

JESUS, THE ONLY TRUE FRIEND.

We are here this morning for the purpose of remembrance. There is great power in remembrance—for good or evil. Some memories are as oil in the bones: some strike daggers in the bowels. It is not needful for me to say to which of these classes the memory of Christ belongs. There is nothing but what is joyous, and healing, and up-building in the memory of him who went about doing good. Yet it is a memory unlike all other memories in that it brings futurity with it. Other memories are as crumpled rose-leaves or old letters: they may remind us of things that were pleasant, but that are gone, and by that very fact, they are saddening and depressing. They have no seed in them of joy to come. The memory of Christ is not only the most pleasing recollection of history, but the most joyful prospect of all human life. His name is a tower of continual strength and comfort.

*“His name shall endure for ever: His name shall be continued as long as the sun:
And men shall be blessed in him: All nations shall call him blessed.”*

Why is it that so few around us are interested in such a name? Why is it that so few are gathered as we are this morning to do it honour, and refresh ourselves in its recollection? Because there are other elements in it besides human benefits. They are not less joyous to those who understand: but they do not appeal to those who can be stirred only by ideas of creature advantage. We see them as we look on the symbols before us on the table. Here is bread to be broken: here is wine to be poured out:

“My body which is given for you,” says Christ; *“my blood which is shed for you.”*

Here is suffering: here is death. Why do so apparently gloomy elements enter into the interesting, the beautiful, the healing memory of Christ? *“For you,”* cried he. But why should kindness take such a painful form? The answer is a large one, and in a manner brings before us the history of the world. Why is there evil in the world? Why does *“the whole creation groan and travail in pain together until now?”* Why is Israel scattered in all lands, and the Lord’s land a desolation and a by-word on the lips of talkers?

We know the answer: it is all because God is. Some people think and argue that if God is, these things ought not to be. Their logic is at fault altogether. God is good, but He is also high, and holy, and jealous: He will not give His glory to another. He will not suffer His prerogative to be clouded. This is the matter with things on earth as they are now. God made the earth for His own glory, and man has ousted Him, not only from all share in its management, but from all consideration in its arrangements. Man not only disobeys, but ignores Him. Man does not only love man, but hates God. How can there be peace in such a state of things? God said to Israel,

“Your iniquities have separated between you and your God. I have smitten you with blasting and with mildew. I have withheld the showers. I have cursed you in all your labours. Your iniquities have procured these things unto you.”

If He showed himself thus contrary to His own people, need we be surprised at the untoward experience of mankind at large? We need not be, and we will not be, surprised if we are governed by reason in the matter. Few people are so governed. They seem to think it strange that God should permit and inflict evil in punishment of sin, although they are obliged to

recognise that in physical constitution of nature, the principle is universal in mechanical operations. Foul gas enters a house: fever and death ensue. A beautiful child falls into the fire, and suffers injuries that bring death. A noble vessel strikes a rock at sea, and goes down in five minutes, drowning hundreds of people and spreading mourning and woe. An avalanche from the mountain-side sweeps away a whole village with its helpless inhabitants. Rain and floods swell the rivers, and carry away houses and human beings and cattle to destruction. Plague breaks out and sweeps away multitudes of men and beasts.

If evil follow thus from disturbed conditions in the play of mechanical forces, why should there be any difficulty about the evil that results from the disturbance of higher conditions? For there are higher conditions just as there are higher powers than mechanical law. Mechanical law itself rests in the inscrutable energy that lies behind and beneath all law: the power, and intelligence, and presence of the Eternal Being who contains all in Himself. He has revealed Himself as the contriver, and maker, and sustainer of Heaven and earth. No human philosophy can displace this revelation or this necessary conception of the origin of things. Human impression may fail to rise to its greatness, or to have a sense of its reality, because of the smallness of the human impressorium: but it cannot exclude it. Therefore, we have to realise that the highest condition affecting human condition is the revealed will of the Eternal Proprietor of man. This revealed will has been set aside. Hence man's evil lot. No philosophy, or sentiment, or "experience" can alter this. Men bow to the inevitable: wisdom bows to the true. This is revealed truth—that evil exists because of sin. And sin is insubordination to Divine commandment. And Divine commandment is founded on Divine prerogative and Divine wisdom. And Divine prerogative and Divine wisdom are inherent in the eternal nature of things—and man's part is just to submit—with the humility of little children.

When men arrive at this, they are interested in this broken body and this shed blood, as the expression of these highest of all principles. They see in this, God first: man only next, and in this they rejoice. They are glad at the manifested kindness of God, in sending forth His son to die that we might live. But they could not be intelligently glad at this if they did not see that kindness required it. This they can see: for they see in the death of Christ the indispensable assertion of the supremacy of God as the basis of all true life and human well-being upon earth, and its recognition as the indispensable condition of the return and reconciliation and salvation of condemned sinners.

It is a sweet and healing memory, therefore that we are reconciled to God by the death of His Son (Romans 5:10): and that, being reconciled, we shall much more be saved by His life, as the same verse says. The world around us has no interest in this, and they look upon us as soft because we are interested in it. That the world is not interested is due to its ignorance: that it is averse to it is due to its badness, for what is there so good and beautiful in itself as this manifested righteousness of God in Christ Jesus? Do they despise well-being? Nay: see their rush for it wherever they think it is to be found. It is the prerogative of God they disrelish. It is His holiness they shrink from. It is His existence they doubt and dislike. Pride and creature satisfaction fill their foolish hearts: and "*they say unto God, Depart from us: we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways.*" How much otherwise it is with those whose eyes the truth has enlightened, and whose hearts and minds the truth has expanded to take in—not the works of God only, but God himself. To them, God is all in all beforehand, as He will be in all the earth yet: His worship and His excellence the supremest delight: the universe, but the expression of His wisdom and His power—the "materialisation" of His eternal energy. If God is the first, the eternal, the essential, the Root, the foundation, the Rock—the Contriver, the

Proprietor, the Possessor, then is His love the reasonable, and the supporting, and the ennobling. David, in this fervent love, stands before us as the rational model. His being the man after God's own heart is intelligible. How puny, and meagre, and impoverished are all other mental types and moods. On a low plane by comparison stands the whole host of science worshippers, who are worshippers mostly of themselves and one another—worshippers that do not worship—at the best, worshippers of “the sum of things”—the abstract—(what is that in truth?)—of force, of elements, of “laws.” David's faith, which is the faith of the sons of God in every age, embraces all that, but vaults beyond it all, and strikes at the head and heart and centre of things—God Himself—the Eternal Father, as revealed to Abraham, active through Moses and the Prophets, and manifest in that historic marvel of marvels—Jesus Christ, whose name baffles the world in every age.

The salvation proclaimed by the Apostles is great and glorious, because it has at its kernel a great and Holy God, who is jealous as well as loving: terrible as well as beneficent: as the storm and the earthquake as well as the balmy morning and the gentle dew. All salvations and moralities that are without the God of Israel inside of them are as sickening sweetnesses without flavour, and flabby beautifulnesses without strength and comeliness. They are effeminate parodies begotten of human feeling, working apart from the robust thoughts of God revealed in the Scriptures. Men get away from the Bible and give us either the barbarism of atheism or the emasculate product of sentimental imbecility, dignified with high-sounding labels that deceive the understanding. “Genius,” “insight,” “poetic frenzy,” “religious inspiration,” “institutions,” poetries, arts, philosophies, &c., &c., are all phantoms of human ignorance and pride. To say so is to utter blasphemy according to current public opinion. The next age will justify it as the declaration of sober truth.

The love that loves God is a love that can rejoice, then, in this exaltation of God, which, looked at by itself, is nothing but painful and heart breaking. We can rejoice to see sin condemned in the flesh on Calvary's mount. We can rejoice in the Father's requiring, and in the Son's yielding, such a foundation of holiness for the life of glory, honour, and immortality to come. Faith discerns the light of beauty and truth in the hour of darkness that veiled the sky, and shook the earth when Jesus bowed his head and gave up the spirit. Faith shouts aloud,

“With his stripes, we are healed.”

“The Lord hath laid on him the iniquities of us all.”

“He hath washed us from our sins in his own blood.”

If from the memory of the troubled past, brought to us in this broken bread and poured out wine, we find comfort and rest in Christ, how much more may we be comforted by all that is true of the present and the future? A present peace, Christ certainly intends all his people to find. His words are express on this point:

“My peace I leave with you.”

“Ye shall find rest unto your souls.”

He is our ever-living and guiding friend. The world can show nothing like this. They have their friends, but the friendship is not deep, and is mostly a thing of convenience. And it is

little that one friend can do for another, and in the long run—we might even say the short run—of things, they all fade off from each other’s horizon—if not in life, then by death, which waits to take them all, one by one. But here is a friend whose friendship is unselfish, pure, divine: who loves you for yourself and for your own love, and not for what you have: whom time cannot weary and death cannot touch—

“who ever liveth to make intercession for us according to the will of God.”

Is not this a healing memory? Who is there among us that does not find life a weary and desert waste, in which we toil painfully forward to the Holy City? Who is there that does not often feel that “days are dark and friends are few?” that fellow-man is blind, and indifferent, and even cruel? Who is there that does not sometimes have the heart wrung deep with anguish at the failure of all hopes, and the blighting of all prospects, and the quenching of all joy? For all this, here is balm: Christ knows. Christ loves. Christ understands. Christ owns us. Christ values us. He reckons as done to himself what is done to us. He has said so—not in our age—not to us personally: but at a time, and through channels, and in a manner that affords absolute guarantee of truth. He dare not speak to us personally while the process of our development goes on. The Divine method requires one speaking for all, that faith may come into play. We have but to call faith to our rescue. Is it not a happy thought and a healing memory that we have such a friend who, if all forsake, will not leave us, if we are faithful to him: who, if all misunderstand and wrongfully accuse, knows the uttermost secrets of the heart, and will justify us at the last and even forgive the aberrations of mortal weakness where others exact the last pound of flesh: and who, if he leave us in the dark paths of adversity while sin reigns on the earth, only does so that he may stretch out his strong right hand at the right moment, to lift us out of the grave and say,

“Come, ye blessed of my Father: inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world?”

Open your heart to all this divine comfort. He intends you to take it, and to have it—now, in this present time. Some may call it sentimental: never mind. There are those who know only the outsides of divine things: who can talk the technicalities of the truth, but know very little of its inner power. Do not take your cue from them. Do not be discouraged by them. Dwell on the Lord’s own words. Take things as you find them in the very Scriptures of truth, which are the Lord’s own oracles by Prophet, Apostle, and Priest. There are men whose hearts are baked hard in the fire of controversy. There are men for whom the truth has no charm except in its polemics. These are men who turn judgment into gall, and the righteous precepts of the Lord into bitterness. Do not allow such to rob you of the comfort with which the Lord intended you to comfort your weary souls with the comforting words of his truth so bountifully sprinkled through all the word of his truth. He has said, “Come unto me”: let nobody else come between. He has said, “Let your soul delight itself in fatness: eat ye that which is good”: nobody has authority to forbid you to take your place at the feast. He has said, “Whosoever will, let him come: him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out.” Refuse to be turned away by any voice but his own. You are weary and heavy laden: it is the very sort invited. You are self-distrustful, wretched, and contrite, and you tremble at the terrible majesty of his word: to this very class, the High and Mighty One, inhabiting eternity, says he will look.

“Come boldly to the throne of grace, that you may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in the time of need.”

In your lowest misery, you cannot get lower than David, who watereth his couch with his tears. You can at least say with him,

“My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.”

Remember that all our clouds are but the weakness of poor flesh, in which dwelleth no good. They are but the accessories of the first stage of the process by which God is developing sons and daughters for a higher state—even his eternal glory, to which Peter says he has called us (1 Peter 5.10). They are but as the clouds of earth which obscure, but do not extinguish, the sun. The sky is always blue above all earth’s vapours. The sun is always shining, though the earth is sometimes dark. So God is always living, and loving, and guiding, though all is apparently chaotic in the evil state that now prevails upon the earth because of sin. The glad voice will yet ring through the earth:

“Arise, shine, for thy light is come!”

Thus the emblems on the table bring a present Christ before us, and with this, how much present comfort when we “only believe?” But their principal significance concerns a future of great desire.

“Do this until he come.”

Here faith, which has many actions, becomes *“the substance of things hoped for.”* We all know the benign effect of hope. The anticipation of good is just as sweet and healing as the fear of evil is depressing and hurtful. Away from Christ, there is no ground for the anticipation of good. Away from him, there is nothing but this life to rest on, and however good we may chance to find it, it ends in darkness, and that in no great while. Away from Christ, the present life is without prospects. In him, it has a bright horizon. There is sunshine ahead. In the darkest of life’s experiences, we can say, “This cannot last: there is joy beyond. I have only to wait, and not very long; for the longest life is short, and when it is gone, everlasting day sets in. I have to go through the grave, I know: but I shall know nothing of that. I shall be out of my grave before I know I have been in. My last illness will only be like a nightmare, suddenly ended by the brightness of the happy morning come.” Without Christ, a very different speech must necessarily be ours. There is no “morning star” for us then: no Sun of Righteousness; no everlasting day. Who would exchange the positions? All that we can suffer now is but *“our light affliction, which is but for a moment”*—affliction with a purpose, and very short-lived in the great measure of things.

Opening the mind to all these great things brings peace. We may have seasons of depression and darkness: but such seasons are not criminal: they are the result of our weakness: part of the heritage of our misfortune—yea, part of the process of our preparation for immortality. Immortality is too great a thing to be placed in the hand of a creature without the adequate schooling in the lesson of our own impotence, which can only be attained in the deep draughts of human woe. In the hours of our greatest bitterness—in the seasons of the completest obscurations of comfort and faith—we can say,

“It is no more I, but sin that dwelleth in me.”

“Lord have mercy on me, and heal my soul.”

We know beforehand the answer that is written:

“The Lord is merciful and gracious: slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever: for as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy towards them that fear him. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. For he knoweth our frame: he remembereth we are dust. He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.”

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