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THE DEATH OF LINCOLN,

APRIL 15th, 1865.

Some of the Religious Lessons which it Teaches.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

ZION CHURCH, NEW-YORK,

ON THE

First Sunday after Easter, April 23d, 1865.

BY THE RECTOR,

THE RIGHT REV. HORATIO SOUTHGATE, D. D.

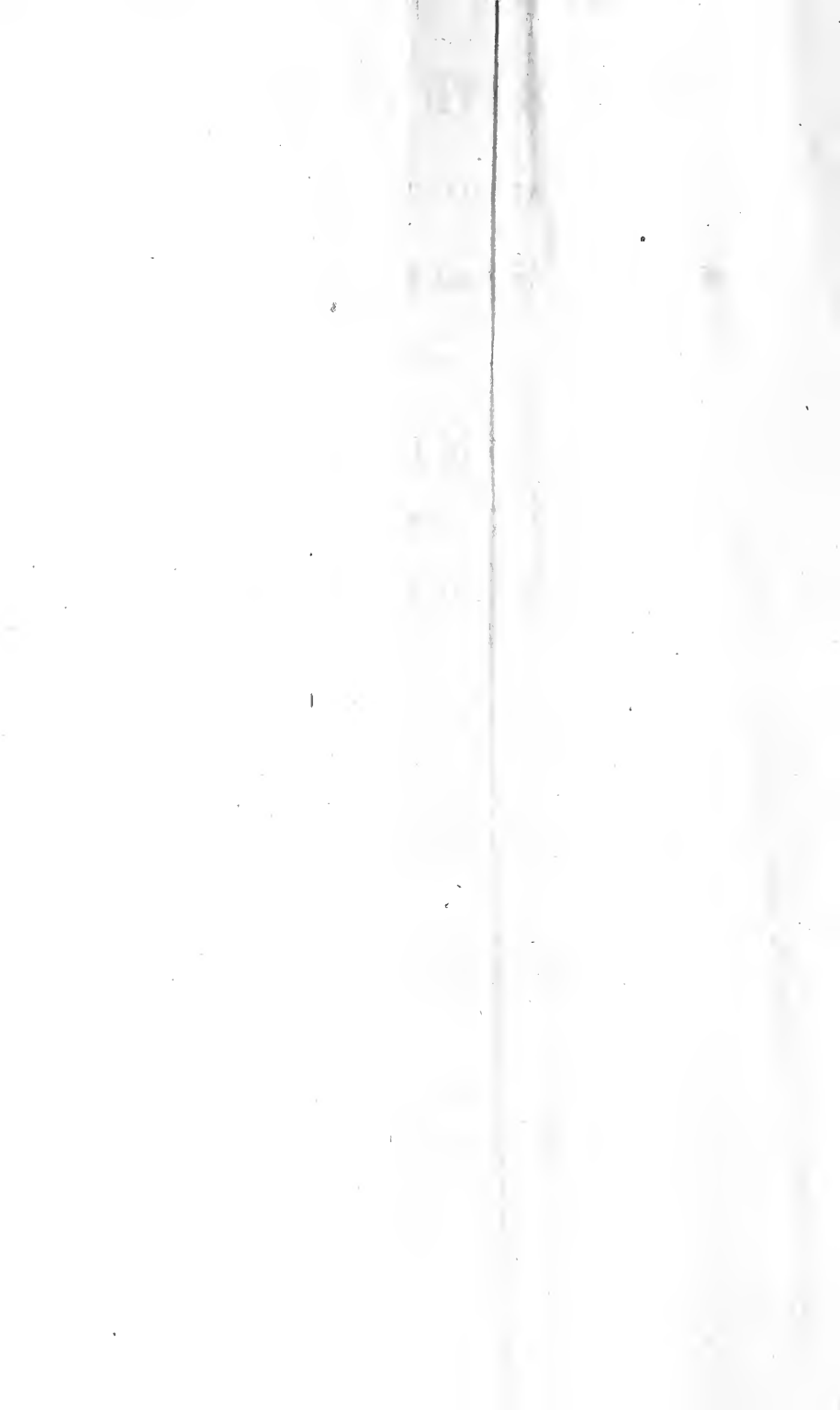
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S E R M O N .

ISAIAH, XXVI., 9.—When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.

It is my custom, on the first Sunday after Easter, to give an annual review of the state and progress of the Parish. But I have no heart to speak of it to-day; although the record would show the highest degree of prosperity that we have attained since I have been your Rector. My thoughts are filled with the one theme which, for a week, has occupied all minds. I find it in vain to attempt to turn them to other studies and meditations, and, I have no doubt, the same is true of you. Let me, then, speak as the Pulpit may fittingly speak, of the one great event which absorbs all interest; and which will live in history as long as the world shall last, the most striking feature of the middle years of the nineteenth century, perhaps the most marked in the whole centennial cycle.

I would hardly trust myself to speak so soon, if it were not probable that the great National Day of Fasting, which will commemorate the unparalleled calamity that has fallen upon us, will have passed before my return from the field of my next month's labours; and it may be, therefore, if I do not speak *now*, my Pulpit will have been silent upon the mighty theme.

I would not have this to be ; for I recognise in the catastrophe an occasion for many utterances which may fitly fall from the lips of the Minister of God. The office of the Pulpit is peculiar, and it is limited. It has nothing to do with worldly politics, farther than to apply to them the great laws of morality and religion. But here is an event, occurring within the civil world, which bows all hearts in humiliation and sorrow. The public mind requires the consolations of Christian sympathy. There are, also, lessons, deep religious lessons, to be drawn from this universal bereavement. I acknowledge myself unqualified, by my very profession, for the task of discussing the civil questions connected with it, and its bearing upon the future political condition and destiny of our land. But within the scope which my office allows, the vast field of its religious uses, I may expatiate at liberty ; and I shall best fulfil the functions of that office, if I may teach you how, as Christian men, you are to regard this visitation of the mighty hand of God.

For, although the blows which have so deeply wounded our peace were struck by wicked men, the lowest theory of Divine Providence must acknowledge that they fell, not only with the prescience, but with the permission of Deity. The most important death, by the hand of violence, that the world has ever known, was foreordained of God, although it was accomplished by the art of Satan, instigating the heart of a traitor. It came to pass, that the divine purpose of universal mercy to man might be fulfilled ; and yet, for Judas, who betrayed our Lord, it were better for him if he had never been born. So here, while the murderous passions of revenge and hate may have stimulated the

heart, and nerved the hand of the wretched man, who, if his life be not speedily ended, is henceforth a "fugitive and a vagabond in the earth," it is no less true, that the death of our President falls within the lines of God's Providence, and enters into the accomplishment of His designs. It would have been as easy for Deity to avert the fatal ball from his head, as to turn aside the knife from the heart of his Secretary of State, or to frighten the culprit who seems to have been in waiting for Stanton, or to disarrange the plan which appears to have been laid for the sacrifice of the Vice-President. Why was Lincoln suffered, against his wish, to go to the theatre, while Grant, who intended to be there, and was, doubtless, to be another of the victims, was diverted from his purpose? We can see in these different issues the hand of God, guiding the order of events, directing each to the accomplishment of that end which suited best with His own supreme design. I say, then, that the death of the President was, unquestionably, a link in the sequence of affairs which connected the accomplished past with the unborn future. It will be only when anticipation shall have become history, that we can read the divine purpose aright. What He intends for us, what is to follow from this direful tragedy, we can only feebly conjecture. But it is all clear to the eye of Him who knoweth the end from the beginning.

One comfort and consolation we have, in the knowledge of the fact, that we are the sufferers of a grievous wrong. Our President has been struck down by the hand of violence. Our country is stabbed in the body of the chief civil officer under the President. It is injustice, it is infraction of God's law, it is murder, practiced upon us. Believe you, brethren, that the cause

will prosper in behalf of which the blows were struck? Believe you that the cause will suffer whose chief was wickedly shot from behind by the hand of one who hates it? Forbid it, justice. Nay, the God of *mercy*, no less than the God of *righteousness*, will suffer no enterprise to prevail by such fiendish instrumentalities. On this point I feel wholly at ease. Our great sorrow, coming as it does, must be the harbinger of good to us. Suffering from the unrighteous deed of man, we may cheerfully commit the keeping of our beloved country to Him as to a faithful Creator. Assassination is the weapon of hatred, malice and uncharitableness. It cannot prosper. I see, then, in the very wickedness of the act on which God frowns, the assurance that no harm can come from it to those against whom it was aimed; no good can come from it to those who planned and executed it, or to the cause in behalf of which it was attempted. They struck a fatal blow at *Rebellion* who were so unwise as to seek to sustain its sinking fortunes, or prevent its threatened downfall, by the crime of wilful murder. As God is true, as He is just, as He is benevolent, as He would sustain the dignity and sanctity of His own laws, He is now pursuing, with His infinite displeasure, the agents in this iniquitous transaction; and, as far as they represent it, He is hostile to the enterprise which has resorted to this impious means of success.

But, how far is that enterprise itself involved in the responsibility? How far does this hideous act implicate those who are sustaining that enterprise—the millions of our fellow-countrymen at the South? Let us suppose, as it is most charitable to do, and as is altogether most probable, that they knew nothing of it

beforehand, and that they will repudiate it with indignation and horror when it is revealed to them. Is their cause responsible? We say it is; so far, and only so far, as the act is the natural and legitimate offspring of Rebellion. And is not Rebellion its mother? and is it not of the very same quality with its parent? What is Rebellion? It is itself a violation of the law of God, an undertaking to destroy the powers that be, which are ordained of God. I have nothing to retract or alter in the doctrine with which, from this sacred place, I set forth, four years ago, the guiltiness of rebellion, as declared by the word of God. That doctrine stands to-day, and will stand forever; because it rests upon the immovable basis of the Divine Word. I need not repeat it now. But, if Rebellion be a sin, what wonder is it that it *breeds* sin? If I, or four millions with me, aim a blow at my country's life, what wonder is it if one of us, or four of us, or a hundred of us, are so blinded by the passion which possesses us all, that they cannot discriminate between the act which would destroy the life of the Government, and the act which would destroy the lives of the individual men in whom, for the moment, it is vested? Is it any matter for marvel, that persons of no more than ordinary intelligence, animated by hate, confound the two? Is not the act which has just now transpired in Washington, and which has brought a nation into the dust of grief, perfectly germane with the act of secession, which more than four years ago struck a blow, meant to be a fatal one, at the Constitution, which is the vital organ of our national existence? What was the life, even of the honored chieftain who has been so terribly and so mysteriously snatched from us, when compared with the

life which the Rebellion itself sought to terminate? It is a great law of religion, (and, therefore, I insist upon it this morning,) that sin produces sin by a sort of natural necessity. He, who enters upon a course of wickedness, is pretty sure to commit, in the prosecution of it, many other iniquities than that which he originally contemplated. It has been so here. The plotted murder of the Nation has led to the sacrifice of the life of its head. Do we stand aghast at the inhuman wickedness of the man who is now fleeing from the wrath of an injured people? Why are we so much amazed? He sowed to the wind; he has reaped the whirlwind. He suffered to enter into his heart the sin of Rebellion. He nourished and cherished it in his bosom. He gave himself up, body and soul, to it. The power which God had taught him to revere and fear, he repudiated and despised. He saw one holding that power, representing it, embodying it. Is it so much to be wondered at, that he transferred his hatred from one to the other? How could it well be otherwise? He had no personal enmity to Mr. Lincoln. His life, in itself, was no object of hate to him. But he wished to kill the nation; and, that he might accomplish that purpose, he killed him in whom the life of the nation breathed and acted. Was not this natural? Was it not to be expected? And, does it not show, that Rebellion is responsible for that ghastly murder? Before God, it seems to me, that this is a righteous verdict. I say, then, to my brethren of the South, (many of whom know how kindly I have felt towards them, however I condemned their sin; not a few of whom, even with tears, thanked me when, not five months ago, I had the opportunity, and used it,

for pleading, before a congregation in which were gathered many of those who sway the council of the nation, for the application, even to rebels, of the great laws of Christian love and magnanimity,) I say to them, with the same love which animated me then, "My brothers, you and I are equally horrified, it may be, by this transcendent crime. But, do you not see, that it has sprung, by natural conception, out of the womb of the great sin of Rebellion? And, shall not this dire catastrophe at length open your eyes to see the true nature of the motive which has led you to raise a par-ricidal hand against the Nation? Will you repudiate the crime, and not the mother which spawned it? Oh, my brothers, let us, at length, see eye to eye; and, over the body of our murdered Head, yours and ours, vow that the sin which struck the blow, shall itself die by the vigorous stroke of our restored unity and love." I have some hope that it will be so; that this revolting spectacle of base and cowardly murder will dispel the delusion which has so long haunted the minds of thousands of intelligent and, otherwise, virtuous men, who were once united with us, not only by the ties of a common country, but by the bonds of one faith, the love of one Lord, the sacrament of one baptism, and the confidence of a warm and tender friendship. But, if it may not be, then, my brothers of this congregation, as Christian men, as men who fear God and respect His commandments, let it be our firm resolve, and let the dead body of our departed chief plead for the fulfilment of it, that we will know no rest till the sin of Rebellion be purged from the land. Has it been hateful before? Let the crime which it has inaugurated, show us its true features in all their frightful hideousness. It is condemned

of God. Let it be proscribed and exterminated by man. Let there be set upon it the mark of the first murderer, "that every one that findeth it shall slay it."

It may be, (but this, as I have said of all such interpretations of God's providence, is matter only of feeble conjecture; for, what fallible man shall presume to fathom His designs?) that He saw, that the gentle and loving course on which our murdered President, with the general consent and applause of the nation, was about to enter, would leave the root of bitterness, in the full vigor of its baneful life, beneath the soil; there to breed, hereafter, another crop of woes, after its kind. It may be, that his gentle heart was taken away from a new work for which he was not fitted. It may be, that a sterner will has been called in to execute it. His mission was ended. He had done the work to which he had been appointed; and, all now admit, in the light of the final success, he did it well. We honor him for his work's sake. He is beyond our poor rewards. But, he is with Him, whose "Well done, good and faithful servant," is far more to him than would be the plaudits of men, the ovation of a popular triumph. The tears we shed, (and, who of us has shed no tear, the last ten days?) the sable hues of woe we display, the gorgeous; yet mournful procession which bears his slaughtered body, embalmed in our memories beyond any art of man, to its final resting-place, and the lofty record of his deeds and of his goodness which we will make, and preserve, in the annals of the nation, and point to, on the everlasting monument which we will rear to his fame, are but the fitting tribute of grateful and sorrowing hearts. But, we mourn not as men without hope; not for him; for, there is more and

more of accumulating evidence, that he was a man who feared God and wrought righteousness; not for the country for which he died; for, God would not have suffered any harm to hurt his life, till his work was done. Of this we may be well assured; and, therefore, through all the blinding tears of our present grief, from beneath the cloud of our brooding fears, we may, confidently, look forward to the light which shines upon our distant path, and see it resting upon the head of him who is now called to bear the burden which our Lincoln has laid down, and believe, that he too has his work to perform, and will be guided by the same Almighty hand to fulfil it. Let us give to him, as he most needs, the homage which Christian men owe, under their supreme Leader, Christ, to one who, Christ's apostle tells us, bears the sword of justice as the "minister of God." And, doubt ye not, that the work which remains to be done, (and, God alone knows what that work is,) will be fitly done by him whom the Most High, in His providence, has called to the arduous task on which he has entered.

But, there is another lesson which I must not fail to teach you this morning. When tidings came of the overthrow of the Army of Northern Virginia, and the occupation of Petersburg and Richmond, and the hearts of all loyal men leaped for joy, not only in view of that grand achievement, but in confident anticipation of the speedy return of peace, I said to myself, "Is it possible, then, that we are to have no greater chastening than we have endured? How wonderful and mysterious are the ways of God! For four long years, there have appeared, among us of the North, no living signs of deep humiliation for the sinfulness which

brought upon us the curse of civil war. Nay, on the contrary, all vice and wickedness have increased, and grown rampant, among us. Corruption in public places, and extravagance, luxury and reckless living in private and social life, to an extent never before known, all showing a greater forgetfulness of God while His heavy hand was upon us, have proved, that His chastisement brought us no profit. I have believed, with fear and trembling, when I have looked upon this growing wickedness, in days which should have been given to penitence and self-searching and sober living, that the war would not end without our receiving some new and severe discipline. That God should give us success, when we have not only failed to repent of our former degeneracy as a Nation, but, even while under His rod, have heaped up iniquity on iniquity; that He should give us final success, without, first, humbling us, has seemed to me impossible. And now the end is at hand. The worst of the war is over. The power of the Rebellion is broken. The day-star of Peace is shining, with benign and cheerful light, above our eastern horizon. And, amidst the universal jubilation, there is no thought but of elated satisfaction and triumph. And God does not punish us. Excepting the precious lives which we have lost, (a loss which has beclouded many a private home, but which has hardly been felt by us as a Nation, so rapidly and fully have their places been supplied by others,) the career of the country, throughout the war, has been one of ever-increasing wealth and prosperity, as well as of ever-growing wickedness. And now all the evil is coming to an end; and, there remains no lesson of thorough humiliation, to benefit us for the future. Nay, rather,

we seem likely to go forward with a more elated, a more proud, a more self-complacent spirit than ever before; and one shudders to think of the way before us, with all this increased confidence in ourselves, all this more deeply corrupted morality of the people and our rulers, all this neglect and practical defiance of God." I could not understand it. It was a mystery to me. Far and wide, in many lands, I had studied God's ways towards man; but this remained a strange and unprecedented development of His providence. I said to myself, "I cannot comprehend it. His ways are not our ways; His thoughts are not our thoughts; and, even when we have learned His ways, a sudden cloud hides them from us."

While I was pondering upon these things, in mingled surprise and adoration of His incomprehensible majesty, while the sun was shining in the clear noon-day of our triumphant prosperity, and hardly a shadow of dimness rested upon the bright vista of our prospects; while all around breathed of peace, and every heart was reposing in joyful security, suddenly, as if it were a thunderbolt out of the clear sky at high noon, there fell upon us a mighty woe. A darkness gathered, in an instant, around us, like the blackness of a starless midnight. We were as blind men groping for the wall. Our leader gone, a sudden dismay sunk into our hearts. We seemed to be standing upon the verge of universal wreck and ruin.

Oh, my brothers, what a lesson for the future is here. Let us thank God, amidst this overwhelming affliction, that we find ourselves on our knees at last. Shall we ever be proud again? Shall we not rejoice with trembling, whatever good His supreme bounty may

bestow upon us? Shall we not be humble, even in triumph? No event of the war has made us really mourn till now. Defeat has only roused our pride, stimulated our hostile passions, quickened our revenge. But now we are in the dust. We know, we feel, that God liveth. We see His hand in chastisement. We bow before the severe blow of His heavy discipline. Happy for us, if this spirit shall abide with us! Happy, if we have learned to recognise God in our prosperity! If our bitter sorrow may but convert us into an humble and a righteous nation, we may, in the great hereafter, raise to our departed President a monument which shall bear the grateful inscription, "we were blessed by his life; we were yet more blessed by his death."

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