who comprised his target audience had limited access to the Scriptures themselves. Yet this advice appears with enough frequency in his homilies for Lent and Easter that it constitutes a hallmark of Ælfrician Christianity. Even more than his sources and contemporaries, who also urge Christians to harmonize deep faith with virtuous works, Ælfric exhorts believers to express their faith through action only after inward reflection on and application of (often sophisticated) theological concepts to their lives. 2 His use of biblical exposition to catechize the laity in right belief and righteous living highlights the importance of exegetical sermons in providing them with opportunities to meditate on Scripture, and attests to the value he places on reflexive Christian belief and practice.

With its biblical translation or paraphrase and, normally, verse by verse exposition, the exegetical homily enabled, indeed enacted, a purposeful consideration of God’s words. ‘[U]s is twyfeald neod on

1 CH II.15, lines 295–8 (p. 159); ‘God’s words are to be considered with very great care so that all his instructions may be taken into account with understanding and action in the night of this present life before the final day of the universal resurrection appears.’ All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

2 The Bible, of course, exhorts Christians to faith and works, a locus classicus of which is James II.14–26, the last verse of which reads ‘faith without works is dead’. Ælfric cites verses from this passage in two sermons, CH I.16 (lines 102–10 [pp. 310–11]) and I.21 (lines 136–51 [p. 350]).
boclicum gewritum', Ælfric writes in another sermon for Easter Sunday: ‘Anfeald neod us is. þæt we ða boclican lare mid carfullum mode smeagan. oðer þæt we hi to weorcum awendan’.³ So central is a knowledge of God’s word to his idea of what it means to be a Christian that Ælfric even asks whether it is possible to be one without having a desire to study and examine it (lines 60–2). If, as he urges, the faithful are to meditate upon Scripture in order to understand and act on it, then it is essential that they be presented with the verses themselves.⁴ The Scriptures are, after all, the means by which Christ defeated the devil during his own temptation, and biblically-based doctrine and deportment would guarantee Anglo-Saxon believers deliverance from the spiritual warfare of both Lent and life.⁵ Armed with ‘þæs halgan gastes swurd. þæt is godes word’ (‘the sword of the Holy Spirit, which is God’s word’), they could engage mind and body, and summon doctrine and devotion to their aid.⁶

This chapter uses Ælfric’s exegetical homilies for Lent as a vantage point for identifying the beliefs and practices that lie at the heart of what it means for him ‘to live and move and have one’s being in Christ’.⁷ As such, the sermons serve as a guide to the theological and thematic predilections that put a decidedly Ælfrician stamp on the season’s catechetical scheme. This is not to argue that the substance of Ælfric’s sermons is new. Even a cursory glance at the sourcing of his homilies highlights the derivative nature of his compositions.⁸ Nevertheless, there is not a single example among the Lenten homilies where he translates a sermon without reordering or combining it with other materials to fashion a homily that is uniquely his own. And while an assessment of the degree to which the Christianity he advocates may be said to be truly Ælfrician must await further study of his immediate sources, the present essay attempts to open up possibilities for such work.⁹

³ CH II.16, lines 55–8 (p. 162); ‘We have a two-fold need for written Scriptures: One need is that we consider with an attentive mind the written Scriptures; the other is that we turn them into works.’
⁴ See, for example, CH I.11, lines 47–57 (pp. 267–8); II.6, lines 175–9 (p. 58); II.13, lines 87–94 (p. 130); II.15, lines 295–8 (p. 159); and Pope 4, lines 293–6 (p. 280).
⁵ See CH I.11, lines 134–5 and 150–3 (p. 271), where Christ overcomes the devil ‘mid halgum gewritum’ (‘by the holy Scriptures’).
⁷ Acts XVII. 28, which Ælfric quotes in Pope 1, lines 284–5 (p. 208).
⁸ See, for example, the sources of Ælfric’s homilies listed on the Fontes Anglo-Saxonici database (Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: World Wide Web Register at www.fontes.english.ox.ac.uk).
⁹ J. Hill observes that ‘it is a searching engagement with immediate sources, however derivative they might be from a modern perspective and however much we might